

Center for American Progress



Guns, Lies, and Fear

Exposing the NRA's Messaging Playbook

By Rukmani Bhatia April 2019

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Introduction and summary



Our Second Amendment is freedom’s most valuable, most cherished, most irreplaceable idea. History proves it. When you ignore the right of good people to own firearms to protect their freedom, you become the enablers of future tyrants whose regimes will destroy millions and millions of defenseless lives.”¹

Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president and CEO, National Rifle Association

The National Rifle Association (NRA), an organization originally established in 1871 to train hunters and marksmen on gun use and safety, has transformed into one of the most effective political lobbies in modern American history. The group advocates for gun rights, resisting any encroachment on what it deems to be an inalienable right to unhindered, unregulated gun ownership. To advance its mission, the NRA deploys a disinformation campaign reliant on fearmongering and the systematic discreditation of opposition voices in order to secure its position as a powerful lobbyist for the gun industry. The NRA has masterfully constructed a narrative based on gun rights propaganda, evoking images of a society devoid of rule of law and under constant threat of attack from an unidentified but ever-present enemy.

Due to the insidious nature of this messaging approach, the NRA has successfully embedded its false narrative throughout much of the country. By deploying a carefully crafted campaign of misinformation, deception, and confusion, the NRA has both undermined legitimate arguments for common-sense gun law reform and made it substantially more difficult for its emotive, provocative propaganda to be countered with fact and reason. In this way, the NRA’s tactics are deceitful not only because they falsely allege to protect American freedoms but also because they mirror fundamentally un-American sources. The propaganda machine of the NRA is similar to that of authoritarian and undemocratic political regimes around the world that deploy disinformation campaigns to secure control over public discourse in their nations, enabling autocrats to maintain a vice grip over information and ensure their power is unchecked and unquestioned.

The efficacy of the NRA’s deceitful tactics has been destructive. Gun violence shatters communities across the United States—particularly communities of color—and ravages the nation’s youth.² Each day, more than 95 people die from gun violence.³ This epidemic is a uniquely American experience, with the United States standing out as an outlier among its peers with both a disproportionately high percentage of the world’s armed civilians and a disproportionately high rate of gun-related fatalities.⁴ Yet despite the harsh realities of gun violence, as well as a plethora of attempts to pass legislative solutions to address the issue over several decades, the NRA has skillfully used its control over the narrative around guns to influence lawmakers, repeatedly blocking common-sense legislation on local, state, and federal levels. At the same time, the NRA has churned out a steady stream of messaging and marketing designed to increase American ownership of firearms and sell more guns.

This report examines how the NRA successfully both created the identity of the American law-abiding gun owner and vilified those in government, civil society, and academia working to reform gun laws to reduce firearm-related tragedies. It then illustrates the ways in which nondemocratic leaders construct narratives to secure political power, and how these tactics compare to the messaging strategy deployed by the NRA. By analyzing the messaging tactics used by NRA leadership and paid NRATV hosts, this report shows how the NRA has a specific strategy designed both to control the debate around guns and to influence legislators and policymakers to prevent the implementation of common-sense legislation focused on public safety. This report dissects the NRA’s messaging approach and provides examples of the group’s rhetoric in order to depict how the organization is mimicking the tactics of autocrats and demagogues.

As gun violence prevention advocates around the country seek to build on the recent public momentum demanding stronger gun laws at the state and federal levels, it is crucial to understand the underpinnings of the NRA’s messaging strategy in order to develop a compelling counternarrative capable of challenging the NRA’s messaging campaigns.

Glossary of key terms

Illiberal nation or regime: A nation or regime whose leaders are democratically elected but who then implement policies that repress the political rights and civil liberties of their nation, standing in opposition to liberal democratic principles.⁵

Authoritarian nation or regime: A nation or regime where power is concentrated among the leadership.⁶

Populist leader: A politician who creates two groups within society: an established, corrupt political elite and a marginalized “common people” whom the leader seeks to uplift in social standing.⁷

How the NRA mutated from supporting gun safety to advocating gun rights

The National Rifle Association has existed for almost 150 years. Today, it is one of the most powerful gun lobbies in the country. However, this modern manifestation would be unrecognizable to its founders. For the organization's first 106 years, its mission was to educate gun owners about guns, with no reference to the Second Amendment.⁸

On November 17, 1871, a group of Union army veterans founded the NRA to train men to be better marksmen. For decades, the group focused on training gun owners to be better hunters, teaching Boy Scouts how to shoot, and discussing hunting and conservation efforts.⁹

The organization's transformation began in the 1960s following a wave of gun control laws; for example, the passage of the Gun Control Act in 1968 created a category of people prohibited from legal gun ownership, including those convicted of violent felonies and domestic abuse.¹⁰ With federal laws beginning to regulate gun ownership, factions within the NRA's membership base felt threatened. This perception resulted in an eventual leadership coup at the 1977 NRA Annual Meeting—often referenced as the “Cincinnati Revolt”—where a large contingent of gun rights radicals ousted the leadership, replacing them with individuals keen to advance an agenda that protected gun ownership rights.¹¹ The change in leadership also marked a pivotal moment for the organization's mission, with the group shifting starkly away from focusing on hunting and gun safety and instead engaging directly in the political debate around guns.

Following that meeting, the NRA became an organization focused almost exclusively on political issues related to gun rights. Under the guise of protecting civil liberties, the group cultivated a political reputation advocating for the protection of gun rights across federal, state, and local laws.

As the organization was establishing itself as a lobbying operation, it began to develop a stronger connection with the multibillion-dollar gun industry. According to analysis conducted by the Violence Policy Center, the NRA enjoys strong financial ties with the firearms industry, receiving millions of dollars in contributions from industry conglomerates such as the Freedom Group, Bushmaster, and Smith & Wesson.¹² Furthermore, as revealed by *Mother Jones'* investigative reporting, the NRA's "Golden Ring of Freedom" membership status, marking donors who contribute at least \$1 million to the group, has numerous executives from firearms manufacturers.¹³ The NRA also creates programming and messaging that is sponsored by specific firearms manufacturers.

For example, the NRA developed specific programs sponsored by different gun industry entities, including the creation in 2012 of the Smith & Wesson-sponsored NRA Women's Network,¹⁴ which purportedly provides women gun owners a resource on gun use.¹⁵ The linkages between the gun industry and the NRA's messaging are particularly visible when it comes to semi-automatic assault weapons.¹⁶ The NRA staunchly advocates that these weapons of war continue to be unregulated and readily available on the civilian market, despite evidence that assault weapons increase the lethality of public mass shootings.¹⁷

In order to advance a political agenda and establish itself within the debate around gun rights, the NRA deploys an aggressive messaging strategy similar to the approaches dictators use to consolidate and secure power. At its core, the messaging strategy of the newly politicized NRA embeds the idea that the Second Amendment is the lynchpin for all other freedoms; the NRA's messaging bedrock rests on the claim that the right to own a firearm is the freedom that protects all other freedoms.¹⁸ This basic concept has become the gun rights organization's rallying cry; stripped of all nuance, the anchor of the NRA's narrative is the idea that the group represents "freedom," making any opposition easily labeled as "anti-freedom."

NRA surrogate and actor Charlton Heston often used his prominent platform to echo this message. In 1997, after being selected to serve as the NRA's First Vice President,¹⁹ the longtime gun rights supporter delivered a speech at the National Press Club, stating:

I simply cannot stand by and watch a right guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States come apart under attack from those who either can't understand it, don't like the sound of it, or find themselves too philosophically squeamish to see why it remains the first among equals: Because it is the right we turn to when all else fails. That's why the Second Amendment is America's first freedom.²⁰

Heston's words have become one of the NRA's most prolific slogans to ground its lobbying efforts in protecting American freedoms, and the sentiment of his remarks is routinely parroted by NRA leadership. Chris Cox, chief lobbyist for the organization, stated at the 2018 NRA annual convention, "Together, we're the most bare-knuckled defenders of individual freedom in American history."²¹ In an NRATV ad campaign, NRA President Wayne LaPierre claimed, "The only truly free people who have ever walked this earth have been armed people capable of defending themselves and their families."²² Meanwhile, the infamous sign-off line, "I'm the National Rifle Association of America and I'm freedom's safest place," is used by the group to end various testimonials and video advocacy campaigns, insinuating that the group is fighting to protect fundamental freedoms.²³ This message is, of course, tainted by the fact that the gun rights lobby's mission runs counter to public safety and advocacy efforts focused on reducing the high levels of gun violence that affect communities across the nation on a daily basis.

Leveraging the demagogue's playbook



Every day of every year, innocent, good, defenseless people are beaten, bloodied, robbed, raped, and murdered ... When a criminal attacks, politicians aren't there to protect you. Their laws can't protect you. And the media's lies can't protect you, either. You're on your own. But you know what can protect you when no one else can, when no one else will? The ironclad, absolute safeguard of the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms."²⁴

Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president and CEO, National Rifle Association

The manipulation of fear and identity politics to develop a convincing narrative that can be shared widely across a population of people is not unique to the NRA. Indeed, it is a core strategy used by autocrats and aspiring dictators to secure power and influence. Demagogues consolidate power by exploiting fear, a primal human instinct, rather than using facts or logical arguments to secure their political standing.

Historically, the approach used by these strongmen includes a common set of tactics:

- Construct a political identity that also serves as a demagogue's target audience
- Craft a political narrative illustrating the existential crises that threaten the defined identity group
- Control the narrative, undermining critical media outlets
- Vilify, discredit, and malign any opposition voice

Construct a political identity

Establishing a target group within the nation is vital for a political narrative to be constructed based on fear of impending doom. A specific group needs to be manipulated into believing itself to be a marginalized population, neglected by the existing power structures and facing demise or attack.

In recent years, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey has attempted to build a new Turkish identity that brings together his conservative religious base and the broader conservative nationalist constituency.²⁵ By targeting both these factions, Erdoğan seeks to create a more unified, dominant right-wing alliance on which he can rely to advance his political agenda and overwhelm any opposition to his power.

Similarly, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has capitalized on the idea of a “Hungarian citizen,” playing up fears about how the European Union and the migrant crisis would affect Hungary. Orbán’s persistence in establishing a threatened Hungarian identity is evident in his public speeches, including one recently delivered in 2018 in which he declared, “We must state that we do not want to be diverse and do not want to be mixed: we do not want our own colour, traditions, and national culture to be mixed with those of others.”²⁶ Through this xenophobic rhetoric, a marginalized Hungarian identity has emerged in a nation that is largely homogenous.²⁷

Craft a political narrative of crisis

Once an identity group is created, the next piece of the puzzle is to make that group fearful for its existence. By creating a narrative that outlines a pending threat to the group, the illiberal leader is able to manipulate that group and gain political power.

This approach was masterfully deployed by Orbán, who built a political platform centered on the “Hungarian” identity to propel his populist rise to power. He seized on moments of conflict and war in Hungarian history to evoke sentiments of “the glorious Hungarian nation,” crystalizing the identity of the Hungarian people and claiming that they are under direct assault from both the large numbers of migrants seeking asylum from conflicts in the Middle East and the European leaders in Brussels who would allow Hungary to be overrun by migrants.²⁸ In Orbán’s own words:

*We shall not allow it [Brussels] to force upon us the bitter fruit of its cosmopolitan immigration policy. We shall not import to Hungary crime, terrorism, homophobia, and synagogue-burning anti-Semitism. There shall be no urban districts beyond the reach of the law, there shall be no mass disorder or immigrant riots here, and there shall be no gangs hunting down our women and daughters.*²⁹

Control the narrative

To perpetuate the fears embedded in the narrative, leaders of the political party—along with designated surrogates from different parts of society, including civil society, media, and academia—are used to emphasize the threats facing the chosen populace.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime has built effective and expansive systems that enable the Kremlin to control and manipulate narratives throughout the nation.³⁰ Putin’s constructed paradigm claiming that the survival of the Russian state is at odds with liberal democracy justifies his vice grip over the media and information. Within the nation, there is limited independent Russian reporting that is free from the influence of either Kremlin officials or Russian oligarchs beholden to Putin’s regime.³¹ Moreover, academic research and teachings that deviate from Kremlin-approved narratives have come under bureaucratic attack. In 2018, for example, the European University at St. Petersburg, a private liberal arts college, had its teaching license revoked and was temporarily shuttered by Putin under the guise of failing to meet bizarre bureaucratic requirements.³²

In the Philippines, in an effort to control the narrative around his controversial “war on drugs” and quash criticism of his regime, Rodrigo Duterte attempts to control the narrative by undermining the media’s legitimacy, referring to the press as liars, spies, and distrustful members of society.³³ His targeted attacks on press freedom are part of a strategy that seeks to erode people’s confidence in the media’s reliability, resulting in critical reporting being discredited or deemed unreliable. Recently, Duterte has focused his efforts on silencing Maria Ressa, co-founder and CEO of Rappler, a prominent news outlet that conducts thorough investigative reporting that often criticizes Duterte’s administration.³⁴ By transforming the media into an unreliable source of information, Duterte seeks to establish his rhetoric around the drug war as the only true narrative.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s regime engaged in suppressing press freedom by either systematically shuttering independent news outlets or having Orbán’s allies seize control of outlets via hostile takeovers—such as in the case of *Népszabadság*, the nation’s largest independent daily news outlet.³⁵ *Népszabadság* had a reputation for conducting quality investigative reporting on scandals involving members of Fidesz, Orbán’s party, which many thought to be the reason the outlet was abruptly suspended in 2016 before being sold to an Orbán ally.³⁶ This crackdown on press freedom is a necessary part of Orbán’s strategy to continue perpetuating the anti-immigrant, xenophobic political narrative that swung voters to support his illiberal party.³⁷

Vilify, discredit, and malign the opposition

Once the political narrative is clearly defined and an “us vs. them” dynamic is established, it becomes easier to sideline, discredit, or malign critics of the regime. Criticism is viewed as a form of treachery and a threat to the survival of the core identity the leader is claiming to protect.

The situation in the Philippines again provides an example. Duterte’s unending “war on drugs” has resulted in the extrajudicial murder of thousands, with death estimates ranging from 12,000 to 20,000.³⁸ His harsh approach has been largely condemned by civil society and government leaders around the world, including Philippine Senator Leila de Lima, who often used her position in the Senate to voice opposition to Duterte.³⁹ In February 2017, Senator de Lima was arrested on charges of drug trafficking; however, human rights organizations have denounced her arrest and charges as transparent efforts by Duterte to use his political power to silence a prominent voice of dissent.⁴⁰

In Turkey, the attempted coup in 2016 provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to intensify his crackdown on political and civil rights and cast all opposition to his rule as a betrayal of the nation—as defined by his own conception of Turkish identity.⁴¹ Erdoğan created a list of perpetrators and co-conspirators that extended far beyond those involved in the putsch itself, using the crisis to mark political enemies as traitors and enemies of the state.⁴² By targeting critical members of the media, academics, and civil society activists, as well as members of the military and government civil service deemed to be disloyal to his regime, Erdoğan purged the state and body politic of dissent.⁴³ The state-sanctioned purges and widespread arrests have left him with total control of state institutions and the media in Turkey, virtually ending democratic politics in a nation once poised to join the European Union.⁴⁴

In Hungary, Orbán’s regime has challenged dissent or opposition to its xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric by vilifying George Soros,⁴⁵ a philanthropist and democracy advocate, claiming he is allied with European bureaucrats who seek to require Hungary to accept migrants who will destroy the country.⁴⁶ The government even passed a law making it illegal to assist documenting migrants in any way—a measure dubbed the “Stop Soros” law.⁴⁷ Orbán’s attacks seek to demonize Soros and undermine his advocacy efforts while also systematically removing links that Soros, a Hungarian American, has to the nation. Orbán’s regime has forced the beleaguered Budapest office of the Open Society Foundations—which is funded by Soros and focuses on human rights and democracy advocacy—to relocate to Berlin due to the repressive environment in Hungary.⁴⁸

Similarly, the embattled Central European University, also funded by Soros, is relocating to Vienna after Orbán's relentless efforts to shutter the revered academic institution.⁴⁹ Orbán's continued attacks on Soros allow the populist leader to undermine a key opposition voice and continue to perpetuate the fear-based narrative that enabled him to secure power in the first place.

Consequences of the playbook

Collectively, these tactics are regularly implemented in illiberal nations whose leadership is focused on stifling debate, with the extreme methods resulting in crackdowns on political rights and civil liberties in order to suppress a nation into submission. This technique of controlling information around key policies has been successfully used by authoritarians and populists throughout the world.

While the NRA is certainly not seeking complete control over a political system, a comparison to the messaging tactics of autocrats is still instructive, as the group is seeking to retain and maintain political power in order to challenge a growing movement to strengthen gun laws. The NRA's political power rests on its ability to embed a narrative about gun ownership into the American populace and key voting demographics. Therefore, the gun rights organization has needed to build a narrative capable of countering the realities of gun violence and the overwhelming evidence that weak gun laws are causing a public health crisis in the United States. To do so, the NRA chooses to draw from the demagogue's playbook and deploy a campaign based on fear and disinformation to retain power, regardless of the human cost.

The NRA's core messaging pillars

Just like a demagogue, the National Rifle Association chooses to direct its messaging efforts toward one simple constructed identity: the “American patriot,” a law-abiding citizen who loves the United States and the freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution—chief among them the right to bear arms.⁵⁰

In keeping with the demagogue's playbook, the American patriot is constantly threatened by two different but related enemies. One existential crisis is represented by the security threats constantly facing the American patriot. In the NRA's crafted narrative, law-abiding citizens are preyed upon by lawless criminals who seek to commit acts of violence; a subcategory of lawless criminals are undocumented migrants or, to use the NRA's label, “illegal immigrants,” who are undermining the safety and security of Americans throughout the nation.⁵¹ Following the NRA's logic, the only way law-abiding citizens can address these constant threats and keep themselves and their families safe is by possessing a firearm—a right enshrined in the Second Amendment. In the words of NRA President Oliver North, “The Second Amendment is the purest metaphor for freedom because if you are not free to defend yourself and your loved ones, then you are really not free at all.”⁵²

This ostensible need to possess a firearm for self-preservation is connected to another existential crisis the NRA has constructed: The NRA has consistently undercut advocates for gun violence prevention and common-sense legislation in order to maintain power over the narrative. To achieve this goal, the NRA has turned its political opposition into an anti-American enemy poised to seize guns and suppress freedoms through its anti-gun agenda. Wayne LaPierre verbalized this message at the 2018 NRA annual convention, stating, “The leadership of the National Democratic Party is the most anti-Second Amendment bunch of socialists in United States' history. They'll aim to seize your firearms, destroy your NRA, and entirely obliterate our great Second Amendment.”⁵³

By routinely associating gun violence prevention advocacy with disarmament—even going so far as to label Democratic members of Congress “disarmocrats”⁵⁴ and the 2020 Democratic presidential primary the “disarmament primary”⁵⁵—the NRA has insidiously developed an “us vs. them” dynamic, pitting the NRA’s constructed gun-owning American patriot against those who want to pass common-sense reforms. The NRA depicts the conflict of ideas as an existential battle between the two groups in an NRA-constructed zero-sum game, in a manner similar to how Erdoğan brands political opponents in Turkey as existential threats, routinely labeling them as enemies and terrorists.⁵⁶ At the 2019 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Oliver North made clear this absolute fight for gun ownership: “Our opponents call themselves gun control advocates. They are not. They ought to call themselves what they really are: the vanguard of the disarm America movement. ... They want to disarm you. No 2nd Amendment, no individual freedom, no civilian ownership of firearms period.”⁵⁷

The NRA generically vilifies people who represent and advocate for liberal and progressive gun policies, labeling them the “violent Left.”⁵⁸ It exploits and expands the political divisions between the law-abiding gun owner and the political left in an effort to discredit the work that is being done by gun violence prevention advocates, similar to how Duterte attempted to undermine Senator De Lima’s credibility—and, subsequently, her investigation into his drug war—by making crass comments about her personal life.⁵⁹ NRATV program host Grant Stinchfield recently deployed this divisive tactic by claiming that law-abiding citizens were essentially at war with progressives, stating:

*The threats from many on the Left are turning to violence and intimidation. All of this tears at the heart of a nation because we aren’t just divided anymore, we are in an all-out fight, a brawl. While we try to fight fair with truth on our side, the Left uses a win-at-all-costs mentality. It means they no longer play fair. That is the greatest threat to our nation.*⁶⁰

The demonization of “the Left” in this manner tarnishes the work of members of Congress, civil society advocates, members of the traditional media, and academics who seek to advance common-sense gun legislation. Moreover, it likens these individuals to other perceived dangers facing the American patriot, such as “criminals” and “illegal immigrants.”⁶¹ As a result, the NRA never has to engage in the actual debate over policy around gun violence prevention, nor does it have to provide evidence and facts to support its opposition. Instead, the gun rights group can claim that freedom and fundamental American rights are again under attack from an anti-American faction of the “violent Left,” thereby deflecting from real policy debate and shifting the focus to a narrative it has skillfully constructed.

How the NRA spreads and engrains its message

Implementing this messaging strategy is effective both for political leaders seeking to retain power—such as Putin, who has held control over Russia’s political system for two decades—and for the National Rifle Association, which seeks to hold political clout over lawmakers in the United States. The group uses both the Second Amendment and the constitutional right to bear arms as justifications for its lobbying and advocacy efforts around gun legislation.⁶² It has infiltrated legislatures and offices in Congress with substantial effect. The NRA has had astounding success at using its messaging to support advocacy for legislation that expands gun rights while endangering public safety. For example, NRA board member and lobbyist Marion Hammer wields substantial influence within Florida and is known to have authored the state’s “stand your ground” law.⁶³ And within Congress, the NRA’s influence is pronounced, with some members parroting NRA talking points in hearings about gun violence.⁶⁴

The NRA’s narrative is accessible through its various media outlets, including Twitter, Facebook, and its own media channel. The gun rights group launched NRA News in 2004; the main programming was “Cam & Co,” a TV show hosted by Cam Edwards that discussed gun-related news throughout the United States.⁶⁵ In 2016, NRA News transformed into NRATV, a 24-hour network with programming on gun rights as well as greater discussions of state and national politics in the United States.⁶⁶

NRATV perpetuates the myths about gun legislation that sit at the core of the NRA’s messaging. By using hyperbolic language and extreme examples that are often disconnected from the realities of gun violence, it maintains that guns are needed for self-defense and that legislation only burdens law-abiding citizens. Prominent NRATV host Grant Stinchfield has linked gun violence prevention advocacy to the Islamic State and the Iranian regime, stating: “You got ISIS wanting us disarmed, you got the ayatollah of Iran wanting us disarmed. Last time I checked, both are enemies of the U.S. that do not want us with an ability to fight back. And the Liberals think that’s a good idea.”⁶⁷

Stinchfield is likening those who seek common-sense gun legislation to violent actors who have publicly stated they seek to attack the United States. This not only serves to “other” those working on common-sense gun legislation but also underscores the NRA’s crafted narrative that anyone who opposes its gun rights agenda stands in opposition to the freedoms granted to those living in the United States.

In addition to discussing the perceived challenges facing gun owners, NRATV’s coverage has expanded beyond just discussing gun rights. In 2017, Wayne LaPierre’s speech at CPAC focused more on the need to support newly elected President Donald Trump than protecting gun rights, matching the programming’s expanding focus on other policy debates within the United States—such as immigration and women’s rights.⁶⁸ For example, commentator Dana Loesch recently used her platform as the host of “Relentless” to criticize efforts to increase gender and racial diversity on children’s TV program “Thomas the Tank Engine,” depicting the animated characters in Ku Klux Klan hoods.⁶⁹ The NRA’s expansion into policy discussions outside its traditional bailiwick aligns with the populist tendencies of the current executive branch leadership under President Trump, thus attempting to further the political division between law-abiding gun owners and anyone aligned with the liberal or progressive political spectrum.⁷⁰ By expanding its coverage to include partisan issues such as immigration policy, access to health care, and free speech, the NRA is widening the political chasm between law-abiding gun owners and their supposed progressive enemies, creating fewer policy issues upon which the two constructed identities can agree, deepening the “us vs. them” dynamic.

Yet even with these tangents into other polarizing political issues, the core message of the NRA continues to be about protecting the freedoms and rights of the law-abiding American—a message that makes it easy for discussions to be spun back into the gun rights debate.

Exploiting xenophobia on issues of border security

The issue of security along the U.S.-Mexico border is a prime example of the NRA’s messaging tactics. President Trump campaigned on the proposal of installing a wall along the U.S. southern border to ebb the tide of people seeking asylum in the United States. The discussion surrounding this issue is not directly linked to firearms or the gun lobby, yet it has still dominated NRATV programming since President Trump’s election.⁷¹ Considering the demagogic approach the NRA uses to craft its narrative, the incorporation of immigration policy in its messaging makes sense.

The issue of immigration at the border presents an existential crisis for the so-called American patriot—a crisis narrative that is perpetuated by the president and his own staff, who have spread blatant falsehoods about the border and the scale of the problem of migrants seeking asylum in the United States.⁷² NRATV pundits seized on this political debate, reporting on the alleged border crisis as if it were a threat to all Americans.⁷³ For example, in March 2019, Grant Stinchfield hosted Maria Espinoza, director of The Remembrance Project, to discuss migration at the border. Espinoza delivered a condemnation of undocumented immigrants that evoked the NRA’s rhetoric around immigration that questions the character of undocumented immigrants, equating them with criminals.⁷⁴

NRATV programming also often hosts so-called angel families, whose loved ones were killed by undocumented immigrants, to link the threat presented by the NRA to law-abiding American patriots.⁷⁵ Mary Mendoza, whose son was killed in a 2014 car crash with an undocumented immigrant driver, was interviewed by Stinchfield to share her story and thoughts on the congressional debate around border wall funding. Mendoza criticized politicians for ignoring the perceived violence associated with increased numbers of migrants entering the United States, at one point claiming, “We’re set to see over a million people come over our border this year. This is an invasion. This is a national emergency.”⁷⁶ Stinchfield did not fact-check her statements, nor did he counter with the overwhelming evidence showing that migration across the southern border does not increase crime in the United States.

The goal of this interview was not to describe the actual problem but rather to depict an imminent threat to the American people. This tactic continues to perpetuate a sense of insecurity that aligns with the NRA’s core message that people need guns to protect themselves.⁷⁷ For example, after University of Iowa student Mollie Tibbetts was tragically murdered by an undocumented immigrant in summer 2018, her death became an NRA rallying cry not just for Trump’s border security policies but also for more people to be armed. Yet these efforts neglected the fact that this incident was a tragic outlier and that cities with increased migrant populations do not see changes in crime rates.⁷⁸ Just like autocrats stir up fears among the populace and present themselves as the only political voice focused on protecting from that threat—something Orbán has done successfully for years in Hungary⁷⁹—the NRA is fomenting fear of violent immigrants to advance its political agenda: ensuring that people feel the need to buy firearms for their self-preservation.

The narrative spun by NRATV is devoid of facts, focusing instead on sustaining the myth of gun ownership being necessary for self-defense in an increasingly dangerous United States. In this way, the NRA's disinformation campaign mimics the rhetoric and approach of populist Hungary, as Orbán, too, often claims that accepting migrants would result in heightened levels of violence and crime.⁸⁰ Perhaps most disturbingly, the NRA seems aware of these similarities, as multiple reports on NRATV have equated the U.S. situation with Hungary.⁸¹ Chuck Holton, a prominent correspondent for NRATV, will often discuss the issue of migration within the United States and compare it to the rise of people fleeing Syria and seeking refuge in Europe. Holton has claimed previously that the asylum seekers' arrival in Europe resulted in increased levels of crime and that the asylum seekers took "great advantage of the generous welfare policies and the more liberal social mores in countries like Germany, France, and the U.K."⁸² The goal of these comparisons is to make people in the United States fearful of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, but it deliberately ignores the distinctions between the two cases. Unlike the demographics of asylum seekers entering Europe, the majority of migrants seeking asylum in the United States are women and children fleeing violence.⁸³ Moreover, evidence shows that U.S. communities with immigrants do not see increases in crime.⁸⁴

Manipulating gender stereotypes

The NRA also projects images of vulnerable women and children under attack in order to propel its message of fear to the American populace. The gendered nature of the NRA's approach manifests in two main ways: hypermasculinity and women's vulnerability.

The image of the American patriot is largely linked to the concept of hypermasculinity. In the NRA's narrative, firearms represent the only tools that will protect a person and their family from harm. The subtext of this narrative is related to imbalanced gender dynamics that frame men as protectors of their vulnerable families, thereby implying that to be a masculine man, one must also be a gun owner; otherwise, one is forsaking his duty as a man to his family.⁸⁵ It is worth noting, however, that the NRA's narrative about the "good guy with a gun" stopping "the bad guy with a gun" is patently false.⁸⁶ Armed civilians have rarely been successful in engaging with and stopping an active shooter. The FBI reviewed 250 active shooting incidents in the United States from 2000 through 2017.⁸⁷ In only seven cases was the shooter stopped by a civilian with a valid firearms permit; unarmed bystanders were more effective at intervening and stopping active shootings. Regardless of the evidence, the NRA continues to peddle this flawed rhetoric because it feeds into the fear-based narrative central to the NRA's message. It implies that the world is full of bad people and the only way to defend yourself is through owning a firearm.

Through its narrative, the NRA will also target women in an effort to encourage them to purchase firearms. The gun rights group uses the image of women in two intertwined, problematic ways. First, the NRA portrays women as vulnerable and susceptible to violence, again building on the fearmongering trope that is central to its messaging.⁸⁸ The gun rights group will also claim that gun ownership is a means of empowerment for women, giving them agency over their life and body.

In order to push the specific message that women are uniquely vulnerable, the NRA imagines a world in which women face constant attacks and threats from unknown entities that can only be addressed through gun ownership.⁸⁹ The organization will often highlight the experiences of individual women who are survivors of violence or harassment, using their stories as proof that all women need to be armed to defend against violent offenders.⁹⁰

To advance the idea that guns are a means for women to feel empowered, the NRA has created programs for women gun owners. For example, “Armed & Fabulous” focuses on glorifying women and guns, linking the featured women to a female iteration of the law-abiding patriot—a woman who is self-reliant and able to defend herself and her family because she carries guns.⁹¹ The NRA also runs a women’s leadership forum to cultivate young women aspiring to become Second Amendment activists.⁹²

Dana Loesch, perhaps the most vocal NRA personality on this subject, has repeatedly pushed the idea of women needing firearms for self-defense and autonomy.⁹³ In an NRA campaign ad, Loesch delivered the following problematic statement:

Here’s a message to every rapist, domestic abuser, violent criminal thug, and every other monster who preys upon women. Maybe you’ve heard the stories about millions of us flocking to gun stores and gun ranges for the first time, the second time, and the 100th time. Here’s what that means for despicable cowards like you: Your life expectancy just got shorter because there’s a very good chance your next target will be armed, trained, and ready to exercise her right to choose her life over yours. This is what real empowerment looks like.⁹⁴

This rhetoric—along with the rest of the NRA’s messaging around women and guns—is merely designed to stir up emotions and fear rather than address the problem of violence against women within the United States.

The realities of women and violence are much more nuanced than the NRA's crafted message. While there is some anecdotal evidence of successful cases of women using guns in self-defense, academic research finds that defensive gun use is relatively rare. Prolific gun ownership is, however, associated with increased harm to women.⁹⁵ Analysis of National Crime Victimization surveys from 2007 through 2011 conducted by David Hemenway and Sara Solnick not only found that a firearm is rarely used in self-defense but also found that during the years reviewed, there were no reports of guns being used in self-defense in incidents of sexual assault.⁹⁶ Furthermore, research shows that firearms are used to intimidate and victimize intimate partners rather than defend against violent attacks.⁹⁷ In the United States, 4.5 million women have been threatened by an intimate partner with a firearm.⁹⁸ Moreover, evidence shows that in cases of domestic violence, a firearm's presence increases the risk that the woman will die by 500 percent.⁹⁹ In light of this evidence, the goal of the NRA's messaging becomes clear: It is only focused on advancing the idea of fear, vulnerability, and the need to buy a gun to feel safe.

How the NRA quashes opposition

A critical part of maintaining a narrative based on misinformation is undermining critics who challenge the lies upon which the messaging is based. Typically, this effort requires either undermining the facts used by opponents, redirecting the debate through “what-aboutism,” or vilifying the opponents, making their opinions invalid since they seek to betray the law-abiding gun owner. For example, illiberal leaders, such as Duterte in the Philippines, will often openly mock their opposition,¹⁰⁰ while more established authoritarians such as Putin will silence critical voices through threats of violence and assassinations.¹⁰¹ Similarly, the National Rifle Association deploys a multifaceted strategy to undercut criticism and gun violence prevention advocacy.

Perpetuating myths and undermining facts

The NRA has a select set of allied researchers who produce academic articles purporting to provide evidence that supports the organization’s extremely lax approach to gun policy. One of the most prominent researchers often interviewed by NRATV is John Lott Jr.¹⁰² Gun enthusiasts often tout his 1998 book *More Guns, Less Crime*, which argues that states that passed concealed carry laws saw decreases in crime rates—an argument that fits neatly within the NRA’s narrative that more guns result in less crime.¹⁰³ However, Lott’s flagship publication has been widely debunked: In 2002, Ian Ayres of Yale Law School and John Donohue of Stanford Law School published a report discrediting Lott’s work. They found that, since 1997, in 14 jurisdictions that passed concealed carry laws, there was an increase in every category of crime studied by Lott, thereby undermining the core of Lott’s argument.¹⁰⁴ David Hemenway at Harvard University went further than Ayres and Donohue, finding that the model used by Lott was academically unsound and deeply flawed, as miniscule changes to the inputs dramatically changed the results.¹⁰⁵ In response to growing academic criticism, Lott chose to create a fake persona to defend his research, rather than produce credible studies.¹⁰⁶ Further degrading his reputation as a reliable and ethical academic, Lott lied about producing a peer-reviewed article and has continued to manufacture or manipulate statistics to fit his—and the gun industry’s—desired narrative around guns.¹⁰⁷

Despite Lott's poor reputation, the NRA continues to provide him a platform to share his faulty research and malign the work of reliable academics whose findings deviate from the NRA's message.¹⁰⁸ For example, Dana Loesch hosted Lott, who she claimed "is never wrong,"¹⁰⁹ to challenge a Boston University School of Public Health study that linked presence of a gun in the home to youth suicide. Lott attempted to undercut the study by stating, "I don't take the study seriously. I think what's going on here is they have poorly done studies and if they keep putting them out again and again ... they'll just convince people over time that they'll be afraid to have guns in the home."¹¹⁰ The irony of Lott's criticism is that he employs the very approach he is attacking—but in Lott's case, his work is routinely found to be flawed by credible academics. On Loesch's program, Lott has also challenged studies that Loesch deems to be "anti-gun"; he claims they are "misleading and biased."¹¹¹ The NRA and its supporters frequently employ this technique: lambast academic studies for being part of the "Left's anti-gun agenda"¹¹² in an attempt to negate evidence that indicates that more guns make communities less safe.

Further compounding the challenges around academic research on gun violence legislation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is unable to conduct any independent, nonpartisan research on the subject. The NRA strongly supported the passage of the Dickey Amendment, which restricted the CDC from using any funding "to advocate or promote gun control."¹¹³ The amendment effectively chilled gun violence research, creating a vacuum. As a result, of the top 30 causes of death in the United States, gun violence is the least researched and second least funded, with many critical research questions left unanswered.¹¹⁴

Whataboutism

Another tactic masterfully used by the NRA to avoid acknowledging clear contradictions within its rhetoric is the practice of "whataboutism," by which it will raise tangential facts or issues to direct the discussion away from the issue at hand. The approach—a favorite tactic of Putin's regime¹¹⁵—is often used by the NRA and its surrogates when covering issues of gun violence prevention in order to misdirect the debate, essentially requiring people to engage in different topics than the core issue at hand.

Recently, NRATV personalities have deployed this technique to argue against common-sense legislation introduced in the 116th Congress to implement a universal background check system for firearm sales. The bill would close existing loopholes in the background check process, which currently only requires licensed gun dealers to run a background check on buyers before selling them a firearm. By requiring private sales of firearms—

including online sales and sales made at gun shows—to require a background check on all buyers to ensure that they are legally allowed to obtain a firearm before completing the sale, the legislation would prevent prohibited people from exploiting gaps in the existing system to obtain a firearm.¹¹⁶

However, instead of engaging in policy discussion, the NRA chose to pivot the debate using lies and tangents. On his show, NRATV host Grant Stinchfield stated that this bill would make it harder for people to get firearms, arguing that it would “put law-abiding citizens in prison” and that “even though federal gun registries are illegal, this bill is the first step in creating one.”¹¹⁷ Stinchfield also made the following misleading statement to divert the debate around universal background checks:

*This background check bill is a vendetta against gun owners and Trump supporters, turning patriots into criminals, stripping us of the right to transfer our gun, possibly holding that gun hostage at a gun store if that gun isn't registered for who knows how long. That government overreach to block us from exercising our constitutional right is a clear and present danger. It is a threat to our republic disguised as gun safety, two words which are a tip off to mean unconstitutional.*¹¹⁸

Stinchfield's claims are false. Nothing in the bill would criminalize law-abiding citizens, and the bill contains explicit language barring the creation of a gun registry.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the expansion of background checks does not limit one's ability to legally possess a firearm or to purchase a firearm; the bill only ensures that all people purchasing a firearm are first determined to be legally able to own a lethal weapon. Stinchfield further muddied the debate by claiming that “the criminals, we know for a fact, will never abide to these background checks,” effectively suggesting that gun laws do not work because criminals, by nature, do not obey laws.¹²⁰ This rhetoric has been repeated by NRATV pundits, who claim that criminals will not submit to background checks and, therefore, the bill would only punish law-abiding citizens.¹²¹ This misdirection in conversation is deeply problematic, as it ignores the reality that this law would greatly limit the ability of prohibited individuals to easily obtain firearms to commit crimes.¹²² Laws exist to set standards and norms within a civilized society with good governance practices; the argument that people break laws is not a reason to reduce legislation. Yet this is one of the NRA's primary arguments against gun legislation.

Stinchfield's and others' vocal opposition does not present a counterargument to universal background checks. It is simply a distraction from the policy debate intended to stoke the fear of losing guns and freedom upon which the NRA's narrative is based.

Vilification of opposition

Much like demagogues and autocrats demonize their opposition, the NRA attacks advocates of gun violence prevention in order to justify its political agenda. In this vein, the group and its surrogates have repeatedly painted the opposition as traitors who seek to strip the law-abiding gun owner and American patriot of their fundamental freedoms. This tactic serves as an umbrella to vilify the media, government officials, and civil society members who advocate for legislation that would reduce gun violence.

NRA pundits often criticize the media—which they refer to as the “legacy liberal media”—for perpetuating what they deem a “gun-grabbing” narrative. The focus on painting traditional media as a self-aggrandizing disinformation machine is a common theme across NRA media platforms.¹²³ Dana Loesch accused the media of enjoying gun violence tragedies as a means to increase ratings, claiming that “many in legacy media love mass shootings. You guys love it. I’m not saying you love the tragedy but I’m saying you love the ratings. Crying white mothers are ratings gold to many in the legacy media.”¹²⁴ The NRA has repeatedly stated that the media increases panic and misinformation around shootings, arguing that the press coverage makes gun violence appear more prominent than it is.¹²⁵ Furthermore, NRA surrogates often imply that the media is deliberately withholding information from the public about gun violence.¹²⁶ Much like Putin’s and Duterte’s attempts to erode public trust in the media, the ultimate goal of the NRA and its surrogates’ efforts is to make media sanctioned by themselves appear to be the only reliable source of information.

Members of Congress advancing gun violence prevention legislation face regular attacks from the NRA.¹²⁷ The NRA portrays these officials as gun-grabbing traitors who seek to make Americans more vulnerable to attack. For example, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), and Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) are constantly attacked by NRATV personalities. The strikes against these elected officials are not based in policy or fact; instead, the NRA’s rhetoric is apocalyptic, using its public platforms to portray those who oppose the group’s political agenda as enemies of the American people. This tactic bears strong resemblance to those used by Turkish President Erdoğan, who uses his office and control over the state broadcaster to paint anyone who disagrees with Turkey’s official narrative as a traitor seeking to undermine the state.

Speaker Pelosi’s leadership has been targeted repeatedly, particularly given her strong stance on not funding a border wall. The NRA attempts to vilify the speaker by making her appear elitist and out of touch with the struggles of average Americans—willing to abuse her power in order to fulfill her personal agendas, including those that would allegedly limit the rights of gun owners.¹²⁸

NRATV personalities depict Sen. Feinstein as someone who is morally opposed to the Second Amendment and American freedoms.¹²⁹ Her repeated leadership on legislation to ban assault weapons has made her a common target of the NRA. She has been dubbed “the queen of gun control”¹³⁰ on NRATV, with some NRATV personalities maintaining that “assault weapons” do not exist, making Feinstein’s proposed legislation a slippery slope toward a universal gun ban.¹³¹ Stinchfield used his show to discuss Sen. Feinstein’s introduction of the 2019 Assault Weapons Ban, stating that by introducing a bill that would likely not advance in the Senate nor be signed into law by the president, the senator was “spitting in the eye of hardworking, patriotic Americans.”¹³²

The visibility of Sen. Murphy’s gun violence prevention advocacy efforts increased following the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and six adults were murdered by a shooter with an assault rifle. The NRA directly links Murphy’s efforts to pass common-sense gun violence legislation to disarmament, which, it claims, will make American families less safe. In response to a speech delivered by Sen. Murphy in which he discussed the realities of gun violence as part of a call to encourage his fellow lawmakers to pass common-sense legislation, Stinchfield stated, “Chris Murphy and his band of loons in the U.S. Senate and the Democratically controlled House of Representatives want to disarm me. That could cost me and my family our lives.”¹³³ Stinchfield presents Sen. Murphy as an enemy of gun owners, whose efforts are only focused on complete disarmament, making it impossible for someone to support both the senator’s call for legislation and also the right to own a gun.

Civil society is actively engaged in the quest to end gun violence and prevent more families from being torn apart by preventable tragedies. The NRA has not missed the opportunity to undermine the efforts of gun violence prevention advocacy organizations by demonizing them as “disarmament advocates.”¹³⁴ These groups are attacked for being mouthpieces for the coastal elite who are, according to the NRA, fundamentally at odds with the American patriot.¹³⁵ The NRA seizes on Michael Bloomberg’s prominence in the gun violence prevention movement through his affiliation with the organization Everytown for Gun Safety.¹³⁶ By linking the movement writ large to Bloomberg, the NRA minimizes the efforts being made across the nation at a local level to address this crisis, which is plaguing communities on a daily basis.¹³⁷ Furthermore, by linking gun violence prevention advocacy efforts to a prominent billionaire, the NRA is able to perpetuate arguments that the movement is disconnected from the average American—akin to the model used by Orbán to vilify George Soros and his efforts to spread democracy within Hungary.¹³⁸

Nor is Soros free from the NRA's criticism. Personalities on NRATV will lambast him and Bloomberg for their alleged efforts to undermine American freedoms. The attacks from the NRA—and from Wayne LaPierre himself—against Soros mimic those of the populist, illiberal regime in Hungary.¹³⁹ The NRA refers to the philanthropist as a “left-wing gun-hater,” and the “field general championing and funding liberal progressive causes that amount to an all-out assault on our freedoms.”¹⁴⁰

Shannon Watts, founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, is also targeted by the NRA for her work following the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary. Her organization's partnership with Everytown incited the NRA to amplify its claims that gun violence prevention advocacy groups are merely pawns of Bloomberg.¹⁴¹

Consequences and implications of the NRA's illiberal messaging

Strongman leaders use fearmongering rhetoric as part of an overall agenda to gain power and retain control over a country. The National Rifle Association uses these tactics to control the debate around gun violence and ensure the gun industry continues to be profitable, regardless of the human toll.

The implications of the NRA's use of these tactics within the United States are devastating. By creating confusion around the realities of gun violence through misleading reporting, inaccurate academic studies, and false data, the NRA is weakening the public's ability to properly inform themselves about the realities of gun violence and common-sense legislation. Public opinion research indicates that the majority of people in the United States—across partisan lines—support policies to reduce gun violence, such as universal background checks for all firearm sales and assault weapons bans, yet polling data also indicate that a majority of Americans believe gun ownership increases personal safety.¹⁴² Multiple academic studies have found that gun ownership elevates the risks of homicide, suicide, and unintentional shootings.¹⁴³ Americans' confusion about guns and safety is indicative of how deeply the NRA's messaging has penetrated the American public and how intractable the false narrative can be.

By perpetuating a culture of fear and divisiveness, the gun rights group is crippling legislators and lawmakers who want to address a public health crisis that kills more than 35,000 people a year in the United States.¹⁴⁴ The gun lobby has prominent political ties and has historically been able to advance or block legislation in many states and in Congress. Many members of Congress not only support or oppose legislation tied to the NRA's interests but also will repeat the organization's talking points in hearings or on the floors of Congress.¹⁴⁵

The NRA and Russia

The implications of the NRA's use of illicit messaging tactics is problematic for the health and strength of U.S. democracy, with questions arising following the 2016 election on the linkage between Russia and the NRA.¹⁴⁶ For years, gun violence prevention advocates have raised concerns about the lack of information around who donates to the organization—which is notoriously tight-lipped about its funding streams.¹⁴⁷ Some links between the gun rights organization and foreign entities were exposed through the indictment of Maria Butina in 2018, who pled guilty to conspiring to act as an unregistered agent of Russia.¹⁴⁸ Butina established a relationship with members of NRA leadership, helping NRA leaders travel to Moscow, as well as meet with prominent Republican political figures.¹⁴⁹ Given Russia's desires to destabilize the United States, the connections between Butina, Russian officials, and NRA leadership are troubling. It brings into question whether the organization that brands itself as “freedom's safest place” could be associated with efforts to destabilize American democratic principles and norms.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion



Americans all over this country are so sick of the lies and the sanctimonious hypocrisy that has pushed good citizens in this country to the edge of fear, fear for the future of their country, fear of an increasingly unstable society.”¹⁵¹

Wayne LaPierre, National Rifle Association Annual Meeting, 2018

While the strategy of the National Rifle Association has been remarkably effective thus far, the United States has recently experienced a shift around gun culture. In 2018, following the murder of 14 students and three staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by a shooter armed with an assault rifle, several corporations severed ties with the gun rights organization.¹⁵² Gun violence prevention has become a priority policy for many people in the United States, with many candidates campaigning on gun violence prevention legislation during the 2018 midterm elections and winning their seats—including in Virginia’s 10th congressional district, where the NRA is headquartered.¹⁵³ Cracks are being exposed in the group’s façade, and it is not responding well.

The vitriol in the group’s messaging has become so pronounced that it has caused long-standing members of the organization to question its strategy. Prominent members such as Marion Hammer, one of the NRA’s most revered lobbyists, have questioned whether NRATV’s expanded messaging and inflammatory language are actually necessary to fulfill the group’s stated goals. Jeff Knox, NRA member and director of The Firearms Coalition, a prominent grassroots gun rights organization, even noted that the programming seems to be more focused on providing “red meat for the hard right” than elevating the Second Amendment.¹⁵⁴ The internal debates on the value of NRATV and whether the organization needs to engage in fearmongering and demonizing rhetoric expose the truth behind the NRA’s messaging strategy: The goal is not to protect gun rights but to secure power.

The NRA has established a narrative that frames the organization as the protector of freedom while combating the passage of legislation that would make communities safer from gun violence. Yet the group is not driven by a desire to protect fundamental freedoms.

Much like a nondemocratic leader, its goal is centered around a desire to secure and sustain political power. While authoritarian regimes use the demagogue's playbook to suppress civil liberties and political rights, the NRA's playbook protects the gun industry and allows the epidemic of gun violence to continue ravaging the nation.

About the author

Rukmani Bhatia is the policy analyst for Gun Violence Prevention at the Center for American Progress. She previously served in the Obama administration in the U.S. Agency for International Development's Bureau for Europe and Eurasia. Prior to her political appointment, she served as the inaugural Hillary R. Clinton research fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security. She holds a master's degree from Georgetown's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a bachelor's degree with honors from Wellesley College.

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