

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

# Odessa, Texas mass shooting responses tie together evangelical Christians and guns

When guns evoke such positive (even sacred) feelings of security and national belonging, is it any wonder that so many evangelicals refuse to consider gun control?



— We can't understand our national divisions over guns without recognizing the powerful role religion plays in Americans' lives. ehrlif / Getty Images

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Sept. 4, 2019, 4:30 AM ET / Updated Sept. 4, 2019, 11:08 AM ET

**By Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry and Landon Schnabel**

The names and dates change, but the story remains the same: **another mass-casualty shooting**, another period of shock, grief and soul-searching for the nation. Like clockwork, **the usual divisions emerge**, with contradictory answers for **how we can keep this from happening** yet again.

**Texas experienced two mass shootings** in August. We wrote this column in the aftermath of the first shooting, **in El Paso** on Aug. 4. But before it appeared, there was another mass shooting – **this time in Odessa**, on Aug. 31. As we all could expect given how **tragically common (even clichéd)** these events are becoming, **immediate responses from public figures** to the Odessa carnage followed the same trend as those we observed a few weeks earlier after El Paso.



President Donald Trump, as he has after other shootings, offered thoughts and prayers but no promises on how he will respond. On Sunday, he said that the **Odessa shooting "really hasn't changed anything"** about how lawmakers are approaching gun control legislation. **Given Trump's support** and then **opposition to gun control legislation** in the weeks after

the shooting in El Paso (but before Odessa), his most recent comments aren't surprising.

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More surprising to some, perhaps, is the prominence of religious rhetoric and reasoning in leaders' responses to gun violence. Scholars who've studied these issues for the past few years, however, now recognize that we can't understand our national divisions over guns without recognizing the powerful role religion plays in Americans' lives.

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*No religious group has been more steadfast in their support for Trump and taken a more central role in debates over gun violence than evangelical Protestants.*

And while a recent poll shows **Republicans' approval** of Trump's handling of gun policy being among his lowest in the GOP, no religious group has been more steadfast in their support for Trump and taken a more central role in debates over gun violence than evangelical Protestants. This is no coincidence, because when it comes to guns in America, **evangelicals stand apart from all other Americans** in what they believe causes gun violence, what they think we need to do to stop it and especially how guns make them feel.

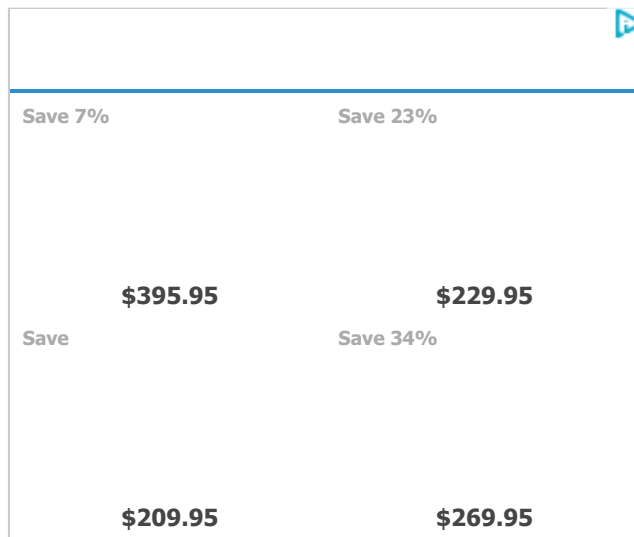
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Less than 24 hours after the carnage in Texas and Ohio in early August, Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor of Texas and an evangelical Christian, **appeared on “Fox & Friends”** and condemned “this evil act,” which he blamed on “a video game industry that teaches young people to kill” and God no longer being a central part of American culture.

“Half of the country are getting ready to go to church, and yet tomorrow we won’t let our kids even pray in our schools,” Patrick said. “As long as we continue to only praise God and look at God on a Sunday morning and kick him out of the town square at our schools the other six days of the week, what do we expect? What do we expect?”

 **[VIEW THIS GRAPHIC ON NBCNEWS.COM](#)**

As it turns out, Patrick’s views are widely shared among American evangelicals. Drawing on data from the **2014 Baylor Religion Survey**, a national sample of Americans, we are able to examine what evangelicals think contributes “a great deal” to gun violence and compare it to what other Americans think (find out more about the survey by clicking on the hyperlink). While this survey is now five years old, it remains the only national survey with high-quality religion questions and a broad collection of measures addressing attitudes toward guns and gun violence.



A few patterns clearly stand out in our research. First, over 74 percent of evangelicals (almost 40 percent more than other Americans) believe that “the absence of God from our public schools and places” contributes “a great deal” to gun violence, almost a word-for-word echo of Dan Patrick’s statement.

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*For a clear majority of evangelicals, America’s growing godlessness is enabling gun violence.*

For a clear majority of evangelicals, America’s growing godlessness – exemplified not just by falling church attendance but by the waning influence of religion in daily life – is enabling gun violence. **Elsewhere we show** it is their overwhelming allegiance to **Christian nationalism** that leads evangelicals to frame the gun debate in these terms.

Second, we see that less than half (44 percent) of all evangelicals believe the availability of guns has much to do with gun violence. The bigger issue, they feel, is the lack of God in Americans’ hearts.



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After the shootings in Odessa, state Rep. Matt Schaefer **tweeted**:

**Matt Schaefer**  
@RepMattSchaefer

Godless, depraved hearts. That IS the root of the problem. Every person needs a heart transformed by faith in God through Jesus. May God be near to those suffering in Odessa and Midland, and everywhere that evil has struck a blow. [#txlege](#)

2,308 8:47 PM - Aug 31, 2019

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You can see this same perspective in evangelical leader Franklin Graham’s response on Aug. 7 to the El Paso shooting and the one in Dayton, Ohio, the same weekend.

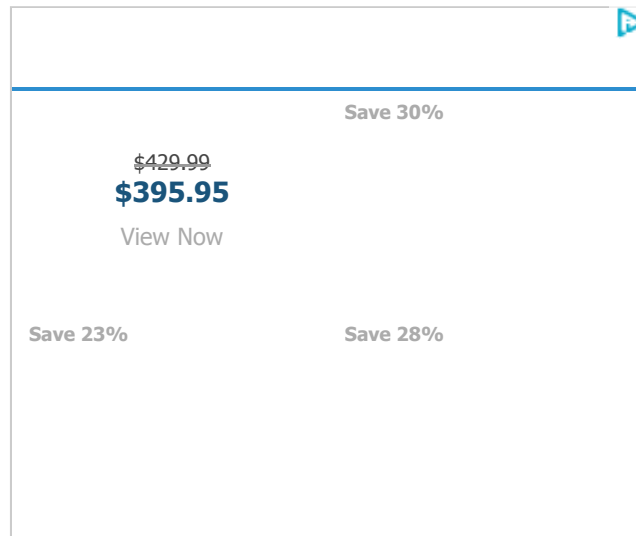
**Franklin Graham**  
@Franklin\_Graham

Where does all this hate come from? It is so sad that 31 people died last week as a result of mass shootings. Our inner cities across this country are war zones. This hate doesn’t come from the barrel of a gun or the blade of a knife, it comes from the human heart.

33.3K 7:36 AM - Aug 7, 2019

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Finally, we can see nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of evangelicals agree with Patrick that media violence – movies or video games – contributes to gun violence in the United States, despite the rejection of this **causal link by most criminologists** who study violence in popular media. This is significantly higher than all other Americans.



Clearly, when explaining gun violence in the United States, evangelical Protestants look to very different underlying causes than other Americans. This naturally leads them to different suggestions on how we should address gun violence.

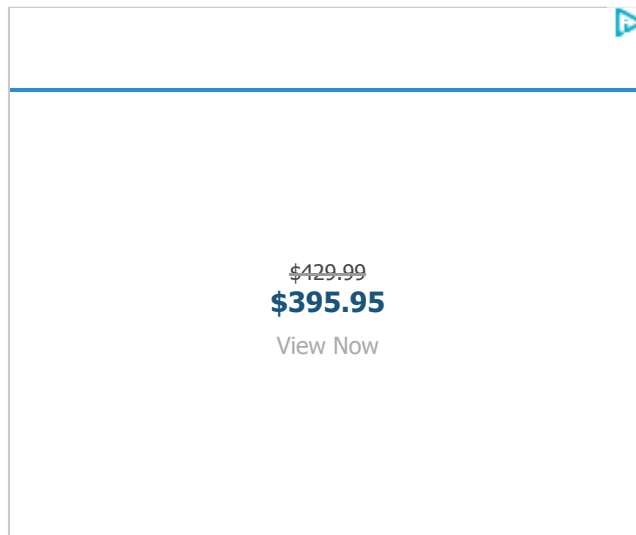
When asked about possible solutions to mass shootings, and gun control in particular, Patrick downplayed bans on guns or assault weapons. Instead, he said heavily armed citizens will limit the destruction. Several times throughout the interview, Patrick maintained that we can't and shouldn't "politicize" this.

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*When explaining gun violence in the United States, evangelical Protestants look to very different underlying causes than other Americans.*


Numerous evangelical megachurch pastors, such as **Greg Laurie, Robert Jeffress and Jack Graham**, echoed this sentiment; politicizing these shootings will, in their view, never fix gun violence.

Evangelicals across America agree. When asked about potential solutions to gun violence, fewer evangelicals (52 percent) favor a ban on semi-automatic weapons than the rest of America (63 percent). And fewer evangelicals favor better mental health screening of gun buyers, bans on high capacity ammunition clips, or banning hand guns except by law enforcement.



**Rep. Schaefer again illustrates these views.** On the day of the Odessa shootings, he forcefully declared his opposition to any form of gun control **in favor of other options.**

 **Matt Schaefer** @RepMattSchaefer · Aug 31, 2019  
 Replying to @RepMattSchaefer  
 I am NOT going to use the evil acts of a handful of people to diminish the God-given rights of my fellow Texans. Period. None of these so-called gun-control solutions will work to stop a person with evil intent. 2/6

 **Matt Schaefer**  
 @RepMattSchaefer

I say NO to “red flag” pre-crime laws. NO to universal background checks. NO to bans on AR-15s, or high capacity magazines. NO to mandatory gun buybacks. 3/6

10.3K 9:35 PM - Aug 31, 2019



7,331 people are talking about this



**Matt Schaefer** @RepMattSchaefer · Aug 31, 2019

Replying to @RepMattSchaefer

I say NO to “red flag” pre-crime laws. NO to universal background checks. NO to bans on AR-15s, or high capacity magazines. NO to mandatory gun buybacks. 3/6



**Matt Schaefer**

@RepMattSchaefer

What can we do? YES to praying for victims. YES to praying for protection. YES to praying that God would transform the hearts of people with evil intent. YES to fathers not leaving their wives and children. YES to discipline in the homes. 4/6

8,889 9:35 PM - Aug 31, 2019

13.9K people are talking about this

But the idea that evangelicals don't want to “politicize” this issue, as the above quotes might suggest, rings untrue. Rather, it is certain political solutions that they oppose.

Evangelicals are far less interested in laws that limit the number of guns or restrict who can buy them. But evangelicals are more in favor of policies that increase the number of “good guys with guns” (security guards, teachers and school officials, all law-abiding citizens).

For instance, **Schaefer signaled his unyielding support** for “giving every law-abiding single mom the right to carry a handgun to protect her and her kids without permission from the state, and the same for all other law-abiding Texans of age.”

In other words, the solution to mass shootings for evangelicals is less about eliminating the possibility of gun violence (which evangelical leaders are often quick to point out cannot be done), but to ensure that evil gun violence can be conquered with “righteous” gun violence.

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So why are evangelicals so different from other Americans regarding guns? One explanation is because of how guns make them feel.

Significantly more gun-owning evangelicals than all other gun-owning Americans report that owning a gun makes them feel safe (77 percent), confident (59 percent), patriotic (48 percent), and more valuable to their family (44 percent) and their community (41 percent).

For gun-owning evangelicals, more so than other gun-owning Americans at least, gun ownership and rights go hand-in-hand with being an American and a good citizen.

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OPINION

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The pervasiveness of **Christian nationalist** ideology and rhetoric within the evangelical subculture inclines them to view their **Second Amendment rights as sacred**, handed down by God for the benefit of the nation (which helps us understand why owning a gun would curiously make them feel more patriotic).

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But in addition to their more “spiritual” concerns, social and psychological drivers matter for those in the evangelical subculture as well. Gun ownership is an expression of civic responsibility and helps them feel useful to those they care about. And it makes them feel secure and self-reliant.

When guns evoke such positive (even sacred) feelings of security and national belonging, is it any wonder that so many evangelicals refuse to consider gun control as a possible solution to America’s epidemic of mass shootings?

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Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry and Landon Schnabel

Andrew Whitehead is an associate professor of sociology at Clemson University and the Assistant Director of the Association of Religion Data Archives. Samuel Perry is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma. Their book "Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States," will be published in February 2020 by Oxford University Press.

Landon Schnabel is a postdoctoral fellow in the Polarization and Social Change Lab affiliated with the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society and the Department of Sociology. His book "Is Faith Feminine? What Americans Really Think about Gender and Religion" is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.