Debate: Gun Regulation (Wednesday, 3/28)

The Question

In the wake of several tragic mass shootings (e.g., those at Sandy Hook Elementary School, a movie theater in Aurora, CO, a church in Charleston, SC, a nightclub in Orlando, FL, and a music festival in Las Vegas), the regulation of guns remains a hotly debated topic in the U.S.

The U.S. has the highest number of guns per capita out of any country in the world (to put things in perspective, there are about 150 times more guns per capita in the U.S. than Japan). In the U.S., there are approximately the same number of firearms as there are people (i.e., about 310 million). Over 11,000 people are murdered by firearms in the U.S. each year. Approximately an additional 21,000 people commit suicide with a firearm each year, and about another 1,000 people die from accidentally discharged firearms. That’s about 33,000 gun deaths in the U.S. each year—almost exactly the same number of people who die in traffic accidents each year.

Most of us think it is morally permissible for the government to restrict some of our freedoms in order to ensure our safety. If one wants to own and operate a dangerous piece of machinery such as an automobile, it is often regulated carefully for the protection of others and ourselves. For instance, in order to operate a vehicle, one must first pass a competency test. Some laws are also in place to protect the operator: Seatbelts, airbags, vehicle inspection tests, and so on are typically required. Other laws protect other people: It is illegal to drive over a certain speed limit, or run stop signs, or drive on sidewalks, etc. And some things are simply so dangerous that they should probably be banned altogether. For instance, it is probably the case that not just anyone should be permitted to own a nuclear bomb, a jet fighter aircraft, or a vial of the ebola virus.

On the other hand, many believe that we have a (Constitutionally protected) moral right to defend and protect ourselves. (Michael Huemer defends this here.) And many worry that banning or heavily regulating guns would infringe upon this right, and would therefore be an unjust restriction of our liberty. Many also claim that banning guns would not reduce the amount of gun violence, and that criminals would still obtain them illegally. Some even claim that the solution to gun violence is not fewer guns but more guns (since would-be aggressors would be less likely to attack if they suspected that their victim was carrying a firearm).

Furthermore, guns are currently regulated. Typically, one must obtain a permit to buy one, and there are laws concerning where they can be carried or fired, and certain types of guns are prohibited altogether in some states (e.g., machine guns). In some states, one must even attend a class and practice firing a gun before owning one.

The question is: In the interest of reducing the number of gun deaths, ought guns be regulated even more heavily (especially in those states with the most lenient regulations)? Presently, our nation is divided over this issue, at a near 50-50% split (roughly 55% say yes, while 45% say no).

Your Task

Question: Should ownership, carry, and use of firearms be regulated more strictly?

You have been divided you into two groups. One group will argue that the answer to the above questions is “yes” (this group will argue in favor of stricter regulation). The other group will argue that the answer is “no” (this group will argue against stricter regulation).
Getting Started

Now that you have met your teammates, I encourage you to continue to email one another, exchange phone numbers, arrange to meet, etc.

You may want to do a bit of research before you begin, in order to familiarize yourself with some of the common reasons that each side gives in defense of their position.

What To Do

Opening statement: Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give an opening statement of 3-5 minutes. During this opening statement, you will present some argument or reasons for believing that your group has the correct answer to the questions above.

Response statement: After both teams give their opening statements, each group will be given a couple of minutes to brainstorm quietly, to agree on what your group will say in response to your opponents. Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give a 3 minute response statement. During this response statement, you will provide some reason or justification for believing that what the opposing group has just said is mistaken.

Open discussion: At the end, the two teams will be allowed some time to discuss the issue with one another informally, before I open discussion to the entire class for Q&A.

Format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Time Allotment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team “YES” opening statement</td>
<td>3-5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team “NO” opening statement</td>
<td>3-5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team “YES” brainstorm session</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team “YES” response statement</td>
<td>2-3 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team “NO” brainstorm session</td>
<td>2 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team “NO” response statement</td>
<td>2-3 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal open discussion between teams</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informal Q&amp;A between teams and class</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
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</tbody>
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Grading

This assignment is worth 10% of your grade. Half of this grade will be assigned by myself based on the performance of your team during the class debate. The other half of this grade will be based on peer assessment. You will be graded by the other members of your team in an anonymous survey following the debate. Here are some things I’ll be looking for:

- Are the arguments that you present clear, carefully stated, and persuasive?
- Do you handle questions, criticisms, etc., clearly, carefully, and persuasively?
- Is it apparent that your team has put some careful thought and consideration into this issue?
- Do you function well as a team? (e.g., avoid contradicting, bickering with, or talking over your own teammates)