

# Students' Opinions about Concealed Firearms on University Campuses<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *Texas Senate Bill 11 passed and will become law in August 2016. The legislation allows individuals with concealed firearms licenses to carry their handguns on all public university campuses in Texas. Prior research indicated that most students do not support such a law (Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, & Nobles, 2012; Thompson et al. 2013). In two experiments we examine if university students' opinions can be altered by the framing of the questions on the survey and how different beliefs and knowledge about school violence and Second Amendment rights relate to feelings about Texas Senate Bill 11. Results showed that framing did have a small influence on approval of a law like Texas Senate Bill 11. Overall, more students disliked the law than those that liked the law. Males and Republicans were most likely to support the law.*

In August 2016 Texas Senate Bill 11 will go into effect allowing anyone with a concealed handgun license to carry firearms on college and university campuses in Texas. Opponents of this law argue that allowing students to carry firearms could increase the chance of risky behavior leading to injury or death. However, proponents believe that allowing students to carry concealed weapons could also discourage a person with the intent to use a weapon on campus from harming students. Proponents often argue that the overall rate of homicide is much higher for the general population than for college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). With the current prohibition of firearms on campuses, it is unclear whether the lower rate of homicide is due to the prohibition or due to other factors that differ between college students and the general population.

The goal of the current study was to examine if framing the discussion about Texas Senate Bill 11 would affect students' acceptance of the law and how different characteristics or beliefs held by students might have influenced their acceptance of Texas Senate Bill 11. A few studies have examined college students' perceptions of laws such as Texas Senate Bill 11. Thompson et al. (2013) selected 15 midwestern public universities from which to draw a large sample ( $N=1649$ ). The instrument used to collect students' opinions was a 48-item survey. Survey results indicated that 78% of participants were unsupportive of allowing students, faculty, and visitors to carry concealed handguns on campus. The demographic characteristics

of a person most likely to support a law like Texas Senate Bill 11 was a male, whose party affiliation was other than Democratic, who had been a victim of crime, and who had experience with guns (Thompson et al., 2013).

Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, and Nobles's (2012) study also asked university students about a law like Senate Bill 11. Their participants were drawn from two public universities, one in southeastern Texas and the other in eastern Washington State. The results indicated that students from Texas and Washington were uncomfortable with allowing students to carry concealed handguns on campus. In both states, more than a 2:1 ratio of students reported being uncomfortable with concealed carry on campuses. Odds ratios indicated that gender, political party, being a victim of crime, carrying a firearm, and following news concerning violent events were associated with comfort with laws like Senate Bill 11 (Cavanaugh et al., 2012).

Although many students have strong opinions about Senate Bill 11, researchers found that opinions about some policy issues can be affected by framing (i.e. providing additional context which may sway opinion before participants consider the main issue). Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) used framing to ask adult Kansas residents about their feelings toward concealed handgun laws. The researchers contacted participants by phone and asked how they felt about a concealed handgun law after framing the issue with either an individual rights frame or a public safety frame. They found that there was more

support for concealed handguns in the individual rights frame than the public safety frame. They also found that male gun owners were more likely to support the law. Finally, Republicans, Independent voters, and participants with less political knowledge showed greater difference in support based on the frame they received (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001).

In two experiments, we asked undergraduate students to answer several questions about their acceptance of aspects of Senate Bill 11 and their knowledge and beliefs about related issues, specifically, school violence and Second Amendment rights. In Experiment 1 we hypothesized that by framing the questions about Senate Bill 11 with questions priming them to think about Second Amendment rights or school shootings that participants would be more or less (respectively) supportive of concealed handguns on campus. In Experiment 2 we expanded our sample size and utilized an online version of the control survey used in Experiment 1. This provided more power to find relationships between feelings about Senate Bill 11 and the aforementioned related issues.

## Experiment 1

### Method

*Participants.* Ninety-six undergraduate students (53 female and 42 male; mean age = 20.42;  $SD=2.91$  years) attending Stephen F. Austin State University participated in the survey. Of participants, 49 reported their race or ethnicity as White, 31 reported as African American/Black, 11 reported as Hispanic/Latino, 1 reported as Asian, and 4 reported multiple ethnicities. Thirty-seven participants reported their political affiliation as Republican, 28 reported as Democratic, 10 reported as Independent, 7 reported as Libertarian, and 14 reported a different party or no party affiliation. One participant was excluded from all analyses because they did not complete any of the demographic questions. In return for participation, students received course credit in the form of extra credit.

*Materials.* The study included three survey forms. The three survey types consisted of the same questions, but the questions were presented in a different order on each. There were 14 school shooting questions (1 open-ended), 14 Second Amendment questions (1 open-ended), and 10 target questions concerning concealed carry on university campus laws. Three of the target questions were identified as the primary dependent variables:

1. How would you feel about individuals who possess a concealed firearm license being able to legally bring their firearms to the SFASU campus?
2. How would you feel about faculty and staff who possess a concealed firearm license being able to legally bring their firearms to the SFASU campus?
3. How would you feel about students who possess a concealed firearm license being able to legally bring their firearms to the SFASU campus?

Survey A presented the Second Amendment questions at the beginning, followed by the target questions, and then the school shooting questions. Survey B presented the school shooting questions at the beginning, followed by the target questions, and then the Second Amendment questions. Survey C was a control version and presented the target questions in the beginning, followed by the Second Amendment questions, and then the school shooting questions. Ten demographic questions were at the end of each survey.

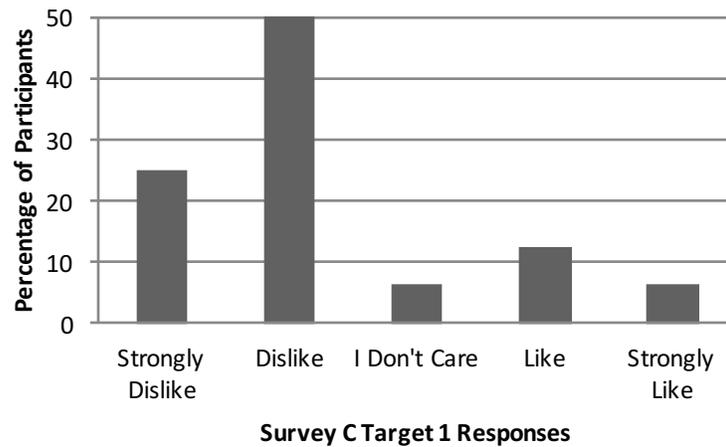
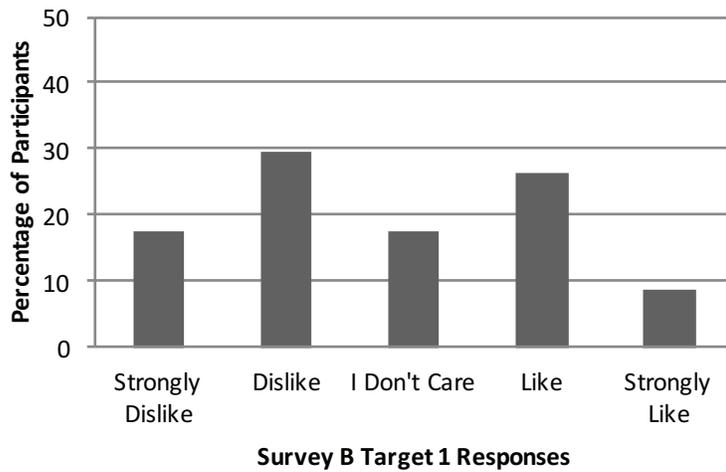
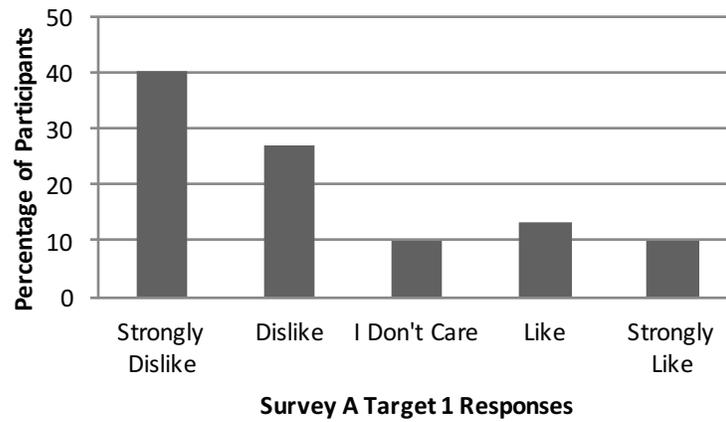
*Design and Procedure.* The experiment was a between-subjects design, containing one independent variable with three levels. Two of the groups were primed and one was not. The participants in the primed groups saw either the Second Amendment questions first or the school shooting questions first. The answers to most of the survey questions were arranged on a Likert scale; some questions were open-ended, had yes or no options, or were demographic questions. Each participant signed a consent form before completing the pencil and paper survey. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the three survey forms. Thirty participants completed Survey A, 34 participants completed Survey B, and 32 participants completed Survey C.

### Results and Discussion

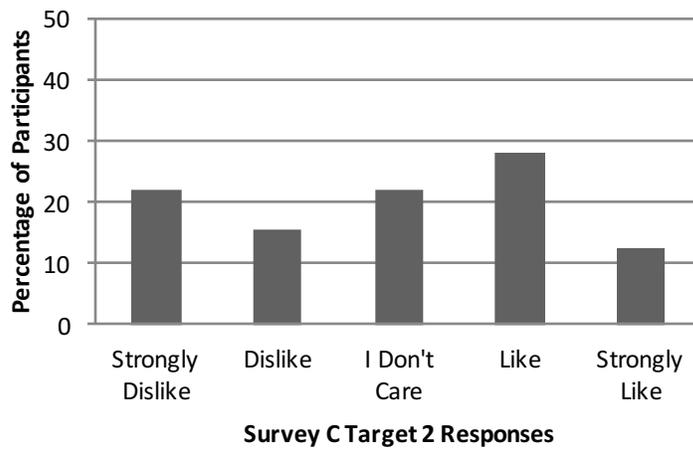
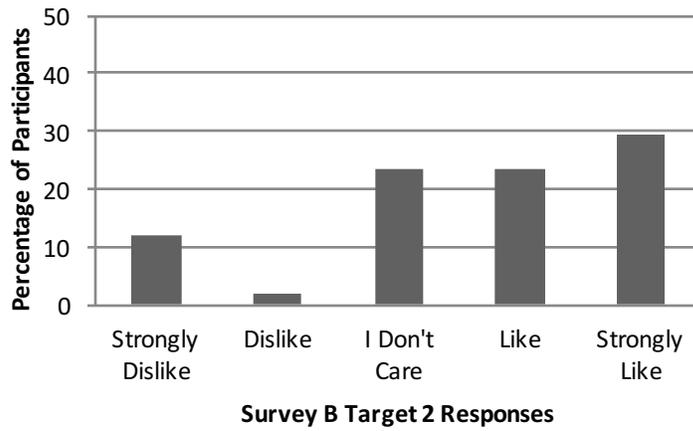
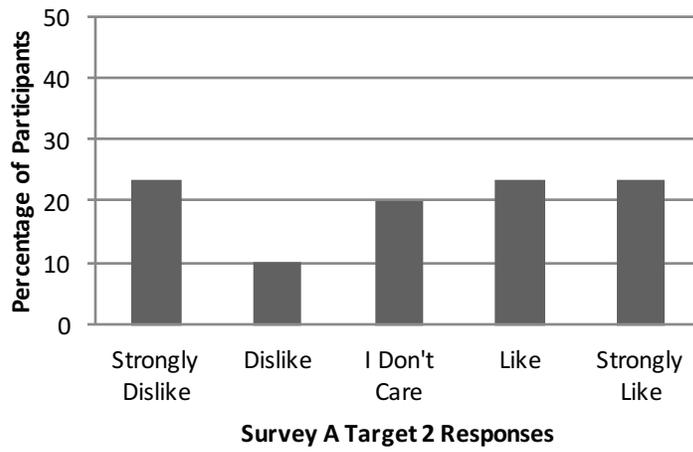
Of primary interest in this experiment was whether the framing used with questions concerning school shootings or Second Amendment rights would affect participants' feelings about a law like Senate Bill 11. The secondary analyses concerned how political party and other beliefs might have affected the participants' feelings about a law like Senate Bill 11.

Figure 1 displays the percentages of participants' responses to Target Question 1. The mean for responses on Target Question 1 for Survey A was 2.27 ( $SD=1.39$ ), for Survey B it was 2.79 ( $SD=1.27$ ), and for Survey C it was 2.25 ( $SD=1.16$ ). Although Survey A and C show similar means, the distribution showed a higher percentage of "Strongly Dislike" for the School Shooting frame

**Figure 1.** The Distribution of Responses to Target Question 1 Based on Survey Form (Exp. 1)



**Figure 2.** The Distribution of Responses to Target Question 2 Based on Survey Form (Exp. 1)



**Table 1.** Mean Approval Rates in Experiment 1 for Target Question 1 based on gender and political party

	Men	Women
Democratic	1.67 (.99) n=12	2.13 (.89) n=16
Republican	3.44 (1.50) n=16	2.71 (1.42) n=21

SD in parentheses and number in each group below the mean

(Survey A) than for the Control (Survey C) for which “Dislike” was the modal response. Survey B showed the highest mean, indicating the greatest approval of Senate Bill 11 for those that received the Second Amendment rights frame. This frame also showed the more traditional bimodal distribution for this issue (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001).

Figure 2 displays the percentages of participants' responses to Target Question 2. This question differed from Target Question 1 in that it asked about faculty and staff carrying concealed firearms rather than the generic “individuals” in Target Question 1. The mean for responses on Target Question 2 for Survey A was 3.13 ( $SD=1.50$ ), for Survey B it was 3.47 ( $SD=1.35$ ), and for Survey C it was 2.94 ( $SD=1.37$ ). Unlike the responses to Target Question 1, the distribution of responses to Target Question 2 does not appear to differ very much regardless of framing. Additionally, the means are much higher for Target Question 2 than for Target Question 1, indicating that participants were more accepting of faculty or staff carrying concealed firearms compared to individuals. Target Question 3, which considered “students” carrying firearms, did not show much difference from Target Question 1 so those distributions were not included. The mean for responses on Target Question 3 for Survey A was 2.37 ( $SD=1.40$ ), for Survey B it was 2.76 ( $SD=1.21$ ), and for Survey C it was 2.19 ( $SD=1.33$ ).

As prior research has shown that male Republicans tend to be the most supportive of laws like Senate Bill 11 (Cavanaugh et al. 2012; Thompson et al. 2013), we analyzed the data using a 2 × 2 between-groups Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with gender and political party as the independent variables and with Target Question 1 responses as the dependent variable. In this analysis, participants who identified a party affiliation other than Democratic or Republican ( $N=31$ ) were excluded, which

left 28 males and 37 females. There was a significant main effect of political party,  $F(1, 61)=13.74, p<.01$ . Republicans ( $M=3.03, SD=1.48$ ) were significantly more approving of individuals carrying concealed firearms on campus than Democrats ( $M=1.93, SD=0.94$ ). There was not a significant main effect of gender,  $F<1$ . However, there was a marginally significant interaction of political party and gender,  $F(1, 61)=3.44, p=.068$ . This interaction indicated that male Republicans had the highest approval of any other group and male Democrats had the lowest approval than any other group. Table 1 shows the means for each of the groups.

Overall, Experiment 1 results supported prior findings. Evidence of priming similar to Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) was found. More participants disliked or strongly disliked laws similar to Senate Bill 11 than liked or strongly liked them overall. However, when asked a series of questions regarding Second Amendment rights, more participants liked Senate Bill 11. The school shootings framing had a less dramatic effect on the distribution of preference but did result in more “strong dislikes” than “dislikes” compared to the control survey. Importantly, the framing did not matter as much as demographic characteristics (political party affiliation) and overall approval increased when the group of individuals that were allowed to carry concealed firearms was limited to faculty and staff. Finally, we found that Republican men supported Senate Bill 11 more than Republican women or Democrats, supporting Thompson et al. (2013) and Cavanaugh et al. (2012). However, with such a small sample size, it was unreasonable to perform a larger scale investigation of the results. In Experiment 2, we decided to focus on how the issues involved in the frames (school shootings and Second Amendment rights) were related to approval of Senate Bill 11 by university students.

## Experiment 2

### Method

**Participants.** Three hundred and fifty undergraduate students at Stephen F. Austin State University completed the survey online through Qualtrics Online Survey Software. There were 87 male participants and 261 female participants (2 did not indicate gender). The mean age was 19.54 ( $SD=2.30$ ) and 42 participants did not report age. One hundred and ninety-one participants reported their race or ethnicity as White (54%), 71 reported as African American/Black (20%), 42 reported as Hispanic/Latino (12%), 8 reported as Asian, three reported as American Indian/Native American, 28 reported two or

**Table 2.** Correlations between Target Questions

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1) Target1	—									
2) Target2	.75** (350)	—								
3) Target3	.84** (350)	.76** (350)	—							
4) CFObtain	.42** (349)	.44** (349)	.44** (349)	—						
5) CFViolence	-.58** (345)	-.58** (345)	-.57** (345)	-.04 (345)	—					
6) CFFatal	.53** (346)	.61** (346)	.56** (346)	.46** (345)	-.48** (344)	—				
7) 2ndAmImport	.33** (349)	.43** (349)	.36** (349)	.40** (348)	-.23** (344)	.43** (345)	—			
8) WitnessViolent	.05 (343)	.04 (349)	.07 (343)	.10 (342)	.00 (399)	.07 (340)	.04 (342)	—		
9) ShootKnow	.02 (350)	.10 (350)	.01 (350)	.08 (349)	-.04 (345)	.12* (349)	.20** (349)	.03 (343)	—	
10) ShootPrevent	.20** (348)	.23** (348)	.26** (348)	.12* (347)	-.13* (343)	.18** (344)	.22** (347)	.09 (342)	.09 (342)	1

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$ 

The number of participants is indicated in parentheses.

more ethnicities, and seven did not report ethnicity. The Texas Comptroller's Office reported that in 2006 48.3% of Texans were White, 35.7% were Hispanic, 11.4% were Black, and 4.6% reported "other" as their ethnicity (Combs, 2008). Our sample over-represented White and Black participants, but under-represented Hispanic participants as compared to Texans as a whole population.

One hundred and forty-nine participants (42.5%) reported their political affiliation as Republican, 102 (29.14%) reported as Democratic, 38 reported as Independent, 25 reported as Libertarian, and 36 reported a different party or no party affiliation. A Gallup Poll (2008) found that 43.4% of Texans were Democrats or Democratic-leaning Independents and 41% of Texans were Republicans or Republican-leaning Independents. Our sample had a similar percentage of Republicans as the population of Texas but many fewer Democrats than the population.

Seventy-five participants started the survey but either left more than 25% of the questions unanswered or completed the survey in less than three minutes and they were not included in this sample. In return for participat-

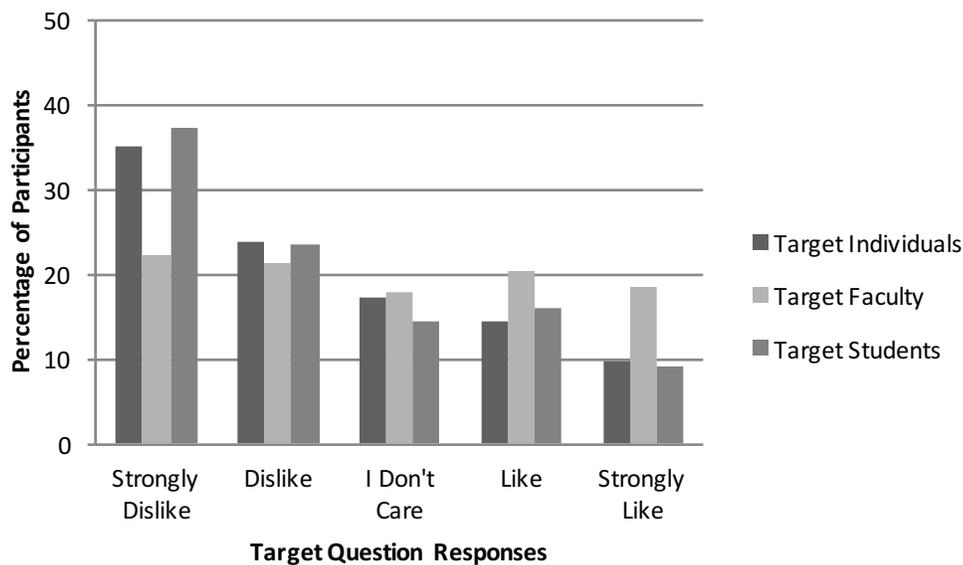
ing, students received course credit in the form of extra credit.

*Materials and Procedure.* The control survey form C was administered to all participants in this study. This survey was changed to exclude four open-ended questions from the school shooting, Second Amendment rights, and demographic sections. Participants clicked on a link to the survey and were immediately redirected to the consent form. If they gave consent, then they would start with the target questions, then proceed to the Second Amendment rights questions, followed by the school shooting questions, and then finally to the demographic questions. In this experiment, we focused on several of the questions in addition to the three target questions used as the dependent variables in Experiment 1. The Appendix lists the additional questions, as well as the abbreviated name for each question.

### Results and Discussion

With a larger sample size, we were able to conduct a more thorough examination of the data. We began by examining some additional demographic characteristics

**Figure 3.** The Distribution of Responses to All 3 Target Questions in Experiment 2



and the frequencies of some key variables. We followed that step by examining how some of the Second Amendment beliefs and school shooting knowledge and beliefs correlated with our three target questions. Finally, we analyzed the effect that political party affiliation and gender had on feelings about a law like Senate Bill 11. This analysis was mirrored from the 2 (political party) × 2 (gender) ANOVA conducted on the data from Experiment 1.

*Additional Demographics.* We wanted to ensure that our sample was representative of the larger Texas population, so we asked the students if they considered themselves Texans and if they were raised in a country or city environment. The vast majority (90.9%) of students did consider themselves Texans. Most students were raised in a city environment (61.4%) but a large minority was raised in the country (38%). Combs (2008) reported that 86% of Texans lived in urban settings, and 14% lived in rural settings. Our sample did over-represent students from rural settings. We also considered how many own or have owned a firearm and found that 30.3% owned a firearm. Kalesan, Villarreal, Keyes, and Galea (2015) reported that the rate of gun ownership in Texas was 35.7% in 2013. We also asked participants how likely it would be that they would obtain a concealed firearm license in the future. Almost half (46.8%) of the participants indicated that they were likely or strongly likely to obtain the license, 33.1% were unsure if they would, and 19.7% were

unlikely or very unlikely to obtain a license. Figure 3 contains the distribution of participants' approval of the three target questions. This distribution is overall very similar to Survey A from Experiment 1, with the largest group of participants indicating a strong dislike for "individuals" or "students" carrying concealed handguns on campus. The means for approval for Target Question 1 was 2.40 ( $SD=1.35$ ), for Target Question 2 was 2.91 ( $SD=1.43$ ), and for Target Question 3 was 2.37 ( $SD=1.36$ ).

*Correlation Analyses.* We conducted a series of Pearson's  $r$  correlations on the three target questions, listed in the Materials subsection of Experiment 1, and several additional questions, listed in the Appendix. We selected these questions to understand better how beliefs about Second Amendment rights, beliefs and knowledge about school shootings, and approval of Senate Bill 11 would relate to one another. See Table 2 for all of the correlations between these issues.

The three target questions had strong positive relationships, showing high reliability between them. The questions that showed a significant positive relation with the target questions were those concerning an armed student or professor reducing fatalities during a school shooting, the likelihood that the participant would obtain a concealed handgun license, the rated importance of the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights, and the belief that school shootings are preventable. The ques-

**Table 3.** Mean Approval Rates in Experiment 2 for Target Question 1 based on gender and political party

	Republican	Democratic	Libertarian	Independent	Other
Men	3.64 (1.25) <i>n</i> =33	2.35 (1.37) <i>n</i> =17	3.57 (1.27) <i>n</i> =12	2.32 (1.38) <i>n</i> =19	2.36 (1.36) <i>n</i> =11
Women	2.58 (1.40) <i>n</i> =115	1.81 (1.05) <i>n</i> =84	2.28 (1.23) <i>n</i> =18	1.89 (1.15) <i>n</i> =19	2.04 (1.02) <i>n</i> =25

SD in parentheses and number in each group below the mean.

tion that showed a strong negative relation dealt with the belief that Senate Bill 11 would lead to a greater number of violent incidents.

Some questions did not show a significant relation with the target questions: the three questions that asked if the participant had witnessed violence and the three questions that asked how much the participant knew about recent, highly publicized shootings, two of which were school shootings. The non-significant correlations for these questions were reported due to previous findings. Cavanaugh et al. (2012) and Thompson et al. (2013) found that being a victim of a gun-related crime was related to feelings about concealed handguns. Cavanaugh et al. (2012) and Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) found that participants who followed news media about gun violence or had greater knowledge of political issues were less likely to support laws allowing concealed handguns.

*Gender and Partisanship.* We conducted a 2 (gender)  $\times$  5 (political party) between-groups ANOVA with Target Question 1 as the dependent variable. Bonferroni corrections were made for multiple comparisons. There was a main effect of gender,  $F(1, 338)=5.51, p<0.05$ , with men ( $M=2.93, SD=1.44$ ) reporting more approval for Senate Bill 11 than women ( $M=2.21, SD=1.27$ ). There was also a main effect of political party,  $F(4, 338)=9.28, p<0.05$ . Republicans reported significantly more support for Senate Bill 11 than Democrats, Independents, or Other Political Affiliations but were not significantly different from Libertarians. Libertarians were not significantly different than any other group. There was not a significant interaction,  $F(4, 338)=1.09, p>0.05$ . Table 3 contains the means for the different gender and political party groups.

Although our participants were recruited from a single university in Texas, this sample was similar in many ways to the general Texas population. Because of the similarity in demographic characteristics, it is likely that the other results would be generalizable to a larger pop-

ulation. Of particular importance though is that these participants are most likely to be directly influenced by Texas Senate Bill 11 since they will spend more time on a university campus than other Texans in the next few years. Overall, the results once again demonstrated that most participants did not support Senate Bill 11.

The correlational analyses found that several issues were positively related to approval of Senate Bill 11. Participants who approved of Senate Bill 11 were more likely view the 2nd Amendment as a particularly important one. They were also more likely to see mass shootings as preventable (perhaps through the greater frequency of normal citizens carrying firearms) and they believed that if students or faculty members were allowed to carry concealed firearms on campus, then the number of fatalities from an active shooter would be reduced. This correlation also indicated that for those participants who did not approve of Senate Bill 11, they did not value the Second Amendment as much and were less likely to view mass shootings as preventable by a concealed firearm carrier.

When we examined how gender and partisanship affected approval of a law like Senate Bill 11, we found that Republicans were more likely to support the law than participants with different party affiliations (except Libertarians) and male Republicans showed the greatest approval. Unlike Experiment 1, male Democrats were more likely to support the law than female Democrats. For all of the political affiliations, men showed greater support than women.

## Conclusion

In two experiments, we explored university students' approval of a law like Texas Senate Bill 11. In both experiments, the majority of students indicated that they strongly disliked or disliked the law. In Experiment 1, we found that the theme of the questions before the target

questions concerning a law like Senate Bill 11 had an effect on the distributions of participants' approval rates. When participants were asked questions about Second Amendment rights first, more participants approved of Senate Bill 11. When participants were asked questions about school shootings and experiencing violence before the target questions, more participants "strongly disliked" Senate Bill 11. In Experiment 2, the distribution was more similar to the school shooting frame than the control version, even though all participants took the control version of the survey.

This finding of similarity between Experiment 1 and 2 on approval of Senate Bill 11 conflicted with the findings of Wells, Cavanaugh, Bouffard, and Nobles (2012). They found that a group of participants that completed a concealed firearms survey online showed greater support for concealed firearms on campus than the group of participants that completed the same survey in a classroom setting. One difference between Wells et al. (2012) and the current study was in participant recruitment. They utilized students in a classroom setting for one group but then emailed all registered students, faculty members and staff asking for volunteers to complete the survey. In our study, students in Experiment 1 participated in a classroom environment but they were able to complete extra credit through research participation in addition to completing the current survey, and participants in Experiment 2 were students seeking course credit and chose to complete this survey online for that extra credit. Thus, our participants in the two experiments were likely more similar than the participants in the two different conditions of Wells et al. (2012).

The results did support the findings of Thompson et al. (2013) and Cavanaugh et al. (2012) in several aspects. The majority of our participants did not support a law like Senate Bill 11, although our participants were more evenly divided between non-support and support than in either Thompson et al. (2013) or Cavanaugh et al. (2012). It is likely that our sample included a larger percentage of rural participants (leading to more experience with firearms) and Republican participants than either of those two studies. Like those two studies, we found that males in general showed greater support of

Senate Bill 11. In two aspects, our results did not support the findings of Thompson et al. (2013) and Cavanaugh et al. (2012). We did not find a relation in Experiment 2 between experience of violence and (non)support for Senate Bill 11, nor did we find a relation between knowledge of violent events and support for Senate Bill 11.

There were several limitations of this study. In Experiment 1, the sample was too small to be able to examine the correlations between beliefs and knowledge and support for Senate Bill 11. In Experiment 2, we only examined correlations and did not use framing as a variable. Ideally, in the future, a large enough sample could be obtained to use the different framing versions and still examine the relations between beliefs. Additionally, we did not ask any faculty or staff members to take the survey. They are also greatly affected by Senate Bill 11 and their opinions should also be taken into account. One aspect of Senate Bill 11 that has not been studied is the ability of the higher administration of the universities to determine any areas on campus exempt from the concealed firearm law.<sup>2</sup> Given that students are not supportive of other students' carrying firearms, perhaps classrooms or residential halls will be selected as no-firearm areas.

Although many students dislike Senate Bill 11, almost half of the participants from Experiment 2 stated that they intended to obtain a concealed firearm license at some point in the future. Those participants that do support Senate Bill 11 are largely Republican men and they are more likely to believe that more concealed firearms on campus can prevent fatalities in an active shooter situation. Unfortunately, research has yet to support this belief. Research that asked students if they support a law like Senate Bill 11 has overwhelmingly found that the majority of students do not want more firearms on campus (Cavanaugh et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2013).

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## Notes

1. This study originated as a collaborative research project created by and the students in Experimental Methodology in Psychology during Fall 2013.
2. Although the intent of the law is to allow licensed concealed firearm holders to carry their guns on campus, some areas can still be deemed as no firearm areas.

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## Appendix

### List of Target Questions for Experiment 2

Abbreviated Name	Question Wording
CFLaw	How familiar are you with Texas' current concealed firearm laws?
CFObtain	How likely would it be that you will obtain a concealed firearm license in the future?
CFViolence	Do you believe that if students/professors were allowed to carry firearms on SFASU campus that it would lead to greater number of violent incidents?
CFFatal	Do you believe that an armed student/professor could reduce the number of fatalities from a person committing a shooting at SFASU?
2ndAmImport	Do you believe that the Second Amendment is an important right in the Bill of Rights?
WitnessViolent	Sum of yes/no responses to 3 questions: Have you witnessed (school violence/domestic violence/firearm violence) that caused serious injury or death?
ShootKnow	Average of Likert scale responses to 3 questions: Are you familiar with the shooting at (Sandy Hook Elementary School/Virginia Tech University/Aurora Colorado at a movie theatre)?
ShootPrevent	Do you believe that any or all of these shootings could have been prevented?