

Upending American Politics

*Polarizing Parties, Ideological Elites,
and Citizen Activists from the Tea Party to
the Anti-Trump Resistance*

EDITED BY THEDA SKOCPOL
and
CAROLINE TERVO

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The Overlooked Organizational Basis of Trump's 2016 Victory

MICHAEL ZOOROB AND THEDA SKOCPOL

On September 15, 2016, less than two months prior to a presidential election win that shocked the world, Donald Trump scored a high-profile endorsement from the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), America's largest and oldest police union. Following a vote of delegates from forty-five states, its president, Chuck Canterbury, explained that the order would enthusiastically back Trump because he "understands and supports our priorities and our members believe he will make America safe again."¹

This was a significant Trump campaign moment for several reasons. Thematically, FOP's endorsement was perfect for a candidate who sought to heighten and benefit from racially charged polarization around US policing. Responding to the Black Lives Matter movement and swelling anger in minority communities about police killings, many Democrats, including the party's 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, embraced new rules about law enforcement practices—potential new constraints strongly opposed by most police organizations and resented by many officers, especially whites. Clinton did not seek FOP's endorsement, and the 2016 Democratic Convention from July 25 through 28 in Philadelphia featured mothers of offspring killed by police officers. In sharp contrast, the Republican Convention held in Cleveland two weeks earlier decried rising violent disorder in America and touted the need to back police authority. During the campaign, Trump regularly visited the order's lodges and boasted about FOP's endorsement at rallies. Repeatedly, Trump told police audiences that he was "on their side, 1000 percent"—as he did on August 18, 2016, to officers assembled at Lodge #27 in North Carolina.²

Beyond symbolic resonances, Trump's embrace of the FOP helped mobilize widespread popular support anchored in organizations and networks spread across thousands of places, including in key swing states. The FOP claims more

than three hundred thousand dues-paying members and two thousand active lodges—and many lodges are concentrated in swing states like North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In 2012, the FOP had refused to endorse either party's presidential candidate; despite the order's qualms about Barack Obama, it saw then-GOP candidate Mitt Romney as unfriendly to unions. The order's change of heart over four years delivered an important contribution to a much-needed ground game for the GOP's reality-TV presidential contender. Not only are FOP lodges widespread, their member officers are respected figures in blue-collar and middle-class communities with ties to many other Americans through their families, churches, and neighborhoods.

The FOP was not the only widespread network of locally embedded popular organizations courted by the 2016 Trump campaign. Also hooked into the Trump campaign were Christian right networks, especially those grounded in hundreds of thousands of white Protestant evangelical churches and associated networks of pastors and counselors, along with equally massive and widespread networks of gun clubs and gun-related businesses tied to the National Rifle Association, its state affiliates, and far-right pro-gun associations. As the summer of 2016 gave way to fall, the GOP candidate sallied forth to perform at massive rallies held in mid-sized cities, yet between those events he mostly operated from his home and small campaign headquarters in Trump Tower, Manhattan. Still, it would be a mistake to imagine that the Trump campaign engaged in little popular outreach, because the candidate and his top aides managed to forge strong links to leaders in various federated conservative organizational networks, links that in turn allowed the campaign to spread messages and activate supporters in thousands of cities, towns, and rural districts.

Most commentators have paid little heed to the popularly rooted organizational basis of Trump's 2016 campaign. Conventional wisdom suggests that, despite a poorly organized staff operation and several changes in key campaign leadership posts, Trump put himself in a position to benefit from last-minute twists (like leaks of DNC emails and the Comey letter re-opening the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton) by dominating the national media, using his personal skills as a reality TV star. This chapter makes the case for an alternative argument, positing that grassroots organizational networks helped propel Trump to victory. Of course, Donald Trump's promises to "make America great again" by defending Christians, protecting gun rights, and backing supposedly embattled police were broadcast far and wide via television, radio, and online media. But those messages also spread person-to-person through locally embedded organizations and networks, and in many places, where grassroots organizers often took it upon themselves to energize Trump supporters. On Election night, November 8, 2016, Trump eked out an Electoral College victory that depended on racking up unusually high GOP margins in thousands of

non-big-city counties, including many with densely networked churches, gun clubs, and police lodges in pivotal states previously carried by Barack Obama.

In the rest of this chapter, we start with accounts of when and how leaders of the Christian right and pro-gun networks, respectively, forged transactional relationships with Trump that helped activate their federated networks of locally embedded popular organizations and members on his behalf. Then we turn back to the case of the Fraternal Order of Police in the 2016 Trump campaign. Usually, scholars find it hard to parse the electoral impact, if any, of associations that endorse and work on behalf of a candidate, because most have repeatedly backed the same party's candidates—as white evangelicals and the NRA have done. However, because the FOP refused to endorse Mitt Romney in 2012 yet got fully behind Trump four years later, we have a unique opportunity to do a statistical assessment of the order's impact in 2016.

How Trump Courted White Evangelicals

Observers regularly point out that Donald Trump is a "transactional leader" who looks for ways to exchange something of little value to him for a clear near-term pay-off.³ The chronology of his 2016 campaign suggests that Trump used promises about issues and actions of special concern to white evangelicals to attract and hold their support. For many years, Trump displayed little personal interest in religion or the US culture wars, and he had at times seemed to endorse liberal positions on flashpoint issues like abortion.⁴ Ironically, his lack of strong moral commitments probably made it relatively costless for Trump to proclaim stances such as opposition to abortion that could help him gain Christian right backing, especially from white evangelicals. Concerted efforts started in 2011, when Trump asked Florida-based pastor and televangelist Paula White to convene ministers to "pray together" over whether the time was right for him to run for president. It was not the right time, they decided, but White and her network became regular Trump advisors four years later when "Trump met early on with Pentecostal and evangelical pastors."⁵

A crowded 2015–16 GOP primary field included competitors for Christian right votes. In early primary states like Iowa and South Carolina, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Ben Carson attracted considerable support from this constituency, especially from the most regular churchgoers. Trump gained significant shares of evangelical support from the start—and ended up the primary season with a plurality from these voters. But pollsters found that Trump's initial evangelical supporters were disproportionately *irregular* churchgoers—that is, less interconnected voters who may well have other, non-religious reasons for backing Trump.⁶ Had this situation persisted, Trump could have ended up with a smaller share of general-election

support from evangelical voters than the shares previously gained by Republican presidential nominees. To preclude such a scenario, the candidate and his closest advisors mounted persistent efforts to reach evangelical hearts and minds through established Christian right organizations and communication networks.

Trump glad-handed nationally influential evangelical kingpins, opened his mass rallies with showy prayers by prominent pastors, and sought well-timed endorsements from the most nationally visible Christian right leaders. Prior to the Iowa caucuses, Trump spoke in January 2016 at Jerry Falwell Jr.'s Liberty University, promising to "protect Christianity" and basking in praise as Falwell attested that "Donald Trump lives a life of loving and helping others as Jesus taught in the great commandment."⁷ Not long before Iowa Republicans voted on February 1, Trump collected an effusive endorsement from evangelical and Tea Party favorite Sarah Palin at a January 19 rally in Ames, Iowa; and he also touted Falwell Jr.'s officially announced endorsement on January 26.⁸ As GOP competitors fell by the wayside in one primary after another, many evangelical leaders warmed to Trump, although some continued to harbor doubts or remained behind Ted Cruz through the GOP Convention.

By June and July 2016, the Trump campaign moved to formalize tactically smart links with key organizational power brokers in the Christian right. Most Trump campaign events were televised mass rallies staged in huge arenas near medium-sized cities in swing states. Occasionally, however, Trump spoke at real-world sites—at association conventions or on visits to actual organizations such as Liberty University or police lodges. The venues for such appearances suggest the organized constituencies and institutional leaders the candidate especially tried to court. Every year, for instance, many activist Christian conservatives convene in Washington, DC, for a "Road to Majority" conference of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, founded by Ralph Reed in 2009 as a successor to the earlier Christian Coalition. On June 10, 2016, presumptive GOP nominee Trump addressed a plenary audience at this conference, telling the activists from all over the country that he would "uphold the sanctity and dignity of life" and "restore respect for people of faith."⁹ His denunciations of Hillary Clinton were echoed by Reed, who urged evangelicals (17 million of whom, Reed said in chastising tones, did not show up to vote in 2012) to cast ballots this fall. "We dare not sit on the sidelines in what I believe is the most important election of our lifetimes."¹⁰ Like other conservatives, Reed saw future Supreme Court appointments as critical—and Trump had weeks earlier released a formal list of conservative-approved judges he promised to consider.¹¹ Several months later, Trump again spoke at a national evangelical convention, telling the Family Research Council's Eleventh Annual Values Voter Summit hosted by Tony Perkins that "one of the greatest privileges of my journey has been the time I've spent with the evangelical community . . . There are no more decent,

devoted, or selfless people than our Christian brothers and sisters here in the United States . . . So let me say this right up front: A Trump administration, our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you've never seen before."¹² With more than two thousand volunteers and 250 paid staff working out of thirty field offices, Faith and Freedom Coalition executed a massive mobilization and outreach campaign to boost Trump electorally. Over the course of the election, organizers and volunteers from the group distributed thirty million voter guides, sent twenty-two million mailers, made fifteen million phone calls, ran twenty-six million digital ads, and canvassed more than one million religiously conservative households in twelve battleground states.¹³

Trump organized his own venues for evangelicals, too. Shortly after the June Faith and Freedom confab, on the twenty-first day of the month in New York City, Trump met for a carefully choreographed discussion and question-and-answer session with a hotel ballroom full of some one thousand conservative religious leaders, most of them white evangelicals. He won "a standing ovation," according to the *Washington Post*, when he "said he would end the decades-old ban on tax-exempt groups—including churches—politicking, called religious liberty 'the No. 1 question,' and promised to appoint antiabortion Supreme Court justices." In essence, Trump told listeners—"who included leaders and founders of many segments of the Christian Right"—that he would take a fighting stance on their behalf. "Throughout the talk Trump emphasized that American was hurting due to what he described as Christianity's slide to become 'weaker, weaker, weaker.'"¹⁴ He pledged to help Christian right leaders fight back.

Nor was this a one-off engagement. As the big gathering adjourned, top aides announced the names and affiliations of twenty-five Christian right leaders Trump invited to join his newly formed Evangelical Executive Advisory Board. According to the campaign, the list represented "Donald Trump's endorsement of those diverse issues important to evangelicals and other Christians and his desire to have access to the wise counsel of such leaders as needed."¹⁵ Trump promised to continue the board if he was elected, and for the rest of the campaign, members not only met occasionally but also participated in weekly conference calls with campaign and GOP leaders. The board's composition was telling. It included various pastors of mega-churches in states like Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas, where white evangelicals made up a fifth to a third or more of the population. Leaders from swing states Florida and Virginia were there, too. Whether pastors or not, many board appointees were broadcast celebrities with regular nationwide Christian radio and television shows. Others were conveners of regular national meetings or principals in widespread associational networks such as American Association of Christian Counselors, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, and the aforementioned Faith and Freedom Coalition.

People named to the advisory board were *not required* to have already endorsed Trump for president, but those who had not previously done so tended to fall in line as time passed, usually at pivotal moments. Not long after Ted Cruz invoked Christian arguments to criticize Trump during the July GOP Convention in Cleveland, Dr. James Dobson—the founder of Focus on the Family and principal on the Family Talk radio program—endorsed Trump just “hours before” he “was set to take the stage to accept his party’s nomination.”¹⁶ During a later two-hour interview with James Strang of Charisma Media, Dobson explained that the July meeting in New York City was pivotal in demonstrating Trump’s concern for religious liberty and willingness to engage with evangelical leaders. Dobson also approved the selection of Mike Pence as Trump’s running mate and the candidate’s promise to nominate prospective new antiabortion judges. As Strang explained, “Dobson’s role in the meeting and subsequent endorsement of Trump did a lot to persuade the evangelical community that they could overlook Trump’s imperfections and vote for him, partly because Clinton was such a horrendous alternative choice.”¹⁷

By October even advisory board member Tony Suarez, a previously skeptical leader of the Hispanic National Christian Leadership Conference, endorsed Trump at a Virginia rally.¹⁸ What is more, when the notorious Access Hollywood tapes broke just weeks before the election, key board participants were already in so deep with Trump that they willingly rationalized away his tawdry behavior and words about women. “We’re all sinners,” explained Jerry Falwell Jr., as he once again pointed to Clinton’s “crimes” and the fearful prospect of liberal Supreme Court justices.¹⁹ Along with the image of Trump as an “instrument of God” willing to help beleaguered Christians fight for their way of life in a threatening world, this long-standing evangelical stress on sin and forgiveness provided rhetorical fodder for preachers, advocates, and broadcasters sending a constant barrage of messages to congregants right through Election Day.²⁰

No doubt it also helped hold and deepen evangelical support when, in the third and final presidential debate on October 19, Trump declared that, if elected, he would appoint Supreme Court justices certain to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1974 precedent guaranteeing women’s right to choose abortion. In a Trump presidency, this “will happen, automatically” he said, because “I am pro-life.”²¹ Such a specific declaration went beyond the generalized allusions to nominating “constitutional conservatives” offered by previous Republican presidential candidates.

On November 8, Donald Trump, whatever his personal failings, did even better among white evangelical voters than GOP candidates before him.²² In 2004, regular churchgoer George W. Bush got 78 percent of what Pew called

the “White born-again, evangelical Christian” vote; John McCain got 74 percent in 2008 and Mitt Romney claimed 78 percent in 2012. In 2016, Donald Trump won 81 percent of these voters—whose turnout constituted 26 percent of the national electorate (as it had four years before). Only 16 percent of white evangelical voters supported Hillary Clinton. Compared even to sporadic churchgoers, weekly churchgoers of all denominations also broke strongly for Trump over Clinton.

The day after the election, Trump’s Christian right advisors touted their contributions to this victory, and claimed to *Time* writer Elizabeth Dias that social media and “the reach of Christian television” was decisive.²³ This is almost certainly too simple. It did matter that Trump mobilized evangelical television and radio broadcasters to put out religiously framed messages on his behalf. But sociologist Lydia Bean has done detailed ethnographic work on evangelicals in politics, probing exactly how the Republican Party in the United States, over many years, has turned these believers into supporters who go faithfully to the polls in midterm as well as presidential years. Because they have become such loyal GOP voters who turn out every time, this religious group has political weight above its gradually waning share of the US voting-age population—as it certainly did on behalf of Trump in 2016. Yet according to Bean, “the coalition between evangelicals and the Republican Party” has not just been “constructed from the top down, by political elites who frame conservative issues in religious language.”²⁴ Explicit political organizing is rare, Bean reports, and GOP outreach to evangelicals is certainly not confined to election seasons. Rather, ties to the GOP are “anchored from the bottom up within the worlds of local congregations,” where fellow congregants and lay leaders reinforce a socially shared sense that good people vote for candidates who take righteous stands. Even more than Sunday services and sermons, everyday social interactions in Bible study groups, prayer sessions, Wednesday services, and special workshops deliver subtle, politically relevant moral messages to congregants, convincing them that they are part of a beleaguered “Christian nation” and should engage in “evangelism and community service outside of their local church.” American evangelicals also learn that liberals are responsible for their country’s “moral decline.”²⁵ Framed and transmitted by national leaders and broadcasters, Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign theme obviously had the potential to resonate with these locally embedded evangelical practices. Even so, the Christian leaders who worked with Trump might not have been able to inspire so many believers to vote for him if the groundwork had not already been prepared—in the daily lives and outlooks of some tens of millions of white evangelicals who attend thousands of churches in every US state.

Trump, the NRA, and America's Gun Owners

A little over two weeks after Donald Trump effectively clinched the 2016 GOP presidential nomination in the May 3 Indiana primary, he traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, to speak to the annual convention of the National Rifle Association and collect its official endorsement. As Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton appeared with mothers of African Americans killed by the police, calling for “common sense” gun safety measures, and criticized her rival Bernie Sanders as too soft on gun issues, NRA leaders saw Trump as all that stood in the way of a Democratic presidency they dreaded. If Hillary Clinton is elected, “you can kiss your guns goodbye,” declared hard-line NRA chief Wayne LaPierre.²⁶ Because he was the alternative, it took little courting for Trump to win the seal of approval of this powerhouse organization. The NRA’s endorsement was delivered even before Trump was formally nominated, much earlier in the 2016 cycle than in previous presidential cycles, when the association had usually waited well into the general election period. The NRA would go on to put its money where its mouth was, spending “more than three times as much money to assist Trump as it spent backing . . . Romney in 2012, airing 4.5 times as many individual ads.”²⁷

The NRA’s quick and enthusiastic embrace of Trump was in some ways odd. Not long before he started his presidential run, Trump had “praised President Obama’s appeal for stronger gun control after the mass shooting in Newtown, Conn.,” continuing a prior history of endorsing new gun control measures such as a ban on assault weapons.²⁸ Trump claimed to be surprised by the early NRA endorsement.²⁹ Nevertheless, he saw the opportunity for a mutually supportive arrangement and grabbed it in Louisville. In red-meat attacks that repeatedly brought the NRA audience to its feet, cheering, Trump denounced Hillary Clinton as someone who would “abolish the Second Amendment” and leave American women and children “defenseless” against violent criminals. Trump said the next president might appoint up to “three to five” Supreme Court Justices, and if elected he promised to nominate pro-Second Amendment candidates from a just-released list of conservatives vetted by the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation. “‘I will not let you down,’ Trump told the NRA members . . . ‘Remember that, I will not let you down.’”³⁰

Trump’s nakedly transactional bargain with America’s pro-gun forces both paralleled and differed from his exchanges with Christian right leaders and white evangelicals. In both cases, it was a matter of working out a bargain between a positively inclined partisan constituency and Trump as a GOP outsider who had prevailed in the primaries. Evangelicals and gun owners had for years tilted toward the GOP, and their leading national organizations were tightly linked to party candidates and officeholders. Nevertheless, as the crowded, raucous GOP primaries unfolded, evangelical and pro-gun people had reason to be wary

of Trump, given his past stands and his reputation for expedient turnarounds. Leaders of evangelical and pro-gun voters wanted to feel Trump out, and his willingness to publish a list of amenable Supreme Court nominees was an important step in reassuring them.

The process was much smoother on the pro-gun side, because the NRA is a heavyweight lynchpin in that universe, and its early decision to endorse Trump closed an efficient bargain. In contrast, because many Christian right leaders have their own individually run pastoral and broadcasting empires, Trump and his campaign had to do months of interpersonal wooing and herding of cats. The maneuvering stretched from Trump’s January visit to Liberty University through the candidate’s June 2016 New York meeting with a thousand religious leaders, during which he announced his Evangelical Advisory Board. Even then, not all board participants fully endorsed Trump, and his campaign had to do additional outreach to reach separate sets of conservative Catholics, Jews, and other religious leaders.³¹

Arguably, religious right figures were not only harder to woo and corral, they could be harder for the Trump campaign to hold in line than pro-gun leaders. Some religious leaders continued to worry about Trump’s personal behavior, or at least felt the need to display consternation at morally awkward junctures like the release of the Access Hollywood tapes or the eruption of public controversies about hateful rhetoric at Trump’s mass rallies. In contrast, the Trump campaign could assume loyal enthusiasm from the NRA network, as well as from most further-right “open carry” gun organizations that have recently mobilized in more than a dozen US states.³² Pro-gun leaders and advocacy organizations cheered Trump’s claims about threats to America from criminals, immigrants, and liberals, and they loved his calls for “Second Amendment people” to take bold action. The NRA and other pro-gun political actors just wanted Trump to win, so he could nominate judges maximally protective of the rights of gun owners, dealers, and manufacturers, and fend off the calls for tightened gun regulations that regularly flare up in the aftermath of America’s recurrent mass shootings.

What, exactly, could the NRA writ large deliver for candidate Trump—and by what means? A first-order answer lies in the key resources of money, members, and organizational reach directly controlled or strongly influenced by the NRA. According to a compilation of “The NRA’s Power: By the Numbers” in *The Hill*, the NRA took in \$336.7 million in revenues in 2015, including from commercial sales, grants, royalties, advertising, and big donations. Less than half of NRA revenues (\$165.7 million in 2015) comes from member dues, including one-year \$40 memberships and \$1,500 lifetime memberships.³³ Beyond the core association, there are several nonprofits in the NRA’s coordinated orbit that channeled more than \$100 million more in 2015. These include the NRA

Foundation, which supports firearms promotion, marksmanship training, and gun safety programs; the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, which does lobbying and political campaigns; the NRA Civil Rights Defense Fund, which supports litigation related to the right to bear arms; the NRA Freedom Action Fund, which encourages pro-gun citizens to vote; and the NRA's Political Victory Fund, which raises and channels tens of millions for election activities.³⁴ In addition to these national entities in the NRA, nominally independent but officially sanctioned state NRA affiliates do lobbying and sponsor shooting contests, gun training and safety programs, community events, and youth programs. Both the national NRA and the state affiliates also have myriad ties to commercial shooting ranges, gun-related businesses, and local and county clubs for gun owners and sportspeople. These ties provide platforms for grassroots mobilization around election time, when the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action recruits volunteers and holds events to mobilize its members and sympathizers.³⁵ Grassroots clout also keeps legislators in line between elections. In many key states, the percentages of residents who feel the NRA speaks for them have long rivaled the shares that say the same about the two major political parties, and NRA members and sympathizers show a fierce willingness to contact elected representatives when asked to weigh in on pending issues.³⁶

In short, budgets and reach are vast indeed in America's interconnected national and state-local associational gun networks. This means that the NRA and its allies can not only fund lawsuits and do inside and outside lobbying on gun-related legislative and regulatory issues in Washington, DC, and state capitals, but they can also pay tens of millions for advertising and voter contacting to back candidates they favor, including Donald Trump in 2016.³⁷ NRA advertising alone can reach millions of viewers and listeners in swing states, as it apparently did for much of Pennsylvania in 2016—where a torrent of NRA ads in October 2016 are said to have played an important role in flipping a key northeastern county, Luzerne, from Obama in 2008 and 2012 to the Trump column in 2016.³⁸

Beyond general lobbying and electioneering, what do we know about the NRA's capacity to reach and inspire activism from America's approximately 80 million gun owners? Answering this question starts with figuring out NRA dues-paying membership, even though detailed member totals and distributions are not publicly available. For some time, NRA leaders have touted the (suspiciously round number of) five million members, but investigative journalists arrive at lower estimates using tax data or membership-linked subscriptions to the *American Rifleman* and other official NRA magazines.³⁹ Such outside analysts also believe that the NRA's dues-paying membership has recently gone into slight decline.

Another kind of estimate comes from a recent Pew Research survey of US gun owners.⁴⁰ About 30 percent of US adults say they own one or more guns, and of

those, 19 percent claim to be NRA members—which works out to about 14 million self-proclaimed members. Of course, more than one person in a family or household may feel they own the same gun(s); and people may be thinking of state-level memberships as well as national enrollments. NRA leaders themselves say that, beyond current dues-payers, “millions more Americans . . . support us and will tell pollsters they are members when they are not . . . For some, it could be that their membership has lapsed and for others they might consider a family member's membership part of their own . . . [T]he simple fact is that our support runs much deeper than among our members alone.”⁴¹

In this last claim, NRA leaders are surely on to something, as both the Pew Research survey and recent scholarly studies suggest. America's gun culture is about a lot more than individuals, because gun ownership is connected to cultural understandings and to social networks of kin and friends who do activities together. Guns are bought, sold, and used especially in non-big city areas that are often thick with sporting clubs, gun ranges, and gun dealerships. The 2017 Pew poll indicates that three in ten gun owners who do *not* claim to be NRA members say they “go hunting”; half say they “go shooting”; and two-thirds say they “have taken a gun safety course”—and even higher shares of gun owners who claim NRA membership report engaging in these activities. Formal membership may not matter, however, because NRA-linked state associations, clubs, and businesses sponsor many of these activities. As sociologist Jennifer Carlson puts it, “the NRA's lobbying and social-oriented arms complement one another.”⁴²

Carlson spells out the implications in an ethnographically rich study of “the everyday politics of guns” that explores complementarities between NRA-certified gun safety programs and state laws mandating the issuance of “concealed carry” gun permits to all qualified applicants. The NRA and other gun lobbies have successfully persuaded dozens of states to enact such laws, most of which require applicants to take approved gun safety courses. Not coincidentally, NRA-certified instructors offer these programs everywhere, and the courses do a lot more than spread technical skills. They help the NRA attract revenue and dues-paying members. Even more important, the courses provide “a critical space in which to shape gun culture from the ground up,” because instructors follow scripts that convey a morally framed social identity and worldview about “good citizenship,” “a moral disposition often associated with police and soldiers.”⁴³ Millions of (disproportionately white, male) Americans who take these courses are urged to think of themselves as civically obligated to use guns to protect themselves, their families, and their neighbors against evildoers threatening violence. This civic duty becomes not only the obligation of public officials but a much more encompassing mark of full citizenship and true belonging in the United States.

Another recent academic study of America's "social gun culture" makes an equally strong case that, for many people, gun ownership is a culturally meaningful identity reinforced by everyday interpersonal ties.⁴⁴ More than a fifth of gun owners reported that guns were part of their social lives with family and friends; and many, though lower percentages, indicated that family members and social associates "think less" of those who do not own guns. In another kind of look at daily networks, Philip Bump of the *Washington Post* mapped the locations of federally licensed gun dealers using data from the Bureau of Firearms, Alcohol, Tobacco, and Explosives showing that non-big city communities, and especially rural counties, are dense with gun dealers—a sure indication that there are many interested buyers on hand.⁴⁵

Bump also found a very high correlation between voting margins for Trump in 2016 and the density of gun dealers, a correlation that both closely parallels and may help to explain why, as Bump puts it, "Trump country is gun country because rural America is gun country, and rural America is Trump country." In a sense there is nothing surprising here—and arguably little that can be attributed in any direct or immediate way to NRA efforts to carry through their political side of the bargain struck with Trump in June 2016. That bargain built on political and cultural realities long in the making. America's gun owners have been leaning more and more Republican since the 1980s.⁴⁶ Similarly, rural voters have increasingly put their faith in Republicans—for reasons that go well beyond enthusiasm for guns to include religious outlooks and a sense that urban Democrats are not on their side.⁴⁷ By now, the very fabric of social and commercial life carries politically relevant meanings in many smaller cities, towns, and rural counties across the country. In churches and social events, residents interact regularly with others who share "us versus them" worldviews echoed in Republican Party claims that Democrats are cosmopolitan elitists who "look down" on "real Americans" and want to confiscate guns, murder "unborn babies," and destroy the traditional family.

Still, we should not entirely write off possible specific NRA effects that may have played out in grassroots gun networks, as well as on the broadcast airwaves in 2016—not just to help all Republicans but to boost turnout for Donald Trump in particular. The Pew Research poll compared gun owners who claim to be NRA members to all other gun owners and found that guns are more important to the NRA members, who skew more heavily Republican and hold more hard-line views about gun rights than even other Republican gun owners:

- Almost half (45 percent) of NRA members say owning one or more guns is important to their identity, compared to a fifth of other gun owners.
- More than three quarters (77 percent) of NRA gun owners say they are Republicans or lean that way, compared to 58 percent of other gun owners.

- Among all Republican gun owners, the NRA members are less likely to support universal background checks, an assault weapons ban, and the creation of a federal database to track gun sales; and the Republican gun-owning NRA members are more likely to favor expanded concealed carry rights and shorter waiting periods for gun purchases.

Not only do NRA gun owners lean more toward Republicans and more strongly favor individual gun rights, when it "comes to flexing their own political muscle, NRA members are much more active than gun owners who do not belong to the NRA."⁴⁸ According to Pew, "some 46 percent of gun owners in the NRA say they have contacted a public official to express their opinion on gun policy," a quarter of them in the past year. Only 15 percent of non-NRA gun owners say they have done this, and just 5 percent in the past year. Overall, the Pew data tell us that American gun owners who claim NRA memberships are intensely, personally involved in the "social gun culture" and are extraordinarily active as citizens to press their views about gun freedoms.

The National Rifle Association's early and high-octane backing for Donald Trump surely mobilized these activists on his behalf, and they, in turn, may have influenced others in their communities. By the time of the 2016 election, a majority of Americans favored at least small steps toward gun regulation, such as universal background checks and limits on purchases by the mentally ill or persons on "no fly" lists. Many non-NRA affiliated gun owners also support such steps.⁴⁹ But NRA gun owners make up with political activism and intensity what they lack in sheer numbers—and many indicators suggest that gun enthusiasts are especially likely to live, work, and buy and use guns in non-big city districts across many electorally key states.

Trump's campaign message—that America must be made "great again" in a battle against immigrant invaders, criminals, and unpatriotic liberals—surely resonated with the sort of us-versus-them worldview that the NRA has long cultivated among its members. In an impressive recent study, political scientist Matthew Lacombe tracked themes and arguments in editorials published between 1930 and 2008 in the *American Rifleman*, the NRA's flagship magazine.⁵⁰ Furthermore, to see whether those ideas influenced gun owners, he examined pro-gun letters to the editor appearing in major newspapers in Arizona, Georgia, Chicago, and New York. Lacombe found that the NRA has long "cultivated an image of gun owners as . . . law-abiding, honest, patriotic citizens who are self-sufficient and love freedom," true Americans who are unfortunately opposed and beset by liberal elites, media and politicians trying to restrict their rights and attack their very identities. This message has gotten across, because gun owners invoke exactly these themes in their letters to newspapers. In contrast, Americans who favor gun safety regulations make technical rather than patriotic and

identity-based arguments. The NRA, as Lacombe sees it, exerts outsized influence in US politics not simply because it spends a lot of money on elections and lobbying, but because its members and supporters have come to see themselves as true Americans threatened by anti-gun forces. Fear and anger-based appeals to real, patriotic Americans are, of course, exactly what Donald Trump delivered in his NRA convention speech and at mass rallies throughout the 2016 campaign.

Trump's appeals to gun people seem to have worked on Election Day. Despite his dalliances just a few years ago with policies anathema to pro-gun advocates, Trump won a substantially larger share of votes from gun owners (62 percent) than McCain in 2008 (53 percent) and Romney in 2012 (56 percent); and his margin over his Democratic opponent was "the second-highest percentage since 1976."⁵¹ In key states like Pennsylvania, Trump carried "gun county"—rural, small-town, and medium city areas—by sufficiently outsized margins that he swamped Hillary Clinton's high margins in big cities. Although statistical proof may be hard to come by, there are many indications that the 2016 Trump campaign successfully used us-versus-them messages and organizational links into local community networks to inspire, activate, and reap extraordinarily high levels of support from two Republican-leaning popular constituencies: evangelical Christians and NRA-affiliated gun owners.

Trump's Boost from White Police Networks

As we dramatized at the start of this chapter, the Fraternal Order of Police was yet another widespread federated organization with popular roots across many districts that got fervently behind Donald Trump in 2016. Of course, this one occupationally based organization cannot rival the scope, resources, and political clout of evangelical networks or the National Rifle Association. Nevertheless, a closer look at the FOP helps us flesh out the Trump campaign's organizational partnerships in 2016—and also gives us an opportunity to demonstrate statistically how federated organizational support gave Trump an added boost on Election Day.

The FOP formed in 1915 in Pittsburgh to improve the working conditions of police officers. Celebrating "law and order," the order originally rejected operating as a labor union, but it later embraced possibilities for collective bargaining. By now, many FOP lodges serve as collective bargaining units, while others stick to fraternal and political activities in states that restrict collective bargaining.⁵² Nevertheless, FOP political activism has continued to tout law-and-order themes and often promotes conservative, racially charged causes. In 1966, FOP invited Alabama segregationist Governor George Wallace to speak at its national convention.⁵³ The order endorsed George Wallace for president

in 1968 and Richard Nixon in 1972, and got behind many "law-and-order" candidates in 1976.⁵⁴ On the policy side, in 2004 then president George W. Bush signed an FOP-backed act allowing law enforcement officers to carry concealed firearms in all jurisdictions, and the order's state-level lobbying has advanced measures called "Police Bill of Rights" protecting officers accused of misconduct in a dozen states.⁵⁵ More recently, the group has backed legislation making killing police officers a hate crime.

Although typically favoring Republicans in presidential races, the FOP did not endorse anyone in 2012—because it saw Obama as unfriendly to law enforcement and Romney as critical of unions.⁵⁶ Arguments in the swing state of Ohio dramatize how badly opposition to police labor union rights hurt the GOP in the 2012 cycle. Republican governor John Kasich had sponsored restrictions on all public-sector collective bargaining, and as one Ohio FOP lodge leader explained, "Some of my members have flat-out said, 'I will never again vote for someone who has an R next to their name because of what John Kasich did.'"⁵⁷ Four years later, Trump fudged this issue by responding on the FOP's candidate questionnaire that he would leave the issue to the states.⁵⁸

Front and center in 2016 were hot-button partisan cleavages around law enforcement. The July Democratic Convention featured the mothers of people killed by police officers, a move that "shocked, angered, and saddened" the FOP according to a viral press release.⁵⁹ Posts on the FOP's private forum also branded Democratic president Barack Obama an "antipolice, antilaw and order President."⁶⁰ According to the late political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, throughout American history, police have gravitated to right-wing, law-and-order politicians, because the "police find few segments of the body politic who appreciate their contribution to society."⁶¹ However, they often find unquestioning celebration on the ethnocentric right—as they did from Trump, who declared in a primary debate that police are the "most mistreated people in this country . . . We have to give power back to the police because crime is rampant."⁶² Such moral and patriotic I'm-on-your-side rhetoric resonated with the FOP. For example, after Trump flipped traditionally Democratic Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, a local FOP leader reflected that "We, law enforcement; and the people needed this win."⁶³

Candidate Trump actively courted the FOP and police officers, especially in the weeks before the FOP's mid-September endorsement vote. On August 11, he visited Lodge #25 in Orlando, Florida "just to tell cops how appreciated they are," and on August 16, in a speech in Wisconsin, he called Clinton "against the police" and billed himself as the "law and order" candidate.⁶⁴ On August 18, he visited an FOP lodge in North Carolina, where he told members "I'm on your side 1,000 percent Trump"—and before speaking at the lodge, he practiced shooting at the lodge's gun range with the county sheriff, who told reporters

"I gotta say, this man can shoot."⁶⁵ On August 21, Trump met with a sheriff in Virginia.⁶⁶ The following day he visited the FOP lodge in Akron, Ohio, sharing pictures of the meeting on Twitter.⁶⁷

After the FOP officially endorsed Trump, substantial campaign help followed. Back in the 2004 election, the Grand Lodge provided volunteers to the Bush campaign and launched a "get out the vote campaign" of members and their families.⁶⁸ In 2016, there are many indications that FOP efforts were at least equally wholehearted, buoyed by exceptional enthusiasm from FOP members who felt "under siege." On September 18, FOP president Chuck Canterbury explained on National Public Radio that Trump "wants to work on the systemic causes of high crime, and Mrs. Clinton wants to work on police reform. And reform in a profession that doesn't need to be reformed is not the answer to fight crime."⁶⁹ In Pittsburgh, the FOP head called Clinton's unwillingness to answer the FOP questionnaire and seek his order's endorsement "terrifying." He praised Trump as "giving the right answers . . . based on the constitution."⁷⁰ Hundreds of miles east in this pivotal state, Philadelphia's leader agreed that Clinton "blew the police off"—while Trump "cooperated" and "participated."⁷¹ The campaign ran a television ad featuring Trump with uniformed officers, and the candidate frequently boasted of his FOP endorsement on the stump. As his campaign took every opportunity for such displays, Trump's "unwavering" support for police and other security officers like border guards became a defining theme.⁷²

The FOP responded enthusiastically. Beyond helping candidate Trump define his image, the FOP's dual organizational features as both a national public-sector union and a social brotherhood helped it mobilize hundreds of thousands of members to shape politics. As a union, the FOP has experience in utilizing endorsements, deploying volunteer members for campaigns, giving contributions to candidates, and manipulating public opinion.⁷³ Researchers have also documented that unions influence political participation through family ties and social networks.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the FOP also makes a difference as a federated set of socially solidary local groups. The order and its members and lodges can affect public perceptions and citizen engagement in many states and localities, much as evangelical church networks and the FOP-allied National Rifle Association and other gun groups do—and, indeed, much as federated brotherhoods and sisterhoods have done throughout US history.⁷⁵ Furthermore, police networks may be especially potent in politics—above all, in emotionally charged battles—because officers have high levels of in-group solidarity, a "police culture" nurtured by shared experiences of stressful work.⁷⁶ As we have heard in their own words, in 2016 many police officers, including FOP leaders, felt socially and physically threatened. With their consciousness as beleaguered police activated by the political climate—and facing a clear choice

between Clinton and Trump—police officers in the FOP were ripe to give Trump an extra measure of support.

Did their enthusiasm matter? To see if the Trump activation of the FOP paid off, we have, first, examined individual-level political behavior of police officers. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a recurrent survey, allows us to compare trends in political behavior among police officers from 2012 to 2016 to similar trends among all eligible voters.⁷⁷ According to these data, in 2016 fully 69 percent of police officers reported that they were contacted by a campaign, compared to 44 percent of the general population. Ten percent reported that they volunteered for a campaign or candidate, and 36 percent reported contributing funds to a campaign—doing both of these things at about twice the rate of the general population. What is more, police officers became more politically engaged in 2016 than they were in 2012. Comparing changes from 2012 to 2016 for police officers to shifts for the general public reveals that officers were statistically more likely ($p < 0.05$) to report they were contacted by a campaign, voted GOP for president, volunteered for a campaign, and contributed to a campaign. All of these findings support the idea that Donald Trump got extra measures of police support.

Our second empirical test follows previous research efforts in political science that use local association units per person as a measure organizational presence in a community. We measured FOP lodge density per capita to assess the order's strength in various states and districts in relation to presidential vote shifts—from 2012, when the order did not endorse the GOP candidate, to 2016, when it did endorse Trump. Details appear elsewhere for our four regression models that compared the GOP vote share across counties of varying FOP presence for the 2012 and 2016 presidential cycles.⁷⁸ Our models controlled for many other politically relevant factors, including racial and economic characteristics, the percentage of county employment in protective services, and the percentage of veterans.

Our models suggest that the FOP did deliver discernably extra electoral help to Trump in 2016. Across various specifications, and holding constant other factors that explain Trump's appeal, a significant and important association persists between the density of FOP lodges and vote shifts toward Trump. Going beyond the overall analysis across all US counties, we have also been able to calculate some counterfactual electoral maps that indicate for key states the difference FOP support made for Trump. In Michigan, for example, our calculations suggest that the FOP was responsible for a GOP two-party vote swing from 2012 to 2016 of about 0.3 of a percentage point, or thirteen thousand votes—which exceeds the number of votes by which Trump won the state. In Pennsylvania, the birthplace of FOP, the swing was about 0.5 percentage points, or about

twenty-seven thousand votes—in a state Trump carried by forty-four thousand votes. If we were able to do similar calculations for the extra Trump support delivered in 2016 by much more massive federated networks like the evangelical panoply and the NRA orchestrated gun networks, chances are good that we would also be able to show statistically that their extraordinarily intense engagement with his campaign made a substantial difference.

Beyond Media Celebrity

Donald Trump's victory in the November 2016 was so surprising to most scholars and pundits that their retrospective accounts stress unique events and media celebrity. Organizational factors have received next to no attention—especially not the role of federated, popularly rooted networks that likely stoked popular support for Trump. Going against the grain, this chapter pulls together evidence from campaign events and sequences involving massive organizational networks, and in particular uses uniquely available quantitative data on police political behavior and FOP lodge distributions to make the case that widespread organizational networks may have played a critical role in Trump's election.

What is more, we have suggested that three major federated networks—the white evangelical network, the NRA-connected gun owner network, and the (overwhelmingly white) FOP network—helped spread and substantiate social identity-based, conflictual partisan messages in the 2016 campaign. Donald Trump startled many observers when he took the stage at the July 2016 National Republican Convention and (misleadingly) declared that America is beset with rising waves of violence, illegal immigration, threats to law and order, and liberal Democratic attacks on religious and patriotic values. But unsettling as these claims may have been to many listeners, they certainly resonated with long-established worldviews and beliefs on the popular right. A decade ago, grassroots conservatives organized local volunteer Tea Party groups all over the United States to espouse and act upon such views.⁷⁹ By the time Trump rode down his golden escalator to launch his campaign of fear and social division in 2015, few Tea Parties were still meeting. But their surviving members are very active as Republicans in many states and districts. More to the point, the Trump message resonates just as much with other, longer-standing, deeply rooted networks of regularly meeting grassroots conservatives—including those involved in evangelical churches, gun clubs, and police groups. Such organized and interconnected Americans, most already voting for Republicans, were often thrilled to hear Donald Trump's message of racially tinged anger, fear, and resentment. They eagerly responded to his call for patriotic Americans to fight back against existential threats from liberals and Democrats. Furthermore, such voters not

only heard Trump messages on national TV but also received personally tailored versions from trusted leaders and peers in churches, at gun events, and at work in law-enforcement settings. In turn, evangelicals, gun owners and NRA supporters, and law enforcement officers surely spread Trump's calls still further, to neighbors, family members, and friends. As a result, Trump garnered very high vote margins from such constituencies, even beyond usual GOP margins.

Our findings underscore the value of organizational and network research. For presidential contests, especially, widely connected organizational networks can be constructed, as they were in the 2008 Obama campaign, or they can be borrowed, as they were through the transactional bargains Donald Trump forged in 2016. Either way, they are likely to matter. Indeed, when ramified organizational networks complement an unremittingly proclaimed and emotionally laden political appeal to people who share social identities, the results can be very potent indeed. Analysts can fully grasp this symbiotic process only by going beyond polling and media studies to probe the underpinnings of organized networks in campaigns—as we have done here for key associational players and networked constituencies in the 2016 Trump campaign.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Alexandra Caffrey graduated cum laude with a BA in government from Harvard University in 2019. Her chapter is derived from her Thomas Temple Hoopes Prize-winning senior honors thesis. She now works in Miami for Forward Florida Action, the voter registration organization Andrew Gillum founded after the 2018 election.

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez is assistant professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University. He is the author of *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation* (2019), as well as *Politics at Work: How Companies Turn Their Workers Into Lobbyists* (2018), winner of the Robert A. Dahl Award from the American Political Science Association. His research focuses on the political economy of the United States, with an emphasis on the intersections among businesses, unions, donors, and public policy.

Maximilian Frank is studying for an MA in American government at Georgetown University. He graduated from Harvard in 2019 with a BA in social studies, with a focus on populism in the United States and western Europe. His chapter is adapted from his 2019 undergraduate honors thesis, winner of a Thomas Temple Hoopes Prize from Harvard College.

Leah E. Gose is a PhD student in sociology at Harvard University interested in social policy, organizational sociology, and poverty theory. Her scholarship includes research on grassroots political organizations formed in response to the Trump presidency. She is currently studying community-based organizations and their local organizational ties as vital components of hunger relief efforts and the American social safety net.

Sally Marsh is a proud Michigander whose chapter is based on her 2018 Thomas Temple Hoopes prize-winning senior honors thesis at Harvard College, which is not connected to her current employment. After graduating with a BA in Government and History from Harvard, Sally returned home to join the 2018 campaign of Jocelyn Benson for Michigan secretary of state. Sally now serves as the director of special projects at the Michigan Department of State, focusing on implementation of recent constitutional amendments calling for citizen-led redistricting and the expansion of voting rights.

Eliza Oehmler, from Memphis, Tennessee, is a member of the Harvard College class of 2021. She is concentrating in sociology with a secondary field of study in global health and health policy.

Lara Putnam is University Center for International Studies research professor in the Department of History at the University of Pittsburgh, where she has been Department Chair since 2014. She writes about Latin American and Caribbean history; migration, kinship, and gender; and the impact of digital technology on historical research. Publications include *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870–1960* (2002) and *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (2013), as well as more than two dozen chapters and articles. Putnam's research on contemporary grassroots political organizing has appeared in *Vox.com*, *New Republic*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Monthly*, *Democracy Journal*, and beyond. She is active in grassroots organizing in Southwest Pennsylvania.

Theda Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas professor of government and sociology at Harvard University. She has authored many books, articles, and reports; won major scholarly awards; and been elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Academy of Sciences. She is a proud teacher of many Harvard students, and her ongoing research focuses on US conservatives and the Republican Party, the politics of health care policy, and citizen reactions to the Obama and Trump presidencies. Skocpol is also the director of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization with more than a thousand members and forty chapters that makes the work of university researchers understandable to civic groups, policymakers, and the media.

Caroline Tervo is currently a research coordinator in the Harvard Government Department, working with Theda Skocpol and others on studies of citizen grassroots organizing, state and local party building, and the local effects of federal policy changes. A native North Carolinian, Tervo holds a BA in government from Harvard University. Her chapter is based on her 2018 senior honors

thesis, winner of two college awards, the Thomas Temple Hoopes Prize and the Seymour E. and Ruth B. Harris Prize.

Elizabeth Thom is a PhD student in government and social policy at Harvard University. She holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania and an MSc from the University of Oxford, where she was a Thouron Scholar. Previously, Elizabeth worked at the Brookings Institution as a senior project coordinator and research assistant to E.J. Dionne Jr.

Vanessa Williamson is a senior fellow in governance studies at Brookings and a senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center. She studies the politics of redistribution, with a focus on attitudes about taxation. She is the author of *Read My Lips: Why Americans Are Proud to Pay Taxes* and the coauthor, with Theda Skocpol, of *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*.

Sophia Young graduated from Harvard University in 2019 with a BA in government and a secondary field of study in moral and political philosophy. She is continuing her research on gun violence prevention at the Brady Campaign in Washington, DC. Her chapter is based on her 2019 senior honors thesis at Harvard College.

Michael Zoorob is a PhD student in government at Harvard University from Nashville, Tennessee. He is interested in the politics of inequality and crime, and the role of organized groups in politics.