

Tracing Changes in a Gun Control Q&A: The Story of “One Hundred Round Magazine Drums”

Di Yu

Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the US society has witnessed a sharp growth in political divide, particularly between those holding conservative and liberal views (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2017). Among the multitude of issues that the American people find divisive, the issue on gun regulation has been one of the most controversial ones (Pew Research Center, 2021) wherein attitudes towards guns vary drastically and are divided along partisan lines. Citizens take to platforms of civic participation such as town hall meetings to express concerns about such divisive issues and seek accountability from politicians. This analysis focuses on one such instance and documents how, with the focal issue of high-capacity firearms, both the citizen and politician adjust their next actions in this gun regulation discussion. Specifically, we observe how the citizen reformulates the notion of gun rights while the politician shifts the perspectives of his responses.

Past research on journalistic questioning and politicians’ evasive responses is most relevant for this analysis. In pursuing political accountability, journalists are found to use a series of adversarial questioning practices such as non-questioning interrogatives preferring certain answers, reformulations of interviewee’s views, accusatory questions prefaced by presuppositions, and modulating the levels of adversarialness (Clayman, 2002; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Clayman & Fox, 2017). On the other hand, when evading or resisting questions, politicians are found to reformulate the questions, use subversive repetitions, minimize divergence in response, and downgrade allegations (Clayman, 1993; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Carranza, 2016; Hanafe & Thani, 2016). Although the data come from a different institutional context in which participating citizens are not professional journalists, we observe some of the similar practices in both citizen and politician practices.

DATA AND METHOD

Data come from a larger corpus of publicly available video recordings of town hall meetings held in 24 states. The data segment for this analysis is from a meeting held in the summer of 2019 in the state of Alabama. Attendees included US House Representative Gary Palmer and his constituents. Ten citizens (CIT) participated verbally in this meeting and discussed issues related to healthcare, the economy, gun regulation, race, etc. Different from a “typical” town hall in which participants take turns to individually address the Member of Congress (MOC), several participants in this meeting spoke multiple times with one (CIT3) speaking extensively throughout the discussion on gun regulation. What follows are three

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excerpts of the exchanges chiefly between CIT3 and MOC. While the topical focus remains consistent throughout the data segments, the analytic focus here is twofold: how the citizen reformulates and contrasts the notion of gun rights in each pursuit of a response, and how the MOC shifts the perspectives of his responses each time to legitimize gun rights.

Treating town hall interaction as a form of institutional talk, this analysis uses the conversation analysis (CA) approach for analyzing institutional procedures and norms through close examinations of talk among participants as they occupy institutional roles (Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Data are transcribed primarily using the Jeffersonian transcription conventions as well as Mondada’s conventions for multimodal transcription (Jefferson, 2004; Mondada, 2019).

ANALYSIS

The following analysis showcases three excerpts occurring in temporal order over the course of 2 minutes 40 seconds. I hope to show that, with a persisting topical focus on high-capacity firearms, the citizen reformulates the notion of gun rights and contrasts gun rights with the right to live in order to pursue responses from the MOC, while the MOC shifts perspectives of his responses from affirming gun rights as constitutionally protected to invoking the individuals’ responsibilities and legitimizing gun rights through reviewing its historical background.

The first excerpt starts with CIT4 inquiring the MOC’s decision on voting against gun control, to which the MOC responds with the list initiator *first of all* (line 02), hearable as starting to enumerate reasons for his opposing stance. As the MOC equates *voting for a gun control bill* with *violating people’s right to keep and bear arms* (line 03), CIT3 then follows up with a series of questions centering on the notion of rights.

Excerpt 1: Fundamental right

01	CIT4	you’re not voting for a >gun control bi-<=why.
02	MOC	well, because that’s not- ↑first of all, uh I’m not
03		gonna violate people’s right to keep and bear arms.
04	CIT4	mhm?
05	MOC	[and-]
06	CIT4	[and-] okay?
07	MOC	[and-]
08	CIT3 →	[what about] the right to have a hundred round
09		magazine (syl- where) they can shoot 26 people in 32
10		seconds. I mean, it- is that someone’s fundamental
11		<u>right</u> (.) to have a hundred round magazine drum.=
12		I went through Baghdad and I went through Fallujah.
13		with <u>my</u> weapon on au- semi automatic I’ve never
14		put it on three round burst.
15		(0.2)
16	MOC	are you [aware that-]
17	CIT3 →	[those weapons are] <u>made</u> (.) to <u>clear</u> out

18 buildings. so do you support ↓somebody’s right to
 19 buy a one hundred round magazine drum, and to have
 20 full body armor and a helmet and to walk into a bar
 21 district,=to walk into a movie theater,=to walk into
 22 ey elementary classroom,=to walk into a nightclub.
 23 and clear out a- >a total room.<=are you saying
 24 that you as an American, you support other
 25 Americans’ rights to buy One Hundred Round of
 26 magazine drum.=is that what you’re saying. it- it-
 27 MOC [the guy:-
 28 CIT3 → [is that *the fundamental right * of Americans.
 29 *RH “chopping down” by syllable*
 30 MOC => it is.
 31 CIT3 [Oh Oh Okay.=
 32 MOC => [(syl) the law.
 33 CIT3 → =so- so You support (.) someone’s right to buy a
 34 hundred round magazine drum.=that’s what you’re
 35 saying.=[that’s what] you’re saying-
 36 MOC [I’m saying]-
 37 CIT3 all One hundred round magazine drum.
 38 MOC => I’m saying that under the law and under constitution
 39 they have that right=

In this excerpt, the citizen’s line of inquiry centers on questioning the MOC regarding individuals’ right to bear arms through a competing formulation of gun rights as owning and utilizing high-capacity firearms. We first encounter the question on *hundred round magazine* uttered by CIT3 in lines 08-11 when the citizen interrupts and repurposes the notion of “right” from MOC’s response (line 03), questioning whether one’s right for bearing arms equates *the right to have a hundred-round magazine* (lines 08-09). The capability of this newly formulated “right,” which is upgraded to *fundamental right* (line 10), is described as *they can shoot 26 people in 32 seconds* (lines 09-10), specifying its lethal impact. The citizen then further specifies the lethal capability of these firearms by describing the sophistication of the gear (i.e., full body armor, helmet) and potential target locations of mass shootings (i.e., bar district, movie theater, elementary classroom, nightclub). These aspects of the modern firearms are also packaged into several questions of accountability (Heinemann, 2008), including *do you support somebody’s right to...* (lines 18-23), *are you saying...* (lines 23-25), which are “unanswerable” yes/no questions (Heinemann, 2008), designedly compelling the recipient to either choose a morally compromised response (e.g., I support someone’s right to by a hundred-round magazine drum) or reverse their stance-so-far.

The MOC’s responding action, on the other hand, remains relatively scarce in this excerpt. Besides a noticeable gap and two interrupted response attempts that are abandoned (lines 15-16, 27), the MOC’s response *it is* (line 30) to *is that the fundamental right of Americans* (line 28) unequivocally affirms his stance for supporting gun rights as outlined by law and the constitution (lines 32, 38-39). Note that the citizen’s *that* in line 28 retrospectively refers to the candidate formulations of the MOC’s stance in lines 23-26, namely, *as an American, you support other Americans’ rights to buy One Hundred Round of magazine drum*. Thus far, the MOC

seems to have accepted the citizen's competing formulation and confirmed high-capacity firearms as part of individuals' gun rights.

We now join the two participants in the second segment of their continued discussion on gun rights, wherein the citizen moves forward with contrasting gun rights with the life rights of mass shooting victims while the MOC shifts his explanation to individual responsibilities during background checks.

Excerpt 2: He lied

- 01 MOC I'm saying that under the law and under constitution
02 they have that right=
03 CIT3 → =a one hundred round magazine drum. okay,
04 what about the rights of the nine people that died.
05 what about the rights of those (syl syl syl). what
06 about their rights.
07 MOC well,=
08 CIT3 =what about their rights.
09 MOC => the guy who bought the hundred round magazine
10 lied (.) on the form. he broke the law.
11 CIT3 actually it- yeah. it w- it was his friend that bought it.
12 MOC [he lied.]
13 CIT3 [but sure.] okay.=
14 MOC => =you're not allowed to buy a weapon. if you: have-
15 had a problem with a controlled substance. which
16 that guy did. plus, he bought it under false pretenses.
17 cu:z when you fill out the background checks, you
18 assert (.) that this is a- a purchase- a personal
19 purchase not t' be transferred t' anybody else. so he
20 broke two laws.
21 CIT3 oh okay. okay. [so-
22 MOC [alright? so [(syl syl syl syl syl)
23 CIT3 → [so he told the truth-
24 he told the truth, he couldn't get it, >and then his
25 buddy won't be able to get the hundred round
26 magazine drum< [as opposed to- as opposed to him
27 MOC [(lately-)
28 CIT3 just not being able to bu:y (.) in the first place.
29 MOC ↓well I'm [not sure he could've bought it.]

Rather than competing formulations of gun rights, the citizen in this excerpt mainly contrasts the gun rights of gun buyers with the right to live of mass shooting victims by using several parallel questions prefaced with *what about* (lines 03-05). While the MOC restates his stance by affirming gun rights as *under the law and under constitution* (line 1), CIT3 contrasts the notion of a constitutionally protected right that is more narrowly defined (i.e., right to bear arms) with a fundamental, human right (i.e., right to live). On the other hand, the MOC does not respond to this contrast and quickly shifts the angle of his response, invoking an individual-based

explanation for mass shootings (lines 9-10 and 14-20). Presumably referring to the El Paso shooting that had occurred only several days ago from the date of the town hall, the MOC attributes the blame to *the guy*—the shooter who *lied* and *broke the law* (line 10), indirectly excusing any accountability of existing laws and regulations. This is further evidenced in lines 14-20, in which the MOC vacillates between the generic *you* and the specific *that guy*, attributing complete responsibilities to the individual—existing laws already prevent illegal gun purchases and individual shooters are entirely to blame for violating the laws. The MOC’s perspective on explaining the occurrence of mass shootings is then countered by the citizen through bringing the debate from blaming the individual for cheating in background checks back to banning the availability of guns: *as opposed to him just not being able to buy in the first place* (lines 26, 28).

What proceeds next in the final segment features the citizen’s continued pursuit on the “fundamental right” of owning high-capacity firearms and the MOC’s yet again shifted perspective on legitimizing gun rights from a historical viewpoint.

Excerpt 3: Despotism

01 MOC ↓well I’m [not sure he could’ve bought it.]
 02 CIT3 → [because it’s a fundamental right.] as an
 03 American to get a hundred round magazine drum,
 04 MOC => [it is.]
 05 CIT3 → [and to be] able to walk into a club district
 06 [and shoot (at many people at once).]
 07 MOC => [because our founding fathers] intended fo:r
 08 the people of America to be able to defend
 09 themselves against despotism.
 10 CIT3 so- so I [just w-
 11 MOC => [that’s why they allow Americans to have a=
 12 CIT3 → =do they have a hundred magazine drums for
 13 ↓muskets?
 14 MOC => they had the same weapons the- that the British had,
 15 [including cannons [by the way.
 16 CIT3 [oh okay. [okay.
 17 MOC => they had the same weapons that they did.
 18 that’s the whole point. go back and read uh what
 19 the founders wrote about °on this°. they wanted
 20 people to be able to protect themselves against
 21 despotism.=they feared despotism. ((continues))

In this excerpt, the citizen reiterates his candidate formulation of the MOC’s pro-gun-right stance to connect mass shootings and gun rights: 1) getting a high-capacity magazine is a fundamental right and 2) one can be equipped with a high-capacity weapon and walk into a club district to open fire at people (lines 02-03, 05-06). The MOC, while confirming the first part in line 04, evades responding to the aspect on mass shootings by invoking a new angle of explanation: the historical perspective for gun rights. In lines 07-09 and 11, prefacing with *because* and *that’s why*, the MOC defends gun rights as designed by the country’s founders to enable people to fight against despotism. It is important to note that so far the historical

background of the Second Amendment has not been made conditionally relevant. Proffering the anti-despotism account in response to the citizen's continued query thus enables the MOC to both reframe the reason for bearing arms and evade directly addressing whether getting high-capacity weapons and committing mass shootings fall within the scope of the "fundamental right." In addition, the citizen joins the historical review and challenges the MOC in lines 12-13 about the adequacy of the historical account for contemporary gun problems—*do they have a hundred magazine drums for muskets?* However, the MOC diffuses this challenge by highlighting the equally high-capacity weapons that Americans had during the Revolutionary War, again sidestepping directly discussing the focal issue of *hundred round magazines*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the above analysis, we have closely observed a piece of heated discussion between a citizen and their MOC on gun regulation and gun rights. On the one hand, the citizen reformulates the notion of gun rights and contrasts gun rights with the right to live in order to pursue responses from the MOC regarding gun regulations; on the other hand, the MOC shifts from affirming gun rights as constitutionally protected to invoking the individuals' responsibilities and citing the historical background of gun rights to account for its legitimacy.

For the citizen, pursuing political accountability entailed repeatedly contrasting the legal notion of "the right to bear arms" with the reality of highly lethal weapons being used in mass shootings, as well as contrasting gun rights with the right to life. While the citizen was skillful in maintaining control of the town hall floor for an extended amount of time, his turn design so far largely centered on candidate formulations of prior talk, which seemed to have resulted in more opportunities for the MOC to affirm his stance and shift the angles of his accounts rather than to yield or change his stance on gun control. In terms of the politician, each shift in his response, be it emphasizing the individuals' responsibilities to account for mass shootings or referring to historical reasons for the Second Amendment to legitimize gun rights, was an opportunity missed to directly respond to and engage with a concerned citizen.

By closely examining the practices taken by both participants and documenting how each side of the discussion evolved in a span of a few minutes, this analysis traces the changes in participant practices when engaging in a highly controversial and divisive topic. Given the limited amount of data, future research should examine facilitated civic discussions over a prolonged period of time in order to document real changes in political stances and policy decisions.

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Di Yu is a doctoral candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her dissertation project focuses on the interactions between citizens and Members of Congress at US town hall meetings. Her co-authored work has appeared in journals including *Research on Children and Social Interaction*, *Discourse & Communication*, and *Language Learning Journal*, along with a few edited volumes. Di currently works as Senior Manager at an EdTech company. Correspondence should be sent to dy2186@tc.columbia.edu.