

In 1993, the United States Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (the “Brady Bill”). This bill limited many categories of people, such as convicted felons and the mentally ill, from purchasing a handgun through a background check conducted by the FBI. It also sought to reduce rash acts of handgun violence by instituting a five-day waiting period for those applying to purchase a handgun. The popular media recognized this bill as a weakening of the gun lobby’s entrenched control of Congress. The media perceived the Brady Bill as a policy that balanced the competing interests of the gun lobby, led by the National Rifle Association, and proponents of gun control, led by Handgun Control Inc. The media presented a policy debate that failed to incorporate the views and research of institutions and individuals that had less apparent bias on the issue of gun control.

I propose to study policymakers’ use and failure to use research on access to guns and the real and perceived benefits of gun control measures during the passage of the Brady Bill, to determine what effect research from non-advocacy organizations had on the legislation. To examine this issue, I will employ the same framework used by R. Kent Weaver in his analysis of the impact of research on the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. Namely, I will review the relevant research produced by advocacy organizations (including advocacy think tanks), more neutral think tanks, and academics around the gun control issue. I will then examine how policy makers used or failed to use this research during the passage of the Brady Bill. Looking at what research was used and not used in the formation of the debate on gun control and the eventual passage of the Brady Bill may help shed light on the influence of special interest groups on specifying alternative policies for issues being considered by Congress.