

# On Obama Administration Gun Policy With Continual Reference To The Multiple Streams Model

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ON OBAMA ADMINISTRATION GUN POLICY WITH  
CONTINUAL REFERENCE TO THE MULTIPLE STREAMS MODEL

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The Multiple Streams model developed by John Kingdon (1995) and Nikolaos Zahariadis (2007) provides a valuable framework for understanding the nature of policy change. This investigation draws extensively upon the Multiple Streams framework in order to understand the development of gun-control policy initiatives under President Barack Obama.

The investigation uses a case-study approach with in-depth analysis of four different mass-shooting events that took place in the United States between 2009 and 2012. Reconstruction of the shooting events and detailed parsing of the Obama administration's official responses to each incident, when viewed through the Multiple Streams lens, clearly explain why Obama's aggressive policy initiative was so delayed in its emergence in spite of several shootings and the President's clearly stated belief that gun-reform was a necessary step for the federal government. While the term "policy change" is broad and may encompass all sorts of governmental responsiveness, the term herein should be interpreted in the narrowest sense: exclusively encompassing legislative initiatives.

Ultimately, the investigation concludes that numerous factors, but most prominently concerns about the timing and results of the 2010 Midterm and 2012 General Elections, prevented an aggressive pursuit of gun-reform prior to January 2013. The tragic shooting of 28 people in Newtown, Connecticut, then served as a prime focusing event for the President to aggressively engage a long-standing goal.

When I first chose to investigate gun-violence, I did so at an intellectual distance – out of sheer interest in understanding government policy. Only after completing the case-studies did I grasp the enormity and tragedy behind this choice.

I modestly offer my research in memory of these fifty-three stolen lives.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A single man arrives at a decision that most of us could never imagine. This man, frequently described by family and acquaintances as a “loner,” has become severely frustrated with his life and sees few courses of action. Easy access to numerous weapons - pistols, shotguns, rifles - informs a deranged conclusion: armed, he will walk into a crowded public area, careful to draw as little attention as possible, and then without warning open fire. Many lives are claimed by derangement and tragedy in the chaos that follows. Within minutes law enforcement arrive and the immediate horror ends, but the community of people will be forever scarred by unfathomable grief. Sometimes this gunman simply resigns himself to arrest. Other times he ends his own life, or is killed in a standoff with police. No matter the outcome, our natural human response will be to ask “Why?” and then, if we are strong enough, to find a solution that can keep it from happening again.

Though the United States is far from consensus on what a solution to this problem might look like, we are at least fortunate enough that our political system can create opportunities for response. The duty of the political scientist, then, should be to accurately describe this process to arrive at a better understanding of how policies change and, by extension, how a society is able to cope with the most serious problems it faces.

Although this country has witnessed many more tragic incidents of mass-shooting, this thesis will focus on four specific incidents which occurred during the first Obama administration in the years from 2009-2012: the 2009 shooting of eight people at a nursing home in North Carolina; the 2011 murder of six in Tucson, Arizona; the massacre of dozens at a movie theater in Colorado in 2012; the loss of 20 children at a Connecticut elementary school the very same

year. Though in the details these incidents differed greatly, broadly speaking, they were very similar; the opening paragraph of this introduction could, indeed, have been describing any one of them. Given the similar circumstances under which these cases occurred and President Obama's long-held stance in favor of gun-control legislation, the vastly different responses of the Obama administration to each of these events needs explanation. At first glance, the raw materials to produce such disparate responses are simply not there. In spite of this, the investigation aims to explain why the President's aggressive gun-policy oriented response came about when it did, why previous shootings did not create viable opportunities to pursue this change earlier, and how the Multiple Streams framework developed by John Kingdon informs the understanding of all these phenomena. In terms of its broader significance to the field of political science, this investigation is also valuable. Oftentimes, political scientists are tempted to deal with policymakers and government officials as independent actors who are free to invoke their powers at any time in their tenure. In fact, the complex web of relationships and considerations can play a much larger role than such a view allows. A vindicated Multiple Streams model can add critical understanding to how government officials act in general, which helps explain perhaps one of the most important areas of political science inquiry: policymaking.

The Literature Review chapter will explain the theoretical underpinnings of this investigation in detail, drawing on scholarly research in many fields to bolster its assumptions. The Multiple Streams framework which serves as the primary organizing theme of this investigation describes federal policy change as occurring in an arena divided into three areas. First, the problem stream consists of all those issues which the public and policymakers believe merit attention. The investigation supplements this with research into public opinion, agenda setting, and framing in order to understand not only how certain issues (i.e., gun violence)

become salient in the policymaking arena, but the respective roles of the media, President, and world events in this process.

The second stream, the policy stream, consists of all possible solutions to the problems identified by the problem stream. Because any problem will have numerous possible and sometimes conflicting solutions advocated by policy entrepreneurs in the polity, policy stream changes as a result of which solutions are the most palatable at some particular time. The investigation relies on literature regarding how the public and policymakers evaluate these solutions, their technical feasibility, and how much they compromise or fortify the values of the political culture.

The final stream is known as the politics stream, and this stream is the sum of all political conditions which bear on the likelihood that a policy will pass and that it will be actively pursued in the first place. The literature drawn upon to evaluate the politics stream focuses on electoral timing, the distribution of legislative ideology, and the vicissitudes of public mood. Each of these conditions heavily influenced the timing of President Obama's gun-control initiative. It should also be noted that, both this thesis and the Multiple Streams Model itself are only intended to explain policy change as a relatively narrow legislative phenomenon – leaving unaddressed the alternative mechanisms of judicial review and executive fiat.

The Data and Methods chapter will explain the methodology employed and the sources of the data used in this thesis. Specifically, the investigation uses case-studies to trace the causal mechanisms that link the Multiple Streams model to the precise variables which had bearing on the Obama administration's gun policy. These four case studies will follow in a chapter of their own using this causal link as a guide, the application of the Multiple Streams model will be a

simple matter of understanding how each stream contributed to or failed to contribute to the opening of a policy window which allowed the President to pursue his policy goal. The investigation will conclude with a final chapter explaining precisely why, in the first three case studies, a policy window failed to open for President Obama, and what unique circumstances surrounding the case of Newtown, Connecticut, allowed for this policy window to finally open.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In late 2012 and early 2013, the United States experienced just such a surge in attention toward the issue of gun control. Though it was dormant in the political arena for over a decade, the sudden explosion of discussion on the issue of gun control during this period is interesting for a few reasons. First, mass shooting incidents in the United States are, unfortunately, nothing new. Although there has been a gradual surge in the number of these incidents occurring each year (Follman, et al. 2012; Blair and Martaindale 2013) the abrupt emergence of this as a hot-button issue and primary goal for the Obama administration cannot simply be explained as a consequence of such a gradual phenomenon. In fact, dozens of lives were claimed in mass shootings earlier in that very same year, 2012, which were not met with the type of public outcry nor governmental response that rapidly developed by the year's end. Furthermore, the pursuit of this issue suggests that the political actors most invested in its success believed that they would be able to push through legislation in a way that perhaps was not likely before. The question, at first glance, poses many anomalies.

In his 1995 book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, John Kingdon poses a question which is central to the understanding of public policy: "Why do some subjects rise on the agenda while others are neglected?" (197). Obviously, explaining the development of public policy is a primary interest for many political scientists because public policy is usually understood as the primary goal of the political system. Policy, however, does not arise spontaneously; it is the product of numerous decision-makers at different phases, each with different interests, and oftentimes without consideration for the best interests of the country as a whole. Ultimately, because of the limited resources of the state to handle policy issues, a given

issue which is granted the scarce attention of the state represents a very precise convergence of circumstances.

The theoretical framework developed by John Kingdon to explain why some issues rise to debate may prove very useful when analyzing gun control under the Obama administration. Insofar as Kingdon's influential "multiple streams model" explains policy development in general, the application of the model will make clearer why an issue, so much a part of American life for so long, suddenly became the most contentious of its day.

### *The Multiple Streams Model*

John Kingdon's goal in developing the multiple streams model is simple: explain how legislative policy change occurs. While it is clear that the mechanisms of the state are somehow manipulated to allocate resources and power, what is not clear is why certain issues arise as the targets of new policy, and furthermore why the final solutions offered have drowned out competing possibilities. This theoretical perspective states that when the "three streams" of public policy align, a fleeting "policy window" is created and provides opportunities for "entrepreneurs" to push their preferred solutions (Kingdon 1995, 165). Of course, without definition these terms are meaningless. The first stream is the policy stream. This stream is in fact an abstract body of ideas regarding what types of plausible solutions to some problem exist. This stream is articulated by technocrats, pundits, academics, and other "experts" who through discourse create the range of options that any problem can be dealt with (Kingdon 1995, 117). These individuals diffuse their solutions to the public and ultimately their policy prescriptions arrive to the decision-makers who employ them. The second stream is known as the problem stream. This stream gradually develops as a particular perspective on what constitutes societal-



level “problems” which merit attention from policymakers. These perceived problems frequently arise out of the deterioration of some government service or area of public life (Kingdon 1995, 90). Although the problem stream and policy stream represent both issue and solution, they alone are not able to create policy change. The third stream, the politics stream, is the sum of all pragmatic, political considerations which help or hinder the development of some new policy. As defined by Kingdon, this stream is influenced by the balance of competing considerations, various lobbying pressures, as well as the turnover and ideological development of the politicians who enact legislation (Kingdon 1995, 153).

At such time when the influences of these three streams have aligned, a path-of-least-resistance is created for some particular type of policy change. This rare opportunity to usher in a new policy is known as a “policy window.” Short-lived and highly susceptible to the vicissitudes of the political arena, a particular policy window does not manifest in change unless capitalized on by an “entrepreneur,” an individual who expends effort in convincing decision-makers that some particular solution must immediately be enacted to cure a problem. This process of consciously linking the putative problem with the optimal solution is known as “coupling,” and at this point the new policy is fully articulated and must be enacted into law by the proper channels (Kingdon 1995, 122-123).

Though the timing of policy output can project an image with “a certain arbitrary character” (Cohen-Vogel and McLendon, 2009; 1) the convergence of these three streams and yet their fundamental independence from one another can go a long way in explaining legislation. Kingdon (1995) describes the process as one in which countless parties “lie in wait in and around government with their solutions in hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to

their advantage” (p. 165). Here the image emerges of a certain autonomy between the public and policymaker’s perceptions of problems, the usefulness of various types of more or less palatable solutions waiting to be proposed, and the coincidental posturing of various actors in the political landscape. Stated briefly, Kingdon’s framework outlines the three necessary conditions – a salient problem, substantial volition, and a palatable solution – must exist in order for policy change to occur. This “three streams” approach will be the primary organizing theme of the research project, as the reciprocal relationship between mass shootings in the United States and Obama Administration gun policy is examined. Cohen-Vogel and McLendon (2009) expands on the influence of Kingdon’s method, while exhorting subsequent scholars to apply this theoretical lens to their work:

“Kingdon’s so-called Multiple Streams approach remains one of the most cited theories of policy formation, if also one of its least systematically applied. At the heart of the perspective lies an interest in explaining agenda change” (Cohen-Vogel and McLendon 2009, 1)

Parsimonious as this framework may be when the three streams are considered together, taken individually each of the streams present numerous questions. What, for example, articulates satisfactory cognizance of a problem on a national scale? What political realities “on the ground” as it were, might block legislative will from being realized? Lastly, what determines which of the many possible solutions will ultimately be implemented? In answering these questions, the literature review will examine several bodies of academic scholarship – broken down by relevance to each stream – and attempt to structure a viable theoretical framework for understanding President Barack Obama’s gun control initiative.

## The Problem Stream

The volume of issues that might conceivably present themselves as substantive problems to the public consciousness far exceeds the lawmaking capacity of any legislature. Consequently, unless we conclude that the problem articulation process is random, then there must be some mechanism which selects issues for public discussion, or at the very least some variables which make policy debate on a matter more or less salient. A parallel immediately demands to be drawn between this type of problem articulation, and the process known as agenda-setting. Indeed, agenda setting may even be the primary mechanism by which this occurs. But, in spite of the simplicity in attributing some process to a single media mechanism, the development of the problem stream and the interaction of the many different parties who contribute to the agenda-setting process assure that this will be anything but simple. The tone and intensity of Presidential response will also inform how seriously the public considers an event, and, taking cues from him, the public may agree that an issue which has merited the attention of the President also merits action. Lastly, as potent as the effect of the media and President may be, they are also to a great extent limited in what they can focus their attention toward based on the chaotic development of national events.

### *Agenda Setting*

The literature on agenda-setting begins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with Walter Lippman's seminal work *Public Opinion*. Therein, the author expounds at length about the gaps which emerge in a complex society between the world of the "Platonic ideal," here used as a shorthand term by Lippman for a community of perfect information, and the distorted interpretations of reality which complicate not only public opinion, but by extension public understanding of

political events. The author claims that “there exists a body of known truth, and a set of well founded hopes, which are prostituted by a more or less conscious conspiracy,” (p.355) which he believes is predominantly propagated by “rich owners of newspapers.” Because of the distance which necessarily exists between the public at large and the facts “as they exist” in the world, the media must play a key role in the process of bringing facts, and hence interpretations, to the public. He concludes, with cynical tone, that it is only on rare occasions when the news media do not actively exert influence in shaping public discourse for the benefit of those rich newspaper magnates. At this point the literature is inchoate, and the contemporary understanding of agenda-setting as a specific process by which some events are highlighted by and others ignored is only vaguely implied. Nonetheless, Lippman’s early work makes major progress toward conceptualizing the ways in which the media mold public perception, and produced an enormous amount of subsequent scholarship in political science and communications.

The first truly concrete articulation of the process of agenda-setting as it is now understood came decades later in the pithy remark: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963; 13). Here lies the crux of the large field of literature concerning agenda-setting. Not only is it the case that, as Cohen remarks, the public consciousness is filled with the issues selected by the media, but later contributors also note that the interpretation of these issues and their relative value is also contingent on the quantity and intensity of media coverage.

In a major study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) the authors conclude that, while the media’s ability to change specific public attitudes is tenuous, the media did exert a significant influence on public perceptions of what issues demanded attention in the 1968 United States

General Election (p.176), and presumably the media has only grown in their influence, given the proliferation of new and more pervasive forms of media exposure. Subsequent authors of communications theory have noted that the media is all-powerful in deciding “what voters considered to be the major issues of [a given] campaign” (Infante, Rancer, and Womak 1997, 366) both through selecting how much information will be presented on a particular topic, and in the relative placement of news stories (e.g., at the beginning versus the end of a newscast; front page headline versus fifth page blurb).

Of course, the media are not alone in their agenda-setting practices. In his 1976 article “What makes it change?” Bruce Westley examines the issue of, not whether agenda-setting occurs, but who influences the media in *their* agenda-setting activities. Starting from the sound assumption that, rather than acting capriciously, the media’s agenda setting is itself motivated by numerous competing interests which often conflict in determining what to highlight. His conclusion forms an important intersection with the subject of this research process by establishing that political actors such as interest groups and, perhaps the administration of President Obama, can exert their own influence on those issues that the media highlights (p.47). Far from being an equal and reciprocal relationship, though, it is still important to understand that neither the media nor the President would be independent of the interests nor the motivations of the other. Westley (1976) also concludes that the relative prestige of media outlets creates an uneven relationship within the media itself regarding whose reporting has the most significant and lasting impact on the agenda-setting process. The interplay between political actors and prestigious media outlets potentially means that, by using the media in general and specific outlets in particular as a conduit, then the President is able to exert a great effect on agenda setting.

### *Presidential Response*

In addition to mere attention, many other facets of Presidential response will color the nature of media coverage and debate. According to Bucy (2003), analyses of speeches given by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11 suggest that the intensity of Presidential rhetoric increased markedly over the course of the Iraq War, perhaps attracting greater media attention in and of itself. While Bucy (2003) places significant attention on the value of tone and intensity of Presidential communication, and while this might seem to fall slightly outside of the scope of interest of the investigation at hand, it is in fact critical in understanding how Presidents publicly react to events and why the validation or negation of this investigation's hypotheses will be more complex than face value might suggest. Seeing as Presidents moderate or intensify their rhetoric in response to shifting goals and situations, we can expect that any analysis of official Presidential responses should have more than one "dimension" of consideration. Consequently, we cannot explicitly expect that the frequency of Presidential response be the only point of interest, but that qualitative analysis is necessary. Of course, the qualitative analysis of each case study will take into account the tone, aggressiveness, and length of Presidential communications issued.

### *National Events*

As in many areas of social scientific inquiry, the relationships that emerge between the media and the President are highly complex and interactive. Certainly the two respond to one another on a continuous basis and, in doing so, can only independently guide the agenda setting process so much. It is also important to note, however, that neither President nor media is free of yet a third variable with no will of its own and more powerful than either: circumstances. Insofar

as the media still relies on facts to produce stories, complete fabrications do not have a place in the national discourse. Clearly, the chaotic progress of real-world events is the first and most definite arbiter of what issues make it to the legislative agenda. Without being molded by both the media and political establishments, there is rarely a consensus on what constitutes problems. As outlined in Cohen (1963) above, the public and policy elite must first have their attention directed onto problems so that they can begin to contemplate them and formulate solutions. Depending on the abruptness or sensationalization of how such real-world events are diffused into public awareness, Kingdon (1995, 100-101) refers to them as either “indicators” or “focusing events.”

In some circumstances, pressure to recognize something as a problem builds gradually over time as some systemic function becomes increasingly maladapted to deal with societal problems. These gradually changing pressures are known as “indicators,” because they usually come to the attention of public officials via some type of quantitative data collection. The government as a whole is continuously under the scrutiny of watchdog and consumer agencies, auditors, and lobbying organizations. Frequently these organizations compile and track statistics which reflect the failures of existing policy and, as figures shift to reflect negative trends, it becomes much easier for these organizations to garner attention to their problems and demand that legislators devote serious debate toward its resolution. While the public tends to be satisfied with the *staus quo*, both they and the political establishment tend to interpret changes in policy effectiveness as threatening and believe these statistical shifts are generally problematic (Kingdon 1995, 91). The academic establishment also plays a role in monitoring various indicators and building a critical consensus around what constitutes problems through research, studies, and interpreting trends in data (Kingdon 1995, 90). Of course, data do not exist in a

vacuum and, once gathered, must somehow be linked to particular solutions. This task is a significant step in the creation of policy, but can only truly occur once the three streams create opportunities for this.

Conversely, “focusing events” are a more abrupt and sensational mechanism through which specific problems are identified. The focusing event is a term which is not always properly defined, especially by multiple streams theoreticians (Birkland and DeYoung 2012, 176). According to Kingdon (1995), a focusing event is a “little push...like a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to the problem, a powerful symbol that catches on, or the personal experience of a policymaker” (94-95). What distinguishes any passing news event from a potent focusing event is the intangible quality of being eye-catching, that is, something which appears problematic *prima facie*, without the need for extensive quantification or academic interpretation to “make sense” to the public and policy elite. Usually these focusing events come in the form of a national tragedy or disaster (95) because the dramatic concentration of policy failure is more salient than an equally harmful series of event spaced over time. In Birkland and DeYoung (2012, 176) the authors succinctly use this phenomenon to explain why certain policy areas are generally more conducive to the influence of focusing events, claiming that “a plane crash that kills 200 people gets more attention than 200 single fatal car wrecks.” This is not to suggest, of course, that the automotive industry is beyond the reach of policy change, simply that some policy changes are more likely to be galvanized by the accretion of data into shifting indicators and others by shocking media events. Such focusing events are also influential because of their potential for adoption as symbols of some specific problem and, oftentimes, some specific solution as well. In *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy, and Focusing Events*, T.A. Birkland contends that the most powerful focusing events will be those which can be reduced “to



simple, graphic, and familiar symbolic packages” (11) because these simple, familiar packages are easily and effectively disseminated by the media without having to make subtle or complex arguments as to why the image is emblematic of something exigent.

Obviously there are a great number of factors which contribute to the articulation of problems in the political arena. In attempting to understand the direction of the problem stream, it is necessary to recognize the contribution made by individuals and by circumstances. While the media and various groups select public attention by agenda setting, they are also limited in their freedom to guide the articulation of problems by the relative weight of national tragedies, and gradual changes in the data that policymakers draw upon to do their jobs. Even still, the articulation of a problem is no guarantee that there is a viable solution, or that political volition will exist to enact it. For this, one must look toward Kingdon’s other streams.

### The Policy Stream

Just as it is the case that more problems exist than can be dealt with, so too is it the case that each problem has a large range of potential solutions which are often mutually exclusive and certainly cannot all be implemented at once. Legions of think tanks, congressional and governmental agencies, academic groups, and technocrats are continuously in the process of formulating and reformulating policy prescriptions precisely in case that some particular problem should become salient. In spite of their geographic and organizational distribution, these groups of policy formulators are known as “policy communities,” (Zahariadis 2007, 72; Kingdon 1995, 117) in that they interact most directly with one another when trying to evaluate these various solutions. The humorous name that the author uses to refer to the sum of all potential solutions produced by a policy community of the “primeval policy soup,” and this soup of choices remains

latent until a successful bid is made to adopt a policy prescription. Interestingly, Kingdon (1995) notes that the driving force behind the development of policy prescriptions is that the policy communities are incentive-based actors and will make prescriptions which benefit them and their ideology (122-123). Regarding President Obama as a policy entrepreneur with his own preferred gun-control positions, there is little question. Even before his presidency, Obama was on the record numerous times coming down against absolute 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment rights, and cast many gun-control votes. In a 2004 Senate debate, the President referred to the expiration of the Bush-era assault weapons ban as “a scandal” (Keyes and Obama 2004) and as the President-elect issued a policy platform which clearly stated his intention to close “the gun show loophole and [make] guns in this country childproof” in addition to “making the expired federal Assault Weapons Ban permanent” (Change.gov 2008). In spite of the influence of personal ideology, policies which arise within this stream are developed based on two important criteria: their technical feasibility and their value acceptability (131-132).

### *Technical Feasibility*

In anticipating questions of technical feasibility, the authors of some particular policy proposal will need to carefully consider all of the components of their proposals implementation and financing. Conflicts and inconsistencies in their policy prescription will quickly be pointed out by advocates of competing positions and exploited (131). Nonetheless, even policy programs which are implausible on technical grounds can still be adopted; it might be better to conceive not of technical feasibility as a prerequisite to harnessing the strength of the policy streams, but rather *perceived* technical feasibility. In the case of the gun-control debate that has colored the beginning of President Obama’s second term, the technical feasibility of various proposals were attacked by proponents of competing camps. While the conventional left-wing response in the

United States has been advocacy for tighter regulation on guns and the need to limit their accessibility across the board, a popular conservative policy position advocated heavily by the National Rifle Association has argued that only an increase in the number of guns will help citizens defend themselves (Abad-Santos 2013, Lott 2010). Clearly, in these cases the opposition strongly contends that, not only are the inverse proposals technically infeasible, but will directly lead to an exacerbation of the problem. In spite of the debatable feasibility of either or both of these prescriptions in achieving the desired outcome, they remain options in the policy arena because there exist large numbers of policy makers in both camps who perceive technical feasibility even where there may be none.

### *Value Acceptability*

Policy prescriptions, however, may conflict in another dimension as well: the acceptability of their values (Kingdon 1995, 132). Clearly a policy prescription which has been put forward by a policy community will match with the values of at least a subset of that policy community – if not the community as a whole. This value acceptability cannot only hold for a subset of technocrats or intellectuals, however, as it must be viable for wide-scale implementation by politicians who are accountable to large public masses. One of the most frequent areas of value conflict appears when policy communities impose values regarding the proper role of the government in public and private life, and continuum which runs from “greater government involvement” to “less government involvement” can be loosely understood as analogous to the left-right spectrum. While for example there may be little debate over if some proposal is able to deal with an issue, there may still be substantial debate over whether it should be implemented anyway due to its undercutting the value of individual liberty, or conversely because of its dramatic handicapping of government agencies to perform their jobs (133).

Revisiting the example of more guns versus fewer guns, in addition to opposing camps objection to the plausibility of the prescriptions as solutions, they also perceive a serious value acceptability problems. On the left, the objection being that introducing more guns would be irresponsible and jeopardize more lives (Abad-Santos 2013), and on the right, that limiting access to firearms would infringe on 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights (Lott 2010). Also critical to the cost benefit analysis that characterizes value acceptability is understanding that those proposals which come at the lowest perceived cost – be this expense in terms of values, time, or money – are more likely to be adopted as the preferred policy initiative.

The policy stream is complex, because understanding how people and circumstances shape the direction of its flow is difficult and value-laden. Certainly when assessing technical feasibility, the policy community is more able to coalesce around an empirical or scientific standard to determine whether or not their proposal is viable. Indeed, these policy communities, because of their expertise in handling specific policy issues, are often the best suited to make judgments regarding technical feasibility and subsequently pass this information on to policymakers.

While by no means are assessments of feasibility unanimous, they are accessible to “outsiders” with education and access to requisite information. With respect to value accessibility, however, these policy communities are often more removed from “common-sense” values that are more palatable to the average citizen, radicalized by their unique professional and intellectual environments. It is in finding a balance between technical and value-oriented considerations that allows policymakers to manipulate the policy stream.

## The Politics Stream

In spite of the myriad issues dealt with by national news media, it is simply a fact that without substantial volition on the part of citizens and lawmakers, policy change cannot occur. This stream may be the most theoretically complex, as any number of disparate factors can influence the relative power of political actors. In times with poor centralization of power, the nation is likely to enter a state of gridlock that prevents actors from mobilizing simply because they see no viable procedural avenues to pursue. Political and public relations considerations, then, may be instrumental in shifting the balance of policymaking-power in the favor of some particular group (Kingdon 1995, 145). At such time, the second stream will make its vital contribution to creating Kingdon's policy window. Just some of the actors will of course be the President, the Congress, the court system, lobbyists and interest groups such as the National Rifle Association, other private organizations, and the public. At any time, rapid developments may change the relationships that exist between these entities and produce change or gridlock. The three streams framework conceptualizes this impetus to change as falling into one or a number of three different categories: the national mood, pressure-group campaigns, and the incremental turnover of policymakers (Zahariadis 2007, 73).

### *National Mood*

The framework holds that changes to the general mood of the nation may, at a given moment, make some policy option more or less palatable than it had been. Because the relative relationship between different policy choices may shift as a result of national mood swings, satisfaction with an older policy may rapidly turn to dissatisfaction and present an opportunity for different actors to present their alternatives. According to Kingdon (1995, 147) the 1970s

were an era of relatively conservative mood, without major ambitions for the expansion of government and averse to big expenses and new regulations. The preceding decade, might comparatively have been characterized by a more liberal mood – embracing major socio-political changes across the United States. It is important to stay cognizant of the fact that the access policymakers have to the political mood is filtered through the channels they use to test it, be this national media, correspondence with the public, or the tone of political rallies. Since policymakers are effectively drawing a sample of the national mood from these events, the most politically active citizens will have contributed most heavily to politician’s unique estimation of national mood at any moment (Kingdon 1995, 162-163).

#### *Pressure Groups and Turnover*

A relative balance of disparate opinions among interest groups may also dampen the urgency with which a problem is dealt. Conversely, when “many interest groups voice their support for [some policy], it is likely that government officials will hasten to include the item on the agenda” (Zahariadis 2007, 73) because the gradual evaporation of opposition to that policy will lower the political cost of enacting the emerging policy. Lastly, the regular turnover of policymakers and administrators assures that there is never an extended period without the possibility that different ideas will emerge. Large numbers of politicians are regularly replaced through biennial elections and create opportunities for the emergence of new leaders, and new organizing ideologies to grapple with older ones. In the case of the 2010 election, for example, the United States Congress saw the emergence of a new subset of conservative Republicans known as the Tea Party who had a dramatic impact on the dynamics of the legislative branch (Zernike 2010) and helped elect Rep. John Boehner to the Speakership. Zahariadis (2007, 73)

believes that these factors, especially the national mood and electoral turnover, exert the greatest influence on the ability of the politics stream to manifest legislation.

### *Executive-Legislative Dynamic*

Other factors, of course, also affect the ability of policies to be pushed through the legislative process. A central question for this investigation is of course the relationship between the President and Congress. Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007) propose many theories as to what political factors determine the President's legislative efficacy. Among other factors, the authors note that congressional gridlock and poor timing, such as being very early or very late in their term, will put the President in a weak bargaining position with Congress. Conversely, they suggest that avoiding any of these scenarios while maintaining a high public approval rating will mean relatively greater legislative success. Because we now know that the Obama Administration will have a second term in power, there is reason to believe that the wider arc between his juvenile presidency and ineffectual lame-duck period will show a more pronounced spike in the aggressiveness of his gun-control pursuits. Furthermore, in light of this evidence we can plausibly assert that the renewal of Presidential and Democratic Party support after the 2012 General Election will likely prove to be a galvanizing influence toward legislative overhaul.

The very timing of elections, while clearly important, does not always have this uniform galvanizing effect, however. In fact, researchers have investigated numerous ways in which proximity to elections influences the formation of policy (Biglaiser and Mezzetti 1997; Chiu 2002) and it is clear that this important element of the executive-legislative dynamic can have a complex impact on the general form of the politics stream. Chiu (2002) notes that as an election draws nearer, policymakers in general become more concerned with the popularity of initiatives

and less concerned with selecting the most efficient policy choice (855). Complementing this finding, and perhaps with even more direct relevance to this investigation, Biglaiser and Mezzetti (1997) finds that while incumbents in peril of losing elections tend to adopt many new policy initiatives in the hope of gaining greater support in the electorate, incumbents who believe that their reelection is likely show abnormally high aversion to adopting new policies out of fear of abruptly alienating voters. The bearing of elections on the politics stream, then, is also contingent on the President's perceived likelihood that he will be able to win (442).

In his groundbreaking work *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt reframed the understanding of Presidential power within American political science by insisting that it be grounded in the President's institutional weakness. Instead of the romantic image of a powerful executive issuing orders and effortlessly seeing change come to pass, the work famously suggests that Presidential power is primarily the "power to persuade" by use of the prestige, reputation, and charisma he is able to project. Fundamentally, Neustadt claims that a President must "convince such men that what the White House wants of them is what they ought to do for their sake and on their authority" (Neustadt 1990, 30).

Considering what this means in practical terms, Neustadt is suggesting that while the President may only be able to make precise and limited threats within his own institutionalized power (e.g., veto threats, executive orders, etc.) his persuasive authority helps foster policy change by encouraging negative systemic consequences for the action which he seeks to prevent or eliminate. As is frequently the case in American politics, the most onerous of these repercussions may be an ouster at the next election. The literature, however, is divided as to what role Presidential approval plays in this mechanism, and to what degree greater approval ratings translate to greater influence in pushing his desired positions. Though we find some success for



this position in Neustadt (1990) and Canes-Wrone and De Marchi (2003), other scholars have suggested not only that public opinion is marginal to the legislative success of the President (Collier and Sullivan 1995, 197; Bond and Fleicher 1990, 188) but that political scientists entire enterprise of monitoring the President's legislative success has produced few variables with much great explanatory power and that, as of yet, the success of Presidents is still largely misunderstood (Bonvecchi and Zelaznik 2011, 146-147).

One school of thought suggests the existence of a “rally around the flag effect” (Mueller 1970; Lee 1975) that causes a spike in public support of the President with the occurrence of some significant or shocking event in international relations and foreign policy. In spite of the questions surrounding the role of public opinion addressed above, this particular phenomenon may be qualitatively different from a mere jump in public approval. If public support for the President is taken to be a proxy measurement for a more politically transcendent “sense of solidarity” with the President, then the jump in approval ratings that typically follows national tragedies may provide the President with even greater leverage to achieve his legislative goals. The authors believe that shocking events focus public attention on the President as the symbol of national unity and leadership. If so, this is an interesting nexus between the public relations concerns of the President and the political leverage that he gains from a boost in support. While this investigation clearly would not occupy itself with the foreign policy concerns at issue in Mueller (1970) and Lee (1975), the causal mechanism proposed by these authors suggests that domestic tragedies – for example the mass shootings of Aurora, Colorado and Newtown, Connecticut – could serve the same function and boost not only the President's approval, but that intangible sense that national unity is necessary. Even still, the “rally around the flag” effect does not always carry a significant impact and, in and of itself, is rarely sufficient cause for major

legislative change. In the article “Patriotism or Opinion Leadership?” Baker and O’Neal (2001) conclude that, the effect is in fact usually “small, by no means certain, and appears to be contingent on a number of contextual factors” (66) such as media coverage, bipartisan appeal of the Presidential response, and the effectiveness of the White House press office in framing the event on their own terms. While entirely reasonable, this conclusion regarding the variable impact of the “rally around the flag” effect is somewhat problematic. Effectively, in reaching this conclusion Baker and O’Neal (2001) make their own argument circular, defining the effect in terms of what it was intended to explain. These conceptual difficulties notwithstanding, if the basic assumptions about the “rally around the flag” effect are correct, then capitalizing on mass-shooting tragedies may prove to have been Obama’s greatest asset in manipulating the national gun-control debate.

Clearly, the wake of a mass-shooting poses multiple competing problems and opportunities for the executive. Because many scholars suggest that effectively addressing salient issues is so important for a leader, this investigation will take very close account of those factors which might impel the President to publicly react to an incident. Alternatively, the investigation must also take into close account the types of variables and circumstances which would have served to suppress commentary on the part of the government. Which of these effects will have the greatest and most consistent cumulative impact in the cases outlined remains to be determined by the case studies, and in those cases with anomalous trends, close examination of the unique circumstances should serve to explain why.

Some debate exists over the nature and causes of governmental responsiveness. Besley and Burgess (2001) discusses this issue, and conclude that the most responsive states will tend to be those with a large degree of media saturation, with their primary proxy variable of interest

being total newspaper circulation. They outline a mechanism of action by which political power is exercised punitively against officials who respond to events poorly or slowly, in favor of officials “likely to be responsive in the future” (Besley and Burgess 2001, 634). If these conclusions are indeed correct, the bearing on the investigation at hand suggests that the Obama Administration would want to increase its own media exposure during or after a mass-shooting to highlight its responsiveness. Still, this does not necessarily entail a response to any or all incidents. Instead, it seems plausible that events of greater news appeal would most powerfully impel the administration to comment, thereby limiting the President’s discretion on which incident’s he must acknowledge and which events he can pass over in silence. It should also be noted that response from the presidency in and of itself makes an incident more newsworthy, and therefore might complicate the prospects of a President uninterested in drawing attention to some particular issue.

### Policy Windows, Coupling, and the Policy Entrepreneur

In the rare circumstances where all three streams outlined by the multiple streams framework have converged, a unique opportunity called a “policy window” is created. Kingdon (1995, 166) likens the opening of this policy window to the opening of a launch window in aerospace. The launch conditions will only stay optimal for a finite amount of time and, in order to get off the ground, the rocket must not miss it. These special opportunities allow “for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems” (Kingdon 1995, 165) to assure that, like the rocket, their solution gets off the ground. Zahariadis (2007) notes that, while a policy window may have opened it will not necessarily be utilized and even when it is, it has not necessarily been used as well as it might have been. The author offers the example of a misappropriated policy window with the treatment of bioterrorism as a security

concern, rather than an epidemiological issue, meant that the state wasted an opportunity to capitalize on a broader concern affecting the whole county – public health (73-74).

Although the opening of these windows is usually brief, it need not always be, and may in fact be an anticipated part of a highly regular governmental process, such as budget-writing, or unpredictable like natural disasters or mass-shootings (74). The act of simultaneously linking a problem with a solution, while simultaneously promoting this solution is known as “coupling,” and the actors who attempt to couple problems with their preferred solutions are known as “policy entrepreneurs” (Kingdon 1995, 178; Zahariadis 2007, 74). Entrepreneurs are individuals who see the political environment as a place where there is something to be gained, hoping for “policies of which they approve, satisfaction from participation, or even personal aggrandizement in the form of job security” (Kingdon 1995, 122-123) and as such they must at any moment be prepared to act with their “proposal at the ready, their special problem well-documented, lest the opportunity pass them by” (165). These individuals invest a great deal of personal and institutional resources in the hopes of changing the policy environment and some are more able to take advantage of the opportunities presented by their policy windows.

Not all entrepreneurs are as successful in coupling their pet problems and preferred solutions at the emergence of the policy window, however. One significant consideration is that different entrepreneurs have varying degrees of access to the cables of power and the attention of policymakers – this can range anywhere from a citizen writing a letter at one end, to the President of the United States and members of Congress with their continual access at the other (Zahariadis 2007, 74). Another significant factor is the amount of resource wealth that the entrepreneur is able to expend. In some cases, individuals and organizations can undertake massively expensive campaigns to saturate policymakers and the public with their policy

proposals. While extravagantly expensive, these campaigns can help ideas gain traction independently of the efforts of the entrepreneur. This resource expenditure need not be measured only in dollar amounts, but energy, manpower, and time are also valuable resources all of which increase the likelihood of, but do not guarantee, the adoption of a policy initiative. Lastly, Zahariadis claims that effective manipulation of the three streams themselves is also likely to increase the adoption of a preferred policy.

With respect to what type of manipulation, we may find it difficult to make across the board statements regarding what constitutes this “manipulation” and how it is done. Seeger (2006) notes that crisis response efforts should be crafted on a case by case basis, and that sensitivity to circumstantial peculiarities may often be more important than even addressing an event at all. Regarding one example, that of foodborne contamination, may require rapid dissemination of information as widely as possible, while transportation accidents or terrorist events may require entirely different strategies. Although the range of issues addressed by Seeger’s analysis is much broader than the scope of this thesis, it remains true that these considerations will be of paramount interest in the national political environment. Because different scenarios may bring about “complex questions about blame and responsibility,” (235) any commentator or government official – the President’s administration specifically – must proceed prudently when attempting to reform policies, manage fallout, and cultivate a desirable public image. Benoit and Brinson (1999) note in their research that an important public relations issue for the post-crisis responder is blame management because it is part of the public psychology to search for a target of blame in the wake of crisis events. In attempting to minimize reputational damage for their own organization, crisis managers will attempt to separate themselves from the source of controversy and, in effect make any necessary “amputation” as

painless as possible. In deflecting accusations of racism that surfaced against Texaco after the emergence of a controversial audio recording, the authors characterize corporate strategy as simply:

“[asserting] that the company itself was innocent of wrongdoing; it neither performed nor condoned the executives’ comments. Having successfully created a clear division between the bad employees and the good, [Texaco Chairman Peter] Bijur argues that the company as a whole should not be held accountable for the actions of the “few rotten apples” (Benoit and Brinson 1999, 496).

Because the public takes major cues from the government and media response as to who will be the target of blame, we can assume that the Obama administration might also engage in blame shifting, though with a key difference: whereas the burden of proof in this case required Texaco to shift blame from themselves, the government has greater flexibility because it does not begin as the putative source of blame at the outset. With the exception of cases of government wrongdoing, as during the Watergate scandal, administrations are able to shift blame in a strategic fashion that maximizes their position against competing factions. Presumably it is also a primary goal of these institutions to clearly articulate a target of guilt so that non-response does not begin to shift public perception of blame onto the government itself. It is clear that a shrewd and swift-acting President pursuing gun-control legislation could effectively leverage this blame assignment mechanism against antagonists.

## A Previous Example: The Reagan Budget of 1981

In his book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, John Kingdon applies the Multiple Streams model to several example cases. A review of one such case may be helpful in illustrating the gun-control application which follows in the case study section of the investigation. The case selected here is of the 1981 budget which was passed by the United States during the first year of the Reagan administration.

In this application, Kingdon (1995) relies in large part on the unpopularity of the outgoing Carter administration and the pessimism surrounding the economic and energy crises of the 1970s to explain the Reagan budget passed by congress in 1981. This budget was remarkable in and of itself. As the first budget of the new, controversial era of “Reaganomic” policies, it dramatically cut taxes and discretionary spending for agencies of the federal government. By virtue of proper timing, the Reagan administration was able to seize the policy window which opened and produce this contentious budget.

At the time, the economic crisis was bleak and contributed to a public disillusionment with existing economic policy which had only served to produce stagflation and a rising public debt. Consequently, right-wing academics and think tanks began the process of formulating counter-prescriptions to alleviate these problems by indulging in supply-side economic theory. According to Kingdon (1995), it was this latent interest in finding a different type of economic solution which primed the “policy stream” and the presence of intellectuals contributing to a potentially new school of economics had the effect of “softening up the system” (211) for dramatic reform years in advance of the concrete adoption of these policies.

This dissatisfaction with the United States economy was not endemic to the intellectual elite, however. Public support for Jimmy Carter who represented this old school of thought was low and is presented as one of the major reasons not only for his loss in the 1980 election, but for the decisive sweep of the Senate which gave the Republicans significant leverage. Commentators considered this a switch in national mood which favored more conservative policies. The Multiple Stream model by this point, concludes that a policy window has opened: the policy stream gradually having articulated a new type of economic theory which was to be put into practice with the 1981 budget, the problem stream painfully obvious because of economic turmoil, and the politics stream ushered in by a new President and congress on the coattails of this dissatisfaction.

In this example the process of this budget's passing has been cast in a particular context: three independent streams which are molded by different variables. The case studies which follow will be a more in-depth evaluation of all the features of four specific incidents which parses the political landscape at the time of four different mass-shootings. A more precise statement of the thesis argument follows, but the case of the 1981 Reagan budget can be used as an example of how cases will be interpreted according to the Multiple Streams model.

### *The Thesis Argument*

This investigation will use an extensive case study approach to evaluate the development of the Obama administration's gun-control agenda. Specifically, the case studies will be used in an attempt to explain the abrupt salience of comprehensive gun-control as a policy goal from the multiple streams perspective. Without this theoretical perspective to explain the contentious emergence of gun-control, a casual observer might be puzzled at why this issue emerged



precisely when it did, or, perhaps more precisely, why it did not emerge sooner. Although President Obama had made clear his stance on an assault weapons-ban clear as early as 2004 (Keyes and Obama 2004), and there had been numerous mass-shootings of substantial media prominence during his first term in office, the gun-control issue still was not able to gain neither enough media traction, nor the attention of policymakers until after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut.

Using the literature review and the multiple streams framework as a theoretical lens, a clearer picture begins to emerge of precisely why gun-control became as salient a topic as it did, when it did. Essentially, the shooting at Sandy Hook was a critical focusing event with exceptional symbolic weight. The death of twenty-seven people, most of them six-year-old children, was an uncommonly powerful news story which resonated viscerally with policymakers and the public. Tragic as this event may have been, it presented a perfect opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to demand gun reform.

The bitterness which many people felt upon being inundated with gut-wrenching stories of dead children meant that the public was more willing to accept a shift in value acceptability away from 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights in favor of public safety. Furthermore, the power of this focusing event was compounded by another, similar focusing event, which was not capitalized upon. The still-recent massacre in Aurora, Colorado had similar gravitas, because of the sheer number of people injured and wounded. Although the Sandy Hook incident saw more fatalities and involved many more children, the Aurora event multiplied the effect of Sandy Hook when it happened just a few months later and created a volatile national mood that all but demanded policy change. Clearly, the problem stream had been articulated and was awaiting a solution.

In this case, President Obama's preferred solution to the gun problem has existed as an option for several decades, at least since the Gun Control Act of 1968, with greater and lesser periods of popular support, but nonetheless always a viable option (18 USC 922). In addition, numerous other political factors, but perhaps most significantly his previous month's re-election to a second term, meant that the contentious battle for gun reform no longer had the high stakes for the Obama administration that it might have had at the time of the Aurora shooting. Overall, the multiple streams theory is a fruitful lens for explaining Obama's gun policy.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### *Research Question and Hypotheses*

Executive responses to mass-shootings in the United States have been highly dissimilar under the Obama administration. In seeking to explain such a profound disjuncture in the varied policy agendas, this thesis adopts a broader perspective, putting each incident in a strategic, goal-oriented context. The Multiple Streams model developed by John Kingdon and Nikolaos Zahariadis is the primary organizing theme of this investigation, and characterizes the President as a policy entrepreneur attempting to pass gun-control legislation when the policy window opens. Only from this theoretical framework can the disparate responses of the Obama administration make sense, and can the emergence of a vibrant gun-control debate in 2013 be explained.

The Multiple Streams framework is a powerful theory which explains legislative policy change of any kind in terms of three unique “streams” which converge at an opportune moment to form a “policy window” through which policy entrepreneurs like President Obama can enact sweeping change. This investigation will use a case-study approach to highlight the variables which made the gun-control debate more or less viable at different points during the first Obama administration. Consequently, this investigation must be structured around these formal hypotheses:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Aggressive pursuit of a policy goal by an entrepreneur requires – but is not required by – the opening of a “policy window.”*

*H<sub>2</sub>: The opening of a “policy window” does not assure that policy will change, only that the opportunity for a plausible initiative exists.*

### *Data*

The data collected for the four case studies in this investigation mostly falls into two categories. The first class is newspaper articles which report the details of each of the four shooting incidents. Because newspapers and wire services are the primary means through which information about national tragedies reach the public, news sources will be the most consistently reliable resource regarding events. News stories about each case tended to provide comparatively little information on the day of the shooting incidents, with subsequent news stories becoming more detailed over the following days or weeks as government investigations uncovered more detail and public interest grew. Later news stories often covered legal proceedings against the suspected perpetrators of the shootings, the results of psychiatric evaluations, and generally more background detail about the lives of the gunman and his victims. Using a large number of newspaper reports, it was usually possible to recreate a very detailed account of each shooting, as well as the time immediately before and immediately after.

The second class of resources used was the documents released by government agencies, the vast majority of which directly from the White House’s Office of the Press Secretary. These statements from the White House were the most direct and reliable source for evaluating administration responses. These documents were most frequently transcriptions of official briefings by the Press Secretary, press gaggles by the Press Secretary and more junior Communications Office officials, speeches by the President and senior Cabinet officials, statements issued by administration officials, or Proclamations and Executive Orders issued

directly from the President. Not all of the documents came from the White House, however, as they sometimes came from other federal, state, and local agencies involved in investigations.

Generally, the newspaper sources were more useful in reconstructing the events on the ground before, during, and after the shootings, while the documents issued by government agencies tended to be more useful in formulating a clear image of the Obama administration's rhetorical and executive response to each incident. This distinction is not concrete, however, as it was often helpful to use press briefings to get an idea of the political context in which each event occurred, and newspaper sources were frequently cited for their quotations from the President. Nearly all of the data collected was from primary sources, as these most accurately reflect the immediate context of each event without editorialization based on subsequent events.

As a minor supplementation to the newspaper articles and official statements mentioned above, this thesis also will occasionally use, as a minor supplement, graphics provided by Google Trends. The Google search engine provides some records of its data for public use, specifically the relative frequency of search terms over a definite period with filters for individual geographic regions. Charting the relative frequency of the search term "gun control" allows the investigation to more accurately gauge public interest in issues related to gun violence and policies formulated to address it. This is not only useful in monitoring the impact of issue salience on the problem stream, but also the relative interest in "gun control" versus alternate search terms will be a good indicator of which solutions presented in the policy stream are gaining the most traction.

The cases themselves were selected because they each represented an entirely different type of response from the Obama administration. In the first case-study, "The Carthage

Shooting,” the Obama administration response was all but nonexistent. In attempting to formulate a clear image of the administration’s response, the investigation uncovered only one brief, passing remark in the context of a speech which did not mention gun-control. In the second case-study, “The Tucson Shooting,” the Obama administration’s policy response was a vague exhortation to tone down vitriolic election-season rhetoric in favor of more dignified discourse. Again, the issue of gun-control was largely ignored. “The Aurora Shooting,” the third case-study, uncovered a very weak pro gun-control policy prescription, but was mostly characterized by symbolic gestures of national mourning and transcendent focus on “healing” rather than policy. The final case study, “The Newtown Shooting,” uncovered a strongly policy-oriented response which aggressively pursued gun-control. The four dissimilar cases selected provide ripe ground for wide-ranging discussion of the Multiple Streams framework, and cast the broadest possible illustration of President Obama’s gun control policy.

### *Variables*

When viewing the emergent gun-control debate through the lens of Multiple Streams theory, the primary goal will be explaining each case study in terms of how close the three streams of policy change were to converging at that point in the first Obama administration. The direction of each stream, however, is independently governed by any number of circumstantial and political variables. Though a discussion of all the possible contributing factors in each case study would be impossible, a few more relevant, salient variables of interest are:

### Problem stream variables

These points of interest in each case study will primarily influence the creation of policy windows in how they shape public understanding of gun-control as a political issue. Effectively, each of the following variables has bearing on the question “Is gun violence a problem that merits attention right now?”

- The number and type of casualties/injuries in each case.
- The intensity, length, and tone of media coverage surrounding each case.
- The proximity to other notable shooting events.
- The perception of each gunman’s mental health.
- The relative significance of other media events contemporaneous with each case.
- The relative significance of other legislative goals contemporaneous with each case.

### Politics stream variables

These points of interest in each case study will primarily influence the creation of policy windows in how they shape the likelihood that the putative policy prescription can successfully navigate the political realities “on the ground” in Washington. Effectively, each of the following variables has bearing on the question “How likely is the gun-control initiative to succeed right now?”

- The ideological distribution of the Senate and House of Representatives.
- The President’s willingness to pursue a gun-control agenda.
- The intensity, length, and tone of Presidential response to each case.
- The proximity to the next General or Midterm Election.

- The relative significance of other legislative goals contemporaneous with each case.

### Policy stream variables

These points of interest in each case study will primarily influence the creation of policy windows by determining which of the possible, existing solutions best lend themselves to each case in question. Effectively, each of the following variables has bearing on the question “Does the preferred policy solution (i.e., gun control) make sense as a response right now?”

- The public perception of each gunman’s mental health.
- Plausibility of alternative proposal suggestions
- The types of weapons used.

### *Why case studies?*

Over the last half-century political science, in fact most of the social sciences, have experienced a gradual shift towards the institutionalization of quantitative methodologies as the gold-standard for research (George and Bennett 2004, 3). Nonetheless, many prominent scholars note that the characterization of case-studies and comparative case-studies as the “weak sisters” of social scientific method is deceptive and unfair, countering that they are critical tools for social scientific inquiry (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 44; Berg 2009, 317; Gerring 2004, 352). George and Bennett (2004) even notes a troubling trend that has divided the social scientific community broadly between academics who tend to cite qualitative research, and those who do not, creating two divorced and insular schools of thought on the validity on qualitative methodology which tend not to rely on the research of the other (3). The authors even propose



the underlying problem to be that “scholars’ understanding of case studies is often distorted by critiques based on the assumptions of statistical methods” when in fact the values and goals of qualitative analysis are not intelligible in those terms (6). In spite of this intelligibility gap that sometimes is problematic for the field, the insights provided exclusively by case-studies are “fundamental to social science” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 44). Before explaining the value of the case study, though, the term itself needs clarification.

Bruce Berg (2009) offers one simple yet comprehensive definition: “in-depth, qualitative studies of one or a few illustrative cases” with the intent of discovering “the manifest interaction of significant factors characteristic of” the phenomenon in question (317-318). While the broad applicability of quantitative analysis is clear, qualitative investigations and especially case studies are far more nuanced and attentive to significant details that alternative methodologies often fail to quantify. One tool unique to the case study approach, and of great benefit to the present investigation, is known as “process-tracing” and attempts to illustrate causation (George and McKeown 1985, 43). This technique is a step by step examination of the observable implications of a theory whereby it is possible to naturalistically construct the “mechanisms of microfoundations behind observable phenomena” (George and Bennett 2004, 143), and subsequently attempt to extrapolate about other, similar cases based on these conclusions. Generally speaking, case-studies will be more useful than quantitative methods when the investigation is marked by a need for greater comparability between a limited number of data points, as opposed to being generally representative of a large class of phenomena. Furthermore, case studies place emphasis on determining causal mechanisms rather than empirically determining the causal effects of some mechanism. Lastly, in addition to the numerous natural strengths that the case study approach has, researchers are also often limited to the case study

option when a very small number of observations leave them with too little measurable variance to employ a quantitative method (Gerring 2004, 352).

With respect to the investigation at hand, the comparative case study approach is clearly the best suited when assessing the development of gun-control policy under the Obama administration and further evaluating the conclusions of the Multiple Streams model. Clearly, there is no immediate, systematic way to quantify each of the three streams themselves because they are merely theoretical constructs that mean nothing outside the framework set forth by John Kingdon and Nikolaos Zahariadis. Consequently, any investigation of these three streams will, at some point, need to make a transition between the abstractions accounted for in the theory and concrete realities as they occur in the world. Although the link that a theoretician may posit between these two may seem logical or intuitive, the validity of a model cannot simply rest on conjecture because, stated concisely, “any coherent account of causality needs to specify how the effects are exerted” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 85). Using the criterion put forward by Gerring (2004, 352), a claim that the listed variables create policy windows for President Obama means that the investigation must necessarily take case-study form; substantiation, here, is entirely a question of illustrating the causal mechanisms.

The need to compare how these mechanisms manifest or fail to manifest across four shooting events during Obama’s tenure also clearly demands the use of the case study approach. Even given perfect information, there simply would not exist enough data-points to perform a large-N quantitative analysis of mass-shootings during the Obama administration (Follman, et al. 2012). Nevertheless, the limited number of cases present herein is not problematic for a case-study investigation. In fact, the comparison of four distinct-yet-similar cases greatly enriches understanding of each one individually, as different circumstances bring to light significant

points of interest which would not have immediately been apparent when researching each case on its own. Finally, the cautious identification of the causal mechanisms which guided the development of Obama's gun-control policies in the wake of the three shootings will prove useful in the investigation's conclusions with regard to the Multiple Streams framework, as a clear understanding of these mechanisms "can sometimes give us more leverage over a theory by making observations at a different level of analysis" (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 86-87). Any investigation which did not employ the case-study approach would necessarily be more modest in setting forth implications for the Multiple Streams theory, as this process of systematically describing the relationships between variables is necessary at some point in order to establish a causal link (Lijphart 1971).

Though no doubt a contentious method to many social and political scientists, "much of the debate over the [case study] has little to do with the method itself and more to do with the state of current research in that field" (Gerring 2004, 353). In *The Multiple Streams Framework*, Nikolaos Zahariadis outlines a research plan for the future of the Multiple Streams framework which relies on "probing applicability under different conditions" (2007, 84) in order to understand how the same points of interest interact with changing circumstances. He also notes that, due to its ready applicability to this particular methodology "it is no secret that most applications of MS... have been qualitative case studies" (2007, 82). Clearly, an investigation of Obama's policy using the Multiple Streams lens demands the case-study approach to truly succeed.

The following chapter will contain the case studies themselves. Each study will include a brief summary of the events pertaining to the shooting, followed by an analysis from the Multiple Streams perspective. Both sections will serve to properly contextualize one another, as

it will not always be clear why some fact has been included in the analysis without an explanation of its bearing on the MS model. Conversely, an interpretation itself will not always make sense without a background of more-and-less relevant facts. Each case study will serve as a self-contained explanation of why a policy window opened or failed to open in its own case. When considered together the four case studies should also illustrate the diachronic dimension of how past events shape the future of policy formation.

## **CASE STUDIES**

The following chapter consists of four case studies on four separate shooting events during the first Obama administration. Each case will first outline the event in question, with relevant factors woven into a brief narrative surrounding the gunman, the incident, and the early aftermath. The second half of each case study will be an application of the Multiple Streams model to the facts of each case and the Obama administration response. Each stream will be examined individually to evaluate whether or not a policy window was able to open, why, and in the cases where it did not, how close a policy window was to opening. The concluding chapter will then present a synoptic evaluation of the four case studies together and explain the bearing of these cases on the Multiple Stream model and its validity.

### *The Carthage Shooting*

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Robert Kenneth Stewart entered the Pinelake Health & Rehabilitation Center with the intention of finding his estranged wife and murdering her. The gunman was known to his family as someone with an explosive temper and a history of drug and alcohol abuse (Associated Press 2009). In the weeks leading up to the incident, Stewart was increasingly depressed by his belief that he had prostatic cancer, his wife leaving him for the second time, as well as substantial difficulty sleeping which later became a significant point of interest in his trial. One report from the gunman's ex-wife stated that Stewart had recently began making cryptic claims that he had been preparing for a "long trip" and that he would need to "go away" for some time (Ibid).

Arriving at the facility's parking lot at roughly 10:00am, Stewart immediately opened fire on several automobiles, including his wife's. During this initial phase of the shooting, the gunman injured a casual visitor who then quickly ran inside the facility to warn staff as well as contact law enforcement officials. Moments later, the gunman entered the facility proper and began his search around the nursing home for his wife. When he was unable to find her in her usually assigned ward, Stewart flew into a rage and began shooting haphazardly at residents and staff, and continued searching for his wife (Dewan 2009). Having been attending to an Alzheimer's ward that day, she was able to seek refuge from her husband successfully, due to the ward's security locks which prevented the patients there from confusedly wandering from their correct area. In spite of her luck, however, one nurse and seven elderly patients were left dead, several of them still seated in their wheelchairs when emergency responders arrived on the scene. The only police officer on duty in Carthage that morning, Justin Garner, arrived shortly after the beginning of the incident and after a brief search, exchanged gunfire with Stewart who he was able to incapacitate with a shot to the shoulder (Ibid).

During an early phone call, observers described Stewart as carrying both "a deer gun and a shotgun," but his arsenal was later clarified as having been a Winchester shotgun and two handheld weapons, as well as a large rifle which he brought to the scene but did not enter the home with (Associated Press 2009). According to the search warrant and subsequent paperwork released by the court, at least eleven other firearms were confiscated from Stewart's home later on the day of the shooting (State of North Carolina 2009). In the aftermath, Stewart was taken into custody at a prison hospital for medical treatment and examination. He reported to officials that, on the day of the shooting he had taken "six nerve pills," which were identified in court proceedings as Ambien. Some media interest was generated by the gunman's defense attorney's

on the case, who challenged his legal culpability by asserting that Stewart was not conscious during the time of the shooting. During the trial, the defense attempted to deflect blame from Stewart by highlighting the sometimes bizarre side-effects reported by those taking Ambien (Zennie 2011). One expert testified that it was possible Stewart was sleepwalking at the time of the shooting, and another expert witness recounted the case of a candy-store owner who would drive to and open his shop for business while technically asleep on Ambien. While the scientific evidence clearly showed some remarkable potential for somnambulism, journal entries left by Stewart just days before made veiled references to “taking a lot of people with” him as he contemplated suicide and ultimately the jury was unconvinced by his defense. He was sentenced to serve a minimum of 142 years in prison (Ibid).

#### Application of MS Model

Even before his election, Barack Obama expressed interest in limiting the use and purchase of guns in the interest of public safety. Though he was prudent about commenting publicly on the subject during his campaign, his actions as a candidate and state official paint a coherent picture. In a 2004 Illinois Senate debate against Alan Keyes, Obama went on the record as saying “it is a scandal that [President George W. Bush] did not authorize the renewal of the assault weapons ban,” (OnTheIssues.org) and in the memoir which outlined much of his 2008 Presidential campaign platform, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama stated that guns needed to be kept out of urban areas and that it was America’s responsibility to “say so in the face of the gun manufacturer’s lobby” (215). In 1996, in response to a questionnaire from Independent Voters of Illinois, Obama seemed to indicate not only support for an assault weapons ban and mandatory background checks, but also the more comparatively extreme ban on all handguns in the state of Illinois (OnTheIssues.org). During his debate with fellow Democratic primary

candidate Hillary Clinton, however, Obama denied holding this position and claimed that the campaign staffer who had filled out the questionnaire on his behalf had been in error.

Nonetheless, on many occasions Obama affirmed a fundamental respect for 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights, while articulating the belief that it was legal and necessary to regulate their manufacture and sale in the interest of public safety. Given this record, it is clear that austere gun-control measures were President Obama's preferred policy position and if he is to be taken at his early word, there is little question about the President's intention to pursue this goal were the opportunity to present itself.

In spite of intentions, the issue-as-problem had not truly emerged by this point in the first term and the Carthage shooting presented some ambiguities about who and what were to blame, as and ultimately was a rather low-profile event not couched in other recent episodes of violence. Although the issue of gun-control did not emerge as a major legislative focus of the Obama administration until late 2012, the President had already issued orders to his cabinet directing gun control policy from very early in his term. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009 – just weeks after taking office – Attorney General Eric Holder made clear the administration's intention to reinstate the assault weapons ban which lapsed in 2004. An unprecedented spike in cartel violence at the US' southern border with Mexico led to a meeting whose intention was the mitigation of violence there. In spite of speaking on the heels of the then-recent Supreme Court decision *Washington, D.C. v. Heller* which for the first time validated the individual right to carry handguns, the Attorney General outlined much of what later took shape as the administration's legislative agenda, saying "I think closing the gun show loophole, the banning of cop-killer bullets and I also think that making the assault weapons ban permanent, would be something that would be permitted under Heller," (Ryan 2009) but also that he could not comment on a likely timetable

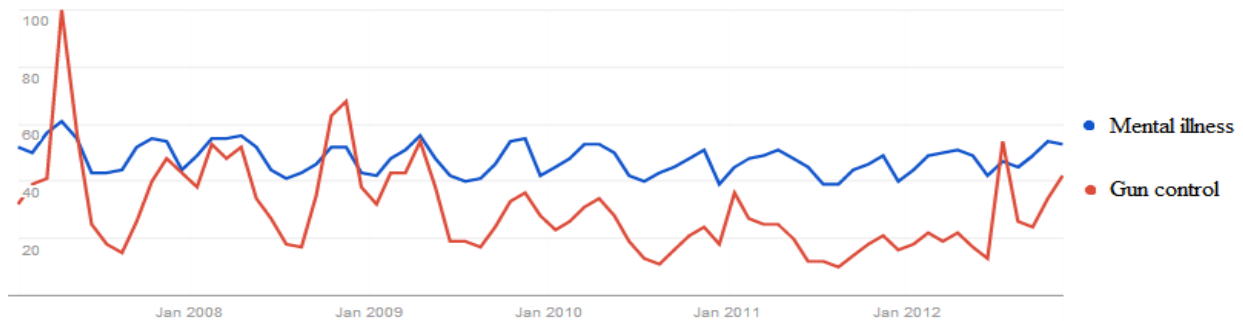


because of the President's busy schedule. By the time of the Carthage nursing home shooting there had not been another mass shooting incident in the United States for just over nine months. It was the first mass shooting episode of the Obama administration (Follman et al. 2012)

At the very beginning of his first term in office, President Obama would likely not have had much time to formulate a strategy in pursuing gun reform. Because of the still developing financial crisis of 2008-2010, much of the Obama administration's agenda at the time focused on mitigating the spread of the credit crisis, saving the banking industry, and offsetting economic downturn through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act's financial injection into the economy (Sahadi 2009). Furthermore, at this time the United States' automotive industry, particularly the "Big Three" car manufacturers located out of Detroit – General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler – were floundering on the edge of collapse with upwards of three million jobs believed to be in jeopardy. Under the previous administration, George W. Bush approved a nearly \$20 billion bailout of the auto industry in December of 2008 (BBC 2008). It was only two months later, and one month prior to the time of the Carthage shooting, that General Motors and Chrysler petitioned the government for another \$21 billion in assistance, and these two issues in conjunction dominated the Obama administration agenda as well as national political reporting (BBCb 2009). In the April 30, 2009 briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, the terms "auto" and "bank" were used fifty times, whereas the terms "gun control," "shooting," and "gun" were not used a single time by the secretary nor the press (White House 2009). Clearly the problem stream was not effectively articulated by this shooting incident at this time, and the politics stream was also obstructed by urgent economic issues of the day. As gun control was not a major focus of the public or news media in early 2009, and because of the immense gravity associated with the financial crisis the "gun control issue" effectively did not exist for most Americans at

this time and any attempt by the Obama administration toward this end would clearly not have found support as a priority early in the first term.

Additionally, the particular circumstances of the Carthage shooting may have made the case more difficult to properly frame within the context of the gun control debate. As demonstrated in the following chart, courtesy of Google Trends, in times where gun control is most salient as an issue of public attention, there is typically parity with mental illness. In the Carthage case, the fact that Stewart's defense was complicated by his Ambien use and the persistent question of his legal culpability were plausible distracters from the frame that the Obama administration would have pushed. The Ambien issue specifically would have been very easy to re-appropriate into discussions over the mental health industry, thereby dealing a substantial blow to the policy stream of the multiple streams model. In addition, the use of handheld weapons rather than assault weaponry and rifles meant that a substantial push against these weapons would have been perceived as far more severe an affront to 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment rights than would have occurred if the gunman had only used more powerful firearms. Because of the likelihood that this incident would have lent itself to solution through other means and the Obama administration could have been criticized for undue harshness, the volition to pursue policy change with Carthage as a rallying point evaporates.



**Figure 1 Search trends for mental illness and gun control**

Interestingly, the statements by Attorney General Eric Holder on February 25<sup>th</sup> of that year made clear that the solution stream was in fact properly articulated. Through his testimony, the Obama administration made clear that by this point in time, there was already a rather developed idea about what a gun control bill might include: a patching of gun-show loopholes, the elimination of certain types of bullets, and a continuation of the assault weapons ban which had expired under George Bush. At a time when there existed little consciousness of a problem, and no volition on the part of the government to pursue the issue, there already existed a solution – showing that sometimes in the world of politics solutions precede their problems.

Three days after the shooting in Carthage, Vice-President Joe Biden made a scheduled stop on the other side of the state. He delivered a speech to the crowd assembled at a newly renovated fire-station on how the recent American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, more colloquially known as “the Stimulus,” would benefit people living in rural America. During this attempt to trudge support for the controversial spending package, the Vice-President casually remarked on the Carthage shooting that occurred “just down the road” and praised Officer Justin Garner for displaying the kind of courage necessary to make it through difficult times, exhorting the audience to “serve their communities with dignity in valor” in the same way (White House 2009). These few sentences in the middle of a much larger speech were the only

acknowledgement by the Obama administration of the shooting, and even here were clearly only invoked in an attempt to promote support for the Recovery Act.

While the Obama administration had made public remarks before this point on their intention of pursuing gun-control in the legislative agenda, the episode was inopportune politically for several reasons and, perhaps even more significantly, was overshadowed by much larger issues of the day. Here, the problem has yet to find traction in public consciousness, the administration will find difficulty presenting gun-control as the unique or best solution, and the political will of the nation is preoccupied with a precarious economy. Consequently, the administration response is all but non-existent.

### *The Tucson Shooting*

The Tucson shooting occurred on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at roughly 10:00 am, local time. However, the parents of gunman Jared Lee Loughner reported that for months before, their recreational drug-using “loner” son began exhibiting increasingly bizarre behaviors, such as taking photos of himself in a g-string with guns, and would often “look like he was having [conversations] with someone” who did not exist (Gassen and Williams 2013). In November of the previous year, Loughner successfully passed an FBI background check which cleared him for the purchase of the weapon used in the Tucson shooting, a 9mm Glock model 19 semiautomatic handgun (Winter 2011; Kim 2011). Though not an assault weapon nor a rifle, the gun was outfitted with an expanded magazine which allowed for 31 rounds to be fired without reloading, and was “illegal to manufacture or sell” under the Clinton-era assault weapons ban which expired in 2004 under the Bush administration (Elliott 2011). Just hours before he opened fire, Loughner attempted to purchase ammunition from a Walmart but employees did not oblige him

due to “strange behavior” in the store (Kim 2011). He was later able to purchase ammunition at a neighboring Walmart. On his way home from making this purchase, Loughner ran a red light and was stopped by a Game and Fish Department officer and given a verbal warning, at whose issuance he began to weep. Returning home, Loughner was approached by his father and asked to explain where he had been the night before, at which point the gunman fled on foot, presumably making his way to the Safeway parking lot where the shooting took place (Gillum 2011).

On that day, the Representative for Arizona's 8th Congressional District, Gabrielle Giffords was holding a public outreach event in open air and answering questions from her constituents (CNN Wire 2011). By that point the event has attracted a small crowd of twenty to thirty people from the area. When the gunman arrived on the scene, he unloaded fire with a semi-automatic pistol seemingly at random in the crowd, but paying special attention to a shot at point-blank range in the Congresswoman's head. After firing somewhere between fifteen and twenty rounds, the gunman paused to reload his pistol, but fumbled and dropped his replacement magazine which was quickly intercepted by a bystander. Now unarmed, what remained of the crowd was able to collectively subdue Loughner and detain him until authorities arrived (Ibid.) While waiting on emergency responders, a congressional intern working for Rep. Giffords cradled her head to prevent her choking on her blood and applied therapeutic pressure to the gunshot wound in her head. She was rushed to nearby University Medical Center in critical condition where a skull fragment was removed and she was placed into an induced coma, ultimately surviving and, after extensive physical and speech therapy, making a substantial recovery (Gupta 2011). While six people died as a result of the shooting and thirteen others were injured, the picture that clearly emerged was that Representative Giffords had in fact been the

target, and upon later investigation Loughner was shown to have a bizarre fixation on her for several years leading up to the shooting (Emshwiller, Barrett, and Forelle 2011).

After a brief search for an accomplice, authorities restricted the investigation of the Tucson shooting to Loughner alone. He was held without bail while the preliminary investigation continued. After being formally indicted on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Loughner was declared unfit to stand trial based on a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, though this did not prevent the case from proceeding to trial and was not an attempt by his defense to shield Loughner by pleading insanity (Serrano 2011). Finally, being declared fit by a court-appointed psychiatrist, the trial proceeded and Loughner entered a plea of guilty to all 19 counts brought against him, including murder of a federal judge, attempted murder of a congressperson, and murder. On November 8, 2012, Loughner was sentenced to seven life terms plus 140 years in prison (Ball 2012; Santos 2012).

### Application of MS Model

In the period between the Carthage shooting of March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and the Tucson shooting of 2011, Mother Jones reports that the United States experienced four “mass shooting incidents,” which resulted in forty fatalities and thirty-seven non-fatal bystander injuries (Follman, et. al. 2012). While the level of media coverage for these incidents varied from virtually none to moderate coverage in the case of the massacre at an army base in Fort Hood, Texas, none of these incidents received the level of sustained and intense interest that was to come as a result of the Tucson tragedy. The gunman's shooting of nineteen people - including the Representative - became an intense focal point for media interest. When compared to the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, gun control advocacy response was fairly muted and the Tucson incident did not

immediately produce any significant gun control legislation. Nevertheless, the media and political spheres were sparked to discussion. One of the most salient points to emerge was that the quality of American political dialogue had become extreme and spiteful (Hulse and Zernike 2011; Somashekar, 2011). The lead investigator of the shooting made comments that the vitriolic American political environment had become “a mecca for prejudice and bigotry,” and this sentiment was not only echoed by many media personalities, but sympathized with by much of the public (Somashekar 2011). Sarah Palin came under harsh criticism when it was discovered that a campaign website of her PAC depicted several US Representatives, including Representative Giffords, behind the crosshairs of a gun. Consequently, Palin and many Tea Party affiliates attempted to publicly distance themselves from political violence (Hulse and Zernike 2011). By this point, the groundwork for an effective problem stream was being set, although consciousness of gun-violence was not highly salient yet, and competing interpretations of the problem meant that the policy stream was not yet dominated by Obama’s preferred policy position. In spite of this, Obama’s reaction was much more high-profile here than it had been after Carthage.

Just hours after news of the shooting, the Obama administration released a brief statement of mourning as prologue to a larger statement on the incident and the Congresswoman’s condition later that same day. These statements, however, were apolitical in tone: they expressed regret, informed the public of the circumstances, and assured that a suspect was in custody and an investigation was ongoing (White House 2011a; White House 2011b). On January 9<sup>th</sup>, the President issued a proclamation that all flags be flown at half-staff for one week, and the next day observed a moment of silence with the First Lady in front of the White House (White House

2011a, White House 2011c). He continued to open events with a string of minor statements regarding the tragedy for several days thereafter.

On January 12<sup>th</sup>, the President delivered a half-hour speech at a memorial event honoring the victims of Jared Loughner. The speech's focus was on celebrating the lives of the victims, with Obama delivering a small anecdote about each of the victims. Again, this speech was largely apolitical in tone, though the President did show inklings of the fervent gun-control debate that was to come. Roughly halfway through the event, Obama remarked:

“Already we’ve seen a national conversation commence, not only about the motivations behind these killings, but about everything from the merits of gun safety laws to the adequacy of our mental health system. And much of this process, of debating what might be done to prevent such tragedies in the future, is an essential ingredient in our exercise of self-government . . . . we cannot and will not be passive in the face of such violence. We should be willing to challenge old assumptions in order to lessen the prospects of such violence in the future. But what we cannot do is use this tragedy as one more occasion to turn on each other.” (White House 2011d).

The speech was widely praised and well-received by the media and public (Langer 2011). A wide range of Obama administration officials and even First Lady Michelle Obama released statements of mourning. Showing the same spirit of sensitivity, these statements all avoided overt politicization of the issue and at this phase of the Obama presidency, we do not yet truly see the executive attempt to parlay national discourse into his concrete legislative aims. In spite of this, other government officials from both parties were more active in pursuing legislation. Commenting early in the gun control discussion, Sen. Charles Schumer remarked that achieving



comprehensive legislation would be difficult but that some more minor measures were within reach (Cohen, 2011).

During his State of the Union Address delivered January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the President did not address the issue of gun control. Except for a few brief remarks at the beginning of the address, the speech did not substantively discuss gun reform or the Tucson incident (White House 2011e). Instead, and predictably in the context of the emerging debt ceiling crisis, the speech focused on numerous measures to reform government spending and outlined major plans to save hundreds of billions of dollars by freezing many domestic projects, eliminating corporate tax loopholes, and reform large entitlement programs (Ibid.) The Multiple Streams model suggests several reasons why Obama's communications at this time would have shied away from aggression.

First, the political landscape at the time severely obstructed this end in early 2011. At the time of the Tucson shooting many significant challenges were shaping the American national government and the administration was only beginning to formulate strategies to cope with major changes and the emergent issues in early 2011. The 2010 Midterm Election saw substantial gains for the President's Republican opposition in virtually all bodies and all levels of government. Most importantly, Republicans gained 63 seats in the House of Representatives, thereby swinging the balance of power and the Speakership in their favor. Two months later – and just days before the shooting in Tucson – John Boehner (R-OH) was sworn in as the new Speaker of the House (Election 2010, 2010). By the time of the Tucson shooting, little had transpired establishing the working dynamic of the administration and the new Speaker, and it is possible that this inchoate relationship presented all parties new opportunities to restructure their legislative agendas and leverage for greater power.

Just a week before the incident, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, several provisions of the highly contentious Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act took effect, including a provision limiting the percentage of premium money to be taken as administrative costs or profit. Several other provisions limited the types of accounts eligible to pay for over-the-counter medications and a new commission began developing innovative payment and drug-delivery plans. (Healthcare 2010; Health Reform GPS 2010). Though these particular provisions were not extraordinarily controversial, continued challenges from state and local authorities to the legitimacy of “Obamacare” meant that there was contention nonetheless and the effective implementation of the PPACA was a primary goal of President Obama for the remainder of his first term.

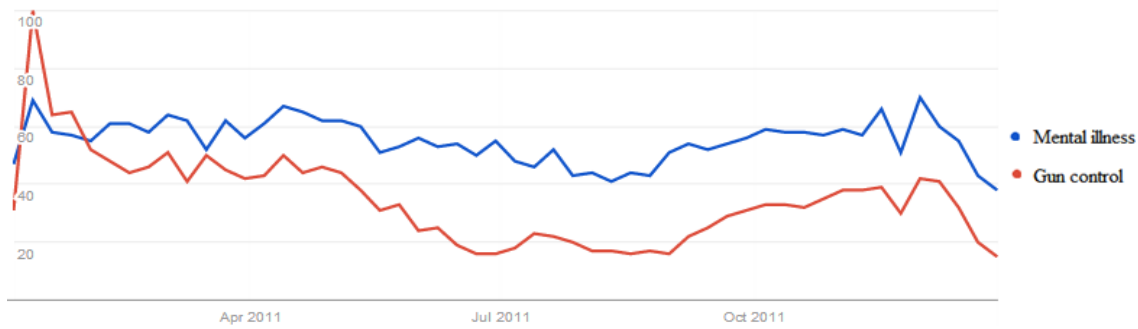
Most salient on the political agenda at this time, and highlighted powerfully by the Tea Party Caucus during the 2010 election, were economic issues related to the debt ceiling and the painfully slow recovery from the financial crisis of 2008. The day before the Tucson shooting, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released their monthly jobs report showing a significant gain of 103,000 American jobs in December, 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). While this represented the strongest growth in the private sector since before the beginning of “the Great Recession,” the unemployment rate still hovered just below 10% and was a substantial point-of-argument for congressional Republicans touting the need for a new era of fiscal discipline (GOP/GOP). Particularly, the influx of Republicans who attributed their win to the Tea Party constituency began vociferously opposing the prospect of yet another debt-ceiling increase, instead demanding a “constitutional amendment requiring balanced budgets” and several other as-yet unrealized demands (AP, 2011). As political contentions began to grow over increasing the debt ceiling yet again, economists began reporting en masse that the effects of failing to raise

the debt limit would be anywhere from seriously problematic, to disastrous. Two days before the Tucson shooting, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner responded to a petition from congress to delineate the consequences of a sovereign default with very grim predictions. Wrote Geithner:

“Default would effectively impose a significant and long-lasting tax on all Americans and all American businesses and could lead to the loss of millions of American jobs. Even a very short-term or limited default would have catastrophic economic consequences that would last for decades. Failure to increase the limit would be deeply irresponsible (US Treasury) .”

This marked just the first phase of a highly polarized economic debate that strongly dominated American political discourse for the first half of 2011. Ultimately, an agreement to raise the debt ceiling was reached just hours before Secretary Geithner’s estimated default deadline. Days later, Standard & Poor’s Credit Agency downgraded the credit rating of the United States federal government and media and public interest in the financial crisis continued (Swann, 2011).

Even as the political stream prevented the opening of a policy window, the policy stream did not lend itself optimally to Obama’s preferred solution. Similar to the case of the Carthage shooting, this incident presented easy opportunities for 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment lobbyists to reframe the gun control debate into a discussion of mental health. In fact, where the first perpetrator’s potential claims to mental instability may have been grounded in lies, Loughner frequently and consistently presented disturbing behavior to the media and the judge at his preliminary trial expressed confidence in the diagnosis of schizophrenia (Serrano, 2011).



**Figure 2- Search trends for mental illness and gun control**

The consistent media image of his shaved head and contorted, bizarre expressions weighed very heavily on public perception of the gunman and consequently the policy stream was not as focused on gun-control legislation as it might have been given a media character who did not have such obvious mental health issues. Indeed, in the excerpt from his memorial speech above, the President gives nearly as much time to consideration of mental health laws as he does to gun reform. In the previous chart, again courtesy of Google Trends, the comparative popularity of the search terms “gun control” and “mental illness” suggest a brief spike in public interest in gun control at the time of the incident, which quickly gave way to more sustained interest in mental health.

Further complicating factors regarding the circumstances of the crime and the American political landscape all but destroy the focus of the politics stream in changing public policy. As mentioned above, the Obama administration had just been dealt a harsh blow with his loss of Democratic support in the House of Representatives. While this would, in and of itself, presented a substantial enough hurdle to clearing legislation, the Tea Party Caucus which was perceived as instrumental in this midterm gain was typically seen as being farther right, and more vocal in their opinions. Neither the political circumstances nor the circumstances of the shooting lent

guided the politics stream toward Obama's goal. The problem and solution streams as understood by Kingdon (1995) lent themselves more readily to gun control legislation in the case of Tucson, but unfortunately the critical third component is entirely missing.

In what sense then was Tucson different from Carthage? If neither event lent itself well to the President's policy goals, why was the non-response of Carthage not seen again here? While Obama could not articulate volition to achieve his goal he was nevertheless simply required to comment on the incident, if only because of the high-profile victims targeted. Since Carthage, far more deadly mass shootings received less attention from the administration and media. It is plausible that Obama's intent in handling the Tucson shooting – rather than capitalizing upon it – was simply to deal with it in symbolic terms, allow it to exit the news cycle, and wait for a different, more opportune moment to trumpet the sounds of gun reform. Though this symbolic treatment did not move Congress or the public toward concrete policy change, it may have contributed to an ever-growing preoccupation with gun violence – in effect, a ripening problem stream. Tucson may reasonably be understood more for its impact on future gun debate, rather than its immediate effect. Indeed, even the most high-profile victim, Rep. Giffords, did not emerge as a vocal critic until she regained her ability to speak – many months later.

### *The Aurora Shooting*

The shooting occurred in the Century movie theater located in the Aurora, Colorado Town Center shopping plaza on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Just after midnight, the gunman purchased a ticket to a screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* and watched the first 20 minutes of the film from the front row. After a brief exit to retrieve his tactical uniform and weaponry, he re-entered the

theater through a side door. Because the premier of this film was one of the biggest Hollywood events of the year, and was deeply grounded in the comic-book world of its protagonist, Batman, several members of the audience had dressed up as characters from the film franchise (Pearson 2012; Brown 2012). Consequently, the perpetrator's entrance was not immediately alarming to any of the audience members because the gunman's tactical gear and gas mask had a plausible resemblance to the film's main antagonist.

Initially, the perpetrator cast two canisters into the audience which began spraying a thick, caustic smoke. As the visibility in the theater became obstructed, the gunman opened fire. He first began firing into the ceiling of the movie theater with a 12-gauge shotgun, and then began firing toward the rear of the screening room (Brown 2012). He then began haphazardly shooting with another firearm, this time a semi-automatic rifle which malfunctioned shortly thereafter (Parker 2012). Severe pandemonium quickly broke out in the theater, and many of the theatergoers were confused as to what was taking place. The timing of the perpetrators shooting to coincide with a shooting taking place on-screen, coupled with the low visibility and smoke, meant that not only were theater-goers uncertain of whether there was a shooting or a fire taking place, but also unable to properly judge which exits were in the direction of the threat and which exits were safer. After the incident, some viewers reported that their confusion had been further complicated by somebody mistakenly shouting that there was a gunman in the lobby of the cinema during the scramble. The perpetrator continued firing into the crowd after the malfunction of his rifle, subsequently removing two handguns from his person and began shooting up and down the aisles of the theater (Pearson 2012; Brown 2012). The first call reached emergency responders roughly a minute after the onset of the attack and police

reportedly arrived on the scene within two minutes. They immediately began transporting injured persons to the hospital in squad-cars until ambulance arrived (Goski 2012).

Shortly after arriving on the scene, police found James Eagan Holmes standing next to his car in much of the tactical dress as it was described. He submitted to arrest without resistance and apparently referred to himself as “the Joker” to authorities (KABC 2012). As of the writing of this case study, James Holmes has not been convicted in court of any charges related to the Aurora shooting, but he is the only suspect in the investigation and is widely presumed to have been the gunman by the press and public. Holmes’ first court appearance was three days later and the bizarre images of him, hair dyed orange and appearing dazed and confused were widely circulated and contributed to an image of mental illness (Pelley and Glor 2012). Ten days after the shooting, state officials formally charged Holmes with 24 counts of murder and 116 counts of attempted murder. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012 James Holmes’ attorney petitioned the court to allow for an investigation into Holmes’ mental health and the outcome of this investigation is, as of the writing of this case study, not yet known. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty against Holmes for what became one of the deadliest shootings in United States history (Pearson 2012).

### Application of the MS Model

The Aurora shooting occurred on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012. According to the “US Mass Shootings, 1982-2012” report from *Mother Jones*, 2012 saw more mass shootings than any other year. In 2012, there were eighteen mass shooting fatalities in three separate incidents before Aurora, and forty-two fatalities (twenty-eight of which were in the notorious Sandy Hook massacre) after Aurora, also in three separate incidents. The movie theater shooting added another twelve lives to the death toll, and an unprecedented fifty-eight non-lethal injuries (Follman, et al. 2012).

Further research using, while using a different methodology, still notes the same spike in 2012 showing a substantial increase in mass-gun violence that year with nearly eighty deaths and over 140 injuries (Follman 2013). A study by Texas State University found a steady increase in mass-shootings over the previous decade, and the authors projected a continued increase in 2012 and 2013 (Blair and Martindale 2013, 3). Of the four case studies, Aurora represents the most significant step forward in creating a salient issue out of gun violence in the public consciousness, and this focus event also triggered a more wide-spread interest in statistical indicators suggesting an alarming rise in gun violence and mass-shootings in the United States.

Several significant domestic and international incidents were dominating the media at the time of the Aurora shooting but, incredibly, most of them gave way to reporting on the incident in Colorado which was particularly severe even for episodes of gun-violence. The most significant event to most Americans at this time was the ongoing discussions surrounding the 2012 General Election scheduled for November. By most accounts the 2008 General Election was considered a historic election due to Senator Barack Obama's nomination the first Black major-party presidential candidate, and subsequently, President of the United States (Staples 2010, 129-130). The 2012 general election, while cast less by the media as a landmark in American race-relations, was still understood somewhat on those terms by the public. At the time of the shooting, the former Governor of Massachusetts, Willard "Mitt" Romney had recently passed the necessary primary delegate count to become the presumptive Republican nominee for the 2012 General Election, but was still roughly a month from his formal nomination at the 2012 Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida (Holland 2012). The primary points of conflict between the Obama and Romney campaigns at this time involved disputes over domestic policy, with particular interest in the impact of the American Jobs Act on the economy, as well



as the ongoing consequences of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and its specific consequences for senior-citizens on Medicare in the swing state of Florida (White House 2012a, White House 2012b, White House 2012c). Aurora showed a remarkable effect in slowing down coverage of the election, and contention between the Obama and Romney camps temporarily subsided. Shortly after the incident it was reported that both campaigns, out of respect for the mourning of Coloradoans, would suspend all of their televised campaign advertisements indefinitely (Weiner 2012).

In terms of foreign policy, mid-July had also been a complex time for the President and the United States. Just two days before the shooting, on July 18<sup>th</sup>, a major terrorist attack occurred in Burgas, Bulgaria. In this incident, known as the Burgas bus bombing, an airport shuttle which had been transporting forty-two Israeli citizens was blown up by a suicide bomber who had carried an explosive device on board in his backpack (Al-Jazeera 2012). The Obama administration was, at the time, actively involved in an international investigation and regularly reporting to the press on his correspondence with Bulgarian and Israeli officials. Though there was little concrete information at the time, early reports indicated that the attack may have been carried out by Hezbollah operatives, though the Obama administration was hesitant to fuel speculation so early into the investigation (White House 2012b).

The more protracted foreign policy concern at this point, however, was the ongoing conflict in Syria between the Ba'athist President Bashar al-Assad, and an ever broadening coalition of rebels uprising against them. In spite of numerous attempts on the part of the international community to act, few concrete developments reflected the continuing escalations in the region. By the time of the Aurora shooting, the Syrian conflict had been developing for over a year; just five days before, the International Committee of the Red Cross which

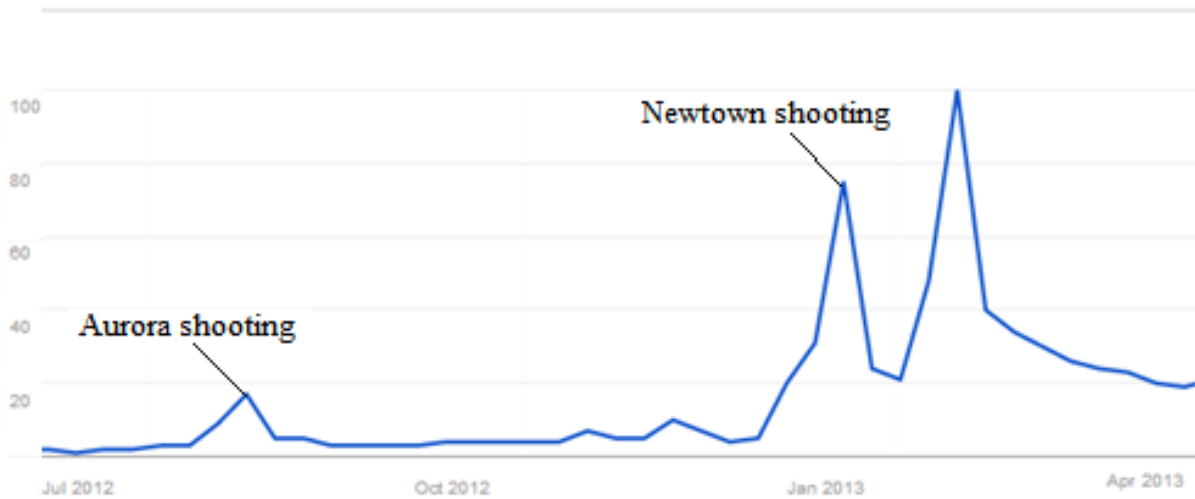
administers certain provisions of the Geneva Conventions invoked international humanitarian law in Syria by officially declaring the conflict a civil war (Goh 2012). The Obama administration had begun issuing serious warnings regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syrian, as United States intelligence reports suggested that the Assad government was removing chemical weapons from storage. On numerous occasions in the week of the Aurora attacks, the Press Secretary iterated the Obama administration's vague assurance that Bashar al-Assad would be "held accountable" (White House 2012c) for human rights violations with few specifics as to what this meant. The day before, the United Nations Security Council had voted on and killed a resolution to impose severe economic sanctions on Syria in the hopes of fostering an end to the conflict (Gladstone 2012). After the Russian and Chinese veto of the resolution, UN Ambassador Susan Rice harshly criticized the decision as missing "yet another critical opportunity to work together" on ending what had now become the Syrian Civil War (Gladstone 2012). Neither these international crises dominating the news, nor the upcoming election superseded coverage of the Aurora shooting in the period following July 20<sup>th</sup>. This is strong evidence that gun violence had trumped all else in terms of salience and suggests that the problem stream was ripe for the opening of a policy window.

Upon the breaking of the story, President Obama immediately issued a Presidential Proclamation entitled "Honoring the Victims of the Tragedy in Aurora, Colorado" in which he ordered all United States flags on public property at home and abroad be flown at half-staff for five days (White House 2012d). First Lady Michelle Obama cancelled a series of appearances scheduled for that day in Virginia, and Vice-President Biden also issued a statement of mourning to the press claiming that "but for the grace of God, the victims could have been any one of our children, in any one of our towns" (White House 2012e). Within a day, a continuous candlelight

vigil in honor of the victims of the massacre had formed nearby the Aurora movie theater had coalesced and swollen to thousands of supporters. Numerous government officials outside the Obama administration offered their condolences, including Speaker Boehner, the Mayor of Aurora, the Governor of Colorado, and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Governor Mitt Romney also affirmed that he stood in solidarity with the President and First Lady in a time of national mourning, and many foreign dignitaries also offered deep regrets, including Queen Elizabeth II, Vladimir Putin, François Hollande, and Pope Benedict XVI (Ingold, Lee, and Robles 2012; Washington Post 2012). The salience of this issue clearly extended far beyond the national media and garnered the attention of many foreign diplomats who, through their acknowledgement, helped solidify the visibility of this event and discussion of gun violence as a serious domestic issue. Disastrous as it was, the unique circumstances of the shooting, including but not limited to the high concentration of people, visibility issues in the theater, and the precise timing and calculation of the gunman allowed him to maximize loss of life in a way that was shocking even to the media and propelled this incident to prominence.

The following graphic shows Google search traffic of the term “gun control” in the United States in the period April 2012 – April 2013. The small spike which appears in July of 2012 marks a 1700% increase interest in the search term over what it was in mid-June of the previous month. It is clear from the data shown, however, that public interest in the search term died back down to its pre-Aurora levels and did not reach its peak until the end the period December 2012 – January 2013, with the occurrence of the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, and the President’s subsequent unveiling of a comprehensive gun-control initiative. In spite of the undeniable jump which occurred after Aurora, the incident did not appear to have

a prolonged effect as a focusing event. The peak in interest was comparatively small and interest returned to normal after a few weeks, remaining there until the next shooting event in December.



**Figure 3 - Interest in "gun control" over time**

The first substantive comment from an administration official came from Press Secretary Jay Carney during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One as the President made his way to Fort Meyers, Florida. Carney stated that the President would work tirelessly in an attempt to bring “whoever was responsible to justice and ensuring the safety of our people and caring for those who have been wounded” (White House 2012b). He also made clear that the President was coordinating with officials in Colorado and would make a more thorough comment later in the day when Air Force One arrived in Florida.

Hours after the shooting, President Obama delivered the address promised by his Press Secretary. Though the event was supposed to be a typical campaign stop with some iteration of his standard stump-speech delivered, the President instead declared that “there are going to be

other days for politics” and led the crowd in a moment of silence (White House 2012f). The President cancelled another campaign event scheduled for that day in Orlando, Florida, and briefly returned to Washington, D.C. to directly oversee federal response and deliver an address from the White House (White House 2012b; White House 2012g) before heading to Aurora on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. That night, after meeting with numerous victims at the University of Colorado Hospital, the President delivered another lengthy speech to local and national media outlets covering his visit (White House 2012h).

Statements, whether by administration officials or the President himself, remained strictly nonpartisan. In every comment to the press in the days following the shooting, Obama officials were very careful not to focus blame on any party aside from the gunman himself, and the single unified message presented by the administration to the media was one of mourning and well-wishes for healing. More relevantly, the Obama administration made still made only very few references to potential gun-control initiatives, and in fact the President’s closest approach to this in the few days after Aurora came through the following statement by his Press Secretary:

“ I would say that, as you know, the President believes that we need to take common-sense measures that protect Second Amendment rights of Americans, while ensuring that those who should not have guns *under existing law* do not get them. And there has been progress in that regard in terms of improving the volume and quality of information in background checks. But I have nothing new -- nothing additional on that for you. This is obviously a very recent event.” (White House 2012c) (emphasis by author)

While as close to politicizing as the Obama administration came in the first days after Aurora, this comment is an extraordinarily weak manifestation of the gun-control initiative that was to come with full force only later. In addition to his specification that the comment applied only to the more rigorous enforcement of currently existing law, the Press Secretary first makes sure to temper what was already a modest blow by affirming President Obama's belief in 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights. Speaking in the same press gaggle as Secretary Carney quoted above, State Department Spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki stated that it was "too early to say on the specific policy issues what that will mean" but left room for development by saying that the White House was "taking it day by day" (2012c).

Indeed, these first days following Aurora saw almost no discussion of gun control whatsoever. Perhaps the only nationally recognized exception to this rule was New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg who, even on the same day of the tragedy, implored President Obama and Governor Romney to "stop talking in broad [generalities] about how they want to make the world a better place" and begin speaking "concretely" on how they were going to solve the issue of gun violence (McGreal 2012). Still, very little came of this exhortation and both the Romney and Obama campaigns remained largely silent on the issue. In spite of the reticence to comment on gun control, the comments by the Press Secretary suggest that the administration was poising itself for a future debate. One possibility is that the predominant tone of mourning and national unity made an immediate deluge of aggressive gun-control rhetoric seem politically unpalatable. After five days of silence on the issue Obama spoke again, still rather modestly. The speech delivered to the National Urban League in New Orleans, Louisiana began with an autobiographical retelling of his early life, casting his success as archetypal of the "American dream". Though the speech did not mention Governor Romney by name, it quickly recaptured

the tone of traditional campaign rhetoric, discussing various alternative political and economic paths for America and implying to the audience that voting for him was the best way to help strengthen the country. Here, the first glimmer of the 2012-2013 gun control debate was articulated by President Obama when he said:

“I, like most Americans, believe that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual the right to bear arms...but I also believe that a lot of gun owners would agree that AK-47s belong in the hands of soldiers, not in the hands of criminals - that they belong on the battlefield of war, not on the streets of our cities. I believe the majority of gun owners would agree that we should do everything possible to prevent criminals and fugitives from purchasing weapons; that we should check someone’s criminal record before they can check out a gun seller; that a mentally unbalanced individual should not be able to get his hands on a gun so easily. These steps shouldn’t be controversial. They should be common sense” (White House 2012i).

While the President was once again careful to affirm his support for 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment rights as afforded by the US Constitution, this statement is clearly far more forceful than the timid speculation offered by Press Secretary Carney just days before and, considering it still took place in close propinquity to Aurora, does represent a major turning point in the national gun control debate. Furthermore, while not mentioning explicitly any prospective laws or reforms, the President refers to a series of “uncontroversial steps,” clearly implying some type of movement forward on guns as a policy issue. The full scale of these “steps” was not unveiled to the public until January, 2013, shortly after yet another major shooting event, but there is clear effort by the end of July 2012 to push the preferred policy.

Public discussion of gun control dipped in the period following July, 2012, and the Obama administration's response eventually gave way to the approaching 2012 general election against Governor Mitt Romney. The promise of yet another highly controversial policy on his campaign platform – especially one known to energize the conservative base of the Republican Party – may have complicated Obama's prospects for reelection. Viewed from the Multiple Streams perspective, it is clear that a policy window did not open simply because of timing. The upcoming General Election meant that the politics stream could not afford to align with Obama's preferred policy. Obstructed by his electoral concerns, Obama abstained from his own role as policy entrepreneur which could have fostered policy change. It may have only been by chance that the issue did not fall off the legislative agenda altogether. Much like the clean-slate of his first term in office provided a substantial springboard for passing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the serendipitous timing of the Sandy Hook incident allowed for a more aggressive pursuit of gun-control legislation in the time thereafter – perhaps primarily boosted by his triumphant victory.

### *The Newtown Shooting*

Just after 9:00 am on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, twenty year old Adam Lanza entered his mother's bedroom and shot her four times in the head with a shotgun. He then took the keys to her car and drove the short distance to Sandy Hook Elementary School. At 9:35 am, the gunman shot through the locked entrance to the school and interrupted the morning announcements with the gunfire from his Bushmaster rifle (Cristoffersen and Apuzzo 2012; Esposito et. al 2012). Shortly after this initial disturbance, the school principal and a school psychologist went to investigate and, after calling out warnings, were shot. These warnings alerted some of the other



staff of the danger, and many of the early shootings were audible via the school's intercom system (Barron 2012).

The entire ten minute rampage has been reconstructed by reporters through physical evidence and eyewitness testimony, but was fairly complex (Barron 2012; Esposito et. al 2012). One particularly notable event during the incident involved the classroom of Victoria Leigh Soto, who was unable to lock her door before Lanza entered. Though she had attempted to hide her students, Lanza quickly noticed and shot several of them. In an attempt to cover for a group of children who were attempting to escape the room, Soto physically blocked Lanza from firing and was herself fatally shot (Christoffersen and Apuzzo 2012). Due to her bravery in this moment, many of her students survived the ordeal. Lanza, however, continued shooting, intermittently stopping to change guns, reload ammunition, and resolve mechanical malfunctions with his weaponry. Ultimately, his attempt to enter several other classrooms was unsuccessful and most of the fatalities were six and seven-year-old children inside of the first-grade classrooms near the front of Sandy Hook Elementary (Barron 2012).

After some initial difficulty placing a call on her mobile phone, teacher Laura Feinstein placed a 911 call to which police promptly responded. Upon hearing their approach, Lanza fled from the potential sight-lines of law enforcement officers and within seconds had shot himself in the head with a handgun he was carrying. Law enforcement, though heavily dispatched, did not fire at Lanza and did not employ any direct tactics to disarm him. Upon his death, police thoroughly searched the school for accomplice gunmen and explosive devices, neither of which were found (Christoffersen 2012; Esposito et. al 2012).

In his rampage at the school, Lanza used several firearms: a Bushmaster rifle, two handguns, a Saiga shotgun with two magazines, and six alternate 30-round magazines. Search warrants and investigative reports released on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, detailed the extraordinarily vast arsenal of weapons, ammunition, violent and disturbing documents, and bizarre items found inside the Lanza home. Though far too extensive to list here, the catalogue includes: three additional rifles, dozens of boxes of ammunition for various classes and sizes of weaponry, dozens of samurai swords, wooden swords and knives including a seven foot spear, NRA certificates for Lanza and his mother, a check made out for the purchase of another firearm, and a seven-by-four-foot long spreadsheet detailing hundreds of shootings, their gunmen, weaponry, and death count. As far as can be concluded, all of the Lanza family's weaponry and ammunition were acquired legally (Williams and Huus 2012; Lupica 2013; NBC News 2013).

No trial resulted from Newtown due to the death of the gunman, although the reports which emerged in the aftermath coalesced around the image of a gun-obsessed murderer and an unspeakable tragedy. After two fatalities in local hospitals, the death count of the Newtown shooting settled at 28 individuals, including Adam and Nancy Lanza (Esposito et. al 2012).

#### Application of the MS Model

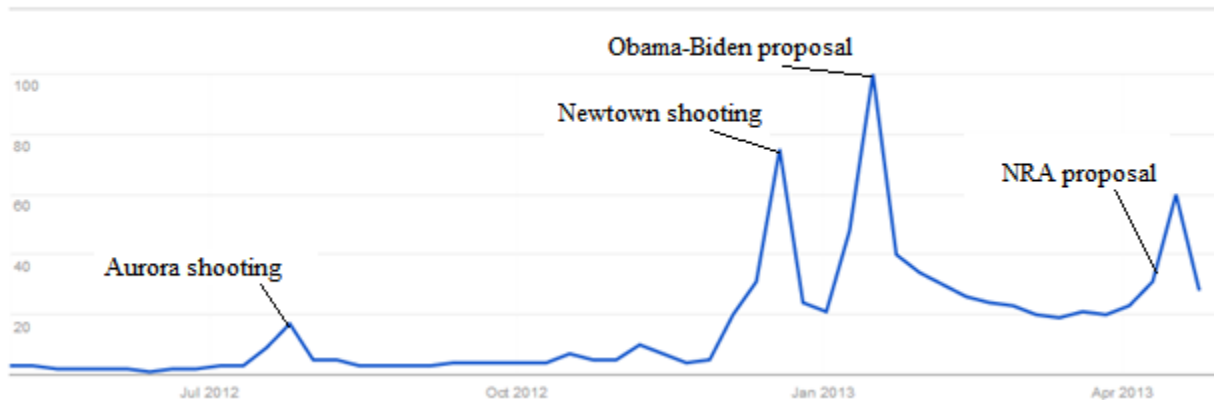
During the period just prior to Newtown, the United States government was scrambling to find the solution to an exigent problem. On December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012, one day prior to the shooting, the Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney was entirely dominated by questions relating to the fiscal cliff negotiations that had been looming for months (White House 2012j). The American public and government leaders had become quite pessimistic in their expectations for averting the "fiscal cliff," a series of austere tax-hikes and sequestrations which was to take

effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. By mid-December, the major negotiations taking place between President Obama and House Speaker Boehner seemed to be at a stalemate and were unlikely to come to an agreement before the January 1<sup>st</sup> deadline (Chaggaris 2012; Falcone and Walter 2012). A then-recent statement by President Obama also clarified his intention to allow the United States to “go over” the fiscal cliff rather than accept a bad version of his own legislative proposal from Republican lawmakers (Corn 2012). By all accounts, the country was deeply concerned for its future following what was sure to be a deep economic blow and the increasingly partisan and dysfunctional wave of brinksmanship in the US Congress.

To a certain extent, it should be expected that other important national concerns could only obstruct the formation of a gun-control policy window insofar as they attract attention to competing issues. Certainly the fiscal cliff negotiations were one such concern. Also prominent in national politics, the day prior to the Newtown shooting Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice withdrew her nomination for Secretary of State to replace Hillary Clinton. Increasing controversy surrounding the attack of a US consulate in Benghazi, Libya informed this decision, and the Obama administration dealt with the minor embarrassment of this rejected nomination and subsequent search for a replacement (White House 2012k). In spite of all that occupied the country and Obama administration at the time, upon the breaking of the Newtown story, there was little competition for media attention and therefore this did not present a significant problem for the articulation of the problem stream in this case.

The nature of the problem stream at the time of Newtown also requires a bit of contextualization. In the time between the Aurora shooting on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and the Newtown shooting, *Mother Jones* reports two mass shootings occurred in the United States with fourteen fatalities between them (Follman et. al 2012). Neither incident received major attention from the

media, nor the Obama administration. Once news broke on the morning of December 14<sup>th</sup>, the problem stream was perfectly aligned for the creation of a gun-control policy window. As outlined in the Aurora case-study, though the nation had been greatly shocked and some voices at state and municipal levels called for gun-reform, the Obama administration chose to pursue an almost exclusively symbolic approach to dealing with the Aurora massacre due to political considerations. At the time of Newtown, the recent memory of another abnormally severe shooting and the frustration which followed inaction in Aurora were ready to manifest as a more aggressive reaction. Within hours of the shooting more than 100,000 people had signed petitions on WhiteHouse.gov demanding that the Obama administration make gun-control a primary goal moving forward (White House 2012l), media outlets flooded with reports on the incident, and the response was truly international. The condolences of foreign dignitaries reached the United States from the UK, France, Canada, Spain, Iran, Portugal, the Vatican City, European Commission, and numerous other states (Xinhua 2012). Ceremonies mourning the dead were also held around the world, including in Pakistan, Russia, Liberia, Canada, and elsewhere (Carbone 2012). The following figure outlines public interest in the Google search term “gun control” in the United States in the year encompassing both the Aurora and Newtown shootings, and the two major policy proposals which resulted from the Newtown shooting. It is clear that, not only was the comparative impact on public interest much larger as a result of Newtown, but this interest was sustained far longer.



**Figure 4 - Interest in "gun control" over time**

Immediately upon news of the massacre, the Obama administration released a standard proclamation honoring the victims of Newtown and ordering that all government flags be flown at half-staff for five days, though he observed a moment of silence eight days later on December 22<sup>nd</sup> (White House 2012m). Substantive comment did not come from senior Obama administration officials until shortly past noon of that day. In a briefing, the Press Secretary confirmed that President Obama was being continually updated on the situation in Newtown but did not yet have any comment given the prematurity of the situation (White House 2012n). The Press Secretary was asked twelve separate questions relating not only to the shooting, but also to the President's personal reaction and policy reaction, in spite of repeatedly stating that he had no information to offer and that "today is not the day" for political commentary. Even when asked if the President planned to make a public statement, Carney was not able to offer a response (White House 2012n).

In spite of the Press Secretary's uncertainty, President Obama did make a statement two hours later from the same lectern. While only five minutes in length, it was a powerful statement

which found enormous replay value in broadcast media because of Obama's clear intention to change policy, as well as some emotional moments where the President appeared to hold back tears (White House 2012o). In his statement, Obama demanded "meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics" and said that he would "do everything in [his] power as President" to make that happen (White House 2012o). Perhaps still without concrete talking points or considering that the event had been earlier that day, Obama's restraint in enumerating specifics may have reflected Jay Carney's statement that it was too soon to play politics with the Newtown tragedy. This, however, must remain just a plausible conjecture.

The following day, President Obama's Weekly Address on WhiteHouse.gov was mostly a truncated restatement of his comments to the press cops the day before, and made no specific policy remarks.

On December 16th, President Obama gave a lengthy speech at an interfaith prayer vigil in Newtown, Connecticut. Although there were still no policy specifics or decisive actions mentioned, commentators noted that the speech was "surprisingly assertive" for a memorial service and left little question as to whether or not gun-control would soon become a central goal for the administration (Landler and Baker 2012, 1). Even in the absence of policy specifics, it was clear that the tone of Obama administration response signaled a "significant change in direction for a president who has not made gun issues a top priority in four years in office" because while after "three other mass killings during his tenure, [Obama] renewed calls for legislation without exerting much political capital" (Landler and Baker 2012, 1). The unambiguous nature of his speech on the Sunday following the shooting led pundits, including congressional aide Steve Elmendorf, to conclude that the freedom from election troubles allowed the President the latitude to finally pursue a policy preference that had been mounting for years

(Landler and Baker 2012, 1-2). Though the election played a key role in shaping the three streams with respect to Obama administration policy change in the period running up to November, the Newtown shooting was the first shooting after the President's second-term victory. As such, this was the first time that the President had not been constrained by electoral concerns from embracing a particular stance on gun-control. The politics stream was for the first time clear for the opening of a policy window through which President Obama had a reasonable chance at achieving comprehensive gun-reform. In the next few days, the President's staff further solidified the prominence of this goal in the President's agenda. Press Secretary Jay Carney repeated numerous times on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012 that the President had "committed himself" to a broad range of solutions, including legislative ones – careful to clarify that mental health and gun education would need to counterbalance gun-control policies in the legislature (White House 2012p). Carney did not shy away from discussion of specific legislative options, such as a reinstatement of the expired assault weapons ban, or closing background check and gun-show "loopholes," but did not definitively put them forward as goals of the administration (White House 2012p). The subsequent day's press briefing iterated many of the same points, claiming "I don't have a specific proposal to tell you about, or even that there will be one," but again entertaining discussion of the measures discussed the day before, with specific reference to Sen. Diane Feinstein's attempted reintroduction of the assault weapons ban (White House 2012q).

Likely in order to combat this, on December 19<sup>th</sup> the President held an extensive news conference detailing the formation of a taskforce headed by Vice-President Joe Biden to create a list of "concrete proposals no later than January," at this point just days away. He specified that it was his full intention to push these formulations to a vote in congress as quickly as possible and

mentioned some plausible recommendations to come out of the commission, such as an assault weapons ban, mandatory background checks, and limiting the size of gun magazines, which he believed had already shown broad public support (White House 2012r). For comparison, where in the five days following Aurora the President had only vaguely called for some “common sense” solutions to a politically sympathetic audience (White House 2012i), here, Obama has already formed a policy commission headed by his most senior advisor and promised to push its recommendations through congress to the White House Press Corps. The following day, Vice-President Biden was already meeting with leaders from law enforcement agencies around the country to get their input and opinions on Sen. Feinstein’s proposal as well as numerous others and affirmed the administration’s “absolute commitment” to saving lives (White House 2012s).

Taking their cues from the Obama administration, countless other organizations and gun-control advocates emerged as vociferous advocates of Obama’s anticipated proposals emerged in the media and the intensity of discussion surrounding this issue only grew. Former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords became yet another prominent voice supporting the gun-control initiative, finally emerging as the advocate she had been unable to be after Tucson and Aurora because of the slow recovery from her own injuries (Associated Press 2012). On January 15<sup>th</sup> of the following year, Vice-President Biden’s commission presented their proposals to President Obama and the very next day the President made this plan public. It was issued with the title “Now Is The Time” and put forward nine major recommendations:

- Require background checks for all gun sales
- Strengthen the background check system for gun sales
- Pass a new, stronger ban on assault weapons
- Limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds



- Eliminate armor-piercing bullets from streets
- Give law enforcement additional tools to prevent and prosecute gun crime
- End the freeze on gun violence research
- Add resource officers, counselors, and emergency plans to create more nurturing schools
- Ensure quality mental health treatment coverage

That same day, the President used his executive authority to enact several of the provisions in his proposal. These included memoranda directing federal agencies to share relevant data with federal background check databases, requiring that criminally confiscated guns be traced to their origin, and ordering the CDC to resume research into gun violence (White House 2013). Though the Obama administration had already made many preliminary comments suggesting the likely route that their preferred policy stream would take, this marks the first formal articulation of a comprehensive gun-control plan and was the central proposal in the legislative debate that followed. For months, discussion of the “Now Is The Time” proposal dominated policy discussion surrounding guns without competition, even as more of its provisions were whittled away from the bills before congress. It was not until April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 that a major alternative proposal was placed forward, the “National School Shield Plan” formulated by the National Rifle Association (Hitchinson 2013). The centerpiece of this proposal was allocating several billion dollars with the purpose of placing an armed police officer in every school in the country. This plan was not met with much enthusiasm and was not taken seriously as an alternative by many policy analysts, particularly of the left-wing (Jasper 2013). The manipulation of the policy stream on the part of President Obama allowed for a near-domination of the national discussion surrounding gun control.

Though at the time of this writing the Obama administration is still seeking gun reform, it cannot be said definitively whether or not actual policy change will have come about from the opening of this particular policy window. In spite of wide-spread and solemn awareness of gun-violence bolstering the problem stream, the political opportunity for the President to pursue gun reform uninhibited by electoral problems aligning the politics stream, and a domination of the policy stream through the quick and thoughtful formation of specific policies, the outcome of this conflict over gun ownership has yet to see a definitive resolution.

## ANALYSIS

This investigation sought to explain the delayed pursuit of gun-control policy by President Obama during his first term with reference to four specific case studies, and viewed them through the Multiple Streams framework as outlined in this thesis. The following paragraphs will analyze each of the events in light of the stated hypotheses: first, the requirement of a policy window to pursue a policy goal; second, that an open window will not guarantee change, only create an opportunity for one; and third, that if no policy window is opened that there will be no policy change. Now, using the observations gathered in the case studies and unifying the observations across these four incidents, it is possible to evaluate each hypothesis with respect to the facts as they occurred. Each case study evaluated the three streams and stated in which of the four cases policy windows opened, and in the cases where no such window opened, explained why.

### *The Carthage Shooting*

In the case of the Carthage shooting, it is very clear that a policy window did not open. In fact, none of the three streams enumerated by Multiple Streams theory was aligned for the creation of a policy window. At this point, there was virtually no awareness of gun violence as a particularly salient problem, exigent political considerations would have drowned out discussion of gun violence in the politics stream, and some details of the case would have easily pandered to a re-appropriation of the policy stream by mental-health or drug-oriented reform.

As detailed in the case study, the Carthage shooting was not of great interest to the media and, of the four shootings, was certainly the one with the least coverage in the media and the

weakest response from the Obama administration. The President's administration did not release a single statement pertaining to this incident and, in fact, the only reference that the case study was able to uncover of the Carthage shooting was a single, passing comment made by Vice-President Biden as part of a speech pushing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Though the President is not the primary director of where the public attention lands, it seems clear that no attempt was made by the administration to guide public awareness toward gun violence in the aftermath of this incident. This shooting simply did not strike the visceral chord with the media and American public that the other shootings did. There may be two reasons for this. First, although eight people were killed – and sad as this may be – the number of deaths may simply not have been shocking enough for this event to serve as a focusing event. Furthermore, as the investigation of Newtown suggested, the American public was particularly shocked and outraged by the murders there in large part because the victims were children and the advanced age of the victims at Carthage may be the result of an inverse tendency. This theory, of course, would need further support and at this point remains conjectural. What is substantiated quite well, however, is that whatever the reasons the problem stream was silent on gun violence in the aftermath of Carthage.

The policy stream was also unripe for the opening of a policy window in this case. One defensive strategy used by the gunman's lawyer in his trial was to dilute blame for the shooting. Specifically, the gunman claimed that his excessive use of the Ambien sleep-aid caused him not only to exhibit many bizarre behaviors, but also perpetrate the Carthage shooting itself. The outcome of this case notwithstanding, the policy stream is most effectively manipulated by a policy entrepreneur when relevant facts all suggest the entrepreneur's favored policy as a solution. In this case, questions surrounding the gunman's awareness of the shooting, drug-use,

and mental illness would have easily lent themselves to other policy entrepreneurs advocating various kinds of drug or mental health reform. Ultimately, the salience of multiple feasible, acceptable policy solutions makes an entrepreneur's task of pushing their favored solution much more difficult.

Finally, in the case of Carthage, the politics stream was also unripe in the aftermath of Carthage. As the investigation showed, the beginning of President Obama's first term was plagued by numerous time-sensitive economic issues. The then-recent bankruptcy of several of the United State's largest financial services firms signaled the beginning of the 2008 liquidity crisis and what became known as the Great Recession. In order to prevent the large-scale failure of the United States economy, the President's stimulus package and the looming auto-bailout represented far greater concerns to the American public, and demanded 'round-the-clock devotion from the Obama administration. When compared to these unprecedented problems, devotion to the minor and unrealized problem of gun-violence would not have been politically viable.

### *The Tucson Shooting*

The shooting in Tucson, Arizona, was also a very poor ground for the opening of a policy window, even if slightly better than the conditions following Carthage. The Tucson shooting did not go entirely unnoticed as had Carthage – indeed it was a point of great interest for both the public and media. Nevertheless, the problem stream did not entirely lend itself to policy window formation. As in the Carthage case, Tucson presented serious political stream obstacles to pursuing gun-reform, and the policy stream also presented some more minor problems.

The attention which surrounded the media's attention after Tucson was vigorous, but unfortunately did not properly coalesce around the correct issue for the problem stream to support a policy window. After the story broke, the media and even the Obama administration concentrated their criticism not on the accessibility of guns, but rather on the tone of political rhetoric. As this shooting occurred shortly after the 2010 Midterm Election, the primary focus of the media tended to be the role that rhetoric played in inciting violence. The mobilization of the highly conservative Tea Party movement and mouthpieces such as Sarah Palin seemed to contribute to an exceptionally vitriolic season for electoral rhetoric. Many pundits believed that this contributed to the shooting, and the novelty of this idea gained some traction in the media. Nevertheless, by this point, the investigation clearly showed that some political actors including President Obama took their first minor steps toward highlighting American gun violence as problematic. The problem stream may not have contributed to the opening of a policy window, but did appear to lay the foundation for the vibrant problem stream which emerged after Newtown, with Tucson victim Gabrielle Giffords playing a major role in later gun-control advocacy. Additionally, this case can be understood as complicating the task of "applying the model" to its precise facts. Where the investigator seeks to apply the model to the case of gun control legislation following Tucson as a focusing event, there will not immediately be clarity as to what precisely would be targeted by "gun control" in the first place. In this instance, gun control as a blanket term is problematic because insofar as this term applies to handguns, the pursuit of this legislation becomes more difficult for the entrepreneur pursuing it – and in fact a comprehensive arms ban was never seriously debated. Rather, gun-control advocates began to divide the broader question into the restriction of all types of guns, versus the restriction of "high-powered" or "military style" assault rifles. From here forward, the Obama administration

can be understood to have limited the “ban” as targeting this more politically vulnerable class of weaponry, though the broader “gun-control” agenda can be understood to include legislation of all types and at all levels, including but not limited to background checks, cartridge and magazine sizes, gun education, and the closing of gun-show loopholes.

The policy stream, under better circumstances, may have been just ripe enough to support the formation of a policy window. All else considered, however, the policy stream did not align as well as it might have and in and of itself was not especially conducive to this. As is usually the case with perpetrators of mass-shooting, mental illness was a question in the case of Jared Loughner. Whereas the Carthage gunman had attempted to confuse his legal culpability with the *Ambien* defense, no intentional obfuscation of responsibility was necessary here. The media’s images of Jared Loughner shortly after his arrest and media reports of Loughner’s disturbed and confusing actions prior to the shooting made very clear that mental illness was as, if not more important, than the question of gun-violence in his case. Again, this susceptibility to a valid and logical counter-policy meant that the Tucson shooting was not optimal in terms of the policy stream.

Finally, the politics stream presented several major problems for any potential gun-reform policy that President Obama might have pursued. As noted above, the Tucson shooting occurred just days after the beginning of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress elected in the 2010 Midterm Election and the ascension of Rep. John Boehner to the Speakership. This congress was highly polarized, and contained a new and vocal minority of Tea Party Republicans whose opposition to Obama initiatives was vociferous. Considering the already polarizing effect of gun legislation, it is supremely unlikely that the President would have been able to take advantage of a legislature which was so vocally and newly skewed toward the right. The objections of the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress

aside, at this time, President Obama was also very concerned with the preservation of his legislative landmark, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Several new provisions of this act had taken effect only days before the shooting, and the urgency with which President Obama attempted to defend PPACA from repeal was a much greater consideration for the administration.

### *The Aurora Shooting*

The shooting in Aurora, Colorado came much closer than either Carthage or Tucson to being effective focusing events and opening the policy window in favor of gun reform. Nevertheless, one critical obstacle, the 2012 General Election which was only months away, prevented President Obama from fully embracing his role as policy entrepreneur and prevented the politics stream from matching with the other streams which were more readily disposed toward gun reform.

The Aurora incident was the first event of the Obama administration to draw serious, sustained attention to the problem of gun violence as such. Although the extent to which the problem stream capitalized on this was less than in the aftermath of Newtown, the case study clearly demonstrates that public concern with gun-violence spiked as a result of this incident. Though the twelve deaths perpetrated by the gunman were shocking enough, the incredible volume of people injured was the most shocking: in addition to the murders, nearly sixty people were grievously injured. In addition to this event's shock value as a focusing event, indicators also showed that 2012 had seen a startling increase in the rate of mass-shooting in the United States. These indicators, when coupled with the sudden attention brought to the issue by Aurora's severity, clearly cast gun-violence as an exigent problem in need of a solution.



Much like the gunman in Tucson, images of James Holmes strongly impressed upon the American public the notion that mental illness played a role in the massacre and, again for the same reason, this issue will to some extent dilute the potency of gun-control as the unique solution by presenting a reasonable alternative. In the case of Aurora, however, the surprisingly high number of injuries which occurred highlighted the particularly dangerous nature of assault weapons, such as those primarily used by the perpetrator of the Aurora massacre. Whereas Tucson's gunman injured comparatively few people before being subdued, the rapid-fire capacity of the weapons used in Tucson made clear that – even where mental illness was a concern – the accessibility of rifles and shotguns greatly exacerbated what might have been a more minor incident. Here, the policy stream neatly suggests the legislation of an assault weapons ban like that supported by the President since long before his tenure. Administration response, though, were mostly symbolic, but made intermittently clear that this was a problem which would soon need serious attention.

This attention owed its deferment, however, to the politics stream. The timing of this incident undermined its viability as a rallying point for the policy entrepreneur, President Obama. Because of the fact that the 2012 General Election was only months away and the presumptive Republican nominee had just rather definitively gained his standing, embracing gun-reform would clearly have been a very risky move. Considering the galvanizing effect that gun-reform has on much of the Republican base and 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment activists, President Obama would clearly have placed his reelection in jeopardy by engaging Aurora as a focusing event for his policy more directly. Nonetheless, Aurora served as a very significant forerunner to the Newtown shooting which was to occur later that same year, after the President's reelection victory.

## *The Newtown Shooting*

Of the four cases investigated in this thesis, the aftermath of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, was the only one to create an opportune policy window through which President Obama was able to pursue gun-control legislation. All three streams were exceptionally well aligned for the opening of this policy window.

This shooting immediately struck the United States as a particularly disgusting act. Not only was the murder of twenty children and seven adults particularly painful for most Americans, but the unrealized potential for gun-reform which had been stifled after Aurora compounded this tragedy with an added layer of frustration. The focusing event and newly alarming indicators primed the problem stream for gun-control legislation months earlier. Yet, as if it had not been, this issue was again thrust into the national discourse by an event so tragic as to improbably surpass the grief in Aurora, Colorado. The visceral impact of this news story was all the greater because of the youth lost at Newtown, with most of the victims between six and seven years of age. As noted in the case study, the outcry was international, the public immediately mobilized with petitions in favor of gun-reform, and interest in “gun control” as an internet search term skyrocketed. There can be no reasonable doubt that this issue had fully arrived as an urgent problem, and that the problem stream fully supported a policy window.

With respect to the policy stream, this incident was also well-oriented for gun-control legislation. The lack of a trial also prevented the gunman from defending himself or his actions, thereby allowing public judgment to come down swiftly and decisively against him – and the firearms he used. As in the case of Aurora, the volume of the gunman’s murders was made possible by assault weapons, indicting the precise firearms that Obama’s preferred policy would

have sought to ban, and apparent obsession with guns that emerged in the subsequent investigation was also important in how clearly it focused the blame and by extension the necessary policy solution. Even months later, when the National Rifle Association released its competing policy proposal, it was met with a lukewarm and at times derisive response.

The factor which most distinguished Newtown as a viable ground for the emergence of this policy window, however, was the politics stream. This shooting was the only incident of the four cases whose policy stream was properly aligned and, therefore, this was the only stream to result in the opening of a policy window. At the time of the Newtown shooting, President Obama was still within the duration of his first term, but had secured his reelection against Governor Mitt Romney just the month before. No longer preoccupied by concerns that including gun-control on his policy platform might cost him reelection, President Obama was finally able to aggressively pursue the legislation which he had supported since before his presidency. Although, like in the other cases, the primacy of this issue as a legislative concern had been complicated by urgent financial issues (i.e., the “fiscal cliff” negotiations) its exigence had reached such a critical stage in the public awareness that, rather than delay attention to the matter until after the fiscal cliff deadline, he immediately appointed Vice-President Biden to an ad hoc council tasked with formulating concrete policy recommendations. In the subsequent weeks, the administration fought to pass these recommendations, but as of the time of this writing no new policy has been signed into law.

When assessing the thesis’ hypotheses with respect to this case study  $H_1$ : *Aggressive pursuit of a policy goal by an entrepreneur requires – but is not required by – the opening of a “policy window”* is strongly supported. Only in the case study characterized by the opening of a policy window did the President act as a policy entrepreneur and aggressively pursue gun-

control. The second hypothesis,  $H_2$ : *The opening of a “policy window” does not assure that policy will change, only that the opportunity for a plausible initiative exists.* is also supported.

Though this case is clearly characterized by the opening of a policy window, legislation has not yet been enacted. This suggests that the Multiple Streams model be best understood not as an explanation of when policy change will actually occur, but rather as a means of more precisely pinpointing volatile moments when policy change is possible. The results of these case studies have been distilled for consumption in the following chart:

**Table 1- Summary of findings**

<b>Case Study</b>	<b>Problem Stream</b>	<b>Policy Stream</b>	<b>Politics Stream</b>	<b>Policy Window</b>
<b>Carthage</b>	<b>NO</b> Virtually unnoticed.	<b>NO</b> Highly visible mental illness/Ambien defense.	<b>NO</b> Crowded out by effects of 2008 financial crisis.	<b>NO</b>
<b>Tucson</b>	<b>NO</b> Attention centered on partisan rhetoric.	<b>NO</b> Highly visible mental illness.	<b>NO</b> Republican congress, vocal Tea Partiers, challenges to PPACA, debt ceiling crisis.	<b>NO</b>
<b>Aurora</b>	<b>YES</b> Notable focusing event, gun violence indicators.	<b>YES</b> Use of assault weapons, putative need for gun-reform.	<b>NO</b> 2012 Election	<b>NO</b>
<b>Newtown</b>	<b>YES</b> Notable focusing event, gun violence indicators, Aurora shooting.	<b>YES</b> Use of assault weapons, putative need for gun-reform, absence of counter-recommendation.	<b>YES</b> Victory in 2012 Election, formation of Biden committee.	<b>YES</b>

## **CONCLUSION**

This investigation obviously leaves much room for the development of further research. Although the Multiple Streams model was theoretically useful in conceptualizing and interpreting the information within these case studies, it is clear that the model is not as useful for predicting whether or not policy change will actually occur as it is at highlighting precarious moments when the possibility exists. Though this should greatly enhance the ability of the political scientist to assess how likely policy change is at some moment, it is not an infallible predictive rule. While the Multiple Streams model would suggest the creation of new gun-control policy should have followed the opening of a policy window after Newtown, this has not come about. Indeed, this window does not seem to have been capitalized upon and it becomes less likely as the focusing event recedes further into the past. The detailed process-tracing afforded by this investigation's case study approach highlights some interesting possibilities. Nevertheless, the failure of the anticipated policy change to manifest itself is highly significant on a theoretical rather than empirical level. Because the opening of the policy window in this instance is uncontroversial, and yet the practical consequences implied by Kingdon's model did not manifest, it would seem that the model is flawed in its formulation. This investigation, contrary to prior research, holds that the Multiple Streams model should not be thought to imply policy change where a policy window has opened. While the conceptualization of the policy window is itself useful, it fails to account for numerous institutional structures – such as the courts, interest groups, and the inequitable distribution of legislative voting power – that may still prevent legislative policy change where a policy window has opened. In order to avoid overstating its own utility, the model should be understood as predicting the emergence of vibrant, aggressive policy initiatives rather than policy change per se.

Prolonged lack of specificity of policy goals at such a precarious moment of national mood might have failed to capitalize on the effect of the focusing event. This possibility was specifically outlined in the original work on multiple streams theory (Kingdon 1995, 95.) Pundits believed that a shift in the dynamic of the gun-control debate was happening as a result of the sheer number of children killed at Sandy Hook Elementary, but that it would soon wane. This was a real possibility, given the administration's advice against "expecting quick, dramatic action" because of how much of the President's time was being spent in fiscal cliff negotiations with congress (Landler and Baker 2012, 2). The need for swift action though, however clear, was somewhat jeopardized by these negotiations. In fact, this might inform future understanding of the politics stream in the sense that, while politically viable in every other respect, competing national concerns may simply not allow some policy entrepreneur – in this case President Obama – enough time to use every policy window that opens. As was demonstrated in the case of Aurora, the proximity of elections played a significant role in shaping the legislative agenda of the Obama administration. According to prior research highlighted in the literature review, the slight advantage held by the President going into his re-election should have made him more reluctant to adopt controversial legislation – precisely what appeared to prevent the opening of a policy window in the aftermath of Aurora.

In addition, lack of immediate policy formulations from the administration also allows more time for competing policy prescriptions to gain traction and effectively compete with the preferred policies once they eventually were laid out. In the particular case examined, the National Rifle Association was the primary interest group attempting to reappropriate the shock of the event in question to their own ends, although the alternative prescriptions outlined by this organization were met unenthusiastically and were substantially delayed themselves.

Consequently, it is clear that delay could lead to a missed opportunity for more than one reason and doing damage to more than one stream from the perspective of the entrepreneur.

The case-studies also effectively highlighted the fact that some relevant points may not be immediately apparent in all investigations – for instance, the role that the death of Adam Lanza after Newtown played in limiting the attention that mental illness received as a competing issue in the policy stream. While the death of the gunman in this individual case may not have seemed salient if investigated alone, it becomes clear in the context of three other gunmen whose disturbing behaviors were in full view of the media for months afterward that proper articulation of the policy stream after Newtown was in part possible because of the death of the shooter. The generalizable point here, of course, being that even given the power of the case-study approach and the Multiple Streams model, an investigation must contextualize its events against a background of other similar cases in order to effectively examine why policy windows are created in some cases and not others. Certainly there can be no doubt that a successful Multiple Streams investigation requires contextualization across cases, but also a deep appreciation of the precise role that each fact plays at a given time is required. The unique facts of each case mean that the same variable may not always have the same effect.

Future research into the nature and timing of policy change might attempt to isolate the circumstances under which policymakers and the public demand policy change – in other words, attempt to identify what factors demand new policy, if any. Though research along these lines might risk underestimating how sclerotic a government can become, the results would greatly deepen understanding of this model and the legislative process in general.



Another fruitful avenue for investigation might be attempting to clarify what types of variables in the Multiple Stream model do not exert a constant effect from case to case. In this investigation's case studies, the role of mental illness was somewhat variable and complicated the interpretation of policy stream and its effects. In some cases, mental illness seemed to be a significant complication for the policy stream. In others, it did not. While mental illness may play a role in most mass-shootings, understanding why the death of Adam Lanza or the usage of assault weapons in Aurora attenuated this effect on the policy stream may give the Multiple Streams theoretician a better grasp on the model itself.

As can be expected of any social scientific endeavor, the ultimate goal of this investigation has been to make a contribution to the well-being of human kind. If further research of any sort is able to clarify the actions of mass-shooters, or even the governmental responses to these tragedies, then some modest step toward that better world will have been made.

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