

## RESEARCH NOTE

### **Religion and Gun Ownership**

Matt Kelly, Xavier University

The Second Amendment is one of the most contentious aspects of the Constitution. While some claim that citizens of the United States are constitutionally permitted to own almost any type of firearm, others claim that citizens should be extremely restricted in what types of weapons can be owned. Accordingly, it is important to understand what makes someone want to own a gun and why there is so much variance in opinions on gun ownership. One potential indicator of gun ownership can be someone's religion. By examining one's religion, it may be possible to determine if they are likely to own a gun. The literature on this topic, however, is conflicting, and scholars are unable to determine if being a Christian, and specifically a Protestant, means a person is more likely to own a firearm. Thus, it is important to ask the question: Is practicing Christianity associated with firearm ownership when controlling for other factors?

In this paper I use the 2014 General Social Survey to assess the relationship between practicing Christianity and owning a gun. The 2014 General Social Survey is a representative sample of 2,538 respondents conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. Information on survey procedures and instruments can be obtained at the GSS website (see General Social Survey 2014).

With these statistical tests described below, it will be possible to test the hypothesis that has spurred this analysis. The hypothesis is that in a comparison of individuals, those that practice Protestantism are more likely than Catholics to own a firearm. However, when controlling for region, party id and income, these variables also cause higher firearm ownership among Protestants. Thus, Protestantism does not directly cause gun ownership, but rather a combination of several variables lead to higher rates of gun ownership. Finally, the null hypothesis will be that those practicing Protestantism are not more likely to own a gun than those practicing Catholicism.

The independent variable for this study is religious identification. The variable is nominal and is named religious preference; furthermore, it asks the question: What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion? The key dependent variable, owngun, is a nominal variable based on the respondent's answer to the question: "Do you happen to have in your home (IF HOUSE: or garage) any guns or revolvers?" Finally, the study controls for three different nominal variables. The first control variable, region, indicates what region the respondent is from (south or non-south). The next control variable, partyid, is based on the respondent's answer to the following question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" Finally, a control variable for

personal income is based on respondent’s answer to the question: “In which of these groups did your earnings from (OCCUPATION IN OCC) for last year--[the previous year]--fall? That is, before taxes or other deductions.”

I begin by throwing out responses that are incomplete. Furthermore, I discard all answers that are not Catholic or Protestant, as these are not pertinent to the thesis. Next I perform a cross tab analysis with religion as the independent variable and gun ownership as the dependent variable to compare percentages. The religion categories include Protestants and Catholics. Next, I conduct a Chi Square analysis to determine whether the null hypothesis can be accepted or rejected. The result of the analysis is shown below:

**Table 1: Gun Ownership and Religion**

	Protestant	Catholic	Chi Square	Sig (2-Sided)	Lambda	Cramer’s V
Gun in house- Yes	38.3%	24.1%	44.781	.000***	.000	.115

GSS 2014 data; Chi Square (2-tailed): \* = p <.05; \*\* = p <.01; \*\*\* = p <.001

The data shows that the distribution observed is unlikely to occur by chance because the Chi Square value is so high and the P-value is below the .05 threshold; however, the strength of the relationship is weak (Cramer’s V is .115), and so a further explanation must be uncovered by examining control variables.

Before the control variables are considered, it is necessary to recode them in order to make the answers more legible. One’s region will either be recoded to be in the South or the non-South, one’s party ID will be recoded into four variables (Democrat, Republican, Independent and Other) and the income results will be put into a low, middle or high category. Finally, I will perform three separate crosstab analyses that account for the three control variables. With this analysis performed, it will be possible to obtain a Chi Square, lambda and Cramer’s V score to determine whether or not there is a relationship between the independent and dependent variable when controlling for a third variable. Also, this will tell what the strength of the relationships is when accounting for control variables.

Below is the crosstab analysis when controlling for Southern vs non-Southern living:

**Table 2: Gun Ownership and Religion, Controlling for Region**

	Protestant	Catholic	Chi Square	Sig (2-Sided)	Lambda	Cramer’s V
South/Gun in house	43.8%	22.3%	22.768	.000**	.000	.137
Non-South/Gun in house	33.5%	24.9%	25.830	.000**	.061	.109

GSS 2014 data; Chi Square (2-tailed): \* = p <.05; \*\* = p <.01; \*\*\* = p <.001

Among those in the South and the non-South, Catholics own firearms at approximately the same rate; however, Protestants own firearms at a much higher rate when in the South than the non-South (43.8% - 33.5%). This suggests that living in the South may cause Protestants to own firearms. Despite this suggestion, however, the Cramer's V value is low for both South and non-South measures (.137 vs .109). Thus, there is most likely another variable that must be accounted for in order to strengthen the relationship between Protestantism and gun ownership. Region does have an effect on Protestant gun owners, but the effect is limited as is demonstrated above.

The next control variable is party ideology/identification. The analysis for this crosstab is presented below:

**Table 3: Gun Ownership and Religion, Controlling for Party ID**

	Protestant	Catholic	Chi Square	Sig (2-Sided)	Lambda	Cramer's V
Dem./Gun in house	27.4%	18.2%	6.335	.176	.000	.063
Rep./ Gun in house	52.2%	39.8%	13.271	.010*	.000	.112
Ind./Gun in house	32.1%	17.7%	7.067	.132	.032	.105
Other/Gun in house	37.5%	25.0%	3.849	.427	.083	.212

GSS 2014 data; Chi Square (2-tailed): \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

When controlling for party ID, the P-Value is well above the .05 threshold and thus the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, with the exception of Republicans. Identifying as a Republican appears to cause a higher rate of gun ownership, but this is only the case for them and none of the other political ideologies, as all other ideologies have too high of a P-value. Additionally, the Cramer's V values are very low across the board, and thus Protestantism and party ID have very little correlation.

The third control variable, income, provides the most interesting insight of all three of the control variables.

**Table 4: Gun Ownership and Religion, Controlling for Income**

	Protestant	Catholic	Chi Square	Sig (2-Sided)	Lambda	Cramer's V
Low income/Gun in house	32.2%	21.6%	9.768	.045*	.000	.092
Mid. income/Gun in house	47.7%	28.0%	12.833	.012*	.000	.139
High income/Gun in house	61.9%	50.0%	7.094	.131	.129	.176

GSS 2014 data; Chi Square (2-tailed): \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .005$

When controlling for income, Protestants show a tendency to own guns at a higher rate as their income increases, while Catholics tend to stay the same across the board. However, both Protestant and Catholic gun ownership increases significantly at the highest income level, but again Protestants own firearms at a higher rate here which

reaffirms the hypothesis. Because of this crosstab analysis, and the fact that the Cramer's V scores are so small, income does have a small effect on Protestant vs Catholic gun ownership, but another variable must be accounted for.

Ultimately, this research project demonstrates the need to more thoroughly investigate variables that cause this higher rate of gun ownership. This analysis "scratches the surface," but there is more research required in order to definitely say what causes Protestant's to own guns at a higher rate. Further analysis is needed to assess the impact of rural, suburban and urban living, as well as age. Furthermore, a regression analysis would more comprehensively assesses the relationship between these variables.

