

Carlson, J. *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 288 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

There are many interesting ways to gauge the pulse of the public as they contemplate and support policy concepts. As consumers of knowledge, Americans tend to watch the ebb and flow of policy debate as new ideas about various issues emerge, gain steam and either become new pieces of legislation in Congress, or fizzle and die out. There are a few different policy initiatives that continue to maintain the interests of the American public, particularly as Congress works to figure out policy solutions to the policy problems that exist within society. One of these policy initiatives is that of gun rights. While the conversation continues to evolve on what to do regarding gun rights and gun control, Jennifer Carlson, an associate professor of Sociology at the University of Arizona, uses the perspective of gun dealers to understand the current sentiments of gun ownership and conservatism in the United States. Her book, *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy*, and her perspective of how to understand the political dynamics of this policy issue is not only interesting but provides how to study policy dynamics in a new and interesting way.

Jennifer Carlson is a policy scholar who often focuses on concepts of conservatism and gun rights, and her book, *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy*, is a fascinating take on the rise of conservatism in the United States. Carlson's book opens with a particularly interesting viewpoint of COVID-19 and the pandemic's impact on gun sales. Instead of taking the book into an obvious angle that focuses on COVID-19 and the scare of the pandemic increased gun sales, Carlson looks at the situation from a unique angle highlighting that COVID-19 ushered in a new opportunity for conservative American citizens to build a new era of political thought. Carlson writes:

“But as I listened... I realized that these pillars of conservative thinking were more than mere ideologies, worldviews or frameworks. At this moment of uncertainty, these themes served as tools for Robert and other gun sellers I met during 2020, who used them to build conservative culture from the ground up. Armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship allowed Robert and others to locate a sense of control amid chaos, tame the cacophony of divergent opinions and divisive rhetoric and ultimately provide them with a sense of their own standing as good citizens and a country they believe has gone astray,” (p. 3).

Carlson’s perspective on analyzing conservatism from a bottom-up perspective is not only insightful but is incredibly important. Carlson uses the concepts of gun ownership and the philosophy behind it as a metric to “check the temperature” on how Americans view this concept (p. 8). She writes, “By exploring the puzzle of not *why* but rather *how* many gun rights proponents remained deeply wedded to a conservative agenda, it helps illuminate the underlying processes by which many conservative Americans have retreated from liberal democracy and with what consequences” (p. 9). Carlson illustrates that gun rights were not always a conservative concept and highlights how the National Rifle Association shifted this concept as a marketing piece—which dramatically changed the landscape for this policy area in the United States (p. 9). By focusing on this aspect, Carlson illuminates not only an important piece of political thought, but also draws on a much larger sociological problem.

Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy is an important read for anyone interested in learning more about the sociology of political arguments surrounding gun rights. Understanding more about the construction of this area of political thought is not only important, but is insightful. It simply helps to illustrate the political dynamics in the United States—and for some, working to understand more of the issues important to those on the other side of the aisle. Carlson’s book is a perfect read for political science students— young and old, and sociology students seeking to understand more about differing sectors of the American public.

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