

Guns, politics and policy: what can we learn from Al Jazeera's undercover NRA sting?

Written by Samara McPhedran, Director, Homicide Research Unit/Deputy Director, Violence Research and Prevention Program, Griffith University

Al Jazeera's [undercover investigation](#) into the US National Rifle Association (NRA) has gained international headlines, partly because of One Nation political wannabes [drunkenly bragging](#) about how important they could be if only they had the money.

None of this should come as a surprise. You would have to be living under a rock to not know that the NRA has money, lobbies with it, and uses a standard set of PR tactics. Likewise, nobody has ever accused One Nation of being sophisticated or lacking grandiose delusions.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: James Ashby rocks a few boats, including his own*](#)

However, in a [carefully timed release to the ABC](#), a report commissioned by Gun Control Australia and Getup! claims gun control in Australia is being eroded because of the gun lobby.

In reality, [Australia's gun laws](#) remain virtually the same as when each state and territory introduced them more than 20 years ago. The last major change was in 2017, when all jurisdictions agreed to ban lever-action shotguns with a magazine capacity of more than five rounds of ammunition. Hardly "watering down".

What is really going on?

Simple: when all we hear is guns, guns, guns, it means an election is on the horizon. It is not about guns, but politics.

Over the past few years, regular as clockwork, we have seen both major parties wheel out [campaigns](#) around

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[gun laws](#)

, [aided and abetted](#)

by the Greens. This occurred most recently in New South Wales, with the Liberal-Nationals running

[attack ads](#)

against the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party.

The campaigns involve one or more of: releasing data obtained under Freedom of Information about [how many guns are legally owned](#) ; claiming gun laws are being (or have been, or will be) dangerously watered down if an opposing major party or rising minor party gains power; and making scary statements about a [well-funded gun lobby](#) (which is somehow all-powerful despite having changed little in over two decades).

The goal is to create fear, in the expectation this will translate to voting patterns. Politicians also like to have an “enemy” to rally against, to display their own virtues. At times, [this tactic has worked](#) . It is a fair bet that politicians’ reactions to One Nation’s buffoonery reflect the hope that it will work again.

Based on past voting patterns, it is likely both major parties anticipate One Nation robbing them of votes in the upcoming federal election and are looking for ways to blunt that. The [mudslinging over preferences](#) makes this clear.

If the recent [New South Wales state election](#) is anything to go by, though, voters seem to be ignoring gun campaigns and making their own decisions based on [much bigger issues](#) .

However, there *is* a genuine danger arising from the Al Jazeera report. Unfortunately, we can now expect that anybody who suggests that effective firearm policy takes time and careful thought – and that it might not be as simple as it looks – will be denounced as an NRA shill. This is a silencing tactic that does absolutely nothing to improve the impoverished and tribalised nature of public debate in this country.

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As New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern recently observed, firearm policy and legislation is a complex area. In addition to the technical aspects, [evidence](#) about [what does](#) and does not work to reduce gun violence is

[nowhere near as clear-cut](#)

as it is sometimes made out to be. Well-intentioned measures can have

[unintended consequences](#)

, which we should learn from and attempt to avoid.

It is not far-right madness to say that if a policy gains appeal primarily because of the emotions surrounding it, rather than on its merits, then it might not be an effective policy. It is not dangerous extremism to suggest that sound legislation comes from careful reflection and robust debate. It is not irrational to raise concerns about the negative outcomes that can arise when reacting is turned into a virtue and thinking into a vice.

Read more: [*Did Al Jazeera's undercover investigation into One Nation overstep the mark?*](#)

In fact, a rational and careful approach, based on rigorous evaluation and calm, measured discussion, is the very foundation of evidence-based policy – a [much-touted model](#) of [how to approach decision-making](#)

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Political failure to adopt evidence-based policy – despite politicians paying it lip service – is the subject of much scholarly teeth-gnashing, and for good reason. Some of the most ill-fated, costly and objectionable policies we have seen in Australia in recent years – in areas including immigration, Indigenous affairs, and youth violence, to give just three examples – have come as a result of ignoring evidence-based policy. We are quick to call these out, and rightly so. Why behave differently about guns?

If we are serious about wanting thoughtful and well-considered decisions, we cannot pick and choose the issues to which we apply reflection and analysis. And if we do want to pick and choose, then we cannot complain when politicians do the same with the issues we really want

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them to do better on.

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