

## Trump country is gun country

By Philip Bump

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Donald Trump attends the National Rifle Association's NRA-ILA Leadership Forum during the organization's annual meeting in Louisville, on May 20, 2016. (Aaron P. Bernstein/Reuters)

The National Rifle Association spent \$31 million on the 2016 presidential campaign, \$11.4 million in support of Donald Trump and \$19.8 million in opposition to Hillary Clinton. It was money well-spent, it seems. Trump has repeatedly demonstrated loyalty to the NRA's agenda since being elected, and even his recent protestations about new constraints on gun sales have been tempered with assurances that NRA leaders are good, patriotic people.

There have been questions about that investment from the NRA, given that the organization spent about \$4 million boosting Mitt Romney in 2012. The FBI is apparently investigating whether money from Russia flowed into the NRA's political arm, which the NRA denies. The NRA's political spending (mostly through associated PACs and 501(c)3s) has increased steadily in recent elections, though, from \$8 million in 2010 to \$20 million in 2012 to \$27 million in 2014 to \$54 million across all races in 2016.

Trump, despite his past comments about gun control, clearly resonated with the NRA in a way that Romney did not. Part of it was that Trump embraced the NRA early and often. Part of it, too, was that Trump, despite his wealth and penthouse in Manhattan, resonated with the rural voters who are central to the NRA in a way that Romney couldn't.

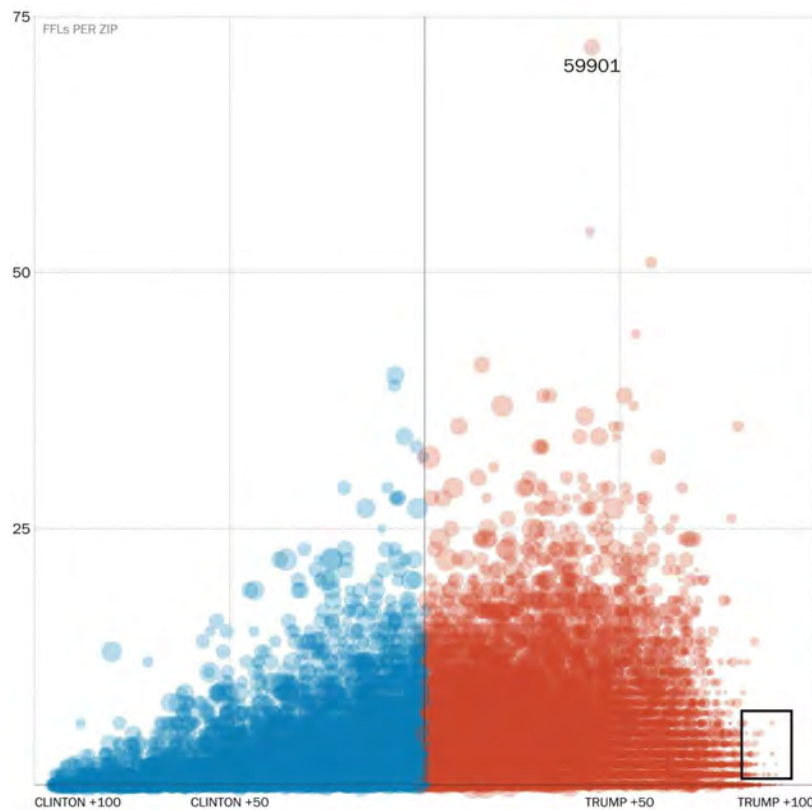
This is essential. Red America is gun country. More to the point, Trump country is gun country.

We can evaluate this by looking at where the gun stores are. The federal government issues federal firearms licenses to businesses that allow them to sell guns and ammunition under the Gun Control Act of 1968. More gun stores in a Zip code suggests that there are more gun buyers and owners in the area.

We cross-referenced data on the location of federal firearms licenses (FFLs from here forward) with the results of the 2016 election. The results formed something of a curve, shifted slightly to the right of center.

### Gun dealers per ZIP code vs. 2016 vote

Data from ATF, Post analysis of precinct-level vote results. Circles scaled to vote total in ZIP code.



The most FFLs were in Zip code 59901, in Flathead County, Mont. — which, according to a Washington Post analysis of precinct-level data compiled by Ryne Rohla, went for Trump by 43 points.

That graph is interesting for a few reasons, including for that little rectangle in the lower right corner, which we'll come back to. We can visualize the same data another way, looking at the average number of FFLs per Zip code, broken out by 2016 vote.

The curve is clearer, as is the slight tilt to the right — but it's a little misleading.

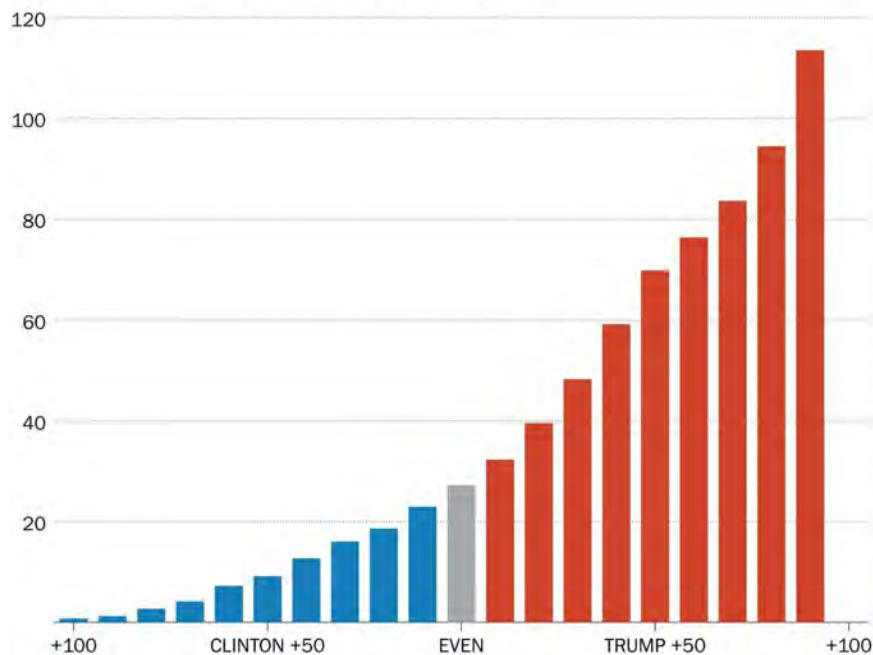
The rectangle on that first graph highlights an interesting detail. Notice that on the far-right side of the graph, the Zip codes are easily distinguishable as the number of FFLs is incremented upward. A row of Zip codes with zero FFLs, a row with one, a row with two, and so on. On the left side of the graph, it all blends together.

Why? Because the points on the graph are scaled relative to the number of votes in the Zip code. These are less-populated Zip codes — more rural ones.

We can look at the number of FFLs not just as a function of the 2016 vote but also as a function of population. And when we do that, the graph shifts significantly.

### Gun dealers per 100,000 residents

Data from ATF, Census Bureau, Post analysis of precinct-level data.



This is not a Zip-by-Zip average; it's a comparison of the total number of residents in each 2016-result bucket with the total number of FFLs.

Again, this is largely a function of the urban-rural divide, which isn't new. Rural Americans are more likely to buy and own guns. Rural Zip codes also have fewer people.

Mapped, the results are a bit spotty. Darker reds — more FFLs per resident — are in the rural Plains states and Rockies. Isolating the urban regions from Boston to Chicago, though, the cities stand out for being mostly absent of color — few to no FFLs in the Zip codes. New York City vanishes from the map almost entirely.

Trump country is gun country because rural America is gun country, and rural America is Trump country.

This suggests that the NRA probably didn't drive gun owners to support Trump in any broad sense; those voters were already there. To some extent, they, like others, capitalized on Trump's appeal to working-class whites nationwide. It was more a symbiotic relationship than is often presented, because Trump was a Republican nominee who held real appeal to rural voters.

There's a deeper implication here. Trump's willingness to consider new gun regulations might, if Congress were to agree with him, force a confrontation between the NRA and the president. If the NRA brought gun owners to Trump, they can pressure those gun owners to keep Trump from acting. If the NRA was largely following rural America's lead in 2016, though, its political position is much more precarious.

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