

November 9, 2004

To: Faculty Colleagues, Boalt and Elsewhere, Visitors and Interested Graduate Students

Re: **GALA, Thursday, November 18, 2004 at 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.**  
**Faculty Lounge, Room 336, Boalt Hall, North Addition**

Fr: Kadish Center

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**DAN M. KAHAN**  
**ELIZABETH K. DOLLARD**  
**PROFESSOR OF LAW**



**“MODELING FACTS, CULTURE AND  
COGNITION IN THE GUN DEBATE”**

**Abstract**

*Donald Braman and Dan M. Kahan*

Can empirical data generate consensus about how to regulate firearms? If so, under what conditions? Previously, we presented evidence that individuals' cultural worldviews explain their positions on gun control more powerfully than any other fact about them, including their race or gender, the type of community or region of the country they live in, and even their political ideology or party affiliation. On this basis, we inferred that culture is prior to facts in the gun debate: empirical data can be expected to persuade individuals to change their view on gun policies only *after* those individuals come to see those policies as compatible with their core cultural commitments. We now respond to critics. Canvassing the psychological literature, we identify the mechanisms that systematically induce individuals to conform their factual beliefs about guns to their culturally grounded moral evaluations of them. To illustrate the strength and practical implications of these dynamics, we develop a series of computer simulations, which show why public beliefs about the efficacy of gun control can be expected to remain highly polarized even in the face of compelling empirical evidence. Finally, we show that the contribution culture makes to cognition could potentially be harnessed to generate broad, cross-cultural *consensus*: if gun policies can be framed in terms that are expressively compatible with diverse cultural worldviews, the motivation to resist compelling empirical evidence will dissipate, and individuals of diverse cultural persuasions can be expected rapidly to converge in their beliefs about what policies are best. Constructing a new, expressively pluralistic idiom of gun control should therefore be the first priority of policy-makers and -analysts interested in promoting the adoption of sound gun policies.