

Gun Control Reform in the United States

Every few years, television screens, radio stations and news feeds flood with reports of a mass shooting. Citizens grieve. In the days that follow, calls to action ring out, and there is a general atmosphere for change. Sometimes minor legislation passes, but in the United States dramatic transformation is rarely seen. Other developed nations provide a stark comparison. Following the Port Arthur shooting in Australia and the Dunblane shooting in Great Britain, both countries mobilized for significant gun reform. The United States differs because the National Rifle Association (NRA) is more aggressive than any pro gun lobby group in a comparable nation, preventing America from initiating change. Since the 1970s, the NRA's agenda has focused on supporting Right to Carry legislation and fighting gun reform within the United States. Most importantly, the NRA controls the national gun narrative. As long as the National Rifle Association continues to shape the debate surrounding gun control by positively defining guns, redirecting blame for gun crimes, and running an maintaining fervent support, proponents of gun control will never have the strength for reform and significant legislation changes will not occur like they have in peer nations.

The National Rifle Association works hard to give guns a positive connotation, reinforcing firearms as a symbol of freedom. Since its founding, America has largely emphasized the protection of citizen rights and sought to place checks on government control. One famous example is the Bill of Rights, in which the Second Amendment states, "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Since the NRA internal revolution in the 1970s, the NRA's platform has

increasingly focused on the right to bear arms as a constitutional right (Toobin 2012). In a country where individual liberties are so important, the NRA benefits from portraying gun control as a limit on personal freedom. Framing the issue such, politicians who vote against gun rights can be depicted in campaigns ads as in favor of large government control and abuse of power. Lobbyists from the NRA actively remind legislatures of this point. ("NRA-ILA Ads.") As a result, many politicians fear the negative consequences of supporting gun control legislation and few laws pass.

In the rare case when gun control succeeds, gun rights proponents, backed by the National Rifle Association, make gun control a constitutional issue when arguing to overturn restrictive laws. In *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), the Supreme Court struck down a ban on handguns because it prevented Americans from using their gun of choice. Citing the Second Amendment, as interpreted to protect an individual's right to carry a gun, the court's landmark decision repealed parts of Firearms Control Regulation Act of 1975 due to constitutionality (Duignan). Therefore, the NRA's reimagining of the gun as an American right serves to both prevent gun control legislation from passing and halt enforcement of regulative laws.

Additionally, the National Rifle Association defines guns not as tools of violence but of protection. Central to the gun reform debate is the question of whether or not guns increase or decrease crime. There are studies commissioned to support both side of issue, and as a result there is no definitive proof for either argument. John R. Lott, an economist, analyzed data from numerous American cities before and after Right to Carry laws passed, and concluded that more guns equate to less crime (VerBruggen 2010). The National Research Council came to a different conclusion. Seventeen of eighteen committee members found evidence for the more guns less crime hypothesis unsubstantial (Donohue et al. 2012). This has not stopped the

National Rifle Association from touting guns as a crime suppressor. Because the NRA is so strong and wealthy, its voice is often louder than that of the gun rights opponents. As a result, numerous right to carry laws have passed in recent year, including laws that allow permit holders to use guns outside of their home state (“Concealed Carry Permit Reciprocity Maps”). Shaping the gun narrative allowed the NRA to pass these laws. Within the media and among voters, the NRA defined the gun as object that could protect citizens from crazed individuals intent on causing harm. The more prevalent this idea becomes, the harder it will be for the United State government to repeal right to carry laws in favor of gun restriction as a cure to gun violence.

Moreover, the National Rifle Association refuses to recognize guns as a leading cause in the increasing number of mass shootings that have occurred recently. In fact, the NRA’s official policy after mass shootings is not to comment (Lepore 2012). In effect, the absence of response conveys the NRA’s position that they are not responsible or involved and therefore have no place voicing an opinion. While the NRA is not vocal immediately following shootings, they still support a theory that “guns don’t kill people. People kill people”. In general, the NRA prefers a story that blames mental illness for shootings. When a particular organization is damaged by the perceived cause of a problem, it will try to reshape the narrative and find another entity to blame. By bringing this new story to the media, public opinion of the problem can be altered (Stone 1989). When shootings are considered the problem and guns the source, potential solutions include stricter background checks and ammunition limits (Gopnick 2013). Mental illness leads to a completely different set of responses. This is an alternative preferred by the NRA because it will not infringe on firearm accessibility. Mass shootings are one of the most visible and widely discussed examples of gun abuse. After tragedy, people come together and are more vocal about

gun reform (Goss 2006). If the National Rifle Associations cannot redirect some of this outrage and emotional volatility, the chance of gun reform passing is greatly increased.

In general opposition to the NRA is extremely weak and often fails to effectively push legislation through congress. While NRA members are intensely invested in maintaining control of their own personal guns, reform supporters often prefer stricter gun laws in theory, but are unable to make the time or financial commitment needed to bring about change. For reform proponents, the marginal cost of investment is greater than the marginal benefit. Each individual does not have the incentive to actively participate, largely because the interest group is too large and too diversified (Olson 1965). According to Kristin Goss, gun control does not even qualify as a movement. In contrast, the National Rifle Association successfully extends the depth, breadth and length of citizen involvement, all criteria used in defining a movement (Goss 2006). Accordingly the National Rifle Association, and associated gun rights supporters, represents the more effective interest group in the gun control debate.

Like the United States, Australia is a nation proud of its individualistic nature and home to a strong gun lobby. Yet, in 1996, Australia passed sweeping gun control reform, buying back millions of guns and creating uniform laws throughout the country. During the process, the gun lobby threatened legislatures, created new political parties and incited the gun rights base (Peters 2013). They failed to stop reform. Australia differs from the United States because elected officials, gun owners and ordinary citizens collectively decided to stand up to the lobby. After the Port Arthur shooting, Australians, led by Prime Minister John Howard, viewed guns differently. They banded together to form the National Coalition for Gun Control, an interest group dedicated enough to combat the gun lobby (Peters 2013). In the United States, no such group exists. Australia successfully passed gun reform because a group larger and more powerful

than the gun lobby developed, but in the United States the NRA is the single largest group involved in the gun debate.

The unique influence of National Rifle Association on the gun control debate in the United States is preventing the US from enacting gun control reform. The NRA is extremely influential in controlling the story regarding control and discouraging oppositional groups from campaigning for change. Thus, in order to start passing gun restrictions, organizations like the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence need to find greater media presence to reshape the narrative. Not until the majority of Americans associate the word gun with violence and shooting with abuse of weaponry will the government be convinced to develop and enforce stricter gun laws. In doing so, gun reform may even become a movement, with individual citizens developing a drive to participate as they learn more about the issue. Legislatively, supporting gun control research will inhibit the National Rifle Associations ability to control the narrative. It will also provide direction for new solutions to the gun problem by helping to identify the root causes of America's firearm dilemma. Thus, in the future, reforms will be better suited to help combat excessive violence and have a greater probability of passing.

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