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National Rifle Association versus House of Representatives and Public Opinion: A Case Study in Interest Group Power

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Single-issue interest groups can be a concern in the United States. At times they represent the interest of a minority of the population. The National Rifle Association is one such group. The NRA opposes any type of gun-control legislation, even if the legislation is supported by a majority of the population. In September 1988, the House of Representatives defeated a popular gun-control amendment to the Omnibus-drug Bill. At the time the House defeated this amendment, public opinion was strongly in favor of it. This paper is a case study of the power of interest groups. Specifically, the topic is how the National Rifle Association's powerful lobbying efforts against the Brady amendment caused its defeat.

The two major political parties in the United States work to influence public policy. However, they are becoming weaker and weaker as time passes and interest groups are filling the void. Allan Cigler and Burdett Loomis argue: "The weakness of political parties has helped to create a vacuum in electoral politics since 1960, and in recent years interest groups have moved aggressively to fill it" (1991, 20).

In 1988, the National Rifle Association (NRA) exerted its power in Congress. They lobbied against a popular gun-control measure, the Brady amendment, which was attached to the Omnibus-drug Bill (drug bill). The amendment would have established a mandatory seven-day waiting period before the purchase of a handgun. The National Rifle Association's powerful lobbying efforts against the Brady amendment caused its defeat.

Interest Groups

Mancur Olson, Jr. addresses the subject of interest groups by saying, "group interests and group behavior are the primary forces in . . . political behavior." Olson continues, "group interests rather than individual interest seem to be the fundamental force in lawmaking" (1968, 118). This is evident not only in the defeat of the Brady amendment, but the defeat and passage of many bills on Capitol Hill.

The National Rifle Association is an interest group or pressure group. According to well known political scientist, David B. Truman, an interest group is:

Any group that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes (1955, 33).

In 1787, one of the framers of the Constitution of the United States, James Madison, also defined pressure groups. He called them factions. Madison could see the dangers that factions or special interest groups could have on people and governments. In Federalist, No. 10, Madison defines factions as:
A number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of the other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community (1987, 46, emphasis added).

National Rifle Association

In his book, Interest Groups in the United States, Graham Wilson describes the National Rifle Association as conceivably the most powerful single-issue interest group in America. The NRA has successfully stopped "any effective gun control." Even with the assassination attempt on President Reagan and the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, there are hardly any federal regulations controlling the purchase or use of guns (1981, 104). The NRA is the primary reason for the lack of effective gun laws.

The National Rifle Association, with its 2.8 million members, is a special interest group or pressure group that seeks to promote Americans' right to bear arms. According to Wilson, roughly 25 percent of the NRA's members do not even shoot guns. They join because they support the right to bear arms (1981, 105). One tactic the NRA uses well is that they try to represent every proposed limitation on firearms as an assault on the right to bear arms (Cigler and Loomis 1991, 391).

Gun Control

In 1791, Americans added the Bill of Rights to the Constitution. Included in the Bill of Rights is the second amendment. This amendment, some argue, guarantees the citizens' right to bear arms. Detroit Police Chief, William L. Hart, explains that this amendment to the Constitution was important, because in 1791 there were no police departments and many people had to hunt for their own food. Today, however, police departments are in virtually every town and people do not have to hunt for their food because of the accessibility of grocery stores. Chief Hart infers that because of this, there are no longer compelling reasons to guarantee the right to bear arms (1988, 32).

Crime rate in the United States is high. Each year thousands of people are victims of violent crimes resulting from handguns. According to the Uniform Crime Reports, since 1980, violent crime has risen by 11 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants (U.S. Department of Justice 1990, 48). During the four years between 1985 and 1989, the homicide rate in the United States has risen by 10 incidents per 100,000 inhabitants. During the same four years, there were almost 92,000 homicides, and 45 percent of those homicides occurred with handguns (9). Handgun usage occurs not only in homicides, but also in assaults, robberies, and suicides. Handgun use also injures and kills thousands of people accidentally each year.

Charles Orasin, President of Handgun Control, Inc., compares the United States to other countries and shows the high homicide numbers in the United States as compared to other countries. He compares New York City to London, both having a population of about 7 million people. In 1986, there were 1,582 homicides in New York City, compared to sixty-seven in London. He also compares the number of homicides in Chicago to the number of homicides in Toronto, in 1985. During that year, there were 666 homicides in Chicago compared to sixty-one in Toronto. Orasin continues by saying:

Data compiled from foreign nations for 1983 shows that handguns were used to murder 35 people in Japan, 8 in Great Britain, 27 in Switzerland, 6 in Canada, 7 in Sweden, 10 in Austria, and 9,014 in America (1988, 13).
There is a large difference between the number of homicides in the United States and the number in other countries. There must be a reason for the discrepancies in cities with the same population base. Professors Sproule and Kennett give a partial explanation for the high homicide rate in the United States. In their article, they compare homicide rates in Canada, which has strict handgun laws, to homicide rates in the United States, which does not have strict handgun laws. Their evidence overwhelmingly illustrates that handgun control does reduce homicide rates (1989, 245-51).

Defeat of the Brady Amendment

On June 30, 1988, the House Judiciary Committee approved a controversial handgun provision. The amendment calls for a seven-day waiting period before the purchase of a handgun (Lawrence 1988, 1839). This amendment is called the "Brady amendment," after James S. Brady, White House press secretary wounded in the 1981 assassination attempt on the President" (1840).

The attachment of the Brady amendment to the drug bill concerned the NRA. Wayne LaPierre, executive director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), commented on the Brady amendment by saying that the bill "is a major issue." LaPierre added, "It's the federal government imposing its views on the states" (1839).

Nadine Cohadas reported in an article that the gun-lobby, mainly the National Rifle Association and Gun Owners of America, geared up for plans to strike the seven-day waiting period from the drug bill (1988, 1904). Defeating the Brady amendment was the major priority of the NRA. The NRA would spend millions of dollars and mobilize thousands of faithful letter writing members to defeat the Brady amendment. In his essay, Paul Johnson says that the NRA has the resources to lobby strongly against the amendment. In 1987, the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action--its congressional lobby group--spent $9.6 million or 15 percent of the total NRA's expenditures (1991, 42).

The NRA uses its magazines, American Rifleman and American Hunter, to get the word out to its members and to start its campaign against the Brady amendment. In 1988, the American Rifleman, alone, claimed a circulation of about 1.4 million readers (National Rifle Association 1988, 95).

As part of the NRA's strategy, in the August 1988 issue of American Rifleman it attacked two similar bills. The targets were Senate bill S.466 and House bill H.R.975, also known as the Metzenbaum/Feighan bill (National Rifle Association 1988, 56). These two bills were the forerunners to the Brady amendment; their content and language were similar to that of the Brady amendment. The attack on these two bills leaves the reader to believe that they and the Brady amendment are one in the same. The NRA even refers to the Brady amendment in its magazines as the Metzenbaum/Feighan/Brady amendment (1988, 56).

In its articles and advertisements, the NRA exaggerated the contents of the Brady amendment. The NRA's article mentioned the Brady amendment to the drug bill, but mingled parts of S.466 and H.R.975 with it. The NRA reports:

Proponents of the "waiting period" provision say states that already have "waiting periods" or permit systems are exempt; however, the bill would require duplication. New Yorkers who need permission from a judge, for example would also need permission from a local police chief with a seven-day wait. S.466 and H.R.975 as introduced (unlike the Feighan amendment to the drug bill . . . ) would apply not just to dealer transfers but also to private transfers—including gifts from parents to children—giving local law enforcement the power to decide whether to disapprove the transfer. These bills would put the government in the middle of every handgun transfer in America. And there would
be no right of appeal, no legal redress in federal law for arbitrary or illegal denial. (National Rifle Association 1988, 56)

In this article, the NRA gave the impression that in addition to the seven-day waiting period and background check on potential handgun buyers, the Brady amendment would call for a waiting period on all gun transfers and a national gun registration. To illustrate this point, the NRA placed a full page advertisement calling for the stop of "the waiting period gun registration scam" (National Rifle Association 1988, 56-7).

In 1989, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) analyzed the NRA. The CRS received complaints about the NRA misstating the facts about gun-control legislation. The NRA tried to lead gun-owners into thinking the government would confiscate their guns (Biskupic 1989, 3313).

In response to the attack on the NRA's advertisements and articles, Wayne LaPierre justified the NRA's actions because of the wide scope of legislation, proposals and amendments each bill faces. The NRA "collectively characterizes the 'types' of bills that might come up." LaPierre continues by saying that the NRA does not use bill numbers in its advertisements. He also says that they make them as accurate as they can, "given that those bills change. And we don't know what kind of floor amendments we have to face" (3313).

Besides the advertisements and articles in magazines, Biskupic says that the NRA astounds lawmakers on both sides of the gun-control issue by mobilizing its grass-root membership (3313). Representative William J. Hughes (D-NJ), describes the NRA as: "A lobby that can put 15,000 letters in your district overnight and have people in your townhall meetings interrupting you" (3313). Ronald Hrebenar and Ruth Scott say that the NRA can "generate a half million letters to Congress within three days" (1990, 103).

The NRA, through its numerous mailings, vocalized the interests of anti-gun control advocates in congressional districts. Arkansas Representative Beryle Anthony, Jr., Chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee, said that many members of the House wanted to vote against the NRA but did not because of "the unpleasantness to which the member would be entertained back home" (Berke 1988, A32).

In his essay, Paul Johnson says that during the fight against the Brady amendment, the NRA more than doubled its political expenditures (1991, 39). An article in the New York Times, by Richard Berke, says that the NRA out-spent the largest gun-control lobby by more than a seven to one margin. Berke also reports that the NRA spent nearly $3 million to defeat the Brady amendment. This cost included mailing three letters to each of its 2.8 million members pleading with them to contact their representatives and urge them to vote against the Brady amendment (1988, A32). This illustrates the determination the NRA has to promote its single-interest policy of the right to bear arms.

Michael Isikoff, a reporter for the Washington Post, reported on the letter sent to NRA members in opposition to the Brady amendment. In the letter, the NRA said: "If this measure becomes law, government bureaucrats will spend millions and billions of your tax dollars investigating you and other honest citizens." The letter continued, saying that those who sponsor the bill, "want the police to visit your home before you can buy a firearm" (1988, A2). A letter like this, no matter how much it is exaggerated, excites people against the legislation. In turn, they contact their representatives speaking out against the Brady amendment.

The NRA targeted others besides its members in its fight against the Brady amendment. The article says that in addition to the NRA's mailing three letters to its nearly
3 million member organization, it also targeted 20 members of the House using radio advertisements to get their support (A2).

Richard Berke reports, in contrast to the large amount of money spent by the NRA, Handgun-Control, Inc. (HCI), the main gun-control lobby, spent $250,000 to promote the Brady amendment. Most of the money paid for newspaper advertisements (A32). Furthermore, the NRA, in its magazines, publicized news conferences and interviews with police officers speaking out against the Brady amendment (National Rifle Association 1988, 58). This shows a split in the weak coalition between HCI and various police organizations.

Congressional campaign contributions can also have an effect on the way members of Congress vote. The National Rifle Association’s Political Action Committee (PAC), called the NRA Political Victory Fund (NRA-PVF), contributed to congressional campaigns during 1988. The NRA reports, "In the 1988 general elections, the NRA--PVF spent an estimated $3.9 million for communication with members, direct campaign donations or for independent campaign expenditures." The NRA-PVF was directly involved with 1,360 campaigns in 1988 (1990, 1). According to Fred Wertheimer, president of Common Cause, PACs create "an obligation for our elected officials to serve PAC interest, first and foremost" (1983, 43). There is no doubt that NRA-PVF contributions influenced some members of Congress to vote for the NRA.

After all of the money and hours spent by both sides of the gun-control issue, the Brady amendment finally reached the House floor for debate and action. Christine Lawrence reports that the Rules Committee allowed a rule considering an amendment to the Omnibus-drug Bill by Representative Bill McCollum (R-FL). The amendment would be the same one that failed in the House Judiciary Committee in July. It would strike the seven-day waiting period and appoint the Attorney General to develop a system to check for felons trying to buy handguns (1988, 2290).

The Washington Post reports that the McCollum amendment split the Democratic leadership in the House. House Majority Leader, Thomas Foley (D-WA), and Democratic Whip, Tony Coelho (D-CA), both supported the amendment and voted with the NRA (Isikoff 1988, A2). With the leadership voting with the NRA many democrats also favored the initiative.

On September 15, 1988, the McCollum amendment came to the House floor for a vote. The Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report reported that the House adopted the McCollum amendment 228-182 to strike the Brady amendment and seven-day waiting period from the Omnibus-drug bill (Congressional Quarterly, Inc. 1988, 2620).

After the defeat of the Brady amendment on the floor, Cohadas reported the following, "[Representative Edward] Feighan and Sarah Brady sought to find a silver lining in their defeat." They pointed out that the vote on the McCollum Amendment illustrates a strong concern for background checks before the purchase of a handgun (1988, 2565). According to national polls, there was more than just a strong concern for background checks. Most of the nation favored the seven-day waiting period at the time of the vote. A Gallup Poll survey taken after the defeat of the Brady amendment, shows that at the time 91 percent of the population favored the seven-day waiting period (Gallup and Newport 1990, 34). This illustrates that the members of the House of Representatives gave in to the pressures of special interest groups, rather then representing their constituents.

Hazel Erskine says, "It is difficult to imagine any other issue on which Congress
has been less responsive to public sentiment for a longer period of time" (1972, 456). She continues by saying that Congress has not been a leader in gun-control or even followed public opinion. Since the beginning of modern polls, in 1938, no fewer than two-thirds of the nation’s population favored gun-control or some type of supervision (455).

Though most Americans favor the seven-day waiting period, Congress will not pass it. Carol Greenwald describes why Congress is afraid of passing gun-control legislation:

The strength of potential electoral influence is revealed in the gun control paradox: over two-thirds of all Americans favor gun control legislation, but it never passes Congress because [of] the National Rifle Association [and] its electoral power. "Elected officials sense that the anti-control voters mobilized by the gun lobby are apt to engage in a kind of bullet voting, and deciding their voting preferences on the basis of the gun question alone" (1977, 63).

Along those same lines, Representative Tom Tauke (RIA), addresses the NRA’s campaign contributions and its grass-roots mobilizing techniques by saying, "I think a member recognizes that a $1,000 contribution is not going to make much of a difference in the outcome of a political race." Tauke continues, "But if 5,000 people are mobilized in opposition, that can obviously be a threat to re-election" (Berke 1988, A32).

Finally, the NRA used timing and the election season to defeat the Brady amendment. Charles Mack writes about how satisfying a legislator’s constituency is most important in getting re-elected. However, this usually means going along with the opinions of a few well organized, active, and vocal groups. He illustrates this by saying:

The public at large may or may not share the views of the National Rifle Association, for instance, but it will not be a tenth as expressive about gun control as are local gun owner (1989, 123)

With election Tuesday less than two months away, a representative would rather not deal with a few angry vocal constituents.

According to Graham Wilson, there are 60 million gun owners in America. Their votes are more of a deterrent to guncontrol legislation than that of the NRA (1981, 105). However, recent polls show that an overwhelming majority of gun owners favor stricter gun-control legislation. 78 percent of those polled favored registration (Gallup 1990, 38). It would seem to follow that most gun owners would favor a sevenday waiting period. If the majority of the people are in favor of stricter handgun control, Congress should follow suit.

**Conclusion**

At times, special interest groups pressure Congress into making policy against public opinion as the NRA did with the Brady amendment. However, this policy making under pressure from special interest groups could be a detriment to society as Senator Hugo Black says:

Contrary to tradition, against the public morals, and hostile to good government, the lobby has reached such a position of power that it threatens government itself. It size, its power, its capacity for evil, its greed, trickery, deception and fraud condemn it to the death it deserves (Cigler and Loomis 1991, 3).

Money spent by the NRA gained them their victory. Michael Isikoff sums it up by saying that at the defeat of the Brady amendment, the NRA re-established itself as one of the most feared and powerful lobbies in Washington. The NRA campaign against the Brady amendment cost them millions of dollars plus the nearly 10 million letters mailed nationwide. The lobby campaign overwhelmed
the coalition of gun-control advocates and police (1988, A2). The case of the NRA illustrates that interest groups play a major role in formulating public policy. Sometimes, as in this case, the policy was overwhelmingly against public opinion.
WORKS CITED


