



The Policy Debate about Guns and Gun Violence

FAITHFUL DEMOCRACY COALITION · JUNE 2014

As people of faith, we recognize the responsibility of our government to seek justice for all people and to build the common good. Justice cannot be achieved unless the rules governing the democratic process are just and fair to all. Central to that process is a citizen's vote—not limited by the powers of money, social class and unequal access to public media.

Unfortunately, the January 2010 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in its *Citizens United v. FEC* decision has rendered the prospect of meaningful campaign finance law protecting the voices of individual voters even more elusive. The Court stretched to ask a question that had not been posed to them, and they answered it announcing that private businesses—including for-profit corporations—have a right to spend unlimited money in elections. The decision reversed numerous Supreme Court precedents and toppled dozens of long-standing campaign finance laws at the federal and state level.

As people of faith, we recognize the responsibility of our government to seek justice for all people and to build the common good. Justice cannot be achieved unless the rules governing the democratic process are just and fair to all. Central to that process is a citizen's vote—not limited by the powers of money, social class and unequal access to public media.

Money has, and probably always will, play a role in electoral politics, but what kind of role it plays should be subject to regulations that reflect ethical and democratic values.

Most important, it is necessary to have policy safeguards in place which ensure that more than just the wealthiest interest groups have a voice in the public sphere.



Gun Regulations and the NRA

Gun violence is among many policy issues that have been significantly shaped by big money campaign contributions. Given the long-standing commitment of many faith-based advocacy organizations to address the impact of gun violence, many of these same faith-based advocacy groups have been drawn to the larger discussion of campaign finance reform and the role of big money in shaping election outcomes and the public-policy decision-making process as they relate to gun violence.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) often comes to the forefront of discussion and debate about the role of big money influencing electoral campaigns and policymaking related to guns and gun violence. It is certainly true that the NRA wields a great deal of power both in influencing election outcomes and in influencing policy debate related to guns—laws concerning gun regulation and manufacturing, gun sales and gun ownership, and laws intended to address the impact of gun violence.

Importantly, NRA is not principally funded by its individual membership, contrary to its origins and the image its leadership continues to convey of a grassroots organization of gun owners. Through its Corporate Partners program, the NRA solicits sizable contributions from corporations related to the gun industry—manufacturers of handguns, rifles, assault weapons, manufacturers of ammunition and related products, gun distributors and dealers. Funders also include corporations not directly affiliated with the gun industry but which have a vested interest in public policy related to guns, such as the private security firm formerly named Blackwater.

In its report “Blood Money: How the Gun Industry Bankrolls the NRA,” the Violence Policy Center notes that over 70% of contributions to the NRA are from corporate partners who are major players in the firearms industry. As the report reveals, these contributions go beyond defending individual gun ownership to the “bigger fight” of growing the industry, in marked contrast with NRA’s version of its “official history” as not being affiliated with the gun industry. This money connection is why the NRA resists even the most limited regulations and, in fact, favors gun makers over gun owners. The Corporate Partners Program states clearly that it is “geared to your company’s corporate interests,” not necessarily the interests of individual NRA members.

The NRA is a key contributor to candidates for elective office, and a highly effective one. A Washington Post analysis of NRA contributions to congressional races shows that 213 members (on both sides of the aisle) of the 113th Congress received NRA campaign contributions. In 2012 elections, 261 House and Senate candidates received NRA campaign donations, and, of those candidates, 80% won election.

Pro-gun lobbyists have directly influenced public policy related to guns through access to those who have drafted and implemented local and state legislation related to guns, such as the “stand your ground” legislation which figured prominently in the killing of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an alliance of big businesses and state legislators funded in part by the Koch Brothers, helped draft and heavily lobby for 10 “stand your ground” bills around the country. In an article on the activities of ALEC published by The Guardian news outlet in August 2013, Wisconsin State Representative Chris Taylor, who has attended ALEC gatherings, stated, “Legislators are treated like the foot soldiers of special interests and are instructed to go out and enact their marching orders.”



Credit: MTA – Patrick Cashin

Gun Regulations and Mayor Bloomberg

However, efforts to shape public policy related to guns are not exclusively confined to pro-gun, big money lobbying efforts by groups like the NRA. In April 2006, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg founded Mayors Against Illegal Guns, an organization fighting for “common-sense reforms to combat the illegal flow of guns into our cities and towns,” funded in large part by contributions from Bloomberg’s own political action committee, Independence USA.

Although over 850 mayors have joined Mayors Against Illegal Guns, nearly all the donations to the organization come from one source: Michael Bloomberg.

In addition to Mayors Against Illegal Guns, Bloomberg contributed directly to campaigns and founded his own “super PAC,” Independence USA, specifically to target elected officials who have, among other issues, “been weak on gun-control.”¹ In 2012, his PAC spent at least \$9.3 million in only seven targeted races including \$3.3 million given to Gloria Negrete McLeod’s underdog campaign to unseat California Congressional Representative Joe Baca who has opposed gun control laws. Although public targeting Baca for his position on guns, Independence USA produced a TV ad on a vote on a water bill and blanketed Los Angeles airwaves, something which neither candidate could have afforded on their own. Ironically, the only mention of gun control by Bloomberg and the PAC was in campaign flyers distributed in the congressional district.²

Last year, former Arizona Rep. Gabby Giffords, a Democrat, and her husband Mark Kelly formed a new advocacy group and separate political action committee called Americans for Responsible Solutions, intended to be a “financial counterweight” to the NRA. Americans for Responsible Solutions called for “common-sense gun policy,” waging major media campaigns and targeting key congressional and gubernatorial races. Kelly said earlier this year on the NPR Diane Rehm show that they had raised \$11 million between Jan. and July last year.

Summary

In the end, individual, grassroots voices, whether calling for the protection of gun rights or for expanded efforts to curtail the impact of gun violence, are increasingly pushed to the margins, as big money-supported efforts wield sizeable means to influence elections and public policy decision making. Our government is built on checks and balances and each citizen should be able to have their voice heard and every vote should be counted equally, and not drowned out by big money.

For more information

To learn more about Faithful Democracy, an interfaith money in politics coalition, please contact Jason Miller: jason@franciscanaction.org.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/18/nyregion/bloomberg-forming-super-pac-to-influence-2012-races.html?_r=0

² <http://www.npr.org/blogs/itsallpolitics/2012/11/23/165761797/how-to-oust-a-congressman-superpac-style>