

Gun-control supporters must use their opponents' own tactics against them

Advocates know that the pro-gun lobby are more adept at using existing political weapons to get a reaction from politicians

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Despite the massacre in Charleston, calls to refocus Congress's attention on gun control have gone unanswered and, rather than a rejuvenation of gun control supporters, gun rights groups are increasingly emboldened.

A December Pew poll shows more support for protecting gun ownership than ever — the first time gun rights beat out gun control since Pew began polling on the issue in 1993. Wisconsin Governor and Republican presidential candidate Scott Walker just signed two laws loosening restrictions on gun-control laws: one removes the mandatory 48-hour waiting period, and the other allows off-duty and retired police to carry concealed guns in schools. New Jersey Governor and fellow presidential hopeful Chris Christie has proposed regulatory changes to gun control laws that expand the category of people who would qualify for an expedited gun license. And gun-rights supporters have launched long-shot recall efforts against five state legislators in Oregon and New Jersey known to be pro-gun control. Though none of these efforts are likely to get on the ballot, they do show a willingness to go on the offensive.

Meanwhile, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid proposed a certain-to-fail Senate vote on increased background checks.

Gun-control advocates know that their opponents are more adept at using existing political weapons to get a reaction from politicians — and this strength stems from not just from the leadership of gun groups like the National Rifle Association, or the deep pockets of the industry, but from the grassroots supporters.

For instance, following the mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado and Sandy Hook, Connecticut, several states tightened their gun laws (though others loosened them). Gun rights supporters in Colorado, one of the most conservative states that passed gun-control legislation, responded by immediately launching recalls of three state legislators. Though the recalls would have no practical effect on the new laws and national gun rights groups were uninterested in, if not opposed to, the effort, locals managed to collect enough signatures to get the recalls on the ballot. Two of the senators were booted, and the third resigned. The senator who resigned was replaced by a Republican, which flipped control of the chamber.

Gun control supporters may do well to take a page from their opponents in proving their strength on the electoral battlefield, and the tools of direct democracy may be a good way to start the battles. It is unlikely that the gun right supporters' recall efforts in New Jersey and Oregon will be of much a model; thanks to the basic principles of redistricting, elected officials are probably as protected from recall efforts as legislators in favor of tighter restrictions in New Jersey and Oregon.

However, gun control supporters have another powerful weapon at their disposal in many states — the ballot initiative process. Initiatives are relatively easy to get on the ballot and, while

they involve significant outlays of cash, groups like Michael Bloomberg's Everytown for Gun Safety have shown a strong willingness to open their wallets to such a fight. There has already been one prominent instance of using initiatives as the new way to fight gun-control issues: in 2014, Washington State voters passed an initiative that would require background checks, and at the same time defeated an initiative by gun rights groups that would have prevented them.

Initiatives are an expensive way to fight a battle, but money isn't the only problem with this strategy. Only 24 states allow for the public to place initiatives on the ballot, and there is no law allowing it on the federal level. So using initiatives may not be a successful way to actually change national policy (though same-sex marriage began as a state-by-state effort, too).

But ballot initiatives could alter the discussion and perhaps operate as a method to show politicians that gun control can gain, rather than cost them, votes. After a continual series of losses and dropping poll numbers, gun-control advocates need to show that their issue can do more than attract sympathy; they need to show that it can actually bring voters to the polls.

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