

How influential is the National Rifle Association in U.S. politics?

Introduction

This presentation examines the influence of the National Rifle Association as the biggest gun rights organisation in American politics by analysing its spheres and methods of obtaining such influence as well as the deterioration of this over the recent years.

The National Rifle Association

The NRA was founded in 1871 in New York. Ever since its founding, it has made it its mission to campaign for the unrestricted right to bear arms.

Monetary Power and Donations

In 2018, the organisation's revenue amounted to over \$412 million (Gutowski, 2019). Much of the NRA's monetary power derives from its membership contributions, but it also has connections to the firearms industry, which provides it with millions of dollars to support its cause (Phillips 2018: 869). Whenever candidates that the NRA financially supports during their campaigns are in office, the NRA inevitably receives the opportunity to exercise more influence over policy. This is evident, for example, in Donald Trump expressing that he was considering stricter background checks in the purchase of firearms in 2019, but then reportedly reversing these plans after a phone call with the NRA leader (Smith 2020: 42). The NRA previously contributed a total of \$30 million to Trump's campaign to win the presidential race (Melzer 2018: 118). Furthermore, its significant monetary strength gives interest groups like the NRA an advantage over ordinary citizens in achieving their political agenda; an example for this is the case of the Colorado recall election in 2013. State Senators Morse and Giron both announced their approval of firearm restrictions after mass shootings within their state, which resulted in the NRA successfully funding the campaign for their removal (Robinson 2019: 88-19). In the process, it outspent citizen groups that were supporting the Senators' measures, which, for a variety of observers, highlighted the group's ability to essentially defy the prevalent popular opinion within the American citizenry (Robinson 2019: 88-89).

The NRA's Supporter Base

The NRA has around five million members, which are of central importance to its political influence, as they provide the voices, votes and financial means that enable the NRA to lobby effectively on their behalf. The organisation possesses gun clubs and shops all over the U.S., which are another source of its revenue (Musa 2016: 2). About two million people receive monthly issues of the NRA publication “The American Rifleman” (Dawson 2019: 4), which acts as a tool that actively promotes the NRA’s objectives (Musa 2016: 2). In addition to this, Dawson (2019: 6,10,11) argues that the NRA frequently utilises religious framing of the Second Amendment as “sacred”, arguing that the Constitution is essentially “God-given” and therefore exempt from the authority of the state, thus expressing their message in a manner that appeals to the vast number of American Christians. It could be argued that its effective marketing strategy and communication are a significant factor in obtaining as well as maintaining the approval of supporters, and thus, preserving its political influence overall.

Grades and Endorsements

Furthermore, the NRA assigns election candidates grades according to their stance on Second Amendment issues. These grades range from an A+, which means that a candidate has a record of voting pro-gun and has taken efforts to promote gun rights, to an F, which the NRA describes as a “true enemy of gun owners’ rights” (NRA PVF, n.d.). It can be argued that this endorsement heavily influences gun owners in their voting choices, and thus, the NRA’s influence in the legislative sphere (Smith 2020: 42). As Smith (2020: 42) argues, gun owners, in their conviction that the ownership of firearms is a positive thing, treat this issue as a “top priority” in elections, as opposed to people that support firearm safety measures, for whom this issue might only be one factor amidst many.

In addition, the outcome of elections is indeed influenced by NRA activities. Bill Clinton stated that the NRA had a considerable impact on the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994 (Musa 2016: 2), and empirical data obtained by Kenny, McBurnett and Bordua (2006) shows that NRA campaigning efforts and endorsement of candidates can increase their vote shares by about 3 per cent per 10.000 NRA members per district, which, depending on membership presence in a particular state, can make a significant difference to a candidate’s chances of getting elected. This translates to the potential of the NRA to essentially swing an election (Kenny et al. 2006: 4).

Limitations to the NRA's Influence

The considerable influence of the NRA may be diminishing, however. Mass shootings in recent years have resulted in a growing opposition against firearms, and students have increasingly started to use their voice especially on social media platforms – student activism resulted in the National School Walkout as a reaction to the Parkland shooting, prompting pupils all over the U.S. to leave their schools as an act of demonstration for tighter gun control measures (Phillips 2018: 869). The March for Our Lives, also a response to the Parkland shooting, attracted hundreds of thousands of participants at over 800 rallies, raised over \$3 million for their cause and was supported by celebrities and a variety of organisations (Phillips 2018: 869). Phillips (2018: 869) argues that student activism had an impact on Florida, which is usually known as a state that is very supportive of gun rights, introducing legislation that can be viewed as a “light” version of firearm safety. The more frequent incidents like Parkland become, the more pressing the issue of gun control becomes within the population, and thus, the pressure on legislative bodies to take action increases. Groups advocating for firearm safety, like, for example, Everytown for Gun Safety, have recently been able to dedicate more finances to election efforts than the NRA itself, which highlights how gun control organisations are attaining more influence while the NRA's ability to maintain its own influence is declining due to recent “financial mismanagement” (Smith 2020: 44). In addition, groups like Guns Down America have made efforts to convince corporations to refrain from engaging with the gun lobby (Smith 2020: 44). Furthermore, gun ownership within the American population has declined from 47% to 31% within the span of forty years, with the majority of particularly younger gun owners supporting more restrictive firearm safety measures, as polls indicate (Phillips 2018: 869).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the NRA has a considerable influence on U.S. politics. Its financial support and its endorsement of pro-gun candidates' campaigns do not only have an impact on election results, but also enhance the NRA's ability to influence policy when endorsed candidates take office. Furthermore, its expenditures on marketing as well as its general marketing strategy enable the organisation to efficiently mobilise its supporter base, which, in turn, makes it possible for the NRA to maintain this significant influence in the political sphere. However, the gun control movement has been on the rise over the past years, and organisations advocating for

firearm safety are obtaining the financial capabilities to pose a significant counterweight to the NRA's influence, particularly since financial mismanagement has recently become an issue within the NRA. In addition, the gun-owning demographic is changing, with an increasing number of especially younger people being open to stricter firearm safety measures.

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