

TAKING BACK THE SECOND AMENDMENT:

**A Seven-Step Blueprint for
Democrats to Promote Responsibility
and Win the Gun Vote**



americansfor
gunsafety



Overview: The Democrats' Opportunity on Guns

Gun owners believe that Democrats are anti-gun, anti-Second Amendment, and do not respect the values of gun owners; however there is a significant opportunity for the Democratic party to gain gun owner support with a moderate message that voices support for Second Amendment rights, calls for the closure of loopholes in our gun laws, and demands vigorous enforcement of the existing laws on the books.

Democrats suffer from a major voting gap with gun owners in both congressional and presidential elections. Among Democrats, the conventional wisdom about how to close this gap is for the party to avoid the gun issue altogether except in urban and liberal areas. But a new poll prepared for Americans for Gun Safety shows that gun owners have such strong preconceptions about where Democrats stand on guns that silence spells certain defeat for Democrats in so-called "red states" -- states that voted for President Bush in 2000 and, not coincidentally, have gun ownership rates more than 35% higher than states that went for Gore.

In short, the data shows that in a generic ballot, Democrats can narrow their deficit among gun owners from twenty-six percentage points to four and increase their margin of support among non-gun owners from seventeen percentage points to forty by adopting a moderate, rights and responsibilities set of policies and messages that emphasizes the need for gun safety while acknowledging, as most Americans do, that there is also a constitutionally protected right to bear arms.

The Gun Gap: Democrats Underperforming, GOP Overperforming Among Gun Owners

Nearly half of the electorate has a gun in the home, and in Southern and Plains states, about three in five households have at least one firearm in the home. The significance of this statistic is that gun ownership has become a predictor of voting behavior. Gun owners tend to vote Republican; non-gun owners tend to vote Democratic.

For example, in the 2000 presidential election, there was a 31-point gap in Al Gore's performance between gun owners and non-gun owners. And the gap was even wider -- 36-points -- for congressional Democrats in 2000. It is no accident that the states that voted for President Bush in 2000 have the highest gun ownership rates (53% of red state voters had a gun in the home, compared to 39% of blue state voters). Moreover, 54% of traditionally Democratic voting union members live in a home with a gun, which gives cause for Democrats to be concerned about losing more base voters.

The gun gap continues to persist. In a national poll of likely voters conducted by Penn Schoen & Berland (October 1-6, 2003) for AGS, a generic

Republican candidate for Congress defeats a generic Democrat by ten points among gun owners, but loses by fourteen points among voters without a gun in the household. President Bush holds a thirteen-point lead among gun owners, but trails by sixteen among non-gun owners -- a 29-point swing.

However, while it is true that gun owners tend to be more conservative than non-gun owners, they are not as conservative as their voting behavior would suggest. For example, 52% of gun owners call themselves pro-life compared to 42% of non-gun owners -- a fairly slim margin. 79% of gun owners support prayer in school, compared to 73% of non-gun owners. 51% of gun owners attend religious services daily or weekly, compared to 49% of non-gun owners. And 54% of gun owners describe their political views as liberal or moderate, compared to 62% of non-gun owners.

This means one of the reasons that gun owners tend to vote for Republicans is the gun issue itself. Gun owners are only slightly more likely to be pro-life, slightly more likely to support prayer in school, and no more likely to attend religious services -- cultural issues that can serve as a proxy for voting behavior. But they are much more likely to vote Republican. Thus Republicans are over-performing among gun owners, and Democrats are under-performing.

Taking Back the Second Amendment: Seven Steps Democrats Must Take To Close The Gun Gap

Democrats can close this gun gap and make significant inroads with gun owners by staking out an aggressive position on guns that reflects both the majority view of gun owners and non-gun owners, and responsible policy positions to keep America safe.

This moderate view supports the Second Amendment, new laws like those designed to close the gun show loophole, the renewal of the ban on assault weapons, and the strenuous enforcement of existing gun laws. If Democrats want to close the gun gap, they need to jettison their existing strategy of silence and embrace these seven steps to improve their performance.

Step 1: Reject the Party's Conventional Wisdom on Guns

Conventional wisdom instructs Democrats to avoid the gun issue altogether, in the hope that presidential and congressional candidates will be able to get gun owners to focus on other bread and butter issues -- like jobs, health care and education -- instead of voting their gun. This strategy is based on a deeply flawed premise -- that if a Democrat is silent on guns, gun owners will assume that they are pro-gun or be unsure about where the Democrat stands on the issue and simply ignore the issue when going into the voting booth.

Our polling shows that voters come to the polls with already ingrained perceptions about where the parties stand on guns. Voters, particularly gun-owning voters, perceive of Democrats as anti-gun and anti-gun owner. Gun owners believe that Democrats look down on them, do not respect their values, and blame them for America's crime problem.

- When asked which party wants to ban guns, by a margin of 63-20% gun owners say Democrats (55-18% for non-gun owners).
- When asked which party supports the Second Amendment right to bear arms, by a margin of 66-15% gun owners say Republicans (54-15% for non-gun owners).
- When asked which party does not respect gun owners and their values, by a margin of 59-20% gun owners say Democrats (44-19% for non-gun owners).
- When asked which party blames law abiding gun owners for the crime problem, by a margin of 55-19% gun owners say Democrats (39-25% for non-gun owners).

Taken together this means that the leading strategy employed by Democrats to win gun owner votes -- namely avoiding the gun issue entirely -- is doomed to fail. Voters have already made up their mind where Democrats stand on guns, and until Democrats redefine the issue in a way that appeals to gun owning voters, they will be perceived as anti-gun.

Step 2: Own the Second Amendment

Democrats need to be aware and concerned about the near-universal support for, and interpretation of, the Second Amendment among all voters.

Only 8% of voters believe that the Second Amendment does not protect an individual's right to own a gun -- a position many gun owning voters feel belongs to Democrats. 74% take a moderate view of the amendment and believe that the right allows for restrictions that keep guns out of the hands of criminals. 14% are absolutists and believe that the right allows for no restrictions whatsoever.

Voters overwhelmingly support the Second Amendment and believe that it confers an individual's right to own firearms. Yet, dangerously for Democrats -- and for organizations that are committed to reducing gun violence -- nearly two-thirds of gun owners and three-fifths of non-gun owners said that the Democrats are the party that wants to restrict gun rights.

Democrats have to take back the Second Amendment -- ending all national party equivocation on the meaning of the Second Amendment by inserting strong support for the individual rights interpretation in all national party documents. They must define the right in a way that makes sense to the vast majority of voters -- as a right that comes with responsibilities for individual owners and for society to support tough enforcement and closing existing gun laws loopholes. And they must preface all of their policy pronouncements with genuine support for the Second Amendment.

Consider the strong support among gun owners for the following messages from a Democratic candidate:

"I take a back seat to no one in support of Second Amendment rights, but I also support requiring criminal background checks at gun shows and continuing the ban on assault weapons." (Supported by 83% of gun owners)

"Americans have a right to own a gun to protect themselves and their families." (Supported by 93% of gun owners)

"Our gun rights come with the responsibility to keep them out of the hands of criminals, terrorists and children." (Supported by 85% of gun owners)

Step 3: Redefine the Issue from Gun Control to Gun Safety

Gun control has become a loaded term that leads voters to believe that the candidate supports the most restrictive laws, including a ban on handguns. Democrats would be foolish to continue using the term gun control -- and to accept the media's imposition of such biased and negative terminology on Democrats -- as foolish as a pro-choice organization labeling itself anti-life.

Voters don't define enforcement of existing gun laws, closing the gun show loophole or renewing the assault weapons ban as gun control. Neither should candidates or the Democratic party -- nor should they encourage or tolerate such mislabeling by the national media.

"By a margin of 70-20% (77-13% among gun owners), voters prefer a Democratic candidate who supports gun safety over a candidate who supports gun control."

Step 4: Promise and Deliver on Enforcement of Existing Gun Laws

Voters are right to be frustrated about enforcement: President Bush correctly assailed the Clinton Administration for failing to enforce the federal gun laws; yet today, on this Administration's watch, the enforcement record is still awful.

- Twenty of the twenty-two major federal gun laws are enforced so infrequently they might as well not exist.
- This administration is twice as likely to audit a typical taxpayer than prosecute a criminal who illegally attempts to purchase a gun.
- Roughly 2% of all federal gun crimes are ever prosecuted.

Republicans are vulnerable because they exploited the powerful enforcement message to score points but then failed to deliver the goods once in power. Democrats can win a major victory with gun owners and have a significant impact on reducing gun violence by seizing the initiative on enforcement, demanding vigorous enforcement of existing laws, and making good on their promise.

The enforcement issue has always been a powerful message used by the right as an argument against new gun safety laws. It doesn't have to be that way. Gun owning voters prefer a candidate who is for vigorous enforcement *and* commonsense gun laws over only enforcement.

"Only 578 out of the 136,000 people who lied on the criminal background check form that is required to buy a gun were prosecuted. We need to get serious and crack down on people who try to buy guns illegally." (Supported by 88% of gun owners).

Step 5: Promote Centrist Gun Policies

The problem that Democrats have on the gun issue has far less to do with the typical policies they espouse than the rhetoric they employ. That is because nearly all gun safety laws are very popular across the board. By a 65-31% margin, voters favor new gun safety laws in general. Even among gun owners, 56% support new laws. When particular gun safety measures are polled, they are invariably popular.

- By a margin of 92-7%, voters support improving the background check system to make instant checks faster and more accurate (90-9% among gun owners).
- By a margin of 90-9%, voters support closing the gun show loophole (85-13% among gun owners, and 83-16% among those who have attended gun shows!).
- By a margin of 86-12%, voters support making gun trafficking a crime as severe as drug trafficking (85-15% among gun owners).
- By a margin of 79-21%, voters support background checks for all firearm purchases (69-30% among gun owners).
- By a margin of 77-21%, voters support renewing the assault weapons ban (66-32% among gun owners).

Even the most liberal proposal, federally registering all firearms (which AGS opposes), is supported by a margin of 67-30%, though it is opposed by gun owners (44-53%). By far the most unpopular gun measure is one supported mostly by Republicans to make it easier for people to carry concealed firearms (43-54%), though it is strongly supported by gun owners (64-35%).

Moreover, for every one of these proposed laws, **voters overwhelmingly believe that a Democrat can support each measure and still be a strong supporter of the Second Amendment.** In other words, the large block of voters who feel that the Second Amendment both preserves rights and allows for restrictions, also believes that these measures fall within the restrictions allowed under the Constitution. When asked on each of these proposals whether a Democrat could support it and “still be a strong supporter of the Second Amendment right to own a gun,” the number saying yes to each measure is as follows:

- Improving the background check system (83% all, 89% gun owners)
- Closing gun show loophole (82% all, 80% gun owners)
- Renewing assault weapons ban (71% all, 67% gun owners)

Because gun safety laws like closing the gun show loophole, renewing the assault weapons ban, improving the instant check, and enforcing the laws on the books are both important and popular; Democrats cannot afford to be timid in staking out their centrist positions -- and standing up for those positions as a strong backer of the Second Amendment.

Finally, don't be shy to marry your positions to those of prominent Republicans who gun owners trust with their rights. Second Amendment stalwart President Bush supports renewing the ban on assault weapons ban and gun rights supporter John McCain has a bill to close the gun show loophole.

Step 6: Take Your Message Directly to Gun Owners -- Don't Let Your Opponent Define You

The best way for candidates to connect to voters on guns is to talk to them repeatedly. Candidates should respect and appeal to local gun values with the confidence that local gun owners do want to close the gun show loophole and renew the assault weapons ban.

It's critical that Democrats recognize that only an aggressive outreach strategy to gun owners will ensure that your opponents message about your gun record does not define your candidacy. Gun owners are not a monolithic voting block -- and they will only vote their gun if they believe that the Democrat is out to take away their gun rights, a long-perpetuated myth about national Democrats.

Democrats are underperforming among gun owners because they have been defined by others on guns. Whether it is talking about personal experiences with firearms and hunting, explicitly talking about the gun issue, or forming a sportsmen for candidate Jones committee -- gun owners are a voting block that can be persuaded to vote Democratic.

"I will bring our local gun values to Washington. That means respecting the right to own a gun and making sure our gun laws do not leave loopholes open that help criminals, terrorists or illegal aliens get guns." (Supported by 86% of gun owners).

"I am pro-hunter because I believe in preserving the environment to protect fish and wildlife. Everyday America loses 365 acres of pristine land to development. We have to preserve these lands or hunting will cease to exist in America." (Supported by 78% of gun owners)

Step 7: Implement Your Gun Plan and Watch the Gun Votes Roll In

Gun owners are ready to support Democratic candidates that support sensible gun safety laws, vigorous enforcement and Second Amendment rights. That is because a plurality of gun owners define themselves as moderate and would be receptive to supporting a Democrat if that candidate was moderate on the gun issue.

Gun owners define this moderate position on guns using three yardsticks:

- Support for the Second Amendment
- Closing Gun Law Loopholes
- Vigorously Enforcing the Gun Laws on the Books

In a generic ballot, 42% said they would vote for a Democrat versus 45% for a Republican who supports Second Amendment gun rights (30-56% among gun owners). When the Democrat is defined as one “who supports gun control” the generic ballot result stayed exactly the same, 42-45% (support among gun owners dropped two points and among non-gun owners increased two points).

When the Democrat is defined as one “who supports Second Amendment gun rights, closing some gun law loopholes, and enforcing the laws on the books,” support for the Democrat increased to 57-32% over the same Republican (44-48% among gun owners). Even the support from non-gun owners increased from 52% to 68%.

When gun support for closing gun law loopholes is taken out of the equation, and the Democrat is defined as one “who supports Second Amendment gun rights and enforcing the laws on the books,” support for the Democrat drops to 46-38% among all voters and even drops significantly for gun owners to 36-53%.

In fact, the Democrat who supports gun rights, closing gun law loopholes, and vigorous enforcement of existing laws outperforms any other Democrat against the generic Republican among gun owners, non-gun owners, southerners, midwesterners, independents, liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Background: Why AGS Has Prepared A Blueprint For Democrats

Historically, the Democratic Party has been the more active party on issues concerning gun safety. But in recent years, the prevailing wisdom has been that the gun issue has hurt Democrats, possibly costing them the 2000 presidential election and control of the House and Senate. Whether this is true or not, the conventional wisdom has made it markedly more difficult to pass effective legislation to close gun law loopholes and to enforce the laws on the books to keep America safe. If this perception is not changed, the future of commonsense gun laws is in jeopardy.

Americans for Gun Safety (AGS) has worked extensively to build bipartisan support for federal gun legislation including closing the gun show loophole and fixing the instant background check system. We believe that this issue does not have to be partisan, and that there are many common-sense solutions that respect gun rights and promote solid gun policy -- solutions that both parties should be able to embrace. Moreover, we have offered to assist the GOP in addressing their gun vulnerabilities, specifically on gun shows and the renewal of the assault weapons ban, yet to date, many in the GOP though not all remain opposed to what AGS, and most voters, consider sensible gun legislation. We hope that situation will change and Republican leadership will move to the center on issues like gun shows and the assault weapons ban.

Because Democrats are currently the party most likely to take the necessary steps to ensure a reduction in gun crime, AGS drafted this blueprint to help Democrats perform better among gun owners while maintaining and promoting the Party principle of supporting commonsense gun safety laws. It is often said that good policy is good politics. But in the case of the polarized gun issue, politics has too often stood in the way of good policy. We believe that this blueprint will encourage the Democratic Party to both actively promote sensible gun safety policies and allow them to make headway with gun owners.