

Gun control and American political parties

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Abstract

Politics and Society of America have held diverse perspectives on the issue of gun rights. These differences may be perceived at the level of political affiliation, race, gender, geography and economic status. The two major political parties of the United States of America, the Democrats and the Republicans too stand divided on the gun rights debate. Whereas Republicans have expressed their favour towards gun rights and crime control, Democrats have articulated their preference towards gun control, crime control and more recently protection of gun rights for hunting and sporting.

Keywords: democrats, republicans, gun rights, gun control, firearms

1. Introduction

The Republican Party from the outset has been committed to an overriding nature of individual responsibility as well as freedom. It may be upheld as a fundamental tenet of the party. Such a political posture has in a way extended to the debate on the right of American citizens to possess firearms. This conservative ideology is grounded not only in the philosophy of the party but also the interpretation of the constitution as well as the idea that alterations in sociological norms have no bearing on the freedoms and rights that were once ascertained by the Bill of Rights.

The Democrats on the other hand, have put forth that they hope to “focus on effective enforcement of existing laws, especially strengthening our background check system, and work together to enact common sense improvements- like reinstating the assault weapons ban and closing the gun show loophole- so that guns do not fall into the hands of those irresponsible, law breaking few.” Further in the 2012 Democratic Party Platform, the Democratic Party declared “We recognize that the individual right to bear arms is an important part of the American tradition, and we will preserve Americans’ Second Amendment right to own and use of firearms.”^[1]

At present, not only do the two parties disagree on the solutions of several challenges confronting the country but also differ in their viewpoints on the nature of the problem itself. From the issues of healthcare, education, marriage equality, abortion to that of gun control, the two parties hold dramatically distinct viewpoints on almost every issue. Given the widespread media coverage of the towering issues of gun violence, the American Society has once again seen the Republicans and the Democrats come to face-to-face with each other.

Republicans

From the very beginning, the Republican Party had made

public its commitment to the overriding nature of individual responsibility and freedom. This conviction is said to be in line with the fundamental principle of the party. The Republicans are in favour of a smaller government with lesser regulations. They are of the belief that such conditions would lead to a more effective manner managing the governance of a country.

This political approach stretches to the right of the American citizens to own firearms. Members of the Republican Party champion the individual ownership, right to carry and use of firearms. Such an idea rests on the ideological principle that is grounded on the interpretation of the Constitution which is in line with the basic principle of the party i.e. the first ten amendments of the Constitution discusses the irrefutable right of the individual citizens of America. Amongst these undeniable rights, the Second Amendment spells out the “right to bear arms.” The Party is of the belief that moderation in sociological norms have no impact on the freedoms and rights enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Republicans are of the belief that government decrees on firearms is both an infringement as well as unconstitutional on the basic rights of individuals. The key idea put forth by the Republicans is in congruence with the Second Amendment i.e. one must be bestowed with the right to protect himself, his property and his family. The conservative position on gun control can best be elucidated through cultural upbringing. The majority of the “red” states are positioned in the Midwest, Bible belt or in the deep south of America. These regions unlike in the west or the north-east coast, has fertile grounds for recreational shooting and hunting. The Republican Party under the leadership of George W. Bush had consistently championed the case of creating more hunting grounds. The early settlers in America utilised hunting as a measure of survival. The Republicans claim that abolishing such a rich tradition of the country through red tape and government

¹ Democratic Views on Gun Control, January 29, 2015

regulation is quite “un-American”^[2].

Texas Congressman Ron Paul had mentioned: “When the Second Amendment speaks of a ‘well-regulated militia,’ it means local groups of individuals operating to protect their own families, homes and communities. They regulated themselves because it was necessary and in their own interest to do so. The Founders themselves wrote in the Federalist Papers about the need for individuals to be armed. Gun control makes people demonstrably less safe- as any honest examination of criminal statistics reveal. It is no coincidence that violent crime flourishes in the nations’ capital, where the individual’s right to self-defence has been most severely curtailed”^[3].

It is generally believed that the conservative stance is upheld by the Republicans. Their philosophy is deeply entrenched in the idea of individual rights and the preservation of traditional social institutions. Traditionally the Republican Party is viewed as a strong sponsor of gun rights. Nominally this Grand Old Party favours opposition to nearly every manner of gun control legislation. However, this excludes the restriction on the usage of guns for criminal purposes or the fundamental rights of convicted lawbreakers.

In 1998, the Undetectable Firearms Act was passed. It received only a few votes from the Republican lawmakers. The law “explicitly prohibits the possession or manufacturing of firearms undetectable by X-ray machines and metal detectors at security checkpoints around the country.” A case in point, Michael Leara, a Republican State Representative in St Louis, introduced a bill that restricted every form of gun control within a state. The proposed law stated that: “Any member of the general assembly who proposes a piece of legislation that further restricts the right of an individual to bear arms, as set forth in the Second Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, shall be guilty of a class D felony”^[4].

Rand Paul, a Republican Senator had once mentioned that “We are the party that adheres to the Constitution. We will not let the liberals tread on the Second Amendment. We will fight to defend the entire Bill of Rights. We will stand up against excessive government power wherever we see it. We cannot and will not allow any President to act as if he were a king. We will not let any President use executive orders to impinge on the Second Amendment”^[5].

Democrats

The Democrats recognize that individual ownership of firearms is a chief characteristic of the American tradition. To this end, they seek to preserve the Constitution’s clause of the right to possess and use firearms that is mentioned in the Second Amendment. Further, the Democrats seek to expand

the definition of a domestic abuser.

The democratic position on gun control can be identified with the state elucidation of gun control. On its part, the Democratic Party has passed the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act in 1993 and Assault Weapons Ban in 1994. In view of the aspect of national security and the dreadful consequences of gun violence, the Democrats are in favour of a reasonable regulation of gun rights. They have introduced a number of measures to bring about an effective implementation of the existing laws, such as instituting background checks system, requirement of a photo licence I.D, carrying out a gun safety test before purchasing a new handgun, and most importantly giving communities and states an additional 10,000 prosecutors to fight cases of gun crime^[6]. This is a sharp contrast to the position held by Republicans on gun control.

President Barack Obama put forth: “As a general principle, I believe that the Constitution confers an individual right to bear arms. But just because you have an individual right does not mean that the state or local government can’t constrain the exercise of that right, in the same way that we have a right to private property but local governments can establish zoning ordinances that determine how you can use it. We can have reasonable, thoughtful gun control measures that I think respect Second Amendment and people’s traditions”^[7].

One area where both the Republicans and the Democrats find common ground with reference to gun control is the matter of mental health. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, a Republican member of the House, mentioned with regard to Sandy Hook shooting: “We need to find out what happened and what drove this individual to this place.” Further, he mentioned that “I think we have to be careful about new- suggesting new gun laws. We need to look at what drives a crazy person to do these kinds of actions and make sure that we’re enforcing the laws that are currently on the books. And yes definitely we need to do everything possible to make sure that something like this never happens again”^[8].

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² “Know The Republican Platform”, *Laws*, <http://gun.laws.com/gun-rights/republican-platform>

³ “Which Party Should You Belong To: Democratic or Republican?”, http://debatepedia.idebate.org/en/index.php/Debate:_Democrats_vs._Republicans

⁴ “Republican Views on Gun Control”, *Republican Views on the Issues*, December 27, 2013, <http://www.republicanviews.org/republican-views-on-gun-control/>

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