

MISC II - NRA

Gun Control Problem

Little Chance Is Seen for Strong Law Because of Opponents' Political Power

NYTimes By DAVID E. ROSENBAUM SEP 27 1975

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 25—The two alleged attempts to shoot President Ford have generated new demands from commentators, law-enforcement officers and private citizens for stiff Federal gun-control legislation. Yet, predictably, the response in Congress has been barely discernible, and there is little chance that strong firearms regulations will be enacted in the foreseeable future. To be sure, Representative John Conyers Jr., a Michigan Democrat with limited influence, proposed a bill that would outlaw the private ownership of pistols, and a Republican colleague, Robert McClory of Illinois, offered legislation to require the registration of firearms and the licensing of gun owners.

But, no sooner had these proposals been introduced this week than Carl Albert, the Speaker of the House, announced that he saw "constitutional problems" with the Conyers bill and had no reason to believe that registration or licensing would deter "anyone with a gun crazy enough to try to kill the President."

'Frightening' Statistics

On the surface, the issue of gun control appears to be one tailor-made for rapid Congressional action. The crime statistics are truly frightening: three out of every four murders are committed with pistols, and such weapons are responsible for 10,000 deaths a year. On the average day, for example, firearms are involved in two murders, 60 robberies and 22 assaults in New York City alone.

Moreover, for years, George Gallup and other pollsters have reported that more than 70 per cent of Americans favor stricter gun laws.

But, as almost any politician who has encountered them will acknowledge, the people who oppose gun control wield political power far out of proportion to their numbers. The reason is the intensity of their feeling on the issue.

For the vast majority of Americans—the 70 per cent in the Gallup figures—a candidate's position on gun control is but one of many factors, and seldom the most important one, taken into account in deciding for whom to vote in an election, political analysts believe.

For the most part, they say, these voters weigh a candidate's party affiliation and his position on a variety of national issues before they cast their ballots.

But, many of those who oppose gun-control legislation apparently vote on the basis of

a candidate's stand on that issue alone. No one knows just how many people fall into that category, but, even if it is only 5 per cent or 6 per cent of the electorate, it could make the difference between a politician's having a safe seat in Congress and losing an election. Take, for example, the 1970 Senate race in Maryland. J. Glenn Beall Jr., the Republican, defeated Joseph D. Tydings, the incumbent Democrat, by 51 per cent to 48 per cent, with 1 per cent of the vote going to a third-party candidate.

Mr. Tydings had been a champion of gun-control legislation in the Senate. Dr. C.P. Chaconas, a Maryland dentist, organized a group called Citizens Against Tydings that campaigned vigorously against the incumbent solely on the issue of gun control.

"We didn't care what else he stood for," Dr. Chaconas was quoted as saying after the election. "We didn't care whether he was God incarnate."

Although there were, of course, other issues in the campaign, Mr. Tydings is said to believe that he would have won handily had it not been for the matter of gun control. Surely, he picked up few votes just because of his position of guns, since, for proponents of gun control, the issue is rarely the decisive one. But, if he lost 2 per cent of the vote to Mr. Beall because of the gun-control issue, it was the difference between victory and defeat.

A Singular Issue

Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, normally votes with big-city Democrats, but he has consistently opposed gun-control legislation. He won re-election last year with 57 per cent of the vote, a comfortable margin. In his rural state, had he taken the wrong position on gun laws, it might have swung the 18,000 votes that would have been needed to defeat him.

There are, of course, other issues—busing and abortion, for instance—that can make or break a candidate. But, in the opinion of most political analysts, politicians' positions on those issues tend to reflect their over-all political philosophy. Gun control, the analysts say, stands as an issue that by itself can cause a candidate's defeat.

"In private, my boss would probably agree that private citizens have no business owning concealable pistols," said an aide to a Western representative. "But he would never dare say so in public. There's something special about guns to the people who own them."