

Taking Back The Second Amendment

Seven Steps Progressives *Must* Take To Close The Gun Gap

A *Third Way Message Memo* by Jim Kessler, Vice President for Policy

The Issue:	Years of mishandling the gun issue have cost progressives the support of many Americans who would otherwise be on their side.
The Message:	<i>I take a back seat to no one in support of Second Amendment rights, but those rights do not extend to terrorists and criminals.</i>
The Policy:	Supporting Second Amendment rights, closing gun law loopholes that terrorists and criminals can exploit, fixing the broken background check system, and reversing the Bush gun crime policy by vigorously enforcing the major federal gun laws on the books.

Overview: The Gun Gap

Gun owners believe that progressives are anti-gun, anti-Second Amendment, and do not respect the values of gun owners; however there is a significant opportunity for progressives 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. In a generic ballot, this formulation improved Democratic performance by a net of 29 points.

Progressives suffer from a major voting gap with gun owners in both congressional and presidential elections. For example, in the 2004 presidential elections, there was a 41-point gap in John Kerry's performance between gun owners and non-gun owners (44 points for Gore). And the gap was similar – 37 points – for congressional Democrats in 2004 (36 points in 2000). It is no accident that the states that voted for President Bush 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 union members live in a home with a gun.

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 conservative candidates is the gun issue itself.

Among progressives, 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 our extensive research shows that gun owners have such strong preconceptions about where progressives stand on guns that silence spells certain defeat for progressives in so-called “red states” – states that voted for President Bush in 2004 and, not coincidentally, have gun ownership rates more than 35% higher than states that went for Gore or Kerry.

A Seven Step Primer To Take Back The Second Amendment and Win The Gun Vote

Progressives 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, and the strenuous enforcement of existing gun laws. If progressives 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 Conventional Wisdom on Guns

Conventional wisdom instructs progressives 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 progressive is silent on guns, gun owners will assume that they are pro-gun or be unsure about where the progressive 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 progressives as anti-gun and anti-gun owner.

- 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 progressives to win gun owner votes – namely avoiding the gun issue entirely – is doomed to fail. Voters have already made up their mind where progressives stand on guns, and until progressives 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

Progressives need to be aware of 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 progressives. 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 progressives – 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.

Progressives have to take back the Second Amendment – ending all equivocation on the meaning of the Second Amendment by inserting strong support for the individual rights interpretation in all gun discussions. 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 law 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. Voters don't define enforcement of existing gun laws or closing the gun show loophole as gun control — neither should candidates.

"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: Criticize Conservatives for Failing to Enforce Existing Gun Laws

Conservatives are very vulnerable to the powerful enforcement issue, because under George Bush and the Republican controlled Congress:

- Twenty of the twenty-two major federal gun laws are enforced so infrequently they might as well not exist.
- This administration is more 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.

Progressives 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 chastising the President for breaking his promise to enforce the gun laws on the books.

“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 with Centrist Language

The problem that progressives have on the gun issue has far less to do with the typical policies they espouse than the rhetoric they employ.

- 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 77-21%, voters support renewing the assault weapons ban (66-32% among gun owners).

Moreover, for every one of these proposed laws, **voters overwhelmingly believe that a progressive can support each measure and still be a strong supporter of the Second Amendment.** 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)

If a candidate or officeholder intends to support gun safety laws like closing the gun show loophole or renewing the assault weapons ban, it is critical to couple that support with support for the Second Amendment and for enforcing the laws on the books.

Finally, don't be shy to marry your positions to those of prominent conservatives who gun owners trust with their rights.

"My position on gun shows and the assault weapons ban is the same as George Bush and John McCain."

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, and – for those candidates who are compelled to support progressive gun safety laws -- have the confidence that local gun owners mostly do want to close the gun show loophole and renew the assault weapons ban.

It's critical that progressives recognize that only an aggressive outreach strategy to gun owners will ensure that your opponent's 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 progressive is out to take away their gun rights, a long-perpetuated myth about national Democrats.

Progressives 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 for progressives.

"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. Every day, 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 progressive 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 progressive 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 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 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, Farm Staters, Westerners, Northeasterners, independents, liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

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