



Addyson "Alpha Addy" Soltau, 9, tries out rifles on Saturday, May 5, 2018 in the Keystone Sporting Arms booth, maker of the Cricket youth rifle, which Soltau first learned to shoot with, at the 147th NRA Annual Meetings and Exhibits, in Dallas, Texas. Photo courtesy Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times/TNS

UNDER THE SCOPE

The NRA grows from a shooting range club to the largest interest group in the U.S.

The National Rifle Association was founded in 1871 by Civil War veterans Gen. George Wingate and Col. William C. Church to promote marksmanship and the practice of rifle shooting, as they were disappointed by the skills they saw in their own troops during and after the war. The group's first activities involved organized shooting competitions, tournaments and pistol matches.

Soon after their creation, though, the NRA formed a committee to lobby for legislation. The first of these lobbying efforts was directed toward funding a gun range in New York. From then on, the lobbying group worked to pass laws that would benefit the gun community and the NRA's pro-gun political stances.

Furthermore, they worked to incorporate youth participation in shooting sport events, including groups such as 4-H, the Boy Scouts of America, the American Legion, Royal Rangers, National High School Rodeo Association and others. In 1903, the Civil Marksmanship Program was authorized as a method to train civilians who wished to serve in the U.S. military, and the program ended up manufacturing pistols for the NRA members.

The NRA also takes a leading role in firearms education, with regards to hunting, law enforcement and civilian use. With special certification programs, the NRA boasts over 125,000 instructors who educate over 1 million gun owners per year.

Today, the NRA is more well-known as one of the most formidable legislative interest groups in American politics. An interest group is an organization that wishes to influence public policy regarding a certain issue. For the NRA, this issue would be anything regarding firearms or the Second Amendment, which protects Americans' constitutional right to bear arms.

Politically, though, the NRA was not always so staunchly against gun reform. During the Prohibition era in the 1930s, there was a major rise in gang crime

and the use of shotguns and Thompson guns in urban areas. The NRA supported lawmakers' moves to restrict access to these weapons, which were included in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal package. They also supported extended legislation following the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy.

Notably, and most recently, the NRA supported California Gov. and later president Ronald Reagan's 1967 attempt to curb "open carry" usage of firearms through the Mulford Act, a move made in response to members of the Black Panther Party carrying shotguns and rifles on the grounds of the California Capitol and using loopholes in California gun laws to empower black Californians in their fight for equal rights.

The NRA began the formation of its political agenda in 1934 with the foundation of its Legislative Affairs Division in response to political attacks on the Second Amendment, which did not lobby legislators directly, but sent information to members who could then take steps on their own. In 1975, the NRA started to lobby directly with the establishment of the Institute for Legislative Action, or ILA. This section of the association remains central to the NRA to this day.

NRA-ILA uses grassroots mobilization, a characteristic tool of interest groups. Grassroots movements use local community power and volunteers who are private citizens to raise awareness and money for their cause, then slowly branching out to other communities. Ways to do this, specifically for the NRA, are going to gun shows, going door-to-door, making phone calls, registering people to vote, hosting events and using social media.

The NRA is one of the most powerful groups to influence policy. Their funding and political clout are far-reaching, and many conservative congressional and presidential candidates rely on their endorsement in order to ensure that they will win their respective elections. One way that the NRA endorses and rejects politicians is by rating them on a scale that runs from A to F, with nuances such as pluses and minuses included as well.

"The NRA is very arbitrary. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, I won't swear to you

on this, you and you could cast exactly the same votes and you get a different rating," Senator Bernie Sanders said. "It is extremely arbitrary."

Another way that the NRA supports candidates is by contributing money to their political campaigns through political action committees and independent expenditures, or "soft money." Independent expenditures are advertisements or activities which endorse or promote a certain candidate, but are not associated with that candidate's campaign directly, instead created independently by the group. They are also where the NRA spends most of its campaign money, a significant \$144.3 million from 1998 to 2016.

Among direct candidate contributions, in the 2018 election cycle, the NRA has contributed about \$200,800 to Republicans and \$7,000 to Democrats. The top overall recipient is the National Republican Congressional Committee and the top individual recipient is Speaker of the House Paul Ryan.

"I knew who the NRA was before this... but I never knew the amount of money they spent on candidates or the extent of their influence," freshman Zachary Beer said. "Before this, I never really thought about it, and I never really cared. But then, this happened to me, and I'm starting to realize the way it works."

While the NRA is most known for their visible spokespeople like Dana Loesch, the real leader of the group is CEO Wayne LaPierre, who also functions as the executive vice president. The NRA is also governed by a board of 76 elected directors. The executive director of the NRA-ILA lobby group is Chris Cox. Other notable figures in NRA leadership are performer Ted Nugent, who most recently made headlines for saying that Parkland students "have no souls," actor Tom Selleck, former NRA president Marion Hammer, former NBA player Karl Malone and Oliver North, who is currently poised to be LaPierre's successor.

In the wake of the recent debate of gun culture in America, many have questioned the role of the NRA and its control in the country's political climate. More specifically, they question whether the efforts of the NRA are as honorable as they profess, and whether the original

purpose of the organization is the same today.

"The NRA is a company, so it doesn't matter if a policy is good for the public or not, the NRA will support it if it makes them money," junior Alfonso Calderon said. "I think, originally, the NRA made sense as it allowed people to create a relationship with firearms. But, they realized that by representing gun companies, they would make so much money... They brand themselves as an organization that protects the second amendment, when they really protect gun companies."

Many others in America, find that the NRA still has merit, holding true to their title as the "first civil rights organization in America." These staunch supporters believe that despite some flaws, the organization is essential to prevent infringements of the government on their second amendment rights.

"I had and continue to have a favorable opinion of the NRA, [because] they advocate for second amendment rights" senior Jalen Martin said. "I plan on joining the NRA as a member, especially after this. I've seen how a lot of people have taken this as an opportunity to go after guns. But, I don't want that; I still want my ability to protect myself."

Many on both sides, though, have become concerned in general with the influence of corporations like the NRA in many different issues that have immense control over policy. In 2010, the Supreme Court decided in the Citizens United vs. FEC case that organizations were an extension of individuals and therefore had the right to donate to political campaigns and support individual candidates in election. The extension of this right has been called into question.

"The NRA does give money to political campaigns, and that is something that we need to look at," Martin said. "This lobbying happens in every industry, especially the pharmaceutical industry. We should maybe put some caps onto [donations of money]- make things more honest in Washington."

Those on both sides of the aisle see that the issue of lobbying, specifically in regard to the NRA is one of significance in the discussion of gun control that has arisen. Story by Rebecca Schneid and Nikhita Nookala

INDUSTRY IMMUNITY

An obscure 2005 law protects the gun industry from lawsuits

The legal process can be a fickle thing. When it comes to lawsuits in the private sector and the regulations in place to protect either citizens or businesses, the process becomes far more complicated. With the gun debate having been at the center of people's attention following the tragedy of Feb. 14, a law passed in 2005 that protects firearm manufacturers and dealers from being held liable when crimes have been committed with their products, known as the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, has come under scrutiny.

In the years prior to the passage of the law, those affected by gun violence in the United States were able to successfully sue the manufacturers and dealers of those firearms for negligence on the grounds that they should have been able to foresee that their products would be utilized for criminal use. In a desperate attempt for gun manufacturers to avoid what former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Andrew Cuomo dubbed as "death by a thousand cuts," most of them complied with an agreement brokered by the government. In this agreement, companies voluntarily agreed to implement various measures and restrictions on their weapons in order to

settle the various lawsuits against them.

Companies that did not agree to the restrictions were left vulnerable to a number of lawsuits that began to be compiled against them. In fact, in early 2005, New York City passed a law that explicitly allowed lawsuits to be put forward against the gun manufacturers that did not comply with the restrictions.

Smith & Wesson, the company that brokered the agreement with former President Bill Clinton, stated that all authorized dealers and distributors of Smith & Wesson's products had to abide by a "code of conduct" to eliminate the sale of firearms to prohibited persons. Additionally, dealers had to agree to not allow children under 18, without an adult present, access to gun shops or sections of stores that contained firearms.

Following that agreement, a boycott led by the National Rifle Association and National Shooting Sports Foundation over the company's potential sale of smart guns nearly led to the company's bankruptcy. Despite an acquisition to bail them out of debt and refocus its marketing on big box retailers, the company has come under increased scrutiny. Its products have been used in a number of mass shootings, including the 2018 shooting at Marjory

Stoneman Douglas High School, the 2015 San Bernardino attack and the 2012 Aurora shooting.

Despite the recent scrutiny, the law itself has legitimate reasons for being both supported and opposed by the public. The support for the law is based on the reasoning that a company should not be held responsible for actions they have no control over.

"You shouldn't be able to sue a hammer company if someone decides to assault someone with that hammer, if it was purchased legally," senior Spencer Frybergh said. "Guns are obviously more dangerous, but the companies who agreed said they would not sell it to minors without parents' permission. The law is there to make sure that companies are protected from the actions of individuals."

However, for some members of the public who would prefer to focus on public safety, they feel as though the law represents a shield for the gun industry, as their products continue to threaten the lives of the common man. Their argument is that were the gun industry still open to lawsuits, the companies and manufacturers would be more inclined to enhance the safety of the public through increased safeguards in obtaining firearms

and the prevention of dangerous members of society getting their hands on those weapons.

"The law is there to protect an industry in the U.S. from being bankrupted, but the weapons they are making are causing the deaths of regular people who didn't sign up for it," senior Scott Hafetz said. "The changes they made after the law weren't enough to stop these shootings. The law needs to be looked at again to make sure that people are safe from the damage that guns can cause."

Experts continue to argue that the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act hinders the safety enhancement and the self-regulation that can be achieved through liability claims against the gun industry. It also continues to provide the industry with immunity from accountability, which contributes to illegal gun sales, negligent marketing and failure to apply safer design choices. The legal argument made is also a powerful one.

The protection for the industry is there to help maintain a significant portion of the American economy from being damaged through various lawsuits and allows a precedent that transfers responsibility onto those who commit acts of violence. Story by Lewis Mizen

THE POWER OF THE NRA

How the NRA spends money to influence politics

