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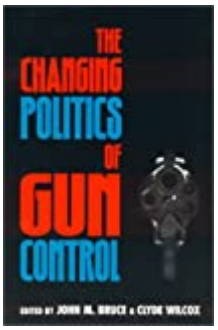

John M. Bruce, Clyde Wilcox, eds. *The Changing Politics of Gun Control.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xiii + 270 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8615-5; $114.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8614-8.

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Gun control is among the more difficult subjects to do research and write about in a dispassionate manner. Scholars are generally no better than nonacademic authors in hiding their biases on the issue, and the underlying tone the reader gets is either decidedly pro- or anti-gun-control. The tone of this collection of eleven essays on gun control is pro-control. However, to their credit in an academic volume intended for serious students of the gun debate, the authors do not take a strong advocacy position. To the editors' credit, the essays they have chosen are all heavily empirical and do actually illuminate the changing politics of gun control in the Untied States. In this regard, *The Changing Politics of Gun Control* is similar to Robert J. Spitzer's *The Politics of Gun Control* (Chatham, 1995), as well as to my own *The Gun Control Movement* (Twayne, 1997). However, students new to this area should also examine the data-rich but more anti-control works of Don B. Kates, Jr. and Gary Kleck (*The Great American Gun Debate*, Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1997), Gary Kleck (*Targeting Guns*, Aldine de Gruyter, 1997), David B. Kopel (and others, *Guns–Who Should Have Them?*, Prometheus, 1995), and John R. Lott, Jr. (*More Guns, Less Crime*, University of Chicago, 1998).

In their introductory chapter, Bruce and Wilcox argue that gun control is best conceptualized as a example of social regulatory policy. Political scientists associate such policy with the following: 1) public opinion that is difficult to rally yet essential to action; 2) intense, polarizing single-issue groups; 3) parties that use the issue to attract votes; 4) substantial state and local autonomy; 4) federal policymaking dominated by Congress, which rarely innovates; 6) presidential involvement that is mostly symbolic; 7) federal agencies with little authority, whose fate is determined by politics; 8) courts that occasionally intervene to redefine the issue. Indeed, the eleven essays the editors have assembled combine to reveal how the issue of gun control fits this model well. The spike in interest in gun control in the public's mind and in Congress following the April 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado is a perfect contemporary example. Pro-control sentiments swelled; Handgun Control Inc. (HCI) and other pro-control groups used this sentiment to promote their agenda. Working with a sympathetic president, they quickly proposed new controls on buying firearms at gun shows, on youths buying guns, and on the selling or giving of firearms between private individuals. In the end, however, a Republican dominated House of Representatives, in response to the NRA and like-minded pressure groups, failed to pass any of these proposals into law.

In the first essay of *The Changing Politics of Gun Control*, Wendy L. Martinek, Kenneth J. Meier, and Lael R.

Keiser assess the degree to which the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) fits the accusation heaped upon it by the NRA and its sympathizers as a "jackboot" organization (per Representative John Dingell's characterization). Their article is a good example of "the changing politics of gun control" in that BATF was once high on the NRA's hit-list; however, when it became clear in the early 1980s that BATF's responsibilities over gun control would be taken over by the Secret Service (a more powerful, more respected, and better funded governmental organization), the NRA did an about face and began supporting the continued existence of BATF. Martinek, Meier, and Keiser argue convincingly that BATF is not a jackboot organization of thugs, but rather a weak bureaucracy that lacks the political support to get the resources it needs to effectively carry out its mandate to enforce federal gun laws. Since it was not created by legislative edict, the Treasury Department could dismantle BATF by fiat. By law, BATF cannot create centralized databases of the disposition of firearms, which greatly reduces its overall effectiveness. Compared to its sister organizations such as the DEA, FBI, and Secret Service, its budgets have grown much more slowly over the past twenty-five years. Although no longer wanting to have it dismantled, the NRA still badgers BATF and makes sure that negative images of it are routinely distributed to NRA members and to the media. The huge amounts of bad press BATF received surrounding "Ruby Ridge" (the killing of Randy Weaver's son and wife) and "Waco" (the assault on the Branch Davidians) were not justified. BATF agents were not involved in the Ruby Ridge killings, nor in the final bloody assault on the Branch Davidians. Martinek, Meier, and Keiser conclude that the gap between its actual status as a weak bureaucracy staffed by agents that are no worse than those of other federal law enforcement agencies (e.g., the FBI) and the media image as a "rogue agency" is one encouraged by the NRA and its sympathizers to keep BATF at bay and ineffective in its attempts to control firearms.

In the second essay in the anthology, Samuel C. Patterson and Keith R. Eakins review the record of Congress on gun control. Their overall assessment is that Congress has not been able to implement effective gun controls, on par with those in most other industrial democracies, because of partisan politics (often caustic and emotional) and the power of the NRA lobby. They review the history of federal gun legislation during the twentieth century (beginning with the National Firearms Act of 1934, which tried to place controls on machine guns and sawed-off shotguns) through the mid-1990s attempts of the House of Representatives to repeal the 1994 ban on assault weapons. They detail how federal legislation has always been preceded by a highly publicized gun tragedy (from the St. Valentine's Day massacre to the assassinations of the Kennedy's and Martin Luther King, Jr., through the assassination attempt of Ronald Reagan and the massacre of school children by Patrick Purdy in Stockton, California in 1989). They also detail the changing politics of gun control, showing how the NRA slowly came to be a major player in the gun-control game and how the issue eventually became one of Republicans vs. Democrats. In part, the conflict between the parties arose as Republicans took over the South, where gun control has traditionally been opposed. The conflict also reflects urbanites vs. ruralites, with rural people much more likely to be gun-owners and much less likely to support gun control. The authors conclude that even though the majority of Americans favor fairly strong gun control, such control will not happen in the U.S. unless the political landscape changes dramatically. The implication of their research is that significant controls will only occur if Democrats control both the presidency and significant majorities in both houses of Congress and if the lobbying efforts of the NRA can be matched by pro-control groups such as HCI (which are currently much smaller in both membership and money).

In the third essay, Karen O'Connor and Graham Barron evaluate the place of the Second Amendment in the gun control debate. Their review of the historic Supreme Court decisions on the amendment (including *United States v. Cruickshank*, *Presser v. Illinois*, and *United States v. Miller*) and other judicial decisions leads them to the conclusion that even though the Second Amendment was intended, in part, to be an *individual* right (not just the right of *states* to maintain militias), the courts have had little difficulty in upholding legislative actions to restrict the possession and bearing of firearms. In short, they conclude that the amendment, per se, is not an impediment to further restrictions on firearms, even dramatic ones such as the banning of pistols. The only seeming exception to this pattern–of the courts letting stand laws that restrict firearms–was *Printz v. United States*, which challenged the constitutionality of the Brady Act's requiring local law enforcement officials to do background checks on those seeking to purchase firearms. On a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court agreed that this was unconstitutional; however, their reasoning had nothing to do with the Second Amendment, but rather was based on the separation of state and federal powers of the Tenth Amendment.

In the fourth through seventh essays, the gun control debate is detailed as played out at in state-level politics. Marcia L. Godwin and Jean Reith Schroedel demonstrate how California's lead in gun control legislation was due to a short-lived confluence of political forces. Its passage of an assault weapons ban in 1989 and of a fifteen-day waiting period for the purchase of firearms predated federal legislation by several years; moreover, the California legislation was more restrictive. However, such legislation came only after large-scale political conflict between pro- and anti-gun control forces; further, the momentum of the pro-control forces could not be carried on into the mid-1990s. The state-level situation mirrors that at the federal level.

Anti-control groups (the NRA; the Gun Owners of America; and in this case, the Gun Owners of California) are better organized and better funded than pro-control groups like HCI. Horrible incidents of gun violence can temporarily make public opinion overwhelmingly pro-control, and if pro-control groups can act quickly enough, passage of firearms regulations can occur. In California, the Patrick Purdy's massacre of school children in Stockton in 1989 provided the incident; HCI quickly galvanized legislators' support; and the NRA was caught in a moment of weakness (having just fired its California lobbyist and having just used up its political capital to defeat a ban on armor-piercing bullets, which alienated the police and their political organizations, as well as former Attorney General and now Governor George Deukmejian).

James G. Gimpel and Robin M. Wolpert analyze the structure of public support for gun control in Maryland, showing how it influenced the outcome of Question 3 in 1988. Question 3 was a referendum proposed by those trying to overturn the state's newly enacted Handgun Roster Board–which was given the power to decide on which handguns could be sold in the state (presumably resulting in the banning of "Saturday night specials"). Their analysis confirms the importance of the long-noted phenomenon "that the intensity of preference for gun rights is far greater among opponents of gun control than the preference for gun restrictions is among proponents of gun control" (p. 112). Although the Roster Board law was upheld, public opinion polls showed that support fell from 3:1 early on to eventual passage by a 1.4:1 margin (59 to 42 percent). Gimpel and Wolpert attribute this to the effectiveness of the NRA's campaign against the law. A multivariate analysis of exit polls revealed that those most likely to support the law were non-gun-owners, urbanites, political liberals, and the prosperous (e.g., those with family incomes above $100,000 were 36 percent more likely to support the law than those under $12,500). Of particular interest were the breakdowns in support by race and ethnicity: blacks (63.9 percent) and Hispanics (62.5 percent) were significantly more likely than whites (51.9 percent) to support the Roster Board law. That the results would turn out this way was not intuitively obvious: on the one hand, the black community in urban areas is often the victim of gun violence–leading to the prediction that they would want gun control. But on the other hand, the black community feels it is less likely to have competent police protection and thus might be more likely to want to have the right to buy inexpensive handguns for protection purposes. Using survey data on gun control in California to compare to their Maryland data, Gimpel and Wolpert show how black sentiments can be swayed toward the pro- and anti-control positions with an effective media campaign and grassroots organization.

Harry L. Wilson and Mark J. Rozell review the politics of concealed weapons in Virginia. Their article reemphasizes the power of the NRA in shaping gun-control agendas at the state level. Working on public sentiment with its grassroots networks and lobbying state legislators, the organization was able to get a "right to carry" law enacted in Virginia by arguing that the "lack of uniformity in implementation–and even arbitrariness–[of Virginia's old laws concerning concealed weapons] mandated change. The NRA skillfully made a case for more uniform and fair procedures–a tack that drew attention away form the more controversial notion of allowing great ease of access to concealed-weapons permits" (p. 126). Wilson and Rozell also show that party politics are similar at the state and federal levels–with Republicans much more likely to be anti-control. For example, the vote in the Virginia state senate for the right-to-carry law found 16 of 18 Republicans in favor and only 8 of 22 Democrats. Finally, the urban-rural split in support for gun control that exists at the national level also appears at the state level, with senators from rural Virginia much more likely to vote favorably than those from urban areas, especially the northern part of the state near the District of Columbia.

In the final article dealing with the states, John M. Bruce and Clyde Wilcox summarize state gun laws and then provide a multivariable explanation to explain the wide variability that exists among the states. For example, half of the states require records of sales of firearms that require sellers to keep track of firearms buyers. Thirteen states require the actual registration of guns by serial number and type with the police. Twenty-nine states

have "shall issue" laws that require states to issue a concealed weapons permit to anyone without a felony conviction or a history of mental illness. Combining the various types of gun-control laws into a single "gun control index," Bruce and Wilcox find the following variables have strong, nonspurious effects: southern regional location (-), liberal political ideology (+), and NRA membership (-). Among the factors not found to be significantly related in their multivariable statistical model were rate of violent crime involving a gun, urbanization, the percentage black, and percentage of the population owning a gun. In sum, "states with larger numbers of liberal citizens, outside the South, and with fewer NRA members adopt more restrictive gun laws" (p. 153).

The final four articles in this anthology examine the NRA, HCI, public opinion, and gun ownership. Ronald G. Shaiko and Mar A. Wallace find the root of the NRA's success to be in its grassroots organizing abilities. Its grassroots activities are concentrated on 250,000 "legislative volunteers." These volunteers can be mobilized in a matter of days, sometimes hours via the mails, the internet, faxes, and the telephone. The volunteers attend state legislative hearings, write letters to elected officials, write letters to the editor, and use popular radio talk shows to their benefit. HCI uses the same tactics, but lacks the money, the numbers of volunteers, and the overall organizational skills that the NRA has honed over the past twenty-five years (in 1977, the NRA it committed full force to fighting all gun control legislation).

Dana Lambert's article on HCI and its allies shows how the fledgling HCI was able to become an effective player in gun-control politics. Among the most important forces was the parting of ways of the NRA and the police, which traditionally had been strong allies. The split began when police organizations strongly supported federal legislation in the early 1980s to ban armor-piercing ("cop-killer") ammunition, only to find that NRA strongly opposed it. The split was finalized in the mid-1980s when police organizations and the NRA squared off against each other over passage of the 1986 Firearms Owners' Protection Act, which dismantled some of the weapons controls of the Gun Control Act of 1968.

David R. Harding Jr. closely examines public opinion data on gun control. His fundamental conclusions include that it is difficult to gauge the true nature of public opinion because slight wording changes can have dramatic effects on the answers given. For example, when the Gallup poll asks the public simply "would you vote for or against ... a law which would make it illegal to sell, or possess, semi-automatic guns known as assault rifles," 57 percent say "vote for." However, if the wording includes the mention of crime reduction (would you "generally favor or oppose ... to reduce crime ... [by banning] the manufacture, sale and possession of certain semi-automatic weapons, known as assault rifles"), the same percentage jumps up to 71. Harding also concludes that public opinion is consistent and strong in favoring purchase permits for firearms and in favoring handgun registration. He is less sure of the generally held belief that the salience or intensity of one's feelings about gun control depends upon which side of the debate one is on: traditionally, social scientists have believed that gun enthusiasts are much more likely to act on their anti-control beliefs than anti-gun individuals are to act on their pro-control beliefs; however, Jelen's essay in this volume (see below) presents convincing data that the traditional social science view is correct. Finally, his findings of National Opinion Research Center (NORC) opinion data on who is most likely to express pro-control opinions hold few surprises: educated, female, urban, nonhunters from the Northeast who are political liberals.

Ted G. Jelen's article on the electoral politics of gun ownership is the concluding essay in *The Changing Politics of Gun Control*. Analyzing NORC data from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, he finds gun-owners to be an "intense minority" whose strongly held beliefs can prevail over a relatively indifferent majority (that would prefer stronger gun control). Regarding voting behavior, he found that gun-owners were more likely to vote Republican (e.g., in 1992, Democrat Bill Clinton did 17 percent better among non-owners of guns). Moreover, there appears to be a significant statistical interaction between political party affiliation and gun ownership in predicting voting behavior. Republican gun-owners are only slightly more likely to vote Republican than Republican non-gun-owners; however, gun-owning Democrats are much more likely to break with their party and vote Republican than their non-gun-owning counterparts. Jelen's fundamental conclusion is that "gun owners in the United States are a politically distinctive constituency and that the issue of gun control has an important longer-term and short-term impact on the outcome of American elections" (p. 244).

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