

**FOCUS GUN CONTROL**

Expanded coverage in the **Chicago Tribune** Nation & World report

# Gun ownership a hair-trigger issue

**During elections, New York mayor, NRA aim to push their viewpoints on political 'third rail'**

BY EMILY FLITTER  
Reuters

NEW YORK — Among the slick, million-dollar ads for the likes of Pepsi and Honda during Super Bowl Sunday, viewers in Washington saw a far more modest spot. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino sat on a couch, touting an issue many politicians avoid like the plague: gun control.

The two mayors, whose local teams faced off in the big game, are making the pitch for Mayors Against Illegal Guns, the organization they co-founded in 2006.

Murder has been on the decline in New York and other major American cities for years, but the mayors say they still see too many dead cops and teens. Bloomberg was at Manhattan's Bellevue Hospital late last month to visit a New York police officer who had been shot in the face in Brooklyn.

"We have someone who's dedicated his life to protecting all of us, who has had a much too close brush with death tonight because of what appears to be an illegal gun," Bloomberg said at a news conference. He also said more Americans have been killed by illegal guns since 1968 than were killed in World War II.

Candidates for local and national office have faced backlashes for advocating restraints on gun ownership, such as assault weapons or guns on campus. Such pushes draw fire from the well-financed National Rifle Association and its allies. For many defenders of the Constitution's Second Amendment, which assures the right to bear arms, guns are the single issue on which they vote.

"We have to face the fact that both Democrats and Republicans have, for a while, viewed this as the third rail of American politics," said John Feinblatt, who helps run Mayors Against Illegal Guns as Bloomberg's chief adviser for policy and strategic planning. (Bloomberg is an independent; Menino is a Democrat.)

Democrats, who are more likely than Republicans to favor some restrictions on gun ownership, made a conscious decision to stay away from the gun issue in the 2010 midterm elections. The aim: protect the so-called Blue Dog conservative Democrats in the House of Representatives who didn't toe the party line on gun control. Most lost anyway.

If the Democratic Party hoped to keep the gun issue off center stage in the 2012 presidential race, Mayors Against Illegal Guns' campaign makes that unlikely. So does the fact that the NRA and the gun industry's trade group, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, have announced they will have a combined war chest of \$225 million.

"We are anticipating having a voter education effort that will be our largest effort ever," said Lawrence Keane, senior vice president and general counsel at the shooting foundation.

NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre echoed the sentiment. "I don't think this is going to be an apathetic year for American gun owners," he said.

New York's activist mayor cannot simply restrict handguns in his city, as he has done with smoking and trans fats. Two Supreme Court decisions — District of Columbia vs. Heller and McDonald vs. Chicago — have declared such local initiatives unconstitutional. Instead, Bloomberg launched Mayors Against Illegal Guns, which has 600 members nationwide, including Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Evanston Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl and Maywood Mayor Henderson Yarbrough Sr.

Although Mayors Against Illegal Guns has a handful of private donors, most of its \$4 million budget comes out of the mayor's pocket.

"He's putting his money where his mouth is," said U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, a Democrat from Long Island who entered politics after her husband was killed and her son severely injured during a 1993 shooting spree on the Long Island Rail Road.

Bloomberg, in his third and last term, is free from concerns about electability and can tap a personal fortune estimated at \$19.5 billion by Forbes. As for speculation he might mount a presidential bid, his leadership on such a divisive issue makes that seem less likely.

In the past, advocates for strict-



JACOB SLATON/REUTERS PHOTO

Ken Aden, an Iraq War veteran, examines a shotgun at a pawnshop in Russellville, Ark. Aden, who is seeking a congressional seat from northwestern Arkansas, collects guns and says he knows what they can do. When he was 16, his father was shot and killed by his stepmother.

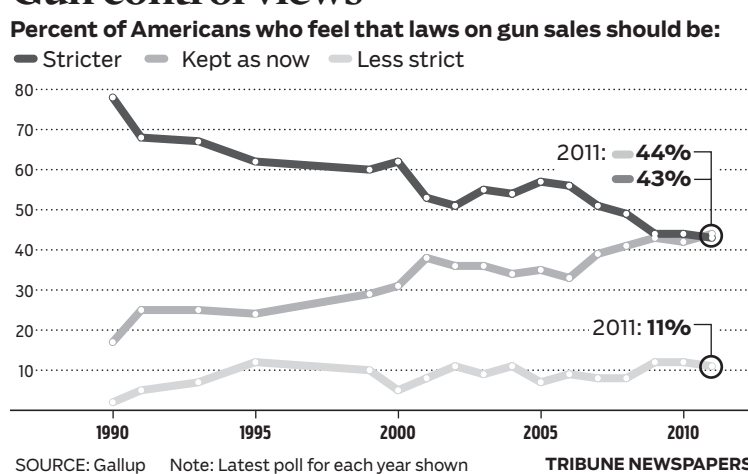


ANDREW BURTON/REUTERS PHOTO



New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, left, who co-founded Mayors Against Illegal Guns in 2006, said Officer Kevin Brennan, above, had a "much too close brush with death ... because of what appears to be an illegal gun." Brennan was shot in the face last month in Brooklyn, N.Y.

## Gun control views



er gun controls held marches, rallies and candlelight vigils. Mayors Against Illegal Guns takes a far more activist approach, conducting undercover investigations and sting operations that are then dramatically revealed to the media.

In 2009, New York City contracted the security firm Kroll Inc. to send undercover agents to gun shows in Ohio, Tennessee and Nevada to demonstrate how people who could not pass a background check easily bought guns.

The group also used undercover investigators to expose gun dealers who sold to "straw purchasers," buyers intending to resell the guns on the black market. Another investigation identified online gun sellers who did not require background checks.

Bloomberg launched another investigation after the January 2011 shooting in Arizona that killed six people and wounded 13, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz. Using city money, he sent undercover investigators to Arizona to repeat the gun show sting and prove how easy it was for someone like suspect Jared Loughner, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, to get a gun.

That move enraged supporters of gun rights.

"The 'sting' was a waste of money that misleads Americans and did nothing to reduce crime," John Lott Jr., an economist who writes about guns, wrote in a column on FoxNews.com.

Keane, of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, said there are serious problems with many of Mayors Against Illegal Guns' actions. He cited another investigation in which the group used gun data collected by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to sue dealers found to

be selling guns to straw buyers.

"The New York City Police Department went to the ATF, traced data, turned that traced data over to private investigators, violated federal law and interfered in 18 ongoing criminal investigations," Keane said. "The ATF had to pull agents out of the field because they were placed at risk."

Marc La Vorgna, a spokesman for the New York City mayor's office, called the allegation "a false, tired claim that has been directly refuted by the ATF. And the courts have validated that our investigations were legal."

The ATF did not respond to a request for comment.

Opponents of the mayors' efforts also have seized on a U.S. Justice Department program code-named Fast and Furious to discredit sting operations. Beginning in 2009, the ATF, investigating a gun-trafficking network in Arizona and Mexico, supplied 2,000 illegal guns they hoped to trace through the system so they could catch the leaders. Instead they lost track of hundreds of the guns. In 2010, two of the weapons were found near the Arizona site where Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry was shot to death.

Last week Attorney General Eric Holder was called before a congressional committee for a second time to explain how the program went bad. He repeated that senior Justice Department and ATF officials had not known about the operation until it was over.

## Real change

Mayors Against Illegal Guns members say they are not trying to take guns away from legal owners, just to close loopholes that allow criminals to get guns and move

them around undetected.

"It's a serious safety issue," said Margaret Stock, the Democratic mayor of Butler, Pa., a town of 13,000 where Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum spent part of his childhood. "If an officer gets shot with an illegal gun, I'm responsible."

Butler is in a sparsely populated area of western Pennsylvania where the first day of deer hunting season is often a school holiday.

"We're a big hunting community, but this is illegal handguns, it's a totally different issue," Stock said. "I had a little bit of backlash from local members of the NRA that I was somehow anti-gun. That was not the intent of the coalition."

Mayors Against Illegal Guns' efforts have spurred some change. In 2008, Wal-Mart signed a voluntary 10-point code of conduct the group developed for gun sellers. It includes videotaping the area of a store where guns are sold, setting up a computerized gun tracing and alert system and performing background checks on its employees.

Mayors Against Illegal Guns claims on its website that "four out of the seven gun shows and venues" identified in the 2009 investigation "have changed their practices."

No one thinks gun control is going to be the most important issue in 2012, but there are specific races and constituencies where it will matter.

One such race is northwestern Arkansas, where Ken Aden, a 33-year-old Iraq War veteran, is challenging his former battalion commander for a congressional seat.

Aden is running as a progressive Democrat; his Republican opponent, Steve Womack, is a freshman incumbent, part of the tea party sweep of the 2010 midterm elections.

Aden, who has met with House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi and other party officials in Washington, has strong views on guns. He collects them and says he knows what they can do.

When Aden was 16, his father was shot and killed by his stepmother in a domestic dispute, using his father's .357 Magnum handgun and his shotgun. The shooting was ruled a justifiable homicide, Aden says; his stepmother has since died.

"We've got to keep guns out of the wrong hands," Aden said.

He supports the background checks mandated by the 1993 Brady Handgun Violence Preven-

tion Act and has pledged in his platform to "fight to make sure that dangerous assault rifles and ammunition with no practical purpose in hunting, self-protection or sport shooting ... stay off our streets."

Womack has co-sponsored several pieces of legislation aiming to reinforce Second Amendment rights, including a bill that would force states to honor other states' permits to carry concealed weapons.

"New, more stringent gun laws will not keep guns out of the hands of criminals," Womack told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette after the Giffords shooting.

"Rather, proper enforcement of our current laws will provide the necessary mechanisms to ensure the well-being of the American people."

The NRA is telling supporters that President Barack Obama will outlaw guns in a second term by appointing Supreme Court justices to reverse the Heller and McDonald decisions.

The White House denies any such goal.

"The real threat to the Second Amendment is the re-election of President Obama," LaPierre said.

## Swing voters

Democratic strategist Celinda Lake, who has spent many years polling on gun issues, said her data suggest two audiences will be open to gun-control measures in the 2012 elections: Latinos and suburban women.

Her firm, Lake Research Partners, conducted a poll in late October for Mayors Against Illegal Guns that found 76 percent of Latinos supported a new program requiring gun dealers in border states to report when someone attempts to buy more than one semi-automatic rifle within a five-day period.

Suburban women, Lake said, who are known to be swing voters, want guns kept out of their neighborhoods.

Bloomberg is keeping a close eye on elections all around the country. He has backed six candidates for Virginia's Senate with contributions of \$25,000 each, and he might give to more candidates.

Feinblatt said Mayors Against Illegal Guns had not identified congressional candidates it wanted to support, but, he added: "We're always watching."

Edith Honan contributed.