

Has Public Opinion Really Changed Regarding Gun Control?

By Kenneth Rapoza

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Gun control took a back seat to Mark Rubio's water break and increases in the minimum wage, but President Barack Obama said victims of gun violence deserve a vote on assault weapons during Tuesday's State of the Union.

Americans may be more willing to accept gay marriage these days at the polls, but on a couple hot button issues, the country remains as divided as ever.

Over the last several years, the only social issues that seemed to matter to voters were whether gays should be allowed to marry, or whether or not the Supreme Court should overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the law that made abortion legal. Today, the biggest social issue is gun violence, and the Second Amendment right that allows Americans to own all kinds of guns, including powerful military style carbines like the Smith & Wesson M&P15 semi-automatic and Bushmasters used in recent public shootings.

The National Rifle Association surely didn't make guns front and center. And, arguably, neither did Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Gun violence stepped onto center stage on Dec. 1, when Kansas City Chiefs Linebacker Jovan Belcher shot his girlfriend, Kassandra Perkins, to death after returning home in a drunken stupor. The next day, Belcher turned the same gun on himself and committed suicide in front of his coaches. Sports talk radio couldn't get enough of the story, and then on Sunday Night Football Dec. 2, long-time sports commentator Bob Costas blamed the mix of sports and gun culture for what went down the night before. Quoting a former Kansas City Star sports columnist named Jason Whitlock, Costas said that "hand guns do not enhance our safety. They exacerbate our flaws. If Jovan Belcher didn't possess a gun, he and Kassandra Perkins would both be alive today."

The right wing media went into a frizzy. Fox News radio firebrands called for Bob Costas to be fired. Our gun debate was off and running after a long pause from a summer shooting spree at a Colorado movie theater.

Ironically, Whitlock was the one critical about guns. Costas just repackaged his words and put them in front of a larger audience. And, even more ironically, Whitlock works for Fox Sports.

For what it's worth, the sports world got America talking about guns after a six month hiatus from the subject. We seem to care about gun violence only when it is a media spectacle, and that always requires a huge body count. Belcher's murder-suicide wasn't a massacre, but it made gun violence the water cooler talk for nearly every man, and surely every sports fan, in the United States.

The massacre came two weeks later, on Dec. 14, in Newtown, Conn., the Sandy Hook Elementary School murder-suicide took the gun story from the sports talk to everybody talk. And now as a result of Sandy Hook, Americans are clamoring for something to be done about assault weapons.

With a ban at least appearing imminent, Americans from Maine to Texas are rushing to buy Bushmasters.

Looked at over a period of time, Americans view on gun control remains rather stagnant. In fact, opinions on gun control from 1993 to 2012 show that it's nearly a dead heat between those who want to control gun ownership, and those who want to protect it.

At the start of the Bill Clinton administration in 1993, 57 percent of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center said it was very

important to control gun ownership. That rose to a whopping 66 percent in favor of stricter gun control by the time he left office in 2000. It remained relatively stable even throughout the eight years of President George W. Bush.

Only when Obama took over did the mood start to change. It went from 60 percent in favor of gun control to just 49 percent. In 2012, it was a minority of 47 percent in favor of stricter gun laws and 46 percent in favor of the status quo.

Recent gun violence have had little impact in swaying the public, despite the outrage at the time of their occurrence.

Shortly after the "Batman shooting" in Aurora, Colo on July 20, 2012, a minority 48 percent wanted stricter gun control and 52 percent wanted to protect gun owners' rights in a poll taken a week after the movie theater shooting that killed 12 people watching a midnight viewing of "The Dark Knight Rises". While that interest in gun control did rise from a similar poll taken in April of that same year, it rose from around 45 percent in favor of stricter gun laws.

Polls can be tricky. We're a fickle bunch. A lot depends on the questioning.

According to a series of CBS News polls asking if gun control laws should be made more strict, less strict or stay the same, 53 percent said it should be more strict when asked in the first week of February. That number remained within the margin of error from a similar poll taken in the first two weeks of January by CBS, with 54 percent saying they were in favor of stricter gun laws. Just after Sandy Hook, those in favor was 59 percent.

It's been falling ever since.

If this keeps up, Americans will likely be where they were in April 2012, when only 39 percent said gun laws should be stronger; 41 percent said they should be kept as they are and 13 percent said they should be loosened further.

Guns n' Babies

Aside from the recent debate on assault weapons, America's long time favorite social issue is abortion. According to a recent NBC News/WSJ poll, more Americans are in favor of keeping *Roe v. Wade* in tact.

The poll has 70 percent of Americans saying they're against overturning *Roe v. Wade*, including 57 percent who said they felt strongly about it. The numbers polled in favor of keeping the status quo is up from the 58 percent who felt that way in 1989; 60 percent who said so in 2002; and 66 percent in 2005. According to the poll, only 24 percent want the *Roe v. Wade* decision scrapped.

That doesn't mean Americans like abortion. They don't. And increasingly so.

When asked if to describe themselves as pro-life or pro-choice, those who say they are pro-life has risen since the Clinton years. In 1995, just 33 percent of those polled described themselves as pro-life. It rose to 50 percent as of 2012. By the same token, 56 percent said they were pro-choice in 1995, falling to 41 percent currently.

1040 words

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