

The Impact of NRA on the American Policy

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine to what extent the National Rifle Association (NRA) has an impact on federal and state policies in the United States of America. The study examined the NRA's political activities within the last 10 years. The political activities include lobbying methods, campaign spending, maintenance plans, and bills lobbied at legislative, executive, and judicial levels. The NRA was founded over 144 years. The NRA's mission is to promote public safety, train members of law enforcement agencies, adopt and encourage the shooting sports, and to promote hunter safety. The research results showed that the NRA operates at over \$250 million a year, and most of the money is spent on ads, lobbying, and Political Action Committees. The research concluded that the primary source of power for the NRA is its 5 million dedicated members. The NRA's members are engaged in the political arena and feel passionate about their gun rights. The NRA has also a strong access to policy makers; they have hired former legislators and government officials, since they can use their friendships and personal connections to gain access to policy makers. The NRA is a powerful organization and has influenced the outcome of state, local, and national elections; however, their power has a limit, as they are still abided by the laws.

Keywords: Lobbying; Interest group; Political science; National rifle association

Introduction

Interest groups are defined as collections of people who share the same self-interest, and work collectively to promote and protect their interest through a political process by influencing the government [1]. James Madison defined interest groups in Federalist #10 as groups work together to protect their common political, social or economic interests. Holyoke [1] clarified that the act of attempting to influence the decisions made by the government is defined as lobbying. Since the late 1800s, the number of interest groups has increased rapidly due to many reasons, such as economic developments, government policy, religious movements, and enhancement in communication methods. Interest groups may represent social causes, trades, or professions.

The interest group that I would like to research is the National Rifle Association (NRA).

The purpose of this research is to examine to what extent the NRA has an impact on federal and state policies in the United States of America. Using an action research method, the study examined the NRA's political activities within the last 10 years. The political activities include lobbying methods, campaign spending, maintenance plans, and bills lobbied at legislative, executive, and judicial levels.

The NRA is an American non-profit organization that advocates for gun rights. The organization was founded in 1871-144 years ago. The association headquarters is in Fairfax VA. The founders of the organization are William Conant Church, and George Wood Wingate. The focus of the group is firearm ownership rights, political advocacy, and publishing [2]. The organization has many subsidiaries, such as the NRA Civil Rights Defense Fund, and the NRA Freedom Action Foundation. The NRA Institute for Legislative Action (ILA) is considered the lobbying arm for NRA. The organization's revenue as of 2012 was \$256 million. The association claims that it has more than 5 million members. The NRA's website states that the association's mission is protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, promote public safety, train members of law enforcement agencies, adopt and encourage the shooting sports, and to promote hunter safety [2].

Lobbying

There is a difference between lobbyists and interest groups. As explained above, lobbyists are the professionals who are hired by interest groups to represent their interest to government officials. Most lobbyists started their careers in government agencies; consequently, lobbyists will often use their experience and knowledge about the internal system to get the job done. Lobbyists' objective is to find ways to persuade and pressure policy makers into acting on their behalf [1]. Interest groups engage both direct and indirect lobbying in order to accomplish their objectives.

Direct lobbying refers to the communications with lawmakers with intentions to influence them to take a position on special legislation. Meeting with legislators or their staff to discuss a specific legislation is considered a form of direct lobbying. Campaign contribution is also considered a form of direct lobbying. Indirect lobbying, on the other hand, is an attempt to influence policy makers by depending on an external factor, such as the public. This occurs by influencing the public to affect their opinion with respect to a specific legislation. When lobbyists send an action alert to the public asking them to contact their legislators about a pending bill, this is considered a form of indirect lobbying.

The NRA goes to a great length and spends a large amount of money on lobbying to defend the Constitution – the right to bear arms. In 2013, the NRA spent on lobbying \$3,410,000, while in 2014, it spent \$3,360,000 [3]. The top issues that the NRA lobbied during 2014 included, but not limited to, firearms, guns and ammunition, federal budget and appropriations, civil rights and civil liberties, natural resources, and taxes. The open secrets website also indicated

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that during the 2014 election cycle, the outside spending for the NRA was \$28,212,718; outside spending usually refers to ads and off-record spending. Over 15 million dollars off that outside spending amount was lobbied against democrats, and \$24,262 was lobbied for democrats; and almost 11 million dollars were lobbied for the republicans, while 92,034 was lobbied against republicans [3].

Lobbying techniques and influence

In order for interest groups to be effective, they follow different techniques. Gaining access to legislators is one of the most effective lobbying techniques used by lobbyists. One technique that interest groups practice is to hire former legislators and government officials, since they can use their friendships and personal connections to gain access to policy makers. Holyoke [2] explained that relationship building is simply an investment for lobbyists. The CEO and Executive Vice President of the NRA, Wayne LaPierre, was actually a legislative aide to a democratic Virginia delegate before joining NRA. Recently, telecommunications companies just hired 267 former government officials to lobby both the Congress and the executive branch to rewrite telecom law - former Senator Don Nickles was hired to lobby for Comcast. It is clear that interest groups hire former politicians to strength their lobbying efforts [4].

One lobbying technique that the NRA practices is creating a separate organization to lobby on its behalf. The Institute for Legislative Action (ILA), for example, is the lobbying arm for the NRA and it is in charge of the association’s political Action Committee (PAC). The ILA was established in 1975, and ever since then, they have played an influential role in passing and stopping many bills; furthermore, NRA-ILA has influenced the outcome of state, local, and national elections. In fact, in 1994, President Clinton attributed to the NRA’s influence the historic Republican Party takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The ILA is becoming a very powerful and it has influenced policy on many occasions [5]. In 2012, the ILA used its influence in Florida to push through a legislation that would punish doctors if they ask patients, whether they have guns [6]. Another example that reflects the ILA’s power is lobbying successfully against the House bill number S. 34 S. 34: Denying Firearms and Explosives to Dangerous Terrorists Act of 2011. The bill summary stated that “A bill to increase public safety by permitting the Attorney General to deny the transfer of firearms or the issuance of firearms and explosives licenses to known or suspected dangerous terrorists.” The NRA clarified that they opposed the bill

because legitimate individual will not be able to inquire a firearm even if they were placed on the FBI watch list by mistake.

The NRA also has advantage over other interest groups - they focus on emotion of their members by pushing them to persistently pursue their legislators. Creativity to increase revenue is another technique that the NRA utilizes to create revenue, so it can be used to lobby for their interests. For example, the NRA created its own gun magazines, gun shops, and gun clubs across the country. The association uses these magazines as an advertisement to spread its message across the country.

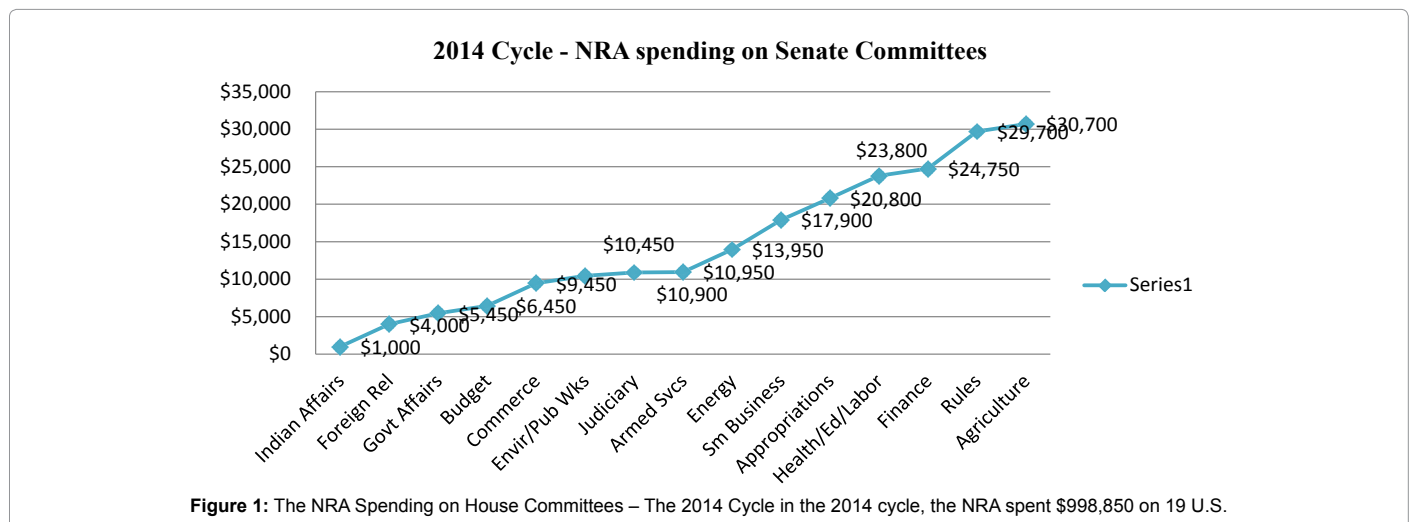
Pressure point in the political process is another technique or method the NRA relies on to pressure policy makers. The legislative branch, for example, has many pressor points that attract lobbyists. There are 535 members of Congress, and they all have the power to introduce legislation or raise new ideas in committees. The House of Representatives and the Senate are divided into committees and subcommittees, where the new laws are typically started – The NRA-ILA uses these committees as a pressure point to influence policies.

Congressional committees

The Congressional committees appear to attract lobbyists the most-about 31 percent of lobbyists have regular contract with committee legislators [1]. The sub-committees are natural targets simply because they are the start place of legislations. Each of these subcommittees has exclusive jurisdiction over some area of the public policy. For example, there is a subcommittee on water and power, which deals with natural resources; the subcommittee members have power over all bills for building new dams and canals. The lobbyists that represent interest groups will simply go after these subcommittees’ members to influence policy makers and try to draft a policy that is in favor of their interest groups.

In the 2014 cycle, the NRA’s total lobbying expenditures was 3,360,000. In the 2014 cycle, the NRA spent \$220,250 on 15 U.S. Senate committees. The agriculture committee received the most lobbying money, followed by the rules, finance, and health committees. Figure 1 illustrates the lobbying spending per committee during the 2014 cycle. Figure 1 shows that the Indian affairs, foreign relation, and government affairs committees received the least.

In the 2014 cycle, the NRA spent \$998,850 on 19 U.S. House committees. Surprisingly, the House Agriculture committee, again, received the most lobbying fund - \$95,100. Figure 2 illustrates



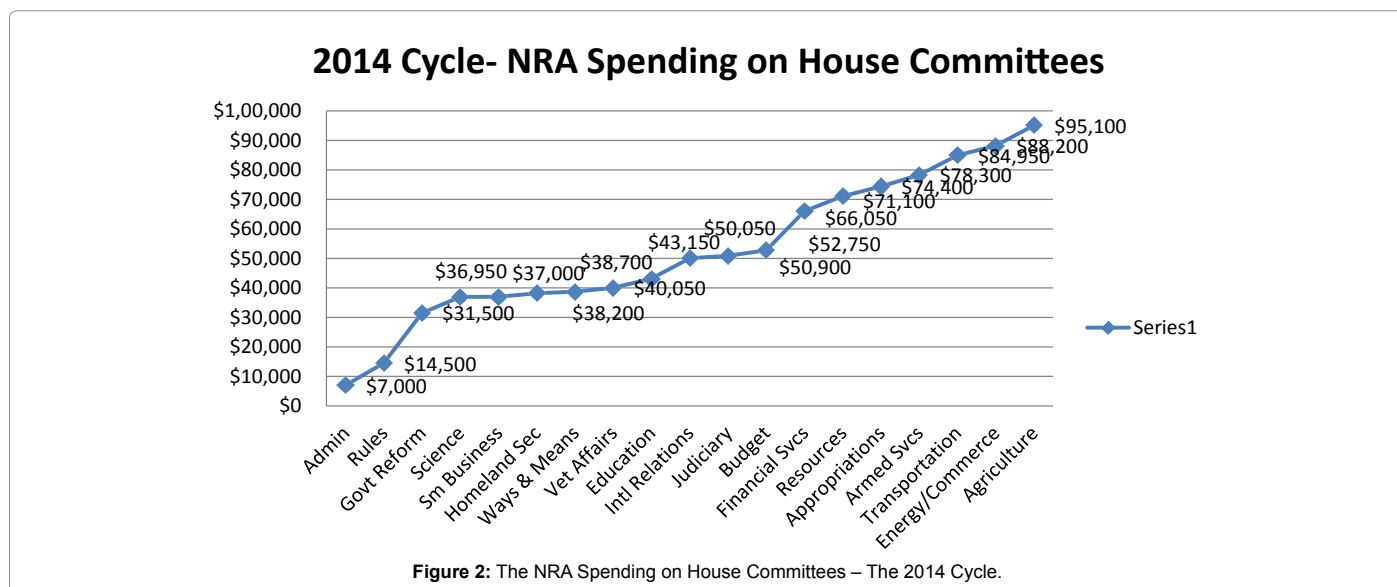


Figure 2: The NRA Spending on House Committees – The 2014 Cycle.

the lobbying spending per committee during the 2014 cycle. The agriculture, energy, transportation, and armed services committees received the most. The admin, rules, government reform, and science committees received the least lobbying fund.

Lobbying at the congress

Congressional lobbying or legislation lobbying is simply lobbying with intention to target legislators or policy makers directly or indirectly. Holyoke [1] explained that lobbyists target policy makers, study them, and learn about their interest, and then target them based on these attributes. Smith et al. [7] explained that some interest groups use a method called “Killing the legislation” as a presser point that gives them power over legislators. Holyoke [1] agreed with Smith et al. [7] that interest groups do use pitfalls to kill bills and they use this technique as a tool to influence policy makers.

Table 1 illustrates the amount of money contributed to congressional candidates by the NRA during the 2014 Cycle. The table shows that the Republicans received \$769,662, while the Democrats received only \$40,800.

Kahane [8] conducted a study based on an econometric model to analyze the political and economic factors affecting the Senate voting patterns on the 1993 Brady Bill and the assault weapons ban. The study results indicated that the political activities, presence, and contributions of the National Rifle Association had a significant impact on the voting patterns by the Senators. Similarly, Price et al. [9] conducted a study to evaluate the relationship between Congressional voting on firearm control legislation and political affiliation, military services, geographic location of representation, education level, sex, and gun control contributions. The study used Congressional voting records from the 103-106 Congresses regarding firearm control legislation. The study found that over \$6 million was donated to members of Congress, over \$5 million to members of the House, and about \$1 million to members of the senate by groups concerned with firearm legislation. The study concluded that there is a strong and consistent relationship between a Congressional member’s position on firearm legislation and the amount of money received, political affiliation, and geographic location of representation [9].

In the 2012 Election Cycle, the NRA contributed to candidates

Dems:	\$40,800
Republicans:	\$769,662
Others:	\$0
Incumbents:	\$635,500
Non-Incumbents:	\$174,962

Table 1: Money to the Congressional Candidates during the 2014 Cycle.

Dems:	\$126,650
Repubs:	\$883,687
Others:	\$0
Incumbents:	\$843,337
Non-Incumbents:	\$167,000

Table 2: Money to Congressional Candidates during the 2012 Cycle.

\$1,022,237; contributions to leadership PACs was \$61,700; and contributions to parties, on the other hand was \$104,505 [3]. Table 2 illustrates the amount of money contributed to congressional candidates by the NRA during the 2012 Cycle. The table shows that the Republicans received \$883,687, while the Democrats received only \$126,650.

Bills lobbied at congress

In 2014, the NRA lobbied for 102 House and Senate bills [3]. Appendix A lists the bill numbers, the Congress year, and the title of the bills. The top issues those bills addressed were firearms, guns & ammunition, federal budget & appropriations, and civil rights & civil liberties. During the 2014 cycle, the NRA relied on a total of 29 lobbyists to lobby for those bills. Some of the lobbying firms that NRA hired include Crossroads Strategies, Barnes & Thornburg, Cauthern, Forbes and Williams, and S-3 group.

Senate bill number S.374 addressed Fix Gun checks Act of 2013. In addition to the NRA, 23 other organizations registered to lobby on this

bill. Some of those organizations included Safari Club International, AARP, Gun Owners of America, and Dick's Sporting Goods. The bill description stated "a bill to ensure that all individuals who should be prohibited from buying a firearm are listed in the national instant criminal background check system and require a background check for every firearm sale." [10].

Another popular bill that was lobbied by the NRA during the 2014 Congress cycle is Manchin-Toomey Amendment to S. 649, the firearms bill. The purpose of the bill is "To protect Second Amendment rights, ensure that all individuals who should be prohibited from buying a firearm are listed in the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, and provide a responsible and consistent background check process" [10]. The senate rejected expanded gun background checks. Waldman [11] explained that the Democrats blamed the failure of their bill on the NRA "lies" about a background check plan from Senates. The NRA said the bill would have infringed on Second Amendment rights, and promised to score votes in favor of the measure against senators [2].

NRA and the executive branch

Lobbying at the executive branch level is a target for interest groups and lobbyists because of the significant resources and the access level to the political and technical information. Hoyoke [1] explained that 26% of lobbyists contact the executive branch regularly; however, they are less visible than how they lobby the United States Congress.

Michael et al. [11] argued that the NRA has the power to elect the United States president. Waldman argued that in 2000, the NRA played an influential role in getting President Bush elected; as a result, the former attorney general then, John Ashcroft, reversed the Department of Justice's position on firearm [11]. The NRA has also been targeting an executive department, the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) through litigation [12]. The NRA funded lawsuits against ATF over new border-states gun regulations calling the regulations "bait and switch scheme." Chris Cox, the executive director of the NRA's Institute of Legislative Action stated that "This is a bait-and-switch scheme by an administration and a bureau frantically trying to distract lawmakers and the general public from the deadly 'Fast and Furious' debacle," [13]. Winkler [13] explained that the NRA appears to be upset due to fact that gun vendors in those border-states are now required to report purchases of two or more rifles, and purchases of multiple high caliber rifles, within 5 days.

The NRA has targeted the executive branch as they advocated anti-Obama ads [11]. In fact, during the 2012 presidential campaign, Chris Cox, an NRA executive stated "Today we live in an America led by a president who mocks our values, belittles our faith, and is threatened by our freedom. So on behalf of the four million men and women of the National Rifle Association, representing tens of millions of NRA supporters, it is my honor to announce the NRA's endorsement of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan." [2].

Lobbying at the judicial branch

At the Judicial level, lobbying can be done through *amicus curiae* and indirect lobbying. The United States courts usually allow and welcome interest groups or interested parties with demonstrated stake in the outcome of a case to file briefs [1]. The NRA lobbies indirectly by massive advertisement ads and through its magazines, clubs, and ads against politicians that support gun control. *Amicus curiae*, on the other hand, occur at the court level, as high courts often want to hear cases of profound importance to the nation.

District of Columbia v. Heller [14] is a perfect example of how the National Rifle Association lobbying substantially impacted the policy by using both *amicus curiae* and indirect lobbying. The issue started by one local resident, Mr. Heller, [13] who wanted to have a gun in the District of Columbia, where personal guns were not allowed. Mr. Heller filed a course case and won, however, the DC government appealed the court's decision. The DC circuit court, again, favored Mr. Heller's right to own guns, and determined that handguns are considered arms and may not be banned in the District of Columbia. The District of Columbia government appealed the decision, this time to the U.S. Supreme Court. The NRA managed to get as many as 46 additional interest groups whose members were deeply interested in the second amendment, gun ownership, and public safety issues, involved and fought with Mr. Heller. Forty-seven groups filed *amicus* briefs supporting Heller. Majority of congressmen and senators, including Senator John McCain also filed briefs to support Mr. Heller [11]. In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that 'based on this understanding, the Court held that a District of Columbia law banning handgun possession in the home violated the second amendment' [11].

At the State level, NRA has also been very active in filing *amicus* pray to share its concern about firearms. In 2012, the NRA weighed in on the state firearms preemption case of Calguns Foundation, Inc. vs. County of San Mateo. The Calguns Foundation challenged San Mateo county ordinance that bans the position of firearms in county parks and recreation area, without providing an exception for people licensed to carry handguns in public. The NRA, in return, filled *amicus curiae* brief to the court with two preemption arguments that the county's ordinance is preempted and invalid (NRA, 2015). The NRA also stated that they believe the state implicitly occupies the entire legal system of regulating carry licensing and regulations, not the county. The NRA concluded "the state has impliedly occupied the entire field of Carry License issuing and regulation and County Ordinance section 3.68.080 is thus preempted by state law." [2].

PACs

Political Action Committee (PAC) is a popular term for political committees focusing on raising fund for elected candidates. In 1944, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) created a special new Political Action Committee to contribute to Roosevelt's reelection - they succeeded. Ever since then, PAC became the common name for all such campaign funding organizations. Per the United States federal campaign law, an organization becomes a PAC, when it receives or spends more than \$2600 for the purpose of influencing a federal election [15]. A PAC is allowed to give no more than \$5,000 to a candidate committee per election [3].

Super PACs are new types of PAC and they are independent political committees that support candidates with unlimited, and often anonymous, donations from unions, individuals, and companies [16]. Super PACs run ads, send mail or communications, and conduct large advertisements complain to advocate the election of a specific candidate [3]. Unlike PACs, there is no limit or restrictions on the sources of funds that are used for expenditures by Super PACs. During the 2013, the NRA Institute for Legislative Action spent \$7,448,189 as a form of independent expenditures.

Langbein [17] noted that the PAC contributions from the NRA, as well as lobbying by Handgun Control, Inc. significantly affected Congressional voting on the Firearms Owners Protection Act of 1986. Langbein [17] went further to explain that the PAC contributions have different affect than lobbying. Langbein [17] study concluded that

money is more likely to mobilize supporters than it is to discharge strong opponents. The NRA contributions to gun controllers had only minimal effect on their vote, while the NRA donations to pro-gun clearly prevented many from switching away from a pure pro-gun position [17].

Maintenance Plan

Many researchers believe that the NRA is one of the most powerful interest groups/PACs in the United States. The NRA understands that in order to be successful and powerful, there must be a maintenance plan. While NRA does not advertise or claim such a plan, their action states otherwise. The NRA understands that in order to be successful, they must have a lobbying arm, must have access to policy makers, must have money, and increase the number of members as much as possible. Dautrich et al. [18] argued that the size of the membership and the wealth of the members of the interest groups do matter and increase interest groups' success.

In addition to NRA's PAC, they also have created a separate firm as its own lobbying arm – the Institute for Legislative Action. The institute was established in 1975. The Institute for Legislative Action is a very powerful lobbying arm and it operates as a non-profit institute for legislative action. The firm lobbies for new laws and run campaign ads [19]. The institute also maintains a staff of lobbyists to support pro-gun legislation, and runs most of the election operations for the organization. The NRA-ILA plays a very influential role in legislations; the institute continuously recruiting congressional allies to push their goals through. The institute focuses on establishing a circle of friends with legislators, so they can have access to lawmaking process. Thanks to ILA's lobbyists, with their help, they managed to pass and stop 100s of bills that align with their firearm beliefs.

An interest group with a large number of members can increase its power and influence. Dautrich [18] argued that large membership alone makes elected leaders responsive to a group's concerns. One advantage that the NRA has over many other interest groups is that its members are devoted to the cause and are politically engaged and active. The large membership (nearly 5 millions) is granting the NRA the leading edge to gain in negotiation ability and funds from membership dues [19]. It is clear that the members' progressiveness and engagement in the political arena is the most powerful cause of the organization's success [20].

Money is power and the NRA understands that. The NRA operates on a budget of quarter of a billion dollars. The organization has total

assets worth \$163 million. The NRA uses this money on lobbying, PACs, runs ads for policy makers that their interest aligns with theirs, and runs ads against policy makers that are not pro-gun. In 2013, the NRA-ILA spent over 8 million on 70 federal election candidates [3]. Since 1990, the NRA has spent almost 22 million as contribution to Republicans and Democrats. The association also spent almost \$20 million on PACs. Table 3 illustrates the amount of spending on democrats, republicans, individuals, and PACs from 1990 to 2015.

Conclusion

The NRA was founded in 1871. They have been existing for over 144 years. Their annual revenue is more than a quarter of a billion dollars. By far, the NRA is considered one of the most powerful interest groups in the history of the United States. The NRA is a very power organization for many reasons. It has money, it has over 5 million members, and it employees experienced lobbyists who have access to policy makers. One technique that the NRA practices is to hire former legislators and government officials, since they can use their friendships and personal connections to gain access to policy makers; therefore, I can comfortably say that the NRA will remain successful for many years to come.

NRA has a noble mission, which is to promote public safety, train members of law enforcement agencies, adopt and encourage the shooting sports, and to promote hunter safety; however, where they stand on gun controls is a subject of controversy to many people, including policy makers. The NRA believes that owning a gun is their Constitutional right, and should not be controlled; many others (majority democrats) argue that guns can be allowed, but need to be controlled, in terms of knowing the individual's mental background and criminal record, prior to issuing a gun, so the public safety can be assured.

NRA's lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action, was established in 1975, and ever since then, it has been very successful by influencing the gun control policies in the United States. The institute has lobbied for 100s of bills, and it has played an influential role in passing and stopping many bills; furthermore, the NRA-ILA has influenced the outcome of state, local, and national elections. The NRA played a role in 1994 Congressional elections; President Clinton attributed to the NRA, the influence of the historic Republican Party takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994. The NRA has been successfully lobbying at all government branches and federal agencies. In 2000, the NRA played an influential rule in getting

Cycle	Total	Democrats	Republicans	Individuals	PACs	Soft (Indivs)	Soft (Orgs)
2016	\$252,975	\$1,000	\$251,475	\$47,325	\$204,650	\$1,000	\$0
2014	\$984,152	\$41,300	\$937,852	\$13,952	\$965,200	\$0	\$5,000
2012	\$1,190,442	\$130,650	\$1,059,792	\$46,205	\$1,141,737	\$500	\$0
2010	\$1,429,010	\$379,150	\$1,044,360	\$7,760	\$1,417,750	\$0	\$0
2008	\$1,230,237	\$243,805	\$985,432	\$13,150	\$1,215,862	\$0	\$225
2006	\$1,085,625	\$148,288	\$933,037	\$4,700	\$1,076,625	\$0	\$0
2004	\$1,273,847	\$161,096	\$1,062,451	\$11,248	\$1,212,299	\$0	\$0
2002	\$1,579,710	\$168,850	\$1,408,562	\$5,750	\$1,352,616	\$221,344	\$0
2000	\$3,236,600	\$252,750	\$2,976,900	\$11,900	\$1,735,478	\$350	\$1,488,872
1998	\$2,086,411	\$285,700	\$1,800,711	\$4,300	\$1,732,111	\$0	\$350,000
1996	\$1,714,396	\$265,700	\$1,448,696	\$1,200	\$1,625,471	\$0	\$87,725
1994	\$2,235,238	\$444,769	\$1,790,469	\$500	\$1,931,238	\$0	\$303,500
1992	\$1,782,346	\$661,042	\$1,116,304	\$700	\$1,781,646	\$0	\$0
1990	\$1,846,096	\$648,642	\$1,192,454	\$0	\$1,846,096	N/A	N/A
Total	\$21,927,085	\$3,832,742	\$18,008,495	\$168,690	\$19,238,779	\$223,194	\$2,235,322

Table 3: The NRA Spending from 1990 to 2016 – Source of information is opensecrets.org.

President Bush elected. In 2008, the NRA assisted Mr. Heller [14] to win his case of attaining a gun in the District of Columbia restriction. In 2012, the NRA sued the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives over new border-states gun regulations. Due to the NRA's skilled lobbyists and the large account of money they possess, they can run campaign ads, spend money for direct lobbying, and mobilize the public to force policy makers to change position on certain issues. The institute for Legislative Action has contributed to NRA's success and will be a reason for the organization to remain successful for many years to come.

I would argue that NRA is powerful, but not too powerful. They can run ads, spend money on elections, and try to influence the public on certain issues, but they cannot enact laws. Congress is the only entity that can enact laws; furthermore, the United States Constitution warrants a check and balance system to ensure that the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the government have some measures of influence over each other's, so they may choose to block processes of other branches.

While I am not a supporter of the NRA, I have to respect them for what they do and what they stand for. While I agree on many of their views on public safety and training citizens on the proper way of handling firearms, I disagree with their position on getting background check prior to issuing a gun. In short, the NRA is a powerful organization that managed to remain successful for many years due to its focused leadership, dedicated members, and the techniques they follow to gain access to policy makers. While the organization is successful and has influenced the firearm policies in United States, they still have a limit, as they are still abided by the laws.

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