

Obama and the NRA's Waning Influence

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Today, President Obama [released](#) a broad and multifaceted plan to address issues of gun safety. This proposal all but ensures that the fight for stronger gun safety regulations is likely to be one of the major political stories of 2013. Over the coming weeks and months, the president's proposals will be debated extensively in congress, the media and the blogosphere. Moreover, it is likely that the passage of any new gun laws will be met by legal challenges later.

Although there are several different dynamics surrounding the coming fight over the president's proposals, one significant way this is being framed is as a fight between the Obama White House and the NRA. The NRA is an extremely powerful interest group in Washington, but like many interest groups it's power depends heavily on keeping a low profile and maintaining relatively strong popular support, or more accurately, drawing only limited opposition. Accordingly, the NRA is much better positioned for a behind the scenes strategy where policy decisions are made at congressional committee hearings and various regulatory agencies than a legislative fight involving the media and mobilized citizens groups.

In recent weeks, the NRA has demonstrated that while it has done many things well over the years, including having a name that evokes old fashioned guns used for hunting rather than semi-automatic weapons, a paid media campaign with the tagline "I'm the NRA" that is one of the most memorable in history and years of stressing the importance of gun safety, the organization is not good at all at speaking with the media or proposing appropriate solutions to the problems that the president and others would like to address.

Proposals such as [putting an armed security guard](#) in every classroom which is being advocated by the NRA or even [arming teachers](#), which has been proposed by numerous people with connections, or good relations with the NRA are the kind of ideas that undoubtedly help mobilize NRA supporters but seem at best implausible to anybody who has been inside a classroom. These types of ideas only underscore the measures to which the NRA is willing to go to avoid limiting access to guns.

Presumably, the NRA has taken these positions as a way to stake out a bargaining position while continuing to mobilize supporters. This is the precisely the kind of strategy that is designed for a more discreet behind the scenes campaign. Asserting that putting a security guard in every classroom is a rational way to combat gun violence is a good way to demonstrate that your organization is poised to negotiate aggressively. However, it undermines the credibility of the NRA and for many Americans shows the organization to be, at best, unrealistic and insensitive.

Obama's decision to propose broad legislative changes aimed at reducing gun violence is a good and timely one for a range of reasons. First the proposal, which [would require](#) background checks for gun sales, ban the sale of armor piercing bullets, limit ammunition magazines to ten round and more reflects sound thinking in an attempt to address a very serious problem.

Additionally, Obama's proposal indicates that the president is not afraid, at least in this one case, to take on a powerful interest group. Had President Obama failed to propose something this strong it would have been evidence of the influence and power wielded by the NRA. Given how politically savvy Obama usually is, his decision to move forward in this way probably indicates that it is the view of the White House that public opinion is changing on gun issues and heretofore all powerful groups like the NRA are seeing their influence wane.

The NRA is a great foil for Obama and for advocates of gun legislation generally. As long as one side is proposing things like background checks and restrictions on some specific kinds of bullets while the other is seen as demanding that all teachers start packing heat, those Americans who are undecided or who have conflicting feelings on gun restrictions will largely side with the proponents of more gun safety legislation.

The problem the NRA and their allies now face is not altogether different than the one confronting conservatives more generally. The extremists are shouting down and squeezing out the more moderate and reasonable voices. Thus, the NRA is no longer able to present itself as the voice of sportsmen, hunters and law abiding citizens who want to be able to exercise their rights. Instead it has become and, more importantly, is increasingly seen as, an adjunct of the Tea Party movement noisily calling for arming teachers and for citizens to be able to defend themselves from the tyranny towards which President Obama is allegedly taking the country. This is a very good development for gun safety proponents, and for the supporters of the president. It is possible that the NRA will develop a more relevant strategy, but if the last month or so are any indication, that remains unlikely.