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# Why Understanding the Gun Control Debate Means Understanding Demographics

To understand the peculiar politics of passing gun reform legislation, it's important to understand the link between gun ownership and demography and the increasingly important role that demography plays in voting behavior.

In 1994, the assault weapons ban passed the House 235-195, with 46 Republicans joining 188 Democrats in supporting it. That a bill limiting gun ownership would pass Congress with *forty-six* Republicans is impossible to imagine happening today. In fact, any bill supported by a Democratic president getting more than a handful (if any) Republicans is something of a miracle in this day and age. The near-extinction of the moderate Republican in the ranks of Congress, especially those from the Northeast, is the main culprit.

As important is the decimation of the ranks of the moderate Democrat. Of the 188 Democrats who supported the ban in 1994, 30 lost their seats. Republicans also picked up another 14 seats held by Democrats who supported the ban but didn't run for re-election. By 2000, Democrats had gained back only one-third (14) of those 44 seats.

In short, there was a political "coalition of the willing"--members who were willing to put policy before party--that existed back in the 1990's that no longer exists. Today, ninety-six percent of Democrats sit in districts carried by Obama, while 94 percent of Republicans are in districts carried by Mitt Romney. There is zero incentive for a Republican incumbent to work with a Democrat and vice-versa. Moreover, members who vote against their party can now expect "retribution" in the form of a primary challenge. That kind of enforcement of party purity did not exist in 1994.

Even more important is the degree to which demography--race, gender, and age--has become inexorably linked to political voting patterns.

As National Journal's Ron Brownstein notes, "Obama lost more than three-fifths of non-college whites and whites older than 45; he carried only one-third of non-college white men, the worst performance of any Democratic nominee since Walter Mondale was buried in Ronald Reagan's 1984 landslide." In the House, writes Brownstein, Democrats hold just 31 of the 143 districts in which whites constitute at least 80 percent of the population.Obama's solid victory

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was accomplished by his strong showing with minorities, young voters, and women.

Which brings us to the demographic profile of a gun owner. According to a recent Gallup study, the highest rate of gun ownership was among white, southern, married men at 64 percent. Fifty percent of white men say they own a gun. More than one-third of Americans between the ages of 50 and 64 have a gun in the home.

The lowest rate of gun ownership was among non-married women at 13 percent. Just 21 percent of African Americans, 18 percent of Hispanics and 20 percent of 18-29 year olds say they own a gun.

In other words, the political profile of a gun owner looks a whole lot like the profile of a traditional Republican voter, while that of a non-gun owner looks a lot like a Democratic voter.

What's more, those gun owners/Republicans don't trust the federal government when it comes to the issue of gun ownership.

In a recent CNN/Time poll, fifty-three percent of gun owners, including 72 percent of Republicans, say they feel the federal government is trying to take away their right to own a gun. A Democratic consultant who works with conservative Democratic candidates told me that "rural gun owners think national Democrats look down their noses at gun owners."

All of this makes it very hard for restricting the sale of certain guns or ammunition to get more traction among Republicans in Congress. In a recent Pew Research Center poll, just 44 percent of Republicans said they favored a ban on assault-style weapons.

The Senate may be controlled by Democrats, but there are more Democrats who represent red states than there are Republicans who represent blue ones.

In fact, seven of the eleven states where Obama has the lowest job approval ratings have at least one Democratic Senator: Alaska (Begich), Montana (Tester, Baucus), West Virginia (Manchin, Rockefeller), North Dakota (Heitkamp), and Arkansas (Pryor). In the ten states where Obama has the highest approval ratings, there are no Republican senators.

So, while the President and his former campaign arm, renamed Organizing for Action from Obama for America may be using campaign-style events to pursue his agenda, rallying the "middle" is not particularly effective tool for

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passing legislation. In an era where partisanship drives policy, nothing can pass the GOP-led House or a Senate with plenty of red-state Democrats unless it has the support of Republican voters.

Today, the only restrictions on gun control that have a majority of support from Republicans are background checks for those who buy guns at gun shows as well as laws to prevent mentally ill people from purchasing guns. But, while Democrats may not get everything they want from a final gun bill, the President will get one very important, and increasingly rare, thing: a real bipartisan victory.

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