

Beating the NRA

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the U.S. Senate voted overwhelmingly to end a filibuster of a bipartisan bill that seeks to curb gun violence by expanding the requirements for background checks before purchasing a firearm. Everything that there is to love and hate about democracy is contained in that vote.

Anytime the National Rifle Association loses a vote, it is a great day to be alive. The NRA in recent years has undertaken one of the most poisonous threats to democracy, creating a political advocacy network that expands an extreme, paranoid point of view held only by a few, and devising policy proposals that are rooted in that crazed worldview but which are drawn in such a way that they appeal a much larger group of mostly sane, non-paranoid, people who, for whatever reasons, like owning guns. The NRA has contributed misinformation, whipped up emotions, and brought powerful pressure to bear on the political system, exploiting some of the weaknesses inherent in our constitutional system, such as the greater influence of rural voters over urban voters in the Senate, and the power of the states to redistrict in ways that frustrate majority rule. Yesterday, none of that was enough. Good day.

But, let's be clear. The bipartisan measure that looks headed for adoption in the Senate is a tepid piece of legislation. Background checks will help, but only marginally, in the fight against gun violence. More significant measures, such as restricting the size of magazine clips, or re-enacting the assault weapons ban that was allowed to lapse in 2004, these are not on Congress' agenda anymore. Which is crazy. Critics of the assault weapons ban say it did not work last time. Well, last time, it was on the books for ten years and it was only a ban on purchasing them. It was not retroactive. People still had plenty of assault weapons that had already been sold and guns can remain in workable condition for a long time. The conclusion that the ban did not lead to a decrease in gun violence is, at best, a premature conclusion. And, a ban on the size of magazine clips would have a much more immediate effect: A gun may last a long time, but one goes through the ammunition more quickly.

More importantly, the sources of gun violence are many and varied. I could not get my lawnmower to start the other day. I am pretty sure the carburetor is clogged or something like that, but perhaps it could be the spark plugs, or some other issue. I am not a mechanic. Social phenomena like gun violence are not like lawnmowers. They are complex, causes interact with other causes, effecting both. If your carburetor is working or if it is broken, it does not affect the spark plugs. But, if poverty increases, educational achievement will dip, and gun violence will likely increase. Is it the poverty or the education problems that cause the gun violence? The breakdown of traditional family structures has many and varied causes, but it also contributes to many and varied effects. Unfortunately, when the assault weapons ban came up for renewal in 2004, the NRA convinced enough members of Congress ? and enough voters ? to conclude it had not worked instead of saying, hey, let's try something else in addition.

I am ambivalent about one other aspect of yesterday's vote. The pressure brought to bear on the Senate was decidedly emotional pressure: The families of the Newtown, Connecticut victims met with individual senators

and reduced some to tears. Emotions are fleeting and less permanent than reasoned argument. On the other hand, something profound happened this week. The pro-gun lobby talked about people's rights, and the pro-gun control groups countered with people. In our society, with its commitment to a formal ethic of rights instead of a substantive ethic of the good, it is really hard to beat back an argument that is framed in terms of rights, especially a right that is explicitly mentioned, if greatly misunderstood, in the Constitution. But, yesterday, real people trumped abstract conceptions, and that is always a good thing. Still, when a democracy can only move forward with an emotion-laden argument, I worry.

Democracies are like big ships. They do not turn around quickly. I am hopeful that the 21 senators with an 'A' rating from the NRA who nonetheless voted to end the filibuster will not suffer at the polls for their vote and that they will realize one can stand up to the NRA and still win re-election. Hopefully, at some future date, that will embolden them to take on the NRA when more consequential proposals are being considered. Rome was not built in a day. Yesterday was a good day. But, does anyone else fear, as I do, that all the political capital spent in the past few months has yielded very little in the way of policy? A good day, but not a great day.

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