

Washington's Paper Tiger:
A Look at the NRA's Ineffective Political Spending



By the Office of Senator Chris Murphy
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Introduction

The terrible tragedy that unfolded on December 14th at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut has sparked a national conversation on gun violence prevention. Public policy makers and average Americans alike are contemplating the steps our country can take to prevent a horrible tragedy like this from ever happening again. This period of self-reflection has led some to reverse long-held positions and evaluate whether we are doing everything that we can to protect children from armed gunmen.

Over the last month, many individuals and groups have contributed sensible ideas to this discussion in an effort to make our schools and communities safer. Some have proposed a new and improved assault weapons ban that also prohibits the sale of high-capacity magazines. Others have focused on improvements to our mental health system or on closing loopholes to ensure that all prospective gun owners must pass a background check before getting a gun. President Obama recently announced his recommendations, which includes these items. Despite overtures by many public policy leaders, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has contributed very little to this conversation beyond repeated claims that the way to solve the epidemic of gun violence in America is through the use of more guns. This agenda and the flawed arguments behind it are the same responses that the NRA has had after other mass shootings. The world did not change for the NRA after the horrific attack at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Over the last two decades, the power and the stature of the NRA has reached almost mythical heights. This report, and future ones, will take an in-depth look at the NRA as an organization, the role it plays in our political process, the reality of its members' beliefs, and the disconnect between the NRA's leadership and the views of most NRA members. Contrary to popular belief, the NRA is not a political powerhouse that can unilaterally defeat federal policymakers. In fact, recent political spending by the organization paints a much different picture – one of ineffectiveness and lack of power. For example, previous researchⁱ has shown that the NRA had virtually no impact in the 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010 elections. This report looks at the NRA's spending during the most recent election cycle and includes an appendix of its funding on specific races. In addition, it examines how the organization is essentially an arm of the Republican Party.

Key Findings

- The NRA leadership – based in Washington, DC – has fostered an aura of political invincibility despite their mixed track record. In many ways, the NRA is a paper tiger when it comes to elections.
- For example, according to the Sunlight Foundation, the NRA's Political Victory Fund (the organization's political action committee) got a less than 1 percent return on its \$11 million investment in the 2012 general election. The NRA's lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action, got an 11 percent return on its investment.ⁱⁱ
- Of the NRA's total spending in 2012, it spent over \$10.3 million against President Obama and \$2.7 million in support of Mitt Romney, but this spending did not affect the outcome of the race.

- Of the 16 contested U.S. Senate races in 2012,ⁱⁱⁱ the NRA lost 13 races, for a 19 percent winning percentage.
 - Of the 7 races where the NRA spent money both for Republicans and against Democrats – Wisconsin, Virginia, Ohio, Nevada, Missouri, Michigan and Florida^{iv} – only one NRA-backed candidate won.
 - Of the other 9 races, the NRA spent money for or against only one candidate. Out of these 9 races, the NRA lost 7 races, spending money to support 5 losing candidates^v and opposing 2 winning candidates.^{vi}
- Instead of representing its members, the organization continues to be an extension of the Republican Party. Of the \$18.5 million it spent on the 2012 U.S. Senate and Presidential elections, \$13.2 million, or 72 percent, was spent against Democrats and less than 1 percent was spent supporting Democrats. The majority of the remaining amount (27 percent) was spent in support of Republicans, and only one percent was spent against Republicans.
- NRA endorsements often mean very little since they largely go to Republicans in conservative districts or incumbents who are already more likely to win re-election than a challenger. According to research¹ by Paul Waldman, a Contributing Editor to *The American Prospect*, between 2004 – 2010, 86 percent of NRA House endorsements went to incumbents. For Republican incumbents, an NRA endorsement was almost guaranteed, with endorsement rates at 90 percent or higher in each election cycle within those six years.
- According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the NRA contributed over \$1 million to the political process to candidates and political action committees during the 2012 election cycle and spent \$2.2 million on lobbying efforts in 2012. Over the last 5 years, the NRA has spent almost \$11.5 million on lobbying activities to derail commonsense gun control measures.

Conclusion

The NRA's reputation as an unstoppable force is one of the biggest misperceptions in Washington. As this past election cycle demonstrated, the NRA cannot unilaterally elect or remove policymakers. While the NRA spends substantial money on lobbying and elections, this spending has proven time and time again to be ineffective or unnecessary.

During the debate on how to prevent gun violence, the NRA will inevitably cling to its belief that the only way to prevent gun violence is to inject more guns into our society. Research proves that this is not what the American people want. Members of Congress should not feel beholden to an organization that holds only perceived power and not actual clout.

Appendix

NRA Spending Against Democrats

<u>Office</u>	<u>Candidate</u>	<u>Totals</u>	<u>NRA position</u>	<u>Candidate Outcome</u>
President	Barack Obama	\$10,365,277	Oppose	Won
OH (Senate)	Sherrod Brown	\$891,573	Oppose	Won
FL (Senate)	Bill Nelson	\$626,128	Oppose	Won
VA (Senate)	Tim Kaine	\$612,449	Oppose	Won
MO (Senate)	Claire McCaskill	\$341,934	Oppose	Won
WI (Senate)	Tammy Baldwin	\$326,228	Oppose	Won
NV (Senate)	Shelley Berkley	\$61,366	Oppose	Lost
CT (Senate)	Chris Murphy	\$50,588	Oppose	Won
MA (Senate)	Elizabeth Warren	\$3,927	Oppose	Won
NE (Senate)	Bob Kerrey	\$1,651	Oppose	Lost
MI (Senate)	Debbie Stabenow	\$96	Oppose	Won
Total:		\$13,281,217		

NRA Spending For Republicans

<u>Office</u>	<u>Candidate</u>	<u>Totals</u>	<u>NRA position</u>	<u>Candidate Outcome</u>
President	Mitt Romney	\$2,734,993	Support	Lost
IN (Senate)	Richard Mourdock	\$349,333	Support	Lost
AZ (Senate)	Jeff Flake	\$322,883	Support	Won
WI (Senate)	Tommy Thompson	\$245,587	Support	Lost
OH (Senate)	Josh Mandel	\$172,475	Support	Lost
ME (Senate)	Charles Summers	\$117,614	Support	Lost
ND (Senate)	Rick Berg	\$83,802	Support	Lost
VA (Senate)	George Allen	\$76,423	Support	Lost
NV (Senate)	Dean Heller	\$30,133	Support	Won
PA (Senate)	John Vernon	\$18,997	Support	Lost
FL (Senate)	Connie Mack	\$3,440	Support	Lost
MI (Senate)	Peter Hoekstra	\$3,078	Support	Lost
MO (Senate)	Todd Akin	\$843	Support	Lost
NM (Senate)	Heather Wilson	\$207	Support	Lost
Total:		\$4,160,293		

Footnotes and Methodology

ⁱ Previous research conducted by Paul Waldman for Thinkprogress - <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2012/02/09/421893/the-myth-of-nra-dominance-part-i-the-nras-ineffective-spending/>; <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2012/02/13/424213/the-myth-of-nra-dominance-part-ii-overrated-endorsements/>.

ⁱⁱ The Sunlight Foundation develops these percentages as a measure of how effectively the organization spends its money in political campaigns. According to the Sunlight Foundation “The percentages listed here show how much of an organization’s money went to support candidates who won and to oppose candidates who lost in the general election campaign.” The lower the percentage, the less effective the organization’s political spending was.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Missouri, Wisconsin Nevada, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Michigan, Indiana, Maine, North Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, Pennsylvania

^{iv} Wisconsin, Virginia, Ohio, Nevada, Missouri, Michigan and Florida

^v Pennsylvania, New Mexico, North Dakota, Maine, Indiana

^{vi} Connecticut and Massachusetts