

December 17, 2012 6:22PM

Another View: Americans support 2nd Amendment with only modest checks

BY WAYNE F. LESPERANCE JR.

Within hours of the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the chattering class, pundits and the Twitterverse began to buzz with the political maneuverings of those interested in exploiting the horrific events unfolding in Newtown, Conn. Some immediately began clamoring for a new conversation about gun control and gun bans. Others reaffirmed a position of no compromise on anything related to the Second Amendment. And so what followed was the back and forth of intransigent ideological positions that leave no room for even the most obvious forms of compromise.

Of course, there is nothing new about politicians standing up for strongly held convictions. And what seems to pass for governing these days is a recitation of talking points that highlight the resolve of some leaders while decrying the potential disasters associated with the other side's point of view. If you need an example, just consider the way in which our national economy is careening towards a fiscal cliff.

But there is hope. While most folks see the fiscal cliff in very abstract terms, there is no such lack of clarity when it comes to guns. For example, Americans do not believe guns or gun culture are the root cause for mass shootings like the one in Connecticut. In a Pew Research Survey following the July cinema shooting in Aurora, Colo., 67 percent of those surveyed believed that mass shootings, "are just the isolated acts of troubled individuals." Fewer than 1/4 believed such attacks, "reflect broader problems in American society." For those who seek to argue that there is a broader gun culture responsible for events like the one that took place in Newtown, the American people disagree by a significant degree.

Furthermore, even after events like the Virginia Tech shootings, the attack on Rep. Gabby Giffords, and the mass shootings at Ft. Hood, Texas, Americans remain largely opposed to any broad-based ban on handguns. In a 2011 Gallup Poll, for example, 73 percent of respondents said they would not support the banning of handguns. Second Amendment advocates should take

great satisfaction in these results.

Still, Americans are supportive of some restrictions on gun rights. First, survey results reveal support for banning high-capacity ammunition clips. A 2011 ABC News/Washington Post survey found 57 percent favored a ban on high-capacity clips. Thirty-nine percent opposed such a ban. A CNN/ORC poll from August 2012 found a very similar breakdown over the banning of clips. Second, the same CNN poll found 96 percent of those who responded supported a background check for all gun purchases. And in the same poll, a majority supported the ban of assault weapons like the AK-47 and prohibiting gun ownership by convicted felons and those deemed mentally ill.

In short, the American people are sending a nuanced message to policymakers. Most support the Second Amendment and believe that private ownership of firearms should remain largely unrestricted. They believe further that what happened in Newtown is the product of an individual, not a gun culture. But they also believe there are reasonable restrictions that can and should be implemented to restrict who can own a firearm, what sort of weapon they can own, and the amount of ammunition that can be loaded into the weapon.

The preamble to the Constitution of the United States begins with three simple words, "We the people," that suggest that our charter document was an expression of the people's will. When it comes to gun control, the American people have some very modest and reasonable ideas that they will support to make our country safer. This sort of reasonable approach to developing appropriate policy should inform legislators across the country. Unfortunately, so long as Washington and state Legislatures remain locked in their ideological positions, reasonable measures to control guns have little chance of gaining traction.

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