

'Assault weapon' not easily defined

By TIM BUCKLAND
New Hampshire Union Leader

What is an assault weapon?

It turns out that simple, five-word question has no simple answer, despite the insistence of a New England College poll.

In an NEC poll released last week, 72 percent of respondents in New Hampshire said they would support a ban on assault weapons, but pollsters acknowledged that they did not specifically define what they meant by the term.

"It is a broad poll question, but we are confident people know and understand the definition of an assault weapon," NEC spokesman Scott Spradling said.

The Union Leader decided to ask people, including state political leaders, to define "assault weapon."

Here are their responses:

State Senate President Peter Bragdon, a Republican: "I don't think there's a definition. The feds have defined something, which I don't know, but from what I talk to from gun owners, there is no standard term called assault weapon. So I don't think people know what an assault weapon is, technically. They may have an idea, but there's no definition I know of."

Eva Blackman of Manchester: "It's those big machine guns."

State Democratic Party Chairman Ray Buckley: "It's generally a gun that's more for warfare than for hunting. It does multiple rounds per second. That's generally what I would think would be an assault weapon. It's not appropriate for hunting or defending one's home, but is designed for warfare or mass killings."

Andrew Moses of Manchester: "An assault weapon is something with more bullets. A bigger gun."

State Republican Party Chairman Jennifer Horn: "I don't think I could answer that question for somebody, because I would get into the conversation between the difference between an automatic and a semiautomatic. You could call any weapon an assault weapon. It just doesn't really mean anything until you start talking about the differences between automatic and semiautomatic."

Stephanie Labracque of Manchester: "I don't know."

Andrew Hemingway, a conservative activist who on Saturday lost an election to serve as chairman of the state Republican Party: "I think that it's defined in a number of different ways. I think President Obama has a definition of an assault weapon, which is probably a lot broader than the definition given by proponents and defenders of the Second Amendment. The actual definition of assault weapon? There isn't an actual, defined definition of it. It's more of a term that is used for a political position."

Tom Blackman of Manchester: "It's a weapon that shoots rapid fire."

U.S. Rep. Carol Shea-Porter, D-N.H.: "I support the definition in the Assault Weapons Ban Act of 2013."

From that bill, which was introduced by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.: "The term 'semiautomatic assault weapon' means any of the following, regardless of country of manufacture or caliber of ammunition accepted: A semiautomatic rifle that has the capacity to accept a detachable magazine and any 1 of the following: a pistol grip, a forward grip, a folding, telescoping, or detachable stock, a grenade launcher or rocket launcher, a barrel shroud (or) a threaded barrel."

The text of the bill, which contains a list of weapons that would be banned, is available at Feinstein's website: feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/assault-weapons.

The question was also posed on Friday and Saturday to the offices of Gov. Maggie Hassan, U.S. Sens. Kelly Ayotte and Jeanne Shaheen and U.S. Rep. Ann McLane Kuster. None of them responded.

tbuckland@unionleader.com