

Wednesday Q+A With Chris Cox

The NRA's top lobbyist talks swing-state races, the courts, and undoing Obama's rules.



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Chris Cox is the chief lobbyist and political strategist for the National Rifle Association, which spent more than any other outside group supporting Donald Trump in the presidential election. The NRA shelled out more than \$50 million in the 2016 cycle across presidential, Senate, and congressional races. Cox spoke with Andrea Drusch about what gun-rights advocates have gotten for their money, and what they hope to achieve in a GOP-controlled Washington.

After eight years with a Democrat in the White House, what changes have gun-rights advocates already seen since Trump took office?

You've changed the fundamental approach to the Second Amendment at the top with the president. ... President Trump is an unapologetic supporter, and the first sitting president since Reagan in 1983 to address

our annual meeting. If you look at his Cabinet, from Jeff Sessions to Ryan Zinke, you see an all-star team of individuals who support individual freedom and the Second Amendment. If you look at his legislative action thus far, he signed a Congressional Review Act dealing with one of Obama's last-minute attempts to undermine the Second Amendment with regards to the Social Security Administration. On [Interior] Secretary Zinke's first day in office, he signed an order repealing a lead ammo ban on certain federal lands that Obama put in on his way out the door.

What is the NRA's legislative agenda for a GOP-controlled Congress? And is there a rush to get things done with the House potentially in play in 2018?

Right-to-carry reciprocity remains our No.1 legislative priority. ... [House and Senate bills] have been introduced and referred to committee; we're in the process of building support and cosponsors. ... We're also working to reform the law as it relates to suppressors [also known as silencers]. We do a lot of work in the appropriations area, particularly in regards to funding restrictions, making sure tax dollars aren't used to undermine lawful gun ownership.

Speaking of politics, two Democrats running for governor in Virginia right now are bragging about their opposition from the NRA. Has this issue changed in swing states?

Our data shows [support for] the goals of the NRA, the rights of law-abiding people to keep and own firearms for self-defense, from a voter's standpoint, is overwhelming. That's why you have everyone from Barack Obama to Michael Bloomberg to Chuck Schumer saying they support the Second Amendment, even though they work tirelessly to undermine it. ... What we've shown, including in 2016, is that gun owners across the country make the difference, not just in state and local elections but statewide elections, federal elections, and ultimately the presidential race. With regards to those two particular candidates ... they'll have to explain those positions to the voters.

How does a Republican in the White House impact this issue in the courts?

Once [Supreme Court Justice Antonin] Scalia passed away, the stakes of the election from a Second Amendment standpoint became even larger, because we no longer had a one-vote majority for the basic right to own a firearm. So with Justice [Neil] Gorsuch's successful confirmation, the election wasn't about four or eight years, but about 30 or 40 years. One of the next questions will be, does your right to defend yourself end at your doorstep? Is it more than just keeping arms? Is there a recognition

to bear arms outside your home? ... There's also some recent cases out of the Maryland 4th Circuit with regards to whether or not the government can ban commonly-owned rifles.

How does Attorney General Sessions impact gun rights?

One of the fundamental arguments over gun control is where the focus should be. Should it be on prosecuting criminals who misuse firearms, or should the focus be on passing more laws that restrict law-abiding access to firearms? ... Under the Obama administration, Chicago ranked either dead last or next to last in the federal prosecution of violation of federal laws regarding illegal use of firearms. Getting the government back into prosecuting criminals ... is going to be important, not only to law-abiding gun owners, but also to communities who want to see something done about crime in their areas.

What does the political landscape look like for the NRA over the next two years?

In 2018, we'll be involved in more than just the Senate and governor's elections, but literally thousands of state legislative races. It's an ongoing, year-round operation for the National Rifle Association. ... We do a lot of postelection data work to see where we were successful and where there's room for improvement. ... We're continuing to do that in preparation not only for 2018 but these 2017 off-year elections. We're heavily involved right now in special elections in Georgia and ... South Carolina.



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