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## Wayne LaPierre Does Not Speak for Most Gun Owners or NRA Members

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Wayne LaPierre, the National Rifle Association's \$970,000-a-year CEO, does not speak for most gun owners or even most NRA members. Polls consistently show most gun owners and NRA members do not agree with the extremist views that LaPierre espouses in speeches, interviews and his testimony before Congress on Wednesday.

LaPierre represents two constituencies. He is primarily a corporate lobbyist for gun and ammunition manufacturers. They oppose any government regulations that limit their ability to sell more guns and make more profits, and LaPierre's rants reflect their interests. LaPierre also speaks for the ultra-right-wing "survivalist" wing of the NRA, whose members and activities overlap with racist hate groups who believe they need to prepare for an armed struggle against their own government.

So it was sickening to watch Wednesday's Senate hearings on gun violence and possible gun control laws and see Republican senators genuflect to LaPierre's outrageous comments and to witness some Democratic senators treating LaPierre as someone with any claim to expertise on gun matters.

It was particularly outrageous to put LaPierre on a panel with former astronaut Mark Kelly, who has become an outspoken advocate for tougher gun laws. In 2011, Jared Lee Loughner killed six people and severely injured Kelly's wife, former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, with a gun that LaPierre's lobbying efforts made it easier for him to obtain.

According to a newly-released survey by the Pew Research Center, 85 percent of Americans favor making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks, with comparable support from Republicans, Democrats and independents. Two-thirds (67 percent) of Americans favor the creation of a federal data base to track all gun sales.

The same survey found that 85 percent of gun owners also favor making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks and 60 percent also favor the creation of a federal government database to track all gun sales.

Nearly three quarters (74 percent) of NRA members supported requiring background checks for all gun sales, according to a poll released Monday by Johns Hopkins University. This finding corroborates another poll this month by the *New York Times* and CBS News which found that 85 percent of people in households with an NRA member support universal background checks.

The Pew study found that 62 percent of non-gun owners, and 54 percent of gun owners, support a ban on sem-automatic weapons. Likewise, 56 percent of non-gun owners and 51 percent of gun owners favor a ban on the on-line sale of ammunition

Back in 1999, LaPierre called universal background checks "reasonable," but in recent years he's backed off this stance as he's moved further and further to the extreme right. In his Senate testimony on Wednesday LaPierre voiced a much harder line, opposing background checks as well as any other limits on the ability to purchase guns and ammo, including military-style assault weapons.

In other words, LaPierre is totally out of touch and out of sync with America's gun owners and the vast majority of his own organization's members. Yet there he is, the public face of the NRA, plastered all over the front pages of newspapers and invited to testify before the Senate, as though he was anything other than a corporate lobbyist and a right-wing extremist.

It is heartening to see some senators stood up to LaPierre after he argued, without logic, that background checks won't work because "you are never going to get criminals to go through universal background checks."

Senator Dick Durbin (D-III) didn't let LaPierre get away with that absurd idea.

"Mr. LaPierre, that's the point," Durbin said. "The criminals won't go to purchase the guns because there'll be a background check. We'll stop them from original purchase. You missed that point completely. It's basic."

But it would also be helpful if Durbin and other senators not only undermined LaPierre's credibility as an expert on gun violence but also challenged his claim to represent America's gun owners or even most NRA members.

They could point out, for example, that almost every gun and ammo manufacturer has close ties to the NRA, but only a tiny proportion of the nation's gun owners are NRA members. About 90 million Americans own guns. The NRA claims to have

about four million members. That is less than five percent of all gun owners.

Moreover, gun ownership is highly concentrated. Twenty percent of gun owners possess about 65 percent of the nation's guns. The NRA is able to mobilize a small but very rabid and vocal group of gun owners -- as well as owners of gun shops -- to attend rallies, write letters to newspapers and comments on blog sites, and contact elected officials. Josh Sugarman, executive director of the nonprofit Violence Policy Center who has written extensively about the NRA, says that the organization's most vocal members are a small proportion of its members for whom "guns are their life." They represent perhaps a few hundred thousand members. Yes, they can make lots of noise but they don't represent the overwhelming majority of NRA members who don't fall for LaPierre's extremism.

In fact, when LaPierre and other NRA leaders have had to choose between the interests of their corporate sponsors and the safety of its gun-owning members, they've revealed where their loyalties really lie. In 2005, the NRA and the firearms manufacturers successfully lobbied for a law that provided gun manufacturers and distributors immunity from lawsuits from victims of gun violence -- legislation sponsored by GOP Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho, an NRA board member, and signed by President George W. Bush in October of that year. Little remembered, however, is that the NRA also lobbied for an amendment to that bill to limit the liability of firearm manufacturers for injuries to consumers caused by defective guns, a provision (which ultimately didn't pass) that would make it impossible for gun owners to sue the manufacturers.

This is not surprising. Rank-and-file NRA members have no significant voice in the organization's decision-making, which is the province of its highly-paid staff and board. They don't decide which candidates the NRA should endorse or what legislation it should support or oppose. In fact, the NRA has disenfranchised its rank-and-file by limiting the right to vote for board members to those who have been NRA members for at least five years or who are lifetime members, a fraction of its overall membership.

There are few rank-and-file gun owners on the NRA 75-member board, which is dominated by representatives of gun and ammunition makers, staffpersons for industry-affiliated organizations and publications, and lobbyists, politicians, and ex-politicians with links to the gun industry.

Under LaPierre's leadership, the NRA has not only dramatically expanded the its ties to the gun manufacturers, but has also linked the NRA to the far right, including the Tea Party. LaPierre is a regular presence at gatherings of extreme right-wing groups, whose paranoid warnings about the threat of tyranny and Obama's secret plan to confiscate all guns are meant to scare Americans into buying more guns and joining the NRA. "We must declare that there are no shades of gray in American freedom. It's black and white, all or nothing," LaPierre said at an NRA meeting. "You're with us or against us."

Commenting on LaPierre's close ties to lunatic right-wingers who believe that Americans need to arm themselves to protect against a military takeover by the U.S. government, Joe Scarborough, a conservative Republican and former member of Congress who hosts an MSNBC morning talk show, warned that "extremism from the survivalist wing of the NRA" is the greatest danger to the GOP's viability as a reasonable conservative voice.

Why are the pols -- most Republicans and a handful of moderate Democrats -- so afraid of LaPierre?

It is true that the NRA spreads its campaign contributions around widely. According to the Sunlight Foundation, just over half (51 percent) of the members of the current Congress received funding from the NRA's political action committee at some point in their political careers. Forty-seven percent received money from the NRA in the most recent race in which they ran.

But it is also true that the NRA is more of a paper tiger than most people believe. The Sunlight Foundation reviewed the NRA's track record in the November elections. The NRA failed to achieve its main goal, the defeat of President Obama, despite LaPierre's constant rantings that the president was part of a "conspiracy to ensure reelection by lulling gun owners to sleep" and to "deceive voters and hide his true intentions to destroy the Second Amendment during his second term." LaPierre also warned that everything that "gun owners across America have fought to achieve over the past three decades could be lost" if Obama won a second term.

The NRA also supported the losing Senate candidate in six out of seven races where it spent more than \$100,000. Over two-thirds of House incumbents who lost their seats in November were endorsed by the NRA. According to the Sunlight Foundation, less than one percent of \$10.5 million spent by NRA Political Victory Fund went to races where the NRA-backed candidate won.

In other words, there is little evidence that the NRA speaks for most gun owners or that it can reliably deliver gun owners' vote at election time.

When future historians look back on the gun control wars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, they will consider Wayne LaPierre, if they consider him at all, to be a right-wing nut whose influence (like the Wizard of Oz) was based on the misguided perception that he actually represented more than a small number of "gun rights" extremists. They will wonder why today's news media and politicians treated LaPierre as a legitimate spokesman for gun owners instead of the corporate shill and survivalist lunatic that he really is.

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