



**POWER**

# **Shift**

**How People Can  
Take on the NRA**



*Holding Power Accountable*

## **Acknowledgments**

Common Cause was founded in 1970 by John Gardner. Common Cause is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to upholding the core values of American democracy. We work to create open, honest, and accountable government that serves the public interest; promote equal rights, opportunity, and representation for all; and empower all people to make their voices heard in the political process.

This report was produced with the support of small dollar contributions from Americans who believe in transparent, open, and accountable government and a democracy that works for all of us.

This report was written by Stephen Spaulding and Jesse Littlewood of Common Cause.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- The NRA's influence and political success is more than its campaign spending – it has built a sophisticated organizing operation with a grassroots base. In 2015 it paid more than **\$20 million** to a single vendor that focuses on building the NRA's membership.
- The NRA's policy positions do not match some of the core policy preferences of its members. Surveys show that about three-in-four NRA members support universal criminal background checks for all gun sales – a policy that the NRA vehemently opposes.
- The gun industry relies on the NRA's lobbying power as a de facto trade association. Although no definitive number exists, independent estimates show that corporate partners of the NRA have contributed between **\$19.3 million** and **\$60.2 million** to the organization, with one firearms retailer declaring that it has contributed at least **\$15 million** to the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action.
- The NRA's employees and PAC have contributed about **\$23 million** directly to federal candidates and parties since 1989, and about **\$17 million** to state candidates and committees since 1990. Interests favoring tighter gun laws have only contributed about **\$4.3 million** to federal candidates and parties.<sup>1</sup>
- But direct campaign contributions are only a drop in the NRA's bucket compared to its independent spending in recent years. Empowered by the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United*, the NRA reported spending at least **\$54 million on independent expenditures during the 2016 federal election cycle**. Other estimates put the number closer to **\$70 million** – accounting for spending on certain field and internet operations that is not reported on FEC reports. Its reported 2016 election spending was nearly double the **\$27 million** it spent during the 2014 midterms and more than double the **\$19 million** it spent during the 2012 presidential election.
- About **\$34 million** of the **\$54 million** it spent on independent expenditures in federal elections in 2016 – **more than 60% of that spending** – flowed through the NRA's **Institute for Legislative Action**, an arm of the NRA that is not required to disclose its donors.
- The NRA also lobbies extensively to pursue its agenda – in recent years it has increased its federal lobbying spending dramatically, from **\$1,815,000** in 2007 to **\$5,122,000** in 2017. In addition to its gun-related legislation, the NRA has lobbied against efforts to shine a light on secret spending in politics, including the DISCLOSE Act. The NRA also uses the American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC] to push its pro-gun laws at the state level.
- Although this report does not recommend specific policies to reduce gun violence, it proposes solutions to boost the political power of Americans of every political persuasion, including the overwhelming number of people who support changes to our gun laws to save lives. Solutions include making voting more fair and accessible, including **automatic voter registration, pre-registration for 16- and 17-year olds, and early voting; changing the way we pay for political campaigns to empower all Americans, not just the wealthy few; shining a light on secret spending in politics; and ending gerrymandering.**

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<sup>1</sup> Common Cause analysis of campaign finance and lobbying data relied in part upon tools and analysis made available by the Center for Responsive Politics and the National Institute on Money in State Politics.

# INTRODUCTION

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After a lone gunman killed 14 students and three faculty members and wounded more than a dozen others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, on Valentine's Day, young survivors of the massacre resolved to tackle the formidable power of the gun lobby across America.

In just a few weeks, the Parkland students have captured the nation's imagination and brought new energy into the long running efforts to regulate gun ownership. They've pushed the Florida legislature and Gov. Rick Scott to tighten the state's gun laws, faced down the president at the White House, and led their fellow students at thousands of high schools across the country in a dramatic, peaceful walkout to demand stronger laws to protect their lives. Now they're planning a mammoth "March for Our Lives" down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC, with sibling marches in cities and towns throughout the country and around the globe to demand that lives and safety "become a priority and that we end gun violence and mass shootings in our schools today."

Gun violence is now a leading cause of death in the United States. Every year on average, more than 35,000 people die from gun violence, and another 81,000 survive after being shot, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.<sup>1</sup> The violence disproportionately affects communities of color; black men are 13 times more likely than white men to be shot and killed by a gun<sup>2</sup> and black children die from gun-related homicides at a rate ten times that of white children, according to a study by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>3</sup>

The death tolls from single-day mass shootings continue to reach new records. Last year, 58 concertgoers died and another 500 were injured at a country music festival in Las Vegas. The year before, 49 people were shot to death and another 50 injured at an Orlando LGBTQ nightclub. Those mass shootings surpassed the death tolls of the Virginia Tech massacre, which left 32 college students and professors dead in 2007, and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, in which 20 children – ages six and seven – and six teachers were murdered in what President Obama called the single worst day of his presidency.

Various policies to tighten gun laws enjoy wide support. According to a February 2018 poll by Quinnipiac University, "support for universal background checks, a mandatory waiting period for firearm purchases, and an assault weapon ban came in at 97%, 83%, and 67% respectively."<sup>4</sup>

If our political system worked as intended, with everyone enjoying an equal voice in the decisions that affect our lives, our families, and our communities, such a combination of facts, backed by public opinion, already would have yielded substantial changes in our gun laws.

But the truth is that our system has been thrown out of balance by the power of moneyed interests, including the gun lobby and the weapons industry. In many places – especially Congress – many with the power to act instead express their "thoughts and prayers" and move on without making any substantive changes to our laws.

Many cite the National Rifle Association's political spending as an explanation for our elected leaders' intransigence on this issue. And with good reason – the NRA boasts that it has 5 million members (a number that some dispute) and spends tens of millions of dollars on politics.<sup>5</sup> But as this report makes clear, the NRA's power goes beyond its campaign spending. It has created a sophisticated grassroots operation to push its agenda in statehouses and in Congress.

The NRA's political influence, however, is no match for the power of the American voter – provided we make our voices heard at every election, and if we solve some underlying governance challenges that skew policy in favor of wealthy special interests.

This report examines critical aspects of the NRA's perceived influence, and is intended to suggest solutions that will rebalance power to ensure that our democracy is responsive to our needs. This report does not recommend specific policies to reduce gun violence – but proposes solutions to boost the political power of Americans of every political persuasion – including the overwhelming number of people who support changes to our gun laws to save lives.

## THE NRA'S ORGANIZING & MEMBERSHIP BASE

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Voters hold the ultimate power in a democracy. Organized voters have more power than unorganized ones. The NRA's influence and political success extends beyond campaign contributions and independent expenditures and into political organizing and mobilizing of a grassroots base of voters who are known to vote frequently and follow the recommendations of the organization.

Key to the power of the NRA and its affiliates is their grassroots base. The NRA claims “nearly five million members,”<sup>6</sup> but this number is impossible to verify and the organization has an interest in reporting an inflated or high-end estimate (including active “lifetime” memberships from deceased individuals).<sup>7</sup> Still, the NRA's membership is perceived by lawmakers as a powerful force that can be mobilized to support – or defeat – legislation and candidates.

The opinions of NRA members do not necessarily match perfectly with the policies the NRA promotes. While some NRA members join the organization because they support the policy goals and political advocacy, many others join for the extensive benefits and services provided – including discounted insurance, access to private clubs, a print magazine, and firearms safety classes, to name a few. This helps grow the NRA's membership ranks and creates a cycle of membership engagement from lifestyle (discounts and a magazine) to politics.<sup>8</sup> After the shooting in Parkland, however, a number of the NRA's corporate partners have re-evaluated their relationship with the organization.<sup>9</sup> It may have a long-term impact.

Individuals can become leaders within the NRA as firearms instructors or coaches. With 125,000 instructors<sup>10</sup> (training 1 million people each year) the NRA gives volunteers a significant role in building the organization. NRA members may have joined for the discounts, but are constantly recruited to take leadership roles, as well as join in political activities supporting the NRA leadership's positions.

There's strong evidence that the NRA's policy and lobbying priorities reflect the priorities of gun manufacturers more than rank-and-file members.

The gun industry relies on the NRA's lobbying power as a “de facto trade association” according to one expert.<sup>11</sup> Opposition to expanded background checks – and other measures like raising the minimum age to buy a long gun or assault rifle – are priorities of the gun industry, which will see its profits shrink with these reforms. But multiple surveys (including from prominent Republican pollster Frank Luntz<sup>12</sup>) have found that about three in four NRA members surveyed support universal criminal background checks of anyone purchasing a gun,<sup>13</sup> a policy the NRA vehemently opposes.<sup>14</sup> The NRA's letter-grade system reinforces a no-compromise approach to political advocacy with the threat that NRA members will vote out of office any official who doesn't receive an “A” grade.<sup>15</sup> Even if NRA members personally agree with policies like universal background checks, the industry opposition is reflected in the letter grades of candidates.

Even if a majority of NRA members demanded change, the structure and bylaws of the organization might prevent it. Only those who have been NRA members for at least five years (or have signed up for a lifetime membership) can vote in NRA elections. And NRA officials and members who cross Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre, who is close with the gun industry, are forced out or marginalized.<sup>16</sup>

The large media presence of the NRA (seven print and online magazines, popular YouTube and other social media channels) also helps it recruit new members and highlights the importance of its political activities. With a constant barrage of stories and commentary that vilifies the NRA's political opponents and reinforces a feeling that the freedom of gun owners is under attack from powerful forces, the NRA membership is primed and motivated to vote. Some of the NRA's recent digital videos evince extreme hostility to the media, echoing President Trump's attacks on journalists and a free press.

Building a grassroots base of support takes significant resources. The NRA paid more than \$20 million in 2015 to a single membership-building vendor.<sup>17</sup> Its corporate ties also help the organization build its membership. The NRA's funding comes from membership dues, plus donations from gun manufacturers and political interest groups; the latter group includes the Koch family-backed Freedom Partners, which contributed about \$5 million to the NRA in 2014.<sup>18</sup> While the NRA doesn't release details on donations from gun industry players, independent analysis by the Violence Policy Center shows that since 2005, "corporate partners" (in NRA parlance) have donated between \$19.3 million and \$60.2 million to the organization.<sup>19</sup> One gun company, MidwayUSA, proudly states on its website that it has donated nearly \$15 million to the NRA.<sup>20</sup> The NRA also receives millions from the gun industry to advertise their products in NRA publications.<sup>21</sup> And gun manufacturer Taurus provides a free NRA membership with each purchase.<sup>22</sup>

## NRA'S ELECTION SPENDING

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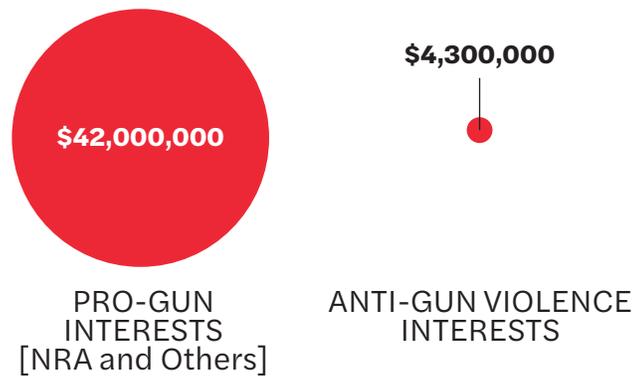
Of the groups and organizations that promote the interests of the gun industry, the NRA is by far the biggest political spender.

Its spending has increased significantly in recent years. Empowered by the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* and other cases, the NRA spends more money every election cycle to elect candidates who will do its bidding and support its policy agenda, and defeat those who won't. And importantly, it also can *threaten* to spend money for and against candidates. The threat alone can advance or stall policy because elected officials fear that the NRA will spend whatever it takes to defeat them.

Since 1989, the NRA – measured by money from its PACs and employees – has contributed approximately **\$23 million** directly to federal candidates, parties, and other political committees, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.<sup>23</sup> Its money almost exclusively supports Republicans. NRA allies like Safari Club International, the National Shooting Sports Foundation, and Gun Owners of America make the bulk of other pro-gun donations, for a grand total of **\$42 million** from the pro-gun lobby since 1989.<sup>24</sup>

At the state level, the NRA has contributed at least **\$17 million** to state candidates and committees since 1990, according to data made available by the National Institute on Money in State Politics.<sup>25</sup> Spending by the pro-gun lobby is exceptionally more than that of groups that favor tighter gun laws – the latter have spent only **\$4.3 million** since 1989.<sup>26</sup>

## Contributions to Federal Candidates and Political Committees Since 1989



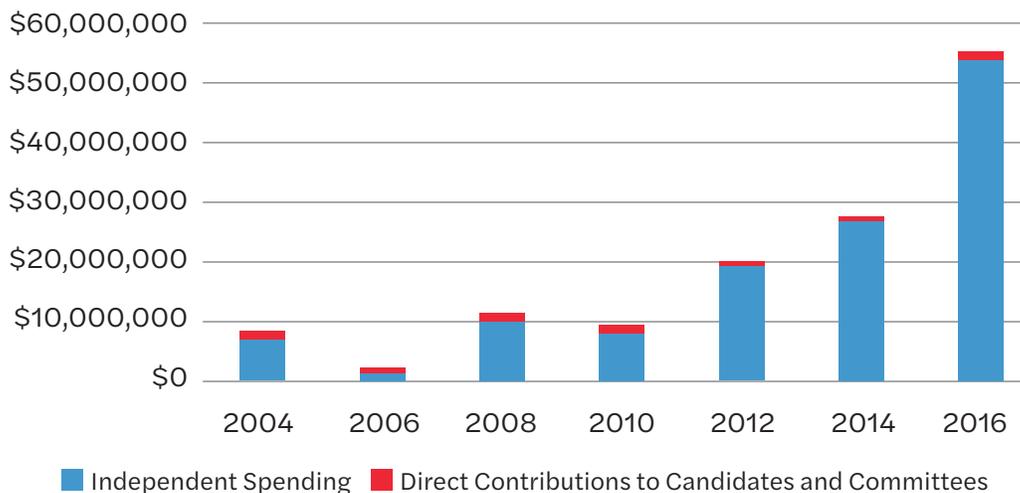
But direct contributions per election cycle are only a drop in the NRA's campaign bucket.

The NRA spends most of its election money on “independent expenditures” – not campaign contributions. Often, these take the form of paid advertisements calling for the election or defeat of candidates.

The NRA greatly boosted its independent spending after the Supreme Court decided *Citizens United* in 2010; that ruling declared that corporations – including some nonprofits like the NRA – have a constitutional right to spend unlimited amounts to influence elections.

In the 2016 federal election cycle alone, the NRA spent at least **\$54 million** on independent expenditures in federal elections -- \$37 million against Democrats, \$17.3 million for Republicans, and only \$265 for Democrats.<sup>27</sup> That is nearly double the **\$27 million** it spent during the 2014 midterms and more than double the **\$19 million** it spent in the 2012 presidential election.<sup>28</sup> The NRA's independent expenditures are far higher than the **\$3 million** in independent spending by groups advocating stricter gun laws in 2016, and the **\$8.6 million** those groups spent in 2014.<sup>29</sup>

### NRA Federal Campaign Spending



“The court declared, ‘With the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters.’ It also said that disclosure ‘permits citizens and shareholders to react to the speech of corporate entities in a proper way. This transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions and give proper weight to different speakers and messages.’ And the court expressed enthusiasm that technology today makes disclosure ‘rapid and informative.’ What went wrong? The court’s vision of disclosure and transparency is nowhere in sight. In fact, campaign finance in the United States has, by many measures, fallen into an era dominated by ‘dark money,’ with donors hiding in the shadows and hundreds of millions of dollars of contributions flowing through politics without a trace of who gave it or why.” *Washington Post* Editorial Board, January 20, 2015

The Supreme Court has affirmed that Americans have a right to know who is spending money to influence their votes and their views. Eight justices endorsed the importance of disclosure in *Citizens United*, even as the rest of the opinion (which only had the support of five justices) demonstrated how out of touch the Court is with how campaigns are run by incorrectly assuming that adequate disclosure already exists.

Unfortunately, any comprehensive analysis of the NRA’s political spending is inherently incomplete. The NRA uses its “Institute for Legislative Action” [ILA] to do most of its political spending. The ILA is an arm of the NRA that keeps its donors secret. About **\$34 million** of the **\$54 million** that the NRA reported to the Federal Election Commission in the 2016 cycle – **more than 60% of its total** – came through the ILA.<sup>30</sup>

Second, some campaign spending often goes unreported because our laws have not kept pace with how groups use changing technology to influence elections. As McClatchy reported in 2016, “two people with close connections to the powerful gun lobby said its total election spending [during the 2016 cycle] actually approached or **exceeded \$70 million** [far more than the \$54 million reported to the FEC]. The reporting gap could be explained by the fact that independent groups are not required to reveal how much they spend on [certain] Internet or field operations, including get-out-the-vote efforts.”<sup>31</sup>

There is also the matter of foreign interference in our elections. The FBI is investigating whether Russian nationals who are close to the Kremlin “funneled money to the National Rifle Association to help Donald Trump win the elec-

tion,” according to McClatchy.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, “a prominent Kremlin-linked Russian politician has methodically cultivated ties with leaders of the National Rifle Association and documented efforts in real time over six years to leverage those connections and gain deeper access into American politics,” according to NPR.<sup>33</sup>

### The 20 Senators Benefitting the Most from NRA Campaign Spending

| SENATOR                     | AMOUNT      |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| John McCain (R-AZ)          | \$7,755,701 |
| Richard Burr (R-NC)         | \$6,986,931 |
| Roy Blunt (R-MO)            | \$4,551,146 |
| Thom Tillis (R-NC)          | \$4,418,012 |
| Cory Gardner (R-CO)         | \$3,879,264 |
| Marco Rubio (R-FL)          | \$3,303,355 |
| Joni Ernst (R-IA)           | \$3,124,273 |
| Rob Portman (R-OH)          | \$3,061,941 |
| Todd Young (R-IN)           | \$2,896,732 |
| Bill Cassidy (R-LA)         | \$2,861,047 |
| David Perdue (R-GA)         | \$1,985,773 |
| Tom Cotton (R-AR)           | \$1,968,714 |
| Pat Roberts (R-KS)          | \$1,584,153 |
| Pat Toomey (R-PA)           | \$1,467,821 |
| Ron Johnson (R-WI)          | \$1,269,486 |
| Mitch McConnell (R-KY)      | \$1,261,874 |
| John Thune (R-SD)           | \$632,486   |
| Jeff Flake (R-AZ)           | \$365,302   |
| Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) | \$335,770   |
| Richard Shelby (R-LA)       | \$259,464   |

*Common Cause analysis of data from the Center for Responsive Politics; includes direct contributions to candidates from NRA employees and its PAC as well as indirect support via independent expenditures. Only includes spending from 1989 to the present.*

### The 20 Members of the House of Representatives Who Have Benefitted the Most from NRA Campaign Spending

| REPRESENTATIVE               | AMOUNT      |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| French Hill (R-AR)           | \$1,089,477 |
| Kenneth Buck (R-CO)          | \$838,315   |
| David Young (R-IA)           | \$707,662   |
| Mike Simpson (R-ID)          | \$385,731   |
| Greg Gianforte (R-MT)        | \$344,630   |
| Don Young (R-AK)             | \$245,720   |
| Lloyd Smucker (R-PA)         | \$222,736   |
| Bruce Poliquin (R-ME)        | \$203,398   |
| Pete Sessions (R-TX)         | \$158,111   |
| Barbara Comstock (R-VA)      | \$137,232   |
| Bob Goodlatte (R-VA)         | \$137,126   |
| Steve Chabot (R-OH)          | \$114,548   |
| Mike Coffman (R-CO)          | \$112,501   |
| Scott Tipton (R-CO)          | \$104,021   |
| Tim Walberg (R-MI)           | \$103,605   |
| Sam Graves (R-MO)            | \$102,137   |
| Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA) | \$95,298    |
| Karen Handel (R-GA)          | \$90,258    |
| Steve Pearce (R-NM)          | \$88,314    |
| David Schweikert (R-AZ)      | \$77,687    |

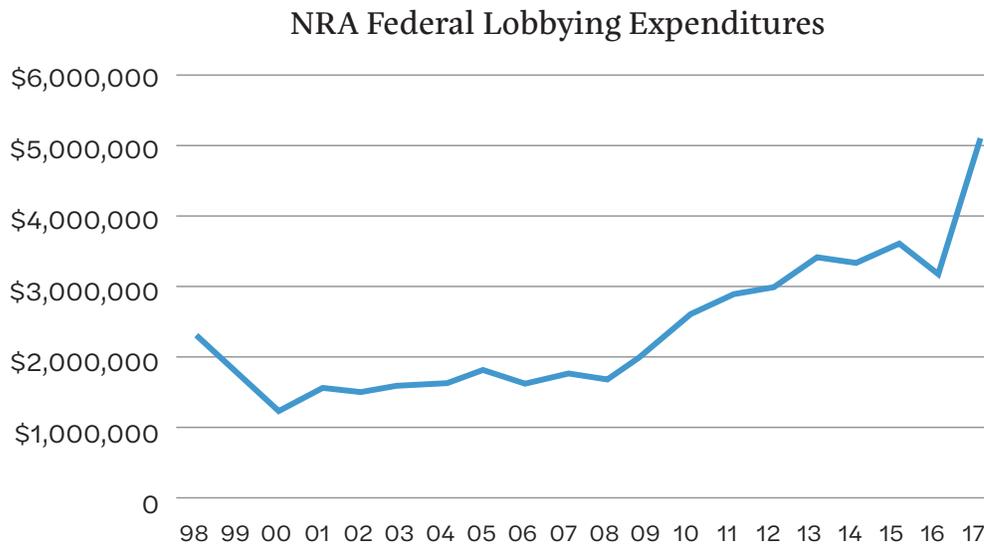
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## NRA'S LOBBYING SPENDING

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Lobbying is another strategy that the NRA uses to accomplish its political goals. It is a prolific spender on Capitol Hill.

In recent years, the NRA has increased its federal lobbying spending dramatically, going from **\$1,815,000** in 2007 to **\$5,122,000** in 2017 -- more than a **182%** increase.



*Common Cause analysis of lobbying data from Center for Responsive Politics*

Its federal lobbying has secured votes on some of its priorities – and blocked bills that it opposes.

Since Congress passed an assault weapons ban in 1994, which it allowed to expire in 2004, not much substantive gun legislation has been signed into law. One exception is the “**Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act**,” President George W. Bush signed it in 2005. The law shields corporations which manufacture and sell weapons from liability when their products harm people. The NRA called this legislation a “vitally important first step toward ending the anti-gun lobby’s shameless attempts to bankrupt the American firearms industry.”<sup>34</sup>

Other gun measures have all failed. The House and Senate have voted on proposals to close the “gun show loophole” to require purchasers at gun shows to undergo background checks and three-day waiting periods. None have gone to the president’s desk.

Other NRA priorities have gained momentum. In 2017, the House of Representatives passed the “**Concealed Carry Reciprocity Act**” to permit concealed handguns across state lines. It awaits action in the Senate. The NRA has pushed this proposal as one of its priority bills.

The NRA’s legislative advocacy is not limited to gun-related legislation, however. It has also been a stalwart opponent of the **DISCLOSE Act**, legislation that would shine a light on secret money in politics, including the money that is flowing through its Institute for Legislative Action, as discussed above. In 2017 – a year after it spent \$33 million from secret sources influencing the 2016 election – the NRA listed the DISCLOSE Act as one of the bills it paid its lobbyists to defeat. The DISCLOSE Act is one of the bills that the NRA lists most frequently on its lobbying reports.

## NRA Ties to the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)

Much of the NRA's work occurs at the state level, where it has used the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to pursue its policy agenda. One of the most notorious laws that the NRA has pushed for the past decade is known as "stand your ground."

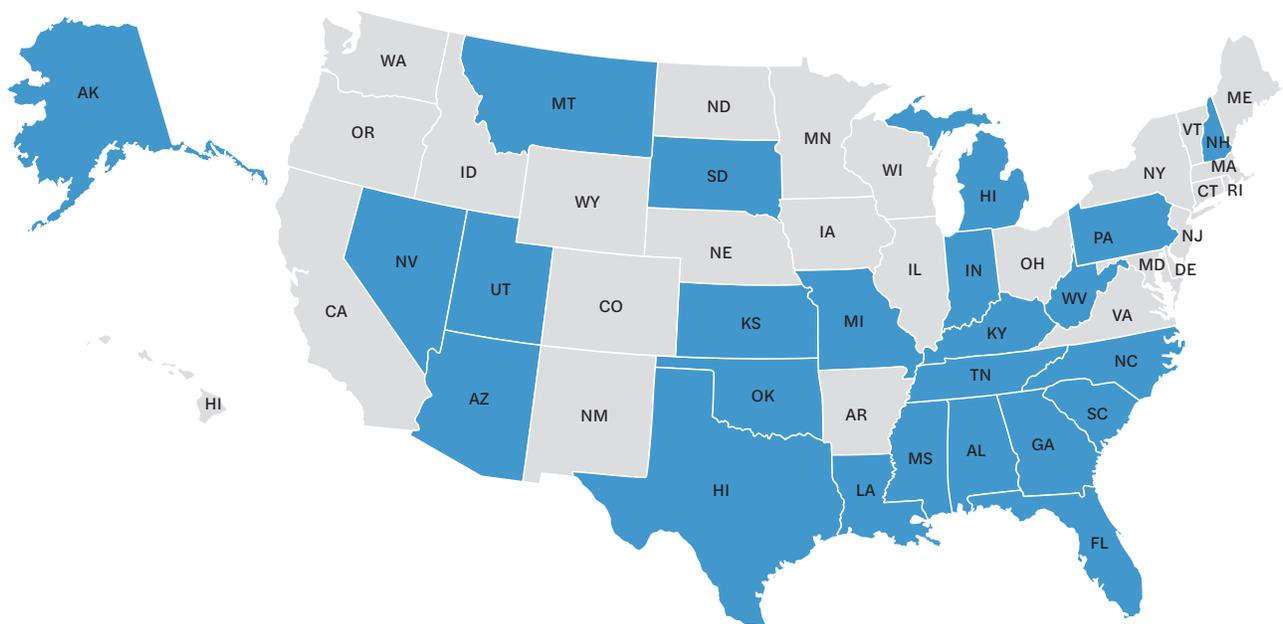
ALEC brings state legislators and corporate lobbyists together behind closed doors to draft and plot the passage of "model legislation" that furthers the corporate interests of its members.<sup>35</sup> ALEC's state legislative members take the model bills and introduce them in state legislatures throughout the country. ALEC staff offers state legislators talking points, boilerplate press releases, and other support to help push the bills over the finish line. ALEC describes itself as a charity, but Common Cause has filed a whistleblower complaint with the Internal Revenue Service challenging its charitable tax status, which gives ALEC's corporate donors a tax write-off for their support of the work that ALEC does to influence corporate-backed legislation.

In 2005, Florida adopted a "stand your ground" law that grants individuals a right to use deadly force, without any duty to retreat, if they reasonably believe it is necessary to "prevent death or great bodily harm ... or to prevent the commission of a forcible felony."<sup>36</sup> Put another way, "stand your ground" is a "self-defense doctrine essentially permitting anyone feeling threatened in a confrontation to shoot their way out," according to Mother Jones.<sup>37</sup>

After Florida passed "stand your ground," the NRA's then-Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre said it was "the first step of a multi-state strategy. There's a big tailwind we have, moving from state legislature to state legislature."<sup>38</sup>

With ALEC's help, the tailwind was felt across the country. An NRA lobbyist took the Florida law and worked with ALEC members on ALEC's "Criminal Justice Task Force" to draft model "stand your ground" legislation that passed in various forms<sup>39</sup> in at least 24 states.<sup>40</sup> Florida's law was at issue in the nationally publicized trial of George Zimmerman, who was acquitted on self-defense grounds after killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, in 2012.

### States with Stand Your Ground Legislation



# SOLUTIONS TO REBALANCE OUR DEMOCRACY

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Americans continue to organize to advance policies that will safeguard our communities from the crisis of gun violence. With every surge in the shocking violence affecting our towns, neighborhoods, and schools, people renew their pushes for changes to the laws that regulate how guns are bought, sold, and handled.

Despite the public support they enjoy, most of these proposals stall. People often cite the NRA's political contributions as a major reason for the ongoing stalemate. And as this report has detailed, the NRA's organizing power and political spending are significant. Too many politicians are beholden to the NRA and fear its influence in their election.

That's where voters come in.

Our democracy should be of, by, and for the people. We need to restore balance to our elections, and ensure everyone has an equal voice and equal say in the decisions that affect our lives – including laws that protect our schools, our homes, and our communities from gun violence.

Working together, we can strengthen our democracy to make our leaders more responsive to their real bosses – we the people. Here are five concrete solutions to shift power away from special interests like the NRA and empower the rest of us. There is more we must do – but here are places we can start to make our democracy more accountable and reflective.

- 1. Register and vote!** Voting is the most important tool we have as citizens to hold our elected officials accountable. Our votes make us all equal and more powerful than we realize – but only if we show up and cast them. In many jurisdictions, you can register to vote online. Other places may require you to mail in a voter registration form or bring it to your local elections office. In many states, young people can “pre-register” to vote before they turn 18. You can find out how to register in your state by going to [www.vote.org](http://www.vote.org). If you have problems registering or any questions about voting, including what sort of identification you may need to bring to the polls, the rules for early voting, and the location of your polling place, you can call a nonpartisan Election Protection hotline run by the Election Protection Coalition. The phone number is 866-OUR-VOTE; you also can visit the Election Protection coalition online at [www.866OurVote.org](http://www.866OurVote.org).
- 2. Urge your state to implement policies to modernize how Americans can participate in the voting process. Policies include pre-registration for 16- and 17-year olds, automatic voter registration, and early voting.** Every eligible American has a right to vote and the process should reflect the way we live and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Voting should be convenient, secure, fair, and accessible for all Americans. That means passing and implementing innovative policies to streamline the registration process and modernize election administration.
  - **Automatic voter registration** will help modernize the out-of-date voter registration systems and databases in most states. Automatically registering eligible voters when they do business with Departments of Motor Vehicles and other government agencies will streamline our systems. Nine states and the District of Columbia have approved automatic voter registration, and momentum is building to pass this common-sense reform in other jurisdictions. As this policy is implemented, it has the potential to add tens of millions of voters to the voter rolls.
  - **Pre-registration for 16- and 17-year olds** lets young people sign-up to vote so that they can make their voices heard in the first election in which they are eligible to participate. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have this policy in place.

- **Early voting** helps ensure that voting is fair and accessible. Americans should have some flexibility when it comes to casting their ballots. Most states allow some form of early voting during a set-period of time before the election. This ensures that Americans who work or may be traveling on Election Day can cast their ballots. Still, 13 states do not permit early voting and require a specific excuse to vote absentee. Learn more about your state's procedures by visiting the nonpartisan Election Protection website, [www.866ourvote.org](http://www.866ourvote.org).
3. **Change the way we pay for political campaigns to empower all Americans, not just the wealthy few.** This means boosting the role of small dollar donors in our elections. With each election cycle, our elected leaders depend on larger and larger contributions from a smaller and smaller share of our population. As a result, our leaders listen more to a handful of deep-pocketed donors and interests than to everyday Americans. To ensure that everyone has a real voice in politics, we need policies that put small dollar donors at the center of campaign finance, using matching public funds, tax credits, or small-dollar vouchers to encourage and supplement their giving. Providing public funding support to amplify the role of ordinary Americans in financing elections also allows more people to run for office – helping elect officeholders more reflective of the community at large – and allows candidates to spend more time listening to their constituents, and leads to policies more responsive to public needs and less skewed by wealthy interests. **Connecticut** has one of the most effective voluntary citizen-funded election systems in our country, with more than 75% of successful candidates participating in the program. Unlike Congress, Connecticut's legislature passed major changes to its gun laws in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.<sup>41</sup> The state prohibited more than 100 types of assault weapons, gun magazines with capacity of more than 10 rounds, and expanded background checks, among other changes to its laws. Large municipalities throughout the country are adopting these programs.
  4. **Shine a light on secret money in politics.** A strong, 21st century democracy requires strong transparency and disclosure laws so that everyone knows who is funding political campaigns. Secret money in elections is unacceptable and undemocratic. More than \$800 million from secret sources has infected our elections at the federal level alone since *Citizens United* in 2010. As described above, the bulk of the NRA's spending in recent years has come with very limited disclosure – and it has fought hard to keep it that way by lobbying against the DISCLOSE Act in Congress. Still, states like California, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, New Mexico, and Rhode Island are leading the way with enhanced disclosure laws for state elections.
  5. **Create #FairMaps and end gerrymandering.** Democracy should mean that everyone counts and has fair and equal representation. Voters should pick their elected representatives, rather than having politicians pick their constituents. Building off several legal victories and successes in creating strong systems in **California** and **Arizona**, efforts to implement solutions that increase fairness and transparency in drawing political boundaries are moving across the country. Redistricting that puts people first requires several elements. Every person living in a community must be fully and accurately counted. This can be achieved through improved census outreach and data collection while ending prison gerrymandering, the counting of prisoners where the prison is located instead of where they previously lived. Districts must adhere to the requirements of the Voting Rights Act and decision-makers should prioritize keeping communities of interest together. A transparent process that allows the public to fully engage requires meetings of decision-makers to be held in public, enforces strong conflict of interest protections, and makes data and software being used to draw districts publicly available. No deliberations among decision-makers should be kept from the people through legislative privilege or other means.

Of course, none of these solutions alone will solve all our problems. But they will help to elevate the power of everyday Americans.

To learn more about these solutions, and to sign-up for action alerts nationally and in your state, sign-up at [www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org) and get ready to plug-in and participate.

## ENDNOTES

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