

The Politics of Firearms Registration in Canada

By Gary Mauser

In this article, Gary Mauser argues that support for repressive gun control laws in Canada is quite thin. The appearance of support was manufactured by the nation's Liberal Party, but the political strategy backfired. Professor Mauser serves on the Faculty of Business Administration and the Institute for Canadian Urban Research Studies at Simon Fraser University, in Burnaby, British Columbia.

The determination of the Canadian government to bring in universal firearms registration (the 1995 Firearms Act) has proven extremely divisive. The Firearms Act, originally introduced in parliament as Bill C-68, radically transformed the criminal code, not only by requiring all firearms to be registered, but also by drastically reducing the traditional rights of Canadians to due process. In this article, I will show that a thorough analysis of Canadian public opinion towards firearms and gun control undermines the government's claim that the public demanded more gun laws. I will argue that Bill C-68 was introduced primarily for partisan political advantage, and that, despite the Liberals' use of sophisticated "political marketing" techniques, their strategy backfired as the gun bill hurt the Liberals more than it helped them in the 1997 federal election.

Public opinion is important for all modern governments for it serves to legitimize government policies. In modern democracies, public opinion is particularly important as it acts as an indicator of people's interests and desires that public officials are supposed to respect. In principle, politicians in democratic countries are responsible to the people for their policy decisions, as they must eventually face re-election. Knowing this, politicians in a

democracy would be expected to try to influence the preferences of the public. It is more than a little naive to treat public opinion as if it were an autonomous force that drives public policy. Thus, it is important to ask to what extent do the fixed preferences of the public determine public policy? Or, to put this question another way, to what extent do politicians create public opinion artificially to promote their policy decisions?

Previous research has shown that Canadians and Americans have remarkably similar attitudes towards firearms and gun control. In both countries, the public has complex and contradictory attitudes towards firearms. In both countries, the public supports so-called “moderate” gun legislation, as well as the use of firearms in self-defence. The extensive similarity of public attitudes suggests that the reason for the stricter gun laws in Canada depends more upon differences in political élites and political institutions than any real differences in public opinion (Mauser and Margolis 1992).

I will examine the politics of gun control in Canada using a model of “public opinion as a dependent variable” (Margolis and Mauser 1989b). In this model, we argue that institutional élites are much more powerful in determining public policy than the general public, and that opinions expressed in the mass media tend to reflect these institutional voices, not those of independent analysts or the citizens in general. The mass media provide the critical linkage between elite intentions and public opinion; at the very least the media plays a role as “gatekeeper,” but the media are also part of the institutional élite as well, so their impact on public opinion is not unbiased. In developing public policy, the government itself occupies a privileged role in commanding media attention. I argue that the government can and does use “marketing techniques” to influence public opinion and even to “manufacture consent” for its policies.

In this article, I will outline the politics behind the 1995 Firearms Act [Bill C-68] and examine the extent to which the new gun legislation can be said to reflect Canadian public opinion. Two questions will be addressed: first, why did the Liberals

introduce this gun control legislation [Bill C-68]? Second, did the bill achieve the Liberals' objectives? Obviously, in order to answer the second question, it will be necessary to know the answer to the first. I contend that the driving force behind firearms registration was the Liberal Cabinet's electoral strategy. To show this, I will examine the political situation facing the Liberals in Parliament and examine the extent to which the 1995 Firearms Act was dictated by Liberal partisan strategy. The analysis of Canadian public opinion will be drawn from a representative national survey of 1,505 adults that was conducted during the public debate over Bill C-68 [Mauser and Buckner 1997]. This study is the most complete analysis of Canadian attitudes towards firearms and gun control legislation ever conducted in Canada. An analysis of the results of the Spring 1997 federal elections will determine whether or not the Liberals' strategy was successful.

A brief description of Bill C-68 [the Firearms Act]

The 1995 Firearms Act (also known as SC 1995, Chapter 39 of the Canadian Criminal Code). introduced extensive changes to the Criminal Code of Canada, including: [a] the registration of all firearms; [b] the confiscation of over one-half of all handguns (without compensation); and [c] draconian infringements on the traditional rights of Canadians to due process. These infringements should frighten any civil libertarian.

The Firearms Act expands the grounds for warrantless searches, reduces restraints on issuing warrants, and requires people to testify against themselves [Sections 102 - 104]. The Firearms Act incorporates much of the language used in the Narcotics Act, and in extending this language to property that has been traditionally legal to own, it vastly extends police powers.

Even though Bill C-68 was passed by Parliament in 1995, before it can have the force of law, a staggering amount of regulations must be drawn up and reviewed by Parliament. The

Department of Justice continually delayed plans until it was finally announced that the new Firearms Act would be phased in starting October 1998 (Canadian Firearms Centre, March 1998). Such sweeping police powers would not be permitted in the United States as this legislation authorizes police procedures that violate the US Fourth Amendment's protection against warrantless searches and the Fifth Amendment's protections to due process.

CANADIAN POLITICS

Canada's Prime Minister has powers that a U.S. President can only dream about (Pocklington 1985: 255). Not only does the Prime Minister appoint all Senators, all Supreme Court Justices, but he does this without any constitutional requirement to consult any other governmental body, such as the Senate. Unlike the U.S. government, the Canadian version of the British parliamentary model includes neither checks nor balances. The Canadian political system was described best by its first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, "Given a government with a big surplus, and a big majority, and a weak opposition, you could debauch a committee of Archangels" (Rayment 1994). Moreover, there is only a brief tradition of individual rights and liberties in Canada. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is much weaker than the Bill of Rights in the United States and was only introduced in 1982.

The political party with a majority in Parliament can pass virtually any legislation that the party leadership desires. Furthermore, Canada has tighter party control over Members of Parliament than found even in the United Kingdom. Canadian MP's are expected to toe the line; independence is severely punished.¹

Thus, control of the Canadian political parties is traditionally tightly controlled by the party leader and his closest advisors. Majority control of Parliament, as seen from an American perspective, combines the Executive and Legislative branches of

government, and drastically simplifies the problem of passing controversial national legislation. Introducing universal firearms registration was indeed controversial, but it was merely one of a series of controversial laws passed during the past twenty years. For example, previous Liberal governments have introduced the metric system and bilingualism, abolished capital punishment, and introduced other controversial firearm laws; and former Conservative governments negotiated the “free trade agreement” with the United States and imposed the Goods and Services Tax. None of these positions was initially popular, but some gained support with the passage of time (Gallup 1975 - 1997).

The Firearms Act was rushed through Parliament by a determined Liberal leadership. The rush resulted in a very bitter debate in parliament prior to passage. When the House of Commons voted on C-68 in 1995, the Liberal Party was opposed by three of the four opposition parties [Reform, the Progressive Conservatives, and the New Democrats].² The Liberal Party also had to subdue a revolt within its own ranks over the bill. Before the vote, many Liberal MP's had signaled their dissatisfaction with the bill, but in the end, party discipline held defections down to a minimum.

This scene was repeated in the Senate, where the issue again split both the Liberal and Conservative ranks. The Conservatives failed in their attempt to build a coalition to amend the bill, due to last-minute defections from their ranks. During the parliamentary hearings, four provincial governments testified against the bill prior to passage.³ After the bill passed, these same four provinces challenged the constitutionality of firearms registration in the Court of Appeal of Alberta. The court's decision is still awaited.⁴

One of the important institutional differences to note between the United States and Canada is that the Canadian Constitution places the primary responsibility for drafting criminal law with the federal government rather than with the Canadian provinces. This is in direct contrast with the United States, where individual

states have this power. Such centralization vastly simplifies the problem of passing national firearms legislation.

Another important difference is that special interest groups work more closely with government in Canada and many even receive a large portion of their operating income from government (Pross 1992). The Canadian government tends to rely upon bureaucratic consultation with certain interest groups. The groups with the best access to government are typically “institutional” groups rather than “issue-oriented” groups (Pross 1975: 10-12). Some authors worry that this is “dangerous to the spirit of liberal democracy” (Prycz 1985: 370).

With respect to the issue of gun control, most of the interest groups that have traditionally opposed additional firearms legislation have been ad hoc, poorly organized, poorly financed, and tended to be somewhat evanescent (Friedland 1984: 75-85; Kopel 1992: 165-167). This contrasted with the situation on the side supporting additional legislation, where they consisted of “institutional” groups, such as the Canadian Bar Association and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.

In addition, the Canadian Justice Department has worked quite closely with selected “issue oriented” pro-control groups. For example, a representative for the Coalition for Gun Control appeared at the side of the Justice Minister at public meetings during the period Bill C-68 was being debated in Parliament. Afterwards, the same representative was invited to appear at international meetings discussing gun control as “independent” spokespersons (Pankiw 1998).

WHY DID THE LIBERALS INTRODUCE C-68?

Three alternatives are the most important to consider: First, the legislation was a policy response to perceived social problems. Second, the Liberals were reacting to a strong public demand. And third, that the bill was introduced primarily for partisan strategic reasons. I will argue that the latter possibility is

the most likely reason that the Liberal government has been so insistent on firearms registration

The first alternative to be discussed is the government's claim that the bill was introduced as a policy response. This is unlikely for several reasons, even though this is precisely what the government claims. The Justice Minister, Allan Rock, who introduced Bill C-68 and who shepherded through the Parliament argued repeatedly that the primary reason for stricter gun control was that Canadians "... do not want to live in a country in which people feel they want or need to possess a firearm for protection. That is the first principle we take as a guiding principle for the preparation of legislation in terms of the regulation of firearms" (Hansard 1995, p 9706). Rock also stressed the symbolic side of Canadian gun control. Bill C-68 symbolized a 'kinder, gentler society' that "... sets us apart [from the United States]" and will prevent "... Canada's streets from deteriorating into American-style war zones where guns are the norm rather than the exception" (Vienneau 1995: A1).

The Liberals first proposed their new firearms legislation—including universal firearms registration—in 1993 just two years after the previous Progressive Conservative government had introduced sweeping firearms legislation [Bill C-17].⁵ The implementation of Bill C-17 had just begun in 1993 and was not completely in force until late in 1994. Canada's Auditor General was critical of the government for introducing additional firearm legislation without having conducted an evaluation of the previous legislation (Auditor General, 1994). Moreover, Bill C-17 was the first major overhaul of the firearms legislation since 1977 and it had been drafted to address the perceived deficiencies with the existing firearms legislation.⁶ What would later become the central feature of Bill C-68, universal firearms registration, had not been publicly demanded by any of the key institutional actors. During the debate on C-17, the Chiefs of Police, the Chair of the Justice Committee in the House of Commons, and the Justice Minister herself, had all testified that they did not need or want

firearms registration.⁷ In fact, the Chiefs of Police even testified that it would not achieve anything worthwhile (Hansard 1991).

One of the arguments made in 1991 by the Chiefs of Police was that many firearms owners would not register their firearms. This statement was empirically supported in a later survey, where nearly thirty percent of firearms owners stated they would not register their firearms (Mauser and Buckner 1997). This refusal rate is consistent with the experience in other Commonwealth countries (Kopel 1992). Opposition of this magnitude suggests that registration violates the timeless principles of policing, developed by Sir Robert Peel in 1822, that were based upon the recognition that the police must gain the cooperation of the public in order to be effective.⁸

However, the best argument that the firearms bill was motivated by policy may be that the government was more concerned about civil unrest than about criminal violence.⁹ If so, these concerns were downplayed during the parliamentary debate over C-68. Simmering just under the surface of Canadian politics are the tensions due to unresolved disputes over native land claims and the demands of Québec separatists. These disputes both have long histories, and they have the potential to erupt into violence. In 1990, a conflict between the Sûreté du Québec (the Québec provincial police) and the Mohawk Warriors at Oka resulted in the death of one police officer and a two month siege of the reserve (Wright 1992).

During the debate on Bill C-68, Allan Rock stated that, a “national registry of all gun owners and firearms will help police track paramilitary groups in Canada,” and that firearm registration, “... among other things would tell you if someone is stockpiling firearms,” (Durkan 25 April 1995). At the time, Opposition MP’s accused Rock of “trying to cash in” on the bombing at Oklahoma City that had been (falsely) linked to “militia groups,” but the government’s real concerns may have much closer to home (Durkan 26 April 1995). On 30 October 1995, while Bill C-68 was being debated in the Senate, Québec held a referendum on separating from Canada. It was a

squeaker. Barely 51% of *Québec* voters cast their ballots in support of Canada. While the majority of francophone Québécois supported a sovereign Québec, non-francophones rejected independence. Aboriginal communities in Québec even held their own referenda, and stated that they intended to remain a part of Canada, “by whatever means necessary,” and to take the northern third of Québec with them (Stewart and Contenta 1995: A1; Came 1995). It would not be surprising then that the government feared violence should Québec unilaterally declare its independence (Stewart and Contenta 1995: A1, A11).

The second alternative is that the Liberals were responding to a strong public demand. This does not appear likely either. Despite media polls showing public support for additional gun laws, there was no significant media pressure on the government urging tighter gun laws. Not only had there been no firearms tragedies since Marc Lépine shot fourteen female students to death at the *École Polytechnique* in 1989, but opinion surveys showed that the public was not particularly concerned about crime or firearm laws in the early 1990’s (See Tables 1 - 3). Even Canadian feminists, who were among the groups who had pushed for Bill C-17, and who usually are among the strongest supporters of any additional legislation, were relatively quiet at the time. There appeared to be a general satisfaction with the previous firearms legislation among most pro-control groups.

Table 1. Perceptions of Importance of Problems Facing Canada

Q1. “In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Canada today?”

Category	Number	Percent
The deficit/government spending	460	31%
Unemployment/job creation	305	20
The recession	18	1
The economy	225	15
Crime/violence	46	3

The environment	14	1
Education/training	10	1
Other	359	24
Don't know	6	4
Total responses	1,505	100%

Source: Mauser and Buckner 1997.

Surveys showed that the public believed that violent crime was increasing, but polls also showed that the public did not view gun control as a solution to violent crime. Table 2 shows that 80% of the Canadian public who had an opinion believed that violent crime was increasing, while only 20% thought it was staying the same or decreasing. What public pressure there was lay in a popular demand for stricter sentences for violent criminals, and other Draconian changes to the justice system, including capital punishment.

Table 2. Canadian Perceptions of Violent Crime

Q2. “Would you say that violent crime has increased, decreased or stayed the same in Canada over the past ten years?”

Answer	Number	Percent
Increased a great deal	680	45%
Increased somewhat	531	35
Stayed the same	193	13
Decreased somewhat	55	4
Decreased a great deal	1	0
Don't know	45	3
Total responses	1,505	100%

Source: Mauser and Buckner 1997.

Table 3 shows that while 23% wanted changes to the justice system, including increased prison sentences and even a return of the death penalty, only 4% volunteered that they wanted stricter

gun laws or wanted to ban types of firearms in order to reduce violent crime. Despite the strong public support for capital punishment, the government made no effort to bring back the noose.

Table 3. Popular Suggestions For Dealing With Violent Crime

Q3. “What do you think should be done about reducing violent crime?” [categorized responses to an open ended question]

Response Category	Frequency	Percent of Responses
Justice [including 158 - “bring back the death penalty.”]	578	38%
Education/Television [including 81 - “reduce violence on TV.”]	231	15
Gun Control	55	4
Responses in two or more of the above categories	59	4
Other Responses/Don't Know	582	39%
Total	1,505	100%

Source: Mauser and Buckner (1997)

It is curious that, even though the government claimed that the new gun bill had been demanded by the public, there were no public rallies to support Bill C-68. The government staged several media events when the bill was before Parliament, but there were no public rallies in support of tighter gun laws. On the other hand, there were dozens of rallies to oppose Bill C-68—drawing between ten and fifty thousand people each—held in almost all of the provinces. Political support for the bill came primarily from groups funded by government—the Chiefs of Police, some public health groups,¹⁰ and the Coalition for Gun Control.¹¹ The

opposition was much more diverse and drew from grassroots organizations, such as recreational firearms groups and aboriginal groups.

Finally, let us turn to the third alternative, that the bill was motivated primarily by partisan considerations and introduced in order to gain a strategic advantage. Despite the lack of enthusiastic public support, there were solid strategic reasons for introducing additional gun control legislation. The Liberals are pragmatic enough to appropriate issue positions from the opposition if they believe that adopting [or even appearing to adopt] such positions will keep them in office. The Liberal Party of Canada has earned the sobriquet of the “only natural governing party of Canada.”

Throughout the nineties, the Liberals have been under pressure from both the Reform Party and the Progressive Conservatives. Reform was attracting political support from voters to the right of the Liberal Party because of its positions on both the economy and criminal justice. Reform stressed the importance of balancing the budget as well as “getting tougher” on violent criminals. These policies were attractive to many voters, particularly in Western Canada. In response, the Liberal Finance Minister, Paul Martin, was dragging the Liberal policy to the right on budget cutting and taxation. This did not sit well with traditional Liberal voters.

As strange as it may seem, the Progressive Conservatives were threatening the Liberals from their left. Under their youthful leader, Jean Charest, the Progressive Conservatives were attracting support from young urban voters in Central and Eastern Canada. Not only was Charest a “red Tory,” but Charest’s youthfulness threatened the much older Liberal leader, Jean Chretien.¹² One of the reasons the Liberals thought was the PC’s had made inroads in urban Canada was their reputation as having passed strict new gun laws [Kim Campbell’s Bill C-17]. Given the greater political importance of Central Canada (Ontario and Québec), the Liberals decided the PC’s constituted the more dangerous threat. Realistically, they could afford to lose the

western vote, but they could not lose the urban vote. The young urban voter was, and is, at the heart of the Liberal constituency. What better way to counter any perceived “drift to the right” on economic policy than by taking a strong position on a symbolic issue, such as gun control, that appealed to their youthful urban supporters? Moreover, there was considerable support for universal firearm registration within the federal Justice Department, since it would create a large number of jobs.¹³ Thus, the Liberals could simultaneously pose as fiscal conservatives and act to expand the Ottawa bureaucracy.

Perhaps more importantly, Allan Rock, the Justice Minister was looking for an issue to ignite his drive to succeed Jean Chretien (Fife 1993, 1997; Fisher 1994). The Justice portfolio has traditionally been prized as a stepping stone that can lead directly to the Prime Minister’s office (Crosbie 1997: 269). It could not have escaped Rock’s attention that gun control appealed more strongly to the heart of the Liberal support in urban Canada than did fiscal conservatism.

The third alternative, that the introduction of the bill was primarily motivated by partisan strategy, appears to be the most likely. Allan Rock and the Liberals introduced universal firearms registration principally to gain strategic political advantage for themselves and for their party. Despite this, it was useful to claim that this policy was introduced based upon a solid policy analysis and was very popular. The Liberals used “political marketing” techniques in an effort to convince the Canadian public that this policy was both popular and endorsed by the “experts.” The nature of political marketing has been outlined earlier [Mauser 1983; Margolis and Mauser 1989a; Page and Shapiro 1987].

Some of the unsavory marketing techniques used by the Liberal government to simulate popular support for the policy included publicizing misleading polls, staging media events, and promoting biased experts. Throughout the debate on Bill C-68, the media and the Liberals referred repeatedly to only one superficial survey question, conducted for the Coalition for Gun Control, as proof of popular support for firearm registration (Reid

1993).¹⁴ The Liberals turned local visits of the Attorney General around the country into media events to gain support for Bill C-68. Ironically, these visits were billed as attempts to “consult” with various groups, but in reality they were carefully timed to correspond with public rallies against Bill C-68 in order to upstage the opponents of firearm registration. In Parliament, the federal government’s argument relied upon biased and unscientific experts (for example, Thomas Gabor, Martin Killias).¹⁵ The Justice Department justified the need to register rifles and shotguns—“field and stream” guns—by releasing its own studies that claimed that such guns constituted about half of the guns “involved” in criminal violence (Canadian Firearms Centre, July 1997).¹⁶

Table 4. Attitude Toward The Right to Own a Firearm

Q: “Do you agree or disagree that Canadian Citizens should have the right to own a firearm?”

Responses	Atlantic	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	BC	Canada
Agree Strongly	31%	11%	34%	41%	33%	29%
Agree Somewhat	40	25	28	33	29	29
Disagree Somewhat	13	22	11	13	10	14
Disagree Strongly	16	42	27	13	28	28
(N= 1,505)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Note: only those voters expressing an opinion are included.

Before it is possible to determine the role firearm registration played in the 1997 election, it is necessary to examine Canadian opinions about firearms and gun control. The real battleground is over basic values. The most important value in determining a person’s support or opposition to firearm registration is the belief

in the right to own a firearm. Table 4 shows that Canadians are profoundly divided over whether or not there is a “right to own a firearm.” A majority (58%) of those who have an opinion think that Canadians should have the right to own a firearm, while a minority (42%) disagree, often strongly. This division is reflected for the most part all across the country, with the most rural provinces (the Prairies and Atlantic Canada) showing the most support, while the most urban provinces (Québec and Ontario) disagreeing the most strongly. It is important to point out that Canadian firearm owners are not insisting upon the “right to keep and bear arms,” as are their American cousins, but they are merely asking for the privilege to continue to own and use firearms within a framework of laws.

Table 5. Perceived Effectiveness of Further Firearms Regulations.

Q10. “If there were stricter regulations for authorized firearms owners, would you say that the violent crime rate would increase, decrease, or stay the same?”

Responses	Atlantic	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	BC	Canada
Effective	44%	55%	38%	29%	41%	42%
Not Effective	56	45	62	71	59	58
(N= 1,505)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

NB. “Increase,” and “stay the same” have been combined as “not effective.”

Canadians are also profoundly divided over their beliefs about the effectiveness of further gun legislation. First, we asked how they believed that stricter regulations on firearms owners would influence the violent crime rate. To simplify the presentation, the answers to this question have been condensed into two categories, “effective” and “ineffective,” and “don’t knows” have been dropped.¹⁷ Over half (58%) of the respondents who had an opinion, said that stricter regulations would be ineffective

in lowering the violent crime rate. Only in Québec did a majority (55%) think that stricter regulations would be effective in reducing criminal violence. (See Table 5). Prairie respondents were the most likely (71%) to think that stricter regulations would be ineffective.

Table 6. Opinion Toward Universal Firearms Registration.

Q: “Do you agree or disagree that all firearms should be registered?”

Responses	Atlantic	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	BC	Canada
Agree	84%	95%	86%	73%	82%	84%
Disagree/DK	16	5	14	27	18	16
(N = 1,505)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Second, we asked Canadians directly about universal firearm registration. Our results mirrored those of other polls that have asked this same question. (See Table 6). We found 86% of respondents supported registering firearms, as did a survey by Angus Reid conducted for the Coalition for Gun Control (Reid 1993).

In public opinion research, a distinction must be made between mass opinion and public judgment. Many respondents will readily volunteer opinions without thinking very deeply about the question; for example, it is easy to agree that poverty should be reduced. But if they are asked to take money out of their own paycheck to do it, many quickly realize that public issues involve making difficult tradeoffs.

This is also true with universal firearm registration. Registration sounds like a good idea so long as it does not involve any cost or inconvenience. However, opinion shifts on firearm registration when the public realizes that it will cost a fair amount of money and divert police officers resources to shuffling paperwork (Wade and Tennuci 1994).

Table 7. Public Judgment of Universal Firearms Registration (high cost).

Q: “If it would cost \$500 million, would you still think that all firearms should be registered?” [Only asked of those Rs who answered they “agree strongly or somewhat.”]

Responses	Atlantic	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	BC	Canada
Agree	45%	57%	52%	38%	50%	50%
Disagree/DK	55	43	48	62	50	50
(N = 1,505)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 8. Public Judgment of Universal Firearms Registration (fewer constables)

Q: “If registration would force the police to pull constables off the street to deal with the paperwork involved, would you still [agree strongly or somewhat] that all firearms should be registered?” [Only asked of those Rs who answered they “agree strongly or somewhat.”]

Responses	Atlantic	Québec	Ontario	Prairies	BC	Canada
Agree	42%	52%	42%	30%	43%	43%
Disagree/DK	58	48	58	70	57	57
(N = 1,505)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 7 shows that support for firearm registration drops over thirty points (to 50%), when respondents are told that it might cost \$500 million to register all firearms in Canada, and it drops to only 43% when the trade-off is a reduction in the number of constables on the street. (See Table 8). These are not merely hypothetical trade-offs. The most recent cost of registration has been estimated as being \$480 million for the first four years. While Bill C-68 was before Parliament, the true cost

had been estimated as falling between \$500 million and \$1.5 billion (Mauser 1995 a, b). Fears of reduced police manpower appear to have been realized, even though few constables have been directly reassigned to shuffling paperwork. The RCMP budget has been virtually frozen since 1993, while the budget for firearms registration has continued to grow. At the same time the Canadian Firearms Centre has swollen to 126 employees, the total number of police officers has declined (Breitkreuz 1998). Canada now has the lowest number of police officers per capita since 1972 (Statistics Canada, 1996).

How successful was the Liberals' strategy? If universal firearms registration was introduced primarily to improve the electoral fortunes of the federal Liberal Party, then the test lies in analyzing the results of the 1997 federal elections. At first glance, it is easy to argue that the promotion of tighter gun laws helped the Liberals since they did after all win re-election in 1997, even though they did so by the smallest majority of any party this century.¹⁸ Moreover, the issue of firearms registration did help the Liberals by splitting the opposition parties. Reform strongly opposed firearm registration, the BQ supported it, while both the PC the NDP were badly divided over gun registration and so neither party took a firm position on the issue during the 1997 election campaign. The leaders of both the PC and the NDP took public stands on registration that differed from their party's official platform. Although the Liberals emerged from the election with fewer seats than before, the Liberals now face four opposition parties in the House of Commons that are badly divided. Despite their tenuous victory, the Liberals should be able to hold onto power if they can keep their own MPs in line.

A closer analysis suggests that the issue of firearms registration hurt the Liberals more than it helped them. The Liberal victory in 1997 badly divided the country. The Liberals drew the vast bulk of their seats (101 out of 155) from Ontario, without even winning a majority of the vote in that province. Nor could the Liberals win a majority of seats in any other region: they won only 13 out of 32 seats in the Maritimes, 26 out of 75 in

Québec, and a dismal 15 out of the 88 seats in the West. The Reform Party has emerged over the past decade to become the strongest opponent to the Liberals. In the 1997 elections, the Reform Party became Her Majesty's Official Opposition. This success has been driven in part by the strong public anger against firearm registration.

Despite this narrow, divisive win, firearm registration might still have contributed to the Liberals' success. The key is to find evidence that shows that the issue helped [or hurt] the Liberals win votes. The data available is scanty, but what evidence we have supports the contrary, that opposition to firearm registration helped the Reform Party, but support for registration did not win votes the Liberals.

To assess the impact of registration in the election, it is necessary to look at each region separately. In BC and the Prairie provinces, the Reform Party and pro-firearm rights groups succeeded in making Bill C-68 an issue. In BC, for example, pro-firearms groups spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on radio and print ads during the election campaign to attack the Liberals for their stand on firearm registration. In BC and in the Prairie provinces, Reform candidates increased their share of the vote, while the Liberals were reduced to winning a few seats in the downtown core of the bigger cities.

In Ontario, with fully one-third of the seats in Parliament, Bill C-68 never became an important issue. While surveys showed that support for firearm registration remained strong in Ontario, the issue was dominated by other issues, such as concern about the deficit and the high levels of unemployment. Moreover, public support for registration was divided among Liberals, PCs, and the NDP. Reform may have performed poorly in Ontario, but the Liberals did not gain votes in Ontario from bringing in firearm registration due to the split among the pro-control vote.

East of Ontario, Reform won minimal support. In Québec, Reform's message of "new federalism," fell flat. Reform has capitalized upon popular resentment against the status quo, but Québec has too much to gain by maintaining the status quo. The

issue of firearm registration was dominated by issues of national unity, and so did not become an important issue. Surveys showed that support for registration was higher in Québec than anywhere in Canada, but the Liberals could not capitalize on this sentiment because all parties campaigned in favor of stricter firearm legislation.

Reform's fiscal conservative message fell on deaf ears in the Maritimes due to their economy's traditional dependency upon federal largess. Even though opposition to firearm registration was strong, Bill C-68 did not become an important issue because economic concerns dominated the election. While opposition to the Liberals was strong, it was divided between the *PCs* and the *NDP*.

In conclusion, popular support for firearm registration did not materialize in the 1997 federal elections, while opposition to firearms registration was one of the factors that propelled the Reform Party to the status of Official Opposition. Support for firearm registration did not appear to emerge as an important issue in Central or Eastern Canada. Not only was firearm registration dominated by other concerns outside of Western Canada, but support for stricter gun laws was divided among several parties. Thus, no party managed to profit from their support for additional firearm controls. On the other hand, opposition to Bill C-68 was one of the important factors in the Reform Party winning many of its seats in Western Canada.

Conclusions

The Canadian decision to bring in universal firearms registration (Bill C-68) in 1995 has proven to be extremely divisive. The principal features of Bill C-68 did not have strong popular support. Importantly, support was lacking for firearm registration. The firearm legislation backfired on the Liberals in that it did not prove to be helpful in winning votes in the 1997 federal elections. Worse, from the Liberal point of view, this

legislation was the one of the most important issues propelling the Reform Party to the status of Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

I have tried to show in this article that the introduction of this Draconian firearm legislation was the result of political marketing, not sound policy analysis. Nor did the driving force for more gun legislation originate in public pressure for additional controls. It was driven instead by the government's partisan strategy; support was limited to the downtown core areas of most provinces. The results of the 1997 Canadian federal elections are consistent with the argument that pro-control opinion is more weakly held than anti-control opinion. Kleck has argued, and I think persuasively, that concrete and immediate personal costs drive behavior more powerfully than do abstract shared benefits that may or may not materialize (Kleck 1991).

Gun control is an excellent example of the pitfalls of governing by poll. A majority is always in favor of "more" gun control, since few people are familiar with the current laws, and many are concerned about violence and firearm misuse. Few will feel thankful towards the government when new laws are introduced and prove to have minimal effect on crime, violence, or perhaps more importantly, on media reports of crime. Many voters will remain ignorant of the "new" laws, even though they will still support "more" gun control. Thus, there is little reason for them to support the party that brought in the new gun control laws.

On the other hand, the gun owners, who bear the burden of complying with the new laws, will view the laws as a constant irritant and a reminder that they have been singled out for discriminatory treatment. Consequently, gun owners are motivated to vote against the government. In the 1997 Canadian elections, gun owners, even though a minority, played a decisive role in the success of the Reform Party. Even though the Liberals won, they will face another election before firearms registration becomes mandatory.

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ENDNOTES

1 Both the Liberals and the Conservatives when they were in government have expelled members who did not toe the party line. Members who vote against the government on any bill, or who even publicly disagree with the governing party, are excluded from committee assignments or they may even be expelled from the party.

2 Perhaps surprisingly, the only opposition party to support Bill C-68 was the Bloc Québécois. The Bloc is an avowedly separatist party and is very tightly controlled by its leadership. Despite strict party discipline, the BQ whip reportedly had to physically restrain some of its rural members who tried to vote against the bill. Even though polls show that Québec has the highest percentage of support for C-68, there was considerable opposition among rural Québécois.

3 These provinces were Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. The provincial government of British Columbia officially straddled the fence. It neither supported nor opposed the legislation or the legal challenge.

4 The court originally was expected to have announced its decision in December of 1997; no decision has been announced as of the end of June 1998.

5 The Liberals swept into power in 1993 primarily because of widespread public anger at the former PC government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, who stepped down immediately before the elections, handing over power to the former Attorney General Kim Campbell.

6 Political as well as scholarly opinion is that the previous firearm legislation had been ineffective in reducing criminal violence (Mauser and Holmes, 1992).

7 Interestingly, the history of Canada's previous efforts to introduce universal firearm registration did not become an issue during this debate. In 1920 and again in 1940, Canada tried unsuccessfully to register all firearms. Both times the attempts failed due to widespread non-compliance (Smithies 1998).

8 Peel's principle #3 of 9 states, "To recognize always that to secure and maintain the respect and approval of the public means also the securing of willing cooperation of the public in the task of securing observance of laws." (Rieth, 1948). And Principle #4: "To recognize always that the extent to which the cooperation of the public can be secured diminishes, proportionately, the necessity of the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives."

9 Both of the times that firearm registration has been introduced in Canada, according to recently available historical records, it may have been introduced because of fears of social unrest (Smithies 1998).

10 The Canadian medical community split over C-68. The Canadian Medical Association, the largest medical group, declined to take a position, but a few smaller groups strongly supported C-68 (e.g., Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians).

11 The Coalition for Gun Control was directly supported by several municipalities, including both Toronto and Montreal, a few police organizations, e.g., the Ottawa Police Department, and it is alleged that the CGC was also covertly funded by the Canadian Department of Justice. Not only did the CGC appear to always manage to have a speaker by the side of the Attorney General during his cross-country trips to "consult" with the public when the bill was before Parliament,

but their President, Wendy Cukier, more recently has attended United Nations' workshops on international firearm regulation chaired by the Canadian officials from the Department of Justice (Pankiw, January 19, 1998).

12 Illustrative of just loosely party labels are linked to ideology, early in 1998, Charest resigned as leader of the federal PCs to become the Leader of the Québec Liberals.

13 At the same time that over 44,000 public sector jobs were lost in Ottawa, the number of employees in the Canadian Justice Department actually increased (Government of Canada, 1993 budget).

14 The publication of biased polls in nothing new for the media (Mauser and Kopel, 1992).

15 For a thorough description of the problems with the "pseudo-research" of these authors see Gary Kleck (1997).

16 The RCMP Commissioner J.P.R. Murray objected to this misuse of their statistics in an letter to the federal Justice Minister that was eventually obtained through a Freedom of Information Request and released to the Canadian public by Reform MP Garry Breitkreuz (Worthington 1998).

17 If the respondent said he thought that stricter regulations would cause the crime rate to "decrease somewhat" or "decrease a great deal," his response was categorized as indicating he thought that the gun regulations would be "effective." If he said the crime rate would "increase somewhat," "increase a great deal," or "stay the same," his response was categorized as indicating he thought that the gun regulations would be "ineffective."

18 The Liberals won only 155 seats out of a possible 301, giving them a majority of only three seats when the Speaker of the House is deducted. (The Speaker is traditionally chosen from the ranks of the majority party).