

11/22/2013

Poll: Iowa law granting firearm permits to blind people has little support

Iowans have divided opinions on the issue of gun control in general, but strong opinions on granting firearms to the visually impaired and mandatory background checks. A University of Iowa Hawkeye Poll conducted Nov. 10 through Nov. 17 of over 1,000 Iowans found that a vast majority of Iowa residents believe that legally or completely blind people should not be granted permits to carry firearms. 79.2% of respondents opposed or strongly opposed the 2011 Iowa state law, which allows legally or completely legally blind people to obtain a permit to carry a firearm in public. Although Republicans and gun owners were more likely to support the law, opposition remained around 75%. Respondents also strongly supported mandatory background checks (91%).

There is significant variation in support for the law that allowed blind people to obtain firearms across different groups. Democrats are more opposed to the policy (90%) than Republicans (76.4%) or Independents (75.9%). Gun owners are more supportive of the policy than respondent households with no guns (opposition for gun owners 73.8% compared to 87.8%); urban respondents more opposed than suburban or rural residents (85.1%, 82.6% and 73.5% respectively); and women more opposed than men (84.9% compared to 73.2%).

[Topline results are available at <http://clas.uiowa.edu/polisci/research/hawkeye-poll>]

The issue of gun permits for the visually impaired gained local, national and international attention after an in-depth report by the Des Moines Register. By state law, sheriffs may not deny an Iowan the right to carry a weapon based on physical ability. Citizens must complete a safety certification to demonstrate knowledge of firearm safety in order to obtain a gun permit, which can be completed online.

Critics of the current policy argue in favor of reasonable limitations on personal liberties for the sake of public safety, such as restrictions on driving privileges for the visually impaired. Proponents of the law argue that denying a gun permit on the basis of a physical disability violates the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Second Amendment, and the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection clause. They also argue that visually impaired people are more likely to be victims of criminal acts and that legally blind people who cannot drive may still be able to safely use a firearm.

Johnson County Sheriff Lonny Pulkrabek laments, "I do not support visually impaired carrying guns in public but I do support them having the ability to own and have them in their home. The permit law when changed a couple of years ago went too far. The fact that people do not have to shoot and qualify as part of their required training is ridiculous."

The Gun Control Act of 1968 and other federal laws do not prohibit gun ownership on the basis of visual impairment. However, many neighboring states have policies that require "proof of vision" (such as Nebraska), require permit applicants to complete a live fire test (such as Missouri or

Minnesota), or require firearms training that includes range instruction (Illinois). Like Iowa, Wisconsin and South Dakota do not restrict permits on the basis of visual ability.

On the issue of gun control more generally, Iowans had divided opinions. 43.4% supported stricter gun control laws while 42.2% preferred keeping the current laws and 14.3% would make them less strict. Democrats favor more strict policies (64.4%), Republicans favor keeping the current policies (51.8%), and Independents are split between keeping the same policies (44.9%) and wanting more strict policies (40.4%). On the issue of background checks, there was strong bipartisan support: 91.9% of Democrats, 91.7% of Independents, and 84.9% of Republicans are supportive.

Despite public opposition, it is unlikely state gun laws will change. In a statement to the Des Moines Register, Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad's spokesperson Tim Albrecht said, "Our position on Iowa's gun laws remains the same as it has been for the last number of years. No changes."

Background: The Hawkeye Poll was conducted Nov. 10-17, 2013 by the Hawkeye Poll Cooperative, comprised of UI faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students in political science, with the cooperation and facilities of the Iowa Social Science Research Center, directed by UI Sociology Professor Kevin Leicht. The faculty adviser for the poll is UI Professor of Political Science Frederick J. Boehmke. The poll is a teaching, research and service project of the UI Department of Political Science. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Office of the Provost fund the poll.

Respondent identification: A random sample was acquired with 70 percent household landline numbers and 30 percent mobile phone numbers. For households, an initial attempt was made on answering the phone to reach the "youngest male who is 18 years or older." All who stated they were over age 18 and willing to participate in the survey were included.

Sample: 1038 participants, margin of error for full sample is +/- 3 percent. Among these respondents, 32.55 percent were Democrat, 26.72 percent Republican and 34.55 percent Independent. 46.49 percent considered themselves moderate, while 20.92 percent self-identified as liberal and 30.9 percent as conservative.

Weighting: Reported results are weighted by sex and age.

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