

House GOP Proposes to Repeal D.C. Gun Bans Vote May Come as Bush, Kerry Debate Limits

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A majority of the U.S. House of Representatives is supporting legislation that would repeal virtually all of the District's gun restrictions, targeting one of the nation's most stringent handgun bans while the presidential candidates are battling over gun limits.

Rep. Mark Edward Souder (R-Ind.) said House Republican leaders have promised him a vote before the Nov. 2 election on his proposed D.C. Personal Protection Act, which would end a ban on handguns in the nation's capital; remove a prohibition against semiautomatic weapons; lift registration requirements for ammunition and other firearms; and cancel criminal penalties for possessing unregistered firearms and carrying a handgun in one's home or workplace.

Souder's bill also would deny the District's elected officials "authority to enact laws or regulations that discourage or eliminate the private ownership or use of firearms." The legislation has 228 co-sponsors, more than enough to clear the 435-member House.

Both sides say prospects for passage are dubious in the U.S. Senate, where advocates of gun restrictions prevailed on two high-profile votes in March. Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), chairman of the Judiciary Committee, has sponsored a bill similar to Souder's that is languishing in a panel headed by Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine).

Souder, who lives in Northern Virginia when Congress is in session, said his proposal is based on the Second Amendment's guarantee of gun rights. "This is a constitutional issue, not a home rule question," Souder said. "The fact is, we didn't allow the District to have home rule on the selling of slaves, either."

Activists on both sides of the issue said yesterday that they hope to benefit from an election-season debate over the District's gun laws. Supporters of gun limits said the proposed repeal shows gun backers at their most extreme and draws attention to a flip-flop by President Bush on extending a 1994 federal ban covering some semiautomatic weapons. But House Republicans said they were eager to rally the party's gun-rights base, whose support has been pivotal in recent elections.

Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), the Democratic presidential nominee, appeared yesterday at the Thurgood Marshall Center in the District with Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) to criticize President Bush for allowing the federal assault weapons ban to expire Sunday night, despite his 2000 campaign pledge to support it.

After praising Kerry for "the courage of your leadership" to extend the ban, Norton said, "I have just learned that the House will shortly schedule an up-or-down vote to repeal all our local gun safety laws. . . . President Bush, who promised to support an effective assault weapons ban four years ago, would apparently allow the unlawful purchase and use of such weapons even in the nation's capital."

Bush has said that congressional Republicans know he would sign an extension of the federal ban if it reached his desk. Asked yesterday about Souder's proposed repeal of D.C. gun laws, Bush campaign spokesman Steve Schmidt declined to comment and referred questions to House GOP leaders.

Seven states and the District have their own versions of the assault weapons ban. Norton said that repealing the District's gun laws would worsen violence in the city, where 13 children have been killed by gunfire this year. She also cited the 2002 sniper attacks that killed 10 people in the region.

Souder drew the opposite conclusion from the city's history of violent crime. The District's homicide rate climbed 200 percent from 1976 to 2001, while the national rate grew 12 percent, Souder said. "No one can argue this law's effectiveness," he said. "For the 14th time in 15 years, they have the murder capital of the world title. At some point you say, 'This isn't working.' "

Senior Republican officials said a vote on the repeal would be held within the next month. Although the most recent challenge to the District's handgun ban was defeated in the House in 1999 by a vote of 250 to 175, 34 members who supported the ban have signed on as co-sponsors of the Souder bill.

But in the Senate, advocates of gun limits assembled 52- and 53-vote majorities, respectively, on amendments in March to extend the federal assault weapons ban and to close a loophole and require background checks of people who buy weapons at gun shows. The amendments became moot when the legislation to which they were attached was withdrawn.

Supporters of gun restrictions said the latest controversy would work to their advantage. "The repeal of the assault weapons ban, or the expiration of it, is not good national politics for Bush," said Jim Kessler, policy director of Americans for Gun Safety. "It gets them off their message, and also, this is a popular law."

Gun rights advocates disagreed. "I don't believe this is going to be an election-year issue in any of the competitive House races," said Carl Forti, House Republican campaign committee spokesman.

Referring to Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), Forti said, "I think Nancy Pelosi's worst nightmare is a vote on this issue because [rural Democrats and House moderates] don't vote with the Democrats. They have no choice; otherwise they'd be finished in electoral office."

Name:

Date:

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Reading Comprehension & Interpretation

After carefully reading over the article, review the following questions and answer in the space provided.

1. What is the “D.C. Personal Protection Act”? What would this act change?

2. How many cosponsors does the “D.C. Personal Protection Act” have? Do most members of the House of Representatives support the bill?

3. What state does Representative Mark Souder represent? Where does he live when he works in DC?

4. Do you agree or disagree with Rep. Souder’s comparison of gun control to slavery? Why?

5. Do you think that the DC Personal Protection Act will make the city safer? Why?

6. How many children were killed by gunfire in 2004?

7. How much did the District's homicide rate change between 1976 and 2001?
How much did the national rate change?

8. How do you feel when DC is called the "murder capital of the world?"

9. Does Rep. Souder believe that DC's gun safety laws should be decided by
Congress or by the DC government?

10. Who do you believe should decide DC's gun safety laws – the DC government or
Congress? Why?
