

Police pushback doesn't stop conservative gun law rollback

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FILE - In this May 22, 2021, file photo a handgun from a collection of illegal guns is reviewed during a gun buyback event in Brooklyn, N.Y. Gun violence is on the rise across the country and law enforcement agencies are struggling with how to manage the spikes, especially in cities. The federal government has stepped in with strike forces and other measures help to stop the sale of illegal weapons. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews, File)

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — The latest push to loosen gun laws in states across the U.S. has put police officers at odds with Republican lawmakers who usually trumpet support for law enforcement.

In states like Texas, Tennessee and Louisiana, police opposed pushes to drop requirements for people to get background checks and training before carrying handguns in public, plans that came as gun sales continued to shatter records during the coronavirus pandemic.

“We feel it was just another opportunity to get our officers hurt,” said Fabian Blache Jr., executive director of the Louisiana Chiefs of Police Association. “It was a danger to law enforcement.”

There, a last-ditch public plea by dozens of Louisiana law enforcement officers helped narrowly avert a push to override the Democratic governor's veto of legislation dropping concealed-carry permit requirements. But he expects the proposal to come back next year, and in several other conservative-leaning states police opposition didn't stop laws dropping permit requirements.

Gun violence is on the rise across the country and law enforcement agencies are struggling with how to manage the spikes, especially in cities. The federal government has stepped in with strike forces and other measures help to stop the sale of illegal weapons. Cops are already working at a disadvantage in

many cities over forces winnowed by retirements and difficulty attracting new officers following the massive police protests in 2020, and many see looser gun laws as one more challenge.

Not knowing who might be carrying a gun heightens the potential danger in any encounter, and less required training means more people who don't know how to properly handle a weapon, Blanche said.

"Police officers are trained around the country, and they make mistakes," he said. "So why are we going to give opportunity to people who are not trained to be able to carry a firearm and use it at will?"

In Tennessee this year, warnings from police chiefs and sheriffs didn't stop a push to drop permit requirements in the GOP-controlled state Legislature. That law passed months after another measure cracking down on protesters camping out for police reform, a vote that was framed as a support for law enforcement.

Though several polls have found public support for gun permits, arguments that they undermine Second Amendment rights have gained favor in conservative-leaning state governments in recent years.

"There is something of a disjunction between repeating the political slogan of 'back the blue' versus supporting policies that rank-and-file police and leaders of police organizations actually support," said Robert Spitzer, a professor at The State University of New York-Cortland and author of "The Politics of Gun Control."

Police opposition hasn't stopped a push to drop permitting requirements that's passed in about 20 states, Spitzer said. While their positions carry authority, they don't have the ad campaigns and lobbyists that overtly political interests often do.

"Their voices and opinions have been known, but they haven't been a real megaphone in public political terms because that puts them in a real bad spot. They're public servants and their job is to enforce the law, no matter what the law is," he said.

And permitless carry has supporters in law enforcement, including sheriffs, many of whom are in elected positions and oversee more rural areas. In Utah and Iowa, police groups were more divided generally stayed out of the debate this year.

Discussions about police reform dominated the conversation in Iowa, as well as how to stem the rise in violent crime, said Sam Hargadine, the Iowa Police Chiefs Association executive director. He doesn't see the permit question as a big piece of the violent-crime discussion, especially since chiefs already couldn't deny people permits.

"I think there's extremes on both sides. But there's got to be some compromises made, because we're having far too many shootings," he said.

Not all police oppose the legislation, and gun-rights advocates don't see a conflict between combating crime and making it easier for people to carry firearms. They argue that people generally don't get permits for guns used in violent crimes, so the change will make it easier for those who do follow the law to get a gun and many measures also tougher penalties for some gun crimes.

For Texas Republican James White, his party's differing with the chiefs of the state's largest cities on permit-less carry was part of the give-and-take of the legislative process.

"There were some things this session ... where we were consistent with where law enforcement would want to be, and there were sometimes that we just had to tell them we have to look a different direction," said White, an outgoing state lawmaker now running for agriculture commissioner.

He also touted the stronger penalties contained in the law for felons who carry guns illegally. "It was a very strong on crime, tough on crime deal," he said.

White argued the new law didn't represent a massive shift in a state where guns were allowed in cars without permits and licenses weren't required for long guns. Texas became the largest state to drop handgun licensing requirements this year, a move applauded by the National Rifle Association and other gun-rights advocates.

Alan Gottlieb with the Second Amendment Foundation argued that policing is already inherently dangerous and dropping permits won't make a big dent but will enhance gun rights. "I shouldn't need a permit to exercise my constitutional rights," he said.

Police opposition had helped keep the idea from gaining traction even in firearm-friendly Texas, but with a change in legislative leadership support swelled over the span of a few weeks this year. It passed over

objections from survivors of the mass shooting that killed 23 people at an El Paso Walmart two years ago.

“One thing I’ve learned in my many years of working with police is, you can rely on them to tell you what’s going to put the public at danger,” said Everytown For Gun Safety President John Feinblatt. “I think that what police know is that crime is rising around the country and this is the worst possible moment to pass laws like this.”