

# Commentary: Apply background checks for gun purchases to voting



A voter enters a booth at a polling place in Exeter, N.H., on Nov. 8, 2016. (Elise Amendola / AP)

By **John R. Lott Jr.**

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**R**epublicans worry about vote fraud. Democrats claim that Republicans are just imagining things. But in testimony Tuesday before the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, I will suggest a simple solution that could make both parties happy: Apply the background check system for gun purchases to voting.

Democrats have long lauded background checks on gun purchases as simple, accurate and in complete harmony with the Second Amendment right to own guns. Senate Minority Leader **Chuck Schumer**, D-N.Y., has bragged that the checks “make our communities and neighborhoods safer without in any way abridging rights or threatening a legitimate part of the American heritage.”

If Democrats really believe that the National Instant Criminal Background Check System doesn’t interfere “in any way” with people’s constitutional rights to own a gun, doesn’t it follow that the same system would not

constitute an infringement on people's right to vote? This would give Republicans a system for stopping vote fraud and Democrats a system that they have already vigorously endorsed.

The NICS system doesn't just determine if potential gun buyers have criminal histories. It also checks whether a person is in this country illegally, has a nonimmigrant visa or has renounced his citizenship. Such people are not allowed to vote. The system doesn't currently flag people who are on immigrant visas but who could be added to the system.

In 34 states, felons are not able to vote immediately upon release. The background-check system would detect these too.

Of course, Democrats and Republicans will continue to argue over whether illegal voting is a major problem.

Since Democrats believe that the NICS doesn't in any way interfere with or suppress gun ownership, how could it suppress legal voter registration? Thus, Democrats shouldn't have anything to worry about. If there doesn't turn out to be any vote fraud, Democrats can say that they were proved right.

But it is likely that Democrats will take issue with the NICS once it is applied to something other than gun purchases. NICS requires government-issued photo IDs, and Democrats have vehemently opposed voter ID laws. Moreover, the fees that gun buyers have to pay on private transfers can be quite substantial, ranging from \$55 in Oregon to \$175 in Washington, D.C., and would be compared to poll taxes. Because of the Constitution's 24th Amendment, the courts have struck down poll taxes as unconstitutional.

Still, I doubt that Democrats would concede that background check costs discourage gun ownership.

A simple solution is for the costs of the background checks to see if people are eligible to vote could be picked up by the states instead of being charged to people registering to vote. Possibly, once Democrats acknowledge this undue burden, we could talk about the government picking up the costs of background checks on gun purchases too.

Applying the NICS background checks to voting would undoubtedly elicit a long list of other concerns from Democrats about how the system interferes with people's right to vote. The debate could prove quite embarrassing for Democrats. Will they finally admit to the double standard? They are very concerned about getting poor people's votes, but they want to make it difficult for poor people to defend themselves.

*John R. Lott Jr. is the president of the Crime Prevention Research Center and is scheduled to testify Tuesday before the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity.*

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