

TIMES INSIDER

Quantifying the Influence of the N.R.A., With the Help of eBay

“The information you want is almost always out there somewhere,” writes Maggie Astor, a reporter for The Times’s politics desk.



By **Maggie Astor**

Aug. 27, 2019

Times Insider explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

Earlier this year, as I was reporting an article about how the gun control movement had evolved since the Sandy Hook shooting, one of my sources told me he saw the National Rifle Association’s influence waning in an unprecedented way.

Usually, this kind of comment wouldn’t have stood out to me. If you report on gun politics, you hear versions of it all the time from gun control advocates. The N.R.A., meanwhile, vehemently denies that it has lost any influence at all.

What made this interview different was that I happened to be in the middle of an intensive data training course that The Times offers every few months. I am a reporter on the politics desk, and I was learning spreadsheet and data analysis skills, and thinking hard about how I could use data in my reporting. What if, I thought, I could comprehensively quantify the N.R.A.’s influence and see whether it had changed?

You can tell it wasn’t easy because that was five months ago, and my article was just published. But I did answer the question: Although the N.R.A.’s influence is probably safe in the short term, with President Trump in the White House and Mitch McConnell in charge of the Senate, it’s clearly in danger in the long term.

The N.R.A. Has Trump. But It Has Lost Allies in Congress. Aug. 26, 2019



I was able to figure this out because of the letter grades the N.R.A. gives to politicians. I analyzed every grade — more than 5,000 — it had given to members of Congress since 2008, along with its roughly 1,700 endorsements.

The hardest part by far was collecting the data, because the N.R.A. doesn’t publicize its old grades anymore. I began with data published by The Trace and Everytown for Gun Safety, covering 2010 through 2018. But that was only a starting point. Because the data came from third parties, not directly from the N.R.A., I needed to meticulously verify it. I also needed data for 2008, because it would have been misleading to compare 2010 (a strong year for Republicans) to 2018 (a strong year for Democrats).

My first thought was to use the Wayback Machine, a digital library of archived internet sites, to find past versions of the N.R.A.'s website. I was able to confirm — or, for 2008, compile — about one third of the data that way. The problem was, each state had its own page, and not all of them had been archived in the narrow windows I needed. If, for instance, the only archive of California's page in 2008 was from April, I was out of luck because the grades hadn't yet been released then.

Pressing on, I found official statements from the N.R.A. announcing individual endorsements. A handful of its state affiliates had republished grades on their own websites. Some candidates had advertised their endorsements on their campaign websites. Some local newspapers had reported on grades and endorsements. Members of gun-rights message boards had occasionally posted screenshots of the N.R.A.'s voter guides.

But even after all this, I had only about three-quarters of the data, and no idea how to find the rest.

Then I stumbled on an article from September 2008 in which the N.R.A. told members to check the next month's issue of its official magazine, "American Rifleman," for a full list of grades and endorsements.

I ordered a back copy of the October 2008 issue — and, when it arrived, discovered that "next month's issue" meant the one labeled November 2008. When I ordered *that*, I found that it listed grades only for the subscriber's state. In other words, I would need copies of the same issue from all 50 states.

I went on Amazon and eBay and started messaging sellers, asking them what state the address label on their copy showed. Twice, I bought an entire year's worth of back issues just to get the November one. Yet I was still missing more than 400 grades from 2008.

That's when — expecting nothing — I emailed VoteSmart, a nonpartisan research organization that posts many interest groups' grades. I didn't see a full list of 2008 grades on its website, but I asked if they were available somewhere I was missing.

I got a response a few days later: VoteSmart had every grade and endorsement from 2008 in their files. They scanned the original documents: printouts from the N.R.A.'s website from back when the grades were posted there. Finally, after four months of work, I had the data I needed.

Compared with that, the data analysis was easy. For the spreadsheet nerds out there, I relied heavily on "if" statements and vlookup. I actually lay awake some nights, mulling how to get Google Sheets to do a particular bit of analysis.

The moral of the story is that the information you want is almost always out there somewhere — and also that I owe an apology to every math teacher to whom I used to complain: "I'm going to be a writer. I don't need this."

Follow the @ReaderCenter on Twitter for more coverage highlighting your perspectives and experiences and for insight into how we work.

Maggie Astor is a political reporter based in New York. Previously, she was a general assignment reporter and a copy editor for The Times and a reporter for The Record in New Jersey. @MaggieAstor

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 26, 2019, Section A, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Quantifying the Influence of the N.R.A.

READ 2 COMMENTS