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Candidates' gun control positions may figure in Pa. vote

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Chad Ramsey likes what he sees.

That worries Kim Stolfer.

Ramsey, the associate director of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, says each of the three presidential candidates has, to some degree, supported the center's efforts to regulate the gun trade. That hasn't been the case in an election year for a long time.

Stolfer says gun rights advocates such as himself shouldn't seriously consider Democratic Sens. Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, but added he has concerns about Republican Sen. John McCain.

Still, Ramsey said, when the Democratic Party picks a nominee to face McCain, "I think there will be plenty of stark differences between them."

Those differences could become an issue in the battle for Pennsylvania's 21 electoral votes in November. Although gun control hasn't occupied much time in the Democratic primary race between Clinton and Obama, Ramsey said that will change.

The candidates are scheduled to debate in Philadelphia on April 16, the one-year anniversary of the Virginia Tech massacre.

Gun control issues are always on the state electorate's mind to some degree, said Berwood Yost, director of the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster.

"It's an important variable in Pennsylvania politics" that goes beyond gun ownership, Yost said. "We think it's an assessment of cultural sensibilities."

About 1 million hunters make Pennsylvania first in the nation in the amount of time its citizens spend hunting each year, according to the state Game Commission. The National Rifle Association says Pennsylvania has one of the highest per-capita memberships among states, with hundreds of thousands of people affiliated with the group.

The gun trade is active, especially in Western Pennsylvania. Nearly 2 million guns were sold or transferred in the state from 2002-06, according to the Pennsylvania State Police. Allegheny County recorded more transactions than

any other, with more than 125,000 during those five years.

Clinton and Obama favor some kind of ban on assault weapons, something McCain opposes.

"I ... think we should reinstate the assault weapons ban (that expired in 2004) in order to give our police officers a fighting chance against the criminals on the street with these military-style assault weapons," Clinton said Tuesday.

All three candidates oppose creating a national handgun registry.

Rather than create a national registry, "I do think we have to do a better job sharing information between local and federal officials," Obama said yesterday. He differs with McCain and Clinton about whether people should be allowed to carry concealed guns. Clinton and McCain oppose outlawing it.

"I am not in favor of concealed weapons," Obama said. "I think that creates a potential atmosphere where more innocent people could (get shot during) altercations."

Obama and Clinton agree on most issues, NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandom said.

McCain, however, "was good on our issues for a very long time. ... For a brief period of time, from 1999 to 2003-04, he wasn't as good. But since 2004, he has voted with us 100 percent of the time."

That time he spent out of step with the nation's gun lobby concerns Stolfer, 53, of South Fayette, who said McCain's campaign finance reform bill nearly banned the group he leads, Firearm Owners Against Crime, from advertising in political campaigns.

"He's got some things to account for," said Stolfer, a firearms instructor and former Marine. "We've tried to contact the campaign, and they've basically said, 'Don't call us. We'll call you.' "

All three believe the Second Amendment gives individuals, not militias, the right to own guns. A landmark case before the Supreme Court is considering that question and whether to overturn the District of Columbia's ban on handguns.

"We are just at the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Second Amendment," said Dave Kopel, research director of the Independence Institute in Colorado. A member of the NRA and the American Civil Liberties Union, Kopel said no matter how the Supreme Court rules, politics will continue to drive decisions on gun control.

"That's why we don't have gun registration," Kopel said. "It's not because the courts stopped it. It's because the people stopped it."

With the pervasive gun culture in Pennsylvania, about 60 percent of its citizens

favor new gun control laws, according to an August Keystone Poll. That percentage has remained about the same since at least February 2000.

"There's always been some support for, I think, what you'd call reasonable gun control measures. Pennsylvanians aren't knee-jerk," said Franklin & Marshall's Yost. Support for stricter gun control "is going to be a deal-breaker for some people, but in the current climate, people are really concerned about the big issues -- getting the economy straight, getting Iraq solved in some reasonable way."

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