



# Developments in Constitutional Law: The Second Amendment

Prepared by: David Moore, Senior Staff Attorney

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides that: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the meaning of and protections afforded by this amendment in three landmark opinions, the most recent of which was issued in June 2022.

## ***DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA V. HELLER***

In *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008), the U.S. Supreme Court held that the District of Columbia’s ban on handgun possession in the home and its prohibition against rendering any lawful firearm in the home operable for the purpose of immediate self-defense violated the Second Amendment.<sup>1</sup> In reaching this conclusion, the Court interpreted the Second Amendment as providing an individual right to keep and bear arms for defensive purposes, unconnected with military service.

Drawing on a variety of founding-era sources, the Court explained that at the time the Second Amendment was ratified, Americans understood the right to keep and bear arms as “enabl[ing] individuals to defend themselves.”<sup>2</sup> The Court further observed that “it has always been widely understood that the Second Amendment, like the First and Fourth Amendments, codified a pre existing right,” an understanding buttressed by the Amendment’s directive that “it shall not be infringed.” According to the Court, “The debate with respect to the right to keep and bear arms ... was not whether it was desirable (all agreed that it was) but over whether it needed to be codified in the Constitution.” The purpose of the Amendment’s “prefatory clause,” referring to a well-regulated militia, then, is to explain why the right was codified, not to limit the right to that purpose.<sup>3</sup>

The Court cautioned, however, that this right is “not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose.” For example, the Court stated that its opinion should not “be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”<sup>4</sup>

## ***MCDONALD V. CITY OF CHICAGO***

Two years after *Heller*, the U.S. Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of ordinances enacted by the City of Chicago and the Village of Oak Park that, similar to the District of Columbia’s ordinances in *Heller*, effectively banned handgun possession by most city residents. The question in *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, 561 U.S. 742 (2010), was whether the Second Amendment applies to states, or only to the federal government.

In an 1833 opinion, the U.S. Supreme Court had held that the first eight amendments of the U.S. Constitution do not operate as limitations on the states, but apply only to the federal government.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, however, the Court began to hold that the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which was adopted following the Civil War, incorporates particular rights contained in the first eight amendments. While the Court’s approach to this process of incorporation varied during this period, the Court in *McDonald* characterized the primary inquiry in this process as “whether a particular Bill of Rights guarantee is fundamental to our scheme of ordered liberty and of justice,” or “deeply rooted in this Nation’s history and tradition.”<sup>6</sup>

The Court then observed that its opinion in *Heller* “points unmistakably to the answer” that the right to keep and bear arms is deeply rooted in this nation’s history and tradition and was considered to be fundamental by those who ratified the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> This continued to be true, according to the Court, at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted.<sup>8</sup> Concluding that “it is clear that the Framers and ratifiers of the Fourteenth Amendment counted the right to keep and bear arms among those fundamental rights necessary to our system of ordered liberty,”<sup>9</sup> the Court held that the individual right to keep and bear arms for defensive purposes, articulated in *Heller*, is fully binding on the states. The Court clarified that while this guarantee limits the ability of states to devise solutions to social problems that suit local needs and values, it does not eliminate it.

## ***NEW YORK STATE RIFLE & PISTOL ASSOCIATION V. BRUEN***

In *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen*, 597 U.S. \_\_\_ (2022), the U.S. Supreme Court held that the Second Amendment’s protection of an individual’s right to carry a handgun for self-defense extends outside the home. In that case, the Court considered the constitutionality of a New York law that required a person to demonstrate “proper cause” to receive a license to possess a handgun. Very generally, the law provided that a license to possess a handgun could only be issued to a person who satisfies eligibility criteria and has a legally recognized reason to possess a handgun, such as possession on certain types of premises or in connection with certain types of employment. A person who wished to carry a handgun without regard to employment or place of possession was required to demonstrate to a local licensing official that “proper cause exists.”

The Court struck down this “proper cause” requirement, concluding that the Second Amendment’s protections may not be conditioned on “demonstrating to government officers some special need.”<sup>10</sup> In reaching this conclusion, the Court also explained how courts must evaluate Second Amendment claims. Rejecting the application of means-end scrutiny to these claims,<sup>11</sup> the Court held that “when the Second Amendment’s plain text covers an individual’s conduct, the Constitution presumptively protects that conduct” and for such a regulation to be upheld, the government must demonstrate “that it is consistent with the Nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation.”<sup>12</sup> As an example, the Court noted one category of laws for which there is a historical record of firearm regulation are prohibitions on carrying firearms in certain “sensitive places.” It observed that “courts can use analogies to those historical regulations ... to determine that modern regulations prohibiting the carry of firearms in new and analogous sensitive places are constitutionally permissible.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> District of Columbia ordinances criminalized carrying an unregistered firearm and prohibited the registration of a handgun. They also prohibited carrying a handgun without a license, but allowed the chief of police to issue licenses for a one-year period. An additional ordinance required that lawfully owned firearms in a home be kept unloaded and disassembled or trigger-locked.

<sup>2</sup> *Heller*, 554 U.S. at 594.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 577, 591, and 598.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 626-27.

<sup>5</sup> *Barron ex rel. Tiernan v. Mayor of Baltimore*, 32 U.S. 243.

<sup>6</sup> *McDonald*, 561 U.S. at 764 and 767 (citations and internal emphasis omitted).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 767-69.

<sup>8</sup> The Court identified as “The most explicit evidence of Congress’ aim [in its efforts to safeguard the right to keep and bear arms following the Civil War] ... Section 14 of the Freedmen’s Bureau Act of 1866, which provided that ‘the right ... to have full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings concerning personal liberty, personal security, and the acquisition, enjoyment, and disposition of estate, real and personal, including the constitutional right to bear arms, shall be secured to and enjoyed by all the citizens ... without respect to race or color, or previous condition of slavery.’” *Id.* at 773 (citations and emphasis omitted).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 778.

<sup>10</sup> *Bruen*, 579 U.S. at \_\_\_ (slip. op., at 62-63).

<sup>11</sup> Subsequent to *Heller* and *McDonald*, federal courts had coalesced around an approach in which a court first analyzed whether a challenged law burdens conduct protected by the Second Amendment. If the court concluded it did, the court then analyzed the government’s justification for restricting or regulating the right infringed by using a form of “means-end scrutiny.” Means-end scrutiny refers to a framework in which a court applies one of the following levels of scrutiny to a challenged law: (a) rational basis, which requires a law be rationally related to a legitimate governmental purpose; (b) intermediate scrutiny, which requires that the regulation be substantially related to an important governmental interest; or (c) strict scrutiny, which requires the state demonstrate that the regulation is narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling state interest.

<sup>12</sup> *Bruen*, 579 U.S. at \_\_\_ (slip. op., at 15).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* (slip. op., at 21). Concurring opinions written separately by Justice Alito and Justice Kavanaugh both directly reaffirm *Heller* and *McDonald* as to permissible restrictions on the possession or carrying of firearms.