

Why New Gun Control Laws Are Not Likely

Has the **Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre** shifted the gun control paradigm? It certainly looks that way. The outcry for tougher gun laws is reaching a fever pitch.

But it may not be that easy.

The debate over guns has been paralyzed since 1994. That was when gun owners came out in massive numbers and shocked the political world by giving Republicans control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. They were seeking retribution for the Brady handgun control bill and the assault weapons ban passed by the Democratic Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton.

Since 1994, Democrats have not dared challenge the status quo on guns. Especially since the Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that the Constitution protects an individual's right to own a firearm. President Barack Obama rarely mentioned gun control in the 2008 or 2012 presidential campaigns. New gun control laws have never been high on his policy agenda.

Now, in the wake of public outrage over the Connecticut shooting of 20 first-graders, we're hearing terms like "tipping point" and "game changer." Democrats who have been strong supporters of gun rights, including Joe Manchin (W. Va.), Mark Warner (Va.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Nev.), are calling for "a new conversation" about guns in this country.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, an independent and a strong gun-control advocate, warned that if Washington fails to pass new gun control legislation, it will be "a stain upon our nation."

Obama responded forcefully on Sunday evening, when he went to Newtown, Connecticut, to speak at a memorial service for the 27 victims. "I'll use whatever power this office holds," he pledged, to prevent "more tragedies like this."

The president was defiant: "Are we really prepared to say that we're powerless in the face of such carnage? That the politics are too hard?"

Gun rights advocates seem to be in hiding. On Sunday, NBC News invited 31 senators with "A" ratings from the National Rifle Association to appear on *Meet the Press*. Not one accepted.

Still, there are reasons why gun control legislation has been difficult to pass. And even now, it's not clear that it will get any easier.

The problem is not public opinion. The public remains supportive of measures like a ban on semiautomatic handguns (favored by 52 percent in the Washington Post-ABC News poll taken just after the Connecticut massacre) and a ban on high-capacity ammunition clips (favored by 59 percent).

But politicians don't just pay attention to numbers. They also pay attention to intensity: How many people on each side actually vote the issue.

Gun rights supporters typically prevail because they vote the issue. Gun rights groups like the NRA threaten politicians: "If you dare to restrict gun rights, we'll come after you. We don't care what else you stand for - we'll vote against you for that reason alone." You don't usually find that same intensity on the other side.

Except maybe now. Intensity shifts whenever there's a sensational incidence of gun violence. Suddenly gun control supporters become angry and start issuing threats: Support new gun control measures or you'll pay the price.

But that kind of anger has proved hard to sustain. Politicians worry: If I support new gun controls, it may be popular now, but will I pay a price two years from now when only gun owners vote the issue?

"These events are happening more frequently," Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) said on Sunday. "I worry that if we don't take a thoughtful look at them, we're going to lose the pain, the hurt and the anger that we have now."

Intensity is one problem. Insularity is the other. More and more politicians represent safe districts. They don't face serious competition from the other party. Why should Republicans pay attention to threats from Democrats on gun control? The biggest threat they face is from a Republican primary challenger who may run against them if they support new gun laws.

There are two political worlds out there—Old America and New America. One packs heat, the other doesn't.

Republicans in 2010 were more than twice as likely as Democrats to have a gun in the household (50 percent for Republicans, 22 for Democrats), according to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. That difference has been widening since the 1970s. Gun ownership has declined among Democrats because the party has lost many of its rural and conservative supporters.

In his 2008 book *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop showed how America is becoming more politically segregated. Since the 1970s, the trend has been for voters to live in places that are either solidly Republican or solidly Democratic. Politicians re-enforce this segregation by drawing congressional district lines that make districts safe for incumbents. Politics follows lifestyle. And guns are an important marker of lifestyle.

Republicans increasingly represent the Old America, where gun

rights are deeply valued. The gun culture has roots in the frontier mentality: We're out here on our own, and we rely on guns to protect ourselves and our families. That's why guns have a deep hold on rural America.

The gun culture also has roots in the conservative anti-government mentality. Many gun rights supporters see guns as the ultimate defense against tyrannical government—especially a government that fails to protect its citizens. A Republican congressman from Texas told the *Financial Times* he wished the principal of the Sandy Hook Elementary School had been armed. “I wish to God she had had an M4 in her office, locked up, so when she heard gunfire, she pulls it out ... and takes his head off before he can kill those precious kids.”

There's no reason for a Republican member of Congress to budge on gun control if his or her constituents are overwhelmingly Republican. They live in their own world. Many Republican politicians - including former GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney - were shocked when Obama won the election because they didn't know anybody who voted for him.

To change the **gun control** paradigm, two things need to happen. Politicians have to show courage. Obama is doing that—but he never has to face the voters again. The public also has to sustain its outrage all the way to November 2014. Politicians must know they will pay a price if they do not support new gun controls.

Bloomberg is organizing a pressure group to communicate that message—and to serve as a counterweight to the NRA. If he succeeds, that would be a real game changer.

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