

Issue: Guns

Gun Violence: An Issue Republicans Refuse to Address

America is Awash in Guns and Gun Violence

In 2017 civilians owned an estimated total of 393,347,000 firearms in the U.S. With less than 5% of the world population, American civilians owned 40% of the civilian-owned guns in the world. Measured by the number of guns possessed per 100 people, the U.S. has a staggering 120.5 guns per 100 people, which is the highest in the world, followed in order by the Falkland Islands, Yemen, New Caledonia and Serbia, each of which have a rate half or less of America's rate.¹

In 2016 the U.S. suffered 37,200 gun-related deaths, second in the world. In that year, six nations—Brazil, U.S., Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Guatemala—accounted for half of the gun-related deaths in the world. The rate of gun-related deaths per 100,000 people in America in 2016 was 10.6, putting it 20th in the world and on a par with the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Paraguay but far greater than the rate in Canada (2.1), Australia (1.0), France (2.7), Germany (0.9) and Spain (0.6).^{2,3}

Increasing Number of Assault Weapons Raises the Level of Violence

A rifle fires a bullet that travels at a much higher velocity than a pistol and produces far greater trauma to the body, shattering bones rather than just breaking them and damaging tissue far from the entry wound. A semiautomatic rifle is designed to reload a bullet each time the trigger is pulled, allowing the user to fire continuously and rapidly. The popular "AR-15 style" assault rifle, originally designed for the military, is a semiautomatic rifle with a detachable magazine for ammunition.⁴

Production of assault weapons was limited to fewer than 100,000 per year for decades until the lifting of a federal ban in 2004. Production began to increase dramatically thereafter to current production levels of somewhere between 1.5 to 2.5 million guns annually. It is estimated that more than 24 million assault rifles have been produced in the last 30 years, and that as many as 20 million assault rifles are owned by Americans today.^{5,6}

Assault weapons are designed to enable killing and wounding quickly and efficiently. This is demonstrated in shootings between 2009 and 2022 with assault weapons that resulted in over five times as many people shot, more than twice as many killed and 20 times as many wounded per shooting than in those without assault weapons. In the last two years alone, shooters using assault weapons and high-capacity magazines killed 11 and wounded 9 people in Monterey Park, California; killed 7 and wounded 48 in Highland Park, Illinois; killed 21 and wounded 17 in Uvalde, Texas; and killed 10 and wounded 3 in Buffalo, New York.⁷

Regulation of Guns and Gun Ownership can Reduce Gun Violence

Gun regulation by the individual states varies widely and reveals the impact of laws regulating the ownership, sale, transfer and use of firearms. These laws run the gamut from background checks, permit requirements, bans on certain weapons and gun-free zones to policing and criminal laws such

as “stand your ground.” The five states with the lowest gun deaths per 100,000 persons in 2021 were Massachusetts (3.4), Hawaii (4.8), New Jersey (5.2), New York (5.4) and Rhode Island (5.6),⁸ and each of those states rated in the top ten states in 2023 for strong gun laws.⁹

The five states with the highest gun deaths per 100,000 persons in 2021 were Mississippi (33.9), Louisiana (29.1) New Mexico (27.8), Alabama (26.4), and Wyoming (26.1),¹⁰ with Mississippi, Louisiana and Wyoming rated in the top ten states in 2023 with the weakest gun laws.¹¹

The Difference in Gun Violence Between Red and Blue States is Stark

As suggested by the states noted in the preceding paragraph, “red states” (defined as states that voted for Trump in 2020) suffer gun mortality rates much higher than “blue states” (states voting for Biden in 2020.) In 2021, of the 15 states with the highest gun mortality rate, 12 are red states; of the 15 states with the lowest gun mortality rate, 13 are blue states.¹² While disparities in gun violence among states can be traced to regional, cultural and historical differences, including how the particular region was colonized,¹³ whether the state votes Democratic or Republican is a difference that can be addressed through political action.

The Republican Response to Gun Violence is More Guns

In response to the increasing number of mass shootings and other gun violence, Republican state legislators have worked to expand access to guns, roll back red flag laws and remove permit requirements for open or concealed carry. In half of all states in the U.S., no permit is required to carry a gun, which is an increase of nine states since 2020.¹⁴ The Republican urge to expand gun ownership and loosen laws on gun use has often occurred over the objections of law enforcement concerned with gun safety. Such legislation has passed in Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, Arizona, Iowa, Texas and Missouri. In Texas, for example, the legislature passed a law in 2021 enabling most Texans to carry handguns in public without a permit or training notwithstanding the opposition of police and notwithstanding that Texas in 2021 had the highest number of police officers killed with a gun of any state.¹⁵

Virginia is no stranger to this phenomenon. Following the 2019 election in which both houses of the Virginia legislature went Democratic, the legislature passed seven bills regulating guns, ranging from background checks to red flag laws to limits on handgun purchases.¹⁶ This effort raised Virginia by some measures to having the 14th strongest gun laws in the nation.¹⁷ However, Republicans captured the House of Delegates in 2021, and further efforts at gun regulation in the Legislature have been blocked by the Republican-controlled House. Likewise, Republican efforts to loosen gun laws have been blocked by the Democratic-controlled Senate.¹⁸ The lesson is clear—there is progress on reduction of gun violence under Democrats, but the reverse is true under Republicans.

What do Americans Think?

Gallup polling indicates that Americans generally support gun regulations. On the question of universal background checks for all gun purchases, fully 90% or more of those polled in 2022 were in favor of background checks. In 2022, 57% of those polled supported more strict laws on the sale of firearms; 55% would ban the manufacture, sale and possession of assault weapons; 81% were in favor of red flag laws; 77% were in favor of a 30-day waiting period for all gun sales; 76% support raising the legal age for gun purchases to 21; and 55% are in favor of banning the sale and possession of high capacity magazines. In 2023, 63% of those polled were either very or somewhat dissatisfied with the

nation's laws or policies on guns. Importantly, 73% of those polled in 2022 do not believe the law should ban the possession of handguns other than by police or authorized persons.¹⁹ It appears that Americans are not ready to eliminate civilian gun ownership but are in favor of tightening the laws to reduce the alarming rise in gun violence.

Base Voters in Republican Primaries are the Driving Force

Notwithstanding the rising level of violence and the general consensus that reasonable gun control measures should be enacted, progress on enacting gun regulations at the federal or state level in states run by Republicans is scarce. The most reliable voters in Republican primaries, certainly comprising the 10% of voters opposed to any background checks, are opposed to any restrictions on guns and believe any such restrictions violate their constitutional right to bear arms. Regardless of how many children are killed or how much blood is spilled, these voters are dedicated to protecting this constitutional right. Republican office holders understand that any wavering in their support of this right will result in a primary loss to someone more reliable on the issue.²⁰

Of course, other factors continue to play a role in elections, particularly campaign funding. In the world of gun politics, no advocate is more important than the NRA, which continues to support gun rights and oppose any restrictions on those rights. The NRA has spent an estimated \$100 million in the 10 years since the Sandy Hook school massacre to elect Republicans. In the 2022 election cycle for Congressional candidates, NRA contributions were directed entirely to Republican candidates.^{21,22}

Even more important than NRA funding, however, is the grade given to Republican candidates by the NRA. An "A" grade indicates that a candidate is fully aligned with NRA positions. Thus, to avoid losing a primary election to a candidate even more extreme on gun rights, Republican candidates must avoid any suggestion of being weak on the right to bear arms.^{23, 24}

Voters interested in seeing sensible gun regulations enacted have only one choice: elect Democrats.

¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country>

² <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/theres-a-new-global-ranking-of-gun-deaths-heres-where-the-u-s-stands>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/26/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>

⁴ https://www.thetrace.org/2022/06/ar15-rifle-assault-weapon-ban/?gclid=EAAlaIQobChMI-df07dze_gIVdgCtBh3ZDgSWEAAAYBCAAEgIbkd_BwE

⁵ https://www.thetrace.org/2022/06/ar15-rifle-assault-weapon-ban/?gclid=EAAlaIQobChMI-df07dze_gIVdgCtBh3ZDgSWEAAAYBCAAEgIbkd_BwE

⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-20-million-ar-15-style-rifles-in-circulation-2022-5>

⁷ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/assault-weapons-and-high-capacity-magazines/>

⁸ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm

⁹ <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/citation/quotes/8271>

¹⁰ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm

¹¹ <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/citation/quotes/8271>

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ariannajohnson/2023/04/28/red-states-have-higher-gun-death-rates-than-blue-states-heres-why/?sh=128570351f81>

¹³ <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/04/23/surprising-geography-of-gun-violence-00092413>

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/us/nashville-gun-laws.html>

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- ¹⁵ <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/republican-leaders-across-the-country-consistently-put-gun-rights-over-the-safety-of-law-enforcement-officials/>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_laws_in_Virginia
- ¹⁷ <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/state/virginia/>
- ¹⁸ https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/amid-divide-on-how-to-curb-gun-violence-a-bill-heads-to-youngkin/article_1b39f5c6-bf77-11ed-9acf-5f9d41e72a06.html
- ¹⁹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>
- ²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/us/republicans-gun-control.html>
- ²¹ <https://democrats.org/news/how-much-did-the-nra-pay-to-buy-off-the-gop/#:~:text=In%20the%20nearly%2010%20years,extreme%20agenda%2C%20including%20Donald%20Trump>
- ²² <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/national-rifle-assn/recipients?id=d000000082>
- ²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/us/republicans-gun-control.html>
- ²⁴ <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2019/07/12/its-not-the-nras-money-that-sways-virginia-politics-its-the-members/>