

The politics of US gun control: Expert analysis on the fallout from Sandy Hook

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The Newtown school massacre in December brought renewed attention in the United States and around the world to the issue of gun control and led President Barack Obama to propose a wide-ranging plan to curb gun violence.

More than 900 shooting deaths have been recorded in the U.S. since the Newtown shooting but sales of guns and memberships with the National Rifle Association (NRA) have increased. What effect will Obama's proposals —regarded as the biggest U.S. [gun-control](#) push in decades—have on a country so divided?

U of T News asked Jenny Dawn Carlson for her take on Obama's proposals. Carlson, an expert on [gun policy](#) in the United States, joins the University of Toronto's Department of Sociology in July of 2013.

What are the most salient points of this gun control plan?

Obama's plan is split between the "must have and politically safe" items (i.e., improving [background checks](#), enhancing prosecution of gun crimes, increased mental health service, enhanced training for frontline workers who may encounter active shooting scenarios, etc.) and the "would really like but politically risky" items (i.e., a ban on assault-style weapons, a ban on magazines and clips that hold more than 10 rounds, etc.). Obama has done something very clever in shaping the execution of

this plan: the must-have, politically safe items will be accomplished through executive orders, while he's placed the politically riskier items in the hands of Congress.

What's the political significance of Obama's proposal?

On the one hand, this is very smart politics: he is rallying his own base by pushing for what they want (bans on certain guns and magazines/clips) while also ensuring that despite the barriers that Congress might face in passing such bans, he will at least have a baseline of new policies in place due to his executive orders. In fact, the [juxtaposition](#) of his Congress-oriented proposal versus his own executive orders may help make the latter seem much less controversial and thus more palatable to Americans — even pro-gun Americans. Had he lumped all of his executive order initiatives into a bill to Congress, it probably would not have passed even though Americans (from the polls released so far) appear to very much support what his executive orders will accomplish.

On the other hand, however, any serious discussion of an assault weapons ban (AWB) is going to rouse the base of pro-gun Americans. I was surprised during my fieldwork to find that gun advocates still referred to the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban as a politically salient event, and in an online survey of gun advocates in Michigan, over 40% said that the 1994 AWB was a key factor in them becoming more involved in gun politics. And this was in 2010, 16 years after the ban had passed and six years after it had expired! Right now, there is a de facto Assault Weapons Ban because gun stores are sold out of AR-15-style rifles, magazines that can hold more than 10 rounds, and certain kinds of ammunition, among other firearms items that would be banned under a new AWB, and the NRA has reported an increase of 250,000 members

over the last month. Just as the effects of the 1994 AWB are still reverberating today (by shaping how pro-gun Americans are reacting to the current political climate), serious discussions about, and implementation of, another AWB may further reconfigure the political field, with significant consequences on state-level politics (e.g., several states have passed, or are planning to pass, laws to bypass federal gun laws), the 2014 midterm elections, and the 2016 presidential elections. There is a significant possibility, therefore, that Obama's proposal may have the opposite effect than he intends: given that there will be no incumbent running for office in 2016, the passage of another AWB could serve as a carte blanche for the Republican party to nominate a more hard-line candidate than the party otherwise would be able to back.

How difficult will it be for Obama to get these plans endorsed by Congress?

There are three major problems that Obama will face in pushing these plans forward. The first issue is the NRA's influence in Washington. After the 1994 AWB, the NRA successfully mobilized pro-gun Americans to help give Republicans control of the US Congress for the first time in 50 years. There is no doubt that members of Congress understand the electoral implications of their actions.

A second obstacle is lacklustre support for gun control among Americans. Polls show that support for many of the elements of the proposal that Obama has sent to Congress are split around +/- 50 per cent. While Americans are clearly pro-gun in certain realms (a late-Dec 2012 Gallup poll showed 74 per cent of Americans opposing a ban on handguns—the largest percentage ever recorded by Gallup), American public opinion is split on the issues of gun bans and magazine bans. Even for Americans that do support gun control, they are much less politically active than their pro-gun counterparts, the latter of whom are much more

likely to donate money to pro-gun causes according to a recent Pew poll. Will there be enough of a push for gun control by the American public as Congress moves forward? Despite claims by pundits that "Sandy Hook changed everything", this is unclear.

A third challenge will be Congressional inertia. This is one of the least productive Congress sessions in recent history, with the recent Fiscal Cliff fiasco being a case in point. If they can't address something as (relatively!) non-controversial as the Fiscal Cliff, how will Congress deal with the hot-button issue of guns?

What does it say that Obama introduced this plan in such close proximity to his inauguration?

Obama's touchstone accomplishment in his first term was his healthcare bill. I think the timing of his announcements suggests that he is placing gun control front-and-center and, perhaps, this will be 'the' issue of his second term, much like healthcare was 'the' issue of his first term.

That said, I also think Obama is simply trying to capture a rare moment in which portions of the American public are mobilizing in demand of more gun control. (As I noted earlier, Americans in favor of gun control are generally out-mobilized by their pro-gun counterparts.) Obama understands that these kinds of moments are rare and fleeting, and so I think it's more of a chance circumstance that everything has coincided for him to make such a proposal prior to his inauguration — a circumstance, no doubt, that he will use to push for gun control.

How does this tie into your research and academic interests?

My research examines the everyday politics of guns — that is, how guns enter into the daily lives of people who carry them for the purposes of

self defense. Since the 1970s, dozens of states have passed laws allowing Americans to obtain concealed pistol licenses, and over 8 million Americans are licensed to carry their guns concealed. This "hidden" side of gun politics (literally - as guns in many states must be concealed when carried!) is rarely discussed in conversations about gun control, but I argue in my work that this dimension is essential for understanding why Americans are as pro-gun as they are: guns are not just an abstract symbol of freedom but also an everyday tool that millions of Americans carry with the intended purpose of enhancing their safety. So, my research ties into these debates by taking a step back from the acrimonious terms of the gun debate and instead trying to clarify why so many Americans see guns as the solution to violent crime, rather than the cause of it.

I argue that today's pro-gun politics is marked by deep concerns about policing and protection: analyzing gun carriers in Michigan, a state marred by a failing economy, informal but austere forms of racial segregation, and infamous violent crime rates, my research shows how social insecurities and suspicions surrounding state efficacy (particularly the police) are proactively managed through the guns that Americans lock and load. For gun carriers, guns provide a means of both self-protection as well as the protection of moral order more broadly — that is, a form of policing. This helps sense of why they define themselves as morally upstanding, responsible citizens in relation, and sometimes against, public law enforcement, often citing statements such as "I carry a gun because a cop is too heavy," "I don't dial 911," and "A gun in the hand is worth two cops on the phone."

Provided by University of Toronto

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