

US Congress ready to extend ban on plastic guns

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This photo taken May 10, 2013 shows Cody Wilson holding what he calls a Liberator pistol that was completely made on a 3-D-printer at his home in Austin, Texas. Congress is extending a ban on plastic firearms that can slip past airport and school metal detectors and X-ray machines, a bittersweet moment for gun control advocates just before the first anniversary of the mass killing at a Connecticut elementary school. (AP Photo/Austin American Statesman, Jay Janner)

A U.S. Senate vote to renew an expiring ban on plastic firearms is shaping up as a bittersweet moment for gun control supporters, days

before the anniversary of the deadly mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut that galvanized a push for new federal gun laws that never made it through Congress.

Monday's vote to extend the prohibition on plastic guns capable of evading metal detectors and X-ray machines for another decade responds to a growing threat from steadily improving 3-D printers that can produce such weapons. But [gun control](#) advocates seem sure to lose an effort to impose additional, tougher restrictions on plastic firearms. That's a harsh reminder of their failure to enact any new federal gun curbs in the year since 20 first-graders and six educators were murdered in Newtown, Connecticut, though some states managed to toughen their own restrictions.

The slayings last Dec. 14 followed a series of mass shootings around the U.S. and prompted the newly re-elected President Barack Obama to push the politically explosive issue of gun control to the top of his domestic agenda. But Congress approved nothing, and gun control advocates face the same uphill struggle in 2014, complicated by internal divisions over what their next step should be.

"The gun lobby still has enormous power in Washington—more, frankly, than I thought they still had," said Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy, who represented Newtown last year while in the House of Representatives.

Illustrating the roadblocks that have thwarted gun control forces, an effort by Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer to make plastic guns more detectable by requiring them to have a permanent metal part seems certain to fail Monday. His plan is opposed by Republicans and the powerful National Rifle Association gun lobby.

The Senate is then expected to easily approve a 10-year extension of the ban, which would otherwise expire Tuesday.

Schumer and other Democrats, as well as gun-control advocates and law enforcement officials, say that's not enough, because there's a problem with current law on plastic guns: It lets gun makers meet its requirements by including a metal part that can be easily detached—thus letting the weapon evade screening devices.

If, as expected, Democrats fail Monday to tighten the restrictions, it will be the latest in a series of setbacks this year.

Their biggest defeat came in April, when the Senate blocked a modest bipartisan effort to expand required [background checks](#) for firearms buyers. The proposal was Obama's top gun-control priority following the elementary school killings.

Background checks, aimed at preventing criminals and the mentally ill from getting weapons, are required only for purchases from licensed gun dealers. The rejected bill, by Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Republican Sen. Patrick Toomey of Pennsylvania—two neighboring states with plenty of rural gun owners—would have extended the requirement to all guns bought on the Internet and at gun shows.

Also rejected in April were more ambitious proposals to ban assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines, which have been used in mass shootings.

Republican leaders of the House never favored any of those proposals, and none came to a vote there.

In a statement last week, the NRA expressed no opposition to renewing the law. But the gun lobby said it would fight any expanded requirements, including Schumer's "or any other proposal that would infringe on our Second Amendment rights" to bear arms under the U.S.

Constitution.

The plastic gun prohibition was first enacted in 1988 under President Ronald Reagan and easily renewed twice. The House approved a 10-year extension of the ban last Tuesday.

Sen. Charles Grassley, top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, says that with the law's expiration at hand, Congress should quickly enact a long extension and study Schumer's plan later. Other Republicans agree.

Supporters of tightening the rules say the 10-year renewal plays into the NRA's hands because it reduces Democrats' ability to revisit the issue.

With Saturday's Newtown anniversary drawing attention to the issue, Republican Rep. Tim Murphy, a psychologist, plans to announce legislation Thursday aimed at bolstering federal mental health programs, including treatment, research and training for workers who respond to emergencies.

In the Senate, Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid has gained none of the five new votes he would need to prevail on background checks.

Eager to avoid exposing potentially vulnerable Democrats seeking re-election next year to politically fraught votes, Reid has said he won't revisit the issue until he can win.

That has left gun control groups split over strategy.

Some want to pursue more modest improvements like strengthening mental health programs and broadening the scope of reports that states provide to the federal background check system.

Groups backing this approach include some Newtown families and Americans for Responsible Solutions, formed by former Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, seriously wounded by a mass shooter, and her husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly.

"We see only good coming from passing mental health legislation around which there is broad bipartisan agreement," said a statement from Sandy Hook Promise, a group representing some Newtown families. "If we don't begin to bury at least some of our differences, we will continue to needlessly bury our children."

Others want to continue raising pressure on lawmakers to back strong background check requirements, and oppose settling for less.

These groups include Mayors Against Illegal Guns, led by outgoing New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, which has been spending money against [gun](#)-rights congressional candidates and lawmakers. They fear Republicans would use votes for weaker efforts to cast themselves as having championed major steps against guns.

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