

# Americans prefer gun control, but few prioritise it

September 5 2019, by Thomas Gift

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As the US Congress returns from its August recess, Republican leaders have promised to work with Democrats to place gun control front and centre. Possible items on the agenda include enacting stronger background checks and passing so-called "red flag" laws that allow the government to confiscate guns if the owner is deemed a threat.

The Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, [declared](#) in early September that: "If the president is in favour of a number of things that he has discussed openly and publicly, and I know that if we pass it, it will become law, I'll put it on the floor."

The words are mildly encouraging, but will reform materialise?

Many are sceptical. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is presumed to be so powerful that it will dissuade congressional Republicans from taking meaningful action on guns. If Republicans defy the NRA and vote for stronger [gun control](#), they know the odds of facing a well-funded challenger in the primaries increase exponentially.

But if Americans really want to know why Washington won't budge on gun control, they should also ask themselves how much they emphasise the issue. For all the newspaper headlines in the wake of mass shootings like Dayton, El Paso, and—most recently – [Odessa, Texas](#), gun control remains a relatively minor concern for many voters.

It's true that large majorities of Americans prefer stronger gun control in

the abstract. An [August 2019 Quinnipiac poll](#) revealed that, overall, 60% favour "stricter gun laws in the United States", 93% want universal background checks, and 80% approve of red flag laws.

Despite pleas that polling data on guns should be [taken with a pinch of salt](#), it's rare for any policy to garner that much bipartisan favour.

## **Not a top priority**

But what's missing in these numbers? Simply put, they mask how much voters actually prioritise gun control relative to other issues. Support for policy ultimately exists along two dimensions: first, the level of agreement for a particular issue; and second, how salient, or intense, those views actually are.

Gun control rates high on agreement, but low on salience. There's consensus on the desire for stronger gun control, but it's not a top-line issue for voters.

According to a [July 2019 Gallup poll](#), for example, only 1% of Americans rank guns/gun control as the "most important problem facing the country today". School shootings register even lower, at less than 0.5%. Those figures are dwarfed by the issue that president Donald Trump has made the centrepiece of his administration: immigration. For 27% of Americans, this is the country's most important problem. It's followed by government/poor leadership at 23%, then race relations/racism and healthcare, both tied at 7%.

It's not just that Americans don't list gun control as the country's number one problem. An [April 2018 NPR/PBS/Marist poll](#) found that a total of 46% of Americans thought that "stricter gun legislation" either "should not be an immediate priority" (19%) or "should not be a priority at all for congress" (27%). A combined 53% of voters said that, in a

congressional race, "a candidate's position on gun policy" would either be a "minor factor" (39%) or "not a factor in deciding your vote" (14%).

If anything, these numbers on policy prioritisation and vote choice probably overestimate the salience of gun control. When voters aren't required to compare the importance of a particular issue relative to others, they're more likely to emphasise a policy such as gun control that's broadly popular. Gun control is a valence issue—one where voters tend to agree—but mobilisation around the issue is fleeting.

Outside of polling data, Americans also don't express their commitment to gun control through advocacy. The NRA says it has more than [5m members](#). While its chief rival, the Brady Campaign, declines to provide official membership numbers, there's reason to believe its size is a [small fraction](#) of that. Despite reports of [financial woes](#), the NRA still managed to [boost its revenues from member-paying dues](#) last year, from US\$128m in 2017 to US\$170m in 2018.

## **Why so little pressure?**

One explanation for why spikes in mass shootings haven't prompted more demand among the American public for gun control is that, despite their horror, such events remain relatively rare. According to one [analysis](#), the odds of dying from a mass shooting are approximately one in 11,125. That's much less than the odds of dying from everyday activities such as bicycling (one in 4,030) or choking on food (one in 3,461).

Voters could also be reluctant to emphasise stricter gun laws because they're uninformed on the issue. The technicalities of which guns can be bought, by whom, where, and how they're regulated are complicated. Voters might hold back if they're unsure what reform would look like.

Political gridlock in the nation's capital has only [increased](#) in recent years. Given that the country faces a bevy of other policy challenges, voters might not want politicians to expend valuable political capital on guns when it could be used to tackle other pressing issues.

Regardless of its cause, the low salience of gun control helps explain why many Republicans ignore Americans who broadly favour stricter background checks, "red flag" laws, and the like. Failing to act on gun control won't doom the re-election prospects of Republicans. Yet because of the money it spends and the power it holds in elections, tightening the screws on the NRA almost certainly will.

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