

In wake of Newtown tragedy, is gun-control legislation likely?

December 19 2012, by Megan Sexton

John Sides, associate professor of political science, comments on public opinion surrounding gun control and whether legislation might pass in Congress.

As the country continues to mourn the victims killed in a shooting spree at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., a debate over gun control is intensifying in the nation's capital.

President [Barack Obama](#) has reportedly asked his cabinet, led by Vice President [Joe Biden](#), to "formulate a set of proposals that could include reinstating a ban on assault rifles," the Washington Post reports. And Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., recently said, "we'll engage in a meaningful conversation and proper debate about how to change laws and culture that allow this violence to continue to grow ... And every idea should be on the table."

But how likely is gun-control legislation, and could it pass? And what does public opinion have to say on the matter? George Washington Today talked with John Sides, a George Washington University associate professor of political science, to answer these and other questions.

Q: Historically, what has public opinion said when it comes to gun control?

A: On the whole, there is mixed support for stricter gun control in the

abstract, and less support now than 10 or 15 years ago. However, many specific gun-control policies—like an assault weapons ban and background checks but not a handgun ban—are supported by majorities of people and have been for some time. Some relevant links are here.

Q: Do mass shootings like the one in Newtown have an immediate impact on public opinion? What about a long-term impact?

A: There was a spike in support for gun control after Columbine, but not after the Virginia Tech, Tucson or Aurora shootings. So these events do not necessarily make a big difference. However, two polls conducted after the Newtown shooting—here and here—suggest a small increase in the percent of people favoring new gun-control laws and a larger increase in the percent who believes that the Newtown shooting reflects a broader societal problem. But whether these shifts continue or have any long-term impact remains to be seen.

Q: The way a question is asked can change public opinion, you recently wrote in your blog. Discuss the effect, post-Newtown, of framing a question that says guns could be carried onto "school grounds."

A: In one study, people appear more opposed to a law allowing concealed weapons when it was framed in terms of security than in terms of individual rights. In particular, the study described security in this way: "laws allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns threaten public safety because they would allow almost anyone to carry a gun almost anywhere, even onto school grounds."

This suggests why an event like Newtown could sway opinion: It brings

concerns about security, and particularly that of vulnerable populations like children, to the foreground.

Q: Can we expect to see gun control at the top of President Obama's agenda this term?

A: It is difficult to see how he could not act, even though he made no specific promises in his recent speech in Newtown. There are, for example, things he might do via executive orders or bureaucratic rule making. He could try to limit the capacity of gun magazines or institute more stringent background checks.

Q: The gun-control debate always intensifies after a mass shooting event but we haven't yet seen Congress act. Will this time be different?

A: The most important thing right now is how congressional Republicans respond. The White House certainly cannot force them to go along with anything. Even [public opinion](#) might not be a powerful enough force, particularly if concern fades as Newtown generates fewer headlines.

My early sense is that at least some prominent conservatives, rightly or wrongly, do not see the need for new gun-control measures. If their perspective is shared within the party, then there may not be sufficient incentive to bring Republicans to the table. Republicans might instead try to wait it out, in hopes that there will be less urgency when the new Congress convenes.

Q: If gun-control legislation were to be introduced, what might it look like?

A: I suspect it will be fairly narrowly tailored. Part of that is to conform to the Supreme Court's rulings. Part of that is to attract the support of the GOP, which would likely balk at a broader measure. Part of that will likely also reflect the circumstances of the Newtown shooting. So you might see focus on those things—assault weapons, large magazines—that helped make the Newtown shooting so deadly.

Q: What are its chances of passing? Is stricter control "unwinnable"?

A: Personally, I see the odds of it passing as less than 50-50. It's not unwinnable, but it's not necessarily likely either. The past isn't always prologue, but many [mass shootings](#)—including of a sitting member of Congress in Tucson—have not led to legislation. The Newtown shooting is different than those shootings in some respects, especially because many of the victims were young children. But the magnitude of this tragedy may not be sufficient to produce stricter [gun-control](#) legislation at the federal level.

Provided by University of South Carolina

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