

How to Embrace Commonsense Gun Safety Legislation



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The politics of guns are shifting. Americans are increasingly demanding and expecting real action to address our country's gun violence epidemic and the endless mass shootings that have torn apart communities from coast to coast. The 2018 midterm elections is evidence that the NRA's clout may be waning. And as the tide turns in favor of gun safety reforms, Americans should welcome policymakers, gun owners, and leaders across the political spectrum reconsidering past opposition and shifting to support common sense gun safety reforms. If you are a public official who has evolved on this issue over time, here are three pieces of advice for how to talk about your changed view on guns.

1. Talk about your journey.

Some pundits and players in American politics are averse to elected officials changing stances, but on guns (as on so many issues), the path to meaningful progress hinges on building broad consensus and convincing those who may not have lent support initially. When explaining your evolution, it's crucial to tell an honest story about why your views

shifted. Be frank about what led you to where you are. A personal narrative about what made you reconsider your past stances will go a long way in thwarting “flip-flopping” attacks.

And frankly, it makes perfect sense that people’s views have evolved. Congress has not seriously debated gun safety legislation in nearly six years, when background check legislation failed in the Senate in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre ¹ The last time we actually *improved* our federal laws on guns was in 1994, over 24 years ago. ² All the while, horrific mass shootings continue to strike our nation’s schools, places of worship, and communities. A generation of American children are growing up fearing that they might not be safe in their classroom or in their communities.

Vermont’s Republican Governor Phil Scott provided an effective model for discussing an evolution on guns when he announced his support for gun safety reforms in the days after Parkland—shortly after Vermont narrowly avoided a similar tragedy. He emphasized his personal experience with firearms and support for the Second Amendment, while making clear that we need concrete reforms to protect Americans from the violence and destruction that continues to plague our country when guns fall into the wrong hands. As the Governor said, “I support the Second Amendment, but I had to ask myself, ‘Are we truly doing everything we can to make our kids and communities safer?’ Because if we’re at a point where our kids are afraid to go to school, and parents are afraid to put them on a bus, or police don’t have the tools they need to protect victims of violence, or families can’t step in to prevent a loved one from taking their own life — then who are we?” ³

It is important to make absolutely clear that backing commonsense gun safety laws doesn’t diminish your continued support for and defense of the Second Amendment. Keeping guns out of the hands of violent criminals doesn’t make a policymaker anti-Second Amendment. Instead, emphasize that rights come with

responsibilities, and we must do better to prevent these senseless tragedies.

2. Invoke the shifting policy and political landscape.

While the past decade has seen a complete void of federal action on gun safety, states across the country (under both Republican and Democratic control) have taken up the mantle and brought about real change. Today, because of state actions, 33% of the U.S. population lives in a jurisdiction with expanded background checks, meaning that for nearly every firearm sale, whether at a gun show, at a gun shop, or through a private transaction, the seller must complete a background check.⁴ When asked about expanding this progress nationally, an eye-popping 97% of Americans say it should be the law of the land from coast to coast.⁵

States have also enacted numerous other commonsense gun reforms in recent years. After Parkland, 26 states including Florida, Louisiana, Ohio, Vermont, and Virginia passed over 50 gun safety bills ranging from bump stock bans and magazine capacity restrictions to domestic violence protections and age requirements.⁶ And 8 states passed red flag laws that allow police to temporarily confiscate firearms from an individual who is a danger to him or herself or others.⁷ Increasingly, policymakers and leaders on both sides of aisle are supporting a whole range of new laws that will make their constituents safer.

And the days when backing these kinds of commonsense reforms came at a political risk are ending. In Florida, for example, staunchly pro-gun Republican Governor Rick Scott signed a robust package of new gun safety laws after the horrific shooting in Parkland. The measure banned bump stocks, increased the purchasing age to 21, and closed waiting period loopholes in the background check system.⁸ And while the NRA banged their fists at an A+ rated governor signing gun safety legislation, they weren't able to extract a political price as they've been successful at doing so many

times in the past. His political career wasn't torpedoed—it was buoyed, giving him just enough support from Independent voters to be elected to the Senate in the 2018 midterms in a year otherwise signified by a “blue wave.”⁹ Similarly, Vermont Republican Phil Scott was reelected to a second term as governor after he signed an even broader package.¹⁰ Both sailed through the primary season, with Rick Scott only facing a token primary challenge from an out-of-state candidate, who also ran in nine other primaries.¹¹ Phil Scott dramatically outraised his primary opponent and outperformed him by a two-to-one margin.¹²

3. Make it clear what reforms do and don't do.

In each and every state that has enacted gun safety reforms, the deeply American traditions of hunting and responsible firearms ownership continue unabated. Gun safety laws aren't keeping firearms from law-abiding citizens who want to use them for protection or sport. Instead, they are ensuring that guns do not fall into the hands of those who shouldn't have them, including domestic abusers, convicted violent felons, and those who are dangerously mentally ill.

Other proposals, like restrictions on magazine capacity, certain deadly, military-style weapons, or bump stocks aren't keeping Americans from defending themselves in the states that have enacted them. They are keeping deadly weapons of war and accessories that make mass shootings more deadly off our streets. This is about taking reasonable, commonsense steps to reduce the violence that is plaguing our streets, classrooms, workplaces, and public venues.

And these reforms are making a real difference. States with universal background checks experience 53% fewer mass shootings.¹³ And in the eight states that restrict magazine capacity to 10 or 15 bullets, residents are 63% less likely to endure a mass shooting.¹⁴ Conversely, when a domestic abuser has a firearm, domestic assault incidents are 12 times more likely to end in death for the victim, yet federal law still

has gaping loopholes in the background check system that continues to allow abusers to buy and possess guns.¹⁵ While federal law has intentionally made it difficult to research the impact of gun safety laws due to pressure from the NRA, the research we do have makes clear that commonsense gun safety laws work, and those who support them can win reelection.

Conclusion

We're witnessing rapid shifts in the politics of guns, but enacting the laws we need to truly combat gun violence will still take political courage. When talking about how your views may have changed on issues related to gun safety, make it clear that we must do better to protect our communities—and that standing up for real solutions in no way undermines their commitment to defending the entire Bill of Rights, including the Second Amendment. And for those that have long sought commonsense solutions on guns, we should greet others who have more recently come to recognize that the status quo of inaction is unacceptable with open arms. If we do, we'll be able to transform this shifting political tide into real policy change that will make America a safer place.

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ENDNOTES

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