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THAT BLANK FEELING

# Why We're Still Arguing About **GUN CONTROL**

The tragedy in Las Vegas has reignited the debate over America's gun laws

## **What is gun control?**

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Gun control is a broad term that covers many kinds of restrictions. It can include regulations on what kinds of firearms can be bought and sold, who can possess or sell them, and where and how they can be stored or carried.

Gun control can involve the responsibilities a seller has to check a buyer's background and whether a gun sale should be reported to the government. The term also covers limits on types of ammunition and the

size of magazines (the part of the gun that holds ammunition).

In recent years, gun control debates have focused on three issues:

- background checks for buyers
- the laws regulating who can carry weapons in public
- the kinds of guns and gun accessories available for purchase.

In the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting, attention has focused not only on assault rifles, which are military-style weapons capable of firing multiple bullets quickly, but also on devices that can be attached to semiautomatic guns to make them fire more quickly.

## What's the state of federal gun control today?

Federal law prohibits specific groups of people from owning firearms. The list includes convicted felons, those diagnosed with certain types of mental illness, and undocumented immigrants.

Since 1994, licensed gun dealers have been required to conduct background checks on potential buyers through an F.B.I. database. This is meant to prevent the sale of guns to someone who's prohibited from owning one.

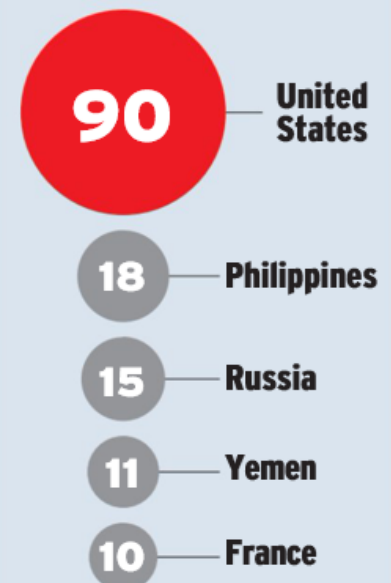
But many small-scale gun sellers claim to be "hobbyists," who aren't required to conduct background checks. Because many of these sellers do business at gun shows, this is often referred to as "the gun show loophole." Another problem: Most people with serious mental illness never receive a diagnosis, so they can still own guns legally.

## Where does the American public stand?

Gun control has long been one of the most sharply divisive issues in the U.S. In general, Democrats and city dwellers tend to favor tighter restrictions on guns. Republicans and people in rural areas, where guns are more common, tend to favor protecting gun rights.

But following the Las Vegas attacks, a Politico poll found that 64 percent of Americans want tighter gun laws, while 29 percent oppose more regulation. There's more consensus on some specific measures: A recent Pew Research Center poll found that 83 percent of Democrats and 81 percent of Republicans support background checks for all gun purchases.

### COUNTRIES WITH THE MOST MASS SHOOTINGS 1966-2012



SOURCE: JAMES LANKFORD/UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA.  
NOTE: FOR THE STUDY, A MASS SHOOTING IS DEFINED AS ONE WITH FOUR OR MORE VICTIMS.

## What are the arguments against gun control?

Gun rights advocates see weapons possession as a matter of individual rights. They say that people have the right to arm themselves for hunting, self-defense, and sport—or just because they want to.

Gun owners say weapons can actually make society safer by giving people the power to defend themselves.

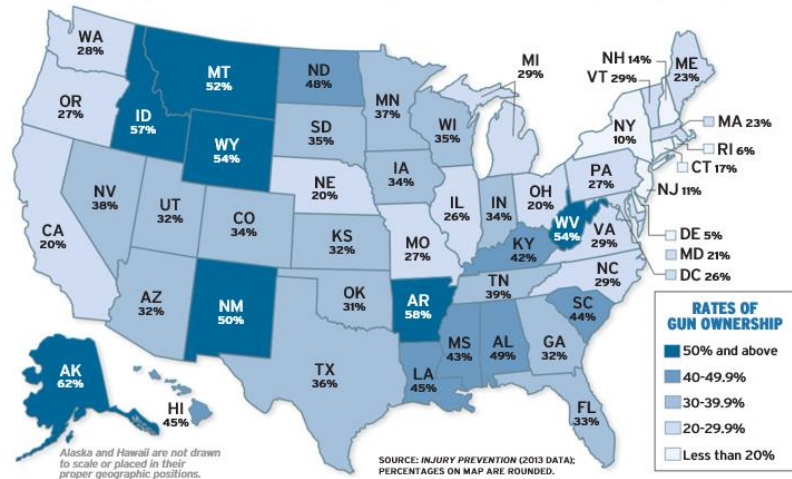
“The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” Wayne LaPierre of the National Rifle Association (N.R.A.), the country’s most powerful gun-rights group, famously said in 2012.

The debates often come down to the Second Amendment, which was adopted in 1791. Americans have long argued over its wording: “A well regulated Militia,\* being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be **infringed**.”

For generations, the U.S. Supreme Court avoided answering the question of whether the Second Amendment guaranteed an *individual’s* right to bear arms or just the people’s collective right, through a militia. But in 2008 and 2010, the Court ruled that the Second Amendment protects an individual’s right to keep a firearm. But since the Court did say some level of regulation was appropriate, the rulings have only fueled the debate over what limits the government can place on gun ownership.

## GUN OWNERSHIP BY STATE

Overall, about 30 percent of Americans own guns, but the rates vary widely among states



## What are the arguments in favor?

While gun rights advocates say arming people makes for a safer society, people who favor gun control say the opposite is true: The more people carry weapons, the more likely it is that someone will use one to kill.

In 2015, there were more than 36,000 gun-related deaths in the U.S. About two-thirds were suicides and about a third were homicides.

Gun control supporters cite figures that equate high rates of gun ownership with more gun violence. According to a 2007 report called the Small Arms Survey, there were 89 guns per 100 people in the U.S., more than in any other country. (Yemen, second on the list, had 55 guns per 100 people.) At the same time, gun-

related homicide rates are more than 25 times higher in the U.S. than in any other high-income country.

Supporters say tougher laws in other countries keep gun deaths down. Australia, for example, had 13 mass shootings from 1979 to 1996. After a gunman killed 35 people in 1996, the country passed strict laws

banning many weapons. It hasn’t had a mass shooting since.

Gun control advocates say closing gun control **loopholes** would still allow law-abiding people to have firearms, while resulting in far fewer deaths. In other words, they argue, it’s not a question of disarming the public, but a matter of where to draw sensible limits.

## Why are gun laws so controversial?

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For many politicians, particularly those in rural states, supporting gun rights is critical to getting re-elected. Also, the N.R.A. and other gun-rights groups are powerful and well-funded, and many

politicians don't want to anger them. Fearing that any additional restrictions will lead to an outright ban on weapons, the gun lobby has become more **unyielding** in recent years, opposing measures like more-stringent background checks, which it once supported.

Over the past generation, American politics has become more partisan and regional divisions more rigid. Republicans have become more uniformly opposed to gun laws at a time when they control Congress and most statehouses.

## What have states done?

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Most gun control exists at the state level. Some states require a license or permit to own a gun, but most don't. California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island have the most restrictive laws.

But in other parts of the country, many states have recently passed laws making it easier to buy or carry guns. Wisconsin has eliminated its 48-hour waiting period to buy handguns. Ohio now allows concealed weapons to be brought into day care facilities and airports.

The wide variety of regulations in different states allows guns to flow freely across state lines. For example, New York has very strict gun laws, but more than two-thirds of guns used in crimes in New York City come from states with weaker gun laws.

## Now what?

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For decades, any measure to restrict guns has essentially been dead on arrival in the U.S. Congress. Republican lawmakers—often with the support of conservative Democrats—have blocked any attempt to pass new gun laws, even after mass shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007; at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012; and at an Orlando, Florida, nightclub last year.

With the tragedy in Las Vegas, lawmakers may have found an area of agreement: banning the sale of bump stocks—the device the Las Vegas shooter used to make his semiautomatic gun fire like an automatic weapon. (Automatic weapons are much more tightly regulated under federal law.)

“I own a lot of guns, and as a hunter and sportsman, I think that’s our right as Americans, but I don’t understand the use of this bump stock,” says Senator John Cornyn, a Texas Republican. “It seems like it’s an obvious area we ought to explore and see if it’s something Congress needs to act on.”

But gun control advocates say much broader action is needed.

“Most of the gun violence that happens in this country is not because of bump stocks,” says Chelsea Parsons of the Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank. “Banning bump stocks is not a sufficient congressional response to this tragedy.”

But in a deeply divided Congress, it may be the best place to start. “For decades, compromise between Republicans and Democrats on this issue has been elusive,” Republican Congressman Carlos Curbelo of Florida told CNN. “This might be a small but a very important step.” ●



NO LIGHT  
AT THE END  
OF THE  
TUNNEL!

GUN VIOLENCE

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