

A perennial American question: why has gun control failed?

From one angle, the answer is complicated; from another, it's devastatingly simple. Tom McCarthy on the key features of the American gun control debate.

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Barack Obama wipes away tears at a White House event on gun control. When legislation failed in 2012, a furious Obama said: 'The gun lobby and its allies willfully lied about the bill.' Photograph: Kevin Lamarque/Reuters.

The gunman who killed 58 people and wounded 527 in Las Vegas on Sunday night qualified as a “super-owner” – one of the estimated 7.7 million Americans who own between eight and 140 guns.

5 Little is yet known about Stephen Paddock and his motives. But the apparent ease with which he acquired his arsenal – 42 guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition, according to police – has renewed the urgency of a perennial American question: why can't the United States effect sensible gun control?

10 Look at Australia, which enacted a ban and mandatory buyback of more than 600,000 long guns following a mass shooting in 1996, effectively ending the problem of mass shootings (already rare) and halving gun deaths. Why can't the United States do that?

From one angle, the answer is complicated. It involves the powerful gun lobby, political partisanship, the hundreds of millions of guns already in US civilian hands,

15 the fact that mass shootings, while horrifying, represent only a sliver of US gun deaths, and a national mythology attached to guns.

From another angle, the answer is simple. The United States could, in fact, adopt gun control – if the public felt strongly enough about it. “If public opinion does not demand change in Congress, it will not change,” Barack Obama said in June 2014.

20 A majority of US gun owners – 74% – say the right to own a gun is “essential” to their freedom, according to Pew Research, while only 44% believe that the ease with which people can legally obtain guns contributes at least a fair amount to gun violence. The disagreements only expand from there.

In the wake of the most deadly mass shooting in the United States, here are key features of the American gun control debate.

25 **How outrage fizzles**

Opponents of gun control feared new restrictions after the killing of 20 six-and seven-year-olds at Sandy Hook elementary school in December 2012. The national outrage was intense, and legislators who previously were not interested in gun control measures suddenly were.

30 Two senators, Democrat Joe Manchin and Republican Pat Toomey, sponsored a bill that would have imposed universal background checks for commercial gun purchases, including at gun shows and over the internet. Eighty-four percent of Americans favor such a law.

35 But after participating in initial negotiations over the bill, the National Rifle Association came out in strong opposition and falsely claimed the bill would lead to a national gun registry. Four Democrats defected, not enough Republicans came onboard and the legislation went down. “The gun lobby and its allies willfully lied about the bill,” Obama said in a furious Rose Garden speech.

‘Successes’ at gun control

40 The last major gun control legislation passed by the US Congress was the 1994 assault weapons ban, which had a 10-year sunset clause and was allowed to expire in 2004. The ban is widely seen as having failed to make a dent in gun deaths in the United States, where more than 30,000 people are killed with guns each year, including more than 20,000 suicides. Rifles, including assault weapons, are used in
45 only 3.55% of gun murders annually, according to FBI statistics.

While the national focus on gun control always intensifies after mass shootings, mass shootings account for only a small proportion of US gun deaths annually. Gun violence instead is concentrated in the country’s poorest, most racially segregated neighborhoods, with African Americans, who represent 13% of the total population,
50 making up more than half of overall gun murder victims.

Is it all the NRA's fault?

55 As the 2013 failure of universal background checks illustrated, the NRA is a powerful lobby. "It came down to politics – the worry that that vocal minority of gun owners would come after them in future elections," Obama said of senators who had not dared to support the bill.

The NRA has more than a half-dozen full-time federal lobbyists and claims a grassroots membership of 5 million. More importantly, NRA members are known for being politically active – showing up at public meetings, bombarding congressional offices with telephone calls, and for voting.

60 However, the NRA isn't even in the top 50 in terms of spending and their influence may be eroded by the increasing assertiveness of Democratic politicians and gun control campaigners who now challenge their arguments and organisation.

What kind of gun control?

65 One hurdle to effective gun control measures in the United States is a disagreement over what kind of action is needed. Focus on a new military-style weapons ban may detract from a potential ban on high-capacity magazines, which may be the more effective measure to limit the terrible toll of mass shootings. Researchers also call for more investment in threat assessment and intervention programs. Community advocates urge more funding for local programs that have been shown to reduce gang-related murder. Health experts urge the public to recognize that mental health is a serious factor in gun suicide.

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Are there simply too many guns are out there?

75 There were about 265m, at last count – more than one for every adult American. That means that any new gun control measure in the United States advances against an ominous reality, of a country already flooded with guns. That reality is the core of gun advocates' claim that new legislation to limit gun ownership would not increase public safety while funneling gun possession toward lawbreakers. [...]