

Reading One:

How Are Democratic Candidates Responding to Mass Shootings?

On August 31, 2019, a gunman opened fire on motorists and officers while driving on highways in the West Texas cities of Midland and Odessa. Seven people were killed, including the gunman, and at least 21 others were wounded. It was the latest in a series of bloody shootings this summer in Texas, California, and Dayton, Ohio. According to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), there have been 283 mass shootings in 2019.

Two of the recent attacks appeared to be motivated by racial hatred: On August 3, 2019, a gunman opened fire at a shopping mall in El Paso, Texas, killing 22 people. After he was arrested, the man said he was explicitly targeting Mexicans. And just a week before that shooting, another man killed three people at a garlic festival in central California, after he had promoted white supremacist material online.

In the aftermath of past shootings, there has been a cycle of outrage, calls for action, and then no real change. But this time, the 2020 presidential race has helped shine a particularly intense spotlight on the issue of mass shootings, with candidates seeking to make clear their proposals for how to respond, and some Congressional leaders pledging action.

Democratic presidential candidates have made the link between gun control and dealing with white supremacist hate groups, speaking on the topic in campaign appearances. In an August 6 article in the New York Times, political reporter Matt Stevens [discussed](#) some of the new proposals that these politicians are offering in the wake of the shootings. He wrote:

Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. endorsed a national assault-weapons buyback program for the first time on Monday night, joining other Democratic presidential candidates in calling for new gun control measures in the wake of two mass shootings over the weekend that left 31 people dead...

As the nation reels from [the shootings in El Paso and Dayton, Ohio](#), many of the 2020 contenders are eager to explain what they would do about gun violence if elected president. While the field of two dozen hopefuls has largely agreed on a set of ideas that Democrats have [been trying to advance unsuccessfully for decades](#), some candidates have latched onto more progressive policies that previously might not have been politically palatable.

Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey [released a gun control plan in May](#) that included a proposal for a federal gun licensing program. Mr. Booker, whose plan is among the more progressive ones in the field, delivered [a major speech on gun violence and white supremacy](#) on Wednesday morning.

Also this week, former Representative Beto O'Rourke, whose hometown is El Paso, [came out in favor of gun licenses and buyback programs](#) after having previously endorsed less stringent measures; Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont [said that he was in favor of buybacks](#); and [Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota](#) and [Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington](#) released their own gun-safety proposals that seek to close various loopholes and take additional actions.

Several other candidates, including [Senator Kamala Harris of California](#), [former Representative John Delaney of Maryland](#) and [the self-help author Marianne Williamson](#), have already issued plans outlining how they would deal with guns.

Many of the Democrats agree on policies like universal background checks, bans on assault rifles and so-called red-flag laws, which would allow for the confiscation of firearms from people found to be mentally ill.

[\[https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/politics/gun-control-democrats-2020.html\]](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/us/politics/gun-control-democrats-2020.html)

One thing that distinguishes the responses of Democrats pushing for gun control now from previous political moments is that these candidates have made direct links between the rhetoric used by some mass shooters (including the El Paso shooter) and President Trump's verbal attacks on immigrants. In an August 12 article for Politico, national political correspondent David Siders [traced](#) this new Democratic strategy, noting how it developed in response to pressure from gun control advocates.

Siders also noted that young people who have taken action have played a large role in influencing politicians' stances. In particular, students from Parkland High School in Florida have led a sustained national campaign for new gun laws following a deadly shooting at their school in 2018. Writes Siders:

[C]andidates are road-testing a withering argument that draws a direct line between gun violence and the president's racist rhetoric.

"We are living with a toxic brew of two different things, each of which is claiming lives and each of which represents a national security emergency in this country," South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg said at a forum on gun violence here on Saturday. "One of them is the ready availability of guns and the way they can fall into the wrong hands. The other is the rise of hate. And when they come into contact with each other, it is deadly."

The previous day, Julián Castro, the former mayor of San Antonio and Obama Cabinet secretary, made an equally explicit connection before arriving at the Iowa State Fair: "Disarm Hate: Combating White Nationalism and Gun Violence," he titled the gun control proposal he released to coincide with the weekend of campaigning....

The traditional response to mass shootings in the United States would not suggest a wide opening for Democrats in that effort — a familiar procession of grief followed quickly by condemnation and legislative scrapping before most massacres fade from view.

But Democrats this year, more so than during the last presidential election, have been buoyed on gun control by gains in statehouses last year, by an internal weakening of the NRA [National Rifle Association] and by a groundswell of youth activism following the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., in 2018.

"To me, the tipping point was first of all Parkland, and you could see those results in the midterm, where those kids didn't just march, they actually voted," Sen. Amy Klobuchar told reporters here. "And then now, with these horrendous massacres in Dayton and El Paso." Sanders told gun control activists in Des Moines that they had "for the first time put the NRA on the defensive, and that is no small thing."...

“There’s a whole generation that is now voting, voted last time, will vote in 2020, will caucus ... who have had to live through this,” said Matt Sinovic, executive director of the progressive group Progress Iowa.

[\[https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/12/democrats-guns-white-supremacy-1458135\]](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/12/democrats-guns-white-supremacy-1458135)

Increasing youth activism around gun violence has not only shifted the positions of individual candidates, but has pushed the entire Democratic field. In fact, Democrats seem far less interested in disagreeing with each other over gun control than in showing a united face opposing the NRA and politicians oppose regulation. In an August 12 article in the New York Times, political reporters Reid J. Epstein and Thomas Kaplan [noted](#) the change in the debate around gun control:

Democrats are used to arguing over healthcare, a debate that has been central to the party’s identity for decades. But there hasn’t been a robust policy discussion on gun control in a presidential primary since 2000, when Vice President Al Gore and former Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey debated the wisdom of a national gun licensing system.

Now, candidates are navigating a Democratic electorate driven in part by young voters who came of age in the mass shooting era and who have little tolerance for kowtowing to a long-held view that gun rights are sacrosanct. The idea of a gun licensing system has returned to the center of the discussion, backed by candidates like Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, [and many candidates have vowed to reinstate a ban on assault-style weapons....](#)

In the healthcare debate, candidates from the party’s centrist wing have warned of scaring off voters with ambitious plans like “Medicare for all.” But there is no Democrat in the race warning that aggressive gun control proposals go too far.

Asked if it was possible for the party’s nominee to go too far on gun control, Ms. Gillibrand replied: “No. I think the American people are behind us.”

Nowhere was the power of the movement — and new financing behind it — more evident than Saturday in Des Moines, where 16 presidential candidates [appeared at a gun violence forum](#) organized in less than a week by Everytown for Gun Safety, the gun control organization financed primarily by Michael R. Bloomberg, the former New York City mayor.

“I have to tell you, it says a lot about how much you’ve accomplished that so many presidential candidates are here today,” Mr. Bloomberg told a crowd of local activists and gun violence survivors who were bused and flown in for the event. “The big reason for the historic unity in the Democratic Party on guns, and the reason this historic gathering has come together, is that we built a grass-roots army with six million supporters.”

[\[https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/us/politics/2020-democrats-gun-control.html\]](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/us/politics/2020-democrats-gun-control.html)

In this respect, changes in the gun control debate are not merely the product of the personal beliefs of individual politicians; rather, they are the result of collective action. But at the same time, the historical record suggests that advocates will need to continue mounting serious pressure if substantial reforms are to be enacted.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
 2. According to the reading, what has changed about leading Democrats' views on gun control? What factors are responsible for this change?
 3. Some presidential candidates have drawn connections between mass shootings and the rise of white nationalist sentiment—tying Trump to an escalation of hateful rhetoric. What do you think of this connection? Is it a valid argument for politicians to be making? Explain your position.
 4. Go online and check out Politico's breakdown of the presidential candidates' views on gun control: <https://www.politico.com/2020-election/candidates-views-on-the-issues/gun-control/>. What differences do you see? Do these differences matter to you? Why or why not?
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Reading Two:

President Trump and Gun Control

After the series of shootings in the summer of 2019, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, said in a radio interview that there was support in his party for expanding background checks. At different points in his career, President Trump has signaled support for gun control legislation, but he has often retracted that support. Trump tweeted support for background checks in the wake of the August shootings, but then [backtracked](#) a few hours later at a press conference.

So where does the President stand? In an August 9 article in the New York Times, White House correspondents Michael D. Shear and Maggie Haberman and congressional correspondent Sheryl Gay Stolberg [looked at](#) the history of Trump and gun control:

In 2013, Donald J. Trump said he supported background checks for gun purchases to “weed out the sickos.” Two years later, as he prepared to run for president, he flip-flopped, telling *Ammoland* magazine that he opposed expanded checks because they don't work. It is a recurring pattern.

As president, Mr. Trump changed his mind again in 2018 after the high school shooting in Parkland, Fla., insisting that stronger checks would be “fully backed” by the White House. But that position only lasted a few days, until a late-night meeting with the National Rifle Association in the Oval Office, after which he backed off his support and later threatened to veto a background check bill.

On Friday, in the wake of massacres in El Paso and Dayton, Ohio, Mr. Trump presented himself now as a deal-maker eager to bring Democrats and Republicans together behind tougher background checks.

But the president's long history on the gun issue raises questions about his real commitment to legislation that would improve the background check system and close loopholes that have allowed firearms to be bought and sold at gun shows without any knowledge of a buyer's history....

"Trump has more opinions on gun safety than a Magic 8 Ball," said John Feinblatt, the president of Everytown for Gun Safety, a leading gun control group. "If he means what he says, he will call Mitch McConnell up and get a pledge from him to bring the Senate back."

If he doesn't, Mr. Feinblatt said, "it won't meet the moment, and it's a clear cave to the N.R.A."

[\[https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/us/politics/gun-background-checks.html\]](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/us/politics/gun-background-checks.html)

On September 1, a day after the shooting in Midland, Texas, Trump said that lawmakers have "a lot of thinking to do" about ways to address gun violence. At a briefing, he pledged to find a way to "substantially reduce" mass shootings.

Trump had made similar statements in early August, following the El Paso and Dayton shootings. But he appeared to back away from them after a phone conversation with National Rifle Association President Wayne LaPierre. The Atlantic reported that Trump had called LaPierre to discuss background checks, but left the phone call opposing any new legislation. Staff writer Elaina Plott [wrote](#):

Three days after a pair of mass shootings in Ohio and Texas that left 31 people dead, President Donald Trump was preoccupied with visions of a Rose Garden ceremony.

His daughter and senior adviser, Ivanka Trump, had proposed the idea of a televised Rose Garden appearance as a way to nudge her father toward supporting universal background checks. The president had recently suggested he was open to the gun-control measure, tweeting, "Republicans and Democrats must come together and get strong background checks, perhaps marrying this legislation with desperately needed immigration reform."....

"He loved it. He was all spun up about it," said a former senior White House official who, like others interviewed for this story, spoke with me on the condition of anonymity in order to share private conversations. On August 7, the president picked up the phone to discuss the idea with Wayne LaPierre, chief executive of the National Rifle Association. "It's going to be great, Wayne," Trump said, according to both a former senior White House official and an NRA official briefed on the call. "They will love us." And if they—meaning the roughly 5 million people who make up the NRA's active membership, and some of Trump's electoral base—didn't, Trump reportedly assured LaPierre, "I'll give you cover."...

LaPierre's response, the sources said, was unequivocal: "No." With that, "the Rose Garden fantasy," as the NRA official described it to me, was scrapped as quickly as it had been dreamed up.

[By late August], according to a person briefed on the call, the president told LaPierre in another phone call that universal background checks were off the table. “He was cementing his stance that we already have background checks and that he’s not waffling on this anymore,” the source told me. “He doesn’t want to pursue it.” In the call, the source added, Trump said he wanted to focus now on “increasing funding” for mental-healthcare and directing attorneys general across the country to start prosecuting “gun crime” through federal firearms charges from the Justice Department....

This is not to say it was easy for the NRA to change Trump’s mind. Following the El Paso and Dayton shootings, Ivanka Trump made several calls to GOP lawmakers in an effort to mobilize support for both universal background checks and so-called red-flag laws, which would allow law enforcement or family members to keep guns from individuals deemed to be dangerous by a court order. But if her influence was in any way an obstacle for the gun group, it was short-lived[.]

[\[https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/trump-background-checks-nra/596413/\]](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/trump-background-checks-nra/596413/)

Observers watching the gun control debate believe that circumstances might be favorable to change. Recently, the N.R.A. has experienced internal upheaval and has decreased financial contributions to candidates—factors that might reduce its influence. A Politico/Morning Consult poll a few days after the shootings [found](#) that 55% of likely Republican voters were comfortable with banning assault weapons. When Republican Ohio Governor Mike DeWine spoke at the vigil in Dayton, he was [interrupted](#) by shouts of “Do something!” At a press conference the next day, he unveiled proposals for additional background checks and a “red flag law,” which permits police or family members to petition a state court to order the temporary removal of firearms from a person who may present a danger to others or themselves.

But translating the moment into national legislation seems difficult. In an August 20 article in the Daily Beast, congressional reporter Sam Brodley, White House reporter Asawin Suebsaeng, and Politics Editor Sam Stein [wrote](#):

A source familiar with the discussions said that Democrats remain willing to work with Trump to reach a legislative compromise on guns. But they are skeptical that it might happen, aware of his tendency to backtrack after past mass shootings. The hope among Senate offices involved in the discussions is that the White House will ultimately make clear what proposals Trump can and cannot support with respect to gun legislation and that that, in turn, will set the table for possible next steps, according to the source familiar with talks....

Democratic Hill aides expect that Republicans will, ultimately, not move on legislation this time around unless it has the NRA’s endorsement. And for that reason, there is growing resignation to the idea that Senate GOP leaders will end up pushing reforms to the background checks system that nibble around the edges rather than directly expanding its scope.

One such bill was introduced by Senators Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Ted Cruz (R-TX) during the wake of the Newtown shooting in early 2013 and [reintroduced in years since](#). The bill increased funding for school safety measures, criminalized straw purchases, and encouraged states to

report mental health records; but it did not actually limit gun ownership, at least in material ways. Another possibility is a so-called “red flag law” proposal — which would aim to keep guns out of the hands of the most dangerous people — that represents probably the maximum level of gun control that the GOP can get behind.

[\[https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-goes-dark-on-gun-control-after-pledging-background-checks-like-weve-never-had-before\]](https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-goes-dark-on-gun-control-after-pledging-background-checks-like-weve-never-had-before)

Just as some politicians have been influenced by social movements supporting gun control, forces such as the N.R.A. have had real sway in stopping elected officials from taking legislative action. Passing meaningful gun restrictions will likely require not only winning over individual officials, but taking on the power of the guns-rights lobby.

For Discussion:

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. How have President Trump’s positions on gun control fluctuated after mass shootings? What do you think might be some of the reasons for his changing positions?
3. The President has said he wants to focus on measures such as increasing funding for mental healthcare. Do you think this approach could be effective? Does gun control need to be part of the legislative response? Why or why not?
4. It can feel demoralizing to see, after each new mass shooting, the same pattern of politicians expressing outrage but then failing to pursue substantive solutions. Why do you think that this pattern continues to persist so stubbornly? Do you see ways in which the cycle might be broken?