



# GUNS IN AMERICA

The tragedy in Las Vegas has reignited the debate over America's gun laws **BY PATRICIA SMITH**

**I**T WAS THE WORST MASS SHOOTING in modern American history. On October 1, thousands of country music fans were enjoying an outdoor concert in Las Vegas, Nevada. Suddenly, Stephen Paddock, 64, unleashed a hail of gunfire. He fired rapidly from his hotel room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay.

The shooting went on for a full 10 minutes. By the time the gunfire ended, 58 people were dead and more than 500 were wounded.

Police stormed Paddock's hotel room. There, they discovered that he had killed himself. They also

found more than 20 guns. In addition, they found special devices that can make guns fire at a faster rate.

As police try to figure out what led Paddock to kill, the tragedy has reignited the national debate over gun control. The United States has more guns than any other **developed country**. It also has far more gun violence. Would stricter gun control laws help lower the number of gun-related deaths? Congress, like the nation, has long been divided over the issue.

Here is what you need to know about the debate.



People shop for firearms at a gun show in Dallas, Texas.

## 1 What is gun control?

*Gun control* is a broad term. It can include rules on what kinds of firearms can be bought and sold, who can have or sell them, and where and how they can be carried.

The debate has a long history in the U.S. It dates back to the 18th century, when the Founders were writing the Bill of Rights. Those are

the first 10 amendments to the Constitution. The Second Amendment gave Americans the right to “bear arms.” However, for more than 200 years, people have disagreed over how to interpret it.

Recently, the gun control debate has focused on three issues:

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

Since the Las Vegas shooting, attention has centered on assault rifles. Those are military-style weapons able to fire multiple bullets quickly. There is also a focus on devices called bump stocks. They can make semiautomatic guns fire even faster.

## 2 What’s the status of federal gun control today?

Federal law on gun control applies to the whole country. It bans specific groups of people from owning firearms. The list includes convicted felons and people who have been diagnosed with certain types of mental illness.

Since 1993, licensed gun dealers have been required to conduct background checks on potential buyers. They do this through an FBI database. This is meant to prevent the sale of guns to someone who is banned from owning one.

But the system has loopholes. Perhaps the biggest loophole is that many small-scale sellers claim to be “hobbyists.” That way, they are not required to conduct background checks. Another problem is that many people with mental illness are never diagnosed, so they can still buy guns.

## 3 Where does the American public stand?

In general, Democrats and people who live in cities tend to favor tighter restrictions on guns. Republicans tend to favor protecting gun rights. So do people who live in rural areas, where guns are more common.

But following the Las Vegas shooting, a Politico.com poll found that 64 percent of Americans want tighter gun laws. It found that only 29 percent oppose more rules. Another poll by the Pew Research Center found that 83 percent of Democrats and 81 percent of Republicans support background checks for all gun purchases.

## 4 What are some of the arguments against gun control?

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

Gun owners say that weapons can make society safer by giving people the power of self-defense.

“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 (NRA) famously said in 2012. The NRA is the country’s most powerful gun-rights group.

The debates often come down to the Second Amendment. 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. →

\*A *militia* is a citizen army. Before the creation of a national army, local militias provided protection for many Americans.

Supreme Court avoided answering the question of whether the Second Amendment refers to an *individual's* right to bear arms or to a *militia member's* right. But in 2008 and 2010, the Court ruled that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to keep a firearm. The rulings have only fueled the debate over what limits society can place on gun ownership.

## 5 What are some of the arguments in favor of gun control?

People who favor gun control say that the more people who carry weapons, the more likely it is that someone will use one to kill. They cite figures that equate high rates of gun ownership with more gun violence.

According to a 2007 report, there were 89 guns per 100 people in the U.S. That is more than in any other country. (Yemen, second on the list, had 55 guns per 100 people.) Yet gun-related homicide rates are more than 25 times as high in the U.S. as in any

other high-income country.

Supporters of gun control say that tougher laws in other countries keep gun deaths down. For example, Australia 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 has not had a mass shooting since.

Gun control supporters say that closing gun control loopholes would help. They say doing so would let law-abiding people have firearms, while resulting in far fewer deaths.



Concertgoers flee gunfire at a music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 1.

## 6 Why are gun laws controversial?

For many politicians, supporting gun rights is critical to getting reelected. That is partly because the NRA and other gun rights groups are powerful and well funded. Therefore, many politicians don't want to anger them. The groups, known as the gun **lobby**, fear that additional limits will lead to outright bans on weapons. In recent years, they have opposed measures like tougher background checks. In the past, they supported such measures.

## TWO VIEWS OF GUN CONTROL

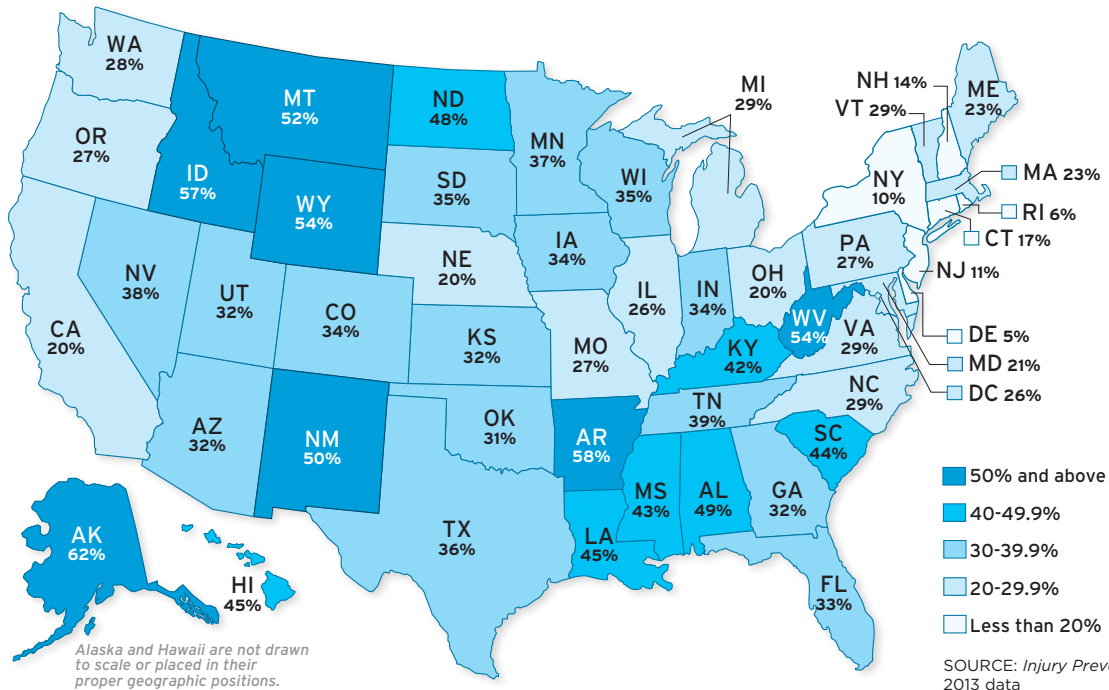


Gun control advocates say when the Founders wrote the Second Amendment, they couldn't have imagined the power of today's firearms—or the gun lobby.



Those in favor of gun rights argue that Americans are safer with guns because they allow people to defend themselves against criminals.

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



In addition, American politics have become more **partisan** over the past generation. Republicans have become more uniformly opposed to gun laws at a time when they control Congress and most statehouses.

## 7 What have states done?

Most gun control laws are at the state level. California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island have the most-restrictive laws.

But many other states are making it easier to buy or carry guns. For example, Wisconsin eliminated its 48-hour waiting period to buy a handgun.

The wide variety of rules in different states allows guns to flow freely across state lines. For example, New York is a state with very strict gun laws. However, more than two-thirds of guns used in crimes in New

York City come from states with weaker gun laws.

## 8 Now what?

 Congress has not passed major gun control legislation in two decades. This is despite mass shootings in recent years, such as the ones at Virginia Tech in 2007 and at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012. Last year, there was a mass shooting at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

After the tragedy in Las Vegas, lawmakers may have found an area of agreement. They seem to support banning the sale of bump stocks. That is the device Paddock used to make his semiautomatic gun fire like an automatic weapon.

"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 Republican Senator John Cornyn of Texas. "It seems like it's an

obvious area we ought to explore and see if it's something Congress needs to act on."

Still, gun control supporters 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 in Washington, D.C. “Banning bump stocks is not a sufficient congressional response to this tragedy.”

But in a deeply divided Congress, it may be at least a 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.” ♦

With reporting by *The New York Times*

**CORE QUESTION** How do you view gun control? Why might other people have a different viewpoint?