In the News: School Shootings

A shooting at a high school in Benton, Kentucky, on Tuesday left at least two students dead and 17 others injured. This shooting came a day after a similar attack at a high school in Italy, Texas, and was the ninth school shooting in 2018 alone.

School shootings have plagued the U.S. for decades including, most notably, the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado and the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut.

Public Opinion Context

A quarter of U.S. parents (24%) in an August 2017 Gallup survey said they fear for their children's safety while they are at school. Parents' concern about children's safety had peaked at 55% following the Columbine shooting in 1999, but declined quickly. It has spiked after other high profile school shootings.

US Parents' Fears of Children Being Harmed at School

More broadly, nearly four in 10 Americans (39%) reported in an October 2017 Gallup poll that they were "very" or "somewhat" worried that they or a family member will be a victim of a mass shooting. This survey came soon after the Oct. 1 mass shooting in Las Vegas, which left 58 dead.

School shootings often reignite debate about gun control laws. Six in 10 Americans (60%) said they favored stricter laws on the sale of firearms, in Gallup's October survey. However, slightly less than half, 48%, favored a ban on assault weapons, while only 28% favored a legal ban on handguns.

For the first time in Gallup's trend, a slim majority (51%) of Americans said they favored the passage of new gun laws, as opposed to the stricter enforcement of existing laws (47%).

About four in ten Americans (41%) said stricter laws would reduce the number of mass shootings. Fifteen percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said stricter laws would reduce the number of mass shootings, compared with 63% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents.

Takeaway

Calls for stricter gun control laws are sure to follow these most recent school shootings, and a clear majority of Americans would support it. In fact, Americans are more supportive of the passage of new gun control legislation than at any time in Gallup's 18-year trend. However, less than half believe these laws will reduce the number of mass shootings.

The challenge for lawmakers will be to craft legislation that would both reduce gun violence and win enough support from gun rights' advocates to be able to pass.

Shootings, Guns and Public Opinion

Last week the country was shocked by the on-air shooting of a reporter and cameraman - shocked, but perhaps not surprised. Gun violence has become an all-too-common part of the news, and after each incident, a debate erupts over gun control. Public opinion data over more than fifty years reveals a country ever less willing to restrict gun ownership, even as mass shootings and other high-profile shooting incidents continue to make news. From the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research archives:

Tragedy in the news. Again.

Gun-related homicide deaths have been decreasing in number since the 1990s. But the number of active shooter events and mass shootings have increased in recent years. Such terrible events make headlines. Pollsters have asked the public about their attention to news stories about these tragedies since 1998. While many stories of national-reported shootings are followed very or fairly closely by half or less of the public, some such incidents gain the attention of eight in ten or more.

shootings in the news

Decreasing support for stricter gun laws

These incidents are occurring at a time of notable change in public opinion on gun control. In polls since 1989, decreasing proportions of Americans have said they favor stricter gun laws. Although high-profile incidents can increase support briefly, the cumulative effect of the increasing number of mass shootings does not appear to be higher support for restrictions on guns.

favor stricter gun laws

The same trend can be seen in public attitudes about the importance of controlling gun ownership versus the right to own guns. The country is about evenly divided on this issue at the moment, while only fifteen years ago, a majority believed controlling gun ownership was more important. Gun owners are more likely to say protecting the right to own guns is more important. In a 2013 Pew poll, 72% said so, versus 30% of those living in a household with no gun. It is worth noting, therefore, that this decline has occurred despite a simultaneous decline in gun ownership rates.

right to own guns vs right to control ownership

The data on public opinion about handguns in particular goes back to the 1950s and reveal the magnitude of changing American attitudes about guns. More than twice as many Americans in 1959 said that handguns should be banned than said so in 2014. While there have been occasional rises in the proportion of people saying that there should be a ban, such as immediately following the shootings of John Lennon, Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II and following Columbine, the overall trajectory has continued away from banning handguns. The country is now nearly equally split on this issue. Banning assault rifles is similarly divisive: in a 2012 Gallup poll, 44% were for and 51% against a law that would do so.

Attitudes about banning handguns

Americans do want some limits on possessing guns. In a 2014 Pew poll, 49% said that it was more important to protect the right to own guns than to control gun ownership; but among those who said so, 76% said there should be some restrictions on gun ownership. Background checks are supported by most Americans; in a 2015 CBS poll, 88% favored background checks for all gun buyers. A 2015 Pew poll found 70% of the country supported a federal database of gun sales.

How do high-profile shootings affect attitudes about gun control?

A slight majority in polls since 2013 have said that stricter gun laws would do at least a little to help prevent gun violence specifically. However, polls in the wake of national tragedies like the slaughter of schoolchildren in Newtown, CT found the country uncertain as to the effectiveness of gun control laws in averting such crimes. After the shootings in Tucson and Sandy Hook, majorities believed that stricter gun laws would have had no effect in preventing the violence that occurred.

stricter gun laws prevent gun violence

In fact, Americans have become less convinced that anything at all can be done to prevent this sort of gun violence. A slim majority after the Columbine shootings thought that government and society could take action that would be effective in preventing shootings like that one from happening again. But after mass shooting incidents in recent years, up to two-thirds of the country have said that such shootings will happen again regardless of what action is taken. In a 2014 AP/GfK Knowledge Networks poll, just 8% of the country were extremely or very confident that the U.S. government can effectively minimize the threat Americans face from mass shootings, while 25% were moderately confident and 63% were not too or not at all confident.

belief that government can take effective action to prevent mass shootings

Multiple poll questions show that Americans have become increasingly skeptical that gun laws can do much to stem the tide of violence. In 1989, the public was divided on whether stricter guns law would reduce the amount of violence in the country. In polls in the 2013 and 2015, a majority said they would not. On this measure, the attitudes of the country overall have come in line with attitudes of gun owners in 1989.

stricter gun laws reduce violence

On a personal level, most Americans have also become convinced that a gun in the home brings more safety than risks. The perception that guns increase personal safety may have the effect of making mass shooting incidents seem more of an argument against than for gun control. In a 2015 Pew poll, 54% of the public said that gun ownership in this country does more to protect people from becoming victims of crime; 40% said it does more to put people at risk.

guns make home safer or more dangerous

Troubled individuals or a troubled society?

After Columbine and other school shootings in 1999 and 2001, the public was asked if these events were indications that something was seriously wrong in the country or isolated incidents that do not indicate anything about the country in general. A strong majority of Americans saw something seriously wrong. After more recent incidents, the country has been asked whether a shooting reflects broader problems or is just the isolated acts of troubled individuals. In some cases the public has been divided (Newtown and Virginia Tech); in others, firm majorities say these are isolated acts (Tucson and Aurora).

broader problems or isolated acts

Those who hope that changing gun laws can help to prevent shootings incidents like last week's on-air homicide or the murder of nine people in the church in Charleston in June have to overcome significant barriers in American attitudes. Those who argue that gun laws are ineffective, that these events are isolated incidents, and that guns bring more safety than danger appear to be winning the public debate.

As Democrats renewed calls this week for broader background checks and an end to military-grade weapons access, at least a handful of GOP congressmen agreed.

They remained cynical, though, that any substantive measures would pass into law.

“The reality is I’ve been here through all of these and there’s never been any change whatsoever,” GOP Rep. Peter King of New York told the New York Daily News.

“We’re not asking for much, but part of it is a love affair with guns,” he said, “almost a religious fervor.”

A former student at a Parkland, Florida, high school killed 17 people Wednesday when he opened fire at the school. President Donald Trump said there were “so many signs” that Nikolas Cruz, 19, was “mentally disturbed.”

After each mass shooting, Democrats and a small cadre of their Republican colleagues seize on the event while it is fresh in the public’s mind to put pressure on lawmakers to enact gun control legislation. Most GOP lawmakers, however, say the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting is not the time to politicize the event.

“It’s just a horrific, horrific, horrible shooting,” House Speaker Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin told a local radio station Thursday. “I think we need to pray, and our hearts go out to these victims. And I think, as public policy makers, we don’t just knee-jerk before we even have all the facts and the data.”

Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut took up the opposite stance.

“Don’t tell me tomorrow isn’t the appropriate time to debate gun violence,” Murphy tweeted Wednesday after the shooting. “If you’re a political leader doing nothing about this slaughter, you’re an accomplice.”

Don't tell me tomorrow isn't the appropriate time to debate gun violence. If you're a political leader doing nothing about this slaughter, you're an accomplice.

A month after a gunman in Las Vegas killed 58 people on Oct. 1 last year, Democratic Rep. Dina Titus of Nevada expressed frustration with Republican attempts to dodge legislative proposals on bump stocks, the device the shooter there used to increase the rate of fire of his semiautomatic rifles.

“It’s just like after Sandy Hook, just like after Orlando,” Titus said. “A lot of talk. And then [Republicans] think they can wait us out. The news cycle will change, people will forget, and we’ll move on. We just can’t let that happen.”

But the Republican message remains that nothing will stop a mentally sick person from obtaining a firearm to do harm to others if that person has made up their mind.

“I’m trying to be clear and honest here: If someone’s decided, ‘I’m going to commit this crime,’ they will find a way to get the gun to do it,” GOP Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida said on the Senate floor Thursday. “That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a law to make it harder; it just means understand, to be honest, it isn’t going to stop this from happening.”

On Wednesday, America was reminded that it's easy for a disturbed person to acquire guns and walk into almost any school, office, or store in the country and start killing. This time, the site was Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where a former student killed at least 17 people and wounded more than a dozen others. It was the second-deadliest public school shooting in American history. The country has suffered through so many similar incidents—at schools and concerts and nightclubs—in recent years that the response is almost ritualized: Photos are distributed of victims' families huddling in grief, biographies are assembled of the suddenly famous murderer, thoughts and prayers are offered in person and online, and many, many Americans call desperately for gun control.

The question hanging over everything is always the same, too: How do we prevent this from happening again? But Donald Trump and other Republicans remain unwilling or unable to take that question seriously.

On Thursday morning, the president noted on Twitter that there were signs the shooter was "mentally disturbed" and chided, "Neighbors and classmates knew he was a big problem. Must always report such instances to authorities, again and again!" But what the authorities could have done about the shooter's problems isn't clear. He reportedly passed a background check when he bought the AR-15 he used in the spree; Florida has fairly lax gun laws, and the shooter didn't fit into any of the narrow categories of people who can't buy or own firearms under state or federal law. (Many mentally ill people can legally own guns.) Last year, the shooter made a YouTube comment that said, “I’m gonna be a professional school shooter.” That comment was reported to the FBI, but little or nothing was done—in America, being obviously unbalanced and obsessed with guns is not a reason under the law to inhibit someone's Second Amendment rights.

Later Thursday, Trump gave a more substantial response in a six-minute address to the country in which he declared, "It is not enough to simply take actions that make us feel like we are making a difference, we must actually make that difference." The only action the president promised to take was pretty vague, though. "We are committed to working with state and local leaders to help secure our schools and tackle the difficult issue of mental health," he said. "Later this month, I will be meeting with the nation’s governors and attorney generals where making our schools and our children safer will be our top priority."

"Mental health" is of course the Republican go-to phrase after a mass shooting. Attorney Jeff Sessions alluded to it on Thursday as well. But people who actually study mass shootings often say that their perpetrators are hardly ever mentally ill. And though Republicans have talked for years about "mental health" as a counter to calls for gun control, they've also supported cuts to mental health services. The American Health Care Act, a.k.a. "Obamacare repeal," would have made it harder for many suffering from mental illness to get treatment by slashing Medicaid and eliminating requirements that private insurers provide mental health coverage. If Trump was talking about placing restrictions on the mentally ill owning guns, that's a different debate—but Trump has already signed a bill striking down those very restrictions.

As for "school safety," that could mean a few things. Trump has previously endorsed the NRA-sanctioned plan of arming teachers as a defense against school shootings, and his administration is apparently open to allowing more guns in schools period. But arming teachers (or placing armed guards in schools) would create other problems—would you prepare every teacher to engage in a firefight? If you did, would you have to (or be pressured to) pay them better? Would you have to be more careful to screen teachers given the expectation that they would be armed? Would cash-strapped towns and cities be expected to provide the weapons to their schools? What if an armed teacher or school resource officer killed a student by mistake? And of course armed guards can't stop all school shootings—they didn't stop Columbine, after all.

Trump doesn't seem prepared to even begin to grapple with what it would mean to put more guns in schools. Republican legislators, for all their concerns about mental health, have never moved to do anything about it. And though Trump promised to support the Florida survivors and families affected by the shooting, he'll likely ignore them if, like other relatives of mass shooting victims, they call for gun control (some already have).

The cynical response to Trump's words is that they are just an excuse to avoid the problem of Americans being gunned down for no reason week after week, and that the Republican Party as a whole simply doesn't care much or at all about gun violence. And it's very difficult not to be cynical after watching so many mass shootings in such a short time: By one count, there have been more than 1,600 since the shooting at Sandy Hook in December 2012, and according to the New York Times, three of the ten deadliest shootings in modern American history took place in the past five months.

As Trump left the podium, a reporter could be heard shouting the obvious questions: "Why does this keep happening in America? Will you do something about guns?"

Trump ignored him, but the answer seems obvious.

After mass shootings, GOP-led legislatures double efforts to loosen gun restrictions, data show

Those controlled by Democrats, meanwhile, typically don’t change policy in any significant way

Demonstrators call for gun-control legislation during President Trump's visit to El Paso on Aug.

The best available research shows that restricting gun ownership is the key to reducing the toll of gun violence. But new data show that mass shootings elicit diametrically different legislative responses depending on the party in control.

Republican-led legislatures tend to push through bills that make it easier to own and use firearms after a mass shooting, according to research from economists at Harvard Business School and UCLA. Those controlled by Democrats, on the other hand, typically don’t change their policymaking behavior in any significant way.

Researchers say they believe this is the manifestation of decades of American gun policy debate, in which gun rights proponents are better organized, better funded and more active in the political process than gun control advocates.

“Ultimately, the research suggests that mass shootings do, tragically, create policy windows where change is possible and likely,” study co-author Deepak Malhotra said via email. “The evidence to date suggests that Republicans who want fewer restrictions on guns have been the ones taking advantage of these situations.”

Researchers compiled data of mass shootings in the United States from 1989 to 2014. The analysis defined a mass shooting as “an incident in which four or more people, other than the perpetrator(s), are unlawfully killed with a firearm in a single, continuous incident that is not related to gangs, drugs, or other criminal activity.” They restricted the sample to include only shootings in which “at least three of the fatalities were individuals unrelated to, and not romantically involved with, the shooter(s).”

They also collected data on the 20,409 gun bills introduced in legislatures during period, and on the 3,199 proposals that eventually became law. They classified each piece of legislation according to whether it restricted gun access (for instance, by implementing stricter background checks or banning certain types of weapons) or loosened access (such as eliminating concealed-carry requirements or allowing guns to be brought into places where they were previously prohibited). Laws that did both, or which were otherwise neutral or unclear, were excluded from the analysis.

They controlled for external factors that could affect the introduction of gun bills, like the legislative calendar (bills are more likely to be introduced in the first year of a two-year session), as well as economic and demographic factors like unemployment and divorce rates.

The researchers found “the annual number of laws that loosen gun restrictions doubles in the year following a mass shooting in states with Republican-controlled legislatures.” Mass shootings in states where Democrats held the majority, on the other hand, didn’t appear to elicit any significant policy response in either direction.

The researchers explain these findings by noting that “Republican voters: (a) tend to be in favor of expanding gun rights and access to guns; (b) often argue that such actions reduce gun crime, and (c) are more likely than Democratic voters (during our sample period) to mobilize for political action on this issue.”

Another explanation for this asymmetry can be found in recent political science literature showing that lawmakers have a poor understanding of what their constituents want when it comes to gun policy. Several studies have shown both Democrats and Republicans believe their constituents favor much more conservative policies than they actually do. One possible reason is the disproportionate influence of business-oriented lobbying groups on the lawmaking agenda.

There are some indications that the lopsided policymaking landscape of gun control is changing. In recent years, gun-control advocates have had considerable success in mobilizing their own supporters and closing some of the intensity gap with gun rights advocates. Much of that mobilization has roots in the reaction to the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., when survivors of the violence made a sustained push for policy changes.

Political concerns aside, there’s the separate issue of the consensus among gun-violence researchers that loosening gun restrictions leads to more violence. That was made clear in a 2018 RAND Corporation analysis of the balance of evidence uncovered by gun policy research done in recent decades.

That analysis found evidence that a number of the permissive policies favored by the National Rifle Association and its allies, like stand-your-ground laws and permitless concealed-carry regulations, actually increase homicides and violent crime. Policies like strict background checks and minimum age requirements, meanwhile, appear to reduce gun violence.

The latest research on policymaking after mass shootings suggests Republican lawmakers respond by introducing legislation that may actually worsen the toll of gun violence. Democratic legislatures, meanwhile, don’t take advantage of the opportunity to pass laws that could plausibly save lives.

Wednesday marked just one month since a 19-year-old man opened fire in a Parkland, Florida, high school and murdered 17 people. One month since Twitter brimmed with thoughts and prayers from some, and renewed calls for gun control from others. And one month since President Donald Trump told lawmakers he didn’t want to wait “two weeks, three weeks, four weeks” to address gun violence in America, when “people sort of forget and we go on.”

After past mass shootings, the rapid-fire news cycle has indeed helped exempt lawmakers from uncomfortable discussions on gun violence. But in the aftermath of the Parkland massacre, students have helped keep the issue alive. And as Trump has backtracked on proposals he supported one month ago, including universal background checks and some kind of assault-weapons ban, reporters are continuing to ask questions.

As many Americans call for tighter gun laws after a mass shooting, Republicans are usually silent. According to the Republican lawmakers I spoke to for this story, there are several reasons why this is the case, from fears of primary challengers to the gun lobby. But, in the wake of the Parkland shooting, an increasing number of Republicans appear ready to abandon these concerns in favor of a more proactive response to gun violence. Now, they’re eager for their leadership to do the same, meaning an issue that has long united the party could suddenly expose even more rifts in an already fractured conference.

“There is a genuine lack of serious discussion on these issues,” Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky, who chairs the Second Amendment Caucus, told me. “Our leadership seems like the sheriff deputies at the Florida shooting: They don’t want to go in and take fire, and instead just hope the issue will burn itself out.”

I spent the day after the Parkland shooting trying to find a Republican to talk to me about the massacre and how he or she thought Congress should respond. Only one member, Representative Joe Barton of Texas—who was on the field during last summer’s congressional baseball shooting—agreed. Barton was remarkably candid in our conversation, and said he was “sad” and “confused” about why his colleagues seemed to have once again gone quiet.

Barton also happens to be retiring.

There is an obvious truth that lawmakers are more willing to speak up after they’ve announced plans to retire. But there’s also a truth most won’t acknowledge on the record—that their chances of another term could be jeopardized by wading into an emotionally fraught debate.

This seemed especially relevant after the Parkland shooting. As expected, lawmakers scrambled to their corners. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi tweeted that Congress had a “moral responsibility” to take “common sense action” to prevent “the daily tragedy of gun violence in communities across America.” The next morning, Speaker Paul Ryan told reporters that Congress should “take a breath and collect the facts.”

In the weeks that followed, I continued to reach out to Republicans; perhaps sensing the issue’s staying power, more of them agreed to talk. Representative Tom Reed of New York told me that, until lawmakers stop worrying about getting reelected, mass shootings will continue. He put it plainly: “A lot of members are just afraid to lead on this issue because of how it can motivate a primary opponent.”

Reed has been busy since the shooting. He’s held three town halls to discuss his controversial proposal of “forced treatment” for the mentally ill and school-safety measures. “We always talk about the individual behind the gun,” he told me. “It’s time we back that up with action.”

“The problem our leadership faces is how polarized the conference can be on these things,” he added. “But if we just start to lead on this issue, I think the politics will take care of themselves.”

It’s a nice enough sentiment, and Reed seems to believe it. But he represents a blue-state district with a mix of suburban and rural voters. For Reed, a proactive legislative response to the American problem of mass shootings is not so politically perilous; in those town halls, he does not contend just with voters who hunt on weekends, who prize guns for recreation.

Those who represent deeply red districts face a more uniform swath of voters. In Alabama, for example, where I grew up, the Second Amendment is not so much a right as an inviolable element of culture—lawmakers are not wrong to believe that challenging this, however slightly, could spell political suicide.

Representative Brian Mast of Florida understands these political pressures, but in the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, he no longer finds them a compelling defense against tighter gun laws. An Army veteran who lost both legs in Afghanistan, Mast may be evidence that some in Congress are shedding their political fear of guns. On February 23, he published an op-ed in The New York Times announcing his support for a ban on assault weapons. “I cannot support the primary weapon I used to defend our people being used to kill children I swore to defend,” he wrote. He also declared his support for background checks on all gun purchases, a ban on bump-stocks, and a ban on firearm purchases by those who have been declared mentally ill.

Mast acknowledged to me that he may have made himself politically vulnerable in his bid for reelection. “I’ve literally lost friends over this,” he told me. “And I said, you know what, someone is probably going to primary me over this, but you don’t worry about being a casualty when you’re trying to save a life.”

Mast’s op-ed was striking not so much for the positions it took, but for its simple existence. It’s unclear whether an assault-weapons ban—or any currently proposed gun-control measure, for that matter—would have prevented what happened in Parkland. But it is notable that Mast is taking a public stance, that he broke through the cloud of rhetoric about “conversations” that, fairly or unfairly, causes many Americans to perceive Republicans as silent on gun violence.

“We’ve become desensitized to killing in a very unhealthy way,” Mast told me. “I’ve seen people bleed out, cry for their families, their tissue laying around them …”

He paused for a moment, then said: “I think this time will be different. It feels different.”

This time may feel different to Mast, to Reed, to a whole host of other Republicans I spoke to. But whether it does to their congressional leadership is another question.

I talked to nearly a dozen Republicans in the House and Senate for this story, and heard nearly a dozen different proposals for how to curb gun violence and mass shootings. They all said they wanted GOP leadership to address gun violence in a meaningful way. It’s not possible to have conversations, they told me, if there’s nothing on the table to talk about. (Only two lawmakers brought up the one measure that leadership has backed—the so-called Fix NICS bill, which would improve the reporting of criminal convictions to the National Instant Criminal Background Check system. The House recently passed the bill, coupled with a proposal allowing someone with a concealed-carry permit in one state to carry in other states.)

Massie is among the few conservative members who want to repeal the Gun-Free School Act of 1990, which makes it a crime to have a gun within a thousand feet of a school. In his view, the best way to prevent the next school shooting is “to be prepared for it,” and that means allowing teachers to carry guns. “The fact is, the issue [of school shootings] won’t go away,” he told me. “But what would curb it is having these people walk in, fire a few bullets, and then end up on the floor dead.”

Recent polling suggests that most Americans think arming teachers is a mistake. Massie acknowledged that his proposal is unpopular. But the important point, he said, is that he’s been out front with it: making frequent appearances on NBC, CNN, and NPR, “trying to reach new audiences with this message.”

He told me he wished leadership would do the same thing with their own proposals, whatever they may be. “I think we have a leadership problem here in the House. A real leader on this issue would be out in front doing what I’m doing,” he said. “I wouldn’t have to go on the Sunday shows if they were really leading on this issue instead of cowering and trying to insulate members from tough votes.” (AshLee Strong, a spokesman for Ryan, responded that the House “has already passed the Fix NICS bill” and is now waiting to see “what the Senate will do.”)

Yet even if more Republicans declare themselves open to a “tough vote,” and respond to political pressures in favor of something proactive, there’s little they can do if they can’t agree on a starting point. On most issues, Senate leadership likes to demonstrate a broad consensus and then schedule floortime, comfortable in the knowledge that the bill will pass. Senator Pat Toomey told me that lawmakers will have to figure it out before trying to convince Senate leadership that new gun laws deserve consideration. “There are a tremendous number of varied ideas and issues competing for time right now, and time is the most limited and precious commodity on the Senate floor,” he said. Until they have 60 votes on a piece of legislation, however modest in scope, “it’s hard to make the case to McConnell” that it deserves floor consideration.

Toomey added that he thought McConnell wanted to get gun legislation to the floor. “But I also think we need to be really honest about the fact that this is a complicated problem,” he said, referring to the intersection of gun control and mental health.

That’s what Toomey hopes senators can achieve with Fix NICS—that in two weeks, senators could be seriously debating new restrictions on gun purchases and more tightly regulated systems for information sharing among law enforcement.

Other Republicans I spoke to, however, said the time had come to stop lumping in gun violence with the rest of the “issues” Congress will tackle this year, as if it were a banking-reform package or a farm-bill extension. Ultimately, they said, the House and Senate leadership can decide to make addressing gun violence a priority if it wants to, whether from the angle of guns, mental health, or both.

Mast cited tax reform as an example, noting the extensive listening sessions, public-relations campaign, and persistent focus on the issue among Republicans in the fall.

“That’s how I would lead. I’d put the same focus and urgency on this as we did on tax reform,” he told me. “I wouldn’t wait for the Senate to do this, or the president to do that. We should be saying, as 435 members of the House, ‘Never again.’”

In the immediate aftermath of the Parkland shooting, Trump indicated he would pressure leadership to make gun violence a priority. In a meeting at the White House with lawmakers, he seemed to enthusiastically endorse universal background checks, expressed support for some sort of renewed assault-weapons ban, and said he wanted to make it harder for mentally ill people to get a gun.

Toomey called the event “a little bit chaotic,” but said he was heartened by Trump’s support of his own legislation with West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, which expands background checks to online firearms sales and gun shows. “If the president vigorously supports it, that could really have a huge impact,” he told me.

To have the president express support for a measure is meaningful: It gives leadership cover to move ahead on legislation that may otherwise make their members skittish. Trump’s roundtable with lawmakers felt like momentum until it didn’t.

Just one day after that gathering, Trump met with the National Rifle Association’s top lobbyist, Chris Cox. He tweeted that it was a “Good (great) meeting.” Cox then assured his own Twitter followers: Trump and Vice President Mike Pence “don’t want gun control.” The White House then said next to nothing about these issues until Sunday, when Trump walked back his support for comprehensive background checks and hiking the age limit to buy certain weapons, tweeting that there was “not much political support.”

It was just two weeks ago that Trump rebuked Toomey for not including that age limit in his background-checks bill, saying he was “afraid of the NRA.” Then on Monday, from the briefing-room podium, White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders declined to say whether Trump supported Manchin-Toomey at all.

Democrats like to pin a lot of Republicans’ inaction on gun violence on the gun lobby, and left-leaning social-media users like to post how much each Republican lawmaker receives in donations from the NRA. Republicans often complain that this is caustic and overstated. But despite all the Republicans who appeared more willing to tackle gun violence after Parkland, the White House reversed course after the president met with Cox.

I asked Michael Hammond, chief counsel of Gun Owners of America, what he thought would happen with guns post-Parkland.

“Nothing,” he told me. Then he chuckled a bit, and said: “But you don’t pop the cork until they bang the gavel.”

Senate Republicans have a new plan for preventing mass shootings: require public schools to use surveillance technology to monitor students’ online behavior for signs of violence or self-harm.

A new Republican bill that claims “to help prevent mass shootings” includes no new gun control measures. Instead, Republican lawmakers are supporting a huge, federally mandated boost to America’s growing school surveillance industry.

Millions of American students, across thousands of school districts, are already being monitored by tech companies that scan everything they write in school emails, chats and shared documents, looking for signs of suicidal thoughts or plans for a school shooting. This surveillance technology doesn’t turn off when the school day is over: anything students type in official school accounts is monitored 24 hours a day, whether they are in their classrooms or their bedrooms.

Under digital surveillance: how American schools spy on millions of kids

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There is still no research evidence that demonstrates whether or not online monitoring of schoolchildren actually works to prevent violence.

Despite this, new legislation introduced Wednesday by Senator John Cornyn, a Texas Republican and longtime ally of the National Rifle Association (NRA), would update the Children’s Internet Protection Act to mandate that public schools adopt “a technology protection measure that detects online activities of minors who are at risk of committing self-harm or extreme violence against others”.

A spokesperson for Cornyn did not immediately respond to a request for comment on why he and other Senate Republicans are mandating that public schools adopt a new technology before there is any clear evidence that it’s effective in preventing violence.

The Cornyn bill, entitled the Response Act, includes a range of other policies without strong evidence of reducing mass shootings, including expediting the federal death penalty for perpetrators of mass shootings, a priority of Donald Trump.

Privacy advocates say pervasive surveillance is not appropriate for an educational setting, and that it may actually harm children, particularly students with disabilities and students of color, who are already disproportionately targeted with school disciplinary measures.

“You are forcing schools into a position where they would have to surveil by default,” said Amelia Vance, the director of education privacy at the Future of Privacy Forum.

“There’s a privacy debate to be had about whether surveillance is the right tactic to take in schools, whether it inhibits students trust in their schools and their ability to learn,” Vance said. But “the bottom line,” she said, is “we do not have evidence that violence prediction works”.

There’s no hard data on how many public schools are already monitoring what students write 24 hours a day. But Vance estimates that only a third of US school districts, at most, currently use this technology.

If Cornyn’s bill becomes law, “you’re going to force probably 10,000 districts to buy a new product that they’re going to have to implement”, she said.

That would mean redirecting public schools’ time and money away from strategies that are backed by evidence, such as supporting mental health and counseling services, and towards dealing with surveillance technologies, which often produce many false alarms, like alerts about essays on To Kill a Mockingbird.

Fear of school shootings has already fueled rapid growth in the school surveillance industry, particularly after a school shooting in Parkland, Florida, last year left 17 people dead. Companies that sell this technology are marketing it to schools with bold claims of lives saved – numbers based only on internal, anecdotal estimates, not independent analysis.

One leading school surveillance company, Gaggle, says its technology is currently used to monitor 4.5 million students across 1,400 school districts. The company claims that in the last academic year alone its technology “helped districts save the lives of more than 700 students who were planning or actually attempting suicide”.

Securly, another company, says its products are used to protect 10 million students across 10,000 individual schools. In the past year, Securly said it helped school officials intervene in 400 situations that presented an “imminent threat”.

Another company, Bark says it works with at least 1,400 school districts across the country, and claims its technology has helped prevent “16 credible school shootings” and detected “twenty thousand severe self-harm situations”. Bark, which sells a for-profit app to help parents monitor what their children are doing online, offers its surveillance technology to schools for free.

First passed in 2000, the Children’s Internet Protection Act was originally designed to make sure that American kids would not be looking at porn on taxpayer-funded school computers. It currently requires schools to monitor students’ “online activities”, although privacy experts say that what that means – and what constitutional limits there may be on the monitoring – have never been clearly defined.

America faces an epic choice...

... in the coming year, and the results will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last three years, much of what the Guardian holds dear has been threatened – democracy, civility, truth. This US administration is establishing new norms of behaviour. Anger and cruelty disfigure public discourse and lying is commonplace. Truth is being chased away. But with your help we can continue to put it center stage.

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Another Mass Shooting, but This Time House Democrats Promise Action

Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader, said she expected action on expanded background checks.

Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader, said she expected action on expanded background checks.Credit...Erin Schaff for The New York Times

By Emily Cochrane and Sheryl Gay Stolberg

Nov. 9, 2018

WASHINGTON — Since the collapse of bipartisan gun control legislation in 2013, a succession of gruesome mass shootings has been greeted on Capitol Hill by thoughts, prayers and then inaction. But the killing of 12 people late Wednesday night at a California country and western bar came just 24 hours after Democrats — many of whom campaigned in support of gun control — regained the House majority in the midterm elections.

This time, Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House Democrats’ longtime leader, has promised a legislative response when her party takes control in January.

“I do believe” there will be action, Ms. Pelosi said in an interview on Thursday on CNN, “because in this Congress, the one that we’re in right this minute, there is bipartisan legislation to have common sense background checks, to prevent guns going into the wrong hands.”

The likely first push will be a version of the bill written after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 — subjecting almost all gun sales to a federal background check, including internet and gun show transactions. Newly elected representatives will descend on Washington next week for freshman orientation, mingling with veteran lawmakers and kicking off the legislative discussions.

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“We want the new members to be a part of this conversation,” said Drew Hammill, a spokesman for Ms. Pelosi.

A legislative lunge toward gun control in the inaugural months of the 116th Congress would offer up the first test for the new Democratic majority. The Republican majority in the Senate, fortified on Tuesday with new conservative hard-liners, has balked at any legislation that can be painted as curbing gun owners’ rights. After a gunman opened fire on Republican lawmakers last year at a suburban baseball field, Republicans actually pressed to loosen gun controls.

ImageRepresentative Conor Lamb has cautioned Democrats against any legislative package that would curtail gun owners’ ability to obtain firearms.

Representative Conor Lamb has cautioned Democrats against any legislative package that would curtail gun owners’ ability to obtain firearms.Credit...Federica Valabrega/Reuters

And Democrats could face their own divisions. A number of victorious Democrats campaigned on reducing gun violence and strengthening gun laws, including Lucy McBath of Georgia, whose son was killed in a 2012 shooting; Jason Crow, from the suburbs of Denver, who made rallying cries of the mass shootings at Columbine High School and an Aurora, Colo., movie theater; and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, a former C.I.A. officer who supports a ban on certain firearms with military-style features.

“I hope that we take swift action and do it fairly soon to enact sensible gun law reform that will keep communities safe,” said Veronica Escobar, who will succeed Beto O’Rourke as the representative from El Paso, Texas. “I’m so tired of being heartbroken — so tired of feeling worry and concern for my children and family. It’s about time we do something about it.”

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“If the president or the Senate chooses not to support it, frankly, it’s on them,” she added, “but we have to try and we have to continue to try until we get it done.”

Gun safety marches and a new breed of advocates — most prominently, March for Our Lives, the movement led by the teenage survivors of the shooting at a high school in Parkland, Fla., — bolstered young voter turnout. Around two dozen candidates supported by the gun lobby were defeated on Tuesday, according to Giffords PAC, the gun safety group run by former Representative Gabrielle Giffords, who was shot in the head in a mass shooting.

“We cannot let these tragedies become our new normal,” said Colin Allred, an incoming freshman Democrat who ousted a veteran Republican, Pete Sessions, in the suburbs north of Dallas. “I think we need to find a way to work together to find some real solutions to reduce gun violence, consistent with the Second Amendment.”

But a handful of other Democrats, including Representative Conor Lamb of Pennsylvania, a former Marine who favors gun rights, have cautioned the party against any legislative package that would curtail gun owners’ ability to obtain firearms. And winning Democrats in districts like suburban Charleston, S.C., and Oklahoma City will have to be mindful of their fragile mandates — especially if any House legislation is destined to die in the Republican-controlled Senate or at President Trump’s desk.

Some incoming freshmen are warning against overpromising or politicizing a tragedy.

“As Democrats, we should not try to make this a political issue that is about gun legislation because any of the gun legislation we’re advocating for would not have prevented this,” said Katie Hill, who defeated Representative Steve Knight in a California district near Wednesday’s shooting. “We lose credibility if we try to make it as if it would’ve,” she added.

The gunman, a former Marine, bought his handgun legally in a state with some of the toughest gun control laws in the country.

Editors’ Picks

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Image

Lucy McBath, whose son was killed in a 2012 shooting, campaigned on reducing gun violence and strengthening gun laws.

Lucy McBath, whose son was killed in a 2012 shooting, campaigned on reducing gun violence and strengthening gun laws.Credit...Lynsey Weatherspoon for The New York Times

That could limit Democratic leaders’ ambitions. Joe Cunningham, the Democratic representative-elect for South Carolina’s First District, said he would endorse a bill banning so-called bump stocks, which allow semiautomatic rifles to fire like automatic weapons, and strengthening background checks.

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“I think some of these things can be accomplished without infringing on the Second Amendment,” said Mr. Cunningham, a gun owner with a concealed carry permit.

Other incoming freshmen said Congress could not be timid. Tom Malinowski, an incoming freshman Democrat from New Jersey, noted the longstanding bipartisan support to expand background checks.

“Keep in mind that even in the Republican House of Representatives, there was a working majority to pass at least universal background checks,” Mr. Malinowski said. “The only reason it didn’t happen is the leadership was too terrified to allow a vote. The new leadership obviously won’t be.”

Ms. Pelosi, who remains confident that she will reclaim the speaker’s gavel next year, said on Thursday that public support would serve as an impetus for moderate Republicans to endorse background check legislation.

“I do believe that our strength is in the public involvement,” Ms. Pelosi said on Thursday.

According to Gallup, 61 percent of Americans want stricter gun laws, and there is even more support for universal background checks and red-flag laws, which allow a judge to issue an order that enables law enforcement officers to confiscate guns from individuals deemed a risk to themselves or others. Such initiatives could garner support from more moderate Republicans and their counterparts in the Senate.

“It’s hard to find issues where you can find 50 or 60 percent saying, ‘yeah, this is a good idea,’” Kris Brown, co-president of the Brady Campaign and Center to Prevent Gun Violence, said of the background check expansion, pointing to a Quinnipiac University National Poll after the Parkland shooting, which found that 97 percent of American voters supported universal background checks.

“More people would say they have a problem with apple pie,” she said.

After Santa Fe school shooting, Democratic lawmakers slam GOP for inaction on gun control

"It’s not too soon. It’s too late. For at least eight families," the Democratic congressman from Parkland, Florida, tweeted.

Image: President Trump Speaks At White House Prison Reform Summit

President Donald Trump speaks during a prison reform summit in the East Room at the White

Democrats slammed President Donald Trump and his party on Friday after the latest deadly school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas, condemning congressional inaction on gun control in the three months since the massacre in Parkland, Florida.

Rep. Ted Deutch, the Democrat who represents Parkland, criticized House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., for failing to bring up legislation on universal background checks after the school shooting in his district.

"It’s not too soon. It’s too late. For at least eight families. For thousands more student-survivors at Santa Fe High School," Deutch tweeted.

For at least 8 families. For thousands more student-survivors at Santa Fe High School. @SpeakerRyan, you’ve had 3 months since our meeting to ready universal background checks for the floor.

How many more?

Lawmakers from states devastated by school shootings — like the 2012 shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, that left 27 dead — were among the most outspoken in saying that Congress has not done enough.

"Let’s call it like it is: The horrifying inaction of Congress, slaughter after slaughter, has become a green light to would-be shooters, who pervert silence into endorsement," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn.

"It is urgent that we implement the reforms Congress recently passed to make schools safer and keep deadly weapons away from those who should not have them," Ryan said.

He did not offer specifics, though the Fix NICS Act, a limited background check bill that seeks to improve enforcement of the existing system by prodding various agencies to keep their records updated, was rolled into the omnibus government spending bill that was signed into law in March.

"This is a time to come together in support of the Santa Fe community," Ryan said.

Many Democrats who spoke out noted the historic protests students have lead in recent months calling for gun control — and lamented the now-familiar cycle of the country reacting to mass shootings.

"Millions of young people are raising their voices and bravely, eloquently insisting on action to end the gun violence epidemic. Congress must show as much courage as they have," House Minority Leader Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said in a statement.

"Only in America are school shootings normal. Only in America will we do nothing when an epidemic of gun violence is killing children. This has to stop," tweeted Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

"I will not stand for this and neither should you," wrote former Rep. Gabby Giffords, a victim of gun violence and staunch advocate for gun control.

"Students across America have come together to push for a better future & Congress has failed them," Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., wrote in a tweet, while Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore, called for "common-sense steps NOW."

Trump on Texas school shooting: 'We're with you in this tragic hour'

Trump expressed his heartbreak and vowed to take action, as he did after the Parkland shooting.

“This has been going on too long in our country — too many years, too many decades now. We grieve for the terrible loss of life and send our love and support to everyone affected by this absolutely horrific attack,” Trump said in brief remarks at the White House. "We're with you in this tragic hour, and we will be with you forever."

The president said his administration would do “everything in our power” to protect students and keep guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott also called for action, while stressing the need to protect the Second Amendment.

"We need to do more than just pray for the victims and their families. It's time in Texas that we take action. To step up and make sure this tragedy is never repeated ever again in the history of the state of Texas," Abbott, a Republican, said.

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation’s second-largest teachers’ union, paused for a moment during a panel she was participating in at a Democratic women’s event in Washington to announce the news she had just received about the shooting.

"Thoughts and prayers are not enough," she said, adding that dealing with shootings has become too-frequent part her members' duties.

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, meanwhile, highlighted the federal commission on school safety that Trump convened in the wake of Parkland.

“Our work remains urgent,” DeVos, who chairs the commission, said in statement. “Our nation must come together and address the underlying issues that lead to such tragic and senseless loss of life.”

A day earlier, DeVos held a meeting with researchers and survivors and family members of victims of past mass shootings.

Democrats focus on victims, Republicans on perpetrators after mass shootings, study finds

In this 2013 photo, from left, Jennifer Hensel and Jeremy Richman, parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victim Avielle Rose Richman; and David and Francine Wheeler, parents of victim Benjamin, attend a news conference in Newtown, Conn. (Jessica Hill/AP)

In this 2013 photo, from left, Jennifer Hensel and Jeremy Richman, parents of Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victim Avielle Rose Richman; and David and Francine Wheeler, parents of victim Benjamin, attend a news conference in Newtown, Conn. (Jessica Hill/AP)

Divisions in the wake of mass shootings go beyond disagreements over gun policy, a study found, with Democrats more likely to talk about the shooting’s victims and Republicans tending to focus more on the perpetrators and, in particular, on shooters of color.

The study, published earlier this month by seven researchers from Stanford and Brown universities, probes the subtle linguistic ways Americans split along party lines in the wake of tragedies that have become a predictable political flash point.

The researchers analyzed 4.4 million tweets sent in the wake of 21 U.S. mass shootings — defined as four or more people shot (not including the shooter) — from 2015 to 2018 and selected the incidents that offered the most Twitter data. They used natural language processing, a field of artificial intelligence that seeks to understand language.

As candidates gear up for a presidential race in which gun control could be a top issue, the study joins a host of research examining the political polarization often blamed for government gridlock. It builds on the methods of another project from 2016 — conducted by some of the same researchers — that found language from members of Congress grew more distinctively partisan over the years, especially after the mid-1990s.

“We live in a very polarized time,” Dan Jurafsky, a Stanford professor and co-author of the study on responses to mass shootings, told Stanford News. “Understanding what different groups of people say and why is the first step in determining how we can help bring people together.”

The differences go beyond a focus on victims versus perpetrators, according to the new study, which was presented earlier this month at a conference with peer-reviewed submissions. Democrats are also more likely to emphasize policy change, the study concluded, while Republicans tend to zero in on the facts of the shooting.

Democrats’ language also conveys more sadness or trust than that of Republicans, the researchers say. Republicans’ language, meanwhile, projects more feelings of fear and disgust, especially when the shooter is nonwhite.

And Democrats are 25 percent more likely than Republicans to use the word “terrorist” when a shooter is white, the study found. Republicans, on the other hand, are 25 percent more likely to use “terrorist” when the shooter is African American, Middle Eastern or Hispanic or Latino.

Some of the findings reinforce other studies’ conclusions, Dora Demszky, a Stanford doctoral candidate and lead author of the study, told The Washington Post. But others took the researchers by surprise.

The team expected Republicans to use the word “terrorist” more frequently when a shooter was Middle Eastern, because of common perceptions of terrorists, Demszky said. But they were taken aback to find a similar trend for incidents involving African American and Hispanic or Latino shooters.

“We didn’t really expect that the terrorism frame would extend to these other ethnicities for Republicans,” Demszky said.

The researchers ignored retweets and categorized Twitter users by party based on whether they followed more accounts from Democratic or Republican politicians.

The terrible numbers that grow with each mass shooting

Many analyses illustrate how Republicans and Democrats are moving further apart in their views: Data from Voteview and Gallup, for example, shows that Congress has become more polarized and that public approval rates of the president have pulled further apart along party lines.

Gun policy is certainly a divisive issue, especially as the United States mourns the victims of deadly attacks with firearms everywhere from schools to movie theaters to places of worship. With each tragedy, Democrats call for stricter gun control, while Republicans tend to argue weapons aren’t the issue.

A Vox analysis in June counted more than 2,000 mass shootings, leaving nearly 2,500 dead, since the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that left 20 children and six adults dead. The archive Vox used to compile these counts defines mass shootings as incidents in which at least four people besides the perpetrator are shot.

A Washington Post analysis that looks more narrowly at public mass shootings in which four or more people were killed tallied more than 1,100 deaths from 163 incidents since 1966.

With shootings and the ensuing clashes over gun control perpetually in the news, the Stanford and Brown researchers’ work opens up questions for future research. Sharing their work at a computational linguistics conference, Demszky said, the researchers encountered colleagues with all sorts of questions for further investigation: How has the polarization they observed developed over the years? How do “bots” — the fake social media accounts like those Russia created in an effort to influence the 2016 presidential election — factor in?

For now, Demszky will be moving on to other projects. But the code and data for the project are public, and she said she looks forward to what others will discover.

The findings, Demszky qualified, are “purely descriptive” — the team has not examined why Americans of different political persuasions have such distinct reactions on Twitter. But she thinks capturing the disparities is crucial to better explaining political polarization.

“Maybe we don’t need to do something about it or may we cannot do something about it, but first we definitely need to understand that to figure out the next steps,” she said.

More than a third of all House lawmakers represent districts where a mass shooting has occurred this year, highlighting the bipartisan pressure on Congress to take action on gun legislation after a wave of killings in Texas and Ohio during August.

An analysis by The Hill found that about two-thirds of those shootings have taken place in districts represented by Democrats, many of whom represent cities hard-hit by the scourge of gun violence, while a third occurred in Republican-held districts, from the suburbs to rural communities.

Through Friday, 158 congressional districts had experienced at least one mass shooting this year. Fifty-two of those districts are held by Republicans, and 106 are represented by Democrats.

The rash of mass shootings has prompted a kind of rote habit among members of Congress who all too often find themselves grieving alongside their constituents. In interviews, lawmakers said they raced to the scenes of mass shootings, then spent the ensuing weeks helping facilitate government assistance to first responders and victims in between memorial services and vigils.

“When schoolchildren are taught how to hide from active shooters before being taught how to write their name, we know that we have a problem in this country with gun violence,” said Rep. Elaine Luria (D-Va.), who represents the Virginia Beach community where a disgruntled city employee killed 12 people at a municipal building in May before being killed by police.

More than 315 mass shootings have taken place this year alone, according to the Gun Violence Archive, which tracks incidents in which four or more people are injured or killed. Those shootings have claimed the lives of at least 346 people, and another 1,200 have been injured.

“We now live in a time in which it appears no place is entirely safe from the threat of violence. Our movie theaters, concert venues, clubs, schools, college campuses, churches and parks have all become backdrops to some of the deadliest shootings in United States history,” said Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.). “There are no words, thoughts or prayers that can quell the unspeakable horror that has befallen so many communities that have experienced mass shootings and gun violence.”

The epidemic of gun violence has received more attention this year than in decades, after Democrats reclaimed control of the House in the 2018 midterm elections.

The House passed a sweeping background check expansion in February. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), chairwoman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Department of Health and Human Services, held her first hearing of the year on gun violence and added $50 million in funding for the CDC and National Institutes of Health to study gun violence.

In recent weeks, Democrats have advanced legislation that would allow law enforcement to take firearms away from those who are deemed a danger to themselves or others, a so-called red flag provision that many states have adopted.

But the prospects of bipartisan action are remote. Negotiations between Senate Democrats and the White House have faltered in recent weeks. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has blocked debate on the House-passed bills, and he has said he will not bring up any gun legislation unless he is certain President Trump will sign it into law.

Some Democrats have warned that mismanaging the politics of gun control or gun safety bills would threaten their party’s political standing. Rep. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.), a retired Marine who served four tours of duty in Iraq, said Democrats need to be realistic about what can earn bipartisan support in the Senate.

“Too often Democrats have put forward bills without understanding guns or how they are used, and that’s part of the issue,” Moulton told The Hill. “It’s nice to pass gun ban bills in the House, but unless they pass in the Senate and get signed into law they’re not going to save any lives.”

A handful of Republicans have signaled they would back red flag legislation, including Rep. Michael Turner (R-Ohio), who represents a Dayton-area district where a man killed nine people and wounded 17 more in a popular entertainment district in August. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) introduced a red flag proposal in response to that shooting.

“Cases of gun violence across the nation are not all the same. And a blanket ban on certain types of guns or gun confiscation altogether isn’t going to stop a criminal from committing a crime,” said Rep. Buddy Carter (Ga.), one of 52 Republicans in Congress whose district experienced a mass shooting this year. “This type of crime is not going to be solved in Washington, D.C. It needs to [be] solved in Savannah, Ga., in our communities.”

There is some debate over what constitutes a mass shooting. Some experts define them as incidents that injure or kill four or more people, while others set a higher threshold.

James Fox, a criminologist at Northeastern University, distinguishes between mass shootings and mass killings, which separates incidents related to gang violence from events like the attack on a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in August that killed 22.

Lars Dalseide, a spokesman for the National Rifle Association, said the lower threshold for mass shootings is deceptively broad.

“While more can be done to address this issue, such as enforcing existing laws, prosecuting actual criminals, and providing proper mental health treatment for those in need, you can’t begin to have an honest debate if the starting point is disingenuous,” Dalseide said in an email.

An analysis of the mass shootings that have taken place in just the first nine months of the year show a distinction exists. The 18 mass shootings in Rep. Danny K. Davis’s (D-Ill.) Chicago-based district have killed seven people and wounded 78; most of those incidents were likely gang or drug-related, Davis said.

Fifteen shootings this year have resulted in more than four deaths. Three of the four deadliest incidents — the El Paso attack, the Dayton attack and drive-by shootings in Midland and Odessa, Texas — took place in August. Ten of the 15 incidents happened between June and August.

Active shooter incidents have become more common in recent years, according to a Pew Research Center report.

When those shootings happen, lawmakers and their staffs scramble to get to the scene. Rep. Scott Peters (D-Calif.) sent an aide to the Chabad of Poway synagogue just after a 19-year-old man armed with an assault rifle shot four people, killing a 60-year-old woman on the last day of Passover.

“Throughout the day, we remained in contact with various law enforcement agencies and local organizations who were assisting on the ground. That night, we stood with the community in solidarity at one of the vigils,” Peters said.

Rep. Bill Foster (D-Ill.) learned of a shooting at a manufacturing plant in Aurora, Ill., when he landed at O’Hare International Airport. Foster attended memorials for the five people killed at the plant and met with the six police officers who were wounded as they responded to the shooting.

Others have been touched by gun violence more directly. Rep. Lucy McBath (D-Ga.) decided to run for Congress after her son was murdered in 2012. A young man died in front of Rep. Jesús Garcia’s (D-Ill.) home two years ago. Rep. Steven Horsford’s (D-Nev.) father was shot in a botched robbery, and Davis’s grandson was shot and killed.

“I know the impact that [gun violence] has had on members of my family. It is indeed a public health issue,” Davis told The Hill.

Public Opinion on School Shootings and Violence

A majority of U.S. teens fear a shooting could happen at their school, and most parents share their concern

BY NIKKI GRAF

(Comstock via Getty)

(Comstock via Getty)

In the aftermath of the deadly shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, a majority of American teens say they are very or somewhat worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school – and most parents of teens share that concern, according to new Pew Research Center surveys of teens ages 13 to 17 and parents with children in the same age range.

Meanwhile, when it comes to what can be done to prevent this kind of violence, far more teens view proposals focused on mental illness, assault-style weapon bans and the use of metal detectors in schools as potentially effective than say the same about allowing teachers and school officials to carry guns in schools.

The surveys of teens and parents were conducted in March and April 2018, following the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School – one of the deadliest mass school shootings in U.S. history. Seventeen people were killed in the attack and more than a dozen others were injured. The surveys also come as the nation prepares to mark the 19th anniversary of the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado.

Overall, 57% of teens say they are worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school, with one-in-four saying they are very worried. About three-in-ten (29%) say they are not too worried about this, and just 13% say they are not at all worried.

Nonwhite teens express a higher level of concern than their white peers. Roughly two-thirds (64%) of nonwhite teens, including 73% of Hispanics, say they are at least somewhat worried about this, compared with 51% of white teens.

School shooting fears differ by gender as well: 64% of girls say they are very or somewhat worried about a shooting happening at their school, compared with 51% of boys.

Parents of teenagers express similar levels of concern as teens themselves, with 63% saying they are at least somewhat worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their child’s school. And there are similar patterns when it comes to race and gender, with nonwhite parents and mothers expressing more concern. Lower-income parents are particularly worried – in fact, 82% of parents with annual household incomes under $30,000 say they are at least somewhat worried that a shooting could happen at their teen’s school, compared with 64% of those with incomes between $30,000 and $74,999 and 53% of those with incomes of $75,000 or more.

Some policies seen as more effective than others

Against the backdrop of organized school walkouts and marches calling for new legislation to address gun violence, teens see more value in some proposed measures than others. Asked to assess how effective various measures would be at preventing school shootings, 86% of teens say that preventing people with mental illnesses from purchasing guns and that improving mental health screening and treatment would be effective, including majorities who say each of these proposals would be very effective. Roughly eight-in-ten teens (79%) say that having metal detectors in schools would be effective and 66% say the same about banning assault-style weapons.

By contrast, a much smaller share of teens (39%) say that allowing teachers to carry guns in schools would be very or somewhat effective at preventing school shootings; 35% of teens say this would be not at all effective.

Black teens are far less likely than white and Hispanic teens to say allowing teachers to carry guns in schools would be at least somewhat effective: 23% of black teens say this, compared with 44% of white teens and 39% of Hispanic teens.

Views on the effectiveness of banning assault-style weapons also differ by race and ethnicity. About eight-in-ten black teens (80%) and Hispanic teens (79%) say this would be at least somewhat effective; a smaller share of white teens say the same (59%). And while teens across racial and ethnic groups are about equally likely to see metal detectors as effective, black teens are far more likely than their white and Hispanic counterparts to say this would be very effective (59% vs. 39% and 41%, respectively).

Partisan divide among adults

Teens’ views on proposals to prevent school shootings mirror those of the general public, for the most part.

Among all adults, opinions on arming teachers and banning assault-style weapons diverge sharply along party lines, according to a separate Pew Research Center survey also conducted in March and April. (The survey of teens did not ask respondents for their partisan affiliations.)

About eight-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (78%) say that allowing teachers to carry guns in schools would be very or somewhat effective at preventing school shootings, compared with just 24% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents. Democrats, on the other hand, are far more likely than Republicans to say that banning assault-style weapons would be at least somewhat effective (81% vs. 35%).

But there are some points of partisan agreement – substantial majorities of both Democrats and Republicans say that proposals directed at mental illness and having metal detectors in schools have the potential to be at least somewhat effective in preventing school shootings.

Gallup's Guide to U.S. Public Opinion on Guns

BY LYDIA SAAD

Gallup's Guide to U.S. Public Opinion on Guns

Here's a quick guide to Gallup's key data on gun violence and gun policy.

Americans support stricter gun laws in Gallup's most recent updates on gun trends, but the majority don't embrace bans on handguns and assault rifles.

Six in 10 Favored Stricter Gun Laws in October 2018

U.S. Majority in 2018 Opposed Ban on Assault Rifles

Gallup finds widespread support for background checks and other restrictions on gun purchases.

Americans Widely Support Tighter Regulations on Gun Sales

The importance of gun control as a voting issue has increased in the past two decades.

One in Four Will Only Vote for Candidate Who Shares Their Views on Guns

Americans supported six of seven ways to deter mass school shootings a month after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, with Republicans and Democrats agreeing on five.

Public Opinion on Solutions to School Shootings

At the same time, Americans thought prevention efforts (mental health screenings, school security) would be more effective than stricter gun laws.

Two Broad Approaches to Preventing School Shootings

After the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, Gallup found nearly half of Americans blaming mass shootings on the mental health system for failing to identify potential shooters.

2013: Ranking the Potential Causes of Gun Violence

Americans' focus on guns as the nation's top problem has historically spiked, and then quickly dissipated, after mass shootings.

Mentions of Guns as Top Problem Dropped by Half Two Months After Parkland Shooting

Four in 10 Americans in 2017 feared being a victim of a mass shooting, with women, Democrats and young adults worried most.

Four in 10 Americans Fear Being a Victim of a Mass Shooting

Approximately four in 10 Americans (43%) report they have a gun in their home, although this has varied by subgroup over the years.

Men, Married, Southerners Most Likely to Be Gun Owners

Crime Victims More Likely to Own Guns

Six in 10 Gun Owners Say They Own Guns for Personal Protection

A slim majority of U.S. adults viewed the National Rifle Association (NRA) more favorably than unfavorably in 2018.

On 14 December 2012, a young man opened fire on twenty-eight people at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, killing twenty school children and six adult staff members in one of the worst mass public shootings in recent US history. In the weeks that followed, an intense public debate surrounded the issue of gun violence, covering a wide array of topics such as the mental health of attackers, 2 cultural issues 3 and violent video games; 4 the core political issue was restricting access to firearms. Speaking about the tragedy, former President Obama reminded Americans that Newtown was not an isolated incident; rather, there seemed to be ‘an endless series of deadly shootings across the country, almost daily reports of victims, many of them children, in small towns and big cities all across America’. 5 While the attacks at Sandy Hook and other mass public shootings like those in Aurora, Blacksburg and Littleton make national headlines, there are countless others that receive considerably less attention but are just as devastating to affected communities.

Gun legislation has become a perennial issue in American politics, driven in large measure by the increased media attention and public interest in gun control laws following mass public shootings. A predictable feature of the discourse following mass shootings in the United States is the polarized response by gun rights and gun control activists. On the one hand, powerful gun rights advocates like the National Rifle Association (NRA) claim that these attacks demonstrate the need for more – not less – access to firearms in the hands of qualified professionals. On the heels of the Sandy Hook shootings, NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre famously said, ‘the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun’. 6 Second Amendment advocates also point to surges in NRA membership following mass public shootings as evidence of the public’s support for their cause. 7 On the other hand, grassroots gun control groups like the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence urge lawmakers to heed the millions of dollars in private donations that poured in after Sandy Hook and similar events as a signal that public opinion had shifted in their favor. 8 Dan Gross, President of the Brady Campaign, pleaded with Congress to acknowledge the growing ‘disconnect between what the American public wants on this issue and what [our] elected officials are doing about it’. 9

When shifting the focus from the responses of elites to the general public, one question of clear importance is whether public opinion is impacted by instances of profound gun violence. Further, compared to citizens living hundreds or even thousands of miles away from a shooting and learning about it through the mass media, there is a relatively large and growing body of Americans who have had their lives personally touched by gun violence by having a mass shooting occur in or near their community. One question yet to be empirically addressed is, for these citizens, does having a mass shooting occur so close to home trigger support for increased government gun control efforts?

While there has been scholarly research on the rate at which mass public shootings have increased in recent decades, 10 as well as a number of investigations into their causes, 11 surprisingly, prior scholarship has not examined whether proximity to a mass public shooting affects citizens’ gun control policy preferences. We believe this question speaks not only to the broader literature on the role of context in shaping public opinion, but also to the more general issue of ‘policy feedback’ 12 in mass politics. In other Western nations where mass shootings have occurred, they were swiftly followed by changes in legislation, indicating a prompt degree of policy feedback. For example, the 1996 Dunblane Massacre of sixteen British school children and one teacher led to the passage of two firearms acts and a permanent ban on private handgun ownership in the UK. Likewise, the 1996 Port Arthur Massacre in Tasmania, which left thirty-five dead and twenty-three wounded, led the Australian Government to introduce the National Firearms Agreement that outlawed automatic and semi-automatic weapons, as well as pump-action shotguns. In the United States, however, we have yet to see similar tragedies catalyze significant policy change, which raises the question: why is the United States so resistant to changes in gun legislation?

While some point to our strong culture of gun rights, 13 and others to polarized responses by elites, 14 one possibility is that a key link in the policy-feedback chain – public opinion – fails to respond to such incidents of extreme gun violence with augmented demand for stricter government regulation of firearms. In this article, we theorize that mass public shootings affect public opinion in a contextually driven manner. Our core hypothesis is that having a mass public shooting occur in close proximity to one’s community will lead to increased support for gun control. Germane to this causal expectation is the notion of threat salience: the basic logic is that proximate (versus distal) threats are more salient. Mass public shootings raise the specter of gun violence, and shootings that happen close to home involve known places and potentially known people. In this way, public shootings occurring in close proximity should make gun violence, as well as falling victim to gun violence, more palpable.

Using data from multiple sources on mass public shootings merged with the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we show that increased proximity to a mass shooting is associated with heightened public support for stricter government regulation of firearms. Importantly, we show that this main effect does not vary by partisanship. To demonstrate the robustness of our main finding, we show that this contextual effect is conditional upon additional salience-related factors, such as (1) repeated events, (2) the magnitude of the event (that is, the number of victims), and (3) the recency of events. As a further demonstration of robustness, we offer placebo tests, which show that proximity to a mass shooting fails to exert any effect on ‘treatment-irrelevant’ policy attitudes (for example, climate change, abortion, gay marriage, etc.). To offer a stronger test of causal effects, we use the 2010–2012 CCES re-interview panel to demonstrate that respondents ‘treated’ with a mass public shooting occurring near their residence between survey waves were significantly more likely than ‘untreated’ respondents to shift their opinions towards support for stricter gun control policies. Lastly, we replicate these results with different survey data collected in 2010 by the Pew Research Center. We conclude this article by discussing the substantive implications of our findings, as well as possible directions for future research.

PRIOR RESEARCH ON MASS SHOOTINGS AND PUBLIC OPINION

To our knowledge, little or no research has directly tested whether mass shootings affect individual opinion towards gun control policy. There has been a great deal of descriptive analysis of polling data about Americans’ attitudes towards gun legislation. On the one hand, recent analysis of Gallup and Pew polling data shows that Americans in the aggregate have become steadily less supportive of gun control over the past 25 years, dropping from clear majorities who favored gun control in the 1990s to less than half of those surveyed by the late 2000s. 15 On the other hand, the polls also reveal spikes in support for gun control that appear to coincide with the mass shootings in Columbine 16 and Newtown; 17 however, such spikes quickly regressed to the steady pattern of declining support seen throughout the full time series. In sum, this largely descriptive body of research suggests that American public opinion may be responsive to certain high-profile mass shootings (e.g., Sandy Hook), but that such responses represent brief bursts of opinion change that do not endure. More importantly, the aggregate nature of the analyses contained in this work, along with the relative absence of panel studies, limits its ability to determine whether there are any real shifts in individual attitudes towards gun control following mass public shootings.

Research investigating how the media cover mass public shootings is more abundant in the scholarly literature. Much of this literature focuses on examining the volume and patterns of news coverage regarding specific high-profile mass attacks, 18 the majority of which demonstrate how the 1999 Columbine school shooting dominated news coverage, and by implication, brought the issue of gun violence to the top of the national policy agenda. 19 Some research provides causal evidence that media frames about gun control affect policy attitudes. For example, Haider-Markel and Joslyn 20 find that support for concealed carry laws declines when the issue of carrying handguns is framed as a potential threat to public safety (versus as a matter of constitutional rights). Moreover, McGinty, Webster and Barry 21 find that respondents supported restricting access to firearms for the mentally ill, as well as banning large-capacity magazines, following exposure to news stories highlighting these specific issues. Together, this body of work suggests the possibility of policy feedback in the form of public demand for gun control in response to mass shootings, albeit such feedback appears highly contingent upon issue framing.

This body of media-centered research on mass shootings is strongly predicated upon viewing mass shootings as something Americans experience indirectly through media imagery and discourse. Yet the sheer volume, not to mention the increasing rate and geographic spread, of mass public shootings in the United States suggests looking beyond such pretenses, as there is an ever-growing subset of the American public that is personally touched by gun violence due to residing in, or near, a location where a mass shooting has occurred. For these citizens, the mass media is not the primary vehicle for experiencing egregious gun violence. Furthermore, when conceptualizing mass public shootings as a treatment delivered through the mass media, it is important to recall that many Americans fail to pay attention to the news and public affairs, 22 and among those who do pay attention, there is a pronounced tendency for selective exposure to partisan news. 23 In other words, there is variation in receipt of the treatment, as well as heterogeneity in the content of the treatment; each suggests a limited real-world meaning of framing effects observed through forced exposure in experimental contexts.

In sum, the limitations in the existing social science literature on the impact of mass public shootings, and gun violence more generally, on public opinion suggest looking beyond descriptive analyses of aggregate data, as well as beyond variation in media coverage and frames. What is distinctly missing is research focusing on another important form of variation in exposure to gun violence via mass public shootings – spatial variation in proximity to where these events occur. Indeed, the literature currently lacks any investigation of whether exposure to mass shootings via proximity to where they occur is systematically related to citizens’ views on gun control. Nor has there been a study of whether individuals change their opinions over time in response to exposure to a mass shooting.

MASS SHOOTINGS IN CONTEXT: PROXIMITY AND THE SALIENCE OF GUN VIOLENCE

Three bodies of research provide a foundation for the expectation that living close to a mass shooting should influence preferences for gun control: (1) studies examining the impact of events on political attitudes, (2) a large and growing body of research on context and public opinion and (3) the political psychology literature on threat.

Scholars have long argued that prominent societal events can exert profound and lasting effects on citizens’ political attitudes and behavior. 24 For instance, Sears and Valentino 25 find that exposure to high-intensity campaign events increases attention to politics among those who might otherwise be apathetic, and crystalizes opinions on issues covered prior to the election. Other scholars have found that extraordinary events like the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, 26 Hurricane Katrina 27 and the 9/11 attacks 28 can indelibly alter evaluations of government, policy preferences, and a wide array of political attitudes and behaviors. Even local events, like the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, have been shown to influence the opinions of those living in the area. 29 In sum, these ‘focusing events’ highlight the need for legislative action by providing a stark example of why a particular policy proved ineffectual or out of line with public opinion. 30 In other words, focusing events provide citizens with an opportunity ‘to observe and evaluate government in action’ 31 and thus create opportunities for feedback in the policy-making process. Sears 32 argues that ‘one criterion for assessing the robustness of a democracy is whether or not the citizenry responds sensibly to ongoing political events’.

One important consideration in thinking about the impact of events is their spatial component, as many potentially impactful events occur at specific locations (for example, protests) or exert their impact differentially across local areas (for example, natural disasters). Indeed, over the past decade there has been renewed scholarly interest in investigating how residential context affects policy preferences and voting behavior, 33 and this literature strongly suggests that the consequences of extraordinary events should be contextually dependent. 34 For example, with respect to environmental disasters, Bishop 35 demonstrates that, while the Deepwater Horizon oil spill may have encouraged some people to favor stricter environmental regulations following the disaster, nearby residents whose communities directly benefited from the oil industry were more likely to support drilling even after the spill. Focusing on natural disasters, Velez and Martin 36 show that the Obama administration’s acuity in preparing for Hurricane Sandy resulted in the strongest gain in votes among citizens residing in areas most devastated by the hurricane. Turning to race-relevant events, Enos 37 finds that the large-scale demolition of public housing projects in Chicago, which resulted in the residential displacement of large numbers of African-American city residents, only impacted the voting behavior of white voters residing in close proximity to demolished buildings. Additionally, Hopkins 38 finds that events related to immigration (for example, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Elian Gonzalez controversy, etc.) led to increases in anti-immigrant sentiment only among citizens residing in areas experiencing growth in immigrant populations. Lastly, Newman demonstrates that the 2008 Financial Crisis instigated perceptions of corporate profiteering and maldistribution only among citizens residing in economically depressed areas. 39 In short, the growing body of contextual research highlights the importance of situating events in space in order to understand the effects of prominent events such as mass public shootings on public opinion.

While each of these studies concerns unique events and different policy domains, the common thread of this research is that the ‘focusing’ quality of prominent events should vary as a function of one’s proximity to the event. As focusing events are theorized to increase awareness, information, and the formulation or updating of opinions about event-relevant issues, the contextual literature suggests that these processes should be more pronounced for citizens residing in close proximity to events. Beyond informational effects, two additional important components of proximity are tangibility and salience: being close to an event should make the forces, issues and – most importantly for our purposes – the threats it poses more palpable and exigent. The effect of the 9/11 attacks, for example, was undeniably more tangible for individuals living and working in lower Manhattan, as well as for residents of the Tri-State Area. Numerous studies demonstrate that those living within a 100-mile radius of the World Trade Center reported considerably higher levels of psychological distress and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder than those living farther away from the epicenter of the attacks. 40 While the mass media may draw attention to extraordinary events on the national stage, those residing close to a specific event should be more personally touched by it. This is especially important when the events in question involve a threat to property or well-being, such as with natural and environmental disasters, public health disasters, or incidents of random and egregious gun violence. In short, those residing closer to destructive events should have a more palpable experience of the incident, a heighted perception of threat and an increased sense of the risk of future victimization.

Thus the literature on perceived threat and anxiety helps us explain one potential mechanism through which proximity to mass shootings may impact their salience. First, we know that humans are acutely attuned to threatening stimuli in their environment. 41 Yet we also know that not all threats are created equal, and reactions to threatening stimuli should differ depending on the specific type of threat encountered. For instance, Huddy and colleagues have argued that it is necessary to distinguish between general threats to the nation and personal threats to the individual; the latter increase feelings of personal vulnerability and motivate self-protective action. 42 Personal threat, which arises from proximate physical danger, is likely to elicit more anxiety than remote threats to the nation. 43 For instance, approximately 75 per cent of New Yorkers were worried that they or their family members would be the victim of a future attack, compared to only 31 per cent of all Americans, in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks. 44 Others have found that those living in the Northeast expressed greater anxiety and felt more personally threatened by terrorism after 9/11 than Americans living in other regions of the country. 45 In addition, social or psychological proximity in the form of knowing someone who was victimized by a terrorist event heightened the sense of personal vulnerability and feelings of anxiety after 9/11. 46 In this sense, mass public shootings should serve as extraordinary focusing events that increase feelings of personal threat and anxiety among nearby residents, thus triggering the brain’s ‘surveillance system’. 47 These feelings of threat and anxiety, in turn, should motivate individuals to seek out information about the issue and to support actions that would reduce the threat of victimization by gun violence.

To summarize, the literature on focusing events suggests that a catastrophe like a mass shooting should increase public scrutiny of the issue of gun violence, as well as highlight the need for legislative action to remedy the problem. The research on contextual effects highlights the spatial component of mass shootings – that is, individuals residing in or near targeted communities bear the brunt of the tragedy, and by implication, should manifest more acute effects than those living farther away. Finally, the scholarly work on perceived threat suggests that individuals should respond to personally threatening stimuli with heightened vigilance, searching for ways to mitigate the danger and reduce feelings of vulnerability. Taken together, these three bodies of work lay a strong foundation for the expectation that proximity to a mass public shooting should make the threat of gun violence more palpable and salient, which in turn should stimulate demand for greater government restrictions on access to firearms. We translate this expectation into the core hypothesis of this article:

Hypothesis 1 (Proximity Hypothesis): Living in close proximity to a mass public shooting should generate support for gun control.

One important issue to address is possible heterogeneity in citizens’ interpretation of (and response to) events. Hypothesis 1 suggests that proximity to mass shootings should make the threat of gun violence more salient to all nearby residents irrespective of their previous attitudes or partisan leanings, and that this should increase support for gun control generally. This expectation is supported by research demonstrating that perceived threats affect policy preferences independently of partisanship, political ideology or even personality traits such as authoritarianism. 48 One alternative, however, is that the motivation to maintain one’s previously held beliefs about gun control influences how one interprets mass shootings. 49 Prior attitudes and partisanship are strong motivational factors in citizens’ political reasoning, 50 and may cause divergences in perceptions of culpability for mass shootings and beliefs concerning the subsequent reduction of risk.

Thus, there could be differences in how partisans perceive the issue of gun control, and polls show that Democrats and Republicans approach the issue from vastly difference perspectives. 51 While most citizens seem to agree that gun violence is a problem, they strongly disagree about how best to reduce such atrocities. 52 On the one hand, Democrats support gun control policies, which they believe will limit access to dangerous firearms, and by extension, reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim of a mass public shooting. Republicans, on the other hand, prefer policies that allow law-abiding citizens to carry firearms (concealed or otherwise) for their own self-defense. They argue that the only way to deter the use of force is by meeting that force head on. This partisan argument fits well with existing theories on motivated reasoning. 53 In short, countering our principal hypothesis, an important counterhypothesis predicts that the effect of proximity to mass public shootings will be conditional upon partisanship, with left-leaning citizens potentially becoming more supportive of gun control but right-leaning citizens either evincing no effect or becoming less supportive. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (Partisan-Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis): Proximity to a mass public shooting should generate support for gun control among citizens identifying with the political left (Democrats), but not among those identifying with the political right (Republicans).

DATA AND METHODS

As an initial test of our hypotheses, we draw upon the 2010 CCES – Common Content. 54 In addition to offering the benefit of a very large national sample of adult Americans (N=55,400), the 2010 CCES includes (1) a measure of respondents’ preferences towards government regulation of firearms, (2) a range of essential control variables and (3) county Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) and zip codes for all respondents. The provision of geocodes enables us to locate respondents spatially, to allow us to test whether reported preferences for gun control are systematically related to the proximity of respondents’ place of residence to mass public shootings. The dependent variable for this analysis is a standard gun control question: ‘In general, do you feel that laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are?’ From this item, we constructed an ordinal variable recoded to range: (1) ‘Less strict’ [19 per cent], (2) ‘Kept as they are’ [39.4 per cent] and (3) ‘More strict’ [41.6 per cent].

To measure our primary predictor – proximity to a mass public shooting – we first had to identify all known mass shooting events in the nation. For this task, we identified three different data sources: (1) the Stanford Geospatial Center’s ‘Mass Shootings in America’ project, 55 (2) USA Today’s ‘Behind the Bloodshed’ mass killing database 56 and (3) Mother Jones’ ‘A Guide to Mass Shootings in America’ database. 57 The differences between these databases are nuanced and revolve around whether (1) the database included events in which victims were killed only with guns or with other weapons (explosives, knives, motor vehicles, etc.), (2) the targets of the attack were family, government or random members of the general public, (3) the cut-off for being defined as a ‘mass’ event was 3, 4 or more than 4 people injured or killed, and (4) the time frame of the data collection.

We combined results from these databases into a single dataset, 58 retaining cases involving (1) firearms as the primary weapon used, (2) attacks on non-family members of the general public and (3) attacks in which at least three or more individuals were injured or killed. 59 Thus our ‘treatment’ of interest is exposure to incidents where a shooter opened fire in a public place (for example, school, shopping mall, movie theater, church, etc.) targeting seemingly random members of the public. Using these restrictions, we were left with a database containing N=210 mass public shooting events between 1966 to 2015; 50 per cent of these events occurred after 2007, and 75 per cent of these cases occurred after 1994. Therefore we see that mass shootings have been increasing over time, particularly over the past 15 to 20 years. 60 The average number killed in these events was 4.5 people (min=0, max=33 [Virginia Tech Shooting]), and the average number injured (excluding those killed) was 5 (min=0, max=58 [Movie Theater Shooting in Aurora, CO]). Figure 1 presents a map of this data, which marks each event’s location and varies the size of the markers according to the number of persons injured or killed.

Fig. 1 Location of mass public shootings in the continental United States, 1966–2015 Note: the size of the circle marker corresponds to the number of injured and killed. The map was created in TileMill®, with state lines drawn from 2014 cartographic boundary shapefiles from the US Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/cbf/cbf\_state.html).

Using this data, we constructed a measure labeled Proximity to Shooting, which captures the distance in miles between the centroid of a respondent’s zip code of residence and the exact location of the nearest mass shooting event. 61 Since we match this data with 2010 CCES data, we constructed the distance variable using mass shootings that occur beginning in 1966 and concluding in October 2010 (when the 2010 CCES data collection commenced). Thus for each respondent, this measure captures the distance between their (relatively approximate) place of residence and the nearest mass shooting. Importantly, for ease of interpretation of the results, we recoded this variable to range from farther to closer (in miles) to an event. The mean distance nationally (within the 2010 CCES) is 84 miles (54 miles), with a standard deviation of 112 miles (55 miles). The range of this variable in the CCES data is 870 to 0 miles, indicating some respondents lived as far as 870 miles away from the nearest shooting event, while some respondents lived in a zip code housing one or more mass shootings. 62 Our analysis includes controls for standard contextual and individual demographic variables, as well as key contextual variables that in theory may influence both (1) the location of mass shooting events and (2) respondents’ preferences over gun control policy. At the contextual level, our analysis includes zip code-level controls for median income, rates of college education, racial composition, population density and total population. 63 To separate out the effect of proximity to a mass shooting from variation in the occurrence of murders more generally, we include a control for the Murders Per Capita in a respondent’s county of residence. 64 It is also possible that the number of firearms in the local area influences the likelihood of a mass shooting and attitudes toward gun control. Thus, we control for Firearm Stores Per Capita within a respondent’s county. 65 Next, we include a control for Republican Vote in respondents’ county of residence, 66 as the level of liberalism versus conservatism in an area may influence the occurrence of mass shootings and is likely correlated to individual residents’ views on gun control. Last, as mass shootings tend to cluster in certain states (for example, California, New York, Texas, Washington, Colorado), we control for the number of shootings in a respondents’ state of residence (Shootings in State) to ensure that proximity to a mass shooting is not simply capturing residence in a state with more shooting events.

A few descriptive statistics are worth discussing. First, we find moderate negative correlations between Proximity to Shooting and Republican Vote (r=−0.28) and Firearm Stores Per Capita (r=−0.38), and weak positive correlations with zip code Population Density (r=0.21), Median Income (r=0.15 ) and College Education (r=0.15). Thus, rather than mass shootings being entirely random events, they instead appear to be slightly more likely to occur in liberal, semi-urban settings where guns are seemingly less prevalent. The possibility that these variables even remotely predict where shootings occur increases the importance of their inclusion as controls, as each factor is also plausibly linked to views on gun control.

Turning to the individual level, our analysis includes standard demographic controls (education, income, age, gender, race and residence in the South), as well as dummy variables for Homeowners and respondents with Children, as it is possible that owning a home or having children alters views on home safety and gun control. We include dummy variables for whether a respondent is enlisted in the Military, or whether they report being from a Military Family, as it is likely that individuals in the service, or with family members in the service, hold more favorable views towards gun rights. Last, we include controls for political and symbolic orientations (Party ID, Ideology and Religiosity), as these variables are known to influence a range of views on key political issues, including gun control. For more information about question wording and variable measurement, see Appendix A.

RESULTS

Given the ordinal nature of our dependent variable, as well as the hierarchical structure of our data (individual respondents embedded within zip codes), we estimated multilevel ordered-logistic regression models with random intercepts for zip code. The results from our analysis are presented in Column 1 of Table 1. As can be seen, the results strongly align with expectations, as an increase in proximity to a mass public shooting is associated with a significant increase in support for stricter gun control laws (β=0.334, s.e.=0.172, p<0.05). 67

Table 1 The Effect of Proximity to Mass Shootings on Preferences over Gun Control Policy

Note: entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from multilevel regression models with random intercepts (zip) estimated using gllamm in the software package Stata®. Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests. Source: 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study – Common Content. \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

The size of this effect is displayed in Figure 2, which presents the first differences in the predicted probability of supporting stricter gun control laws associated with a change in Proximity to Shooting. The first plotted coefficient (labeled ‘Proximity’) indicates that going from respondents residing in zips the furthest away (Pr(Y)=0.322) to those housing a mass shooting (Pr(Y)=0.394) is associated with a 0.072 increase in the probability of desiring stricter gun regulations. One way of conceptualizing this effect is with an analogy to experimental research where the estimated quantity of interest is the difference in an outcome between the treated and untreated. In our case, respondents residing furthest away from a mass shooting reside in the state of Alaska, which is spatially separated from the continental US and did not experience a mass public shooting during the 1966 to 2010 time period. 68 Thus, the comparison between respondents in this zip code and those in zip codes housing a mass public shooting can be viewed as representing a comparison between ‘untreated’ Americans and those receiving the strongest ‘dose’ of the treatment by having a mass public shooting occur in their neighborhood. While a change of 0.072 appears to be a modest effect, it represents over a 20 per cent increase in the probability of supporting stricter gun laws.

Fig. 2 Impact of proximity to a mass public shooting on change in the probability of support for gun control Note: entries are point estimates for the first difference in the predicted probability of preferring gun control laws be made ‘more strict’ associated with changes in proximity variables, holding all control variables at their mean values. Vertical bars intersecting point estimates are 90 per cent confidence intervals. Each listed estimate is the effect from a separate model. ‘Proximity’ is Proximity to Shooting, and ‘Avg. Prox (2)’ and ‘Avg. Prox (3)’ are the average proximity to the nearest two or three shooting events. Changes in the proximity variables are from minimum to maximum values. Probabilities obtained from post-estimation analysis using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003). Source: 2010 CCES.

Turning to the contextual controls in Table 1, we find some interesting but unsurprising effects. First, we see that residing in more population-dense, well-educated, politically liberal and racially diverse areas is associated with increased support for gun control. Countering these effects, however, we see that residing in areas with higher murder rates and more firearm stores per capita is associated with significant decreases in support for gun control. This latter effect strongly confirms the suspicion that areas with a strong ‘gun culture’ influence views on gun control. Indeed, moving from areas with less than 1 firearm store per 1,000 people to an area with 9.7 firearm stores per 1,000 people is associated with roughly a 0.40 decrease in the probability of preferring stricter gun control laws. This large effect is only paralleled by that of education rates, where moving from zip codes with no college-educated residents to those where every resident has at least a bachelor’s degree is associated with a 0.39 increase in the probability of supporting stricter gun laws. Thus while we observe statistically significant and substantively meaningful changes in support for gun control as a function of proximity to a mass public shooting, the most powerful effects are driven by variables related to local culture, with pronounced but expected differences emerging between respondents in rural, conservative and gun-heavy areas and those residing in urban, liberal areas with few firearm stores.

Shifting our focus to the individual-level controls, we see that gun control is more likely to be opposed by men, homeowners, individuals in the military or from military families, and by those identifying with the political right. Conversely, gun control is more likely to be supported by those of higher socio-economic status and by non-whites. In the sections that follow, we address key threats to causal inference stemming from our use of cross-sectional observational data. We demonstrate through a series of robustness checks, including the use of panel data, that our results hold.

Partisan-Motivated Reasoning

To test the partisan-motivated reasoning hypothesis, we re-estimated the model in Column 1 of Table 1 among Democrats, Independents and Republicans separately. 69 We present the results from this analysis in Figure 2, as well as Appendix Table B5. Figure 2 presents the change in the predicted probability of supporting stricter gun control laws associated with an increase in Proximity to Shooting among Democratic, Independent and Republican respondents. As can be seen, there are no significant differences in the effects of proximity when focusing on respondents situated at opposite ends, or in the middle, of the partisanship spectrum. 70 The effect of proximity is noticeably larger for Independents, and the pattern of results suggests that the policy preferences of Independents and Republicans are more responsive to proximity to mass shootings than those of Democrats. However, rather than these effects being due to Democrats being unfazed by mass shootings, closer inspection of the data suggests they likely derive from a ceiling effect: the average value of the dependent variable (ranging from 1 to 3) is 2.6 among Democrats, 2.1 among Independents and 1.85 among Republicans. Thus, we observe increasing room for the movement of policy opinion as we move from Democrats to Republicans. The takeaway point of these results is that the effect of Proximity to Shooting observed in the full sample is not driven by one specific partisan group in a manner that is statistically significant. In short, we fail to uncover evidence of motivated reasoning in reactions to mass shootings.

ROBUSTNESS CHECK: OMITTED VARIABLE BIAS

One concern with our results is that, despite the inclusion of a comprehensive range of controls, the observed association between proximity to a mass shooting and gun control attitudes may nonetheless be capturing the effect of an omitted variable. Such a variable might predict variation in both where mass shootings occur and gun control attitudes. This problem subsumes other related concerns, such as residential self-selection. One plausible omitted-variable explanation for our results is the possibility that, since mass shootings are slightly more likely to occur in liberal, semi-urban areas, our findings could be due to the association of these environmental characteristics with holding liberal views on gun policy, and to those with liberal views selecting into liberal environments where mass shootings are slightly more likely to occur. It is important to reiterate that this logic highlights the importance of controlling for population density, contextual partisanship and individual political orientations, which are included in all of our analyses.

Repeated Events, Magnitude and Recency

One method of assessing the robustness of our findings in light of this potential omitted variable problem is to determine whether our findings vary depending upon additional factors, which according to our theory should enhance or attenuate our initial findings. Here, we explore the role of (1) repeated events, (2) the magnitude of an event and (3) the time elapsed since an event. Each of these variables in theory should relate to the salience of mass shootings, and of gun violence more generally: (1) residing near repeated mass shootings may increase the salience of gun violence over that obtained by a single event, (2) mass shootings that take a greater toll on human life may make gun violence more salient than those with fewer casualties and injuries and (3) the time elapsed since a shooting may attenuate its theorized effect on the salience of gun violence. In short, a critical question for our research is, when analyzing repeated shootings or the effect of proximity to a shooting conditional upon the number of victims or time elapsed, do the results from these more nuanced analyses ‘behave’ in ways that accord with our hypothesis or with the omitted variable counterhypothesis?

We begin with repeated events: according to our theory, proximity to a mass shooting should make gun violence, and the risk of victimization, more salient. One logical deduction of this expectation is that residing near more than one mass shooting should increase the ‘treatment effect’. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (Repeated Events Hypothesis): Residing near multiple mass shootings will be associated with more support for gun control than that observed for residing near a single mass shooting.

Turning to the magnitude of an event, one logical deduction of our theory is that mass shootings with high casualty and injured counts should have a larger ‘treatment effect’ than events with fewer killed or injured. Indeed, research on other events, such as natural disasters, finds that the magnitude of an event is associated with the size of its effect on experienced stress 71 and subsequent political behavior. 72 This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 (Event Magnitude Hypothesis): The effect of proximity to a mass public shooting on support for gun control should increase with the number of victims.

Last, when looking at the time elapsed since shootings, a final logical deduction of our theory is that the salience of gun violence aroused by mass public shootings should dissipate as time passes. Research in psychology indicates that the time horizon of events affects how people think about such events, with temporally proximate events visualized in a more concrete and visceral fashion than temporally distant events. 73 This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 (Dissipation Hypothesis): The effect of proximity to a mass public shooting on support for gun control should dissipate as time passes.

To test the repeated events hypothesis, we constructed a variable labeled Average Proximity, which measures the average distance in miles from the centroid of respondents’ zip code of residence to the two nearest mass shootings, as well as to the three nearest mass shootings. We re-estimate the model in Column 1 of Table 1 using these averaged proximity variables and present the results in Table 1, Columns 2 and 3. As can be seen, not only do the results hold, the statistical significance and size of the effects moderately increase (see Figure 2). While the increase is modest, the results do suggest that the impact of proximity to a mass public shooting on support for gun control strengthens when living close to more than one shooting. Moreover, when analyzing a different sample and dependent variable in the section below, we observe more drastic increases in support for gun control associated with proximity to multiple mass shootings (Table 4 and Figure 3 below). To test the Event Magnitude hypothesis, we re-estimated the model in Column 1 of Table 1 at varying values of the total number of victims (killed + injured) of an event and present the results in Figure 2, as well as Appendix Table B5. Figure 2 shows that when focusing only on mass shootings with fewer than five victims (25th percentile), there is no statistically significant difference in gun control preferences between those residing far versus close to the shooting. However, as we focus on events with an increasing number of total victims, 74 we see that the effect of proximity gains in significance and effect size. Last, with respect to our Dissipation hypothesis, we find that the results hold when focusing on shootings occurring more than 10 years ago (that is, before 2000), 75 but do not hold for shootings occurring more than 20 years ago (that is, before 1990). 76 Thus when we focus on proximity to shootings occurring farther back in time, we fail to uncover any systematic difference in gun control attitudes between those residing close to, compared to those residing far from, the events in question. 77 We only find a systematic relationship between proximity and gun control attitudes when focusing on mass shootings occurring within the past 20 years.

Fig. 3 Impact of change in proximity to shooting on change in probability of favoring gun control over gun rights Note: entries are point estimates for the first difference in the predicted probability of believing gun control IS more important than gun rights associated with changes in the values of key predictor variables. Vertical bars intersecting point estimates are 90 per cent confidence intervals. ‘Proximity’ is Proximity to Shooting, and ‘Avg. Prox (2)’ and ‘Avg. Prox (3)’ are the average proximity to the nearest two or three shooting events. Changes in the proximity variables are from minimum to maximum values. Probabilities obtained from post-estimation analysis using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg and King 2003). Source: 2010 Pew Survey.

Taken together, these findings help shore up potential doubt about the results presented in Table 1. When subjected to more nuanced analysis, we demonstrate that the pattern of results varies according to our theory: proximity to mass shootings – as well as proximity to repeated events, more horrific events and more recent events – increases the salience of gun violence, and thus garners support for gun control. These patterns of results work to render an omitted variable explanation for our initial results increasingly untenable. Indeed, the clearest way to discount this additional evidence would be to make the argument that mass shooters are not only more likely to stage their attacks in areas where residents favor gun control, but are also more likely to kill and injure more people in such areas. An omitted-variable explanation for our main results would also require arguing that attackers in 1970–90 were randomly generated across environs and/or were indiscriminate about the location of their attacks, but that this process fundamentally changed over the past two decades. We find these counterarguments untenable. For example, while mass shootings are slightly more likely to occur in population-dense, Democratic voting areas, the total number of victims of a mass shooting is entirely uncorrelated to Population Density (r=−0.05) and Republican Vote (r=0.08).

Preferences Over Treatment-Irrelevant Policy Issues

If the omitted-variable counterhypothesis is correct, and mass shootings tend to occur in areas that, for example, are more politically liberal, then the relationship we observe between proximity to shootings and gun control attitudes should also be observed for other political issues. Thus an important additional (placebo) test of the robustness of our results is whether the effects we observe for proximity to a mass shooting on gun control attitudes influence ‘treatment-irrelevant’ political attitudes. To test this, we estimated the model in Column 1 of Table 1 substituting for gun control four presumably treatment-irrelevant policy issues: (1) belief in Climate Change (2) support for a woman’s right to an Abortion, (3) support for Gay Marriage and (4) support for granting legal status to undocumented workers living in the United States (Immigration). For full question wordings for these policy items, see Appendix A. We present the results from this analysis in Table 2.

Table 2 The Effect of Proximity to Mass Shootings on Other Policy Attitudes

Note: entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from multilevel regression models with random intercepts (zip) estimated using gllamm and xtlogit in the software package Stata®. Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests. Source: 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study – Common Content. ^p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 2 demonstrates that proximity to a mass shooting does not increase the holding of liberal positions on any of these other prominent issues. On the contrary, we only uncover a systematic relationship between Proximity to Shooting and preferences over gun control laws. These null findings further bolster not only our confidence in our original finding, but the causal inference we seek to make from these findings.

Retest Using Panel Data

In a final attempt to address the omitted variable counterhypothesis, as well as the more general issue of the limitations on causal inference from the use of cross-sectional data, we conducted an analysis of the 2010–12 CCES Panel Study. 78 An N=9,500 subset of the total N=55,400 participants in the 2010 CCES was re-interviewed in October and November 2012. One benefit of using this panel is its large size and low attrition rate relative to other popular panels (for example, American National Election Study panels). Further, as noted by Ansolebehere and Schaffner, 79 the demographic and partisan characteristics of the panel respondents do not significantly differ from those of the larger 2010 CCES cross-section, and few socio-demographic or partisan differences emerged in panel attrition. Important for our purposes, the 2012 re-interview asked respondents the same gun control question contained in the 2010 CCES questionnaire. Thus using this panel, we are able to assess whether changes over time in panel respondents’ preferences over gun control systematically correspond to the occurrence of a mass shooting near their place of residence between panel waves.

We created a dichotomous treatment variable coded 1 if a respondent resided in a zip code within 100 miles of a mass shooting occurring between survey waves (December 2010 to September 2012), and 0 otherwise. There were 0 mass shootings in 2010 after the first CCES wave, six mass shootings in 2011, and ten in 2012 prior to the 2012 CCES re-interview (see Appendix C for a list of these events). A total of 621 respondents in the panel lived 100 miles or closer to one of these sixteen events. Importantly, we restrict our analysis to respondents whose zip codes did not change between survey waves, thus helping to ensure that those coded 1 on our treatment variable received the treatment occurring in their reported area of residence between survey waves.

For our analysis, we estimated a static-score lagged dependent variable model, where we regress 2012 gun control attitudes on 2010 gun control attitudes, our dichotomous treatment variable, and the set of 2010 controls used in Table 1. 80 We present the results from this analysis in Table 3. As can be seen, even after controlling for prior attitudes – which is expectedly one of the most powerful predictors in the model – having a mass shooting occur close by between survey waves is associated with a significant increase in the probability of favoring stricter gun control laws. Indeed, post-estimation analysis of predicted probabilities indicates a 0.06 increase in the probability of preferring stricter gun control laws as a function of having a mass shooting occur within 100 miles of one’s place of residence between survey waves. While this effect appears rather modest, it is quite impressive in light of the massive variance in 2012 gun control preferences accounted for by 2010 preferences. Indeed, a minimum to maximum value change (that is, preferring less to more strict gun control laws) in 2010 reported gun control preferences is associated with nearly an 0.80 increase in the probability of reporting a preference for stricter laws in 2012.

Table 3 Local Occurrence of a Mass Shooting and Support for Gun Control Over Time

Note: entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a multilevel regression model with a random intercept (zip) estimated using gllamm in the software package Stata®. Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests. Source: 2010–2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study Panel. \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01

Thus we see that residing near a mass shooting between waves explains a non-negligible amount of the variance left over after explaining 2012 attitudes with prior attitudes. We should also note that we conducted a placebo test to assess whether our treatment influenced gun control preferences reported pre-treatment in 2010. The results from this test are presented in Appendix Table B9. In short, we found that while our treatment variable significantly predicted 2012 attitudes, it had no effect on 2010 attitudes.

REPLICATION OF RESULTS

An additional concern with the results presented thus far is that they largely rely on a single dataset and dependent variable, and thus may be an anomaly that fails to appear outside of the 2010 CCES. As a further test of the robustness of our findings, we sought to replicate our results using a separate national sample of adult Americans, as well as a distinct dependent variable. For this purpose, we draw on the 2010 Political Independents Survey (N=3,500) conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 81 This survey contained nearly all the measures included in the CCES (except homeownership); thus we were able to perform a very clean replication test. The dependent variable for this analysis is a question asking respondents: ‘What do you think is more important – to protect the right of Americans to own guns, OR to control gun ownership?’ From this item, we constructed a dichotomous item coded (1) ‘Control gun ownership’[47.5 per cent] or (0) ‘Protect the right of Americans to own guns’ [48.6 per cent]. 82 We present the results from our analysis in Table 4 and Figure 3. For information about question wording and variable measurement, see Appendix A.

Table 4 The Effect of Proximity to Mass Shootings on Chosen Trade-Off Between Gun Rights vs. Gun Control

Note: entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from multilevel logistic regression models with random intercepts (zip) estimated using xtlogit in the software package Stata®. Reported significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests. Source: September 2010 Political Independents Survey, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. ^p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars Speculative Applications 2020 (Job Number: 190005XU)

In 'The Art of War’ Sun Tzu once stated: ‘Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.’ Rolls-Royce as a pioneer company understands that fully. Being able to constantly innovate means to be constantly ahead of competitors in understanding the market and customer to provide state-of -the art solutions.

The company's current strategy implies that there are exciting and challenging times ahead especially in reinventing throughout 'Digital First' as a core driver for transformation internally and externally.

Having the opportunity to be a part of this transformation knowing that Rolls-Royce will excellently execute this strategy sound absolutely fascinating to me. It displays the perfect environment to bring in my knowledge and expertise and therefore ultimately grow alongside the company.

Beginning with Table 4, the results reveal that key effects observed with the 2010 CCES data replicate when focusing on a different measure of views on gun control, as well as an entirely different national sample. Interestingly, when looking at Figure 3, we see that the size of the effects of proximity to a shooting are even more dramatic in the Pew data than in the CCES data when focusing on proximity to more than one mass shooting. Further, similar to what was found with the CCES data, we see that the estimated size of the effect of proximity to a mass shooting is (1) enhanced when focusing on events with more victims and (2) attenuated when focusing on events occurring further back in time (for full results, see Appendix Table B10). While not presented in Figure 3, there were no significant differences in the effect of proximity by partisanship (see Table B10), which provides additional evidence against the Partisan-Motivated Reasoning hypothesis. These results corroborate our initial findings and strongly suggest that our findings are not an artifact of any single dataset or dependent variable.

CONCLUSION

Former President Obama personally addressed the nation more than a dozen times following a major mass public shooting during his tenure in office. What was surprisingly absent from these speeches – at least prior to the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting, which appears to be a watershed moment (at least for the Obama Administration) – was the issue of guns as a causal factor for the rising gun violence. 83

In fact, members of Congress from both political parties have been largely reticent on the issue, reluctant to pass legislation regulating firearms for fear that they lack sufficient public support to challenge powerful gun rights’ groups. Nearing the end of his time in office, the former president’s attitude appears to have shifted from one of political caution to outright indignation. Visibly frustrated by the spate of recent mass shootings, particularly the shooting at Umqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, which wounded seventeen people (nine fatally), Obama pleaded with news organizations to push the issue to the top of the agenda and publish statistics comparing deaths in the United States from terrorist attacks to those resulting from gun violence. Obama concluded: ‘This is a political choice that we make to allow this to happen every few months in America […] if you think this is a problem, then you should expect your elected officials to reflect your views’. 84

Manager Brand Strategy & Brand Standards (Job Number: 1900042P)

Indeed, our findings suggest that Americans – Democrats and Republicans alike – are responsive to tragic events like mass public shootings, albeit in a contextually dependent way. In contrast to claims made by vocal gun rights’ advocates, we uncover evidence that citizens living near mass public shootings are more likely to prefer gun control. One unfortunate implication of our findings is that movement away from a permissive culture of gun rights towards majority support for strict gun regulations may rest upon the occurrence of more mass public shootings. To be sure, this implication places gun violence and gun control on par with policy-feedback loops observed in many other issue domains, such as environmental regulation, disaster preparedness and regulation of speculative trading – where the breaking of opinion inertia and status quo policy requires exogenous shocks that inflict pain on the nation.

Our findings also make several important contributions to the literature, and suggest important directions for future research. First, our research addresses a visible gap in the scholarly literature on the effects of mass shootings on public opinion. While there is currently a wide swath of descriptive analysis of aggregate polling data on gun legislation, there is a surprising dearth of individual-level research on the effects of mass shootings. Secondly, we provide empirical evidence of an important class of focusing events, characterized as intentional criminal acts designed to inflict mass casualties on random members of the public. Much of the extant public policy literature on focusing events concerns the effects of unintentional events such as natural disasters or environmental accidents on public opinion. Thirdly, we add to the literature on contextual effects by providing a strong empirical demonstration that Americans’ preferences over gun control are responsive to proximate instances of egregious gun violence.

This contextual finding is important in light of recent work by Hopkins, 85 who uncovered surprising non-responsiveness in Americans’ policy attitudes to various policy-relevant factors operative in their environment. Indeed, while Hopkins finds that citizens’ policy attitudes are not responsive to local pollution, income inequality or the presence of military bases, they are responsive to crime, unemployment and immigrant populations – stimuli reasoned by Hopkins to be threat laden and publicized by the mass media. Thus our findings add to these by showing an important instance of citizens’ responsiveness to their surrounding environment. Finally, we stipulate a potential causal mechanism through which mass shootings may operate on gun control attitudes – namely, that these events heighten the perceived threat of gun violence, which in theory should induce greater scrutiny of policy-relevant information, increased sensitivity to risk and anxiety-reducing actions intended to mitigate the threat, among other things.

Future research should build upon our efforts by exploring the proposed causal mechanism relating to threat. More specifically, scholars could test whether exposure to nearby mass shootings heightens threat perceptions, thereby inducing anxiety. In addition, scholars could search for behavioral data linked to the gun policy domain. Of particular interest would be behavioral change resulting from residing near a mass shooting (akin to what scholars have observed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks). For example, we might expect individuals living near mass a shooting to seek out information related to the issue of gun control, discuss the issue among members of their social network, potentially shift their partisan loyalties and possibly contact their legislators to press for policy change (as is often the case for family members of those injured or killed in a mass shooting). Indeed, our findings present an important but incomplete piece of a potential policy-feedback loop, as changes to public opinion may be insufficient to stimulate policy change without opinion changes translating into political action aimed at influencing policy. Thus an important step for future research in this area would be to assess the implications of our findings with respect to mass political behavior, as well as to assess whether the spatial pattern of shootings and opinion change we uncover corresponds to potential spatial variation in changes to local gun ordinances.

A heart-stopping school shooting ad: No child should have to text last words to mom.

The new Sandy Hook public service announcement is brutal but not gratuitous. It tells us we must not accept gun violence in our schools as inevitable.

Sharon Brous and Jacqui J. LewisOpinion contributors

One of the great travesties of the gun violence culture in America is that after a mass shooting, once the news cycle moves on, it is those whose lives have been shattered, the survivors and victims’ family and friends, who are left to lead the fight to prevent future gun atrocities.

The standard-bearers for turning tragedy into transformation are the families who lost loved ones at Sandy Hook Elementary School, who have repeatedly emerged as voices of moral courage and clarity. Together, they created Sandy Hook Promise (SHP), dedicated to preventing gun violence and doing whatever they can to awaken the nation to the insanity of our gun addiction and the real toll it takes on real people, including too many real children.

Their new public service announcement is penetrating and unforgiving. It will make you profoundly uncomfortable — and it should. By mocking the ubiquitous back-to-school ads that characterize this time of year, they show the real face of gun violence in a country that last year had 110 school shootings, with 61 deaths. Think of that: Dozens of children who went to school to learn did not make it home at the end of the day. More than 228,000 students in the United States have lived through gun violence at school since Columbine in 1999.

School supplies as literal lifesavers

The PSA is a heart-stopping twist on this “new normal,” where common back-to-school items, like new shoes, pencils and skateboards, become life-saving tools during a school shooting. It closes with a young girl crouched in a closet, weeping and trembling as she texts “I love you mom” into her new bedazzled phone, the shooter’s footsteps ominously approaching.

Screen shot from Sandy Hook Promise public service announcement.

It’s brutal. But it’s not gratuitous. Their message: We must not accept that gun violence in our schools is simply inevitable. “Preventing school shootings and violence is the real ‘Back-to-School Essential’,” says Nicole Hockley, co-founder and managing director of SHP, whose 6-year-old son, Dylan, was killed in the 2012 massacre.

SHP has trained 7.5 million people from Los Angeles to Miami-Dade County in its Know the Signs program, which has successfully averted multiple planned school shootings, teen suicides and other types of violence afflicting students across the country. These efforts have saved lives.

A depraved moral calculcus

Of course, it’s not only our schools under fire. Guns are used in murders, assaults, gender-based violence, unintentional shootings and suicide. The problem is rural and urban. Gun violence happens at home (living in a home with guns raises the risk of homicide by 40% to 170% and the risk of suicide by 90% to 460%). It happens at the mall, in the movie theater, at church and in synagogue.

Gun violence in America is a public health crisis.

Watch the PSA. It is vital that we — and our children — know the signs. That would go a long way in stopping many types of gun injuries and deaths, especially suicides, which are at epidemic proportions among teens. And at the same time, let’s not dare pretend that it’s the responsibility of our children, or their teachers, to keep themselves safe from gun violence.

After the Sandy Hook massacre, the whole world witnessed the National Rifle Association and its congressional allies manipulate the massacre into a commitment to loosen gun laws. They laid blame on mental illness, video games, broken families — everywhere but on the AR-15 and magazines used to murder those kids and teachers. They claimed that protecting gun ownership is more inviolate than protecting human life — a depraved moral calculus.

We need an assault weapons ban

You need a license to drive a car and get married. It’s long past time for a federal gun licensing program that would require not only comprehensive universal background checks but also that all guns be sold through licensed dealers. The Senate Background Checks Expansion Act, introduced back in January, sits stalled because Republican leadership refuses to bring it to the floor for a vote. No matter our political affiliation, we must all insist this bill move through the process immediately.

Assault weapons and high-capacity magazines serve no purpose other than to kill as many people as possible as quickly as possible. They must be banned. Gun manufacturers must be held accountable for injuries resulting from use of firearms, just like automakers, tobacco companies and manufacturers of other consumer products made in the United States. And we need federal funding to support community-based violence intervention programs, like Operation Ceasefire in Oakland, California.

These actions will make all of us, and our children, safer.