
The Gun Control Movement has Found its Voice: But Still Needs to Find its Way

Ethel Klein, PhD
EDK Associates
New York, NY

© 2000
Berkeley Media
Studies Group
2140 Shattuck Ave.
Suite 804
Berkeley, CA 94704
510.204.9700
fax 510.204.9710
bmsg@bmsg.org

Prepared for the "Strengthening the Public Health Debate on Handguns, Crime, and Safety" meeting,
October 14 & 15, 1999, Chicago, IL, with support from the Joyce Foundation



**The Gun Control Movement has Found its Voice:
But Still Needs to Find its Way**

From kitchen tables to houses of worship, there is a national consensus that something needs to be done about the easy availability of guns. For the first time in decades, the debate over gun control may become a central part of our political dialogue as State legislatures, the Congress, the White House and the courts grapple with issues surrounding access to firearms.

In the past, “right to bear arms” advocates dominated the public debate by asserting that gun ownership was a constitutional right, that the criminal, not the gun, was the problem, and that government had no right telling people how to live their lives. While the public has been in favor of responsible gun policy for some time, it was not a priority issue to most voters. People who oppose government efforts to control the availability of handguns had a louder voice because they cared enough to organize, give money, vote, and lobby against unrestricted access to handguns. That has changed.

Currently, the scenes of a gunman, police and terrified children have become much too familiar. As bullets flew and bodies fell in schools in West Paducah, Kentucky, Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Springfield, Oregon, demands for making it harder for people to get guns began to increase. This cry for change has turned into a roar after Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, became a deadly shooting gallery. This roar has been sustained by images of children being shot in a childcare center in Los Angeles, California, and a Baptist church in Fort Worth, Texas.

As the shooting victims of today’s headlines shifted from urban gang members to suburban schoolchildren and parishioners, Americans were more insistent that something be done about all these guns. The political tide has turned away from gun advocates toward support for handgun regulation. The majority that has been in favor of stricter gun control measures is silent no more. The issue has risen on their agenda and they are telling newscasters, pollsters, and politicians that they want something done to end the ease with which people can get guns.

The gun control movement has found its voice. The problem it faces is not one of creating political will among the electorate but one of creating opportunities for public engagement that will hold politicians accountable. The public, and that includes most gun owners, are in favor of significant gun control measures. According to a recent *Newsweek* poll, 81% of non-gun-owners want all handgun owners to register with the government, a position also held by 66% of gun owners. At least eight of ten non-owners and owners favor mandatory courses on gun safety, child safety locks on guns, and a waiting period for background checks for all handgun purchases. There’s even substantial support among gun owners — 45 percent — for requiring the owners of hunting rifles to register with the government.¹

Politically, the gun lobby has had more success winning the votes of congressmen and state legislators than the hearts and minds of American voters. The gun lobby is seen as much stronger than the gun control lobby. Five years ago, when the Democrats lost their majority in Congress, they felt they had paid dearly for backing a ban on assault weapons. The polls showed strong support for the passage of assault weapons legislation in 1994, but

¹ “The Gun War Comes Home,” by Howard Fineman. *Newsweek*, August 23, 1999.

the National Rifle Association targeted key districts and punished those who did not support their views.

This outcome reinforced conventional wisdom that the people who vote on and care most about gun issues tend to be gun owners, people who are far more sympathetic to the NRA perspective. Both Democrats and Republicans credit the NRA for being a critical factor in helping the House Republicans gain the majority in 1994. But that was before a series of school shootings culminated in the massacre at Columbine High School.

At the moment, the gun lobby is larger and financially much more powerful than the anti-gun lobby. In 1998, for example, the National Rifle Association's political action committee donated \$1.35 million to the Republican Congressional candidates and \$283,000 to Democrats. In contrast, Handgun Control Inc. gave a total of \$213,984 to Democrats and Republicans combined. The NRA reports having a membership of nearly 3 million while Handgun Control Inc. reports only 1 million members.

But there could be a movement demanding more restrictions on gun ownership in the upcoming elections. Most voters are dissatisfied, if not angry, at the way Congress is handling this issue. They recognize the power of the NRA and they believe that the organization has become too powerful.² So while most people feel that Congress *should* pass stricter control measures, they do not think Congress *will* do so.

Nearly six in ten (59%) voters are either dissatisfied (41%) or angry (18%) at the way Congress has handled this issue thus far.³ Two-thirds believe that Congress should pass stronger gun control measures but only 39% believe that Congress will pass such measures. And they are right. Congress will not pass meaningful gun control legislation until voters are able to hold elected officials accountable.

The upcoming elections offer a real opportunity for mobilizing voters to back their opinions with their votes. The Republican majority in the House of Representatives is slim and shooting sprees have changed the political landscape leaving both Republicans and Democrats nervous either about falling on the wrong side of any volatile issue or conceding any potentially popular cause to their rivals.

Gun Control has Become a Salient Political Issue

Concerns about crime have gone down dramatically, but people's anxiety about easy access to handguns has not. Most voters believe this remains a serious problem. This is the first time in this decade that questions about the importance of restrictions on gun ownership have made it onto the pollster's agenda of legislative issues. Americans say a candidate's stand on stronger restrictions on firearms will have a positive rather than a negative influence in deciding how they will vote.

Support Has Strengthened Over The Years

The overall percentage of people in favor of stricter gun control laws has not increased significantly over the last decade, but the importance placed on the issue by supporters of gun control has increased dramatically. [See Table 1.] In 1989, 60% of Americans favored

² ABC News/*Washington Post*; 8/30–9/2/99; 47% of adults say that the NRA has too much influence over gun control laws in this country.

³ CBS News Poll; August 15, 1999 (N=736).

stricter gun control laws, but only 28% of adults were strongly in favor of new legislation. In 1999, 63% of Americans favor stricter gun control laws and 52% say they are strongly in favor of more restrictions. In contrast, only one in four (25%) are strongly opposed.

Democrats are overwhelmingly supportive of making it much harder to obtain a gun (73% in favor), followed by a majority of voters who identify as Independents (59%). Republicans divide on the issue with 47% in favor of stricter gun control laws and 49% opposed. People who have a gun in their house are more likely to oppose stricter gun control (54%), but a large percentage do favor passing stricter laws (46%).⁴

Table 1. Stricter Gun Control Laws Gain In Saliency

*Do you favor or oppose stricter gun control laws in this country?
Is that strongly or somewhat favor/oppose?*

	Net	Favor Strongly	Some	Net	Oppose Strongly	Some	No Opinion
9/2/99	63	52	11	36	25	11	1
8/15/99	62	46	16	34	22	12	3
5/16/99	67	55	12	31	21	10	1
10/13/93*	64	40	24	33	20	13	3
6/8/89*	60	28	32	34	23	11	6

Source: ABC News/*Washington Post* Polls

*Gallup: "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose enacting tougher gun control laws?"
Error due to rounding.

⁴ CNN/*Time* Poll conducted by Yankelovich Partners. July 14–15, 1999. (N=1,017 adults nationwide.)

⁵ The Harris Poll conducted between June 10–16, 1999. (N=1,022 adults nationwide.)

⁶ The Harris Poll conducted between September 17–21, 1999. (N=1,009 adults nationwide.)

⁷ NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll conducted by the polling organizations of Peter Hart (D) and Robert Teeter (R). September 9–12, 1999. (N=1,010 adults nationwide.)

Note that the wording of these questions uses the phrase "gun control" laws rather than "handgun control" laws. Polls consistently show that the public makes a distinction between handguns and long guns (shotguns and rifles). To illustrate this point, a recent Harris poll reveals that people are even more likely to support stricter handgun control laws (73%) than the more generic gun control laws (63%).⁵

Gun Control is On the Public's Political Agenda

Polls taken by Harris over the past two years illustrate how much more salient gun control is to voters these days. When asked what they thought were the two most important issues for the government to address, only 1% of voters volunteered gun control in the period between January and April 1999. In May, that figure jumped to 10% and has remained virtually unchanged through September.⁶

Americans say enacting tougher gun control measures should be one of Congresses top priorities. Asked what should be the highest priority for the Congress this session, 29% said making changes to preserve Medicare, 17% said tax cuts, 16% said restricting the sale and distribution of guns. The next three items on the list were increasing military spending (11%), passing a patients' bill of rights (10%), and increasing the minimum wage (9%).⁷

When they were asked about a more expanded cluster of issues that were very important for the Congress to address, gun control remains in the upper half of people's concerns. Most voters ranked protecting the social security system (82%), the Medicare system (80%), and the patient's rights in the health care system (79%) in the top tier. Right after that came tougher gun control measures, with more than half of the public (55%) naming it the most important or very important issue for Congress to address. Tougher gun measures rank above other hot button issues such as cutting taxes (53%), campaign finance (41%), and increasing military spending (37%). [See Table 2.]

Table 2. Enacting Tougher Gun Control Measures is on the Agenda

How important it is for Congress to address the following issue? Would you say it's one of the single most important issues, very important, somewhat important or not important at all?

	Most important	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all	No opinion	Most or very important
Protecting the Social Security system	13	69	15	2	—	82%
Protecting the Medicare system	11	69	18	3	—	80%
Protecting patients' rights in the health care system	10	69	18	2	—	79%
Enacting tougher gun control laws	10	45	23	21	1	55%
Cutting taxes	7	46	35	11	1	53%
Reforming election campaign finance laws	6	35	42	15	2	41%
Increasing spending on national defense, or the military budget	4	33	46	15	1	37%

Source: ABC News/*Washington Post* Poll based on random telephone interviews with 1,526 adults between August 30 and September 2, 1999. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Concerns Translate Into Votes

Ultimately, political judgements are made in the polling booth. There are a lot of issues on the public agenda that are important to voters. The political potential of a constituency group is measured by what percentage of the electorate really cares about the outcome. In the past, most people who said they were in favor of responsible gun policy were not as committed to the issue as they were to other items on the political agenda.

Now that tougher gun laws have become significantly more salient, the electoral map could favor those who champion stricter handgun controls. Strong supporters of candidates who propose handgun legislation significantly outnumber strong opponents. Recently, *Newsweek* reported that 78% of voters believe gun control would be an “important” factor in their choice of a president.⁸ Gallup found that 61% of Americans say gun control will be an important issue in determining their vote in the upcoming Congressional elections.⁹

One measure of the relative advantage one side has over the other is obtained by subtracting the percentage of voters who say they strongly oppose a candidate in favor of stricter gun control laws from those who are strongly in favor of this legislation. For example, in the lull between Littleton and Fort Worth, CNN reported that 59% of voters said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who favors stricter gun control laws while 32% said less likely (giving those advocating for stronger gun control a net advantage of +27%). What is surprising is that 42% of gun owners are more likely to vote for this candidate (46% are less likely). [See Table 3.]

The data suggest that the stability of commitment among those who are likely to vote against a candidate who champions stricter control is not as solid. Last May, closer to the Littleton incident, the percentage of people saying they would be more likely to favor a candidate who supported gun control was virtually the same (61%) as when the question was asked two months later (59%). However, only 20% said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate who championed gun control compared to 32% two months later.

Table 3. More Support for Candidates Who Favor Stricter Gun Controls Laws

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate who favors stricter gun control laws?

		All	Gun Owners
July 14–15, 1999	CNN/ <i>Time</i>		
	More likely	59%	42%
	Less Likely	32%	46%
	Not sure	9%	12%
May 19–20, 1999	Fox News/ <i>Opinion Dynamics</i>		
	More Likely	61%	46%
	Less likely	20%	31%
	No difference	12%	15%
	Not sure	7%	4%

Given the public’s sense that the NRA has become too influential, it is not surprising to find that an endorsement by that organization can turn voters off. When asked if they would be more likely or less likely to vote for a candidate who is endorsed by the National Rifle Association, 42% said they would be less likely to support the candidate compared to only 23% who would be more likely. The rest (35%) did not think it would be a factor in their vote.¹⁰

⁸ “The Gun War Comes Home,” by Howard Fineman. *Newsweek*, August 23, 1999.

⁹ Gallup Poll: August 3–4, 1999 (N=1,048). How important are the following issues in determining your vote in the upcoming Congressional election?

% Saying extremely or very important

Social Security	84%
Health care	79%
Medicare	78%
Gun control	61%
Tax cuts	60%
Campaign finance reform	40%

¹⁰ *U.S. News and World Report*, May 7–9, 1995 (N=1,000 registered voters).

Strong Support for Stringent Handgun Policies

None of the gun control legislation under discussion in Congress today would have prevented the shooters in the recent spate of gun violence from purchasing their weapons. The current legislative debate is inadequate and gun control advocates need to take advantage of the current climate and push for a more aggressive agenda. Americans support an array of safety measures and consumer protection efforts but to really make a difference people are looking for a comprehensive approach to controlling easy access to guns. To that end, there is a great deal of support for licensing of gun owners and registering of guns. This is an issue that many people who own guns are also ready to support.

Assault Weapons and Saturday Night Specials: “Just Say NO”

All guns are not created equal. Americans see no reason for citizens to own an Uzi or a Saturday Night Special. The public is not looking to ban handgun ownership, but they are looking for a common-sense approach to the problem. Bans on assault weapons and cheap, easy to conceal handguns have been popular throughout this decade.

Assault weapons are designed to kill people, not game. Americans see no need for anyone to own such a gun. They favor banning the sale of assault weapons by a three-to-one margin (77% in favor). Nearly seven in ten (68%) strongly support a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons compared to 14% who are strongly opposed.¹¹ The majority of gun owners (66%) favor a nationwide ban on assault weapons.¹² This sentiment is not new; large majorities of Americans have supported a ban on the sale of assault weapons for some time. [See Table 4.]

Table 4. Banning Assault Weapons

% Support a law requiring a nationwide ban on the sale of assault weapons.

8/30–9/2/99	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	77%
	Strongly support	68%
	Somewhat support	9%
8/15/99	CBS News Poll	76%
5/16/99	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	79%
1994*	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	80%
1993	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	66%
1990	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	72%
1989	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	72%

*In 1994, the question was worded as “ban on sale of assault rifles.”

¹¹ ABC News/*Washington Post* conducted 8/30–9/2/99.

¹² CBS News Poll conducted 8/15/99.

Many people also see no need for Saturday Night Specials. More than half the electorate (58%) supports banning the manufacture of easily concealed, inexpensive handguns, often known as Saturday Night Specials. A majority of both gun owners (51%) and people who do not own guns (60%) support this ban.¹³ This is a longstanding position. In 1976, 65% of voters favored the abolition of guns such as the “Saturday Night Special” handgun from public usage.¹⁴

Licensing and Registration – A Comprehensive Response

This is the right time to offer the public a more systematic approach to handling the problem – licensing and registration. Proponents for comprehensive licensing and registration hope to convince Americans that this approach will do a lot of good. Solving gun-related crimes will be easier because of improved record keeping of handgun sales and ownership. Requiring more training for people who wish to purchase handguns would improve safety. Black market gun running will be deterred because this legislation makes it harder for people to buy handguns legally and then resell them illegally.

Comprehensive licensing and registration is not a new political response to gun violence, it just has not made it onto the legislative agenda. The public has supported responsible gun policy for decades. That support has grown from 61% in favor of registration of all handguns in 1968 to 79% in 1989 and has averaged about 77% in 1999. Today, 81% of people who do not own guns and 66% of gun owners support a law requiring all handgun owners to register their firearms with the government. Similarly, most Americans (77%), including the majority of gun owners (64%) support a law requiring people to get a license in order to legally own a handgun. [See Table 5.]

¹³ Tom Smith, “1998 National Gun Policy Survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings.” (NORC, University of Chicago.) May 1999. Table 1, 9.

¹⁴ Harris Poll (IRSS Study number S7685.) July, 1976. (N=1,514 voters nationwide).

Table 5. Licensing and Registration**% Support a law requiring all handgun owners to register their firearms with the government.**

8/30-9/2/99	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	75%
8/12-13/99	<i>Newsweek</i> Poll	74%
	Gun owners	66%
	Non-gun owners	81%
7/14-15/99	CNN/ <i>Time</i>	76%
	Gun owners	64%
6/11-13/99	Gallup/CNN/ <i>USA Today</i>	79%
2/99	Gallup	79%
1993	Gallup	81%
1991	Gallup	80%
1990	Gallup	81%
1989	Harris	79%
1989	CNN/ <i>Time</i>	84%
1985	Gallup	70%
1982	Gallup	66%
1971	Harris	66%
1968	Harris	61%

% Support a law requiring all owners of hunting rifles to register their firearms with the government.

8/12-13/99	<i>Newsweek</i> Poll	61%
	Gun owners	45%
	Non-gun owners	74%
2/13-14/89	CNN/ <i>Time</i>	74%

% Support a law requiring people to get a license in order to legally own a handgun.

7/14-15/99	CNN/ <i>Time</i>	77%
	Gun owners	64%
5/19-20/99	Fox News/ <i>Opinion Dynamic</i> Poll	77%
	Gun owners	68%

What The Public Won't Support

Americans support responsible gun ownership. They believe that people have a right to own a gun if they take all the right steps to ensure the safety of others. They are not willing to ban the sale of handguns to people other than law enforcement officers. Unlike other gun control measures, support for banning handguns has actually declined modestly as we debate the issue rather than increased in support or in saliency. [See Table 6.]

Table 6. Banning Handguns & Concealed Weapons

% Support a law requiring a nationwide ban on the sale of handguns, except to law enforcement officers.

8/30-9/2/99	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	32%
8/15/99	CBS News Poll	35%
8/12-13/99	<i>Newsweek</i> Poll	37%
5/12-16/99	Pew Research Center	44%
4/9/99	CBS News Poll	43%
4/99	Gallup	38%
4/21-22/99	<i>Newsweek</i> Poll	50%
2/99	Gallup	34%
12/93	Pew Research Center	45%
12/93	Gallup	39%
3/93	Gallup	42%
3/91	Gallup	43%
9/90	Gallup	41%
1988	Gallup	37%
10/87	Gallup	42%
6/81	Gallup	41%
1980	Gallup/ <i>CNN/Time</i>	31%

% Support a law requiring a nationwide ban on people carrying a concealed weapon.

8/30-9/2/99	ABC News/ <i>Washington Post</i>	49%
-------------	----------------------------------	-----

The public is also divided on the issue of concealed weapons. Nearly half (49%) would support a nation wide ban on people carrying a concealed weapon. The issue of whether the gun is concealed seems less important than the background checks, safety courses, trigger locks, and perhaps even personalization that would come with a comprehensive licensing and registration system. We need to do more research on this subject in order to have a fuller picture of why the public is eager to register guns but not ban the concealment of guns.

A Dramatic Shift in the Public Debate

In the past, the majority of voters were in favor of responsible gun policy but they accepted and respected the arguments made by opponents to responsible gun policy laws. When organizations such as the NRA talked about keeping government out of their lives, this struck a responsive chord. When opponents stressed the typical, conservative argument that legislation would increase bureaucracy and waste tax dollars, proponents had difficulty persuading the general electorate to keep an open mind to responsible gun policy. Most importantly, the NRA kept the focus on the criminal, reminding us that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”

All that has changed. When the NRA argues about individual rights, the public talks about responsibilities. When opponents say licensing and registration creates a bureaucratic nightmare, the public says it is a common-sense solution. When the naysayers stress it won’t work, the public says it will do more good than harm.

Individual Liberty Versus Public Safety

The public believes it has a serious responsibility in balancing an individual’s right to act without government intrusion and the public good served by regulatory action. In the case of passing a comprehensive handgun licensing and registration law, voters need to weigh protecting the individual’s easy access to handguns against providing for public safety.

Proponents of licensing and registration of handguns believe that handgun ownership is a responsibility. Given the need for public safety, they argue, it is fair to ask handgun owners to obtain a license to use a gun and register their handguns with local law enforcement officials. Opponents of handgun licensing and registration argue that government should stay out of people’s lives. [See Table 7.]

Table 7. The Rights of Gun Owners Versus the Protecting Public Safety

*Let me read you two positions on government regulation of firearms.
Which do you tend to side with more?*

Government goes too far in restricting the rights of citizens to own firearms	37%
Government does not do enough to regulate access to firearms	59%
Not sure	4%

Source: NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll: June 10–15, 1999 (N=2,011).

*What do you think is more important:
To protect the right of Americans to own guns or to control gun ownership?*

	Protect Rights	Control Guns
All	30%	65%
Men	42%	53%
Women	19%	75%
Republicans	42%	53%
Democrats	19%	76%
Independents	33%	63%

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press May 12–16, 1999 (N=1,179).

By a margin of two-to-one, Americans believe that it is more important to control gun ownership (65%) than to protect the rights of Americans to own guns (30%). While the majority of both men and women agree with this position, women are much more concerned than men about the need to control gun ownership (75% of women in comparison to 53% of men). In terms of partisan comparisons, support for responsible gun ownership is generally found across party lines but Democrats are most likely to call for gun control (76%) followed by Independents (63%) and a bare majority of Republicans (53%).

An Example from California

Polling EDK conducted in California in 1998 for the Violence Prevention Initiative on how the public balances the need for public safety with the need to protect the rights of individuals provides greater detail about how voters approach this dilemma. Many Californians (62%) did have at least some concern that a comprehensive licensing and registration law will give the government too much power. Fear for public safety, however, overrides this worry of increasing government control.¹⁵ And, fear for public safety has only increased since the time of the poll.

When asked to choose which is the greater priority for them, Californians are more likely to view handgun ownership as a responsibility that justifies asking handgun owners to license

¹⁵ Random digit dialed telephone surveys of 600 registered voters state-wide in California on November 17–19, 1998. Margin of error with 95% confidence level is 4.0 for sample of 600.

and register their guns (65%) rather than assert that government should stay out of people's lives (29%). People who expressed concern about increased government power ultimately felt public safety is the greater problem, almost three out of four believed that handgun ownership was a responsibility as well as a right (73%) and would vote in favor of passing a comprehensive responsible gun policy law (72%).

The majority of almost every demographic group shares this assessment. Unexpected support is found among 52% of Republican voters despite their usual opposition to government regulation. Gun-owning households, which one might assume would oppose any regulation of handguns, divide on this issue with 48% in favor of licensing and registration.

Making a Difference Versus Doing More Harm Than Good

There are a host of policy areas where Americans believe government action makes a difference for the better. These issues range from environmental protection to Social Security to occupational health and safety. This support for specific legislation, however, is tempered by a public judgement that, in general, the government does more harm than good.

This anti-government sentiment has been one of the core rallying points for those opposed to any constraints on the purchase and ownership of handguns. They insist that gun control will not work. They say it punishes law-abiding citizens but will not keep guns out of the hands of criminals. They also point to all the existing gun control legislation that has not been enforced, arguing we should focus on greater enforcement of current laws before we add more symbolic legislation to the books. As a final point, they emphasize that guns serve to promote safety.

Most Americans do not think stronger restrictions on gun ownership will solve the problem of gun violence, but they do think it will make a difference. Asked if stronger gun control laws would reduce the amount of crime in this country, 68% of adults say "Yes." A third (33%) believe it will make a lot of difference and virtually another third (35%) believe it will make a little difference. Even those who are uncertain how much good these laws can accomplish, tell opinion researchers in focus group after focus group that "it is worth a try." [See Table 8.]

Faced with growing public support for more gun regulations, The NRA and its supporters in Congress responded by stressing that if America really wants to crack down on gun crimes, the answer lies in enforcing the more than 20,000 existing local and federal gun regulations. They argue that police could do more to reduce firearm violence by enforcing existing laws, including prosecuting would-be gun buyers who fail background checks. Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush underscores the need for some support of gun control among long-term NRA politicians.

Less than a week after a gunman's rampage through a Fort Worth church killed seven people, Governor Bush announced a \$1.6 million program that would, among other things, pay for eight special prosecutors to focus strictly on gun crimes. The prosecutors would have the option of trying gun crime cases in federal court, where prison sentences are longer, judges have less discretion and parole is nonexistent. Thus, Bush turns a gun control measure into a "tough on crime" policy.

Table 8. It Makes a Difference

Would stronger gun control laws reduce the amount of violent crime in this country?

		% saying Yes
8/30-9/2/99	ABC News/Washington Post	50%
8/12-13/99	Newsweek Poll	66%
	A lot	33%
	A little	35%
	Not at all	29%
	Do not know	3%
4/21-22/99	Newsweek Poll	71%
	A lot	33%
	A little	38%
	Not at all	26%
	Don't know	3%
5/7-9/95	U.S. News and World Report	41%
11/5-7/93	ABC News	58%

The federal government requires background checks for most gun purchases. Do you think these background checks help reduce the number of crimes committed with guns?

Do help	52%
Do not help	42%
Don't know	5%

Source: Associated Press Poll April 16-19, 1999 (N=1,073).

*Which of these is more likely to decrease gun violence:
better enforcement of existing laws or tougher gun laws?*

	Better enforcement	Tougher laws	Neither (vol.)/Do not know
4/28-5/2	39%	51%	10%
4/16-19	47%	42%	11%
6/17-18/98	45%	36%	19%

Source: Associated Press: April 28-May 2, 1999 (N=1,006).

This argument is losing ground. Focusing on enforcement of existing laws is less popular with the public today than it was about a year ago. In June 1998, 45% of the public felt that better enforcement of current law would do more to end violence than tougher gun control laws. At that time 36% felt voting in tougher laws would be more effective in reducing crime and 19% were unclear about what would make a difference. Today, the balance has flipped. In April 1999, the majority (51%) called for tougher laws and the minority (39%) called for increased enforcement. The number of people who were unclear about this dropped to 10%.

The NRA also cites studies to prove that having a gun in the home promotes safety. This argument has not made a great deal of headway in countering the current support for increased regulation. The public is basically divided on the issue of whether guns make you more safe or less safe. In 1998 43% of the public felt guns in the home made you more safe, 46% said it makes the home less safe, and 11% were unwilling to make a judgement. The percentage of people saying less safe has increased slightly from 43% in 1996 to 46% in 1998.

On specific dimensions of safety, most people (73%) agree that having a gun in the house provides people with a sense of security. They also agree (60%) that having a gun in the house allows people to better protect themselves from home invaders. They do not agree that this security is real. Few (20%) would argue that having a gun in the house reduces the chance of being burglarized. What it does is increases the chance of someone accidentally being shot (85%), the chance of domestic violence (56%), and raises concerns about the gun being stolen or misused (93%).¹⁶

Common Sense Solution Versus Wasteful Use of Tax Dollars

Voters will not support the enactment of legislation unless it passes their “common sense test.” They ask themselves does this policy make sense? Will it help solve the problem? Is it worth the investment of public funds?

Americans agree that we have to license drivers and register cars because cars can be dangerous. Guns can also be dangerous, say the gun control advocates. If it makes sense to license drivers and register cars, then it also makes sense to license and register handguns. The majority of voters (77%) across the country agree that people should have to complete an instruction course and get a license to own a gun — similar to what they have to do to drive a car. Most people who own a gun (68%) also agree with the analogy between a license to own a car and a license to own a gun.¹⁷

Proponents of responsible gun policy are currently framing the debate. The analogy to motor vehicle regulations makes a lot of sense to voters throughout the country. For the first time in years, opponents of responsible gun policy legislation find themselves on the defensive. Building on the “car” analogy, pro-gun advocates have stressed that gun control laws will create a massive, wasteful bureaucracy. They point to the often maligned Department of Motor Vehicles as the epitome of red tape and wasted tax dollars, noting that this is exactly the kind of bureaucracy we don’t need to replicate for handguns.

¹⁶ Tom Smith, “1998 National Gun Policy Survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings.” (NORC, University of Chicago.) May 1999. Table 12.

¹⁷ Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll conducted May 19–20, 1999 of 912 registered voters nationwide.

Another Example from California

In California, respondents were asked to choose between two statements. One argued that if we license and register cars because they can be dangerous, then we should also require licensing and registration of handguns. The other stressed the last thing we need is to create another bureaucracy like the Department of Motor Vehicles to license and register handguns. All we will get is more red tape and wasted tax dollars. While red tape and wasted tax dollars are usually key phrases used to defeat legislation, they do not work in this case. Many more voters said the car analogy was closer to their view than the bloated bureaucracy scare (58% to 35%).

This analogy helps reframe how people think about handgun licensing and registration. At the beginning of the California survey, one in three voters favored mandatory waiting periods and background checks of handgun purchasers, but they were not ready to endorse licensing and registration. Having heard the analogy between firearms and motor vehicles, the majority of this group (55%) agreed with the statement that if we license cars we should license gun owners and register guns. Only 37% of this group felt the last thing Californians need is more red tape and wasted taxes.

These arguments made sense to many people, especially those who were not ready to embrace licensing and registration from the outset. This group was convinced of the need for training handgun owners in order to increase safety (72%). Nearly six in ten (57%) were persuaded that better records would help police solve handgun related crimes. They weren't quite as convinced that it would reduce gun running, but 47% believed it is worth a try.

New Opportunities: Recommendations

The time seems right for passing comprehensive gun laws in this country. The leadership of the National Rifle Association now holds less influence on voters. The percentage of people who say stricter gun control legislation is very important to them has grown dramatically. People in favor of licensing and registration now outnumber those who are opposed to it by two to one. More people would reward a politician who championed comprehensive responsible gun policy legislation than they would punish that politician.

These individual voices need to be brought together and empowered to hold politicians accountable. They need to make it clear that they too can punish politicians who take their views lightly and the pro-gun lobby's money more seriously. For this to happen, gun control supporters need to learn that they are the majority and millions of people share their views. They need to be encouraged to make their voice count and educated on how to do that.

We know enough about how people view gun control. What we need to understand is how to increase their commitment to taking action. To create a public movement for changing gun policies we need to know: What will motivate people who support gun control to feel more passionately about taking action? What actions would they be willing to take? How can we communicate with this audience in an efficient way? Who do they want to hear from? and What do they think needs to be said?

Some people take action as individuals. Others need the support that comes from a community of people taking action. Finally, passing legislation is about empowering all these citizens to engage with the political system and believe that they can make change happen.