

## Topics / Gun Control / Gun Control: Outlook

The contemporary debate over gun control has two key sides: those believing in strict control (gun control advocates) and those believing in minimal control (gun rights advocates). The Brady Campaign, headed by Sarah Brady, is the largest organization promoting gun control, while the National Rifle Association (NRA)—whose chief spokesperson is Wayne R. LaPierre Jr.—is the largest organization advancing the rights of gun owners. The two organizations hold diametrically opposed views on how and to what degree we should regulate firearms; they refuse to cooperate with each other, and indeed, often attack each other publicly with harsh invective. To many observers, this lack of cooperation between the Brady Campaign and the NRA is one key reason why the United States lacks a rational and coherent set of federal gun control regulations.

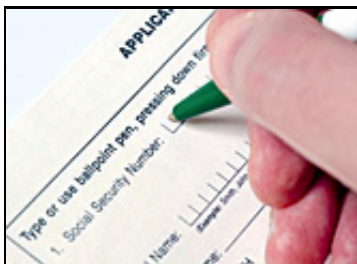


The United States has a huge number of guns—well over 200 million. It also has weak national gun laws compared to the economically developed nations of Western Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Japan. And compared to these countries, U.S. gun violence is very high. The crux of the gun control debate is whether there is a causal link between these two social facts—a large number of weakly regulated firearms and high rates of violent crime, suicide, and accidental firearm-related deaths. Gun control advocates say yes, while gun rights activists say no. Among the most important and contentious issues debated are assault weapons control, background checks, registration, defensive gun use, right-to-carry laws, and the Second Amendment.

### Assault weapons control

Although the most common crime weapon is a handgun, during the 1980s the U.S. public became particularly fearful of assault weapons. Against the strong protests of the NRA, Congress eventually passed a 10-year assault weapons ban as part of the Violent Crime Control and Enforcement Act (1994). To the chagrin of gun control advocates, a Republican-controlled Congress allowed the federal assault weapons to expire in 2004. Legislation to reinstate the ban has been introduced several times in Congress. In the meantime, various states have enacted their own bans on assault weapons.

### Background checks



The Brady Law (1993) bars many types of individuals from buying guns—most importantly, those having a criminal background and minors. Gun control advocates place central importance on the screening of prospective gun buyers. Many gun rights enthusiasts scoff at the law's potential effectiveness and point out that criminals typically don't go to retail dealers to buy their guns. Criminals typically acquire guns via theft, sales in the private market (e.g. at unregulated gun shows, at flea markets, or between private individuals), or "straw purchases" (in which a friend or relative without a criminal record makes the original retail purchase). "Universal" background checks—checks on private party and gun show sales—have been implemented in several states. Gun control advocates have called for similar requirements at the federal level.

### Registration

Gun rights advocates view a national system of gun registration as the worst form of gun control that they can

imagine (aside from the actual confiscation of guns from law-abiding citizens). Gun registration would mean keeping a permanent record of every firearm sale in a central location. Gun control advocates point out that registration is a critical component of the gun violence containment efforts of other economically developed democracies, where it has been found to reduce the supply of guns to criminals.

### **Defensive gun use**

Gun rights advocates argue that the causal arrow between high rates of gun prevalence and high rates of violence might very well run opposite from the direction assumed by gun control advocates. Or, in other words, that rising rates of violence prompt citizens to arm themselves. Gun control advocates observe that there are no reliable data to support this theory.

### **"Shall issue" (right-to-carry) concealed weapons laws**

The belief that defensive gun use is a real and significant deterrent to violent crime led to a revolution during the 1990s in state-level concealed weapons laws—a revolution bemoaned by the advocates of strong gun control. Beginning with the state of Florida in 1987, dozens of states have enacted "shall issue" laws. These allow the average citizen to acquire, with relative ease, a concealed weapons permit for a handgun.

Many states have also adopted "stand your ground" laws that expand the circumstances in which a person can use deadly force if they feel threatened.



### **The Second Amendment**

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." For many individuals involved in the debate over gun control in the United States, the Second Amendment and how they interpret it forms the foundation of their position. Gun rights proponents would have the public, lawmakers, and judges believe that the amendment guarantees the individual the right to own and use arms for protection—protection of one's person, home, or property, as well as protection against a government that might descend from democracy into tyranny. On the other hand, the proponents of gun control would have us believe that the Second Amendment is a collective right that guaranteed states, not individuals, the right to form armed militias for protection in case the democracy of the fledgling nation failed. Both state and federal courts have largely favored the collective right interpretation. However, in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the District's ban on handguns unconstitutional, essentially saying that the federal government (which holds jurisdiction over the District) cannot ban handguns entirely under the Second Amendment. In *McDonald v. Chicago*, the Court ruled that under the Fourteenth Amendment, the Second Amendment protects handgun ownership at the state level in addition to the federal level.

### **Outlook**

Ultimately, the informed citizen must make up his or her own mind on the issue of gun control on the basis of his or her fundamental values and view of human nature. For many, this choice will be manifested in their voting. Politically speaking, several features of American society ensure that the gun debate will continue to be salient, and often heated, in the decade to come. The United States is awash in guns, with 2–3 million new firearms being added to the total each year. Because guns don't wear out quickly, the total number of firearms in the United States will exceed the size of its population within the next few decades. Easy availability of firearms through both legal and illegal means is a fact of life in contemporary American society.

The winner of the continuing battles over gun regulation will be determined, in large part, by the political makeup of Congress and the presidency. History has demonstrated that a conservative president plus one conservative house of Congress will favor the gun rights side. In contrast, a liberal president and a liberal majority in at least one house will favor the Brady Campaign and the gun control side. Any other combination—liberal president/conservative

Congress or conservative president/liberal Congress—will produce a standoff.

## Gregg Lee Carter

### Further Reading

Carter, Gregg Lee. *Guns Control in the United States: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006;  
Carter, Gregg Lee. *The Gun Control Movement*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997; Spitzer, Robert J. *The Politics of Gun Control*. 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2004.

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