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# Five myths about gun control

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by ROBERT J. SPITZER • DEC. 21, 2012

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After the horrific [mass shooting](#) at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, a nation long resistant to gun control seems ready to act — or at least talk about acting. President Obama has said he will make firearm legislation a “central issue” of his second term, and National Rifle Association Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre called for Congress “to appropriate whatever is necessary [to put armed police officers in every school in this nation.](#)” But before America tackles gun control, let’s tackle a few misunderstandings about how dangerous our weapons are, what they’re used for and what the Constitution says about them.

## **1. Gun control is a losing battle for Democrats.**

In his 2004 memoir, Bill Clinton wrote that Democrats lost control of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections because they had passed an assault-weapons ban that year. Many Democrats believe that Al Gore lost the 2000 presidential race because of his embrace of stronger gun laws during the Democratic primaries.

But close study of these and other elections shows otherwise. In the Republican victory of 1994, many incumbent Democrats in traditionally GOP-leaning districts couldn’t hold on to their seats, whatever their position on the Second Amendment. And American Prospect editor [Paul Waldman’s analysis](#) of national elections from 2004 to 2010 found that the NRA had little success electing pro-gun candidates over those not favored by the group. Waldman also concludes that, despite its repeated claims, the NRA did not deliver the presidential race to George W. Bush in 2000.

The lesson is not a new one in American politics: Single issues rarely determine electoral outcomes, and guns are no exception. This year, for example, the open

floodgates of campaign cash on both sides — [more than \\$1 billion](#) for each presidential candidate alone — dwarfed NRA spending.

And witness conservative Democrats, such as [Sens. Mark Warner \(Va.\), Joe Manchin \(W.Va.\)](#) and Bob Casey (Pa.), as well as [Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper](#), who have voiced support for possible new gun laws after Sandy Hook.

## **2. Guns are deadliest as murder weapons.**

Gun murders grab headlines, but more Americans die every year from gun suicides than gun homicides. In 2009, for example, almost 11,500 Americans were killed by someone else with a gun, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but more than 18,000 killed themselves with a firearm.

Some may shrug and say that suicidal individuals without guns would simply turn to another method. This is wrong. Not only do numerous studies link the presence of guns to elevated suicide rates, but suicide by gun is far more lethal than other methods. The “success rate” of gun suicide is about 90 percent, compared with less than 30 percent for poisoning, for example. Firearms also require the least amount of persistence and effort; the ease of pulling a trigger makes a gun more appealing to those who act on impulse. And studies of suicide survivors find that only about one in 10 makes a second attempt.

## **3. America’s schools have become shooting galleries.**

From Columbine to Sandy Hook, few crimes are more heinous than the killing of children. But schools are remarkably safe for kids — safer than their homes or the streets. Out of a school-age population of roughly 50 million, the number of violent school deaths between 1992 and 2010 did not exceed 63 per year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In other words, the odds of a child dying from a violent attack at school are about one in a million.

That statistic is cold comfort to the families of the children slain in Connecticut and elsewhere. But schools continue to be safe places, and since the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, many have implemented [security procedures](#) to foil those contemplating crimes in the classroom. These measures include lockdown drills, metal detectors and security cameras, extra training for faculty and staff, and the presence of police officers — sometimes called “resource officers” — assigned to regular school duty.

#### **4. Gun regulations are incompatible with America's gun heritage.**

When we think of settlers of colonial America and the 19th-century Wild West, we often picture fearless frontiersmen defending hearth and home from predators. But while gun possession is as old as the country, so is gun regulation.

In 1619, the Virginia House of Burgesses passed a law making the transfer of guns to Native Americans punishable by death. Other laws across the colonies criminalized selling or giving firearms to slaves, indentured servants, Catholics, vagrants and those who refused to swear a loyalty oath to revolutionary forces. Guns could be confiscated or kept in central locations for the defense of the community. And, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the state and federal governments conducted several arms censuses. (Imagine what the NRA would say if government officials went door to door today asking people how many guns they owned and whether they were functional.)

On the western frontier in the 19th century, to stave off violence, new towns and cities enacted laws to bar carrying guns. In fact, the typical western town [had stricter gun laws](#) than many 21st-century states. Today, four states have completely eliminated permits for handgun ownership and carrying.

#### **5. The Second Amendment was intended to protect the right of Americans to rise up against a tyrannical government.**

This canard is repeated with disturbing frequency. The Constitution, in Article I, allows armed citizens in militias to “suppress Insurrections,” not cause them. The Constitution defines treason as “levying War” against the government in Article III, and the states can ask the federal government for assistance “against domestic Violence” under Article IV.

Our system provides peaceful means for citizens to air grievances and change policy, from the ballot box to the jury box to the right to peaceably assemble. If violence against an oppressive government were somehow countenanced in the Second Amendment, then [Timothy McVeigh](#) and Lee Harvey Oswald would have been vindicated for their heinous actions. But as constitutional scholar Roscoe Pound noted, a “legal right of the citizen to wage war on the government is something that cannot be admitted” because it would “defeat the whole Bill of Rights” — including the Second Amendment.

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