



Voicing Our Values—To Curtail Gun Violence

This is an addendum to our book, [Voicing Our Values: A Message Guide for Candidates](#). Our purpose is to help lawmakers, candidates and activists understand how to argue in favor of current proposals to curtail gun violence. As we explain [here](#), we have tried to make this resource as easy-to-use as possible by placing model language in boxes throughout. We encourage you to adapt the language to your own voice and personalize it with your own knowledge and experience. Much more comprehensive, detailed or technical talking points are available from advocacy groups listed at the end of this paper.

Our most important advice: (1) Lay out the problem in very simple terms—most Americans have no idea how easy our laws make it for dangerous people to buy handguns and assault weapons; (2) Don't let pro-gun advocates sidetrack the debate into "straw man" arguments, obscure "facts," or a focus on the technical properties of guns—about 90 percent of their arguments are actually designed to change the subject so you need to insist on a debate that is relevant to the legislation at hand; and (3) Generally:

Don't say . . .	Say . . .
Gun control Stricter gun laws You oppose the 2 nd Amendment	Preventing gun violence Stronger gun laws Support for the 2 nd Amendment goes hand-in-hand with keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people

Why . . .

People have negative reactions to "gun control" and "stricter" laws, and they [feel positive about the 2nd Amendment](#). Also, average voters have a [favorable view of the National Rifle Association \(NRA\)](#). You are welcome to criticize the NRA when speaking to the progressive base, but it won't help you persuade swing voters. That's why these talking points don't include anti-NRA language. If the situation requires you to attack the NRA, then condemn "NRA lobbyists" or the "NRA's out-of-touch leaders." Do not attack average NRA members or local NRA leaders; that language doesn't work.

How to introduce your argument

Start with the fundamentals:

Say . . .

The most basic purpose of government is to keep law-abiding citizens safe and secure from crime. But every day, far too many of us are victims of gun violence. Dozens of Americans *will* be murdered, hundreds of others *will* be shot, and nearly one-thousand *will* be robbed or assaulted with a gun—*today*. (If you can, tell a personal story here.)

Why . . .

Don't skip the universally-shared values we are fighting for—safety and security. And then, don't ignore the [fundamental facts](#) that motivate us to fight: there are about 10,000 gun murders, about 100,000 people shot, and about 350,000 Americans robbed or assaulted with firearms—every single year. Let people recognize that every day, wherever we go in America, we are all at risk of gun violence. And then:

Say . . .

It is obvious why so many people are killed or victimized with guns, day after day—we have some of the weakest gun laws in the world. To make us, our families, and our communities safer, we need to change a few of those laws—now.

Why . . .

Don't assume people understand why we need new laws. Link the problem to the solution.

About Background Checks

The basic argument:

Say . . .

It is absurd to allow guns to be sold to felons or the dangerously mentally ill. That's why current law requires that no gun can be sold by a *licensed gun dealer* without a criminal background check. But millions of guns are sold by *unlicensed* sellers at gun shows and through Internet sites with no background check. We need to strengthen current law to cover all gun sales. The few minutes it takes to complete a computerized check will certainly save lives. How can we *not* do that?

Why . . .

Since 1968, federal law has banned the possession of firearms by convicted felons, domestic abusers, and people who are dangerously mentally ill. The Brady law, enacted in 1993, requires a criminal background check before any licensed dealer can sell any firearm. (Some states require more.) A National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) for gun purchases,

operated by the FBI, began operation in 1998. The White House says that because private sales are exempted, “as many as 40 percent of all gun purchases are conducted without a background check.” That is true but it’s more effective (and more accurate) to say “millions.” Requiring a background check for every gun sale is simply common sense, and that’s why [over 90 percent of Americans support it](#).

Pro-gun argument: “Criminals will get guns anyway.”

Say . . .

The federal background check law has blocked more than [1.5 million illegal gun sales](#) over the past 14 years. It works. The problem is that the law doesn’t apply to private sales, so felons can avoid a background check and get any kind of gun, no questions asked. Both the [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#) and the national [Fraternal Order of Police](#) have endorsed mandatory, universal background checks because they know it will save lives. It’s time to close the private sales loophole.

Why . . .

Nobody suggests this law will stop all criminals. To be successful, it doesn’t have to. No law stops all crime! It’s simply common sense to block as many illegal sales as possible. Many conservatives and conservative groups, including former [Secretary of State Colin Powell](#), the [Southern Baptist Convention](#), and the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), support universal background checks because it will save lives.

Pro-gun argument: “I shouldn’t have to get a background check to give a rifle to my son or grandson.”

Say . . .

[The legislation](#) contains exceptions for transfers between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings, and for inheritances.

Pro-gun argument: “Background checks will give the federal government the data to create a gun registration list, and that’s what they will do.”

Say . . .

There is nothing in the background check proposal that creates a registry. In fact, existing law forbids the federal government from establishing a gun registration list. Specifically, every time the background check system is used and the gun purchase is approved, the government is required to destroy all records about the purchaser.

Pro-gun argument: “Even if not in this current legislation, background checks will lead to gun registration and confiscation later on.”

Say . . .

I support the 2nd Amendment and would fight against any future overreaching legislation. But it’s not realistic to oppose something on the grounds that it might someday lead to something else. The fact is, even [gun owners overwhelmingly favor](#) requiring a criminal background check of anyone purchasing a gun. What It will lead to is fewer firearm deaths.

Pro-gun argument: “The proposed background check would violate the 2nd Amendment.”

Say . . .

I support the 2nd Amendment. The fact is, we’ve had a federal background check for nearly 20 years and state background checks long before that. Courts uniformly rule they are constitutional. The NRA itself has conceded the point by repeatedly endorsing a variety of background check proposals. The constitutional question is settled.

Why . . .

[In 1999, the National Rifle Association endorsed](#) background checks for all firearm sales at all gun shows. The NRA previously endorsed background checks for all firearm sales through all licensed dealers in [1988, 1989, and 1993](#). Background checks can’t be okay a few years ago and then unconstitutional today. If a pro-gun activist argues that the 2008 *Heller* Supreme Court ruling changes things, see “How to rebut common pro-gun arguments” below.

About Military-Style Assault Weapons

The basic argument:

Say . . .

We all know some weapons are too dangerous for civilian use. That’s why, [for nearly 80 years, federal law has banned](#) machineguns, sawed-off shotguns, silencers, very high-caliber firearms, grenades and bombs. Military-style assault weapons—like the one used to murder defenseless children in Newtown—are versions of military weapons that are designed for rapid fire. They are weapons of war, and like machineguns, too dangerous for civilian use. Our communities will be safer if we stop their manufacture and sale.

Why . . .

It's important to point out that we have been banning particularly dangerous guns for years. It is also okay to be emotional about assault weapons. Just consider the three most [prominent school massacres](#): Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut—20 children and 6 faculty murdered with a semiautomatic copy of the U.S. military's M-16 rifle; Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado—13 killed and 23 wounded with four guns, including 55 rounds fired from a TEC-9 semiautomatic assault pistol; Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California—5 small children killed and 30 wounded with a semiautomatic copy of the Soviet military's AK-47 rifle. What makes these guns different is they were originally designed as machineguns, so they have features—like large-capacity magazines, pistol grips and barrel shrouds—that enable the shooter to shoot a lot of bullets very rapidly and still keep control of the gun. In the hands of someone with practice, an assault weapon can fire almost as fast as a machinegun. You can see this on videos all over YouTube, [here for example](#). But even without much practice, any fool can fire two rounds per second, emptying a 30 round magazine in 15 seconds or less.

Pro-gun argument: "There is no proof the 1994-2004 ban prevented crimes."

Say . . .

In the ten years that the federal ban on assault weapons was in effect, the percentage of [assault weapons traced to crime fell by 66 percent](#). The ban worked.

Why . . .

Gun tracing statistics provide the best measure because they cover all types of crime and accurately identify the guns. Pro-gun advocates will cite statistics about rifle murders (see below) or "mass casualty shootings" (where the data are easy to manipulate).

Pro-gun argument: "There are relatively few murders committed with rifles each year."

Say . . .

We have a responsibility to prevent as many killings as possible. And we cannot limit the debate to rifles when there are also semiautomatic assault pistols, like the one that fired 55 rounds in the Columbine school massacre. Also, we're not just talking about murders, we're concerned about all gun crimes. The fact is, some weapons—like machineguns, sawed-off shotguns, and silencers—have been banned for years because they are too dangerous to sell to civilians. Military-style assault weapons are also just too dangerous.

Pro-gun argument: "Some people use an AR-15 to shoot coyotes and varmints."

Say . . .

Nobody needs a military-style assault weapon for hunting. Rapid fire is contrary to the whole point of the sport. Now is the time to draw the line between sporting guns and weapons of war.

Pro-gun argument: "The guns that would be banned by this legislation are not any different from sporting pistols and rifles, they're all just semiautomatics."

Say . . .

I fully understand that a semiautomatic requires a pull of the trigger for each shot and I'm not suggesting we ban all semiautomatic firearms. But the gun used in Newtown is a semiautomatic version of the U.S. Army's M-16 rifle. This weapon is *designed* so it can be fired rapidly from the shoulder or hip; it is *designed* to remain stable during rapid fire; it is *designed* to accept very large capacity magazines. With this weapon, any lunatic can fire 30 rounds in 15 seconds and retain control of the gun.

Pro-gun argument: "The difference between assault weapons and sporting guns is merely cosmetic."

Say . . .

Nothing on a gun is cosmetic except the color. Every part has a purpose. The features of an assault weapon that look different from a sporting gun were carefully designed to maximize lethality on the battlefield. Assault weapons look different because they are different.

Why . . .

In this argument, the word "cosmetic" is gun industry message framing. Reject that term.

Pro-gun argument: "These guns you're banning aren't 'assault rifles' because that term refers to weapons that can shoot full-auto."

Say . . .

It was the gun industry that started calling these semiautomatics "assault rifles" and "assault weapons." They used that language to sell their guns.

Why . . .

It is astonishing how often pro-gun advocates make this argument. They are wrong, but in fairness, probably don't know it. You can look at the [Gun Digest Buyer's Guide to Assault Weapons here](#). (Search inside to page 11.) Gun Digest is an authoritative pro-gun publication. But more important, this argument attempts to sidetrack the debate to an irrelevant point. It does not matter if they don't like the term "assault weapons," what matters is that semiautomatic versions of military weapons are being sold to civilians. In the legislation, these guns are described and listed—and there is also a list of thousands of sporting guns that are explicitly not affected by the ban. Stick to the subject: why should we be selling these weapons of war?

Pro-gun argument: "An assault weapons ban violates the 2nd Amendment."

Say . . .

The federal assault weapons ban was in effect for 10 years. During that time the gun industry lost every court challenge against it. Several states, including California, have banned assault weapons for decades. Those laws are uniformly upheld in court. This law is proven to be constitutional.

Why . . .

Assault weapon bans have been upheld for decades. If a pro-gun activist argues that the 2008 *Heller* Supreme Court ruling changes things, see "How to rebut common pro-gun arguments" below.

About High-Capacity Ammunition Magazines

The basic argument:

Say . . .

We all know some gun accessories are too dangerous for civilian use. Silencers, for example, have been [banned for nearly 80 years](#). High-capacity ammunition magazines are designed to shoot a lot of people, quickly. There is no hunting or sporting purpose for these magazines and they were banned between 1994 and 2004. Just like silencers, high-capacity magazines are simply too dangerous for sale to civilians.

Why . . .

Like assault weapons, it's important to show that we have been banning particularly dangerous gun accessories for years. And [high-capacity magazines are very common in mass shootings](#). The shooter in the Newtown, Connecticut massacre used at least three 30-round magazines. The shooter in the Tucson, Arizona massacre—in about 15 seconds—fired 31 shots from one magazine, hitting 19 people, including Rep. Gabby Giffords, and killing six, including a 9-year-old girl and a federal judge. The shooter in the Aurora, Colorado movie theater had a 100-round magazine.

Pro-gun argument: "A magazine ban wouldn't save any lives."

Say . . .

The Tucson massacre is a good example. The shooter had an ammunition magazine with 31 bullets. [He was tackled](#) after he shot out his clip and was trying to reload. If the magazine had only 10 rounds, a lot of people would have been saved.

How to rebut common pro-gun arguments

The standard pro-gun tactic when arguing against gun laws is to change the subject. Whatever else you say, bring the debate back to the specific legislation on the table.

Pro-gun argument: “The Second Amendment forbids the proposed gun law.”

Say . . .

I support the 2nd Amendment. Hunting and shooting are part of our national heritage. But the Supreme Court ruled, just five years ago, that reasonable gun laws are constitutional. Justice Scalia’s majority opinion explicitly upheld the current ban on possession of guns by felons and there is no *constitutional distinction* between having that ban and enforcing it with a background check. He also affirmed the ban on sawed-off shotguns and there is no *constitutional distinction* between that ban and one on semiautomatic assault weapons or large-capacity magazines. Legally, there is no question that modest gun laws like these do not violate the 2nd Amendment.

Why . . .

The 2008 Supreme Court opinion in [District of Columbia v. Heller](#) guarantees Americans the right to have a handgun in the home for self-protection. But at the same time, Justice Scalia went out of his way to add that “nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.” And he explicitly reaffirmed the Supreme Court’s 1939 [U.S. v. Miller](#) opinion that upheld a law banning sawed-off shotguns (the same law bans machineguns, silencers and grenades) and also agreed that Congress has the power to prohibit “dangerous and unusual weapons.”

Pro-gun argument: “The assault weapon law wouldn’t have stopped Newtown” or other claims that one particular law wouldn’t have prevented one particular crime.

Say . . .

But we don’t make *any* laws that way. The law against murder doesn’t stop all murders; we don’t expect it to. The law that lowered the blood alcohol level for driving didn’t stop all drunk driving; we didn’t expect it to. The question is not whether this law would have certainly stopped any particular crime, it is whether our communities would be safer with this law.

Pro-gun argument: “This proposed law puts us on a slippery slope that will lead to worse laws down the road.”

Say . . .

You could make that argument against *any* law. Why not claim we shouldn’t have driver’s licenses because it might lead to bicycling licenses, walking licenses, and the confiscation of cars? All you’re doing is suggesting you can’t find a good argument against the actual proposal. Can we get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Pro-gun argument: “The gun law in Switzerland/Israel/elsewhere proves...”

Say . . .

There is no country on earth that is even remotely similar to the U.S. on guns. We have five percent of the world’s population and [we own nearly half of the world’s civilian guns](#). Our [gun murder rate is 20 times higher](#) than other developed nations. All you’re doing here is suggesting you won’t address *our* nation’s problem. Can we get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Why . . .

The claim that strong gun laws in [Australia and Britain](#) failed to reduce gun crime is simply false. The claim that military weapons are widely available in [Switzerland and Israel](#) is also false—those nations have strong gun restrictions. Talking about other countries is a tactic to sidetrack the debate. None of these countries have our problem and none of their laws are reasonably similar to the legislation being debated here. Don’t let the debate go down a rabbit hole; stick to the problem in this country and the proposed solutions here.

Pro-gun argument: “That gun law will inhibit the right to self-defense.”

Say . . .

I support the right to self-defense and nothing in this legislation would prevent law-abiding citizens from defending themselves with a gun. Without assault weapons, Americans will still have thousands of guns to choose from. Can we get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Pro-gun argument: “We should provide armed guards/do something about mental health/make parents take responsibility/ban violent video games instead.”

Say . . .

We should make our communities safer. If you’ve got a good proposal, that’s fine. But this is not an either-or debate; one policy does not exclude another. Can we get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Why . . .

You can scoff about arming teachers later. Don’t let them sidetrack the debate!

Pro-gun argument: “There are already lots of gun laws on the books, so let’s enforce the law.”

Say . . .

I agree that current laws should be enforced to make our communities safer. We have a law that says felons are prohibited from buying guns. The only way to enforce that law is to require a criminal background check before every gun sale. In addition, we can both enforce existing law and strengthen it, which is what we need to do. This is not an either-or debate. Can we get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Pro-gun argument: “The answer to gun violence is to have more guns. An armed society is a polite society.”

Say . . .

The states with the highest gun ownership rates have more gun violence—by far! But more important, this legislation will not prevent law-abiding Americans from buying or owning guns. The point is irrelevant. Let’s get back to the real debate.

Why . . .

It is clearly true that having more guns causes more gun murders and more gun deaths (the latter includes suicides and accidents); see [Myth #2 here](#). You can also say the [Harvard School of Public Health](#) shows that more guns cause more murders. But again, this is an attempt to move the debate in an irrelevant direction. Don’t let it go there.

Pro-gun argument: “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”

Say . . .

It just doesn't work. Columbine High School had an armed deputy sheriff. Virginia Tech had an entire police force, including a SWAT team. At the Tucson shooting, not only was there an armed civilian who failed to stop the shooter, but he almost shot one of the brave unarmed people who tackled and disarmed the shooter. The Fort Hood massacre happened at a military base filled with soldiers. President Reagan and his press secretary Jim Brady were surrounded by armed police and Secret Service, and yet both were shot. Let's get back to the real debate.

Why . . .

You could also say that in all the mass shootings over the past 30 years, [not one of them was stopped by a civilian with a gun](#). But again, the important thing is to return the debate to the actual legislation. Nothing in that legislation prevents any “good guy” from getting a gun.

Pro-gun argument: “I'm right about this—look it up on Wikipedia.”

Say . . .

The gun lobby has made it a project to alter almost every Wikipedia page that mentions guns or gun laws. Usually Wikipedia is a great resource, but crowd-sourcing breaks down when it's under constant attack.

Pro-gun argument: “Gun laws are fascist.”

Say . . .

Actually Hitler loosened restrictions on guns. But you know, talking about Hitler or fascism makes it sound like you can't make a relevant argument. Let's get back to the issue—why do you think we should be selling these guns and magazines to any adult, no questions asked?

Why . . .

You can read a debunking of the [Hitler myth here](#). There is also a phony Hitler quote that the pro-gun advocates often use. It's false, but more important, totally irrelevant.

Sources for more detailed talking points

More information from the experts:

Brady Campaign on [background checks](#), on [semiautomatic assault weapons](#), and on [high-capacity ammunition magazines](#).

Mayors Against Illegal Guns on a [variety of gun measures](#) and “[Demand a Plan](#).”

Center for American Progress on “[Changing the Conversation: Preventing Violence, Not Gun Control](#).”

Message Matters [one-pagers on guns](#).

For an excellent book by **Dennis Henigan** about how to debate the NRA, read [Lethal Logic: Exploding the Myths that Paralyze American Gun Policy](#).



Voicing Our Values—To Curtail Gun Violence is online at http://www.progressivemajorityaction.org/gun_messaging