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Advocacy

Reframing the Gun Debate

To enact policies that reduce gun violence in the United States, advocates are flipping the script to make the conversation about saving lives rather than taking away Americans’ guns.

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By **Erika Soto Lamb** | May 29, 2018

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These questions drive gun safety advocates across the United States. As the former and founding head of communications at **Everytown for Gun Safety** and **Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America**, which together form the largest gun



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violence prevention organization in the country, I know that searching for answers is at the heart of everything gun safety advocates do.

Political leaders' failure to act after the 2012 tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut—even as the country reeled from the horror of the murder of 20 first graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School—was a considerable blow.

Since then, there have been too many tragedies to name—from the mass shootings that many can recite by the city where they occurred, to the hate-fueled murders that have rightfully called on us to learn the names of singular Black or Trans victims, to the sadly routine gun violence that **kills 96 Americans** and injures hundreds more every day.

However, while the questions above still stand, advocates have found some answers to help shift the dialogue on guns in America today. To enact policies that reduce gun violence, we are changing the issue “frame” from one centered on taking guns away from people, to one centered on saving people’s lives.

Who controls the narrative?

It used to be that when candidates were asked about guns on the campaign trail, even Democrats touted their hunting bona fides. Doing something about “gun control” was considered almost impossible; it was truly the third rail of politics that forced Democrats to assure the electorate that absolutely nothing was going to threaten easy access to guns for all.

That’s because for a generation, the National Rifle Association’s (NRA) message frame prevailed. What had once been an organization focused on hunting, firearm training, and conservation **morphed into a lobby for gun manufacturers** that puts profit ahead of public safety. With politicians bought and paid for, the gun lobby controlled the narrative. It blocked

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common-sense laws like background checks for all gun sales and kept government dollars from flowing to researchers working to understand the problem. The lobby used fear to convince many Americans that they are only safe when armed and advanced its own agenda to pass lax gun laws that created a guns-for-anyone-anywhere culture.

The NRA blames America’s gun violence problem on **false narratives that mental health**, violent movies and video games are to blame, completely ignoring the facts that Americans do not suffer from mental illness at disproportionate rates compared to other developed countries, and American movies and video games are popular around the world. The corporate gun lobby very effectively cast gun control advocates as bogeymen coming to take away all the guns. Interest groups convinced many Americans that if they gave an inch, anti-gun violence advocates would take the full mile and repeal the Second Amendment.

Moving the needle

One measure of change in the gun debate is the size of the “**intensity gap**”—between the small-but-loud minority of Americans opposed to gun reform, and the large-but-quiet majority of Americans who don’t want gun violence to affect their lives but don’t vote on the issue. This gap **was widely cited** as the reason significant federal gun reform legislation did not pass in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting, despite independent polls at the time showing that **more than 90 percent** of Americans supported background check requirements for all gun sales. Politicians proved, once again, that they were beholden to corporations that profit from gun sales and other moneyed interests that ensure their job protection.

But this gap is closing. Just a few years ago, the only gun-related grassroots movement was among the small subset of American gun owners for whom unfettered gun rights is their number one, number two, and number three voting issue. Only this group would consistently show up to town halls and tie up representatives’ phone lines whenever the specter of gun reform entered the national discussion. Today, there is a counterweight: the grassroots army of mothers, gun violence survivors, young people, veterans, and people of every political persuasion and walk of life who understand the gun homicide rate in America is more than **25 times higher than other developed countries** and who believe people have the right to live their lives free of the threat of gun violence. Today, they are the ones storming statehouses,

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tying up phone lines, and getting out the vote to demand that political leaders take action.

The starting point in public dialogue has shifted from “thoughts and prayers” to demands for immediate action. The young people whose friends and classmates were murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, did not miss a beat in “**calling BS**” on politicians who have failed to act. What’s more, they immediately understood and **shared the stage with Chicago youth activists**, communicating that the crisis was not just about what happened in their school, but part of a systemic problem affecting Americans—particularly young Black Americans—every day.

The more than one million people who **participated in the March for Our Lives event** and in the national school walkouts over the last few months are proof that the tide has turned. And while Washington remains gridlocked by partisan politics, legislators are passing stronger gun laws **in statehouses across the country**—and have blocked hundreds of bills backed by the NRA to **weaken standards for who can have a gun** and where they can carry it.

That’s not to mention the growing list of **corporations making policy changes** to address gun violence—including brands like **Dick’s Sporting Goods** and **Kroger**, and **companies from diverse sectors** that previously sat on the sidelines like **Delta Airlines**, **Bank of America**, **Citigroup**, and **BlackRock**. The momentum has undoubtedly shifted in the direction of change.

Finally, today candidates at all levels of government and from both parties are not only saying they will vote for common-sense measures like background checks and “**red flag**” **laws** meant to keep guns out of dangerous hands, but also using saving lives from gun violence as a signature issue and vying to win the endorsement of gun safety groups.

So how did this happen?

These successes could not have happened without a change in narrative and issue framing. With a new focus on saving lives from gun violence, **supported by research conducted by Everytown for Gun Safety** proving that gun violence is a uniquely American epidemic, gun

safety advocates have been able to engage voices to carry forward the message to new audiences.

To push back on the gun lobby narrative that liberals were “coming to take our guns away,” in 2012 our organization commissioned well-known GOP political consultant and pollster Frank Luntz. Luntz surveyed Republicans and NRA members on our proposals to pass laws to close background check loopholes and other measures. In the process, we found that **strong majorities of Republicans, gun owners, and NRA members** supported gun safety. But since poll numbers alone seldom move people, we also found and amplified the voices of real people—including law enforcement, veterans, mayors, and faith leaders—who exemplified the fact that gun safety crosses party lines. We created campaigns centered on these compelling messengers and shared their common message across a variety of platforms: We’re not talking about guns, first and foremost, we’re talking about saving lives.

We also worked with people directly affected by gun violence to appeal to Congress. One such messenger was **Elvin Daniel**, a Republican gun owner and NRA member whose sister Zina was murdered by her estranged husband after he bought a gun online without a background check. When Daniel went to Washington to ask Congress to pass background checks on all gun sales, members of Congress listened in a way they never had before.

Meanwhile, countless members of the **Everytown Survivor Network**—a community of support for Americans affected by gun violence that empowers them to become advocates and leaders—turned their mourning into a movement by telling their stories. And, inspired by what Mothers Against Drunk Driving accomplished in saving lives from another cultural problem that seemed unchangeable at the time, groups of American mothers began to engage with the issue in a way they never had before. Moms Demand Action has already given it’s ‘seal of approval’ to a new generation of candidates and aims to fuel massive voter turnout.

When the message meets the moment

On the near horizon, a new bloc of **young voters and angry parents is solidifying**, carrying forward the momentum of the March for Our Lives with plans to make guns a deciding issue in the 2018 and 2020 elections. For many years, gun safety advocates have said, “Change gun

laws or change Congress”—and it appears it’s time for the latter.

There’s still much more to do, but today the starting point is further down the field. This is a credit to the reframed message, and the many Americans who joined the movement to save lives and carry that message forward every day—and must continue to do so.



Erika Soto Lamb ([@erikasotolamb](#)) is the former and founding chief communications officer of [Everytown for Gun Safety](#), which includes Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and Mayors Against Illegal Guns. She currently serves as the national director of strategic communications for [Democrats for Education Reform](#).

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BY Jerry Poje

ON [June 1, 2018 01:23 PM](#)

Wonderful wisdom on ways to better communicate the need for commonsense policy reforms. Every American child inherits our constitutional right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Just as structures are rebuilt to withstand manifest decrepitude and increasingly extreme storms, we have a unique opportunity to strengthen our community’s foundation of gun violence prevention.

Hooray for the common-sense organizing and diligence of the Parkland High School students, parents and friends for constructing better policies in Florida.

They’ve inspired people young and old to reimagine a new conversational landscape where saving lives is an honorable common pursuit.

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