

GUEST ESSAY

Republicans Are Breaking With the N.R.A., and It's Because of Us

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By Dave Cullen

Mr. Cullen is the author of "Columbine" and "Parkland."

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You were right to feel hopeless. Gun safety was a lost cause. The National Rifle Association was invincible, and the Republican Party was never going to defy it. The failure to alter that reality after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School — 10 years ago on Wednesday — choked off our last faint wisp of hope.

If losing those 6- and 7-year-olds couldn't drive that change, nothing would.

But we had it wrong. Gun safety wasn't buried in Newtown, Conn. The modern safety movement was born that day.

Sandy Hook unleashed a slow-motion tsunami of determination that culminated this June in the first significant act of Congress on gun safety in nearly three decades. Fifteen Republican senators broke with the N.R.A. — unthinkable in the old political landscape.

Sandy Hook galvanized two women. The day after the shooting, a suburban mother, Shannon Watts, started Moms Demand Action, which morphed into Everytown for Gun Safety after merging with another group. Three weeks after the massacre, the former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords created the forerunner to her gun safety organization, Giffords.

The groups reinvented the feeble "gun control" movement as "gun safety." The failed gun controllers were a ragtag band of disorganized, underfunded Washington think tanks that never connected with voters or found a compelling message. Who wants to be controlled?

Everytown and Giffords grew into political powerhouses. Giffords cultivated strong candidates for state and local offices and reached out to gun owners, identifying them as allies rather than antagonists. Everytown raised a staggering activist army: It says it has around 10 million supporters — almost double the N.R.A.'s nearly five million dues-paying members. Both safety organizations are run by data-driven professionals who employ polling, focus groups and election post-mortems to help candidates test and hone effective messages.

New leaders, new strategies, new coalitions, new organizing principle. And they have been winning deep in gun country. President Biden ran on what was likely the most aggressive gun safety platform embraced by a major party presidential nominee in history — and flipped Georgia and Arizona.

The safety movement was just reaching critical mass in early 2018 when the Parkland kids rose up. Victims refusing victimhood, they drew 1.4 million to 2.2 million demonstrators across the country to the March for Our Lives — one of the largest protests in American history. The vital missing element was restored: hope. Then they converted hope into action that fall by helping flip the House from Republican to Democratic control, finally demonstrating that gun safety was no longer politically toxic; it could help candidates win.

Until the Parkland uprising, I was a doubter, too. I had covered the Columbine shooting as a reporter and wrote a book about it. Children kept being shot. But two decades later, I spent nearly a year with the Parkland kids when I was researching another book, and I watched them team with Giffords and Everytown, supercharging their efforts.

The N.R.A. is not vanquished, but it is walking wounded. The primary battleground over gun legislation has been the statehouses, where Parkland set off a startling reversal. After decades of getting trounced by the N.R.A., activists saw 67 gun safety laws passed at the state level in 2019, compared with nine pro-gun laws. This year, 45 new gun safety laws have been adopted in states, while 95 percent of gun-lobby-linked bills have been blocked, according to an Everytown report.

Our power must be real now, because Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, warned his conference it was. Before the vote for the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act this June, Mr. McConnell told his conference the game had changed. In a closed-door session, his team presented stunning internal polling of gun-owning households. He summarized it for reporters: "Support for the provisions of the framework is off the charts, overwhelming."

And with that, the architect of the gun safety blockade in Congress blew a hole in it. He needed to peel off 10 of his senators, and he got 15. The law strengthens background checks, especially for people under age 21 and provides funding to carry out red flag laws and for mental health, school safety and violence interrupter programs.

That was just a start. Our anger, trained on Congress, can propel a string of initiatives to finally bring America's shameful mass-shooting era nearer to a close.

For the first time in decades, Republicans in Congress are taking our demands seriously. They are finally less afraid of the N.R.A. than they are of us.

This spring, before an act of Congress seemed possible, Angela Kuefler, a key pollster for Everytown and Giffords, explained to me why a breakthrough was on its way. "There has been a shift in the emotion of Americans from sadness after mass shootings to rage," she explained. "People are increasingly mad in these moments, and that anger is activating." Sadness is demoralizing and demotivating, she said.

Her polling picked up an even more decisive change just recently. "We've broadened out the villain," she said. For decades, Americans saw the N.R.A. as the impediment to gun legislation. But rage is refocusing on members of Congress, increasingly seen as the N.R.A.'s collaborators: "politicians who actually fail to do anything again and again," she said, "and have failed to stand up to the N.R.A. And that's what people actually want — are politicians with a backbone."

It's why Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa — an N.R.A. darling who ran for office by firing a handgun in a major ad campaign — broke with the organization leading up to the June vote. She said her phone lines were swamped, with callers six to one in favor of the gun safety bill, urgently repeating: "Please do something."

Senator Todd Young, Republican of Indiana, reported calls 10 to one in favor. Senator Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia did not endorse the initial compromise, but then she met with Republican constituents. "Do something," they also demanded. She voted yes.

Two Republicans up for re-election this year voted yes: Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Mr. Young. Both won — Mr. Young by more than 20 percentage points.

At the same time, polling analysis released recently by Everytown on the key battlegrounds of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Colorado demonstrates that candidates were punished for being too soft on gun safety. In Pennsylvania, John Fetterman hammered Mehmet Oz relentlessly for weakness on gun safety and won that Senate seat by five percentage points.

Progress will be paused. I don't see the new Republican-controlled House drafting gun laws, but two years is a blip in this generational struggle. Voters are fired up now. They can punish a do-nothing Congress in 2024.

The solution that will reverse this blight is a comprehensive array of actions. Everytown, which tracks progress in every state, calls for 38 separate initiatives. Everytown and Giffords prioritize six foundational measures: comprehensive background checks; widespread red flag laws that keep guns from domestic abusers, the mentally ill and others; secure storage laws to keep guns out of the hands of children; requiring concealed carry permits; the repeal of "Stand Your Ground" laws; and, most important, more funding for violence interrupter programs, since these have proved wildly effective at de-escalating urban cycles of violence, which lead to most of the homicides in this country.

There are so many things we can do. We have the means. We have the hope. We have the resolve.

Dave Cullen is the author of "Columbine," "Parkland" and a forthcoming book on gay soldiers.

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