

## Republican 2024 Hopefuls Embrace Gun Politics at N.R.A. Meeting

The current and potential 2024 presidential candidates showed strong support for gun owners' rights — a core issue for the party's base, but one that can be a tougher sell in a general election.



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They cited Scripture and issued calls for prayer. They applauded law enforcement and demanded tighter security in schools. They lamented the nation's mental health crisis and offered tough talk about the death penalty.

But as the most prominent current and potential Republican presidential candidates spoke before the annual gathering of the National Rifle Association, most virulently rejected the idea that more gun restrictions could curb bloodshed, even as two American cities are still mourning the latest massacres in the nation's gun violence epidemic.

"This is not a gun problem," insisted former President Donald J. Trump in a dark and meandering speech on Friday afternoon. "The only way to stop these wicked acts is to ensure that any sicko who would shoot up a school knows that within seconds, not minutes, they will face certain death." He also nodded to the party's focus on crime, saying that the issue is not too many guns, but "too many thugs, hoodlums and savage criminals on our street."

Mike Pence, Mr. Trump's vice president, who faced boos as he took the stage, also toed the line.

"Stop trampling on the God-given rights of the American people every time tragedy happens," Mr. Pence said, directing his comments at "gun control extremists."

And to warm applause, Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota signed an executive order onstage "to protect the God-given right to keep and bear arms from being infringed upon by financial institutions."

In many ways, the gathering was part of a pattern — a devastating mass shooting, followed by Republican displays of fealty to a group that rejects even many modest efforts to curb gun violence — that underscores a central and deepening tension in the broader American culture wars.

In 2018, prominent Republicans affirmed their strong support for gun owners' rights at the N.R.A. meeting three months after a gunman had murdered 17 people in Parkland, Fla. In 2022, they descended on the N.R.A.'s event a few days after a gunman had killed 21 in Uvalde, Texas. And on Friday, they spoke at the N.R.A.'s convention in Indianapolis, even as Nashville and Louisville, Ky., are still grappling with the aftermath of recent mass shootings.

Despite a relentless drumbeat of gun violence that has outraged the public, galvanized a youth movement and spurred Democrats and some Republicans to action, conservative activists and organizations like the N.R.A. still often demand unwavering and effectively unlimited allegiance to the rights of gun owners, complicating any effort by candidates to meet the alarmed mood of the nation without alienating the base.

On Friday, some of the current and would-be candidates did not even attempt to navigate a balancing act.

"I've resisted calls to take up gun control even when such a stand is superficially unpopular," said Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, who recently signed a bill allowing Florida residents to carry concealed guns without a permit. He spoke briefly by video, as did Nikki Haley, a former ambassador to the United Nations; Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina; and Mike Pompeo, a former secretary of state, who said Friday that he was not running for president.

"I understand that it is precisely at those moments when a right is unpopular that it needs true champions," Mr. DeSantis said.

Mr. Trump, for his part, focused only briefly on last month's shooting at a Nashville school during a lengthy address that, though well received, also saw attendees leaving in noticeable numbers about 40 minutes in. He highlighted a number of proposals related to the topic at hand, such as encouraging teachers to pursue concealed-carry firearm training, or a measure that would allow concealed-carry reciprocity across states.

But the former president, who was recently indicted, also lashed the left in vicious terms, complained about his myriad legal troubles, touted his poll numbers by flashing them on screens, talked about taking over "management" of Washington D.C., and mocked some of his political rivals. In particular, he seemed to delight in the jeering that Mr. Pence, a former governor here, had received as he took the stage earlier, a reminder of the now-tense relationship between the two men after Mr. Pence refused to try to overturn the 2020 election.

Mr. Pence, in his speech, laid out a range of proposals including funding for armed school resource officers and a federal death penalty statute that would “ensure that those who engage in mass shootings face execution in months, not years.”

The event also drew other announced and possible candidates, including former Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas; Vivek Ramaswamy, an entrepreneur, author and “anti-woke” activist who received an energetic reception as he detailed proposals like one to abolish the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and Gov. Chris Sununu of New Hampshire, who is viewed as more moderate on many issues.

The appearances — both virtual and in person — of some of the most talked-about presidential candidates were expected, said Robert Blizzard, a Republican pollster. “In states like Iowa and New Hampshire, which are really the only states that matter on the calendar for the time being, most Republican primary voters are gun owners and strong supporters of the N.R.A.,” he said.

The N.R.A. meeting was on the books well before the most recent shootings, though the violence did not appear to prompt high-profile invitees to skip the event, in contrast to last year’s gathering, when some Republicans took a pass after the mass shooting in Uvalde.

Some in the nascent 2024 field were also expected in Nashville this weekend for a Republican donor retreat — a choice of venue that has left some in the grieving city on edge.

The issue of guns, which inspires great zeal among many Republican primary voters, gets far more complex in general elections.

Voters rarely cite guns as their most important issue in general elections. But public sentiment is clear: A recent Morning Consult poll found that 67 percent of voters supported stricter gun control laws, including nearly half of Republicans surveyed. And Democrats have used Republican inaction on the issue as part of their broader argument that the G.O.P. is outside the American mainstream, an effective message in last year’s midterm elections.

“One of the challenges that Republicans face in suburban areas across the country is they are being viewed, in light of Trump, in light of abortion, and to some extent on guns,” Mr. Blizzard said, “as being a little bit too extreme on their positions.”

He stressed that the gun issue had not been as politically potent as strong feelings about Mr. Trump or abortion rights, and that the defense of Second Amendment rights “is part of the Republican Party’s DNA.”

The political impact of mass shootings has not been lost on Republican leaders, however. Senator Mitch McConnell, the minority leader, said as much last year as the Senate approved bipartisan legislation intended to curb gun violence. Mr. McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said he hoped “it will be viewed favorably by voters in the suburbs we need.”

And John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety, said in an interview that the approval of the N.R.A. — an organization that faced significant internal challenges in recent years — has “turned toxic, and certainly turned toxic when it comes to a general election and you’re trying to appeal to independents and swing voters.”

In a briefing with the news media on Thursday organized by the Democratic National Committee, Senator Christopher Murphy of Connecticut, a Democrat who has been heavily involved in efforts to combat gun violence, said that Republicans were courting electoral disaster with their approach to guns.

“As the Republican Party continues to give the middle finger to kids,” he said, “they are just asking for an electoral tidal wave.”

On Friday, Wayne LaPierre, the longtime N.R.A. leader, offered his own political analysis.

“Gun-hating politicians should never go to bed unafraid of what this association and all of our millions of members can do to their political careers,” he declared, to cheers in the hall.