

Senate Passes Gun Safety Bill, Breaking Decades-Long Partisan Gridlock

The Senate cleared a decades-long partisan impasse over how to address gun violence on Thursday night, passing a modest set of gun safety measures that would enhance background checks for younger buyers and fund new mental health programs.

The bill passed by a vote of 65 to 33, garnering support from the entire Democratic caucus and 15 Republicans, on the same day the [Supreme Court expanded the scope of gun rights](#) in a landmark ruling.

“This is the sweet spot ... making America safer, especially for kids in school, without making our country one bit less free,” Senator Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky and the minority leader, said Thursday. “This is a common-sense package. Its provisions are very, very popular. It contains zero, zero new restrictions, zero new waiting periods, zero mandates and zero bans of any kind for law-abiding gun owners.”

Along with McConnell, the other 14 Republicans that voted for the bill were Sens. Roy Blunt of Missouri, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, Susan Collins of Maine, John Cornyn of Texas, Joni Ernst of Iowa, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Lisa Murkowski of

Alaska, Rob Portman of Ohio, Mitt Romney of Utah, Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Patrick Toomey of Pennsylvania and Todd Young of Indiana.

It was all but inevitable the bill would pass after 10 Republican Senators vowed to back the original framework last week. But that didn't stop others from attempting to delay the vote. Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky proposed nine amendments to the bill on Thursday, arguing that the framework would not do enough to protect the constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans. Republican Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and John Barrasso of Wyoming urged the chamber to instead take up their legislation, which would increase funding for school-based security officers and leave the current gun laws intact. After hours of feverish debate, they lost their motion 39 to 58.

The bill now heads to the House, which is expected to pass it on Friday. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat from California, signaled last week that the House would enact whatever bill the Senate could pass.

“This is not a cure all for all the ways gun violence affects our nation,” Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York, said Thursday. “But it is a long overdue step in the right direction ... I hope it paves the way for future action on guns in Congress.”

The bipartisan legislation came together over several weeks of intensive negotiations largely between Cornyn, a Republican, and Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, as both parties sought to achieve the sort of deal that had eluded them for years. If it becomes law, it would mark the most significant action Congress has taken on gun control in nearly 30 years.

The Senate vote comes nearly a month after a gunman [killed 19 children](#) and two teachers [in Uvalde, Tex.](#), the second-deadliest school shooting in U.S. history. That massacre occurred just 10 days after a [racially-motivated mass shooting](#) at a [Buffalo, N.Y. supermarket](#). There have been 279 mass shootings in 2022, according to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), which defines a mass shooting as an incident where four or more people are shot or killed, not including the shooter.

But while leaders on both sides of the aisle consider this a breakthrough moment, the bill falls well short of the more sweeping gun-control measures that President Joe Biden and many [activists have called for](#), such as an assault weapons ban or restrictions on high-capacity ammunition magazines. In an attempt to keep Republicans on board, Democrats agreed to a narrower bill that largely tweaks existing gun safety measures.

For instance, the bill enhances background checks, but only for prospective gun buyers under the age of 21, requiring for the first time that authorities search juvenile criminal and mental health records over a 10-day period. Under current law, anyone 18 or older can buy rifles and shotguns, including the military-style semi-automatic rifles used in numerous recent mass shootings, as well as the ammunition for both. The more thorough background check process would expire after a decade, just as the assault weapons ban did in 2004.

The legislation also expands a current law that bars domestic abusers from being able to purchase a firearm to include serious dating partners, closing what's known as the "boyfriend loophole." Under existing law, only domestic-violence offenders who committed their crimes against a spouse or partner with whom they had lived or had a child with are barred from purchasing firearms. Negotiators agreed to allow dating partners convicted of a

misdemeanor to regain the right to purchase a gun after five years if they were first-time offenders and not found guilty of any other violent misdemeanor or offense.

The Senate bill also sets aside \$750 million over five years to help states implement crisis intervention programs, including so-called “red-flag” laws, which allow authorities to temporarily confiscate guns from people deemed to represent a threat to themselves or others. Other provisions toughen the criminal penalties for third-party gun sales, known as “straw” purchases, and clarify that individuals who repeatedly buy and sell firearms “to predominantly earn a profit” must register for a federal firearms license so they can run background checks on their customers.

In addition, the legislation sets aside billions of dollars, largely in grants, to address mental health and school security. The bill would launch more than a dozen new initiatives, including one that would create a broader network of “community behavioral health centers” and another that would increase access to telehealth services for those in a mental health crisis. The federal spending would be offset through a one-year delay of a Medicare drug-rebate provision, according to the bill summary, with federal savings estimated to be roughly \$21 billion.

The National Rifle Association fiercely opposed the bill, releasing a statement on Tuesday that said it “does little to truly address violent crime while opening the door to unnecessary burdens on the exercise of Second Amendment freedom by law-abiding gun owners.”

Meanwhile, the bill drew the support of various other groups including the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the American

Psychological Association. Biden, who [called for sweeping gun control measures](#) in an emotional televised address after the Uvalde school shooting, also expressed support for the bill. “Our kids in schools and our communities will be safer because of this legislation,” he said in a statement Thursday. “I call on Congress to finish the job and get this bill to my desk.”

But even though the Senate bill fell short of what many Democrats feel is needed to address a [mass-shooting epidemic](#), the vote on Thursday represented a significant breakthrough in gun policy, which has gone largely unchanged since 1994.

“Many have come to doubt whether we’re capable of making our institutions work,” Sen. Cornyn said on Thursday. “We proved that we can.”