

# New Labor Forum

<http://nlf.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Massacres and Movements: Challenging the Gun Industrial Complex**

Peter Dreier

*New Labor Forum* 2013 22: 92 originally published online 18 April 2013

DOI: 10.1177/1095796013482456

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://nlf.sagepub.com/content/22/2/92>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Murphy Institute, CUNY

**Additional services and information for *New Labor Forum* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://nlf.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://nlf.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - May 17, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Apr 18, 2013

[What is This?](#)



# Massacres and Movements: Challenging the Gun Industrial Complex

New Labor Forum  
22(2) 92–95  
Copyright © 2013, The Murphy Institute,  
City University of New York  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1095796013482456  
nlf.sagepub.com

Peter Dreier<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

conservatism, corporations, liberalism, politics, social welfare

Progressive social change typically happens in incremental steps, but occasionally there are “movement moments” that widen the opportunities for protest groups to gain momentum and accelerate political transformation within a short time span. Gun control was not an issue in the 2012 presidential campaign but on December 14, five weeks after President Obama was reelected, the mass killings in Newtown, Connecticut put the topic near the top of the nation’s agenda. Local grassroots gun control groups and national advocacy organizations, that for years had been pushed to the political margins, suddenly had an opening to mobilize support for stricter gun laws.

Every day, an average of thirty Americans are killed by guns, but these deaths stir little public outrage or action. Often the family, friends, and neighbors of the dead will hold a prayer vigil to honor the victims’ lives, and sometimes they will organize a march or rally to protest the killing, the epidemic of violence, or the failure of the police to protect innocent people. But, typically, nothing happens—until the next killing, and then the cycle repeats itself.

Americans hold contradictory views about guns. Most believe that the Second Amendment’s “right to bear arms” confers the right to buy and own any kind of gun, although many scholars consider that a misreading of the Founders’ intent, as they were primarily concerned with arming a militia (because the United States lacked a standing army) and doing so with muskets. At the same time, most Americans also believe that the government has the right to keep

dangerous assault weapons out of the hands of the general public. These two conflicting views are at the center of the debate over guns in America.

For many years, the political playing field has been tilted toward those who believe in an unfettered Second Amendment. That is because that group has been politically mobilized, primarily by the National Rifle Association, while those who lean toward tough government limits on guns have been fragmented and disorganized.

Surveys conducted since 2000 show that the majority of Americans—including police chiefs, gun owners, NRA members, “blue state” voters, and high school students—support stricter gun laws. They reveal a consistent core belief in restricting access to assault weapons.

## **Surveys conducted since 2000 show that the majority of Americans support stricter gun laws.**

The massacre in Newtown—where Adam Lanza brought a Bushmaster AR-15 assault rifle into the Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed twenty children and six adults—may have changed the political odds, in large part because of growing anger around the country. A Pew Research Center survey conducted a

<sup>1</sup>Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Peter Dreier, dreier@oxy.edu

month after the Newtown killings found that 85 percent of Americans favor making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks, with comparable support from Republicans, Democrats, and independents. Two-thirds of Americans (67 percent) favor creating a federal database to track gun sales. Majorities favor a ban on assault-style weapons (55 percent) and high-capacity ammunition clips (54 percent). The same survey found that large majorities of gun owners also favor making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks and favor the creation of a federal government database to track all gun sales. More than half of gun owners support a ban on semiautomatic weapons (54 percent) and a ban on the online sale of ammunition (51 percent). Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of NRA members supported requiring background checks for all gun sales, according to a Johns Hopkins University poll.

But growing public outrage about gun violence needs to be translated into strategic political activism. Despite these polls, the media continued to question the political feasibility of enacting tough gun laws. The NRA—every major newspaper, magazine, and broadcast outlet insisted—was simply too powerful. What it did not count on was a groundswell of grassroots opposition.

Gun control groups have long existed in every state and almost every city. They comprise mainly white, middle-class suburbanites. The antiviolence advocates in inner cities have tended to be ad hoc, pulled together by ministers and neighborhood leaders following a shooting. These groups got a second wind after the Newtown killing and began to join forces with others—including local faith groups, unions (particularly the major teachers' unions, who identified with the teachers killed in the Newtown tragedy and opposed the NRA's proposal to arm teachers with weapons), and families of people victimized by gun violence, such as Harlem Mothers SAVE, which helps parents whose children have been killed by gun violence. National gun control organizations—including the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the Violence Policy Center, and Mayors against

Illegal Guns (started and funded by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg)—responded to the killings with public statements and lobbying efforts, generating more media attention than they had received before. Mayor Bloomberg and former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (who was severely injured in a mass shooting in Arizona in 2010) each started political action committees to target campaign donations and TV ads to lobby gun control opponents and/or defeat them in the next election cycle. Netroots groups like MoveOn.Org quickly reached millions of people through the Internet who signed petitions, directed at President Obama and members of Congress, calling for stricter gun laws. The Courage Campaign, another netroots group, initiated a national petition urging Walmart to stop selling assault weapons.

Last January, gun control advocates, including several families of Newtown shooting victims, organized a March on Washington for gun control, the first of several protest events meant to back Obama's proposal. More than sixty Catholic priests, nuns, and scholars—and two former U.S. ambassadors to the Vatican—sent a letter to members of Congress with high NRA ratings urging support for “common-sense reforms to address the epidemic of gun violence in our nation,” including limits on the sale of military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. Religious leaders from more than forty denominations started a new group, Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, to demand strong controls on guns.

Two college presidents—Lawrence Schall of Oglethorpe University and Elizabeth Kiss of Agnes Scott College, both in Georgia—wrote an open letter to President Obama and other elected officials urging immediate action to stop gun violence, including a federal ban on assault weapons. Within a week, more than 300 other college and university presidents had signed on. “I was just sort of haunted by the challenge of the president when he said this is America and we can do better,” Schall said. “I just began to think, what can I do?” A similar letter, written to President Obama by Emerson College President M. Lee Pelton, gathered support from more than 160 university presidents within a week.

People who had not been politically involved before—or at least not involved in gun control issues—started new efforts and organizations calling for tighter gun laws. For example, the *New York Times* profiled Shannon Watts, a young mother from Zionsville, Indiana who started a new group, One Million Moms for Gun Control, with a Facebook page. Within a few days, more than 31,600 Facebook users had “liked” the group. Through Facebook, she connected with others doing similar things. By late January, the group had chapters in cities across the country. In New York, they organized a march across the Brooklyn Bridge and a rally at City Hall Park. Ms. Watts, a former public relations executive who was now a stay-at-home mom, flew to New York to speak at the rally. “We need MADD [Mothers against Drunk Driving] for gun control,” she told the *Times*.

Reed Exhibitions—sponsor of the week-long Eastern Sports and Outdoor Show in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania—initially announced that it would ban the display and sale of assault weapons at this year’s event and then decided to postpone it altogether, explaining, “In the current climate, we felt that the presence of modern sporting rifles would distract from the theme of hunting and fishing, disrupting the broader experience of our guests.” Local officials estimated that the region would lose about \$80 million in revenue.

In Pasadena, California, a group of high school students started an online petition asking their local school board to stop buying supplies at retailers—like Walmart—that sell guns. The Pasadena effort was part of a broader strategy that many groups quickly embraced—targeting the gun industrial complex itself, including those who finance, manufacture, and sell guns and ammunition. It had parallels with previous divestment, boycott, and “corporate” campaigns used by unions, environmental groups, and anti-apartheid activists to put pressure on business practices by mobilizing shareholders, consumers, and investors.

Within days of the Newtown massacre Walmart—the nation’s largest seller of guns and ammunition—announced that it removed the Bushmaster AR-15 style assault rifle from its website, but continued to sell that weapon, and

more than 400 other types of guns, in its stores. In response, an online petition gathered 85,000 names within a few days asking Walmart to stop selling assault weapons entirely. Dick’s Sporting Goods, a national chain, stopped selling semiautomatic rifles four days after the shooting, “out of respect for the victims and their families.”

**[After Newtown] many groups quickly embraced [a broader strategy] targeting the gun industrial complex itself, including those who finance, manufacture, and sell guns and ammunition.**

Less than a week after Newtown, the California State Teachers’ Retirement System (CalSTRS)—which has a long track record of socially responsible investments—started raising questions with Cerberus Capital, a private equity firm that owns Freedom Group, the gun manufacturer that made the Bushmaster AR-15 rifle used by Adam Lanza. The pension fund has \$750 million invested with Cerberus. Stephen Feinberg, Cerberus’ owner, quickly announced that the firm will sell Freedom Group. California Treasurer Bill Lockyer said that the state’s pension funds (California Public Employees’ Retirement System as well as CalSTRS) should be “scrubbed clean” of investments that make military-style assault weapons and other guns that are illegal in the state “and expose our communities to violence and death.” Thomas DiNapoli, the New York state comptroller, called for a review of the \$150 billion New York State Common Retirement Fund’s investments in firearms makers, including its \$50 million invested with Cerberus. Massachusetts Treasurer Steve Grossman asked his state’s pension fund to do an audit to see whether it has investments in gun, ammunition, and other companies.

Purchases by federal, state, and local governments represent 40 percent of gun industry revenues. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa sent a letter to the city’s pension funds asking them to “end their investments in corporations that manufacture firearms, ammunition, or

high-capacity ammunition magazines.” He was also considering asking the Police Department to stop purchasing guns and ammunition from companies that sell military-style assault weapons and ammunition to the general public. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel ordered city pension and retirement funds to divest shares in gun makers. The Chicago Municipal Employees Annuity and Benefit Fund agreed to shift \$1 million from manufacturers of assault rifles, including Freedom Group, Smith & Wesson, and Sturm, Ruger & Co. Emanuel also wrote to the CEOs of Bank of America and TD Bank to stop lending to gun makers as a way to put pressure on the industry to support stronger gun laws. (Bank of America gives Sturm, Ruger a \$25 million line of credit; and TD Bank gives Smith & Wesson a \$60 million line of credit, according to the letter.) New York City’s public advocate began ranking banks and investment firms by the size of their gun holdings. He called those with the twelve biggest stakes in the gun industry the Dirty Dozen. In Philadelphia, Mayor Michael Nutter outlined what he called the “Sandy Hook Principles” that the city would use in deciding where to invest its pension fund money, including whether a firm is tied to the manufacture or sale of assault weapons.

Faculty at Princeton University, which has a \$17 billion endowment, sent a petition to President Shirley Tilghman calling on the school to renounce “current or future investments in companies involved in the manufacture and distribution of multiple, rapid-firing semiautomatic assault weapons, and the bullets that equip them.”

Politicians quickly responded to this upsurge of activism or, in some cases, sought to co-opt the activists by getting out in front of the issue. The Glendale (California) City Council voted to ban gun sales from all city-owned property, a rebuke to the Glendale Gun Show, which since 1992 had rented the city’s Civic Auditorium several times a year.

Immediately after the Newtown tragedy, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo proposed legislation to strengthen the state’s existing gun

control laws. His staff worked with the Brady Campaign, New Yorkers against Gun Violence, and the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence in San Francisco—groups that had not had the spotlight for years—to develop his gun control measures. One month later, on the first day of its session, the legislature approved Cuomo’s plan, including a significant expansion of the state’s assault weapons ban, even though the state Senate was controlled by Republicans.

### ***The Glendale (California) City Council voted to ban gun sales from all city-owned property, a rebuke to the Glendale Gun Show.***

For the gun control movement to succeed, it will require that these examples multiply exponentially, that they coordinate with each other, and that they not only use corporate campaign strategies to target the gun industrial complex but also mobilize voters in states and congressional districts represented by “swing” Senators and House members who are reluctant to vote for tougher laws. History is filled with “movement moments” that fizzled. Most people of conscience hope that the broad coalition of gun control supporters will be able to seize this “movement moment” and mobilize a winning campaign to stop the deadly epidemic of gun violence.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Author Biography**

**Peter Dreier** teaches politics at Occidental College. His latest book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*.