

Gun laws, gun culture

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When Vice-President Al Gore cast the tie-breaking vote in the U.S. Senate last month for a plan to require background checks on people making purchases at gun shows, it was hailed as a major triumph for gun control. The lobbying power of the National Rifle Association was ebbing, we were told, following the school shootings in Colorado and Georgia.

That a close vote on background checks could be construed as a new era in gun control tells us a lot about the vast power the NRA has wielded over legislators. A 51-50 vote is not exactly a mandate for change, and a background check hardly constitutes an onerous regulation. But then the gun lobby is not accustomed to setbacks of any sort. The Senate's vote for background checks was the first gun control measure to win favor since the Republicans took control of Congress in 1995.

Other sensible curbs on guns have been proposed, including measures to limit sales to minors and sales by private dealers; to limit the number of gun purchases that can be made at one time so as to cut down on "gun running"; and to require more child-proof safety locks on guns. The amount of attention those measures receive in Congress will tell us more about whether a new era has truly begun.

Meanwhile, cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, impatient with the slow movement on legislation, are taking another route: they are taking gun manufacturers to court, seeking to hold them liable for the way they make and market weapons. Like the tobacco companies, gun makers are likely to change the way they do business if the courts threaten them with financial penalties.

Still, the gun control movement in the U.S. seems painfully slow and incremental compared to the measures other countries have taken. Following a school shooting that killed 16 children in Scotland in 1996, Great Britain didn't merely ponder background checks. It banned possession of all handguns.

The Brits, of course, have a different culture—no Wild West nostalgia, no populist tradition of hunting, no mischievous (and misinterpreted) Second Amendment. But

Great Britain also happens to be a society in which you are 24 times less likely to be killed by a firearm than you are in the U.S. While the annual U.S. death rate from handguns is over 9,000, the British rate is about 30.

Now is the time to remind legislators of these facts and others—such as that more than a dozen children are killed every day by firearms in the U.S., and that guns kept for self-defense are 43 times more likely to kill a family member or friend than to be used to kill someone in self-defense. Anguish over dramatic, horrific school shootings may give a temporary boost to the advocates of gun control. But what is needed is a sober knowledge of the everyday facts about the sale and use of guns—and the political courage to act on that knowledge.