

Gun control risks losing momentum as impeachment fever rises

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After mass shootings in Ohio and Texas this summer, gun control burst back on the scene as a major political issue for Democrats. Now it risks taking a back seat as impeachment fever overtakes Washington.

Gun control advocates are determined to prevent that from happening.

Nine White House hopefuls will be in Las Vegas for a forum on gun policy on Wednesday, almost two years to the day after a gunman killed 58 people at a country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip in the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. The event is being hosted by MSNBC, March for Our Lives and Giffords, the advocacy organization set up by former Arizona congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who was shot and gravely wounded during a constituent meeting in 2011.

The forum is an effort to keep gun violence front and center of the debate and gives 2020 presidential candidates a chance to showcase their plans to combat the violence. Polls show that a majority of Americans favor stricter gun laws, while even more support specific proposals like universal background checks. But negotiations between President Donald Trump's administration and lawmakers have halted over background checks legislation passed by the Democratic-controlled House, an effort that faced long odds even before the impeachment inquiry began.

"Impeachment sucks everything out of the room. Certainly it's the focus of Trump's attention," said Jack Citrin, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of California-Berkeley. "If you need to reach some kind of bipartisan agreement and one party is determined to throw the president out of office, rightly or wrongly, it's a little hard to see how that builds the kind of goodwill that's necessary on this or any other issue."

Ariel Hobbs, a 21-year-old student organizer with March for Our Lives in Houston, said her group wants "to hear from the candidates that they are taking this seriously and they understand they can no longer ignore America's gun violence epidemic." She doesn't think the impeachment inquiry is a reason for lawmakers to stop their push for a bipartisan

solution.

The candidates scheduled to participate in the forum are former Vice President Joe Biden; New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker; South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg; former Obama Housing Secretary Julián Castro; California Sen. Kamala Harris; Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar; former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke; Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren; and businessman Andrew Yang.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders was expected to attend, but his campaign said he was canceling appearances "until further notice" after undergoing a heart procedure for a blocked artery.

O'Rourke recast his campaign around gun control after the August shooting in his hometown of El Paso, Texas, where a gunman targeting Hispanics killed 22 people. O'Rourke even vowed to ban assault weapons, saying at a debate in Houston in September, "Hell, yes, we're gonna take your AR-15, your AK-47, and we're not going to allow it to be used against your fellow Americans anymore."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Democrats will continue to press for gun control.

"Let me just say on gun violence prevention: We are not going away until we get legislation signed into law that protects our children," Pelosi said at a news conference Wednesday at the Capitol.

One expert said he doesn't see a downside for O'Rourke or any of his fellow presidential candidates to talk about impeachment alongside other issues like gun control.

"If (O'Rourke) is pointing out that because of impeachment, the president has decided not to work at all on an issue that involves people's

lives, he could make the argument if he wanted that this is itself an impeachable offense," said Michael Green, a history professor at the University of Las Vegas-Nevada focused on state and national politics. "If you are trying to get your base, your base probably does not mind the idea of impeachment."

Another challenge for candidates is to distinguish themselves on the issue of guns. O'Rourke stands out with this call for a mandatory federal buyback program for military-style weapons used in many mass shootings. That goes beyond the proposals of most other Democratic candidates, who have focused on expanding background checks and banning the future manufacture and sales of certain high-powered weapons—but not making it illegal to possess those already in the market.

Ahead of Wednesday's debate, Biden released a detailed gun policy plan emphasizing his role as a leading senator in adopting a background law in 1993 and a ban on certain semi-automatic weapons as part of a sweeping 1994 crime law. That ban expired after 10 years.

Besides renewing that ban and including high-capacity magazines, Biden's proposals include an outright ban on online sales of guns and ammunition, along with a voluntary buyback program for the military-style guns. Biden doesn't offer a price tag for his voluntary buyback proposal but proposes a \$900 million, eight-year grant program for evidence-based intervention programs in 40 cities with high homicide rates. The idea reflects a point Biden and some other candidates make often when campaigning: Mass shootings making headlines account for only a small fraction of U.S. gun deaths.

Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut has played a key role in negotiations with the White House on a background checks deal and will attend the forum. The conversations have gone silent in the past two

weeks, but he's told the White House that he's still willing to talk. Trump has accused Democrats of ignoring other issues to focus on impeachment.

"The Democrats are so focused on hurting the Republican Party and the President that they are unable to get anything done because of it, including legislation on gun safety, lowering of prescription drug prices, infrastructure, etc. So bad for our Country!" he tweeted Sept. 24.

Murphy says reaching consensus may still be possible.

"I think that the president is going to have some pressure to show that impeachment isn't consuming him, and a breakthrough on a background checks deal that nobody thought was possible would probably be a pretty good tonic for the administration right now," he said.

While his fellow Democrats may not be keen on the idea of giving Trump a win, Murphy said he'll keep pushing because gun control remains top of mind for voters.

"Our party needs to find mechanisms to keep our focus on the issues that matter to voters, and guns is right at the top of that list," he said. "The forum is an effort to try to keep the primary dialogue focused on an issue that is absolutely going to be top of mind for swing voters."

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