

Chapter 4

Policy Reform After a Mass Shooting: The Case of Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the case study of the Las Vegas mass shooting. Utilizing analyses of news media content and results from interviews with gun violence prevention (GVP) advocates, it explores the policy debates occurring after this shooting. Findings indicate that within the news media coverage the two main targets for policy change were bump stock devices and assault weapons. Bump stock devices had a direct link to the shooting and ended up banned; however, there are some issues with the way this measure was passed. There was also no traction on renewing the assault weapons ban. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the news media coverage was shown to adopt a defeatist tone indicating that no policy reform was expected to take place, citing a lack of action after previous incidents and the current political landscape as the reasons why nothing would happen.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the gun-related policy responses to the Las Vegas shooting. Despite the news media pushing the policy proposals of restricting bump stock devices and renewing the assault weapons ban, there was very little action on gun-related legislation. A restrictive measure on bump stocks was eventually passed via Executive Order; yet, there are a number of issues with doing it this way. Throughout the news media coverage, there was a defeatist tone indicating that policy action was unlikely to take place. News media analyses and results from interviewees in the GVP movement are documented here.

The main target of blame after the Las Vegas shooting were bump stocks, device allowing a semiautomatic firearm to fire automatically with a single trigger pull. This is likely because bump stocks had a direct link to the attack. Moreover, political leaders including the Presidency and Republican Congress representatives seemed tentatively open to the idea of discussing restrictions on these. In the end, a ban was passed via Executive Order. Interviewees and news media coverage denote that doing it this way

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could have been strategic to save Republicans in Congress from having to vote on legislation. Assault weapons were the other main policy target after Las Vegas. Letters to the editor cited these more frequently than bump stocks as a blame factor for this incident and mass shootings generally. News media coverage also centered on renewing the assault weapons ban as a means of policy change. In the end, no action was taken on assault weapons, probably because these had no direct link to Las Vegas. This shows that the news media influence over policy debates can be limited (Kingdon, 1994/2003). The last emerging theme from news media coverage was a defeatist tone in the immediate aftermath of the shooting. It seemed that writers were inured to the idea that no policy action would be taken with the current political make-up. Paralinguistic techniques like evaluative adjectives, meta-opinions, emphasis, broken sentence structure and presenting the alternative argument as the “Other” (Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1998) were used in news media coverage and letters to the editor. These techniques are utilized mainly to discredit the arguments of political leaders who refuse to take policy action after the shooting and advance the idea that there is the need for tighter gun restrictions.

This chapter goes through each of these issues. The first section defines what bump stocks are and what the legislation around these was at the time of the shooting. It then moves on to explore the theme of bump stocks being blamed for the Las Vegas shooting and how a measure was eventually passed on these devices. The second section details the other emerging theme of blaming assault weapons for the shooting. Finally, the chapter finishes by looking at the theme of a lack of action within news media coverage. In this, it was anticipated that despite calls for a policy response, reform will not occur due to the political climate at that time.

BUMP STOCKS

Blaming Bump Stocks

Examining the news media coverage of the Las Vegas shooting found that bump stocks were commonly blamed for the incident. Bump stocks are devices that allow for a semiautomatic firearm to fire automatically with a single pull of the trigger. Their basic purpose is to transform a semiautomatic firearm into a fully automatic one firing all available ammunition when the trigger is depressed, known as a “machine gun” (Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2018). A ban on machine guns resulted from the rise of organized crime during the Prohibition period. Pictures of the St. Valentine’s Massacre appeared in the front pages of newspapers in 1929. This was an incident where Al Capone’s hit men killed seven from a competing gang using Thompson submachine guns (known as “Tommy guns”). The widespread publication of images from this massacre caused outrage and culminated in a political movement that eventually led to the 1934 Gun Control Act passed by former President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This legislation restricted access to machine guns and sawed-off shotguns, the common weapons of choice for those involved in organized crime (Dizard, Muth & Andrews, 1999, pp. 6, 10-11; Vizzard, 1999, p. 132; Winkler, 2012). As a result, machine guns are tightly regulated by federal law requiring registration. Moreover, any transfers on these weapons are taxed and have to be approved by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives (ATF). Newly manufactured machine guns are prohibited; yet, those owned before 1986 are “grandfathered” in that they are still legal to own provided they are registered with the ATF. Recent figures indicated that 638,260 machine guns were still registered in the United States. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia have laws prohibiting the sale, possession and manufacture

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