

ASSESSING GUN-CONTROL LEGISLATION IN NEW JERSEY: A MOVING TARGET

HANK KALET | DECEMBER 10, 2013

Some of the more ambitious bills to help fight gun violence have been vetoed or are stalled in committee



How are the governor and state Legislature doing in their efforts to curb gun violence?

Gun-control advocates will likely say that Gov. Chris Christie has failed to address a potentially deadly problem, and that the state's already strong laws need to be tightened to better protect New Jerseyans against the kinds of mass shootings that seem to occur with some frequency, most recently in Washington D.C. and Chicago.

Gun-rights groups may not mention the governor at all, while harshly criticizing Sen. President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester), whom they accuse of attacking their rights.

The polls are no more definitive.

In a Monmouth University poll released September 17, 9 percent of respondents gave Christie an A on gun issues; 21 percent gave him a B; 27 percent, a C; 21 percent, a D; and 19 percent, an F (12 percent did not grade him).

And a Rutgers-Eagleton poll released September 18 found that about seven in 10 New Jerseyans are "very concerned" about gun violence, with another 22 percent saying they are "somewhat concerned."

But here's where it gets tricky.

David Redlawsk, director of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, said those numbers have to be measured against the relatively small number of New Jerseyans who view crime and drugs as significant issues.

"From the voters' standpoint, this is an important issue only when it rears its ugly head," he said. "When we hear about these mass shootings, people become more focused but for a briefer and briefer amount of time these days.

"Most people don't vote on the issue," he added. "To a great extent people who have voted because they care about this issue are the people who care more about gun owners' rights than gun control."

Gun violence grabbed the nation's attention (again) in the wake of the December 14 mass shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, which took the lives of 20 children and six adults. The shooter, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, also killed his mother before the attack. Lanza, who killed himself after the shooting, used a Bushmaster rifle and at least one handgun during the attack.

Connecticut, New York, Maryland and Colorado all passed stricter gun laws in reaction to the shooting, while several states, including Texas, Iowa, and Missouri have moved to loosen state gun laws and exempt themselves from federal provisions. Also, Colorado voters earlier this month recalled two state legislators who backed the stronger gun provisions.

In New Jersey, Assembly Democrats moved quickly to pass new gun control legislation, with more than two dozen bills being introduced in January and 12 passing the full Assembly on February 21.

[See the table](#) for a complete breakdown of gun-control bills, passed and pending.

Those bills included a .50-caliber ban, several that were combined with the Senate ID and background checks bill, and a reduction in the maximum size of automatic weapon magazines from 15 rounds to 10.

The Senate moved more deliberately, not acting until May on its own slate of bills.

Overall, 16 bills were passed by both houses and sent to the governor, with 13 becoming law. They include a bans on the transfer of guns to those under 18 and possession by those on the terrorist watch list; the creation of panels to study school security and violence as a mental health issue; and several enhancing penalties for illegal gun possession and the possession of firearms during the commission of a crime.

Most of the bills that passed were consistent with the antiviolence plan the governor unveiled in April. The plan, which was issued a week after a Christie-appointed task force released a report on guns and violence in the state, included harsher sentencing for gun crime, tighter bail rules, the inclusion of mental health records in background checks, a photo identification requirement for firearms purchases, and the banning of .50-caliber weapons.

[Single Page](#)

1 | [2](#) | [3](#) [Next Page »](#)