

ROLL CALL

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Ibarra: Add Gun Control to the Latino Policy Agenda

By Mickey Ibarra
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The tragic shooting that took place at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., took the lives of 20 children and six adults. Among them was 27-year-old Victoria Soto, a young woman of Puerto Rican descent, whose efforts to shield her kids undoubtedly saved lives.

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary has renewed a nationwide debate about gun control, an issue that has divided our nation for more than a decade. Since 2004, when the federal ban on assault weapons expired, a trend toward laxer gun laws emerged, fueled by the ever-powerful gun lobby led by the National Rifle Association. While similar calls for greater gun control took place after each of the mass shootings our nation has experienced in recent years, from Columbine to Virginia Tech to Arizona, there seems to be a growing consensus, among even gun enthusiasts, that something must change.

Sen. [Joe Manchin III](#), D-W.Va., an avid hunter and NRA member, has called for Congress to rethink gun legislation in the wake of the shootings. He joins New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in calling for a ban on assault weapons. Sen. [Mark Warner](#), D-Va., and Senator-elect [Martin Heinrich](#), D-N.M., both candidates who were endorsed by the NRA, have also added their voices to the growing call for reasonable gun control.

With Latinos fresh from the political victory that ushered President Barack Obama into his second term, we are a significant potential force for good in the growing new campaign for gun control.

In fact, Latinos are more likely to favor stricter gun-control laws than either whites or African-Americans, according to a report released last April by the Pew Research Center. The study found that only 29 percent of Latinos felt it is more important to protect gun ownership rights than to control the ownership of guns, as opposed to 57 percent of whites.

An earlier poll, conducted in 2011 by the Mayors Against Illegal Guns Coalition, found that 86 percent of Latinos support background checks on gun sales and 69 percent believe that gun laws should be strengthened.

Latinos are right to be concerned about gun laws because, as a community, Latinos, and especially young Latino males, are particularly vulnerable and more likely to die as a result of gun violence than white males. In fact, among Latinos ages 15-24, homicide is the second

leading cause of death, according to federal data. Latino communities also bear a disproportionate share of violence-related death and injury, compared with the general population.

Latinos have an opportunity to use their newly found political clout to call upon their leaders and members of Congress to enact stricter gun-control legislation, starting with renewing the ban on assault weapons. And they can do it without diminishing their efforts to win comprehensive immigration reform.

As a proud veteran of the U.S. Army, I know firsthand that assault weapons like the ones used by the military on the field of war have no place in our homes, our schools or our communities. They are not weapons of protection nor are they weapons of sport. They are too often the weapons of choice for drug runners and cartels, not law-abiding citizens.

For too long, the NRA has wielded the Second Amendment in an effort not to cede any ground to gun control advocates. They have long argued that guns in the hands of citizens help protect them from becoming victims of crime. It's time to bring a sense of reason back to this debate, because the facts do not support their arguments.

A study by the California-based Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence determined that seven of the 10 states with the strongest gun laws also have the lowest gun-death rates, while states with the weakest gun laws have some of the highest gun-death rates. Common sense is so uncommon! Let's not let this debate slide until the next act of senseless violence. Let's add Latino voices to the growing call for sensible gun control. We owe it to the children and other victims of Sandy Hook. And we owe it to Victoria Soto.

Mickey Ibarra is founder of the Ibarra Strategy Group and chairman of the Latino Leaders Network. From 1997 to 2001, he served as assistant to the president and director of intergovernmental affairs in the Clinton White House.