VOTE FOR OUR LIVES!

By Robert Mikkelsen, January 23, 2019
The attack

On February 14, 2018, the lives of the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, were shattered when former student Nikolas Cruz opened fire in the hallways with a semi-automatic AR-15 assault rifle, killing 17 and injuring another 17 in a six-minute shooting spree (see Access Update: Don’t Shoot! The Plague of Guns in America).

The trauma inflicted on the survivors ran deep and wide. Sari Kaufman was in debate class when gunshots rang out. She began to get videos of her friends being shot at. “It was very surreal .... we realized we’re in a shooting and I just went into survival mode ... And then when it’s 17 dead, it’s just, it’s incomprehensible.” David Hogg hid, cowering in an unlit cupboard with several other students. He pulled out his phone and began describing the event, “Right now, we’re in the school,” he whispered, “An active shooter. It’s not a drill.” Emma Gonzalez was rushed into an auditorium where she took cover on the floor between the folding seats, holding hands with other students to keep calm. “I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t want to go on my phone to check ... I was in a complete state of denial.” She would not learn the full extent of the tragedy until she saw the names of all the dead in the newspaper. Later, Morgan Williams, who cowered under her desk as bullets flew through her classroom, said “I know I’m not the same person I once was and I wish I didn’t have this ongoing battle inside between the new me and the old me. This is my final year of high school and I absolutely hate it ... It’s impossible trying to heal and move forward with my life when I have to see that (school) building every day.”

The sad fact is that mass shootings in the United States have become so common that an almost standard set of emotional reactions for dealing with them has developed, referred to as the “thoughts and prayers response”. The
relatives and friends of the victims are thrown into agonizing loss and grief. There is much public hand-wringing and denouncement of the terrible crime. Declarations of sympathy flow from high and low. Prayers are said for the living and the dead. And then .... the world moves on because, after all, these things do happen and no one seems to agree about how to stop them. As former President Barack Obama put it, “We’ve become numb to this.”

The response: MSD Never Again!

Not this time. In the face of such deadening apathy, the student survivors of Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) stood up and turned their grief and anger on the older generation they held responsible for allowing this tragedy to happen, calling them out. Four days after the shooting Emma Gonzalez gave a speech that lit up the internet and sparked what became a mass movement among youth for gun control. She attacked the powerful pro-gun National Rifle Association (NRA) head on:

“To every politician who is taking donations from the NRA, shame on you! ...

Politicians … telling us nothing could have been done to prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS. They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun. We call BS. They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars. We call BS. They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don’t know what we’re talking about, that we’re too young to understand how the government works. We call BS. If you agree, register to vote. Contact your local congresspeople. Give them a piece of your mind.”

(Crowd chants:) “Throw them out.”

(BS = bullshit, ed. note)

Gonzalez’s speech was the start of the MSD Never Again campaign for gun control organized by the survivors of the school shooting, students like Sari Kafuman, Daniel Hogg, Cameron Kasky, Matt Deitsch, Jaclyn Corin, Dalaney Tarr and many others. Their hashtags – #NeverAgain and #EnoughisEnough – soon gained tens of thousands of followers and national attention. Together with Everytown for Gun Safety, they went on to organize the March for Our Lives rally for stricter gun control laws on March 24, 2018, in Washington D.C. An estimated 1.2 million people took part in
demonstrations across the nation, making it one of the biggest youth protests ever held. It seemed possible that change was in the air.

**MSD: Road to Change**

With momentum and public support on their side, the MSD students decided to “turn this moment into a movement” as Sari Kaufman put it. They launched a major campaign with other voter participation groups to get young people to vote for gun control candidates in the upcoming midterm elections of 2018 (see ACCESS UPDATE: Preview The Midterm Elections in the USA). The March for Our Lives turned into Vote for Our Lives. In the summer of 2018, MSD students crisscrossed America in a campaign they called the Road to Change. Its aim was to register and activate young voters. They held rallies and meetings in 80 communities in 25 states in a whirlwind tour of just 60 days.

Their message was clear: Register to vote. Oppose candidates supported by the NRA. “Our lives are in the hands of the people that we elect,” proclaimed Gonzalez. “Vote in every election like it’s your last – because it very well could be.” Their ambition was breathtaking. “We are going to be the kids that you read about in the textbooks ... we are going to change the law. That’s going to be Marjory Stoneman Douglas in that textbook,” she said. MSD survivor Dalaney Tarr echoed Gonzalez’ words as
she got ready to vote for the first time in the autumn, “Our voices were ripped away from us on February 14,” she said. “We felt like we had nothing. Everything was taken and to get that power back … creating some sort of positive change out of such a horrible experience – that is reclaiming our power.”

The opposition they faced from established pro-gun forces was fierce. Their principle opponent and target, the NRA, roundly condemned them from the beginning, posting the following message on its website before the Washington March for Our Lives demonstration – “Today’s protests aren’t spontaneous. Gun-hating billionaires and Hollywood elites are manipulating and exploiting children as part of their plan to DESTROY the Second Amendment* and strip us of our right to defend ourselves and our loved ones.” One of the NRA board members went so far as to characterize the MSD student survivors as “liars” and “poor mushy brained children.” More importantly, pro-gun forces had developed close political contacts and given financial support to pro-gun candidates for decades. In Florida, home of the students, the NRA supported the Republican pro-gun candidates Rick Scott for the U.S. Senate and Ron DeSantis for governor with hundreds of thousands of dollars. In the face of such entrenched interests, the upcoming election looked like a David vs. Goliath battle to many observers.

*“...the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

Mixed Midterms

In the event, the results of the Vote for Our Lives campaign were mixed – just as they were for the midterm elections in general (see ACCESS UPDATE: After the Midterms). The Democratic Party – which largely favors gun control – won a majority in the House of Representatives, from which they
could pass new gun control legislation. They were helped in this by the defeat of more than 38 pro-gun rights Congressional candidates. “More NRA-backed politicians lost their seats last night than ever before!” tweeted a delighted Jaclyn Corin. In addition, the percentage of young voters between 18 and 29 increased to 31% – the largest percentage in 25 years and up 10% from the midterm elections of 2014. The great majority of these young voters supported gun control candidates, making a difference in several key races across America. Moreover, for the first time in history, gun control advocates actually outspent the NRA, using $11 million to support their candidates to the NRA’s $10 million. As one commentator put it the day after the election, “The NRA lost big last night …. the politics around gun safety are changing.”

On the other hand, the largely pro-gun Republican Party actually increased its majority in the Senate. That meant newly elected NRA-backed Senators could help block any national gun control legislation passed by the House of Representatives (See Access to English: Social Studies, “Congress – legislative powers, pp. 186-187). Rather than spreading its resources among all pro-gun candidates up for election, the NRA had focused much of its $10 million to support a handful of conservative Republican pro-gun Senate candidates in specific states – including Florida.

For MSD students who watched the Florida results come in on election night, it was particularly frustrating experience. Republican pro-gun candidates won both of the state’s major races, for governor and the US Senate. “I’m shaking with anger right now,” said Jaclyn Corin to fellow students in the room. “It’s like the same feeling I was getting on the night of 14 February, so angry that I don’t know what to do with that anger.” Her fellow student, Matt Deitsch, took it more quietly, “The Florida numbers weren’t surprising, but definitely reminded us where we are in Florida.” It was a sobering experience.

The future of Never Again

Despite these setbacks in their home state, the MSD activists show no signs of slowing down their efforts to change the gun laws of America. That same evening, Jaclyn Corin declared that, “We’re not going to stop fighting … I can tell you, I’m doing this for the rest of my life.” For his part, David Hogg said, “It just proves we have a lot further to go. This is going to be a long, uphill battle.” Fellow survivor Cameron Kasky summed it up by saying, “Tonight was filled with wins and losses for both parties. No matter who you are or how you feel, never give up on civic engagement. Keep on fighting … And we’ll get it next time. Until then, we won’t stop working to make this state the safest, best
place possible.” When asked what they were planning to do next, Matt Deitsch replied, “We’re going to keep doing what we’re doing and create a blueprint for young people to have more of a force in the electoral process. Elected officials now know that they’re going to need young people to win.”

The eyes of the MSD activists are now on the elections of 2020. If they are to be believed, their battle has just begun.
TASKS

1  AFTER READING
Did you find anything you had heard regarding gun control mentioned in this article? Did you find anything new about such efforts? Compare your results with a fellow student.

2  MAIN POINTS
Answer the following questions:

a  How many people were killed in the attack on Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School?
b  What is meant by the “thoughts and prayers response”?
c  What do the letters BS stand for?
d  What is the NRA?
e  What was the Road to Change campaign?
f  What did the NRA call the MSD students?
g  How much did the youth vote increase by in the 2018 elections?
h  How did MSD students react to the results of the 2018 election?

3  DISCUSSION
Form groups and discuss the following questions:

a  What do you think were the most important reasons that the MSD students got national attention and support for gun control laws? Put the factors in the list below in order of most important to least important. Feel free to add other factors if you wish. Then compare your final list with another group.

- They were well-educated and well-spoken
- They were young
- They were very angry
- They were innocent victims of an attack
- They were from a wealthy suburban high school
- They were good organizers
- They were honest
- They made good use of social media
- Their cause was just

b. Do you think the MSD students will continue to be as successful as they have been in promoting gun control laws during the coming years until the 2020 elections? What circumstances work for or against their continued success?

4 RESEARCH

a. Choose one of the following MSD students and see if you can find out what they are doing these days:

- David Hogg
- Cameron Kasky
- Matt Deitsch
- Jaclyn Corin
- Emma Gonzalez
- Sari Kaufman

b+. How many gun control laws were passed in 2018 on the state and federal level?
(see Links - The Year the Gun Conversation Changed)

5 WORKING WITH STATISTICS

Look at the graph below and then answer the following questions.

Note: Rep/Lean Rep = Republican/Lean Republican
Dem/Lean Dem = Democratic/Lean Democratic

a. What percentage of Americans support stricter gun laws?
b. What percentage of Rep/Lean Rep support stricter gun laws?
c. What percentage of Dem/Lean Dem support stricter gun laws?
d. How large is the difference in percentage between Rep/Lean Rep and Dem/Lean Dem on this?
e. What does this tell us about the gap between the Republican and Democratic parties on this issue?
f. How does being a gun owner affect these positions?
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<tr>
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Note: No answer not shown.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER


Links in order of first use:

Florida shooting suspect set off fire alarm – 'and there the carnage began'

Emma Gonzalez Opens Up About How Her Life Has Changed Since Parkland Tragedy
What happened next? How teenage shooting survivor David Hogg became a political leader David
Hogg

Florida student Emma Gonzalez to lawmakers and gun advocates: 'We call BS'

Transcript: Read the Full Text of Obama's Statement on the Shooting in Oregon
http://time.com/4058961/oregon-shooting-president-obama-transcript-speech/

It's official: March for Our Lives was one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War

Road to Change
https://marchforourlives.com/road-to-change/

Parkland survivor Emma González: Vote on Election Day 'like it's your last'

The Year the Gun Conversation Changed

Here's what the NRA had to say today about the March for Our Lives

Ted Nugent calls Parkland survivors 'liars' and 'soulless' in interview

The 2018 Midterms Saw Big Youth Voter Turnout, but There's Still Room for Growth

Pain for Parkland students after pro-gun candidates win: 'I'm shaking with anger'

NRA Has Mixed Results in Midterm Elections

‘We Don’t Want to Live a Long Life in Fear’