

The Guardian

Interview

Parkland students interview Bernie Sanders: 'Your generation has the power to change America'

Rebecca Schneid and Dara Rosen in Washington

Two student journalists from the Eagle Eye, Stoneman Douglas high school's newspaper, interviewed the Vermont senator about the search for a breakthrough in the gun debate - and his own voting record

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We are a part of the Eagle Eye newspaper at Stoneman Douglas. We just wanted to ask a couple of questions. So first, has the Parkland shooting affected your opinion on how gun laws should be handled federally?

Bernie Sanders I wouldn't say it affected my opinion other than it made the entire country start focusing on an issue, which previously did not get the attention that it deserved. And I think, you might ask, "Why Parkland? Why not Las Vegas, the terrible tragedy we had in Las Vegas or other shootings?" I don't know why. But somehow or another, maybe because of the response of the students, or maybe because the American people finally had enough, the consensus was [it was] the straw that broke the camel's back, and people looked around and said, "What is going on in America? We have got to do something." Saying that in a way that we have not seen for a long, long time. I think people are saying, I am saying, many members of Congress are saying, "We have got to do something. We've got to do it now. Kids have got to be safe in school and we cannot allow people just to be shot down with military weapons."

Your home state of Vermont is one of the most gun-friendly states in the nation, yet has one of the lowest gun violence crime rates. Why do you think that is?

In states like Vermont, which are very, very rural states, people hunt, people do target practice, people go to gun shows. Guns are a way of life and people take that very seriously, and they treat guns with a lot of respect. That is something very different in other parts of the country, where guns are used by people who are criminals, who are into drug dealing and so forth and so on. But I would also say, maybe I'm wrong on this but I think I'm right, that in Vermont the vast majority of people, including gun owners, understand that we need what I call commonsense gun legislation.

People say, "Oh, the American people are divided on the issue of guns." Well, you know what, by and large the American people are not divided. It is this Republican Congress that is controlled by the NRA [National Rifle Association] that is the problem. If you go out, and you look at the polling, and you'll say to the American people, "Do you think we should improve and expand background

checks?" You know what the American people say overwhelmingly, what gun owners say overwhelmingly? "Of course."

The majority of the American people say, "This is pretty crazy. Let's deal with it." Increasingly, something that I've felt strongly about for 30 years, people also understand that military-style assault weapons should not be sold in this country and distributed. More and more people believe that. But not quite as many as believe the other thing. So I think what Parkland was about is the straw that broke the camel's back. That people want action right now. That people are prepared to stand up to the NRA. I want to say that you, you guys, in the high school deserve an enormous amount of credit for helping bring about that change of attitude."

In the past couple of years we've seen a lot of grassroots movements, like the #MeToo movement, and Black Lives Matter and now the Never Again movement. What do you feel is the importance of these kinds of grassroots movements on changing policy?

Extraordinarily important. That's how change takes place. I've said it a million times in every speech that I give. Change never takes place from the top. It always comes from the bottom on up. So right now, when you have large numbers of young people all across this country who are saying to the leaders of this country, "When we go to school we want to feel safe," that will have an impact, absolutely, to my mind.

So what do you think of the importance of students and young people getting involved in politics?

How many hours do you have here? I think it is enormous. I think you are the future of this country. And I think, one of the things ... There are two truths here and that is young people in general, not just high school students but younger people in general, don't know their political strength. They don't know their political strength. They can turn this country around.

I was just on the floor today dealing with another issue, dealing with Yemen. And the point that I talked about [was] the Vietnam war. That war was finally stopped. You know how it was stopped? Not by people here, but by people on the streets, mostly young people. It was stopped because kids 18 and 19 were saying, "I don't want to go to Vietnam and get killed or kill people. This war does not make sense." So I think that the future of this country is in the hands of young people. You have to understand your power, you've got to be involved politically. And I very much hope that that's what your generation does.

So in 2006 you were awarded a C- rating from the NRA. What prompted that raise in rating?

I have no idea. I have a D- lifetime average. The NRA is very arbitrary. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, I won't swear to you on this, you and you could cast exactly the same votes and you get a different rating. It is extremely arbitrary.



Bernie Sanders is interviewed by students of the Eagle Eye newspaper. Photograph: Amana Fontanella-Khan for the Guardian

Do you think that the NRA has the kind of hold on Congress the media portrays?

It has a very significant hold. I think that hold may be breaking a little bit.

I think what the NRA can do, like any other powerful interest, whether it's Wall Street or the pharmaceutical industry, if you vote the wrong way, they will primary you - they'll run a candidate against you in the primary and they will spend a lot of money against you. And they have a lot of power, they have a lot of members. They intimidate a whole lot of members here [in Congress].

You're seeing that power in the sense that the American people want serious gun safety legislation. We're not seeing that on the floor. Why is that? Are they doing what 80% of the American people want? No. They're doing what the NRA wants.

And you're seeing the president who one day, as is usually the case with him, on a Monday he says one thing and on a Wednesday he says something completely different. But that has to do with the power of the NRA.

Do you think federal emphasis should lie in mental healthcare laws or gun control laws?

Both. Here's the problem and this is a sad truth. And I indicated to you some of what I think has to be done in terms of expanding background checks, doing away with the gun show loophole, doing away with the so-called straw man provision, banning the sale and distribution of assault weapons, doing other things as well. That's the gun safety part. But let's be very clear, sad to say, this is not anything we should be happy about, but in this country today there are many thousands of people who are walking the streets as we speak who are suicidal and homicidal.

So it's not either/or. What the people who are dominated by the NRA are saying, "Oh it's just a mental health problem." Well, there's truth to that. But it's not just a mental health problem. It is also a gun issue and we have to deal with that as well.

Why did you, though- it was 1993 - vote against the Brady bill, that would have introduced a lot of gun control measures to reform issues, including background checks and waiting periods?

Well, there was a debate at that time. It was a long long time ago, between what is now understood to be the case and that is kind of automatic background checks as opposed to a

waiting time. And the people in my state preferred the automatic background checks rather than the waiting time. I think that's the reason. Yes.

So would you say, though, over your tenure as a senator and as a representative of your state, that there have been things that have influenced your ideas of supporting those universal background checks and supporting longer waiting periods and things like that in regards to gun reform?

Well, again, I come from a state, as you indicated, which has no gun control legislation. And 30 years ago, as it happens, I may have lost an election. I lost an election by three points and running against a Democrat and a Republican who both opposed the ban on assault weapons, and I supported that ban. That cost me the election mainly. But that was 30 years ago. Not everybody was talking about that at that point. I think that ... That's all. I voted the way I did and I gave you the reason why. And I also voted to ban assault weapons, and I think my own view, now and for many years, has been that we can bring people together.

For example, on the banning of assault weapons, there are real differences of opinion in this country. But on many other things, there is overwhelming support and we should do that. And we can do that right away.

Do you think that it's likely that Congress will pass any kind of legislation soon and what obstacles do you think are in place to prevent that?

I think it is 100% dependent upon grassroots activism. So, if you're an average politician and somebody says, well 80% of the people in your state want to do something, you would think that you would do it, right? It's pretty good politics. And that's the case. On the other hand, what they are weighing is the power of the NRA. And if we can create, and I know the marches have got to be part of that, if we can create a strong grassroots movement and real pressure, yeah, I think we will. If not, we won't. The NRA is very powerful.

It's also about creating a united front of a bipartisan agreement that we all want this to happen never again?

We all do. There's no one there who's going to tell you that they're not outraged by school shootings. But I really do think it comes down to the power of a very powerful interest, this is the NRA. And whether, in this case, mostly Republicans, will have the courage to stand up to them. And some will. But the job of, I think, grassroots America is to make sure that we have a majority of people [in Congress]. We're close to that. We are very close to that. It can be done. It's going to take a lot of grassroots activism to do it.

Do you think President Trump has the courage to take on the NRA?

No. President Trump lies all the time and he will come up with some ideas that may sound good. In fact, he had a televised meeting with some members of Congress and said all the things he wanted to do and two days later he backed away from it. No, I think he sees the NRA as very important to his re-election effort. And I do not think he has the courage to stand up to them.

This interview was edited for clarity and length

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