

LOCAL

# Legislative defeats on gun restrictions set stage for 2020

State lawmakers defeated stricter firearms laws, but neither side is backing down.

By **Stephen Montemayor** (<http://www.startribune.com/stephen-montemayor/298000161/>) Star Tribune

JUNE 3, 2019 — 5:18AM

Gun safety activists see a silver lining in the defeat of stricter firearms laws this year in the Minnesota Legislature.

With the 2020 elections coming into view, DFL-backed gun measures are likely to remain a potent organizing tool, particularly among young voters growing up in an age of school shootings, a chronic problem that could put pressure on Senate Republican holdouts.

At the same time, GOP leaders maintain that they won't face consequences at the polls — and may even be rewarded — for their defense of gun rights, a bedrock issue for a large swath of the Republican base.

Those clashing perspectives on one of the Legislature's most combative issues suggest that the debate will only intensify in the months ahead.

For the first time, the DFL-controlled Minnesota House passed an expansion of criminal background checks for private transfers at gun shows and online, long a focus of national gun control advocates. DFL lawmakers also advanced what would become a new "red flag" law allowing authorities to temporarily take away firearms from people considered a danger to themselves or others.

Neither measure got a hearing in the Republican-led Senate. GOP Majority Leader Paul Gazelka promised all year to defeat them, and he was able to keep them out of the state's public safety spending bill signed into law by DFL Gov. Tim Walz last week.

"We will not forget who stood in the way," said Erin Zamoff, director of the Minnesota chapter of Moms Demand Action. "It's pretty clear that this will end in one of two ways: Either lawmakers will catch up with the rest of Minnesotans, or Minnesotans will elect lawmakers who will."

Zamoff leads one of a growing number of gun safety advocacy groups in Minnesota, many of whose members flooded the Capitol throughout the year. Aided by First Lady Gwen Walz, they sought to lean on senators from districts won by her husband in last year's gubernatorial race, as well as by Democratic House candidates.

That gambit will again be put to the test in 2020. The Legislature returns next February with the same partisan split, but on the eve of an election in which all 201 seats will be up for grabs. So far, Gazelka, a Nisswa Republican, is wagering that voters will be more motivated by President Donald Trump's name on the ballot than anything else.

"If you get outside of the suburbs, everybody is very excited that they don't have more gun restrictions," Gazelka said in an interview last week. "If you're inside of the inner cities, they want more gun restrictions, and the suburbs are up for grabs. But I don't think that will be the highest issue. I think the biggest issue will be the national election and how people feel at the time."

Enacting new gun laws during the budget session of a divided Legislature was always going to be a long shot. The failed gun measures were among a slew of policy proposals from both parties that fell by the wayside in the Legislature's final budget negotiations: A major push to cap probation sentences and restore voting rights to felons under community supervision also fell through. So did a DFL-backed paid family medical



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Governor Tim Walz, Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka and House Speaker Melissa Hortman held a press conference Sunday night

leave proposal. Republicans had to give up on a 20-week abortion ban, a top priority in their social agenda. They also were not able to pass a plan to provide grants for students from low-income families to attend private schools, a top personal priority for Gazelka.

But DFL lawmakers and gun safety activists are still claiming smaller victories in having their top two gun bills debated and passed in multiple lengthy House hearings. House passage of the background checks and red flag law means they are automatically kept alive for next year, the second year of the Legislature's biennium.

"I can't say enough about the difference that elections make," said the Rev. Nancy Nord Bence, director of Protect Minnesota, an organization working to prevent gun violence. "If you compare 2019 to 2018, we couldn't get anywhere in 2018 at all."

Rep. Dave Pinto, DFL-St. Paul, who sponsored the background check proposal, also remains hopeful after watching law enforcement leaders and prosecutors testify in favor of the measures.

"I just feel like when you have a coalition of law enforcement, medical professionals, young people, teachers and parents all pushing — I don't know how we don't join the other states that have these provisions in place," said Pinto, who works as a prosecutor in Ramsey County.

Minnesota gun rights activists acknowledge that they will likely play defense on the issue for the foreseeable future. Rob Doar, policy director for the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus, has shifted to full-time lobbying at the Capitol in the past two years and noted that caucus members are far more active when confronting bills they don't like than those the group supports.

Doar, who testified against the new gun bills this year, expects Democrats to focus more on using Republican opposition to the two gun bills as a campaign cudgel instead of trying to pass new laws next session.

He noted that House Democrats cleared the gun measures as part of a broader public safety spending bill headed for end-of-session budget talks, not as stand-alone legislation. "We do expect them to make a lot of noise, but I imagine it's going to be more focused on the Senate than actually trying to get the bills passed in the House," Doar said, referring to the House's refusal to hold separate votes on the gun provisions.

Bence's Protect Minnesota and Zamoff's Moms Demand Action were joined recently by the new Gabby Giffords-backed Minnesota Gun Owners For Safety, which the former Democratic congresswoman from Arizona called a venue for gun owners who don't believe the gun lobby represents their interests.

That activist base won't likely go dormant in the interim months: Zamoff spent last week in neighborhoods such as Frogtown in St. Paul, distributing fliers for an upcoming Gun Violence Awareness Day event, part of a national campaign. Groups like Protect Minnesota plan to continue outreach initiatives to address questions about what Bence is calling the state's "Big Two" gun bills.

Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers again expect to counter new gun law proposals with pushes for more money for school security measures and mental health resources.

"That was our safety direction," said Gazelka, adding that he will not oppose Senate hearings on gun legislation next year now that legislators have completed a two-year budget, the central focus of the session that ended May 25.

But that doesn't mean Republicans intend to capitulate. The chairman of the Senate's Judiciary and Public Safety Committee, Sen. Warren Limmer, R-Maple Grove, has dismissed the idea that Republicans will pay at the polls for not passing or even hearing this year's gun bills. Earlier this year, after Gwen Walz said voters would come after Republicans who blocked new gun laws, Limmer quipped, "Bring it on."

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**Stephen Montemayor** covers politics and government in Minnesota. He previously reported on federal courts and law enforcement for the Star Tribune.

