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Biden eager to sign bipartisan gun bill that falls well short of his own plans

Haisten Willis

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President Joe Biden says the 1994 assault weapons ban he helped pass was the last big thing done to address gun violence. He hopes to end that 28-year drought by signing a bipartisan piece of legislation into law later this year, though it falls short of the agenda he proposed.

Biden was a Delaware senator when he helped usher in an assault weapons ban as part of a wider 1994 crime bill, which later proved controversial. While the bipartisan measures now under consideration are more modest than his own proposals for what to do in 2022, Biden said he's eager to sign compromise legislation into law.

"I want to thank Sen. Chris Murphy and the members of his bipartisan group — especially Sens. Cornyn, Sinema, and Tillis — for their tireless work to produce this proposal," Biden said in a Sunday statement. "Obviously, it does not do everything that I think is needed, but it reflects important steps in the right direction, and would be the most significant gun safety legislation to pass Congress in decades."

A bipartisan group of senators announced Sunday a proposal to combat gun violence, stemming from a concerted effort on Capitol Hill to respond to a string of deadly mass shootings in the United States. The legislation is still being written, but reforms will aim to crack down on illegal sales, provide funding for mental health and school security, and enact measures meant to protect victims of domestic violence.

Biden had touted a full assault weapons ban, raising the minimum purchase age for semi-automatic rifles to 21, and limiting magazine capacity, and he also condemned 9 mm guns, which he contended "blow the lung out of the body." None of those ideas appear to be in the offering for the bipartisan proposals.

Nonetheless, the White House is strongly supportive of the bill even before the final text emerges.

"This is about saving lives," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Monday. "The president wants to see Congress act. He wants to see this on his desk as quickly as possible, and that's going to be our focus."

The 1994 ban on semi-automatic rifles and high-capacity magazines marked arguably the biggest win for the gun control movement in U.S. history. But that legislation expired in 2004, and Biden

has become inextricably linked to failed efforts at reviving gun control measures in the years since.

There seems to be much greater momentum for reforms to pass now compared to those previous failures. Protesters on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., chanted "This time is different, this time is different" over the weekend.

Efforts following the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, got a boost from Hollywood star Matthew McConaughey, who has met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill and made an impassioned speech at the White House last week calling for a "viable path forward."

McConaughey, a native of Uvalde, said he was a proponent of the Second Amendment and responsible gun ownership. He called for what he described as bipartisan proposals, specifically red flag laws, stronger background checks, and raising the minimum age to purchase an AR-style rifle to 21.

The actor released his own statement Sunday that praised the congressional proposal and noted that "for the first time in 30 years, something has happened." The bipartisan group of senators includes 10 Democrats and 10 Republicans, indicating it may have the votes for full passage if that group holds in the 50-50 chamber.

How effective those proposals will be in the real world remains to be seen, especially with most details still being worked out. Trevor Burrus, a fellow in constitutional studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, expressed cautious optimism about the ideas on hand.

"It will be very important to look at the text of the law as it comes out," he said. "There are bad ways of crafting those laws, and there are better ways of doing it."

Burrus noted that many previous red flag laws have proven ineffective, so enforcement mechanisms will be key. He favors background checks if they can prevent dangerous people from buying guns without making it functionally impossible for all 20-year-olds to obtain them.

"The devil is in the details," he said.

Details aside, Biden for now appears eager to get whatever gun control measures can survive congressional scrutiny on his desk and signed into law as soon as possible.

"With bipartisan support, there are no excuses for delay and no reason why it should not quickly move through the Senate and the House," Biden's statement concludes. "Each day that passes, more children are killed in this country: The sooner it comes to my desk, the sooner I can sign it, and the sooner we can use these measures to save lives."