[**DC Decoder**](http://www.csmonitor.com/usa/dc-decoder)**: Politics, unlocked and explained**

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**Obama vs. Romney 101: 4 ways they compare on gun control**

A spate of gun violence has beset the [United States](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/United+States) ahead of the November election – including shootings at [New York](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/New+York)'s [Empire State Building](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Empire+State+Building); an [Aurora, Colo.](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Aurora+%28Colorado%29), theater; and an [Oak Creek](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Oak+Creek), [Wis.](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Wisconsin), Sikh temple – raising the perennial question about how effectively America regulates the 300 million-plus guns in its collective gun cabinet. Yet neither presidential candidate is likely to hoist his own complicated record on gun regulation as a rallying cry.

Here is how [President Obama](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Barack+Obama) and [Mitt Romney](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Mitt+Romney) have addressed support for the [Second Amendment](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Second+Amendment) and gun-control laws, as well as whether they own guns and how their vice presidential candidates stack up.

- [Patrik Jonsson](http://www.csmonitor.com/About/Staff/Patrik-Jonsson), Staff writer

[](http://www.csmonitor.com/var/ezflow_site/storage/images/media/content/2012/0905-guns-2nd-amendment.jpg/13662758-1-eng-US/0905-guns-2nd-amendment.jpg_full_600.jpg)Picture: Gun enthusiast D.J. Dorer of Yorktown, Va., carries his AR15 pistol outside the state Capitol during a pro gun rally in Richmond, Va., on Jan. 17, 2011. (AP Photo/ (Steve Helber/AP/File)

**1. Second Amendment**

Weighing the two candidates’ views on the [Second Amendment](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Second+Amendment), the tone that comes across is surprisingly similar – that while the “right to bear arms” is foundational, it is hardly absolute.

Despite the perception is that [Mr. Obama](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Barack+Obama) is anti-gun rights (gun shop owners say fear of his policies drives [strong gun sales](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/DC-Decoder/2012/0725/Why-gun-sales-spike-after-mass-shootings-It-s-not-what-you-might-think)), he has repeatedly reaffirmed the right to bear arms. Indeed, the only gun-control laws he has signed as president have been to expand gun rights – allowing guns on national park lands and [Amtrak](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Amtrak) trains. He also said this year that “hunting and shooting are part of a cherished national heritage.”

He does not, however, believe that gun rights should be unrestricted. “The reality of gun ownership may be different for hunters in rural [Ohio](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Ohio) than they are for those plagued by gang violence in [Cleveland](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Cleveland+%28Ohio%29), but don't tell me we can't uphold the Second Amendment while keeping AK-47s out of the hands of criminals," Obama declared at the [Democratic National Convention](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Democratic+National+Convention) in 2008.

Former Massachusetts Governor Romney has taken the same line in the past, especially when he was the Republican executive of a Democratic state. “There’s no question I support Second Amendment rights, but I also support an assault weapon ban,” he said in 2007, referring to his signing of a [Massachusetts](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Massachusetts) assault-weapons ban in 2004.

But Romney has made more categorical statements in favor of gun rights in recent years. During the presidential campaign he has said he would sign no new gun control laws as president, out of respect for the Second Amendment.

“I do support the right of individuals to bear arms, whether for hunting purposes or for protection purposes or any other reasons,” he said at the 2008 presidential debate in [Boca Raton](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Boca+Raton), [Fla.](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Florida) “That’s the right that people have.”

Both candidates' stances seem to reflect political realism. A Pew poll in April found that 55 percent of independent voters believe “it is more important to protect gun ownership than to control guns.” Only 40 percent said passing new gun-control laws was more important. What’s more, some political analysts have said it amounts to political suicide to back gun control in key battleground states like [Colorado](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Colorado).

## 2. Where they stand on gun control

Both presidential candidates were blasted by [New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Michael+Bloomberg) – a gun-control advocate – for not taking stronger stands in reaction to the July 20 shootings at a midnight showing of "[The Dark Knight Rises](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/The+Dark+Knight+Rises)" in Aurora, which killed 12 people. Considering that the alleged shooter is reported to have bought large amounts of ammunition online and carried the bullets in large magazines, the incident acted as a prism for the candidates' views on gun control.

A few days after the shootings, [Obama](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Barack+Obama) did make perhaps his most overt gun-control comment since the 2008 primaries: “I … believe that a lot of gun owners would agree that AK-47s belong in the hands of soldiers, not in the hands of criminals,” he said in [New Orleans](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/New+Orleans). “That they belong on the battlefield of war, not on the streets of our cities.”

On Aug. 6, Obama spokesman [Jay Carney](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Jay+Carney) said that Obama "does support renewing the assault-weapons ban,” which would ban civilians from buying some semiautomatic weapons, but “there has been reluctance by Congress to pass that renewal.”

Obama himself has not publicly pushed a renewal of the federal law, which expired in 2004, though he supported renewal as a presidential candidate. Nor has Obama overtly backed a long-shot Democratic bill that would alert police to large-scale ammunition purchases online.

Instead, Obama more generally called for a “common sense” approach to assault-weapon ownership after the Aurora shootings, specifically that no mentally unstable person should be able to legally buy those kinds of arms. (The mental health of the alleged shooter, [James Holmes](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/James+Holmes), is in question.)

**Picture: President Obama walks up the stairs of Air Force One at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., on July 22, on his way to Aurora, Colo., to visit with families of victims of the movie theater shooting. (Jose Luis Magana/AP/File)**

As a former governor who signed an assault-weapons ban, [Romney](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Mitt+Romney) has gone on record supporting such measures in the past. But his views have evolved. In an interview with political blog [Instapundit](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Instapundit.com) in 2008, Romney said: “I don’t support any gun-control legislation – the effort for a new assault-weapons ban, with a ban on semiautomatic weapons, is something I would oppose. There’s no new legislation that I’m aware of or have heard of that I would support.”

He remained firm on that claim in the Aurora aftermath, saying new laws would not have stopped what happened. And if new laws can’t stop deranged people from mass murdering their fellow citizens, then they will only impact law-abiding citizens, he said.

In a July 23 interview on [CNBC](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/CNBC+Inc.)'s "[The Kudlow Report](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/The+Kudlow+Report)," Romney was also asked whether he’d back proposals to ban online ammunition sales or purchases of semiautomatic rifles. "Our challenge is not the laws, our challenge is people who, obviously, are distracted from reality and do unthinkable, unimaginable, inexplicable things," Romney answered.

Romney is seen as more likely to support the expansion of gun rights, such as reciprocal concealed carry, which would allow concealed-carry permit holders to move across state lines without fear of getting into trouble with local police – though he has not taken a public stance on the issue.

Romney’s tenure in [Massachusetts](http://www.csmonitor.com/tags/topic/Massachusetts) was widely seen as a net gain for state gun owners, since he also boosted protections for shooting clubs and relaxed restrictions on manufacturer testing of some types of pistols.