

# How Congressional Democrats are employing a Civil Rights era tactic to address a problem from today

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*Yesterday, Democrats in the US House of Representatives staged an unprecedented sit-in in the House aimed at bringing a “No fly, no buy” gun control bill to the House floor for a vote. [Rolda L. Darlington](#) writes that the sit-in is a reaction to an increasingly gridlocked and partisan Congress, and harks back to the tactics of Civil Rights-era activists. This use of an “old tool for a new job” shows that the tenor of the gun control debate has now shifted irrevocably.*

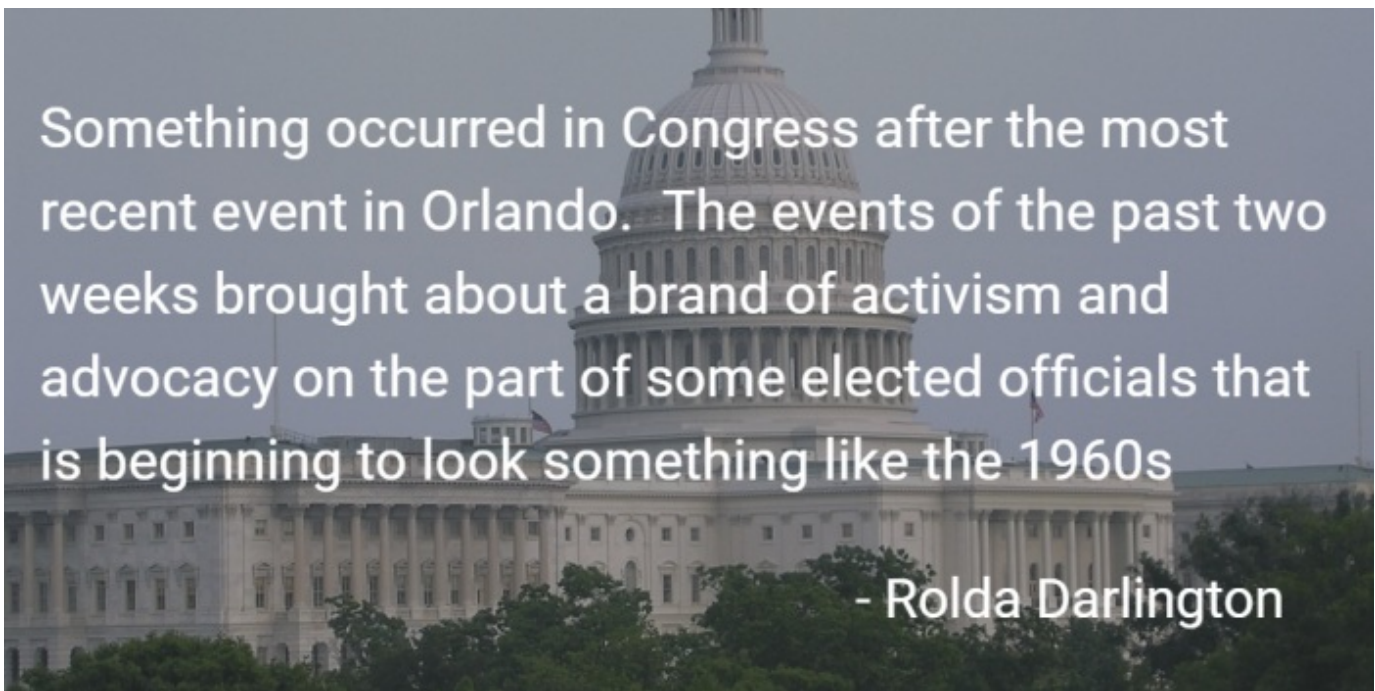


The Gun control debate is far from a new topic of discussion and legislation in the United States. Choose a decade, choose a conflict, and you can find one flare up or another concerning the country’s relationship with guns, both legally and socially. To complicate this history, how the institutions of the US government have chosen to address the gun issue over time has changed as many times as there are styles and models of pistols. The most recent tactic used to tackle the nation’s ambivalence toward guns and gun legislation, however, was used on the floor of the House yesterday. Under the ostensible leadership of [Rep. John Lewis \(D-GA\)](#), members of Congress, Senators and Representatives alike, staged a sit-in on the House floor.

Some background: Last week, [Senator Chris Murphy \(D-CT\)](#) stood on the floor of the Senate and held a [filibuster](#) for 15 hours. His objective was simple, albeit controversial. In the wake of the horrific shooting in Orlando earlier this month, Murphy hoped to force the Republican Senate leadership to put four separate gun bills to a vote. His efforts were successful, in a matter of speaking. While the four votes were held in the Senate this past Monday, none passed. Two bills dealt with closing loop holes which allowed people to purchase a gun without a background check if purchased online or at a gun show, while two aimed to prevent people on terrorist watch lists from purchasing firearms.

Murphy’s strategy was far from novel, as the filibuster has a long and increasingly-frequent presence in the law-making body of the US government. Senators have used the filibuster in innovative and crafty ways since the late 1830s. The tactics employed by the Democratic members of Congress yesterday, however, harken back to another time some may be all-too-familiar with.

To be sure, the Civil Rights era stimulates memories for some that seem significantly more contentious than what the US Congress is confronting with gun control legislation today. Nevertheless, a growing number of gun control advocates in Congress are comfortable with utilizing the tools of yesteryear to get their point across.



Despite the failure of the gun bills voted on in the Senate earlier this week, a number of members of Congress believe that if a vote were to be held on background checks and a bill commonly referred to as the “No Fly, No Buy” bill, the House would have the support necessary to pass them. While this cannot be verified for sure, those who support an increase in gun control seem to be operating with the sort of confidence demonstrated by activists of another time and context.

Rep. John Lewis is most widely known for his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. He engaged in sit-ins, marches, and protests, not without severe injury and trauma. His inclination toward leading a movement like this on the floor of the House, in which he has served since 1987, is not surprising. The comradery Lewis has engendered, on the other hand, is quite unique. Some political pundits who have covered Congress for years report that they have no memory of anything like this happening on the floor of the House. Lewis rallied his colleagues by offering words he may have uttered more than 50 years ago as he marched alongside fellow civil rights leaders. While the words may not have been exactly the same, he peppered his speech to members in the room with words of encouragement:

*“Sometimes you have to do something out of the ordinary. Sometimes you have to make a way out of no way. We have been too quiet for too long. There comes a time when you have to say something, you have to make a little noise, when you have to move your feet. This is the time. Now is the time to get in the way. The time to act is now. We will be silent no more. The time for silence is over.”*

Perhaps this brand of activism and representation is fitting for the type of fervor the nation has seen concerning gun control, especially in light of the massacre that plagued Orlando, Florida, in the previous week. On Sunday morning, June 12<sup>th</sup>, a gunman walked into [Pulse](#), a popular gay nightclub, and killed 49 people and injured more than 50. The gun debate has been heated in the US for decades, and becomes so again each time a mass shooting is reported.

Something occurred in Congress after the most recent event in Orlando, however. The events of the past two weeks brought about a brand of activism and advocacy on the part of some elected officials that is beginning to look something like the 1960s. The “No Bill, No Break” movement of the Democratic members of the House is the consequence of a group which feels as if they have been silenced and have no recourse. No, the minority party of the contemporary US Congress can hardly claim the injustices and indignities suffered by the activists who sat at

lunch-counters across the Jim Crow south, but the symbolism is not lost on the electorate. Democratic members of the House and Senate have decided, once and for all, that desperate times call for historically desperate measures.

There is always a chance that the actions of the Democrats on the floor of the House are simply the desperate tantrums of a minority party in a legislative body. Consider the tactics of a pre-1994 minority party which eventually led to the [Republican Revolution](#) under Newt Gingrich. Members of the US House of Representatives do not experience the legislative process in the same way as their colleagues in the Senate. Unlike the Senate, the House does not have a provision for the filibuster, and the Speaker of the House usually enjoys sole discretion when it comes to which bills are sent to the floor for a vote. In an increasingly partisan Congress, it could be the case that sit-ins are a natural extension of a beleaguered minority party using a toolbox of odd implements to make sure their voices are heard.

Perhaps the Democrats are using the tactics of trail-blazers of a time never forgotten because the gun debate warrants an old tool for a new job. On the other hand, it may be more convincing to argue that the events of the past day and evening are the actions of a minority party metaphorically stomping its feet, taking its ball, and going home. The impetus for the unprecedented occurrences on the floor of the US House hardly matters. What we know now is that the tenor of the gun control debate has shifted irrevocably. The electorate is now witnessing the actions of a legislative body willing to utilize the tactics of a more contentious time, a time when the nation was in a place it was better off leaving. Rep. [Maxine Waters \(D-CA\)](#) was quoted as saying that she would leave the floor when “hell freezes over.” It may not take that long for gun legislation to more closely mirror the policy preferences of a majority of the American electorate, but the landscape has changed, and the tactics of battle have been altered in a way that can no longer be ignored.

*Featured image credit: [Rep Scott Petera Periscope](#)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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