

# VICE News

## Washington Is Banning Assault Rifles and Left-Wing Gun Owners Are Scared

The state is about to ban assault rifles, but is allowing gun owners to keep the weapons they have. Progressive gun owners say it will create an imbalance.

TO By [Tess Owen](#)

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COLT M4 CARBINE AND AR-15 STYLE RIFLES ARE DISPLAYED DURING THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION (NRA) ANNUAL MEETING AT THE GEORGE R. BROWN CONVENTION CENTER, IN HOUSTON, TEXAS ON MAY 28, 2022. (PHOTO BY PATRICK T. FALLON / AFP) (PHOTO BY PATRICK T. FALLON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Washington is about to become the 10th state to ban assault weapons.

Under the new law, expected to be signed by Governor Jay Inslee shortly as the bill was passed by the [legislature Wednesday](#), it will be illegal to buy, transfer or export any firearm that falls under Washington's definition of an assault weapon.

The ban applies to 62 specific models of firearms, including the infamous AR-15, as well as most semi automatic rifles, pistols, or shotguns that have the capacity to accept a detachable magazine, and many others.

Washington residents can keep their assault weapons that were owned prior to the ban, and the bill says that they can take them to a licensed gunsmith to get them repaired.

But some Washington residents told VICE News that they're worried the ban creates a situation where "traditional" gun owners—white, male conservatives—are sitting on an arsenal of high-powered weapons, which emerging demographics of gun owners, like LGBTQ people, leftists and minorities, no longer have access to.

The enactment of the ban comes on the heels of two mass shootings: one at a school in Nashville that left three children and three adults dead, and another at a bank in Louisville that left five adults dead.

"Assault weapons are civilian versions of weapons created for the military and are designed to kill humans quickly and efficiently," lawmakers wrote in the bill.

Washington's new law is also notable because the state has the highest level of household gun ownership compared to other states with similar assault weapon bans on the books. (A study by RAND in 2016 found that about 34% of Washington adults lived in a household with a firearm—a figure that's likely increased in recent years, given soaring gun sales during the pandemic). California, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York, all had significantly lower rates of gun ownership by comparison when they passed their own versions between 1990 and 2000. As did Delaware and Illinois when they passed their own assault weapon bans in the last year.

Although Washington is a solidly blue state, it has deep-red rural pockets of residents who feel increasingly culturally alienated from their liberal, urban counterparts. A 2020 study identified Washington as one of the top five most polarized states in the U.S.

A poll of 825 Washington adults last year found that 61 percent were in favor of an assault weapon ban, which was driven largely by Democrats over the age of 50 in urban and suburban areas.

VICE News put a call out for gun owners on the subreddit WAGuns, and found that fear of their fellow citizens, distrust of the government, and paranoia about the future was one of the key reasons driving opposition to the ban from gun owners across the political spectrum.

George, a 40-year-old lifelong-Democrat who declined to give his last name, says he supports other gun safety measures that made their way through the legislature but says recent unrest in the U.S. has made him nervous about the future of the country.

"This is also the worst time to unilaterally disarm a population of left-minded individuals," George said. "These next five or 10 years might decide the fate of America, and when the music stops and the next January 6 happens and we're all scrambling to find a chair, I'm worried that the fascists will be the ones with all the guns."

### News

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Black Teen  
Knocking at His  
Door Was Just  
Arrested

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News story after news story has documented the trend of women, minorities, leftists and LGBTQ people buying up guns for protection. And a recent *Washington Post* feature explored how deep-seated anti-government resentment and concern for future unrest was driving militants on the left and right to arm themselves, particularly with AR-15's.

John Rewolinski, 39, a political moderate from Bellevue, Washington, says that he's noticed the shifting demographics at his local gun range—and thinks it's unfair that new types of gun owners will never have a chance to catch up.

“Minorities and LGBTQ have been starting to participate in gun culture but now they won't be able to,” said Rewolinski. “They're severely outgunned compared to their right-wing counterparts, they won't see themselves on equal footing.”

Rewolinski thinks it's an important part of the social code that civilians on both sides of the aisle have access to the same kind of weaponry: and at the moment, the vast majority of high-powered weaponry are still owned by white, male conservatives. “It's a cold war against anyone who might do you harm. It's the mere fact of having them,” said Rewolinski. “Neither side is going to use them [on each other], because they both have them.”

He added that he thinks the horse is out of the barn, and there's too many high-powered guns circulating for bans to actually work. “I would love to see a world without firearms, but it's not a realistic scenario,” he said.

For River Johnson, a 23-year-old Asian transgender woman, it's all about self defense and knowing she can have access to the same kinds of weapons that so many others already own.

She says she grew up in a liberal, wealthy part of the state, with parents who were strongly anti-gun, but found her position on firearms shifting overtime as “the world was becoming a scary place.”

“While I’ve never had to directly defend myself, it feels like things are becoming increasingly harder for people like me,” she said. “Many of the most radical anti-trans segments of the population are already extremely armed with semi auto rifles, this [ban] will do nothing to mitigate that, besides enabling a continuing divide in those who can effectively protect themselves.”

Matt S, 33, a self-described “lefty Seattle gun owner” who declined to give his full last name, said he was conflicted on the assault weapon ban. He doesn’t personally own any assault weapons, and isn’t convinced that they’re more practical than any other firearm when it comes to self-defense—he thinks people’s obsession with high-powered guns “revolves around a fantasy that a ‘shit hits the fan’ scenario happens.”

But Matt also articulated an opinion that’s often heard from far-left gun owners: he thinks cops should also be subject to an assault weapon ban if civilians are. “I’d love to see an amendment that applies the ban to police after five years or whatever,” he said.

Meanwhile, some conservative gun owners cited concerns about crime in cities; one Reddit user who declined to give his name at all said that the ban would only make “citizens less defensive and criminals more dangerous, confident and brazen knowing the public doesn’t have what they have” all while “punishing” law abiding gun owners.

As far as whether the ban will spark a backlash, or even protests, from hardcore gun owners, it’s unclear. There are a few threads on far-right message boards, where users have discussed the ban, while grumbling about “left-wing tyranny.” Others seem more focused on getting the law blocked through courts, rather than taking the streets in protest.

Stephen Piggott, an expert on the far-right and program analyst with Western States Center, a community organizing racial justice group in the Pacific Northwest, has been monitoring reactions to the bill as it made its way through the legislature.

“It could serve as a catalyst for mobilization, but what I’m seeing so far, from anti-democracy groups around Washington State and Paramilitary groups, is that they’re much more focused on LGBTQ+ and drag shows right now,” said Piggott.

## News

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KEEGAN HAMILTON

03.29.23