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A bump stock that attaches to a semiautomatic rifle to increase the firing rate is seen at Good Guys Gun Shop in Orem, Utah, U.S., Oct. 4, 2017. (OSV News/George Frey, Reuters)

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After the Supreme Court June 14 struck down a Trump-era federal ban on bump stocks June 14, the U.S. Senate tried to pass a ban on the devices by unanimous consent, a procedure in which the Senate considers a matter agreed to if no senator objects.

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., spearheaded the ban effort, but it failed June 18 amid objections from Republicans that the language in the measure was overly broad.

Bump stocks allow a shooter to convert a semi-automatic rifle into a weapon that can fire hundreds of rounds per minute. Under the Trump administration, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in 2018 issued a ban on them in the wake of a 2017 mass shooting at a music festival in Las Vegas, the deadliest in U.S. history, in which the shooter had bump stocks among other pieces of weaponry.

Bump stocks were invented shortly after the expiration of a 1994 ban targeting assault weapons, which expired in 2004.

In its 6-3 ruling, the high court found that the ATF exceeded its authority when it issued the ban. Justice Clarence Thomas wrote the majority opinion of the court. Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued a dissent for the minority, which she read from the bench.

In his majority opinion, Thomas wrote that while machine guns are banned under federal law, that ban is not inclusive of bump stocks as currently written, citing in part previous guidance issued by ATF that bump stocks did not qualify as "machineguns."

In a concurring opinion, Justice Samuel Alito wrote that he joined the majority because "the horrible shooting spree in Las Vegas in 2017 did not change the

statutory text or its meaning."

"That event demonstrated that a semiautomatic rifle with a bump stock can have the same lethal effect as a machinegun, and it thus strengthened the case for amending (current law)," he wrote. "But an event that highlights the need to amend a law does not itself change the law's meaning."

Alito argued there is "a simple remedy for the disparate treatment of bump stocks and machineguns. Congress can amend the law — and perhaps would have done so already if ATF had stuck with its earlier interpretation. Now that the situation is clear, Congress can act."

Sotomayor argued that the ruling will have "deadly consequences" and "hamstrings the Government's efforts to keep machineguns from gunmen like the Las Vegas shooter."

Susan Liebell, a professor of political science at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, told OSV News that state legislatures could choose to take up bump stock bans.

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"Congress can make a change in the law," she said. "But we should be clear that the states and the Congress can make changes. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia ban bump stocks. That was redundant since the federal government banned them, but not after the Supreme Court overturned the interpretation by the ATF. So, everyone should be talking about states and how they can — tomorrow — ban bump stocks. Today, the Congress is not passing much legislation at all — so the calls for Congress to act ring hollow."

In response to a May 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers, Congress passed a modest gun safety bill, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The law expanded the background check system for prospective gun buyers under 21 years old, closed a provision known as the "boyfriend loophole" by banning domestic abusers from purchasing firearms regardless of their marital status, and funded new investments in mental health resources.

While President Joe Biden has touted that legislation, he also has called for additional measures, including an assault weapons ban and universal background check legislation. Either measure faces unlikely odds in a divided Congress, where Republicans hold a narrow majority in the House, and where Democrats have a narrow majority in the Senate and would have to overcome a potential filibuster.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has called for action banning "assault weapons," a term commonly referring to military-style semi-automatic weapons capable of being fed by large capacity magazines that allow a shooter a consistent rate of fire before having to reload.

A 2020 USCCB backgrounder titled, "A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence," highlighted bishops’ letters to Congress on the issue and various statements, including a 2000 pastoral statement from the bishops, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," in which they "called for all people to work toward a culture of life, to do more to end violence in our homes, and to help victims break out of patterns of abuse."

Regarding gun violence prevention, the bishops wrote, "We support measures that control the sale and use of firearms and make them safer (especially efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children or anyone other than the owner), and we reiterate our call for sensible regulation of handguns."