

Democrats in GOP Country Shift Toward Gun Restrictions

Once considered a liability, a moderate stance on gun control is becoming an asset in spring primaries



AP PHOTO/NATI HARNIK

Kara Eastman, one of two Democrats vying to challenge House Republican incumbent Don Bacon, R-Neb., in a district centered in Omaha, Neb., speaks April 5 at rally in Omaha, Neb. Just 18 months after declaring his opposition to banning assault weapons, Nebraska Democrat Brad Ashford has changed his mind. But make no mistake, Ashford's conversion comes as he's being challenged aggressively by Eastman, an ardent gun-control advocate who's frustration with Congress failure to act is echoing throughout once safe GOP territory and illustrating the fast-emerging belief among Democrats that they cannot win in this supercharged environment without embracing gun control.

By **Thomas Beaumont**
Associated Press

OMAHA, Nebraska — Just 18 months after declaring his opposition to banning assault weapons, Nebraska Democrat Brad Ashford has changed his mind.

The former one-term congressman, now trying to win back an Omaha-area seat he lost in 2016, used to consider it futile to push for a ban while Republicans held power on Capitol Hill. But the student activism that has followed the

rampage at a school in Parkland, Florida, has changed his thinking in a way that other high-profile shootings, including two in his hometown since 2007, had not.

Ashford's conversion mirrors the one underway in his party. Not long ago, a moderate record on guns would have been considered a plus for a Democratic candidate in the GOP-leaning suburbs and conservative outskirts of Nebraska's largest city. Today, even with Ashford's reversal, it's a vulnerability that

his opponent in the May 15 Democratic primary has been quick to exploit.

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That contest, along with races in Virginia, rural Pennsylvania and

other places where gun control has been taboo, shows how far the Democratic Party has traveled on this issue. The November elections will test whether Democrats will make room for candidates who don't back all gun control measures.

“He should have been stronger on this,” said Kara Eastman, the 46-year-old political newcomer running against Ashford, a 68-year-old former Republican, for the Democratic nomination in the 2nd Congressional District. “We need leaders who are going to stand up and fight for the kids.”

Eastman, director of a children's nonprofit group and a community college board member, has focused her message on suburban women and young people. She and other progressives, energized by rallies across the country, say they the best way to turn out voters is to offer a contrast to pro-gun Republicans.

“Women have had it with what's going on,” said Crystal Rhoades, the Douglas County Democratic Party chairwoman who supports Eastman. “They're mad that they have to worry about sending their kids to school out of fear they'll be murdered.”

Polling shows there's little disagreement among Democrats on the question of stricter gun laws.

A poll last month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 69 percent of those surveyed, including 90 percent of Democrats, think gun laws in the U.S. should be tightened.

There are political risks.

The Omaha district represented by Republican Don Bacon has a

healthy number of gun owners, and that could make Eastman's call for comprehensive gun control a problem for her if she advances to the general election. The GOP-leaning district includes a portion of a rural county south of the city where many active duty and retired military personnel from Offutt

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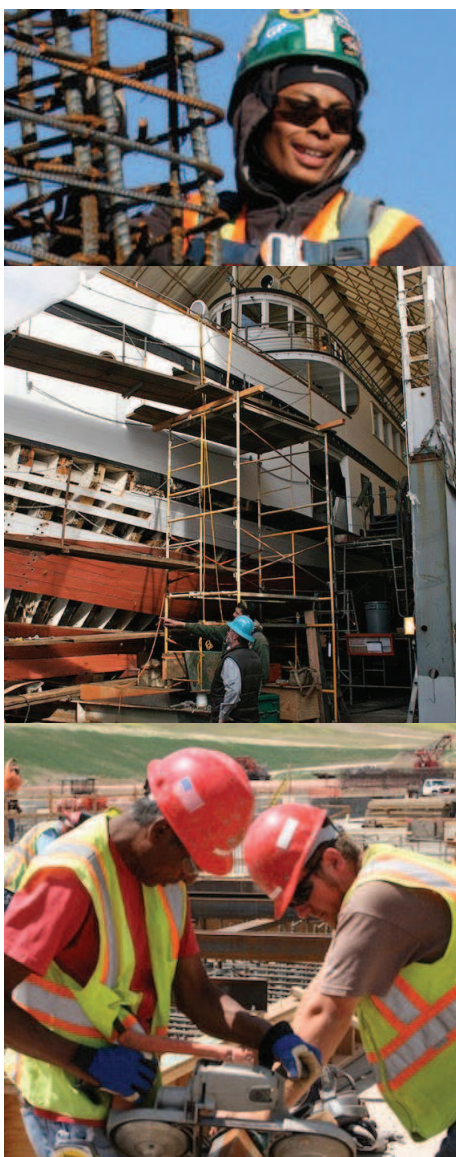


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