

# What is an ‘assault rifle’? Language to know as leaders discuss gun legislation

Grace Reader – The Hill - 060422

AUSTIN (KXAN) — There’s a push by Democrats, and President Joe Biden, to revisit the idea of an “assault weapons ban” following a shooting at a Texas elementary school where 19 students and two teachers were shot and killed.

## **But you may be wondering: what qualifies as an “assault weapon” or an “assault rifle?”**

Like other legislation that has garnered a political nickname – most recently including Texas’ abortion law, which some have referred to as the “heartbeat” law, and Florida’s legislation that prohibits talking about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools until a certain age, which opponents have called the “Don’t Say Gay” law – the terms “assault rifle” or “assault weapons” ban is highly contested, and used inconsistently, if not inaccurately.

The Associated Press Stylebook, which is used widely by journalists and news organizations, updated its guidance on weapons terms in 2020. That guidance suggested reporters avoid the terms “assault rifle,” “assault weapon,” “military-style rifle” and “modern sporting rifle” because they tend to be highly politicized.

Still, as leaders discuss how we move forward after the Uvalde tragedy, these terms have persisted in reference to weapons used to commit mass shootings, specifically in reference to AR-15-style rifles.

## **How gun groups define ‘assault rifles’**

The National Rifle Association claims to use the U.S. Army definition on their website, defining an assault rifle as the following: “A selective-fire rifle chambered for a cartridge of intermediate power. If applied to any semi-automatic firearm regardless of its cosmetic similarity to a true assault rifle, the term is incorrect.” The NRA defines an “assault weapon” simply as a weapon used directly in assault.

An AR-15, the style of gun used in the Uvalde mass shooting and by a shooter at a Tulsa hospital, is a semi-automatic firearm, meaning only a single cartridge is fired when the trigger is pulled. Meanwhile, new automatic weapons, ones that fire continuously when one holds down the trigger, are not legal to be sold in the United States to civilians.

The Firearm Industry Trade Association (NSSF) also rejects the idea that AR-15s, or similar semi-automatic weapons, are by definition “assault rifles” or “assault weapons.” NSSF refers to them instead as “modern sporting rifles,” which again, AP Style similarly warns against when referring to gun crimes or legislation.

“If someone calls an AR-15-style rifle an ‘assault weapon,’ then they’ve been duped by an agenda. The only real way to define what is an ‘assault weapon’ is politically, as in how any given law chooses to define the term — this is why the states that have banned this category of semiautomatic firearms have done so with very different definitions,” the NSSF website said.

Note: The “AR” in AR-15 does not stand for automatic rifle or assault rifle, but instead refers to the company ArmaLite that first developed the gun.

## **Automatic rifles are already illegal – mostly**

By definition, in the gun community, an “assault rifle” generally refers to a military weapon that is fully automatic. The rifles that Democrats and the president are looking to ban do not fall into that technical definition.

According to NSSF, automatic firearms have been “severely restricted from civilian ownership” since 1934. That’s when the National Firearms Act was signed into law.

After the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Gun Control Act of 1968 was also passed, according to ATF. Part of that act was that “it shall be unlawful for any person to transfer or possess a machinegun.”

Some people may have automatic weapons, or machineguns, that were “grandfathered in.” The transfer of those weapons is highly regulated by ATF and those weapons are often expensive and inaccessible. Those are not the weapons being used in highly-publicized mass shootings like the one in Uvalde, Texas.

### **Federal judge hears arguments in Texas gun owner’s bump stock lawsuit**

Of note, after a mass shooting in Las Vegas where the shooter used bump stocks on his semi-automatic rifles, President Trump made it so that bump stocks, and like devices that allow a semiautomatic weapon to operate like an automatic weapon, are not allowed under the Gun Control Act and National Firearms Act.

### **The 1994 ‘Assault Weapons’ Ban**

Although gun groups do not define semi-automatic rifles as “assault rifles,” the semi-automatic weapons we’re talking about today were banned under the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban. President Biden has often referred to that ban after the Uvalde shooting.

According to a U.S. Department of Justice brief, the ban prohibited certain pistols, rifles and shotguns, along with “features test weapons” (meaning semi-automatic weapons with features like detachable magazines or threaded barrels for attaching silencers). The law also banned magazines designed to hold more than 10 rounds.

In that ban, specific semi-automatic weapons were listed, including the Colt AR-15, Baretta AR-70 and the Avtomat Kalashnikov (AK).

While specific legislation may be labeled an “assault weapons ban,” it may actually be written to include semi-automatic weapons, which are not “assault rifles” by definition within gun communities. Democrats have further defined legislation to say “semi-automatic assault weapon,” as was the case in a 2013 attempt.

At the end of the day, it will be in the details of the legislation that a determination is made as to what the word “assault” means when referring to rifles and handguns. Meanwhile, a politically neutral term to describe the guns used in recent mass shootings is “semi-automatic rifle” or simply “rifle.”