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How Florida's GOP Senate president angered Trump Jr., the NRA and incurred the wrath of the right

By SKYLER SWISHER SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | JAN 27, 2020 | 10:01 AM | TALLAHASSEE



Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, broke ranks on guns. Then he incurred the wrath of his own party. (Steve Cannon/AP)

As Florida kicked off its 2020 legislative session this month, Senate President Bill Galvano broke ranks with the National Rifle Association and threw his political muscle behind expanding gun background checks.

Then the Republican leader found himself under attack from members of his own party. Their charge: Galvano was nothing more than a fake Republican. Suddenly, the respected Senate president had been transformed into a "gun-grabbing" villain.

Much of the anger stemmed from a \$500,000 donation Galvano's political committee had received from Everytown for Gun Safety, a gun control group founded and largely financed by Democratic presidential candidate Mike Bloomberg.

Donald Trump Jr., the president's son, took aim at the mild-mannered state senator with a long record of GOP service, telling The Daily Wire that the last thing Florida needs is "a liberal, gun-grabbing Bloomberg minion." Conservative Andrew Pollack, whose daughter was murdered in the Parkland school shooting, accused Galvano of exploiting his daughter's death to push an anti-gun agenda.

"Bill Galvano might as well switch parties and call himself an anti-gun liberal," Pollack wrote.

Andrew Pollack @AndrewPollackFL
No one can call themselves a Republican and accept \$500,000 from mini Mike Bloomberg.
Bill Galvano might as well switch parties and call himself an anti-gun liberal.
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Trump Jr Blasts FL Republican Bill Galvano Over Past Support...
Donald Trump Jr. slammed incoming Florida Senate President Bill Galvano, a Republican, for siding with extreme anti-Second Amendment.
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North Florida's U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, considered to be one of the "Trumpiest" members of Congress, chimed in on Twitter: "Republicans. Taking money from Bloomberg. In Florida. To pass gun control. No. No. No."

The episode highlights the political price Republicans can incur by reaching across the aisle and crossing more conservative elements in their party. In the era of social media, the punishment can be doled out quickly through Twitter accounts with hundreds of thousands and even millions of followers. The more extreme the post, the more viral it becomes.

Galvano, 53, who represents the Bradenton area, will leave the Senate later this year because of term limits. Galvano said Wednesday he knew the gun bill would be difficult given how polarizing the issue is. Polls, though, show the overwhelming majority of Floridians want universal background checks.

"We have had objections or concerns raised on both sides of the issue," Galvano said. "I have a lot of faith ... in the process, and we'll see where it goes from there."

The bill (**SB 7028**) does not include any "gun grabbing." It seeks to close the so-called "gun-show loophole," requiring background checks for gun sales conducted in public. Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and seven other counties already have that requirement on the books. People who sell a firearm privately wouldn't have to run a background check, but they would have to keep a notarized record of the sale, including a signed affidavit that the purchaser meets the requirements to own a gun. Failure to make the record would be a misdemeanor offense.

Federally licensed firearms dealers already are required to run background checks.

State Sen. Joe Gruters, who is chairman of the Florida GOP, said **he's a "solid no"** on the bill. Galvano's colleagues — Gov. Ron DeSantis and House Speaker José Oliva — haven't embraced the gun bill, but they are defending Galvano's record.

Oliva said he has served with Galvano for nine years, and Galvano is not a "RINO (Republican in name only)."

"The pile-on was entirely unnecessary," Oliva said, adding that he doesn't expect the gun bill to pass in the House.



Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, has come under attack from some in his own party for not opposing a bill to expand gun background checks in Florida. (Steve Cannon/AP)

Galvano has a history of supporting conservative causes that include banning sanctuary cities, lowering taxes and expanding school choice programs, DeSantis said.

Sen. Manny Diaz, R-Hialeah, dismissed the notion that the backlash showcases a divide in the Republican Party. He said the comments directed at Galvano aren't warranted.

"As far as a divide in the Republican Party, I think that sometimes gets exaggerated," he said. "There are individual senators who have individual views. ... We are made up of individuals who have (different) views and life experiences that we bring to the table. It seems to be a lot of click bait."

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Galvano's legacy also will include **legislation passed after the 2018 Parkland school shooting**, a compromise he helped broker that raised the age to buy a rifle from 18 to 21, required a school safety officer be stationed on every campus, boosted funding for school-based mental health, and created Florida's red-flag law.

Fred Guttenberg, a gun-control advocate whose daughter was killed in the Parkland shooting, said Galvano should be "honored" and "commended" for having the courage to take on the powerful gun lobby.

"He is trying to do one simple thing — be a part of making sure more Floridians don't die of gun violence," Guttenberg said. "There is not a single thing he has gotten behind that is an affront to the Second Amendment. ... They are using amped-up rhetoric to tell a lie."

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State Rep. Dan Daley, D-Coral Springs, said Galvano shouldn't worry about the backlash because the majority of Floridians support expanded background checks. A Florida Atlantic University poll conducted shortly after the Feb. 14, 2018, Parkland school shooting found 87% of Florida voters supported universal background checks.



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"I think he'll be pleased with his place in history when he looks back," Daley said.

Galvano **toured Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School** shortly after the Parkland massacre. He saw fresh blood stains, and a school riddled with bullet holes.

"I will carry that experience with me for the rest of my life," Galvano wrote in a letter to the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

Information from the News Service of Florida was used in this report.

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