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Obama woos millennials on guns

The president's week-long gun control campaign — including Thursday's televised town hall — is aimed largely at converting young people.

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When it comes to promoting gun control, President Barack Obama is aiming this week's messaging campaign at millennials, the generation of young adults who helped put and keep him in office.

What makes the generation a prime target for the president isn't their opinion on guns; polls show millennials split down the middle on gun control, about in line with older generations. It's that unlike their elders, millennials appear more persuadable on the issue because even after seven years in office, this president still holds remarkable sway with them.

“The Obama administration might have success in that he has a lot of credibility among this group,” said Emily Ekins, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who has studied millennials' social views.

Millennials have been the driving force behind many of the cultural changes likely to form Obama's legacy, including expanded gay rights, acceptance of immigrants and a more forgiving criminal justice system. They also disproportionately vote Democratic and are less likely to own a gun than older generations, polls consistently show.

“That's why the audience I'm speaking to today is so fundamentally critical,” said Vice President Joe Biden in an [interview](#) with NowThis, a news organization that makes videos designed to be shared on social media. “You are the people in this country responsible for the cultural changes that take place in this country.”

But millennials are roughly in agreement with their parents when it comes to the broad questions of guns — and their support for gun rights is up significantly compared to people their age 20 years ago.

An October Gallup poll showed that 49 percent of adults under 35 think the laws for firearms sales should be more strict. It's the same for adults ages 35-54, and even more seniors support tighter gun control, 56 percent.

A July Pew poll found that protecting gun rights is more important than controlling gun ownership for 49 percent of adults age 18 to 29. For Gen Xers up to age 49, gun rights are a priority for 44 percent, Baby Boomers are at 49 percent and 48 percent of seniors over 65 share that view.

But adults under 30 haven't always been so evenly split. In Pew polls conducted between 1993 and 2007, young adults were the least likely of any age group to prioritize gun rights; their support ranged from 21 percent (2000) to 37 percent (2007). The preference for gun rights didn't crack 40 percent until 2008. It's risen fairly steadily since, aside from a dip in 2012, and the current crop of young adults support gun rights at historically high rates for people their age.

Young adults' social and cultural tolerance may come from an emphasis on individual autonomy that makes their views on guns less predictable, pollsters say.

"On gun rights, it's tricky," said Ekins. Compared to other generations, "millennials are the most likely to say that individuals should make their own choices."

They tend to be torn between both sides' arguments, compelled by the idea that people should be allowed to own guns as well as a desire to help people harmed by them, said Ekins, author of a sweeping report on millennials' political views based on a 2014 Reason-Rupe survey of 2000 adults under 30. "I think that's one reason we see them right in the middle of the pack," she said.

On banning assault weapons — a top, if unreachable priority of Obama and other Democrats — young adults are disproportionately against it. A Pew survey found only 49 percent back such a ban. Support appears to grow with age, up to 63 percent of adults over 65.

The latest Pew survey also shows how millennials stand out from the rest of the political coalition that Obama has relied on, which also includes women (55 percent back gun control over gun rights) and minorities (72 percent of blacks side with gun control, as do 75 percent of Hispanics). Adults under 30, however, are evenly split.

That presents a challenge for the White House as it works to rally that coalition to confront the intensity of the National Rifle Association. Even though more than 80 percent of Americans backed expanding background checks in the wake of the Newtown massacre, the gun lobby was able to kill legislation to do that in 2013 by relying on a well-organized network of activists.

Support for background checks is still equally high across age and demographic groups, and the White House is trying to rally support for the president's latest executive actions to expand them — and to pressure Congress to do more.

One of that effort's youngest leaders, Sarah Clements, 19, was directly inspired by the Sandy Hook shooting: her mother, a teacher at the elementary school, lived through it.

"A lot of folks in my generation have a misconception of what our gun laws actually are," said Clements, a Georgetown University student who is working to form gun violence prevention groups on other campuses. Many assume, she said, that background checks are already in place for all online sales. (They're not, unless the seller has a license.)

“That gap in the polling is actually an educational gap,” she said.

Even when there is a genuine difference in opinion, Obama has good reason to think he can pull some millennials who’ve strayed from him on gun issues back into his fold, according to Ekins.

“One thing that makes them different on gun control issues is they don’t assume bad intentions from political authorities,” she said, noting surveys showing millennials’ were least likely to view politicians as exploiting the Newtown tragedy for political gain and that they tend to be more trusting of government than other generations. So Republican candidates warnings about how Obama is coming for your guns, and NRA missives about disrespect for the Second Amendment might not be compelling for them.

Millennials also just really like Obama, and they blame the political system — not him — for areas where he hasn’t lived up to expectations, Ekins said, citing studies of young adults conducted by Harvard’s Institute of Politics.

“He could have some success persuading them but I think the main hurdle he faces is this is just not that important to them,” she said.

The White House is working to change that over Obama’s week-long rollout of his executive actions on gun control. In addition to Biden’s NowThis interview, there have been multiple Twitter Q-and-A sessions with top officials like senior adviser Valerie Jarrett and Press Secretary Josh Earnest. Obama is heading to George Mason University in Virginia for a televised town-hall session on Thursday (though it’s not clear how many students will be there since the event is invite-only). On Wednesday, the White House hosted a press call with Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), a favorite among young progressives, and some of the House’s most junior Democrats: Joaquin Castro (Tex.), 41; Seth Moulton (Mass.), 37; Patrick Murphy (Fla.), 32 and Ruben Gallego (Ariz.).

“I’m a young 36; we have a couple of members here that are very young,” Gallego said. “We’re here because we’re going to be in this fight for a long time.”

The NRA is also stepping up its efforts to draw in millennials. It already has 4.6 million Facebook likes and almost 320,000 followers on Twitter, and it put its relatively new SnapChat account to use during October’s Democratic debate — where Hillary Clinton cast herself as a more loyal supporter of gun control than Sen. Bernie Sanders — with a special NRA filter.

Then again, it’s never been about the raw numbers of supporters for the NRA. The intensity of gun-rights activists has always been their advantage.

“It’s not the legislators we know or the money that we might spend on advertising our campaigns,” said NRA spokesman Lars Dalseide. “It’s the fact that the people that support us are very politically active.”