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5 on 45: How a new generation of activists could shape US politics

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

FREY: I'm William Frey, I'm a senior fellow with the Metropolitan Policy Program here at the Brookings Institution. The children's crusade against gun violence stemming from the Florida shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February the 14th, appears to be more than a transitory movement. Already sweeping cities across the country, pointing toward a March 24th march in Washington, this groundswell of student support, reminiscent of protests against the Vietnam War in the 1960s, could hold long term consequences for national politics. Especially if the President and the Republican led Congress continue to hold fast to their NRA backed stance against meaningful gun control. This post-millennial movement could solidify already strong youthful support for the Democratic Party.

Such support among young people was evident in the past three presidential elections when millennial generation young adults showed the highest democratic voting margins among all groups for Democratic candidates. By 2028 post- millennials, now under age 20, will comprise a non-trivial portion of the voting age population. However prior to that, their clout as activists could be felt toward energizing voting turnout and choices in the upcoming congressional and presidential elections. This would draw from the strength of this sustained movement. There are savviness with social media and relationships with their older voting age associates and parents who themselves are relatively young adult Millennials and Gen Xers. One aspect of this upcoming voting age generation, is their unique racial diversity. Nearly half of post- millennials are part of racial minority groups that have favored Democratic candidates in the last three presidential elections. In fact, though whites as a group voted Republican in each election, young adult whites voted less strongly Republican than their elders in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the 2012 election of Barack Obama.

After having voted Democratic for Obama in 2008, the political leanings of post-millennials themselves favor the Democrats. A 2017 survey taken by PRRI indicated that 57 percent of persons aged 15 to 24 have favorable views of the Democratic Party, compared with 31 percent in their views of the Republican Party. Yet among minorities of these people, favorable views of the Democratic Party are much higher. Eighty-four percent for blacks, 76 percent for Asians, and 64 percent for Hispanics. White young people were more evenly divided with 46 percent favoring the Democratic Party, and 43

percent favoring the Republican Party. The strength of Democratic support among minorities is significant in light of the way minority percentages of the post-millennial population vary across states. Minorities comprise more than half of post-millennial living in 13 states, plus Washington D.C., and more than 40 percent in an additional 11 states. Among these heavily minority post-millennial states are the presidential election swing states of Nevada, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, and the near swing state of Texas. Clearly strong activism among post-millennials can be important in both near and long term elections. While most post-millennials are not yet a voting age, some indication of how they might vote can be seen from a large survey of voting preferences among Grade K to 12 schoolchildren by Scholastic News taken prior to the 2016 election. The results show a popular vote 52 percent to 35 percent win for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton over Republican Donald Trump. As well as a resounding 436 to 99 win for Clinton in the mock Electoral College election. Clinton won the South and West swing states that were mentioned above, in addition to northern swing states, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

Of course this is a crude indication at best of the long term political preference of these elementary and secondary student post-millennials. But it says something about their predispositions, as many of them are now involved with great fervor in rallies and marches around the country about an issue that they see as impacting them directly. These young people will be paying close attention in the coming weeks and months to the actions or inactions taken by their representatives in the U.S. Congress and by the president himself. This time feels different from earlier movements about gun violence, and feels unlike earlier student movements in general. As of now, Democrats have the opportunity to retain the support of this demographically significant generation for future elections. But both parties would be well advised to take their concerns seriously.

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