

Study: Generational divide over climate action a myth

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Older people are just as likely as younger people to recognize the need for action on climate change and to say they're willing to make big sacrifices to protect the environment, suggesting claims of a generational divide over the future of the planet may be exaggerated, according to a new UK study marking the publication of the book *Generations* by Professor Bobby Duffy.

The research, by the Policy Institute at King's College London and New Scientist magazine, finds that around seven in 10 people from all generations surveyed say [climate change](#), biodiversity loss and other environmental issues are big enough problems that they justify significant changes to people's lifestyles, with no real difference in agreement between Baby Boomers (74%)—the oldest [generation](#) polled—and Gen Z (71%), the youngest.

Similarly, there are almost identical levels of agreement across the generations that people themselves are willing to make big changes to their own lifestyle to reduce the impact of [climate](#) change: there is virtually no difference between the proportion of Baby Boomers (68%), Gen X (66%), Millennials (65%) and Gen Z (70%) who say they're prepared to make such a sacrifice.

Where there is some generational difference in views is on whether environmental concerns should take precedence over economic growth: 66% of Gen Z and 57% of Millennials agree environmental concerns should take priority over the economy, compared with 44% of Baby Boomers and 45% of Gen X.

But despite this, older generations are still more likely to agree than disagree that the environment should come first—for example, 24% of Baby Boomers think we shouldn't prioritize climate change over the economic growth, far lower than the 44% who think we should.

Younger people are more likely to be fatalistic about climate change

While [younger people](#) are often thought to be most active on climate issues, they are actually more likely than older generations to say there's no point in changing their behavior to tackle climate change because it

won't make any difference anyway: 33% of Gen Z and 32% of Millennials feel this way, compared with 22% of Gen X and 19% of Baby Boomers.

There is an even bigger gap between different generations when it comes to rejection of this idea: 61% of UK Baby Boomers disagree that there's no point altering their behavior—compared with 41% of Millennials.

Public perception is that older people are most likely to think changing their behavior is pointless

Half the UK public (wrongly) believe that older people are most resigned about what they can do to save the environment.

49% think Baby Boomers and those in older generations are most likely to say there's no point changing their behavior to tackle climate change, compared with 30% who think Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z are most inclined to feel this way. But the reality is that these younger generations are more likely to be fatalistic about this.

The public think that younger generations are most likely to have boycotted certain products for socially conscious reasons in the last year, with 27% guessing that Gen Z have done so and 23% saying the same about Millennials—much higher than the proportions who guess that Gen X (9%) and Baby Boomers (8%) have done so.

But according to previous research conducted as part of the European Social Survey, it is actually [older generations](#) who are most likely to have carried out such boycotts: for example, in 2018, 31% of UK Baby Boomers said they had boycotted a product as a way to improve things or prevent things going wrong—more than double the 12% of Gen Z who reported doing so.

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said: "There are many myths about the differences between generations—but none are more destructive than the claim that it's only the young who care about climate change. When Time magazine named Greta Thunberg their person of the year in 2019, they called her a 'standard bearer in generational battle,' which is reflective of the unthinking ageism that has crept into some portrayals of the environmental movement. But, as I examine in my new book, *Generations*, these stereotypes collapse when we look at the evidence.

"There is virtually no difference in views between generations on the importance of climate action, and all say they are willing to make big sacrifices to achieve this. What's more, [older people](#) are actually less likely than the young to feel that it's pointless to act in environmentally conscious ways because it won't make a difference. Parents and grandparents care deeply about the legacy they're leaving for their children and grandchildren—not just their house or jewelry, but the state of the planet. If we want a greener future, we need to act together, uniting the generations, rather than trying to drive an imagined wedge between them."

Richard Webb, executive editor of *New Scientist*, said: "There's been a lot of talk about the attitude of different generations towards the pressing issues of the day, not least the existential challenge of climate change and other aspects of our impact on the planet, but there's precious little in the way of hard data. At *New Scientist* we're all about informed debate, which was why we were pleased to join forces with Bobby and his team to get some facts on the table."

"The findings of the survey provide food for thought for policymakers ahead of the crucial COP26 climate summit in Glasgow in November. Far from being an obsession of a young, activist few, support for measures that put our lives on a more sustainable footing as we look to

building back from the COVID-19 pandemic command broad support across generations. They could be a route to increased engagement among groups increasingly disillusioned with politics."

More information: Generations: Does When You're Born Shape Who You Are? atlantic-books.co.uk/book/generations/

Who cares about climate change? Attitudes across the generations: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... t-climate-change.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...t-climate-change.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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