

Governing for our descendants

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Social scientists worry that too often we think only of ourselves.

"There's been an increasing recognition that over the last few decades the economy and society have become incredibly focused on the individual, to the detriment of our social fabric," says Lily L. Tsai, the

Ford Professor of Political Science at MIT.

Tsai, who is also the director and founder of the MIT Governance LAB (MIT GOV/LAB) and is the current chair of the MIT faculty, is interested in distributive justice—allocating resources fairly across different groups of people. Typically, that might mean splitting resources between different socioeconomic groups, or between different nations.

But in an essay in the journal *Daedalus*, Tsai discusses policies and institutions that consider the needs of people in the [future](#) when determining who deserves what resources. That is, they broaden our concept of a collective society to include people who haven't been born yet and will bear the brunt of climate change in the future.

Some groups of people do actually consider the needs of future people when making decisions. For example, Wales has a Future Generations Commissioner who monitors whether the government's actions compromise the needs of future generations. Norway's Petroleum Fund invests parts of its oil profits for [future generations](#). And MIT's endowment "is explicitly charged" with ensuring that future students are just as well-off as current students, Tsai says.

But in other ways, societies place a lower value on the needs of their descendants. For example, to determine the total return on an investment, governments use something called a discount rate that places more value in the present return on the investment than the future return on the investment. And humans are currently using up the planet's resources at an unsustainable rate, which in turn is raising [global temperatures](#) and making earth less habitable for our children and our children's children.

The purpose of Tsai's essay is not to suggest how, say, governments

might set discount rates that more fairly consider future people. "I'm interested in the things that make people care about setting the discount rate lower and therefore valuing the future more," she says. "What are the moral commitments and the kinds of cultural practices or [social institutions](#) that make people care more?"

Tsai thinks the volatility of the modern world and anxiety about the future—say, the future habitability of the planet—make it harder for people to consider the needs of their descendants. In Tsai's 2021 book "When People Want Punishment," she argues that this volatility and anxiety make people seek out more stability and order.

"The more uncertain the future is, the less you can be sure that saving for the future is going to be valuable to anybody," she says. So, part of the solution could be making people feel less unsettled and more stable, which Tsai says can be done with institutions we already have, like social welfare systems.

She also thinks the rate at which things change in the modern world has hurt our ability to consider the long view. "We no longer think in terms of decades and centuries the way in which we used to," she says.

MIT GOV/LAB is working with partners to figure out how to experiment in a lab setting with developing democratic practices or institutions that might better distribute resources between current people and future people. That would allow researchers to assess if structuring interactions or [decision-making](#) in a particular way encourages people to save more for future people.

Tsai thinks getting people to care about their descendants is a problem researchers can work on, and that humans have a natural inclination to consider the future. People have a desire to be entrusted with things of importance, to leave a legacy, and for conservation.

"I think many humans actually naturally conserve things that are valuable and scarce, and there's a strange way in which society has eroded that human instinct in favor of a culture of consumption," she says. We need to "re-imagine the kinds of practices that encourage conservation rather than consumption," she adds.

More information: Lily L. Tsai, Taking Responsibility for Tomorrow: Remaking Collective Governance as Political Ancestors, *Daedalus* (2023). [DOI: 10.1162/daed_a_01986](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01986)

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