

The first climate strikes had an influence on Swiss residents, study finds

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A study by EPFL researchers found that Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future climate strikes have influenced the environmental behavior of Swiss residents.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg made the headlines in September 2019 with her Fridays for Future climate strikes, in which some 4 million students in 150 countries protested to demand action on climate change. Frustrated with the slow pace of political leaders' response to global warming, these students carried out peaceful protests to express their anger and call attention to the steady increase in greenhouse gas emissions. So far, most of the press coverage and research on Fridays for Future have focused on figures involved in the movement, while few studies have examined how the movement affected society at large.

Livia Fritz, an EPFL researcher studying the social and political aspects of [climate change](#), decided to investigate the societal impact of Fridays for Future through a study carried out with colleagues at the Laboratory on Human-Environment Relations in Urban Systems (HERUS) in EPFL's School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering (ENAC). Their findings appear in [Sustainability Science](#).

"We looked specifically at people in Switzerland who didn't take part in the protests," says Fritz. "We wanted to see if the movement resulted in concrete changes in their behavior." To conduct their study, the scientists ran a survey of Swiss residents in October and November 2019, just after the peak of the [climate](#) strikes. It included general questions about respondents' environmental habits as well as more specific questions about changes following the strikes.

The survey was carried out online among 1,206 people aged 18 to 74 and living in the French- or German-speaking parts of the country. The respondents were representative of the Swiss population as a whole in terms of gender and age, but those with a higher level of education were overrepresented.

Transportation, purchasing habits and recycling

"We analyzed the responses using [statistical methods](#), and collected qualitative information through open questions where people could describe exactly how they've changed their behavior," says Fritz. When asked about their views of Thunberg and Fridays for Future—on a scale ranging from "very negative" to "very positive"—the majority of respondents said they looked favorably on both her and the movement. Did that translate into concrete changes in their everyday habits? Yes, according to nearly 30% of respondents.

"Our study looked only at the perception people have of their behavior—we didn't go out and verify their statements," says Fritz. "But our findings showed that people have become more aware of how their behavior affects the environment and that significant shifts are under way at an individual level."

Most of the perceived changes were in three areas of the respondents' daily lives: transportation, purchasing habits and recycling. For instance, people said they now tended to look for alternatives to driving to work; to choose vacation destinations closer to home so they don't have to fly; to seek out local, [organic produce](#); and to eat more vegetarian meals. They also reported making an effort to reduce waste—especially plastic waste. Most of those who noted that they'd changed their [behavior](#) were already sensitive to environmental issues before the movement and had a higher level of education.

"Our study found that this type of civic engagement through [collective action](#) can have a direct effect on society, confirming that such action is warranted," says Fritz. "We also saw that changes made at the individual level can lead to broader societal change provided they're supported by political action at the same time. Both types of impetus are needed if we're to achieve long-term results on the time scale need to mitigate [global warming](#)."

More information: Livia Fritz et al, Perceived impacts of the Fridays for Future climate movement on environmental concern and behaviour in Switzerland, *Sustainability Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11625-023-01348-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01348-7)

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