

# What image of the year 2050 do young people alive today have?

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Literature describing the image of the year 2050 held by children and young people alive today is not easy to find. Children particularly are relatively infrequently asked for their views. There is less of a shortage of literature that posits them as the principal victims of the dystopian direction in which, according to the consensus of scientific work, we are heading. A newer and now rapidly growing literature has now begun to portray young people as the victims of anxiety. Often absent from these discourses are attempts to ascertain their values regarding what matters to them.



This might be regarded as an omission of high significance since the most recent evidence points unequivocally toward values and in older youth, consequent political beliefs as the principal determinants of environmental behaviour. Values in older adolescents have been found more influential than traditional factors of identity such as age or gender.<sup>1</sup>

The now rapidly growing literature that has begun to portray children as the victims of anxiety not infrequently identifies government inaction as a main source of their feelings of helplessness or anger.<sup>2</sup> Anxiety may not be an entirely bad thing. A large-scale meta-analysis of 94 studies by Kuhner et al considers the case that anxiety may induce despair and hopelessness or alternatively may motivate positive action and pro-environmental behaviour which can have positive outcomes for anxiety levels.<sup>3</sup> They conclude that the latter generally outweighs the former. In their study those with positive anxiety were more likely to be younger individuals, women and people with left-leaning political views. Individuals “highly concerned about the future or with *strong environmental values and attitudes*” (my italics) were also included in this group.

Surprisingly, political allegiance in another study has even been found to override actual experience of disaster.<sup>4</sup> Arguably a focus on “eco-anxiety” diverts attention from young people’s operative values<sup>a</sup> and the consequent actions they may take as they move into adulthood and gain the power to influence the governments of which they were critical as adolescents. Value as a reason for action was the topic of my thesis, published in 1988. As reported elsewhere on this site, the children studied for that work during the mid-1990s readily expressed concern about popular environmental topics such as deforestation, species loss, or the hole in the ozone layer (often mistakenly believed to be resulting in global warming). At the same time, assessment of their values and the actions that would likely arise from these predicted that, as adults, these children would become net contributors to the problems they had expressed concern about.

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<sup>a</sup> Operative values differ from expressed values in that they are determined by observation of what people do as opposed to what they say.

Thirty years later, that is indeed where we are. The values of that generation, now in their forties, have not translated into actions that will mitigate climate change to the degree required by response to an “emergency”, if emergency is understood as a situation that requires immediate action at the highest level of priority. Indeed, this generation of adults, concerned about “the environment” as children elects governments that, whilst recognising the need for a degree of mitigation, fail to act at a level commensurate with “emergency”. The situation is ongoing regardless of which political party is in power for the simple reason that governments are constrained by the priorities of an electoral majority which does not itself understand the meaning of “emergency” in relation to climate. In asking what image of 2050 the current generation of children hold, I am therefore asking whether the children of the 2020s in any way hold substantially different values to the children of the 1990s. Does the way children see themselves as adults living in the world beyond 2050 differ from the present sufficiently to motivate action, either in personal behaviour or at the ballot box?

A paper advocating the setting up of “CRAGS” (Children’s Advisory Groups) was probably not wrong to claim that it “makes sense that younger people are more likely to challenge a conservative status quo than their parents and grandparents, who are perhaps more likely to be comfortably established within it”<sup>5</sup>. However, one might legitimately ask how it might be that children are in any position to give advice. They might advise that they are fearful or anxious about climate change, or that they believe the action of world governments is insufficient, but they are hardly able to give detailed scientific advice to those governments about what they should be doing. That role is in any case admirably fulfilled by the IPCC. Those papers that have asked children their views have, unsurprisingly, unleashed torrents of criticism of the governments and the adults that have elected them. The proponents of CRAG seem to have been unduly influenced by the media attention (including legacy media) given to Greta Thunberg and the FFF (Fridays for the Future) protests. Whilst this has been considerable,<sup>b</sup> the actual impact on the values of the voting population has not been sufficient to change the position established in 1998 and there is no acknowledgement of the weak association between age and a rightward political drift known to exist<sup>6</sup>.

Asking children for their views is not the same as analysing their values. A deeper and more sober analysis based upon values is found in a thorough review of international studies published in 2015 by Adam Corner and colleagues.<sup>7</sup> Their paper refers to a “robust body of evidence documenting the relationship between the values that people hold and their views about climate change”. Willingness to embrace climate change mitigation strategies is associated with “self-transcendent values” which are in turn associated with left-leaning political inclinations whereas the holding of self-enhancing values such as wealth and status is associated with right-leaning political inclinations generally antithetical to climate mitigation. Although young people in the 12-25 age group were more inclined to left-leaning inclinations than older voters this was somewhat tempered by a tendency by those same young people to place comfort, ease and luxury above self-transcendent values, apparently indicating little change from the position in 1998 which was admirably summarised by the comment “I know that my car is bad for the environment, but it’s warm and comfortable so I still use it”.<sup>8</sup>

The Corner et al analysis found evidence that young people with better scientific education were more likely to believe in the necessity of climate change mitigation and engage in self-transcendent behaviours themselves. However, these were a minority and the analysis also found that scientific knowledge of the topic was slightly less amongst 12 to 25-year-olds than

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<sup>b</sup> The associated mass mobilization of over six million people across 150 countries on the 20th of September, three days before the UN Climate Change has been considered the largest climate protest in world history.

amongst the whole adult population. Scientific misconceptions amongst the young were at least as widespread in 2015 as in 1998. All in all, there was little change between 1998 and 2015. Translated into the voting intentions so necessary to result in governments that might take the strong action young people regard as lacking, the very same constituency was at least as likely in 2015 as 1998 to support political agendas in which climate mitigation is given lower priority than the perennial concerns with health, cost of living and “the economy”. This was in 2015. Is there any evidence of what we might call a Thunberg/Monbiot effect between 2015 and the present (2026)? It is not shown in voting intention polls where the topic of immigration has risen significantly in the agenda to assume a higher place than climate mitigation. This may be economic nonsense and the result of scapegoating by most if not all political parties,<sup>9</sup> but if it hands power to populist parties that deny the urgency of climate mitigation, we have probably gone backwards since 2015.

Evidence, not only that this is so, but that it is part of a trend that fluctuates with economic conditions is found in another large-scale international study by Katrin Uba and colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Unusually, this was not a cross-sectional study. 3656 young people aged between 18 and 34 from nine European countries<sup>c</sup> were questioned over two “waves” beginning respectively in 2018 and 2019. This allowed changes of priority to be identified, and a clear inverse relationship was found between economic wellbeing and climate concern. Experience of “economic strain” was seen to be associated with intolerance of immigration and hostility to left wing agenda such as the redistribution of wealth. During times when significant numbers of young people experience economic hardship in one form or another, positive responses and expressed intentions toward climate mitigation decline. That is the situation in which we currently find ourselves. Many younger people face poorer economic prospects and the need to tackle items such as “cost of living”, health and housing push environment and climate mitigation into the background.

However, even amongst the less economically challenged, voting for policies that placed environmental mitigation as a sufficiently high priority to achieve the climate mitigation thought necessary by science appeared no more likely in the 2020s than the 1990s. This has much to do with the question I addressed in my previous essay, the perception of time and the ordering of priorities according to immediate needs. Nepras et al were amongst several researchers to find that, whilst primary aged children do worry about climate change, shorter term risks are accorded more urgency. Another study of older children similarly found that short-term risks such as meeting basic needs and dealing with criminality are priorities over risks perceived (increasingly wrongly) as long-term such as climate change.<sup>11</sup>

The problem then is not that the threat from climate change is denied, but that mitigation at the scale needed is never able to rise high enough in the list of needs to occupy a sufficient political priority, even when left-leaning governments that recognise the need are in power. I quote directly from the Uba et al paper to demonstrate the similarity with voter priorities of previous decades. Respondents were asked to choose priorities from the following list:

- Inequality
- Corruption
- Unemployment
- economic situation
- rising prices/ inflation
- Government debt
- health and social security

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<sup>c</sup> France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

- crime
- taxation
- pensions
- the education system
- immigration
- housing
- the environment
- climate and energy issues
- terrorism other (please specify)

The most frequently chosen issues at both waves were unemployment (25% in wave I, 21% in wave II) and immigration (20% in wave I, 15% in wave II).<sup>12</sup> As the authors observe, changing the selection from, e.g. climate to unemployment does not mean a respondent is no longer generally concerned over climate change, it means that while they might still be concerned about it climate loses its relative importance at this particular time point.

The implications of this are considered by Hansen, Taylor and Knowles in their 2025 paper on youth political engagement and environmental behaviour across four European countries.<sup>13</sup> They cite an influential analysis by Levy et al that stresses the fact that the problem of anthropogenic climate change we now face is political, not scientific.<sup>14</sup> The science, whilst perpetually developing and never conclusive is well-known. What is lacking is sufficient understanding of why despite the widespread availability of this scientific knowledge, governments continue to be restrained in their response to the “emergency”. Hansen et al found a positive relationship between civic engagement and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.<sup>15</sup> However, they were unable to reach a clear conclusion in favour of civic engagement since patterns differed markedly across the four countries they studied. Critical views of the political system were associated with pro-environmental attitudes in four countries but translated weakly in pro-environmental behaviours in only two of them, Spain and Sweden. Their overall conclusion was that policy makers should focus on increasing student civic engagement, surely something of an irony since students are so generally critical of policy makers.

I was reaching the end of this essay on the day that the UK government’s climate change committee (CCC) published *A Well-Adapted UK*, its fourth independent assessment of climate risk.<sup>16</sup> There can be no doubt that the government is in full possession of all the necessary facts and has before it a clear road map of the expenditure that is going to be unavoidable for protecting populations from extreme heat, flooding, wildfires and water shortages. Yet the story running in the media at the time was that of how the Labour government had fallen in step with its Conservative predecessor in wishing to depose its leader after only a short time in office, a problem that affects much of Europe where Macron in France and Mertz in Germany are reported to be even more “hated” than Starmer in the UK. Constantly changing leaders can hardly be considered an approach that will promote well-informed civic engagement by a politically literate youth. The problem would therefore indeed seem to be a political one. An adequate response to the climate emergency is not going to come until we get our current political difficulties sorted.

So, what image of the year 2050 do young people alive today have? There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no simple or single answer to that question. It depends upon what each young person believes and will vary according to values and political allegiances, and whether a disaster has already been experienced. Studies such as Cantellani suggest it would not be wrong to suggest an overall picture of confusion.<sup>17</sup> Inaction can then be interpreted as a sign of a difficulty for individuals to make sense out of a messy and complex reality. The consequence, though, is that it is also not wrong to suggest that whatever picture they might hold, young people are going

to experience the consequences of a significantly deteriorating climate during their lifetimes. It may be that insufficient numbers of those old enough to vote are prepared to vote for a political party bold enough to recognise the meaning of “emergency” in its manifesto, but any party with such a manifesto would almost certainly not at the current time be elected, a Catch 22 if ever there was one. The science of what to do is comprehensive and well-known, the UK government (and almost certainly others) knows it rather better than young people give them credit for. The obstacle is the priorities determined by the politics of which young people are themselves part.

Boat of Garten  
May 2026

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<sup>8</sup> Ashley, M. (1998) *Value as a Reason for Action in Environmental Education*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Bristol: University of the West of England.

<sup>9</sup> De Haas, H. (2023) *How Migration Really Works*. London: Penguin/Random House

<sup>10</sup> Uba, K. Lavizzari, A. and Portos, M. (2022) Experience of economic hardship and right-wing political orientation hinder climate concern among European young people, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2022.2061433

<sup>11</sup> Nkoana, E. M. (2019). Exploring the effects of an environmental education course on the awareness and perceptions of climate change risks among seventh and eighth grade learners in South Africa. *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, 29(1), 7–22.

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<sup>12</sup> Uba et al. *ibid.* p6

<sup>13</sup> Hansen, T., Taylor, C. and Knowles, R. (2025) Digital Media and Political Engagement: Shaping Youth Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours in Four European Societies, *Societies*, 15: 300. doi.org/10.3390/soc15110300

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<sup>15</sup> Hansen et al op. cit., p.13.

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