

Since Greta Thunberg's breakthrough at the 2018 COP 24 summit, the climate has been seen as a topic that is as central to the life of Generation Z as the cold war was to baby boomers'. At the same time, today's young people, the first generation of digital natives but also of global-warming natives, are also sometimes described as too accustomed to climate change to find it abnormal and too dependent on high tech to be prepared to reduce their energy consumption. The young are thus portrayed as caring either more or less than their elders about the environment, and as being either more or less politically involved.

That ambivalence is the subject-matter of this transcript of a report broadcast on NPR's daily news show *All Things Considered* on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023, where journalist Ximena Bustillo analyses the complex connection, or lack of connection, between American young people's environmental concerns and their voting behaviours [*autre formulation possible* : XB analyses the way young Americans' preoccupation for the climate translates, or fails to translate, into voting behaviours].

Young American citizens name climate change and other environmental issues as the most important political topic, a preoccupation confirmed by the 2023 New York march or by the fact that, according to an advocacy group, in 2018 eight electoral races in the US were tipped by "environmental" voters. Yet, most of the time, the environment is paradoxically not the issue that matters the most in young people's votes. For instance, many environmental protesters plan to vote for Biden in 2024 although they are disappointed in his record as president. The factors that trump environmental concerns when young people vote include economic issues, abortion rights, or a rejection of more conservative candidates. However, campaigners point out that environmental issues may influence election results if turnout is high among some specific demographic groups including young people, women and people of colour, especially in state and local elections, so that they focus on encouraging young people to vote in all elections, not just national ones.

By highlighting the discrepancy between young people's concern for the environment and their voting behaviours, this document raises the question of young people's commitment to environmental causes and the forms it assumes in the context of a changing public sphere. I will first take a look at young people's relationship with environmental causes. I will then examine the ways in which this relationship is affected by their relationship to politics. Finally, I will weigh the impact and the limits of acting to protect the environment outside the channels of traditional politics.

Conventional wisdom has it that young people in the developed world are concerned about the environment. Many opinion polls show that climate change tops their priority lists, while the success of Fridays for Future and many other protests is evidence that no other cause currently has the ability to mobilise young people to the same extent. In 2022, new AgroParisTech graduates made the news when they pledged not to damage the environment in their professional lives.

Still it may be worth wondering to what extent climate-conscious youths are a reality and to what extent they are stereotypes of what older people would like young people to be. After all, how likely are a generation of people who have always known heat waves to perceive them as disruptive? How prepared to give up a lifestyle they take for granted are a generation who have grown up with electronic devices and frequent, easy travel? To put it more bluntly, how much do young people care about the environment? We may sometimes get the impression that their environmental awareness is at least as often mentioned by older people as it is expressed by themselves, and suspect that adults drum environmentalism into them and then enjoy believing they have successfully modelled the youths they wish for.

All in all, there is inevitably much diversity among young people. Besides, many of them probably do not fall into "chemically pure" categories of active environmental campaigners on the one hand or enemies of nature on the other. Indeed, as the document suggests, they, like everybody else, must balance several, sometimes conflicting, objectives when it comes to making choices as citizens. After all, the fact that the environment is their number one concern does not mean it is the only one.

Furthermore, protecting the environment, however crucial it may be, is probably not enough of a goal: it merely makes the future possible, which is a pre-condition to anything else, but it does not give one any of those things with which to fill the future, either on a personal or a collective level, which makes it a uniquely ambiguous cause: both vital and minimal.

Thus, young people must act for the environment, not as an end in itself, but as a means to enable more substantial ends which may sometimes paradoxically override ecological concerns, and they have to do it in a world where the meaning of the word "acting" is changing.

One of the most striking recent trends in the public sphere is the challenges to its traditional forms. The environmental movement, Me Too and Black Lives Matter are just three examples of the fact that the most influential forces today are out of the control of politicians. NGOs and citizens' initiatives are probably playing an unprecedented part in today's world and may be responsible for major concrete changes in our future lives.

This shake-up does not only affect politics from outside, but also from inside, as illustrated in 2016 by the Brexit referendum in Britain and the election of Donald Trump. In France, traditional parties were soundly defeated in the latest two presidential elections, and similar recent examples of successful outsiders in politics abound worldwide.

Conventional politics has never seemed so irrelevant to so many people, and it seems particularly out of touch with young people. Their turnout rates are low, not because they are unconcerned by social issues, but because they do not see a connection between those issues and elections.

It therefore need not be a contradiction if young people's deepest concerns are disconnected from their voting choices: it may simply mean that they do not think voting is always the most efficient way to act for the collective good. More precisely, the document suggests that they differentiate between topics on which they expect voting to have a direct impact, such as abortion rights or economic policy, and topics for which voting seems to them less efficient, or for which they think other tools are more appropriate.

In other words, to make a single voting choice, not only do young people have to consolidate several types of motivations, as mentioned earlier, but they also need to ponder how efficient they think voting is, which does not mean that they give up the environment when they vote against their ecological conscience, but that they act on it differently.

It seems clear that the environment is one of those topics which many young people think call for more concrete, specific forms of action than voting. The electoral results of green parties often do not reflect voters' concern, even young voters' concern, for environmental causes because they generally appear as single-issue parties that fail to take the entirety of people's lives into account. Moreover, young people may suspect these parties of being comprised of politicians ultimately more interested in their careers than in genuinely advancing any cause. On the other hand, traditional parties may be accused of pushing the environment down their priority lists precisely because they have a more general approach to politics instead of a special focus on one topic. This general scepticism about party politics and government encourages them to use other avenues.

Environmental activists have sometimes succeeded where politicians have not, for example in preventing the building of Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport. Other protests, even when they are not successful in their specific aims, attract media attention which helps raise the general public's awareness and puts pressure on officials to make eco-friendly decisions.

Additionally, many young people believe that acting in an eco-friendly way depends more on personal, everyday lifestyle choices than on governmental decisions: choosing responsibly what—or if—to buy, avoiding waste, and so on, seem to them more relevant ways of acting.

Similarly, young people are often more interested in governmental actions that seem to them less spectacular but more efficient because they happen at a local level: by becoming involved in their "short-range" public life, they can hope to contribute to the implementation of short food supply chains for school meals, green spaces, eco-friendly building materials for public buildings, reduced energy consumption by public facilities, or even an energy shift in their local grid.

However, low-scale action can only go so far when it comes to addressing the climate crisis: large infrastructures such as roads, national grids, long-range transport (rail and air travel in particular), for example, are areas with a high environmental impact which are inevitably the province of large-scale government, showing the limits of bypassing national politics to protect the environment.

As a conclusion, most young people are concerned about the environment because they are concerned about their future, and they have more future than older people, so they try to protect it the best way they can in a world where the relationship between individuals, society and public action, is changing. No doubt they will play a part in this transformation too, and come up with their own ways of participating and acting in public life, out of the control of their elders. In fact, they are already doing so.