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Climate change, children and future generations

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is driven by the fossil fuel consumption of past and current generations. Its effects will disproportionately fall on today's children and those yet to be born ('future generations'). We chart the historical contribution of high-income countries, including the UK, to their climate futures before exploring the intergenerational orientations of two key actors in climate politics: the United Nations (UN), the collective voice of sovereign states, and adults with the right to vote in these states. Taking UK adults as our example, we suggest that adults share the UN's commitment to protecting children and future generations from accelerating climate change. We conclude by noting the importance of this ethical alignment at a time of polarised debates about climate change and the increasing fragility of global institutions like the UN.

Keywords United Nations, future generations, UK, climate politics, children

Introduction: generational inequalities in climate change

The increase in global temperatures, particularly since 1980 (World Meteorological Organization 2025), is rapidly moving the planet beyond the boundaries within which human societies have become established (Richardson *et al.* 2023). The primary driver of rising global temperatures is the burning of fossil fuels and the resulting emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂). The growth in global emissions has slowed in recent years, but has yet to peak—and both the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere and global temperatures continue to rise (Global Carbon Project 2025; World Meteorological Organization 2025). While CO₂ concentrations increase as soon as emissions enter the atmosphere, the resulting increases in global temperature take longer to materialise. These lagged effects mean that 'even when reductions in CO₂ concentration occur, the global temperature response will still take decades or more to fully respond' (Met Office 2019: 4).

Behind the upward trend in global emissions and global temperatures is the fossil fuel consumption of past and current generations in high-emitting countries (Matthews *et al.* 2014). Historically—from 1800 to the early 20th century—this group of countries was dominated by early-industrialising and high-income countries (including the US, Canada, UK and the EU) (Ritchie *et al.* 2020). Across this period (1800–2005), estimates of the total contribution of CO₂ emissions to global temperature change put the US as the largest

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contributor. However, when the historical contribution is expressed in per capita terms, the UK tops the international ranking (Matthews *et al.* 2014). The UK's premier position reflects its industrial history as the first country to harness fossil fuels to power its economy, and its reliance on coal as its main source of energy until the 1980s (Mamurekli 2010). Despite its rapid reduction in emissions, the UK remains among a small number of countries that has made an outsized contribution to global warming (Ritchie & Roser 2024).

Emissions are recognised to have 'transboundary impacts' (Handl 2008). High-emitting countries, and high-emitting individuals within countries, are contributing to climate extremes (for example, extremes in heat) in far-distant communities, including the Amazon, southeast Asia and east Africa (Schöngart *et al.* 2025), with those living in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) at heightened risk (Thomas *et al.* 2020). In consequence, 'low-income regions incur the brunt of the harm caused by emissions concentrated among the wealthiest populations worldwide' (Schöngart *et al.* 2025: 631).

Transboundary impacts operate across time as well as space. While climate change is driven by the consumption patterns of past and current generations, their temporal position protects them from its effects. In contrast, those living their lives in the future will face climatic conditions that older generations will avoid. An analysis of intergenerational exposure to extreme weather events, including wildfires, extreme heatwaves, droughts and river floods, found that 'people younger than 10 years in 2020 will experience about a fourfold increase in extreme events if global warming is limited to 1.5 °C [centigrade of pre-industrial temperatures], an increase that older cohorts will never experience, even if a scenario toward 3.5 °C warming is followed' (Thiery *et al.* 2021: 159). These exposed populations include today's children as well as those yet to be born; these yet-to-be born populations are commonly referred to as 'future generations', the term we adopt.¹ All those living beyond the average lifetimes of today's adults—so both today's children and future generations—risk inheriting a climate system that is 'out of their control but not of their doing' (Hansen *et al.* 2013: 19–20). The future climate burden will be greatest for children in low-income countries, countries in which childhood cohorts are largest (Thiery *et al.* 2021; UNICEF 2025).

Generational inequities operate within and between generations. This was spelled out by the youth plaintiffs in the 2018 litigation case against the government of Colombia for its violation of human rights through failing to protect the Amazon (Future Generations v. Ministry of the Environment and Others 2018). As the plaintiffs noted, intergenerational inequities operate between the generations of adults and children alive now, and between 'those who live with us right now and with whom we share the same time ... and those who are not here but are going to be alive sometime in the future' (Kaminski

¹Future generations do not occupy a fixed temporal location: with their birth, individuals surrender their membership of the future generations and join the current generations of children. For example, there are 500,000 births in the UK each year: annually, 500,000 future members of the UK population join the UK's 12 million children currently under the age of 18 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2023> (Accessed 11 September 2025)).

2025, not paginated). Decisions—relating not only to the climate system but to other planetary resources like biodiversity and water (United Nations Environment Programme 2024b)—have so far offered little protection to children and future generations (United Nations Environment Programme 2024a). Without this protection, accelerating climate change is taking an increasing toll on children’s emotional well-being, including their sense of ontological security: the world is seen as frightening and adults are not doing enough to avoid climate catastrophe (Hickman *et al.* 2021; Spiteri 2025).

Their vulnerability is compounded by the fact that children and future generations are not directly represented in the governance systems tasked with responsibility for addressing climate change. The primary actors in the global governance system are sovereign States, with defined territories, resident populations and governments that have the right to enter into agreements with other States. States are typically represented by their governments and government leaders and, in the majority of countries, are elected by adults deemed eligible to vote. In most of these countries, voting is restricted to those aged 18 and over, but ranges from 16 to 25 years (World Population Review 2025).² Public office, too, is restricted to those who have achieved ‘the age of majority’. Like future generations, children ‘are not yet citizens and therefore have no voice’ (Thompson 2010: 2); they are therefore disenfranchised within the formal structures of government. This inequity is driving a transnational youth climate movement that is reframing climate change in intergenerational terms and engaging with these national and global structures (Hayes *et al.* 2023). However, young people face multiple barriers to meaningful participation (Thew *et al.* 2020; Kolleck & Schuster 2022).

Against this backdrop, our paper focuses on two actors in contemporary climate governance: the United Nations (UN), the primary structure through which States address transnational challenges like climate change, and adults with the right to vote in States represented at the UN. The UN is an important site for the articulation and circulation of global moral norms, and we consider the ways in which safeguarding children and future generations is enshrined in its Charter and instruments. The perspectives of the adult population on climate change, children and future generations, have received little attention.

In the two sections below, we look in turn at the UN and its sustained commitment to protecting children and future generations and at evidence that sheds light on adults’ perspectives on the intergenerational dimensions of climate change and climate policy. The subsequent section then focuses on adults in the UK, a high-income country that has made a large historical contribution to the changes in the climate system that are threatening the lives of children and future generations. Drawing on survey evidence, we explore the place of children and future generations among adults’ concerns about climate change and their priorities for climate policy.

²In the UK, children under the age of 18 cannot vote in UK parliamentary elections; in Scotland, those aged 16 and over can vote in Scottish parliamentary and local elections. The UK government is seeking to extend the right to vote to those aged 16 and over.

The final section draws our analysis together. We identify an ethical axis running between the UN and adults in its Member States. While recognising the limitations of a single case study, we argue that the prominence given to children and future generations in the climate change concerns and policy preferences of UK adults points to a commitment to their future likely to be shared by adults in many—and potentially all—societies.

The United Nations: protecting the future for children and future generations

As the cornerstone of the global governance system, the UN has long been a site of connectivity and contestation. Its history is intimately connected to the dominance of the Global North—and, as UN membership has tipped towards the Global South, it has provided a forum for post-colonial alliances and influence (Emerson 1971; Gorman 2014). At the same time, the UN has both promoted global moral norms that transcend sectional interests and enabled multinational corporations to influence its decision-making processes, including those related to climate action (Fernandes & Girard 2011; Nasiritousi 2017; Guerra *et al.* 2022; van Asselt & Green 2023; Wright *et al.* 2024). In consequence, the UN's legitimacy as the custodian of the international order is coming under increasing scrutiny (Binder & Heupel 2015; Kornprobst & Redo 2024).

Despite these multiple pressures, the UN continues to promote global recognition of the vulnerability and the moral claims of children and future generations. To do so, it draws on two important strengths.

Firstly, the UN positions nations as the primary actors. It is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of its 193 Member States (United Nations 1945), which together represent the majority (89 per cent) of the world's population.³ Through its Member States, it seeks to find 'global solutions to collectively confront global challenges' (Spijkers 2012: 362).

Secondly, the UN is anchored in ethical commitments that are fundamental to national and global climate action to protect children and future generations. These commitments relate to safeguarding 'succeeding generations' and protecting human rights.

Established in 1945, UN's founding Charter opens with the words, 'WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war ... and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights' (United Nations 1945: 2; capitals in original). Its Member States 'accept the obligations contained in the Charter' (United Nations 1945: 4, 2025a). In doing so, States agree to uphold these shared commitments and be bound by the decisions of the UN's main policy-making body, the UN General

³The Vatican City and Palestine are not members of the UN, the latter because applications for full membership have failed to gain approval from the UN Security Council, the UN body from which approval is required prior to a vote at the General Assembly. The vast majority of UN Member States recognise Palestine as a State. (UN News Palestine's status at the UN explained <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148351> [Accessed 11 September 2025]).

Assembly (UNGA) on which all Member States sit, as well as the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ). Among other functions, the ICJ provides advisory opinions on matters referred to it by authorised organs of the UN, for example by the UNGA (United Nations 2025b).

The UN's commitments to succeeding generations and human rights have been carried forward in a range of UN instruments, including 'framework conventions'. These are legally binding international treaties that set out goals and principles on which parties to the treaty are agreed, with the details of delivery taken forward in subsequent agreements (Matz-Lück 2011; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe 2011). Examples of relevant UN instruments are considered briefly below.

The commitment to human rights was quickly enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the UNGA in 1948. As a declaration of principles, it imposes no legal duties on signatory States. However, it has provided a human rights benchmark for other legally binding treaties, including the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989). Adopted by the UNGA in 1989, the UNCRC enshrines the rights of children under the age of 18, including the right to be heard (Article 8). However, it bestows no rights on those whose lives have yet to begin (Gibbons 2014).

The commitment to protecting future generations has, however, been carried forward in environmental and climate change instruments. The UN's 1972 *Stockholm Declaration* on the human environment noted that 'man ... bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations' (United Nations 1972: 2). This intergenerational commitment was more emphatically stated by the UNGA in its *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (the Brundtland Commission), which defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations 1987, not paginated).

Obligations to future generations are also built into the UN's *Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC states that 'the Parties [to the Convention] should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity' (United Nations 1992: 4). However, this commitment to intergenerational equity is absent from the protocols designed to operationalise the UNFCCC: the 1997 *Kyoto Protocol* and the 2015 *Paris Agreement*. In the Paris Agreement, references to the protection of future generations were removed from earlier drafts (Lewis 2018) and only a passing reference to 'intergenerational equity' is made in the Agreement's non-binding Preamble. Nonetheless, safeguarding the future of children and future generations was a recurrent motif in media coverage of the Paris Agreement, and figured prominently in speeches of political leaders and celebrities (Graham & de Bell 2021).

As a more recent example, intergenerational commitments are put centre stage in the UN's *Pact for the Future* and its annexed *Declaration on Future Generations*, both approved by the UNGA at its September 2024 meeting (United Nations 2024). The Pact is a powerful response to Member States'

concerns about the fraying of multilateral cooperation around global challenges like climate change—and seeks to rekindle the shared commitment embodied in the UN Charter to future generations (United Nations 2023). The Pact defines future generations as ‘all those generations that do not yet exist, and who will inherit the planet’ (United Nations 2024: 52) and urges Member States to ‘ensure that decision-making and policymaking today takes greater account of the needs and interests of generations to come’ (United Nations 2024: 23, Botticelli 2024). However, as a Pact, it is not legally binding. Like other UN instruments, it also has little to say about youth engagement and confines its discussion of human rights to current generations (Botticelli 2024; Desai 2024). Nonetheless, it is the first global instrument that ‘brings the formulation of “future generations” into a multilateral setting’ (Desai 2024: 304).

Alongside, and often drawing on UN instruments, climate litigation is playing an increasingly important role in actions to protect the interests of children and future generations. Particularly for Global South communities hardest hit by climate change, litigation can provide an institutional process through which to expose, and seek redress for, climate inequities (Boom *et al.* 2016). However, the effectiveness of litigation as a tool for climate justice is often blunted by legacies of colonialism, including judicial systems modelled on those in high-income countries and the wider economic dominance of the Global North (Ali *et al.* 2025).

Climate litigation is broadly understood to refer to cases that ‘raise material issues of law or fact relating to climate change mitigation, adaptation or the science of climate change’ (United Nations Environment Programme 2023: 3, Sabin Center for Climate Change Law 2024), and cases have been brought before judicial bodies operating at international, regional, national and subnational level. Plaintiffs are typically subnational and non-state actors without direct representation in the structures of government, and their lawsuits are informed by the growing body of scientific evidence on the pace and impacts of climate change and the inadequacy of government and private sector responses. Most cases are brought against governments and corporations (Sabin Center for Climate Change Law 2024), and young people, and those acting on their behalf, are often the plaintiffs (Dickson Poon School of Law 2024). For example, the case noted earlier was brought against the government of Colombia by twenty-five children and young people (*Future Generations v. Ministry of the Environment and Others* 2018). Their lawsuit, which was supported by evidence from climate science (Hansen 2018), rested on the violation of human rights to life, health, water and food, in relation both to their generation and to generations to come.

In July 2025, the ICJ issued what is widely regarded as a landmark ruling on States’ intergenerational obligations with respect to climate change (Bharadwaj 2025). Following campaigning by young people from the Pacific Islands (Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change 2025), both within the Pacific Islands and through engagement with civil society and the UNGA, the UNGA adopted a resolution submitted by Vanuatu for an advisory opinion from the ICJ on the *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change*. In July 2025, the ICJ issued

its advisory opinion. The Court unanimously found that States have an obligation under international law to protect the climate system ‘for present and future generations’ and are therefore required to act with ‘due diligence’ to protect the climate system, including by regulating the actions of private actors (International Court of Justice 2025).

Like other UN instruments, the IJC ‘is ultimately dependent on the sovereign will of States’ (Joachim 2025: 8). Their engagement and consent are, in turn, strongly influenced by their domestic politics. Within States, the views and policy preferences of adults—and politicians’ theories of these views and preferences—therefore hold considerable sway (Sheffer *et al.* 2024). It is to this question of adults’ perspectives on climate change, children and future generations that our paper now turns.

Adults’ perspectives on children, future generations and climate change

As noted in the sections above, children and future generations are disproportionately at risk from human-induced climate change—and offering protection to these succeeding generations is a condition of membership for States seeking to join the UN. We noted, too, that electoral support is essential for the governments of Member States seeking to address climate change and its intergenerational inequities. In this section, we shed light on what is known about adults’ concerns about the intergenerational impacts of climate change and their preferences for climate policies.

Evidence is limited (and heavily tilted towards high-income countries). While children and future generations are most at risk from climate change, the focus of research on public perspectives on climate change has been on other issues. For example, studies have explored adults’ perceptions of tangible, near-term threats of climate change, like jobs and the economy, health and the environment, and the potential benefits of policies that tackle these threats (Dasandi *et al.* 2022). Perceptions of more diffuse and long-term threats and benefits—for example to future lives—tend to get sidelined. Another set of studies has investigated differences in people’s attitudes and beliefs about climate change and, using latent class and segmentation analyses, has identified population segments holding opposing views on climate change (Leiserowitz *et al.* 2021; Kácha *et al.* 2022). Climate change concerns and commitments that may cut across issues like jobs and health, and cut across different population segments, have received less attention.

With little research focused directly on adults’ perspectives on the intergenerational dimensions of climate change, this section explores two fields which provide some pointers. We look at sociological studies of intergenerational ties and economic studies of how people and governments weigh the costs and benefits of actions that play out over time.

Studies of intergenerational ties point to the importance of relationships between and across generations in centring people’s identities and structuring

their everyday lives, with research disproportionately oriented to high-income countries where birth rates are declining. These studies highlight the strong affective ties and obligations between children, parents and grandparents, with longevity strengthening vertical ties over horizontal ties (Bengtson & Robert 1991; Bengtson 2001; Leopold & Skopek 2015). Studies point to ties that are strongly gendered: nurtured and sustained through women's relational labour and 'kinkeeping' (Barnett *et al.* 2010; Luppi & Nazio 2019; Hornstra & Ivanova 2023; Aubel 2024).

The focus of this seam of research is on adults, particularly women, who are parents (and grandparents). Nonetheless, the evidence they provide suggests that many adults, regardless of parental status and gender, may care deeply about the impact of climate change on the welfare of children and future generations and, in line with the UN's founding principles, may favour climate policies that protect succeeding generations.

However, evidence is sparse. There are qualitative studies of parents and grandparents engaged in the climate movement, which suggest that concerns about, and responsibilities for, children and future generations, are a strong motivating factor for engagement (Howard 2022; Schelhas & Gast 2024). There are also studies of how adults' reproductive decisions—for example, decisions not to have (more) children—are influenced by their climate change concerns, and particularly by concerns about impacts on children and future generations. However, the sample base is skewed towards adults, and women in particular, from advantaged backgrounds who are actively engaged in climate change politics. What is missing is insight into the perspectives of the wider adult population (Graham *et al.* 2025a).

One of the difficulties facing those seeking to understand more about people's concerns about climate change is the limited information about the parenthood profile of the adult population. Official data sources, like the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the U.S. Census Bureau (Office for National Statistics 2025a, Office for National Statistics 2025b, US Census Bureau 2023, 2026), record other dimensions of people's social position and identity, for example, their age and gender. These agencies also release regular updates on household composition (for example, the proportion of households with children under 18 years) and women's reproductive histories (for example, the proportion of women who have had a child by the age of 45 and, correspondingly, the proportion who are 'childless'). But they do not provide information on the proportion of adults who are parents, an evidence gap we address in the next section.

Economic studies of intertemporal choices. Within economics, there is a large body of literature on 'intertemporal choices': the choices made by individuals and governments about how the costs and benefits of an action play out over time (Frederick *et al.* 2002). Again, evidence is heavily tilted towards high-income countries.

Individuals. The long-standing conclusion is that, as individuals, 'we care less about our further future' (Parfit 1983: 49). Economic studies suggest that, when making decisions with intertemporal impacts, individuals take greater account

of costs and benefits in the near term than those occurring in the longer term. In other words, they have a ‘time preference’ for immediate benefits over those in the future; when weighing up choices with temporal effects, people ‘discount’ the future. This would suggest that the UN’s commitment to succeeding generations may not be in line with public preferences.

Discounting is supported by studies that ask individuals about their preferences for the timing of benefits across different time periods. For example, participants are asked about their preferences for saving lives ‘now’ rather than at variable points in the future, with time periods that can range from 5 years to 50 or 100 years ahead (Cropper *et al.* 1994; Seaman *et al.* 2022). It is acknowledged that the variable time periods make it hard to disentangle an individual’s intragenerational time preferences (relating to their own lifetime and generation) from their intergenerational time preferences (relating to future others and across generations). There is therefore a risk of confounding between an individual’s intra- and intergenerational time preferences. For example, an individual may heavily discount their own well-being (preferring benefits now rather than later) but, at the same time, be willing to forego more immediate benefits to protect the well-being of children and future generations. These time preferences may also vary across social groups—for example, by parental status and by gender.

A few studies have explored people’s intergenerational time preferences (Frederick 2003; Graham *et al.* 2017). These population surveys ask participants to choose between policies bringing the same benefits but distributed differently between their generation, their children’s generation and their grandchildren’s generation. The policies have included health policies to save lives as well as environmental policies to protect homes, businesses, transport and other infrastructure against severe flood damage. Across these studies, only a minority of adults opted for the policy that most benefited their own generation; instead, the majority selected a policy that brought equal or greater benefits to children and future generations. However, we know very little about the social patterning of intergenerational time preferences within the adult population. For example, preferences may vary between women and men and between parents and those without children.

Governments. Discounting is also used to guide the policy decisions of governments. Again, the guiding principle is that ‘generally people prefer to receive goods and services now rather than later’ (HM Treasury 2022: 45). This principle underpins the social discount rate (SDR) which is used to convert future costs and benefits of a policy into present values, with these present values usually based on market values (for example, interest and savings rates). Its use means that policies with higher upfront costs to secure longer-term benefits are accorded a lower present value than ones with lower near-term costs and greater short-term benefits (Groom *et al.* 2022).

Traditional economic models are therefore grounded in principles and practices out of line with the UN commitments to ‘succeeding generations’. As is widely acknowledged, a positive discount rate ‘tilts decisions toward the present, making it less likely that society will undertake actions to mitigate

climate change’ (Polasky & Dampha 2021: 709). Some leading economists have therefore challenged this economic paradigm. For example, and in line with the UN Charter commitment, the 2006 *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* argues that ‘future generations have the same ethical claim to our attention as the current one’ and that, in consequence, policy appraisal and evaluation should be guided by the principle of moral equality in which ‘we treat the welfare of future generations on a par with our own’ (Stern 2006: 1).⁴ In line with this principle, the report argued for a near-zero discount rate.⁵ The 2008 *Climate Change Review* for the Australian government came to the same conclusion (Garnaut 2008). It also noted that a near-zero rate would incentivise climate mitigation policies to benefit future generations both in Australia and, through its role as an exemplar in global climate governance, globally. Following the Stern Review, the UK government commissioned a review of its methods for policy appraisal to take account, among other priorities, of its commitment to reduce carbon emissions (Lowe 2008). It recommended that, for interventions with long-term effects, the government’s standard social discount rate of 3.5 per cent should be restricted to the first thirty years of a programme, and a schedule of declining discount rates used thereafter (HM Treasury 2022). However, even with this adjustment, the discount rate—even after 125 years—remains appreciably above the near-zero rate recommended by the Stern Review.

In this brief review of social science research, we noted evidence of the deep emotional bonds running across generations and a small pool of studies—albeit it of adults leading privileged lives—that point to people’s concerns about climate change’s impacts on children and future generations. In contrast, we noted that conventional economic models ensure that greater weight is given to benefits accruing to current rather than future generations. However, other economists reject this approach and argue against discounting future lives. In addition, a small number of studies of adults’ intergenerational time preferences suggest that, like the UN, they are seeking to protect succeeding generations.

Overall, however, there is much more to be known about adults’ concerns about the generational impacts of climate change and their intergenerational time preferences with respect to climate policies. The next section considers these questions. To do so, we focus on the UK, the first country to industrialise and to commit to reducing its emissions to net zero.

Adults’ perspectives on children, future generations and climate change: evidence from the UK

In countries like the UK where governments are elected, governments rely on a mandate from the public to tackle complex and urgent policy challenges like

⁴ As the Stern Review put it, ‘It is as though a grandparent is saying to their grandchild, because you will live your life 50 years after mine, I will place far less value on your well-being than I do on myself and my current neighbours, and am therefore ready to take decisions with severe and irreversible implications for you’ (Stern 2006: 654).

⁵ As the Stern report explains, a near-zero rate of 0.1 per cent allows for the possibility of human extinction (on the assumption of a 90 per cent probability that humanity survives for 100 years); ‘higher probabilities of survival would imply a still lower rate’ (Stern 2006: 663).

climate change. In this section, we explore the concerns of UK adults about the impacts of climate change on children and future generations, and their intergenerational time preferences for climate policies. We also investigate whether there are differences in the views of women and men and between parents and adults without children. We refer to adults without children (either under 18 or aged 18 and over) as non-parents. We recognise the term may be considered pejorative. However, we consider it important to adopt a term that refers explicitly to parental status. Reference to ‘children’ (for example, adults without children/adults who are childfree) risks implying the exclusion of parents with adult children.

We draw on two cross-sectional surveys of UK adults aged 18 and over conducted across 2024 and 2025, with a total sample of 8260 (Table 1). Each survey was conducted at two time points to take account of time-specific factors (for example, a major UK policy announcement or extreme weather event) that may have heightened public concerns about climate change and/or change their priorities for climate policies.

Table 1. The cross-sectional surveys.		
Survey	Survey 1	Survey 2
Measure	Intergenerational time preferences	Parental profile of UK adults Climate change concerns by parental status
Survey dates (two timepoints per survey)	March 2024; July 2024	November 2024; February 2025
Sample size	2051	6209
Population	UK adults aged 18 and over	UK adults aged 18 and over
Survey design	Quota design (surveys representative of UK adult population)	Quota design (surveys representative of UK adult population)

Both surveys were representative of the UK adult population with respect to gender, age group, ethnic group⁶ and socioeconomic position (proxied by highest educational qualification, classified using the International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED).⁷ The surveys are also representative of UK adults with respect to country of residence (Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and, for England, for English region.⁸ For both studies, online surveys platforms were used.⁹ Ethical approval was secured from the Research Governance Committee, Department of Health Sciences, University of York (reference numbers

⁶For gender, we asked, ‘how would you define your gender?’; response options were man, women, prefer to self-define, prefer not to share this information. For ethnic group, we used the list of ethnic groups used in the 2021 Census. See <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/>.

⁷Survey 2 did not set a quota for educational attainment, with the result that the sample was skewed to those with higher educational levels (ISCED 5–8). Survey weights were therefore applied to educational attainment to produce a sample representative of the educational profile of adults in the UK.

⁸There are nine English regions, used for administrative purposes by the UK government: North West, North East, Yorkshire & Humber, West Midlands, East Midlands, East Anglia, South West, South East, and London.

⁹Qualtrics for Survey 1 (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>) and a combination of Qualtrics (for the Surveys) and Prolific (for sampling) for Survey 2 (<https://www.prolific.com/>) (Accessed 11 September 2025)).

HSRGC/2023/566/A and HSRGC/2024/646/B).¹⁰ In the sub-sections below, only statistically significant differences are noted.

With little known about the parental profile of the UK adult population, we begin our analysis by mapping the parental status of survey participants. For this, we draw on Survey 2. The survey asked participants if they were a parent of child/ren, including children aged 18 years. Additionally, participants aged 18–44 who were not parents were asked if ‘you think you may have children at some stage in the future’.

Parents represented the majority (60 per cent) of the UK adult population.¹¹ Among those aged under 45 who were not parents, 70 per cent noted that they may have children in future. Other sources indicate that 21 per cent (14+ million) of the UK population is under the age of 18 (Office for National Statistics 2024). Taken together, parents, future parents and children clearly represent the large majority of UK residents.

As expected, the proportion of parents was lowest among participants aged 18–24. Among women, but not among men, those in more advantaged groups (as measured by high ISCED) were less likely to be parents. Among non-parents under the age of 45, more advantaged groups were more likely to report that they may have children in future, a pattern found among both women and men.¹²

Adults’ climate change concerns were explored in Survey 2. Participants were asked how worried, if at all, they were about the impacts of climate change ‘for humanity in general’, ‘for my country’, ‘for me personally’ and ‘for children and future generations’. The question was framed around the levels of governance embedded in UN instruments: global (‘humanity in general’), Member States (‘my country’) and individual (‘me personally’). Additionally, and reflecting the UN’s mandate to ‘save succeeding generations’, the question asked about concerns for children and future generations. The response options ranged from ‘not worried at all’ to ‘very worried’, together with a ‘don’t know’ option.

The greatest level of climate change concern was expressed about impacts on children and future generations. Overall, 46 per cent were ‘very worried’ about these impacts, with over 80 per cent reporting that they were ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ worried. The proportions who were ‘very worried’ about the impacts of climate change on ‘me personally’, ‘my country’ and ‘humanity in general’ were appreciably lower (Figure 1). The picture did not change when ‘very’ and ‘somewhat’ worried were combined; levels of concern remained consistently higher for children and future generations. Parents reported lower levels of concern than non-parents about the impact of climate change on humanity and on them personally. But for impacts on children and future

¹⁰ All data were anonymous and held in secure GDPR-compliant databases.

¹¹ A contemporaneous online survey of UK adults reported that 58 per cent were parents of children under 18 years (More in Common (2025) *Shattered Britain* <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/shattered-britain/> (Accessed 11 September 2025)).

¹² This could indicate a potential ‘austerity effect’ on the parenting plans of young adults in straightened economic circumstances. However, using a different measure of socioeconomic circumstances, namely financial strain, we found no significant differences in the parenting intentions of non-parents under the age of 45. By contrast, education (ISCED) showed a strong and consistent gradient.

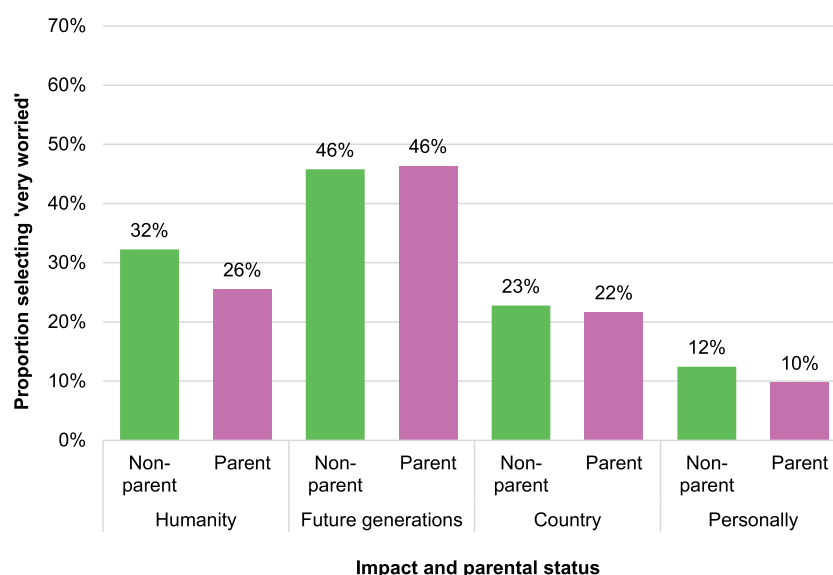


Figure 1. Concerns about climate change, children and future generations among parents and non-parents. UK adults (2024–25, $n = 6209$). Proportion reporting that they are 'very worried' about the impact of climate change for 'humanity', for 'future generations', for 'my country', and for 'me personally'.

generations, the patterns did not vary between parents and non-parents. On this core dimension of adult identity, parents and non-parents were not polarised in their views; in both groups, 46 per cent reported that they were 'very worried' (Figure 1). There were, however, gender differences in concern. Among those who were not parents, women (54 per cent) were more likely than men (38 per cent) to report that they were 'very worried' about the impacts of climate change for children and future generations. These gender differences persisted (and remained significant) among parents; 49 per cent of mothers and 43 per cent of fathers stated that they were 'very worried'.¹³

Adults' intergenerational time preferences for climate policies were investigated in Survey 1. We asked participants about their preferences for the distribution of benefits (saving lives in the UK) from climate policies across three generations: 'your generation', 'your children's generation' and 'your grandchildren's generation'. Our question was informed by previous studies in the US and UK (Graham *et al.* 2017; Frederick 2003). Unlike the US study, we did not include a policy option which would save an equal number of lives in each generation. This was done to avoid a potential 'fair shares' bias, in which participants chose this option simply because it represented the equity option—so selected it without necessarily weighing up their intergenerational time preferences. Instead, participants were asked to select one of three policies, all of which distributed the policy's life-saving benefits unequally across generations (Table 2).

¹³Parental status and gender were both independent predictors of being very concerned about climate change impacts on children and future generations in multivariate analyses using weighted binomial logistic regression that took account of age group, education (ISCED) and ethnic group, political leaning (where the participant placed themselves on a scale from extreme left to extreme right) as well as parental status and gender.

Table 2. Survey question on intergenerational time preferences for climate change policies.

Thinking still about climate plans, the government is considering three plans that will save many lives in the UK, but the amount of lives may differ across generations. Each plan would start next year, would be in place for 30 years, and cost the same amount - but only one can be afforded.

POLICY A would save:

- 3 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children's generation
- 1 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

POLICY B would save:

- 0 lives in your generation
- 3 million lives in your children's generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

POLICY C would save:

- 1 million lives in your generation
- 2 million lives in your children's generation
- 3 million lives in your grandchildren's generation

Which, if any, of the above would you prefer?

The option choices were Policy A, Policy B, Policy C, or "I'm not interested in any of these".

As Figure 2 indicates, a large majority (66 per cent) of survey participants selected policies that favoured succeeding generations (so selected Policy B or Policy C). Excluding those who did not select a policy option (16 per cent of participants), 78 per cent selected policies that disproportionately benefited children and grandchildren. These policy preferences are consistent with the concerns expressed in Survey 2 about the impact of climate change on children and future generations. In Survey 2, 80 per cent were 'very' or 'somewhat' worried about these impacts; in Survey 1, 66 per cent selected a policy that would prioritise the lives of succeeding generations over their own.

Parents expressed stronger preferences than non-parents for Policy B (Figure 2). Under this policy scenario, benefits for 'your generation' would be entirely foregone and, instead, all the benefits would be deferred to their children's and grandchildren's generations.¹⁴ Beyond this stronger preference for Policy B, patterns were more complex. For example, women did not consistently prefer policies that disproportionately benefited children and future generations (that is, Policy B and Policy C).¹⁵ There is clearly more to be learned about how people's social circumstances and identities are related to their views on climate policies to protect children and future generations.

We acknowledge that our evidence comes from a single UN Member State, albeit a high-income society whose social and economic history is intertwined with the global transition to fossil fuels. However, studies that have considered other aspects of public perspectives on climate change (for example, adults' climate change beliefs and their support for particular climate policies) have found patterns in the UK that are in line with other European and Anglophone

¹⁴ Parental status remained an independent predictor of selecting Policy B after adjustment for age group, education (ISCED) and ethnic group as well as parental status and gender.

¹⁵ Analyses took account of age group, education (ISCED) and ethnic group as well as parental status and gender.

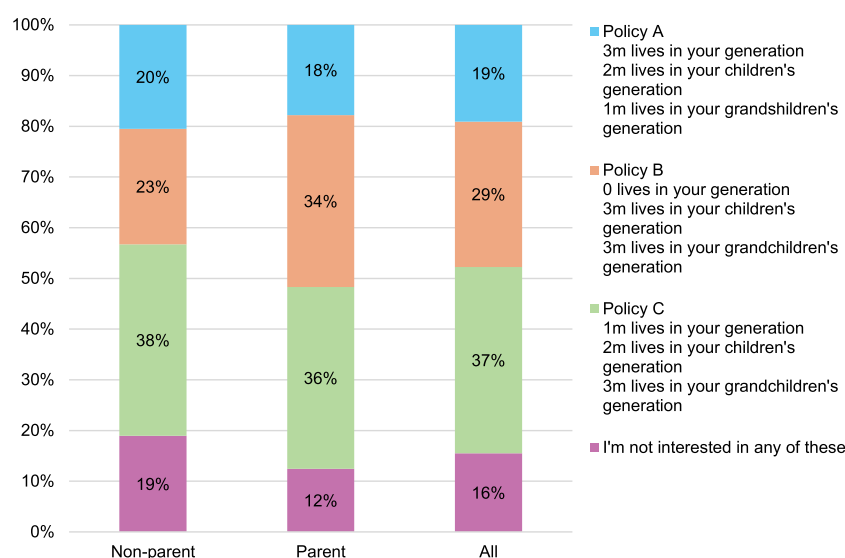


Figure 2. Intergenerational time preferences for climate policies. UK adults (2024, $n = 2051$). Note: some results are also reported in Graham *et al.* 2025 (Graham *et al.* 2025b).

countries; it is the US that tends to be an outlier (Hornsey *et al.* 2016; Ziegler 2017; Lewis *et al.* 2019).

We also acknowledge that the question exploring intergenerational time preferences (Survey 1) asked about hypothetical policy choices without any real-life consequences (for example, without a commitment to monetary payments to support the selected policy). However, such ‘stated preference’ methods are often the only ones available for policies for which there are no observable markets through which public preferences can be measured (Pearce & Özdemiroglu 2002). Additionally, the question was framed in personal terms (referring to ‘your children’s generations’ and ‘your grandchildren’s generations’), potentially introducing a question-wording bias with respect to survey participants with children. In further analyses, we found that non-parents were not more likely to select the policy (Policy A) that most benefited their own generation. However, if the survey was repeated, alternative phrasing should test for possible framing effects.

Despite these caveats, the evidence is helpful in indicating that, as in the UK, adults in high-income countries may value future lives in ways that deviate markedly from the approaches to social discounting used by governments to evaluate policy options (Pearce & Özdemiroglu 2002; Groom *et al.* 2022). Instead, like the Stern Review, their values may be aligned with those of the UN, with a shared commitment to succeeding generations.

Conclusion

Climate change is powered by the carbon emissions of past and current generations, but its impacts are falling forward in time, onto children and future generations. Those living in the future will be hardest hit by climate change and

by the inadequacy of the global response, with intergenerational multiplier effects across generations. The UN argues that it is still possible to reduce global emissions in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement's goal of keeping the increase in global temperatures to 1.5° centigrade of pre-industrial temperatures. However, it would require 'a massive global mobilization' led by high-emitting countries (United Nations Environment Programme 2024a: xi).

Those with most to gain from such a global mobilisation—and most to lose without it—are not represented in the decision-making structures that would drive it. As the plaintiffs in the case brought against the Colombian government noted, children and future generations do not have voting rights and have little or no political power (Future Generations v. Ministry of the Environment and Others 2018). Within this political void, we focused on two actors with capacity to influence decision-makers on their behalf: the UN and adults in its Member States.

Like other global institutions, the UN is under increasing scrutiny. But it remains the only institution that represents the majority of the world's nations and the majority of the world's population—and, therefore, the world's future population. In exercising its mandate, the UN is guided by its Charter commitment to 'succeeding generations', a principle that has been restated and refined across its eighty-year history. Recent examples are its 2024 *Pact for the Future*, which commits 'the Heads of State and Government, representing the peoples of the world ... to protect the needs and interests of present and future generations' (United Nations 2024: 1), and the 2025 judgement of the ICJ confirming that States have an obligation under international law to protect the climate system 'for present and future generations' (International Court of Justice 2025: 1).

Member States are central to delivering this mission. Through their UN membership and their collective endorsement of UNGA resolutions, they share an obligation to protect children and future generations. At the same time, Member States retain authority over their territories and populations—and gain their legitimacy via the election-based systems through which the leadership and composition of national governments are determined. This positions adults with the right to vote as the second key custodian of children and future generations.

We discussed the paucity of research on adults' perspectives on the intergenerational dimensions of climate change and, to begin to address this gap, we presented evidence for the UK. Drawing on surveys of adults, we found that the large majority of adults are parents, and, among younger adults who are not parents, the large majority anticipate that they may have children in future. We found a high degree of concern among parents about the impacts of climate change on children and future generations—a concern that was matched by adults who are not parents. For both groups, concerns about the intergenerational impacts of climate change outstripped concerns about impacts on themselves personally, their country and humanity in general. However, drilling into gender differences, we found that, among both parents and non-parents, women were more likely than men to be 'very worried' about the intergenerational impacts of climate change.

With respect to adults' preferences for climate policies, a large majority of adults did not discount the future in ways that standard economic models would predict. They did not favour policies that maximised the benefits for their generation. Instead, and in line with the ethical commitments that anchor the UN, the adults in our survey selected climate policies that gave priority to saving the lives of children and future generations. Again, this preference was evident among both parents and non-parents (although parents had a stronger preference for the policy in which all benefits for their own generation would be foregone in order to protect these generations).

Taken together, our surveys suggest that UK adults have strong commitments to what the UN *Pact for the Future* refers to as 'all those generations that do not yet exist, and who will inherit the planet' (United Nations 2024: 52) and favour 'decision-making and policymaking [that] takes greater account of the needs and interests of generations to come' (United Nations 2024: 23). Yet analyses of people's perspectives on climate change and climate policies provide little insight into public concerns and policy preferences relating to the generations that will suffer most.

In beginning to address this gap, we have noted that our surveys were conducted in a single Member State; other studies are needed to establish whether the intergenerational concerns and policy preferences we have found in the UK are shared with adults elsewhere. Nonetheless, we have provided strong suggestive evidence of an ethical axis that runs between the UN, as the collective voice of sovereign states, and the adults who elect governments in its Member States. It is an alignment that speaks to and embraces young people for whom cross-national collaboration is critical for achieving 'a massive global mobilization' on climate change. At a time of increasing fragility of global institutions like the UN, evidence that its guiding principles are in line with public sentiment would lend much-needed weight to its legitimacy and authority. The UN could indeed be recognised as representing, and giving voice to, 'we the people'.

Our example of the UK also points to the importance of how climate change and climate policy are framed. It argues for a framing that foregrounds people's shared ethical and emotional commitments to children and future generations. Evidencing and promoting these widely held commitments have a particular urgency at a time when the public discourse on climate change is becoming increasingly polarised, particularly in the Global North. Beneath this fracturing, we pointed to deeper common concerns and personal values. Our UK case study suggests that, when faced with accelerating climate change, adults are—like the UN—committed to protecting children and future generations, children whose lives will extend beyond their own and generations whose lives they may never share.

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