"I Want You the Feel the Fear That I Feel Every Day": An Analysis of How Climate Change Affects Youth Political Participation

Kristina Norbury

University of Maine - Main, kristinanorbury4@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors

Part of the International Relations Commons

Recommended Citation
Norbury, Kristina, "I Want You the Feel the Fear That I Feel Every Day": An Analysis of How Climate Change Affects Youth Political Participation" (2023). Honors College. 834.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/834

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
“I WANT YOU TO FEEL THE FEAR THAT I FEEL EVERY DAY”:
AN ANALYSIS OF HOW CLIMATE CHANGE AFFECTS YOUTH
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

by
Kristina Norbury

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Political Science)

The Honors College
University of Maine
May 2023

Advisory Committee:
Ryan LaRochelle, Lecturer - Cohen Institute for Leadership and Public Service, Advisor
Amy Fried, John Mitchell Nickerson Professor of Political Science
Rob Glover, Associate Professor of Political Science & Honors
Nicholas Micniski, Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs
The purpose of this thesis is to explore the connection between climate change and youth political participation. Using data from a large, cross-national survey done by the University of Bath in the United Kingdom, this project analyzed young people’s emotional responses to climate change. This project synthesized and brought together two threads of scholarly literature in order to make claims about how emotional responses to climate change may be influencing youth political engagement. The line of scholarship explores how emotions traditionally influence political behavior. This research indicated that emotions such as anxiety can have a debilitating effect on people and prevent them from getting involved politically. The second focus of the research was on young people’s relationship to voting, and why they traditionally are not as active as other age groups. This project notes that there is a serious lack of data connecting emotions to youth political behavior. This project’s finding suggests that these forces may be connected in ways that scholars have not fully explored and that future research should analyze this relationship in more detail. The data shows that climate change is a topic young people feel very strongly about. They do not feel heard or represented by their governments when it comes to this matter, which could be a partial explanation for their political inaction. Young people in the U.S. have been more involved in more recent elections than they have been in the past, but it is too early to tell if this will be a long-term, consistent trend. Regardless of this, it is evident that climate change is an important topic for Gen Z, and that emotions may play a more complex role in youth political behavior than previously thought.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my parents as thanks for all of the unconditional support and love they have shown me my entire life. They have encouraged my education at every opportunity and are the reason I am where I am. They have helped shape me into the person I am today and I am eternally grateful for all they have done for me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the members of my Thesis Committee for their support and ideas, which helped shaped this project. I am incredibly grateful for all the time they put into helping me, especially my advisor. He really helped this thesis become what it is today. I would also like to thank my boyfriend for all of the encouragement and for the sometimes necessary act of taking my phone away. Lastly my cats, for being a sometimes welcome distraction and for the affection.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: DATA ANALYSIS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 1</td>
<td>Graph of how Americans' perceptions of environmental issues have changed between 1993 and 2018.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 2</td>
<td>Data from Pew Research Center for turnout at Presidential Elections based on age</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 3</td>
<td>Graph of voter turnout by age from the years 1988 to 2016</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 4</td>
<td>Voting turnout from 1984 to 2022</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 5</td>
<td>Bar graph of data depicting the data for the question does climate change make you feel afraid</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 6</td>
<td>Bar graph showing responses to the question does climate change make you feel helpless</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 7</td>
<td>Bar graph showing data for the question does climate change make you feel sad</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 8</td>
<td>Bar graph for the question does climate change make you feel anxious</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 9</td>
<td>Bar graph of the responses to the question if climate change makes you feel angry</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 10</td>
<td>Bar graph of the question does climate change make you feel guilty</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 11</td>
<td>Bar graph of question does climate change make you feel optimistic</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 12</td>
<td>Bar graph of the question does climate change make you feel indifferent</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 13</td>
<td>Bar graph for the question does climate change make you feel grief</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 14</td>
<td>Summary of emotions by country</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 15</td>
<td>Bar graph showing results from the question about if the government is doing enough to protect the planet and future generations.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 16</td>
<td>Bar graph depicting results of question asking if governments were dismissing people’s distress about climate change</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 17</td>
<td>Crosstab presenting different levels of approval towards government action on climate change</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Adults keep saying: ‘We owe it to the young people to give them hope.’ But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire. Because it is.”¹ This impassioned plea from Greta Thunberg is echoed by a majority of her peers, and climate change is one of the top issues for young voters in America. The Gen Z climate activist has been an outspoken proponent for climate protection and has made several challenges to global leaders to take decisive and immediate action. According to the Spring 2023 Harvard Youth Poll 50% of interviewees agreed that more action needed to be taken to mitigate climate change, even at the expense of economic growth. This number drastically increased from 2013, in which only 29% of participants agreed with the statement.² The Harvard Youth Poll from Fall 2022 also indicates a strong interest in climate change among young people. Sixteen percent of Democrats in the poll cited it as their most important issue. When asked what the top two issues impacting your vote in 2022 are, regardless of party affiliation, 12% cited climate change as the most important, and 16% answered it was their second most important.³

Another study from the National Science Board explored the way the American public feels about environmental pollution. The data indicates that a large portion of

² “Spring 2023 Harvard Youth Poll,” The Institute of Politics at Harvard University, April 24, 2023, https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2023-harvard-youth-poll.
people feels some level of concern towards pollution, and that number has steadily climbed in the last decade. As Figure one below shows, in 2018 three quarter of respondents indicated that pollution of waterways was “extremely” or “very” dangerous. Questions about air pollution caused by industry and the use of chemicals in farming showed similar answers. This study shows that most people are aware, to some extent, of the dangers facing the environment. The data proves that people are becoming more scared of climate change and learning about other threats contributing to pollution. People are, rightly, really waking up to just how much damage is being done to the environment as a result of our own actions.

Figure 1: Graph of how Americans' perceptions of environmental issues have changed between 1993 and 2018. Credit to National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, National Science Foundation, Survey of Public Attitudes Toward and Understanding of Science and Technology (1993–2000); NORC at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey (2010–18).
Climate change is perhaps the most pressing global threat of our lifetime. President Biden’s Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin highlighted the national security threats posed by climate change, stating, “There is little about what the Department does to defend the American people that are not affected by climate change. It is a national security issue, and we must treat it as such.”⁴ According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is a scientific group assembled by the United Nations to monitor all global efforts on climate change, the progress being made is not enough: “Even if every country in the world delivers on its current climate pledges, that’s probably not enough to keep global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels—a threshold scientists believe is necessary to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.”⁵ This will have detrimental effects on ecosystems all over the world, causing the extinction of many plants and animals. This disturbance in the ecosystems will also have costly effects on humans. Climate change also increases the likelihood of major weather events, such as deadly heat waves, droughts, floods, and powerful storms increasing in strength. These events will affect everyone, but specifically people in vulnerable communities, who will lack the financial means to move as certain parts of the world become uninhabitable.

This may seem like a bold claim to make, that climate change will make the world become uninhabitable, but all the science supports that. Rising sea levels, caused by melting glaciers, will cover low-lying areas. Entire cities and countries will be underwater. Millions of people will be displaced and forced to become climate refugees

⁵ https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-insights/perspectives/ipcc-report-climate-change/?gclid=CjwKCAjwl6OiBhA2EiwAuUwWZRYG2qksqA4t4f9_rrwcZuESxJb2f1EjPEwQsdaVwXINqGeG10l4vBoCxdlQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds
and hope another country has the resources to take them in. Which may be difficult as
natural resources become more scarce.6

Young people are particularly affected by and interested in climate change. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that they will be the ones dealing with the devastation caused by climate change. Or maybe it is because they learned about climate change as young children, and watched it get worse while nothing was done about it. Regardless, climate change and related issues consistently appear among the most pressing issues for young people.

This thesis aims to explore the dynamic and complex relationship between young people’s attitudes and feelings about climate change and their engagement with politics. This is a particularly important issue for several reasons. First, young people’s political participation—especially voting rates—tends to lag behind older generations. Although just over half of the entire voting age population tends to turn out in presidential elections (see Figure 2), according to the United States Census Bureau, in the most recent Presidential election, Americans between the ages of 65-74 were the highest, with 76% voting. It was lowest among people aged 18-24 at 51.4%.7 Figures 3 and 4, seen below, are very useful in showing the historical nature of this trend. However, recent elections show a change occurring. It is important to determine why this change is happening, but also why youth voters are typically not as involved as other age groups. Figure 3 is also interesting as it depicts a slow shift in young voter turnout, which spikes in 2020 and

---

drops back down in 2022. This indicates that young voters place higher importance on Presidential elections, and are not as involved with midterm elections.

The puzzle of low youth participation in the U.S. has been the subject of extensive research by political scientists, but few have explored whether and how the contemporary generation of young people—one which has been particularly attuned to and affected by the climate crisis—fits into the patterns demonstrated by previous generations. Secondly, given that young people will be the generation most significantly affected by the climate crisis and our collective adaptive capabilities, it is critical to understand how this segment of the population is making sense of their political context and their collective future.

---

**Turnout in U.S. presidential elections**

*Votes cast as a share of...*

---

*Source: Census Bureau (population estimates), House Clerk's office and Pew Research Center (vote totals).*

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

Figure 2: Data from Pew Research Center for turnout at Presidential Elections based on age
Figure 3: Graph of voter turnout by age from the years 1988 to 2016, data comes from the United States Election Project
This thesis is going to analyze newly available survey data in an effort to make connections that have previously not been considered. In order to do so efficiently I have organized this thesis in a concise way that will make it easy to follow. In the next chapter I delve into literature on two main topics, how emotions affect political behavior, and youth voting behavior. In the third chapter, I will present and analyze the data from a study conducted by the University of Bath. I summarize a vast amount of data in this chapter to show how young people not just in the U.S. but around the world feel about climate change. I present a series of cross-tabs and summary tables to demonstrate the vast array of negative emotions that young people feel as a result of climate change. In Chapter Four I attempt to synthesize the findings from Chapter Three. I will explore what is presented in the literature and what the data is saying in a way that makes a meaningful association between the two. Lastly, Chapter Five is a conclusion chapter that
summarizes the rest of the thesis, presents ideas for future research, and acknowledges that there are some questions that I have yet to find an answer to.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This project focuses on the connection between climate change and youth voter participation. As such, I engage with several existing lines of inquiry from scholarship in the fields of political psychology, political participation, and, to a lesser extent, policy feedback. This thesis aims to bring together the extant scholarship in new ways. I argue that scholars who study political psychology (specifically the way that emotions influence political attitudes) and scholars who study political behavior (specifically the political behavior of young people) have much to learn from one another and that only by bridging these two fields of study can we truly understand how climate change is currently shaping young people’s engagement with the political world.

To a certain extent, the connection between climate change, emotions, and youth political engagement is brand new. There has not been research done connecting all three concepts. It is my hope to synthesize a valuable connection between these ideas that will be useful in future scholarship. Youth voter participation, or lack thereof, has been a popular concept in political research for a while. Climate change is one of the biggest, most concerning issues of our time. These two were inevitably going to correlate at some junction. Looking at these two together is vital to understanding the current political climate and planning on how that will change in the future.

The way emotions toward climate change impact voter activity was my main interest. As a result, the research was split between two main topics; the effect of emotions on voter behavior and youth political engagement. The literature used for this project is all academic, with several well-researched books being included. There are also some studies that focus more on the data itself. These are all credible sources that work in
unison to help explain the connection between climate change and youth political behavior. The following sections summarize and analyze the existing scholarship. I identify several ways in which these lines of scholarship could benefit from more engagement with one another, and articulate how they shed light on the central question of how climate change affects young people’s political attitudes and behavior.

**Emotions and Political Behavior**

The first section of scholarship that I will be analyzing is the impact of emotions on voter behavior. Understanding this is vital to being able to interpret the data. It is also important to understand how certain powerful emotions can either be debilitating or cause people to be more likely to take action.

This first piece of literature was published in *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* in 2021 by a group of Australian researchers. This study uses data from a national Australian survey data to explore the difference between different emotions in either inspiring or debilitating people from action in regard to climate change. There was a focus on anger and frustration as the authors felt that a great deal of attention had been paid to emotions such as depression and anxiety. The results of this study indicated that anger towards climate change had a better mental health outcome than anxiety and depression. It also led people to become more involved with climate activism and personal accountability. This study also showed that those experiencing eco-depression were more likely to get involved in climate action than those with eco-anxiety. This supports other literature that identifies anxiety as a debilitating factor for people. This study provides a lot of helpful information on why different people respond to climate
change differently and the almost opposite effect certain emotions can have. It helps explain a lot and provides quality information for analyzing emotions and connecting certain emotions and responses. However, this study does not consider the voting patterns of young people in any way. It would have been interesting to see how these powerful, negative emotions either motivate or demotivate voters.8

The next piece of scholarship is a book by environmental studies Professor Sarah Jaquette Ray, *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*. Ray’s book deals with the complex emotions of burnout and guilt, while also encouraging readers to keep getting involved in climate justice. It also explores all the negative emotions people have regarding climate change, and how these emotions can lead people to take drastic, sometimes dangerous measures in order to try and make a change. Ray’s analysis is useful for my project as it emphasizes just how much some people truly care about the climate. Regular citizens are developing eating disorders because they are trying to consume less, and committing suicide over climate change, while the government does very little. This text emphasizes how fraught with emotion this subject is, and this helps explain why some people may be giving up on the government. The regular people do not feel heard or that the government is listening to their fears on such a big issue. While dealing specifically with climate change it does not make a correlation between the effects discussed in the book and the political participation habits of young people. Nonetheless, the data presented in Ray’s work

---

suggests a potential link between climate-related emotional responses and broader patterns of action and engagement.⁹

The next piece of literature deals with the psychological aspect of emotions related to climate change. Written by Tobias Brosch from the University of Geneva, it explores what certain types of reactions emotions are likely to trigger. Both positive and negative emotional communication can lead to more sustainable behavior. Negative affect, essentially negative emotions toward a subject, is the greatest indicator of someone making a climate consciousness change in their own life.¹⁰ As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, the data set from the University of Bath shows that young people are experiencing a wide range of negative emotions toward the subject of climate change. If people are able and willing to make more eco-friendly choices in their personal lives, it would be extremely disheartening to see governments, with access to power and greater resources, not do the same. It is one thing to look at data about emotions and make an educated hypothesis about how that will impact voting behavior. It is even better to have a study directly focusing on the psychology of these emotions in regard to climate change, this will be a vital resource in correctly interpreting what emotions led to product climate justice. Understanding the psychology of emotions, specifically, those related to climate change is going to be vital to have a deeper understanding of voting behavior. Again, it would have been interesting for this to specifically look more at young voters and how psychology may impact their habits directly. It seems like a bit of a wasted opportunity.

---


The sources covered so far focus primarily on the psychology of emotions. Scholars in the field of political behavior have recently sought to explore how emotions influence political attitudes and patterns of behavior. *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World* by Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner Gadarian analyzes how anxiety, a seemingly ubiquitous emotion in our current moment, is related to a broad range of political attitudes and behavior. While not entirely devoted to the subject of climate change, as it explores anxiety and politics on a more general level, there is one chapter devoted to climate change. Anxiety can be both harmful and useful to democracy, depending on the subject and the response of the particular person. The source just helps to strengthen the connection between anxiety and climate change. It is also useful as a way to link anxiety to youth activism in general.\(^\text{11}\) I believe that research would show that young people are anxious and concerned about a lot of modern political matters, perhaps more than their predecessors. Had the book actually delved more into youth voting habits it may have provided a clearer picture of the effect of anxiety on politics. The specific climate change chapter would have been a good time to do so, as that is one of the most pressing issues young voters face right now.

The next piece of scholarship is also not specifically focused on climate change but is useful background knowledge for better understanding political behavior. *American Insecurity: How our Economic Fears Lead to Political Inaction* by Adam Seth Levine explores the financial insecurity many Americans struggle with on a daily basis. This is an ever-present thought for many people, as simple tasks such as grocery shopping are a stark reminder of how unstable the current economic climate is. Many

Americans have not felt the harsh effects of climate change directly, so economic problems hit much closer to home. Given these two factors, it is unsurprising how previous generations were unmotivated to fight for climate justice. Understanding how and why people, experiencing anxiety and fear towards a certain subject, choose to be politically active or not, is beneficial to my project. This is again a general overview of political action, not focused on any certain demographic. But Levine does show that the anxiety that low-income individuals feel as a result of their precarious economic situations—which is distinct and more pervasive than the anxiety felt by other socioeconomic groups—does depress this group’s broad patterns of political engagement and behavior. Levine’s research provides useful insights about how an emotion like anxiety is related to political behavior.12

Another piece of scholarship that investigates the politically debilitating effect of anxiety, in general, is a dissertation by Andrew W. Podob. “The Divergent Effects of Anxiety on Political Participation: Anxiety Inhibits Participation Among the Socio-Economic and Racially Marginalized,” specifically looks at individuals who are economically and racially marginalized. Anxiety has been shown in some circumstances to inspire political participation and help motivate people to vote. However, as this article explains people who are economically and racially marginalized are used to being let down by the government and witness officials take action that has a direct negative impact on them. Anxiety can also be very damaging mentally and it can be difficult for some to translate those negative feelings into actions. Sometimes the anxiety is just

overwhelming.\textsuperscript{13} Podob’s research is useful for my project as people who care deeply about the environment are also used to seeing the government take little to no action. After a while, one may give up hope that the government will ever take serious action, and just become overwhelmed by anxiety. Looking at the relationship between negative emotions and political involvement is going to be crucial to being able to interpret and understand data. This is also relevant as many of the people already being directly affected by climate change are minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status. They are also going to be the ones suffering the most as it continues to worsen. This gives these individuals a unique perspective on climate change and the data seems to indicate that they are more concerned about it than people who are not already being affected. This work focuses on a very specific group of people, that the other pieces of literature have not, which is socio-economically and racially marginalized individuals. While the topic is incredibly important in its own right, having a portion of this research focusing on the youth of those two categories could have made a powerful connection about not just youth voting but how people in marginalized groups vote as well.

\textbf{The Puzzle of Youth Voting Behavior and Political Engagement}

This section explores the literature on youth voting activity and broader patterns of youth political engagement. As noted above, historically this demographic has been the least politically active. Despite an uptick in the two most recent U.S. elections, young people still turn out at the lowest rate of all age groups. There has been a great deal of

research done into the voting behavior of young people, and researchers have developed numerous theories and explanations for this group’s relatively low levels of political participation. But research has tended to look at the broad picture and not at more narrow single issues. While the extant scholarship on this subject is important and necessary, it would be interesting to see more research focus on how climate change is impacting this shift in youth voting. I believe that underestimating the impact of climate change on young people is unwise and will create serious gaps in the data. Looking specifically at voting, the next several sources analyze why young people’s voting rates lag behind older generations. This line of scholarship posits that young people generally vote less than older adults for three primary reasons: habituation, the unequal burden of voting for young people, and the fact that young people may engage in politics in less traditional ways than older citizens.

Habituation

One line of research suggests that the primary reason young people vote less than older folks is because they have not yet created the habit of regularly voting. As one group of researchers put it, ““Voting is a habit. People learn the habit of voting, or not, based on experience in their first few elections.”14 Author Eric Plutzer explores how voting truly is a habit that people have to get used to, and young people simply are not in the habit. There are a couple of reasons for this, one being the connection to local politics, and therefore to electoral politics as a whole, which strengthens through major life events, such as marriage or having children. Young people do not have those same ties to the community and therefore are not as motivated to get involved in local politics.

Salary is typically something that increases over time, and economic status is a factor in increasing electoral interest. In a similar vein, Mark N. Franklin finds that individuals of all ages are influenced by their social contexts. Given that young people are less likely than older folks to have seen their friends make the choice to vote, especially over a series of several election cycles, they thus have not been externally habituated to turnout.

The High Cost of Youth Voting

Recent research has posited that the first few times a young person votes are often the most difficult. Voter registration laws vary from state to state. Young people tend to be particularly mobile during their early adulthood, which may make it difficult to keep up with state-level voting rules and regulations. In addition, young people may have less flexible employment schedules or lack the financial resources to take a day or half of a day off of work to vote. Charlotte Hill summarizes the numerous costs young people must bear to vote:

I show that voting costs are unequally distributed by age, and that higher costs predict lower registration and turnout rates. Compared to seniors, today’s youth are less informed about the voting process and how to research candidates and issues; struggle more to find the time to vote, to plan ahead to vote, and to balance voting with other life tasks; face greater transportation issues and tradeoffs between voting and earning money; have greater difficulty with the parts of voting that cannot be done online; disproportionately think mail voting is a hassle; and are less likely to own the documentation they need to register and vote. When asked directly, youth are significantly more likely than older Americans to say that registration and voting are difficult. After adjusting for race-ethnicity, gender, education, and family income, being young (relative to being a senior) is a large and statistically significant predictor of voting costs. I also find that young people are the least-informed of any age group about their state’s policies on same-day

registration, early voting, mail voting, and whether individuals must update their voter registration after moving.\textsuperscript{17}

Young people clearly face different barriers than older folks when it comes to voting.

**Young People and Alternative Forms of Participation**

A third line of research argues that young people are just as engaged as older generations, but they participate in politics in different ways than voting. Joseph Kahne, David Crow, and Nam-Jin Lee looked at data from high schools in two different regions in the United States, Chicago and California, to explore how the school environment of high school students affects their political engagement. The data presents the idea that youth are less interested in the seemingly ineffective nature of traditional politics, such as voting and political debates, and more interested in more direct action, such as community involvement and politics that invoke self-expression and self-actualization. This would complicate the idea that young people are getting more involved with traditional politics, which is something that the data indicates to be true. However, this study is incredibly interesting and strengthens the idea that in general, this group is showing more political interest. This research also shows that distrust of the government is particularly strong among this demographic. They have grown up watching the government fail to act on many important matters, including climate change. This interest in politics through direct action proves that they do not think the government is representing their interests in a meaningful way and do not trust their governments to take the action necessary.\textsuperscript{18} Had this study focused directly on climate change I believe that


would have just reinforced the idea that young people feel disillusioned with traditional politics and are seeking other outlets for change.

Michael Xenos, Ariadne Vromen, and Brian Loader explored the connection between youth political engagement and social media in three countries; Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This shows there is a positive correlation between social media use and political engagement, indicating that this provides an easy route for people to get involved in politics. Notably, however, the authors’ definition of political engagement excluded voting. This research suggests that this will continue to be a beneficial influence in a traditionally uninvolved demographic of people. Traditionally socioeconomic status is one of the most important factors of political involvement. This study shows, however, that in terms of young people, social media usage is just as, or even more important than socioeconomic standing when determining the likelihood of political engagement. Social media as a tool of political engagement is an important concept. As a young person on social media, I can attest to the fact that a lot of young people care about political issues, at least online. It provides an easy way to gain access to information as well as news. Political news from all over the world is available through social media if one makes the effort to look. Learning more about politics and pressing issues could inspire young people to get involved. This is especially true of climate change. Issues from around the world can be brought to social media, even if more mainstream news outlets are not covering them. While this article suggests that social media usage may increase young people’s broad patterns of engagement, it does not
explain youth voting behavior.\textsuperscript{19} A similar cross-national study found that participation in various forms of political engagement are structured by age. Voting is strongest among the elderly, while engaging in demonstrations is more pronounced among youth.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Emotions and Youth Political Engagement: A Missing Link}

As noted in this review of the existing literature, the study of how emotions influence political behavior and the study of youth political engagement have, up to this point, been separate endeavors. Researchers have shown that emotions can have a profound effect on whether and how individuals engage with the political world. In particular, several studies have found that negative emotions like anxiety and fear can have demobilizing effects. And we know a great deal about why young people tend to vote at lower rates than older individuals. My project aims to bridge these two lines of research in novel ways. The link between young people’s emotional responses to climate change and their political engagement is an underexplored area. By leveraging a massive survey of young people’s attitudes toward climate change in the next chapter, I aim to develop new ways of understanding the links between these attitudes and patterns of behavior. As will become clear, however, the results of my project are preliminary. Nonetheless, my thesis offers several insights and new ways of bridging existing lines of scholarship to better understand how climate change is shaping contemporary youth’s political attitudes and behavior.

CHAPTER THREE: DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the primary data explored in this thesis. As the tables below will show, climate change has led young people around the world to experience a wide range of negative emotions. Young people signal high rates of fear, anxiety, depression, and other emotions as a result of their exposure to and knowledge of climate change. In addition, young people around the globe feel frustrated by government’s unwillingness or inability to adequately address the climate crisis. As the quote by Greta Thunberg at this thesis’s outset notes, young people are angry about the state of the world, and they are increasingly frustrated by political leaders’ inaction in face of this existential threat.

The main set of data used for this analysis was published by the University of Bath in May 2022. There were 10,000 participants from 10 different countries: Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. 1,000 individuals from each country were selected using quota sampling, based on age, gender, and region. All participants were between the ages of 16 to 25 and were fully anonymous. The survey was composed of questions regarding climate change and emotion, specifically negative emotions caused by climate change. There are also questions about government inaction on climate change.21

Another study was done by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School that interviewed 2,123 individuals, between the ages of 18 to 29. It was organized with students from the Harvard Public Opinion Institute. Interviews, in both English and

---

Spanish, took place between September 29 to October 14, 2022. All participants in this study were American residents. This study explored how this group of people felt toward American politics and their political inclinations. It also looked into what issues this group of voters views as most important.

One important aspect to mention about this data is it is entirely focused on younger people, so this is not an accurate representation of how older people feel about the subject of climate change. While it is likely that many of them do feel the same adverse emotions towards climate change, I am doubtful that they feel as passionately about the topic in such high volumes. Older adults likely would show more indifference toward climate change. The exception possibly being individuals in countries already feeling the effects of climate change. These people would have a harder time denying climate change, as they have lived through its negative effects. In areas that have not been impacted as severely yet, there are still seemingly people in older generations who wish to deny the existence or severity of climate change. This would definitely skew the data and provide very different results compared to the results from interviewing younger people.

Below I summarize some of the main findings from this data. I first show that climate change has led young people to experience a wide range of negative emotions. I then explore how young people feel about their governments’ responses to climate change.
Young People’s Emotional Responses to Climate Change

The data presented by the University of Bath provides a lot of fascinating insights into the global attitude toward climate change.\textsuperscript{22} It shows how some of the questions presented seem to be influenced by region and personal experience with climate change. For example, the Philippines consistently expressed high levels of negative emotions toward the subject of climate change. As shown in Figure 5 below, for the question of does climate change make you feel afraid, 897 answered yes, with only 98 answering no. This was the largest number of people reporting yes to this question, the next highest was India with 743 participants responding yes. These are countries that are already dealing with the direct impacts of climate change. As an archipelago, the Philippines are already facing serious threats from rising sea levels. Millions of people will be affected and homes and businesses will be lost.\textsuperscript{23} Some villages have already been lost to changing sea levels. India also has suffered from climate change, specifically pollution. It is estimated that “Ambient and indoor air pollution is estimated to have caused 1.7 million premature deaths in India in 2019. The health impacts of pollution also represent a heavy cost to the economy. Lost labor income due to fatal illness from PM 2.5 pollution in 2017 was in the range of $30-78 billion, equal in magnitude to about 0.3-0.9 percent of the country’s GDP.”\textsuperscript{24} Again, a country heavily hurt by climate change understands that it poses a very real threat. Countries that have not been as heavily impacted by climate change, such as

\textsuperscript{22} It should be noted that the survey included 1,000 respondents from each country. So all numerical responses indicated below can be analyzed as the number out of 1,000 who responded yes or no to each question per country.
the United Kingdom and the United States, had fewer people report being afraid of climate change. The US was the lowest, with 542 people responding with yes and 441 answering no. This data supports the idea that people do not care as much about an issue until it is directly affecting them.

Another interesting set of data provided by this study asked if climate change made participants feel helpless (Figure 6). The answers to this were not as predictable as the previous inquiry. Again, both India and the Philippines had a majority of respondents answer yes, with 634 from India and 636 from the Philippines. What is interesting about this question is that there are four countries with more no answers than yes’s. These are; the United States, Nigeria, Portugal, and Brazil. Portugal had the biggest discrepancy.

Figure 5: Bar graph of data depicting the data for the question does climate change make you feel afraid.

Figure 6: Bar graph of data depicting the data for the question does climate change make you feel helpless.
with 647 participants answering no and only 327 saying yes. One possible explanation for why this is the case is that these people do feel as though they are taking action against climate change. Perhaps small, personal changes are enough to make these participants feel empowered and not as hopeless against climate change. In order to understand the drastic difference in the data from Portugal, it is useful to understand what action the country as a whole is taking to prevent climate change. In 2022 a new law was enacted that: “includes an enhancement of the 2030 target of reaching a 55% GHG emissions reduction compared with 2005 levels, and the possibility of reaching net zero by 2045 rather than 2050.”

Researchers also asked participants if climate change made them feel sad, to which an overwhelming amount of people said yes, as shown in Figure 7. There were a total of 6669 people who answered yes and 3152 who responded no. The highest number of no’s came from Finland, with 442, and the United States with 414. I am not entirely sure how to explain these numbers. Finland has a very aggressive climate policy enacted: “Finland has passed arguably the world’s most ambitious climate target into law. It aims to be the first developed country to reach net zero, in 2035, and net negative – absorbing more CO2 than it emits – by 2040”\(^\text{26}\). Based on this it seems like people would be inclined to feel sad about climate change, as they understand the seriousness of the

situation. One potential explanation for both Finland and America displaying high numbers of people responding no is that both cultures are highly individualistic. There is a priority made on focusing the individual over the community as a whole, in this instance I believe it would be fair to call the whole world the community. Based on this it would help explain these numbers, many people have not been hurt directly by climate change yet so it is easier for them to not care as much about the issue. Of course, this does not apply to everyone from those countries, as a large number of people still reported feeling sad about climate change. From this data, it is unsurprising that over 900 people from the Philippines reported that they felt sad, with only 87 answering no.

![Bar graph showing responses to the question does climate change make you feel sad](image)

Figure 7: Bar graph showing responses to the question does climate change make you feel sad

The next emotion participants were asked to respond to was anxiety (Figure 8). The results are not that shocking and continue the trends seen in previous questions. A
majority of responses indicated that people do feel anxious about climate change. Finland actually had the smallest discrepancy in response with 493 people answering yes and 486 saying no. These two numbers are incredibly close and I think add support to the idea that some people perhaps are not having such intense emotional responses to climate change because they have not been directly impacted yet. Again, the Philippines had a large majority of people answer yes, 830 responses, and only 165 responded no.

Figure 8: Bar graph showing data for the question does climate change make you feel anxious

The next emotion interviewees responded to was anger (Figure 9). This data was more split down the middle. While much of the numbers were closer than previous questions, this one was interesting as in Nigeria more people answered no than yes. 558 people said no and 433 people said yes. I find this to be incredibly interesting as Nigeria
is listed as one of the ten countries most vulnerable to climate change,\textsuperscript{27} but they are also one of the countries least responsible for it. According to the World Bank, the wealthiest countries total only 12\% of the global population while accounting for 50\% of fossil fuel emissions and industry in the last 170 years\textsuperscript{28}. Nigeria is not one of these countries, so it is essentially paying the price for other nations' contributions to climate change. That seems like something that should make more people angry.


The next question was concerned with the feeling of guilt (Figure 10). The data for this one was close for most countries, with Nigeria and the Philippines being the two major outliers. 744 people from the Philippines responded with yes, climate change did make them feel guilty and only 250 said no. Nigeria was the opposite with 710 answering no and 282 saying yes. Again, the Philippines consistently stands out as the country most emotionally touched by climate change, which adds more support to the idea that being physically impacted by climate change heightens the emotional connection to it. This question also deals with the subject of personal responsibility. While the main polluters of the environment are large corporations and other similar entities, there are ways that every single person contributes to climate change daily. Many people may not feel guilty about climate change because the actions of a single person does not compare with the
damage being done by people with power. At the same time, the mindset of the individual not mattering, is also not helpful and allows people to feel less guilty for their own contributions to climate change. This question reveals a lot about how Western countries, traditionally more responsible for climate change, feel compared to countries already being hurt by it.

The next question presented by this study is an interesting one, in the complete opposite direction of the previous questions. This time it was: does climate change make you feel optimistic? The results are displayed in Figure 12 below. A majority of the answers given here are not surprising, with only 31.7% of people answering yes and 68.3% responding with no. What was surprising to me was the way each country answered. Western countries responded with an overwhelming no, with all of their
individual no’s being in 600 and 700. However, India, Nigeria, and the Philippines were all significantly closer. I am truly unsure how to explain this part of the data. The Philippines has consistently been one of the countries most concerned about climate change and is also one of the countries most at risk. This is a question that is beyond the scope of this project but one worth exploring.

Figure 11: Bar graph of question does climate change make you feel optimistic

The next question presented was does climate change make you feel indifferent? This one (Figure 12) again had some vaguely predictable answers, with a substantial majority answering no. However, the Philippines and India presented a unique perspective on the question, as both of their yes categories were very close to the no answers. This is once again puzzling because these are two countries that have already been severely impacted by climate change, and will likely keep facing those
repercussions. Perhaps there are cultural reasons for this, or maybe the emotional strain of being directly affected by climate change is taking its toll. Regardless, this is something worth learning more about.

Figure 12: Bar graph of the question does climate change make you feel indifferent

The last question asked which was specifically related to emotions, had to do with grief (Figure 13). This question showed some very interesting data and was more controversial than any of the other questions that were previously asked. India, Finland, and the Philippines all had a majority of people respond with yes, while the rest of the countries had more no’s. This seems to indicate that proximity to the suffering caused by climate change, as opposed to simply learning about it from a secondhand source, does make the emotions related to it more intense. After all, grief does seem more intense than
some of the other emotions included in the study. Feeling grief over something is much more final than just being anxious, it implies that something is already dead. In this case, I assume that would be the earth itself. For India and the Philippines, it is also possible that the people interviewed for this study have already lost their homes or loved ones to climate change. As for Finland, they seem to just feel the woes of climate change more intensely than the other countries interviewed. Figure 15 provides a summary of how each country responded to these questions.

Figure 13: Bar graph for the question does climate change make you feel grief?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Aus.</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Phil.</th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>49.50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilty</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpless</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14: Summary of Emotions by Country
Young People and Governmental Response to the Climate Crisis

This section explores how young people feel about their governments’ response to climate change. The next question (Figure 15) asked by the study focused directly on government action or rather inaction. The question was do you believe your government, as well as governments across the world, are taking enough action to protect the planet and protect future generations? The answers here were fairly unsurprising, with a vast majority of people saying no. Brazil had an overwhelming amount of people respond with no, which is fitting as it is likely going to struggle a great deal with the effects of climate change in the future. India was the outlier here, with people responding yes slightly outnumbering those who responded with. India seems to have a great deal of faith in its government, which I do not know is an appropriate response to the situation.

Figure 15: Bar graph showing results from the question about if the government is doing enough to protect the planet and future generations.
This next graph (Figure 16) is similar in nature to the previous one, however this time the question was do you feel as if the government is dismissing people’s distress about climate change? Once again the data was not that surprising, a large majority of people responded to this question with yes as well. Brazil was once again incredibly disapproving of its government's behavior. During the time this study was conducted Jair Messias Bolsonaro was President, and known for being quite conservative. Therefore it is not unsurprising that he would not take decisive action on climate change and would be prone to ignoring the complaints of his constituents. This would explain why Brazil has such high levels of disapproval in questions concerned with government action.

![Bar graph depicting results of question asking if governments were dismissing people’s distress about climate change](image)

Figure 16: Bar graph depicting results of question asking if governments were dismissing people’s distress about climate change
This question leads to the final one, which is a more in-depth look at government action towards climate change (Figure 18). And this study proves that most participants find the government to be insufficient. For this question participants were given five options as answers: “not at all”, “a little”, “moderately”, “very”, or “completely reassured”. Very few people selected the options showing support for government action. A majority of people responded with not at all, which was unsurprising. As this study proves, many young people have a lot of emotions about climate change. Given that many governments have only made small steps toward a better, greener future, people being displeased is expected. However, what was surprising about this data set is the responses from India. It seems as if a majority of people are at least moderately impressed with government action. India had the highest number of people who felt either “very reassured”, 153 responses, or “completely reassured”, 118 responses.

**Country * I am reassured by governments’ action on climate change. Crosstabulation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>not at all</th>
<th>a little</th>
<th>moderately</th>
<th>very</th>
<th>completely reassured</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3548</td>
<td>2353</td>
<td>2554</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>9616</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 17: Crosstab presenting different levels of approval towards government action on climate change
Preliminary Summaries and Unanswered Questions

These provide compelling insights about the emotional toll of climate change on young people. The findings presented above show that, on average, young people around the world experience a range of negative emotions as a result of climate change and feel let down and frustrated by their governments. The data also demonstrate some interesting cross-national similarities and differences. As noted in the analyses above, the emotional responses to climate change are not uniform across countries, and some countries stand as outliers on various questions. These data nonetheless provide an important first look at how young people are making sense of the climate crisis and governments’ responses to it.

These data, unfortunately, cannot fully explain how these emotions influence young people’s subsequent political engagement. To do so, it would be necessary to link these data with individual data on political behavior, which were unfortunately unavailable. The subsequent chapters aim to shed light on what these data can—and cannot—tell us about the links between emotions and youth political behavior.
CHAPTER FOUR: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The data presented in Chapter 3 show that young people across the globe are experiencing a wide range of negative emotions as a result of climate change. In addition, the majority of young people surveyed in the data are frustrated by their governments’ unwillingness or inability to adequately address the causes and consequences of climate change. This data is incredibly valuable and provides us with interesting questions to ponder. However, it does not show the full picture. In order to truly understand the data it must be combined with the information presented in the literature. By connecting the real data with the literature it is possible to take a more theoretical approach and use it to provide potential insights about youth voting behavior. It is important to emphasize the fact that the emotions and political participation of younger generations have not been linked together in the past, so this thesis is doing something quite exploratory in nature. This thesis is working to connect pieces that have not been properly connected in the past, and will hopefully lead to more studies about the phenomena of emotional impact on political behavior.

All of the literature indicates that negative emotions like anxiety, stress, and fear are debilitating factors when it comes to political participation. They can weigh a person down and take a toll on the person’s mental health. Participating in politics becomes far too much, and requires more mental effort than someone may have. This can trap the person dealing with these feelings in a vicious cycle. They are experiencing anxiety, depression, or whatever else it may be because of something around them, and perhaps political action could make the situation better. However, they are unable to act because of those emotions. There really is no way for them to win. These are also all emotions
commonly associated with climate change. The data from the University of Bath study emphasized just how many adverse emotions are related to climate change.

As noted in the Introduction, Gen Z, and Millennials at the end of that generation, care deeply about the environment. They are well aware that their own futures are at risk. So it is not surprising that young people are more attuned to the climate crisis and are more concerned compared to previous generations. The data analyzed in the previous chapter suggests that the emotional toll of climate change may be playing an important but under-analyzed role in structuring young people’s engagement with politics. Across all of the countries included in the survey, the data show clearly that climate change has caused young people to feel a host of negative emotions, ranging from stress to fear to anger and guilt. Given what we know about how these sorts of emotions can affect political attitudes and beliefs, we can surmise that these young people’s emotional response to climate change may help explain why young people are less likely to participate in formal politics (especially voting) than other generations.

Prior research on youth political participation has been overwhelmingly focused on institutional factors. Much of this research explains young people’s low levels of participation by focusing on institutional or administrative costs, such as young people’s frequent address changes, voter registration requirements, difficulty accessing absentee ballots, and other forces. In addition, the extant research finds that young people have not yet made voting a habitual behavior in their lives. These forces undoubtedly affect youth political participation. But they do not tell the whole story. Emotions, particularly the negative emotions caused by the climate crisis, seem to have at least some effect on young people’s engagement with the political world.
But these findings are merely preliminary and speculative. As noted earlier in the thesis, youth turnout in the US increased substantially in the 2020 presidential election and was well above average in the 2022 midterm elections. The recent uptick in youth turnout suggests that an alternative emotional mechanism may be at play. Rather than depressing turnout, we may now be witnessing the beginning of an anger-fueled emotional backlash, which could launch young people into an increased pattern of political engagement. The data presented in the previous chapter show that young people are increasingly frustrated by their government’s unwillingness or inability to adequately address the climate crisis. While this frustration could certainly lead young people down a path toward cynicism and disengagement, given that climate change frequently ranks as a very high priority for young people, the lack of action may have a mobilizing effect. Further research is necessary to explore this hypothesis in more detail.

Nonetheless, the evidence presented in this thesis indicates that emotions are an understudied force affecting young people’s political engagement. Given how strongly emotions have been shown to affect a wide range of political attitudes and beliefs and how strongly young people feel about the climate crisis, it is likely that these emotions have some effect on youth political engagement.29

Youth political participation is not a simple thing to navigate. In the U.S. youth voter turnout reached a high in the 2020 presidential. And despite an expected downturn in the 2022 midterm elections, youth voter turnout in that year was the highest it had been in a midterm in decades. It may be worth scholars considering just how unprecedented this generation is. They care deeply about politics, according to John Della Volpe

---

Director of Polling at the Harvard Institute of Politics: “Every major political battle in America has Gen Z in the middle of it. This generation has a fire and urgency unlike any I’ve seen in 20 years, and they expect their elected officials and candidates to show the same.”

This factor alone makes them different from previous generations. But they are also living in unprecedented times. Many young voters have had their young adult years be heavily influenced by a global pandemic, which certainly adds to feelings such as anxiety and depression. They have also grown up alongside technology, and that has been a shaping factor in how they perceive everything. Social media has been exposing this generation to shocking and upsetting information daily. That has an effect on how people behave and how they process information. It may be time that researchers consider the possibility that young voters are reacting to these emotions differently than previous generations. Otherwise, I do not believe that the research will accurately reflect what is going on in their minds.

Researchers in political psychology and political behavior have talked past one another rather than with one another when it comes to the question of youth political engagement. As a result, our understanding of youth political participation, especially contemporary youth political engagement, is incomplete. Given the emotional toll that climate change is having on today’s youth, it is critical to explore how young people’s responses to this crisis is influencing how they feel about the political world and how they then choose to act. The vast scholarship on policy feedback provides some potential theoretical frameworks to explore the connection between climate change and youth engagement.

---

30 “Spring 2023 Harvard Youth Poll.” The Institute of Politics at Harvard University, 23 Apr. 2023, iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2023-harvard-youth-poll.
engagement in more detail. It may be that young people are learning lessons about how
government works (or does not work) based on government inaction on climate change,
and then making broader conclusions about the political world as a result. This thesis
demonstrates that much more research is needed to fully understand how climate change
is influencing young people’s engagement with the political world.

---

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This data does not lend itself to a simple, plainly-stated conclusion. It proves that climate change is a subject that invokes a lot of emotions in young people, specifically ones associated with anxiety, fear, and unease. The data also proves that there is little faith in the government to take meaningful action that will result in a positive change. However, the data does not show an overwhelming consensus that indicates all young people feel the same way. There are many discrepancies in the numbers, many of which I currently do not have an answer for. In addition, there are variations across countries that do not lend themselves to easy answers. There is a lot of room for more research in this area, and I believe it would be very beneficial for there to be more work done on the subject. Climate change is one of the biggest current issues and is only going to continue to become more prevalent. Having an understanding of how this issue impacts young voters is going to be important in understanding future political trends and data.

The impact of emotions on youth voter turnout has never really been delved into before, which creates a real gap in the scholarship on this subject. While understanding the more practical reasons why young people do not vote is important, such as not being in the habit of voting and moving around more often than older age groups, that does not show the full picture. However, this relationship between emotion and political action is not foolproof. Young people have been more politically active in recent years, even with all the chaos of the modern world. With the popularity of social media, it is possible to keep up with world events in real-time, and unfortunately, a lot of these events are not positive. A lot of modern problems would be reasons why someone may feel anxious or
scared. I believe that the emotional aspect will only continue to play a larger role in influencing how involved young people are.

Due to social media, this age group is now able to learn about current political issues from across the world. While it is seemingly safe to say that a majority of young people do not get their news from traditional media outlets, which may or may not be a good thing, they do get a lot of information from various social media sites. The stories presented by social media often come from the people being affected by the issue and are a plea to others to listen. This can have a stronger emotional impact than a story being presented by a newscaster in between commercials. Social media presents an easy way for young people to feel involved in important, topical issues. Through the use of strategies such as signing petitions and email campaigns to government officials, they get to feel as though they are making meaningful action, even if the effectiveness of these methods could be debated. I believe this emphasizes the point that young people do not feel heard or represented by the government. They feel more empowered to take small steps on their own in hopes of seeing a change because they are so used to the inaction of the government.

So despite the overwhelming evidence that climate change is an issue a lot of young people feel very strongly about, there are still outliers. The data from the University of Bath shows the people feeling negatively toward the subject of climate change always outnumber those who either feel indifferent or feel some level of hope towards the subject. But why are those deviations there? Have some people just not been learning about the dangers of climate change as much as others? Or perhaps it is the idea that some people just do not care about things until they are being directly hurt by it. I
think it is also worth considering that some people may be emotionally detaching themselves from the topic as a whole. As the literature has indicated, emotions such as anxiety and fear can affect people in different ways. While the looming threat of climate change makes some people impassioned and emotional, it is worth considering the opposite. That such a threat may shut people down and make them numb to it. After all, people have been claiming that the world, as we know it, is going to end soon and there is nothing that can be done to change things or make the situation better. At a certain point, when all of the news on the topic is discouraging and the few people with the ability to take action refuse to, maybe some people just detach. They have already accepted the worst and do not have the emotional capacity to worry about the situation anymore.

This research is vast and opens the door to many more questions about the nature of emotions and climate change. As this data looks at ten different countries, there are a lot of valuable insights to be gained from exploring it further. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all of these countries' emotional responses to climate change in depth, but hopefully, future research will do. The Philippines in particular would be a fascinating country to analyze in more detail. The data proves that the people of the Philippines care deeply about the environment and have strong emotional reactions to it. However, these were not always consistent and have raised even more questions. In particular I believe it would be wise for future researchers to look at the connection between proximity to climate change and emotional response. Another country that would be interesting to look at more in depth is India. Their responses showed less disapproval with the government than other countries, which is interesting. Future
research could look at the relationship between the people and the government and try to synthesize an explanation to this.

Further research also should be done into the topic of how young voters may be responding differently to negative emotions compared to their predecessors. Future analyses and surveys of youth political engagement should ask questions about young people’s emotions, as this is a missing link in our understanding of what is structuring youth political behavior. What used to be debilitating to previous voters may actually be inspiring Gen Z to be more politically active, at least when it comes to climate change. This thesis is essentially looking at a connection that has not been made before, but more research needs to be done in order to have the best possible understanding of how young people are now reacting to these emotions. They are the future, and understanding what motivates them politically is vital for the future of politics.


“Portugal – Climate Performance Ranking 2023: Climate Change Performance Index.” CLimate Change Performance Index | The Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) is a scoring system designed to enhance transparency in international climate politics., December 21, 2022. https://ccpi.org/country/usa/.


Kristina Norbury grew up in the small town of Alloway in southern New Jersey. She was raised on a farm by her parents and has two older half siblings. She made the decision to go to the University of Maine and was a member of the Delta Phi Epsilon sorority for a few semesters. Kristina graduated in May of 2023 with a major in Political Science and an English minor.