

The kids are all fight: How millennials, Gen Z are driving change on climate

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Correction: The name of Kathy Alesgaf, Deloitte Global Chief Sustainability Officer, was misspelled in two instances in the original version of this article.

Benji Backer is a young person with an old story.

Coming of age in 2017, he took a look at the world around him and felt discontent. Its politics didn't match his; elders didn't share some of his core values and priorities. So he struck out on his own to forge a new path.

Here's the twist. Backer, 24, is a stalwart conservative and Republican activist. His chief frustration? His party isn't doing enough to address climate change.

The disconnect led him to launch the [American Conservation Coalition](#), an environmental nonprofit headquartered in his home state of Wisconsin with a mission to promote climate action within conservative circles. Five years later, Backer says he has come to realize that differences of opinion on climate change often feel more generational than political.

“We can talk climate all day to the under-40 crowd, whereas if we're talking to an older generation, there are so many walls and assumptions,” Backer said. “It's not that I don't value them; older generations have a role to play. It's the unwillingness to change that I think is the biggest problem.”

Backer's experiences highlight something showing up in polling data, academic research and corporate boardrooms across the country: The kids just aren't going to take it anymore.

Professional? Political? It's all the same

Millennials and Gen Z – roughly anyone under 40 – are far more likely than older generations to carry their political and ethical views with them wherever they go. Particularly on climate, they are more willing to take action on those beliefs than baby boomers or Gen Xers when deciding where to work, what projects to take on, what to buy and where to invest their money.

Anecdotes are everywhere. There is no more visible youth climate activist than [Greta Thunberg](#), the Swedish 19-year-old who for years has chastised world leaders on their climate inaction. In July, a half dozen progressive congressional staffers were arrested after [staging a sit-in at Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's office](#), imploring him to keep negotiating with Sen. Joe Manchin on climate legislation.

While such demonstrations may be easy to dismiss as youthful exuberance, serious economic and social forces gathering in the background are not. Kathy Alsegaf, [Deloitte](#) Global Chief Sustainability Officer, says millennials and Gen Zers are having a transformative effect on the corporate world.

Last year, Deloitte [surveyed more than 23,000 people in those two generations](#) across 46 countries. Climate change was the second-ranked priority for both, just behind cost of living and ahead of unemployment.

Survey respondents said they expected employers to take action on the issue, along with other priorities like work-life balance and professional development opportunities. And when the employers don't, they often walk. About 2 in 5 said they had rejected a job or assignment based on personal ethics, a number that grew to nearly half among those holding senior positions.

Companies are in turn feeling the heat, especially in a tight labor market. Nearly 2 in 3 corporate executives told Deloitte in a separate survey that they feel pressured by employees to deliver meaningful action on climate change, only slightly less than the pressure they feel coming from regulators and investors. Alsegaf said that squares with her personal experiences and noted Deloitte itself has [invested \\$1 billion in growing its sustainability and climate consulting services](#).

“Younger generations are deeply concerned about the state of the world. They're passionate about aligning their values and their ethics with their employer,” Alsegaf said. “That came out very loud and clear.”

Generational pressure also is coming from outside the building. Michal Barzuza, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law who has studied the [growing influence of younger generations on the corporate sector](#), notes that millennials are expected to be the recipients of about \$24 trillion in generational wealth transfers. Instead of simply investing to maximize returns, many want to see corporations act as good global stewards before plopping down their dollars.

With younger generations also being sophisticated online sleuths, that means companies can no longer easily paper over questionable environmental practices with donations to philanthropic endeavors.

“They're internet animals – they know how to look for information,” Barzuza said. “If corporations pretend, and then (younger generations) find out, then you lose trust.”

Climate connects young adults

Growing up in the small city of Hamilton, Ohio, during the Great Recession was a formative experience for Ashton Potter. As she door-knocked for the first Obama campaign, Potter recalled stories of maxed-out credit cards and friends' parents who couldn't pay the mortgage.

She grew further political at Kent State University, where a psychic mark formed after discussions with alumni who were there for the 1970 massacre that left four Vietnam War protesters dead.

But after graduating in 2013, Potter took a job in the fashion industry in New York City and put her activism in a box for after-work hours. Then the COVID-19 pandemic came crashing in. Already soured on long work hours and a lack of sustainable focus within the industry, she felt “old, conservative men” at the executive level forced workers back to the office too soon.

It was the final straw. Potter left her job for a four-month stint on the presidential campaign of Joe Biden, then found her way to [Business Forward](#), a nonprofit that empowers small businesses across the country to work on issues like climate change, immigration, and the future of work.

“I had been debating quitting my job for a good while,” Potter said, “But that finally pushed me to, 'It's OK to do this.'”

National polling shows Potter's priorities are common among her peers. While surveys of all Americans almost always show the economy or jobs within the first few priorities, polling of Gen Z and Millennials show climate change also sticking near the top of the list, along with other priorities like racial justice.

In surveys around the 2020 election, CIRCLE, a civic research shop at Tufts University, [found that 13% of people ages 18 to 29 marked climate change as their top concern](#), the most of any issue. Nearly 1 in 3 list climate change among their top three issues – second only to health care – and 74% said they wanted Biden to prioritize a transition to renewable energy, trailing only COVID-19 and “combating violence against people of color.”

Alec Tyson, associate director of research at the Pew Research Center, says national polling regularly shows climate change among the “top tier” of issues for Gen Z and millennials. A lot of that can be explained by younger voters skewing toward the Democratic Party: Democrats typically say they are more concerned about climate change, and with more young people identifying as Democrats, the issue naturally rises toward the top of the list.

But something else is going on, Tyson says. Within the Democratic Party, younger voters are more likely than baby boomers and Generation X to say they've taken action on climate change.

Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, president of NextGen America, a nonprofit youth voter organization, said in a statement after [Biden's signing of the climate legislation](#) Tuesday that millennial and Gen Z support for climate-focused candidates and causes made them the lead force behind the bill.

“Democrats in Congress came together to advance this bold piece of legislation,” Tzintzún Ramirez said. “They heard young organizers and felt the pressure of our movement – and today the president is delivering.”

Also striking are statistics among young conservatives. Less than half of Gen Z Republicans support more mining for coal, more hydraulic fracturing or more offshore drilling, compared with about 3 in 4 baby boomers in their party who support the activities. Those differences represent the largest generational divide on climate issues across any demographic, Tyson said.

In another Pew survey, 67% of Republicans aged 29 and under said they supported the country reaching “net zero” carbon emissions by 2050, in line with an international goal often supported by Democrats.

“Young Republicans are cool on things like fossil fuels,” Tyson said, adding that across parties, Gen Z and millennials are also “much more likely to express anxiety about the future.”

Benji Backer, 24, president and founder of the American Conservation Coalition, says that Republicans care more about climate change than is often believed. Particularly younger conservatives: the Coalition supports the U.S. achieving "net zero" carbon emissions by 2050, in line with international goals.

Backer says he understands that firsthand. He believes a sense of urgency on climate change is a primary bridge connecting young voters on both sides of the political aisle. He doesn't shy away from calling former President Donald Trump a climate change “denier” and says he understands that older generations in general do not want to see the world change as rapidly as younger Americans do.

As his own generation advances in political and economic clout, he hopes common ground on climate will depoliticize the issue, particularly if Republicans win back power in Congress or the presidency in the coming years.

“I think you will see Republican action on climate,” Backer said. “The tide has changed on this, even if the narrative hasn't yet.”

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