

Millennial paradox

Engaging conflicted younger Canadians
in environmental protection

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ABRIDGED VERSION



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Summary

This abridged version of the EcoAnalytics brief titled “Millennials paradox: Engaging conflicted younger Canadians in environmental protection” (Dec. 2019) draws on major new research to shed light on how Millennials engage with the environmental movement, as well as the associated values and psychological barriers that can affect this engagement. The original, full brief draws on data from EcoAnalytics’ Partner-Supporters Survey (Partner Survey; n=2,653), and General Population (GP) Survey (n=3,458), both of which were fielded in the spring of 2019. This version, however, presents only the results from the General Population Survey, so as to protect the confidentiality of data submitted by supporters of Partner organizations, as promised in the original terms of the research. The results reveal that, while Millennials in the general population are more likely than other generations to act pro-environmentally, they are also most predisposed toward self-enhancement as opposed to altruistic and biocentric values. We also find that Millennials are most affected by psychological barriers hindering further environmental actions, though the extent of these barriers differs between Millennials in the Partner and GP samples.

Overall, our findings indicate there is enormous potential for Partners to engage with Millennials insofar as: 1) Millennials make up a large portion of Canadian society; 2) Millennials tend to be more engaged with the environment than older generations; and 3) Millennials seem well positioned to become active and credible messengers when speaking about the collective moral imperative we all have toward saving the planet.

Specific recommendations for skirting the identified psychological barriers to action include:

1. **Take on tokenism:** Diminish belief in the tokenism of individual behaviour change by engaging in ways that activate, strengthen, and mobilize the environmental identity (attitudes and motivation) of youth.
2. **Go high-impact:** Provide information to overcome the lack of knowledge about appropriate high-impact behaviour changes (giving up red meat, limiting consumption, etc.). Do this so as to encourage youth to set aside fears of “Tokenism” and recognize how changes could benefit them personally—as well as the environment.
3. **Reward progress:** Find ways to provide feedback on progress made. Young people are motivated by personal achievement and may be more motivated to

change their behaviours if they can measure whether they are doing their fair share or too little to protect the environment. We offer an example of a tool at the end of this report.

4. **Normalize:** Tap into social norms to address the “Interpersonal relations” barrier in a way that is consistent with youth values. A potential strategy may be to activate or otherwise create new norms via social media and provide youth with more opportunities to share information about their engagement and compare their performance with that of their friends.
5. **Slay dragons, positively:** Consider framing climate change and environmental engagement as a positive opportunity to overcome the “dragons of inaction,” and use research to test different strategies for doing this directly on youth within Partner organizations, and/or via further research using more representative youth samples.

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Introduction

“We are not just some kids skipping school or some adults not going to work. We are a wave of change and together we are unstoppable.”
 —Greta Thunberg, a few weeks after hundreds of thousands of young people around the world took to the streets in September 2019 to demand serious action on climate change.

According to a recent Université de Montréal survey (Climate of Change, 2019), young people mobilizing in the fight against climate change inspires many Canadians, and this at a time when the future of the world lies more than ever in young hands. Aged between 18- and 38-years-old, Millennials are now the largest generation of Canadians, accounting for about 27% of the total population of Canada. These young adults have grown up with more exposure to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation than their parents and grandparents. However, it is unclear whether Millennials are more engaged with environmental issues than older generations, and if so, what forms this heightened engagement takes.

For years now, observers have lamented a secular decline in youth democratic participation (i.e. one that is likely to persist). In Canada, Blais and Lowen (2011) found that most of the decline in overall voter turnout is attributable to younger generations failing to turn up at the polls. While young adults seem less likely to engage in electoral politics, Dalton’s good citizen thesis (2008) suggests that the generally pessimistic picture of youth engagement tends to overlook non-electoral forms of political participation, such as protesting, petitioning and boycotting. According to Dalton, young people in the United States and in other advanced democracies are reshaping politics by engaging widely in non-electoral forms of civic participation.

In the context of the present climate emergency, some research suggests that members of younger generations care more about societal values like environmentalism than older generations (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Recently, Ballew and colleagues (2019) found that younger Americans were more likely than older generations to view global warming as personally important and to express a willingness to engage in climate activism. Additionally, their results suggest that younger generations rank global warming higher in issue priority than older generations. In contrast, other research finds that younger generations do not become more societally engaged than their elders but are rather less likely to engage in civic matters, such as environmental activism (Twenge et al. 2012). In addition, research suggests that Millennials differ greatly across countries. For instance, a survey

conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that young Europeans lack a sense of agency as compared to their American counterparts, with a majority of them saying that they cannot impact the world around them or their future (Stokes 2015).

In this context, this analytical brief draws on data from the General Population Survey (n=3,458) fielded in the spring of 2019 to examine three questions: 1) Relative to older generations, to what extent are Millennials engaged with environmental issues and conventional environmental groups?; 2) To what extent do Millennials' values differ from those of older segments of the Canadian population?; and 3) What obstacles are most important to this generation when they try to engage with environmental issues?

Our findings reveal intriguing contradictions. Paradoxically, Millennials are more likely than any other generation to act pro-environmentally, yet they generally consider hedonism and personal achievement as relatively more important than helping others and protecting the environment. Additionally, we find that Millennials are most affected by psychological barriers hindering their motivation for environmental action.

Overall, our research suggests there is still quite a bit of room to engage more deeply with young adults, and mobilize this segment as a driving force for the environmental movement. Indeed, a majority of Canadians are aware that environmental problems are going to affect younger generations most, imparting this group with much needed credibility when speaking about questions of environmental justice. Moreover, there is clear evidence that young adults may be particularly predisposed to civic engagement and political participation, though maybe not of the traditional type. In sum, tapping into the potential of young adults may be an effective strategy to build greater engagement with the movement—across generations—as they seem predisposed to participate, yet not fully motivated to do so. In turn, youth participation might have secondary effects, motivating older generations to engage further. While values may be slow to change, removing the psychological obstacles holding Millennials back from further environmental engagement is a strategy groups should actively explore.

Millennials are both more hedonistic and more likely to act in defence of environment

Results

1. Youth engagement

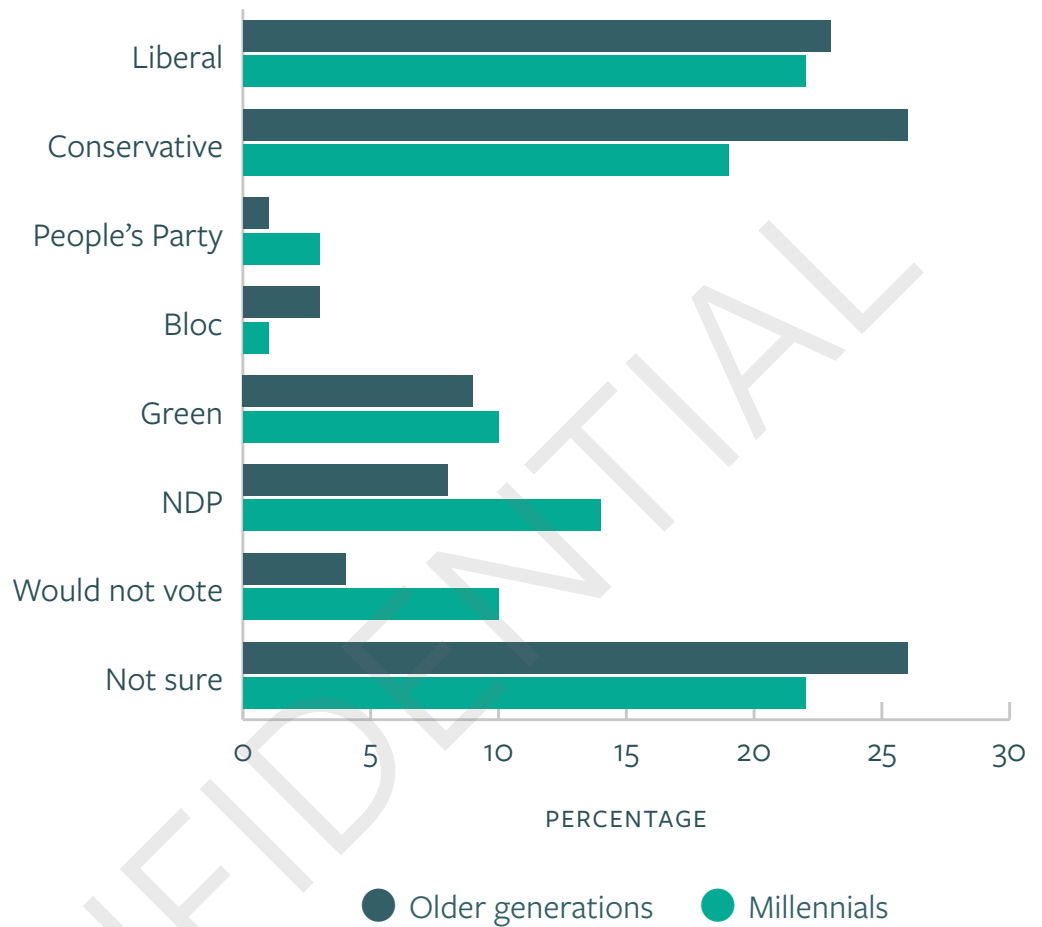
As a first step in assessing to what degree Millennials are engaged with the environment, we asked respondents whether they had donated time or money to environmental or conservation causes over the past 12 months. As shown in Table 1, results indicate that about a third of Millennials report having donated time or money over the last year, while about a fourth of their elders did the same.

Table 1. Donated time/money to environmental or conservation causes over the past 12 months by generation (General Population sample only)

	Older generations	Millennials
No	68%	54%
Yes	26%	36%
Not sure	6%	10%
Total	100%	100%

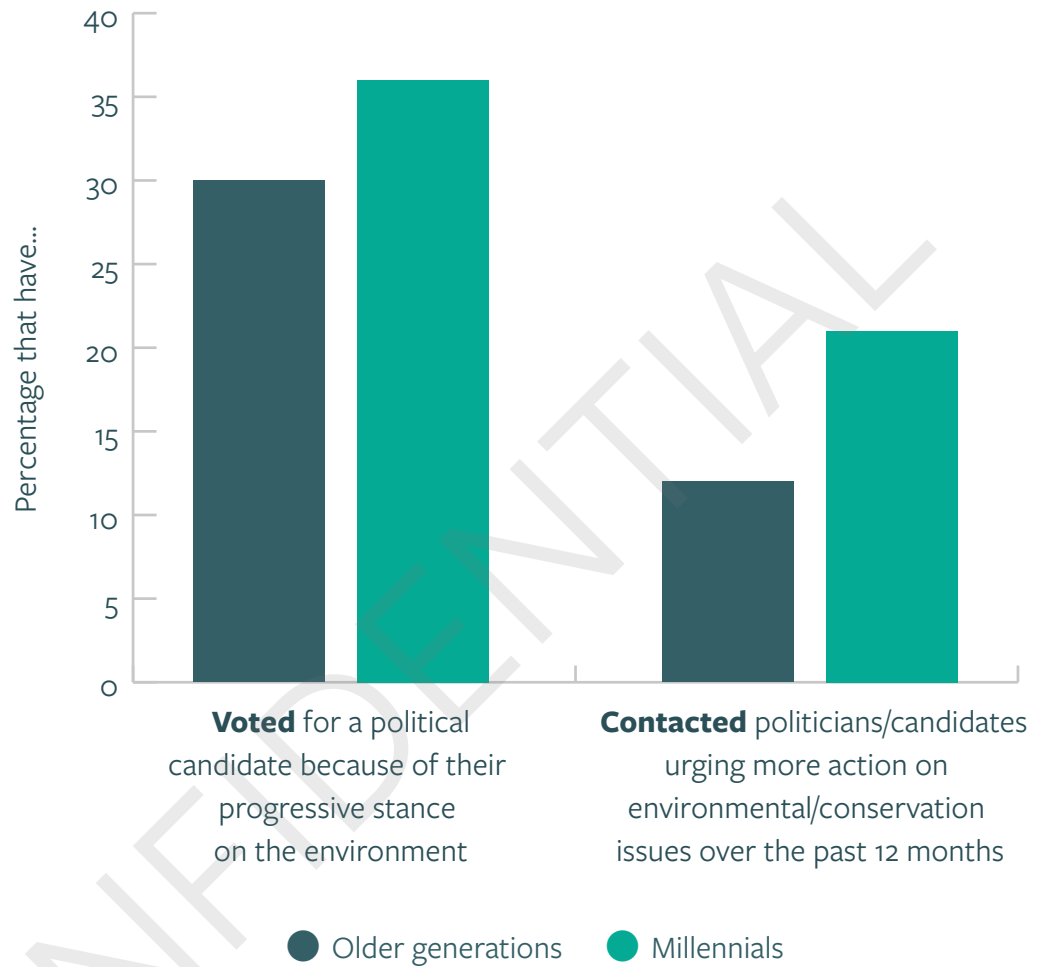
Results suggest that Millennials in the general population are more engaged than older adults on several measures of electoral and non-electoral engagement. When asked for which party they would vote if a federal election were held today, respondents expressed relatively similar voting intentions across generations (Figure 1). Nearly one in ten respondents, all generations included, said they would vote for the Green Party and about one in five said they would vote for the Liberal Party. The largest generational difference appears in the NDP vote, and among self-reported non-voters, who are more likely to be Millennials.

Figure 1: Voting intention by generation (General Population sample only)



While results indicate that Millennials are slightly more likely than older generations to indicate that they would not vote, Millennials are more likely than their elders to have ever voted for a political candidate primarily because of this person’s progressive stance toward the environment. As Figure 2 illustrates, 36% of Millennials say they have at some point voted for a candidate for this reason, while 30% of older adults say they have done this. This difference may appear small, but one should keep in mind that younger generations have participated in fewer elections. Millennials are also more than twice as likely than older generations to have contacted politicians urging more action on environmental issues over the past 12 months (21% as compared to 12%).

**Figure 2: Electoral engagement by generation
(General Population sample only)**

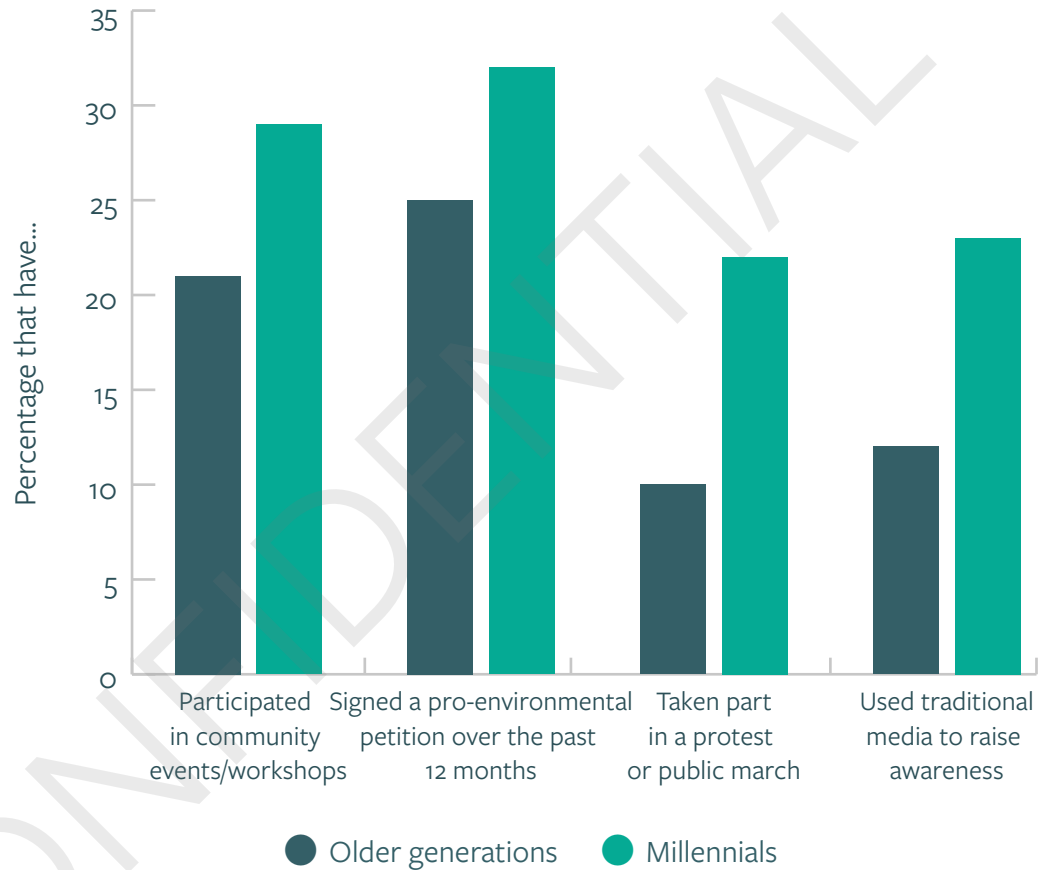


Our survey included a series of questions focusing less on mainstream or routine politics and more on forms of participation that allow for individualized-responsibility-taking. Individualized practices take various forms, including activities such as a citizen’s decision to take a day off of work to demonstrate for a cause, or post on a website, or donate money to a cause (Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

Figure 3 presents results for questions asking respondents whether they have ever participated in various forms of individualized-responsibility-taking (percentage having participated). Results indicate that almost one third of Millennials have participated in community events/workshops on environmental or conservation concerns, while only one fifth of their older counterparts had done the same. These young adults are also more likely to have signed a pro-environmental petition and are twice as likely as their elders to have taken part in a protest or public march,

or to have used traditional media to raise awareness about environmental issues (e.g. by sending a letter to the editor of a newspaper).

Figure 3: Non-electoral political participation (General Population sample only)

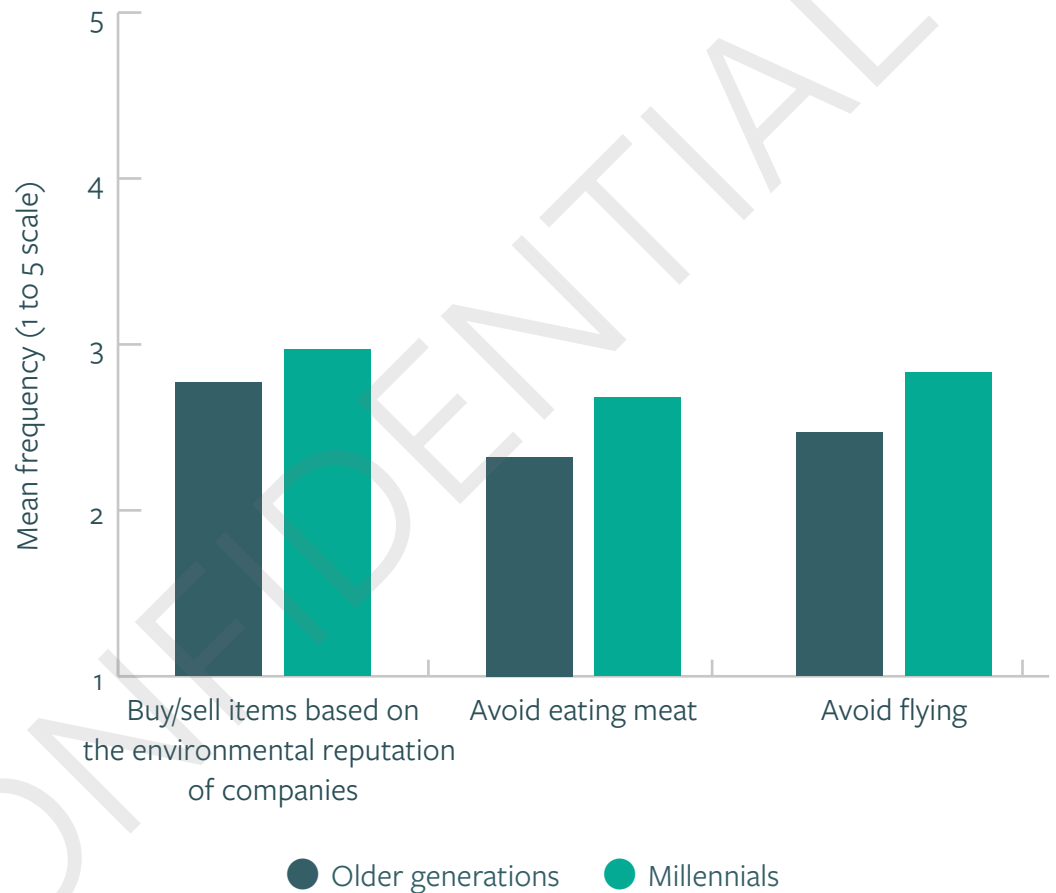


One more specific form of individualized participation is political consumerism, which has been defined as a consumer’s use of the market as an arena for politics to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). To assess the extent to which different generations engage in political consumerism, respondents were asked to rate, on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always) how frequently, if at all, they were engaged in various activities.

Figure 4 shows the mean score on a scale of 1 to 5 for three different variables of political consumerism for Millennials and older generations. Findings reveal that Millennials are significantly more likely than others to buy or sell frequently items

(e.g. goods, services, stocks) based on the environmental reputation of companies. The younger generation is also more likely, than older generations, to avoid eating meat. Millennials also say they avoid flying more frequently than elders do, even when it is inconvenient.

**Figure 4: Political consumerism by generation
(General Population sample only)**



Our results also suggest that, on average, Millennials in the general population travel more kilometres per year in a private vehicle than their elders. As Table 2 shows, 28% of Millennials say they travel more than 20,000 km in a private vehicle each year, while this proportion decreases as we move to older generations: 24% of Gen Xers, 13% of Boomers, and only 9% of Silent Generation members report travelling more than 20,000 km per year.

**Table 2: Kilometres travelled per year in a private vehicle by generation
(General Population sample only)**

	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers	Silent Gen
I do not travel in a private vehicle	12%	9%	6%	6%
< 5,000 km	13%	17%	24%	30%
5,000–10,000 km	24%	26%	29%	29%
10,001–20,000 km	23%	25%	27%	26%
Total less than 20,000 km	72%	76%	87%	91%
20,001–30,000 km	16%	13%	8%	8%
30,001–40,000 km	5%	6%	2%	1%
40,001–50,000 km	4%	2%	1%	< 1%
> 50,001 km	4%	2%	1%	< 1%
Total more than 20,000 km	28%	24%	13%	9%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Altogether, these findings indicate that young Canadians in the general population tend to be more engaged in pro-environmental behaviours than their elders. Partner groups might wish, therefore, to invest more resources in engaging this segment, if not already doing so. This finding also suggests future research should focus on how best to engage these segments. The following section suggests this may involve appealing to different sets or combinations of values.

2. Millennial values

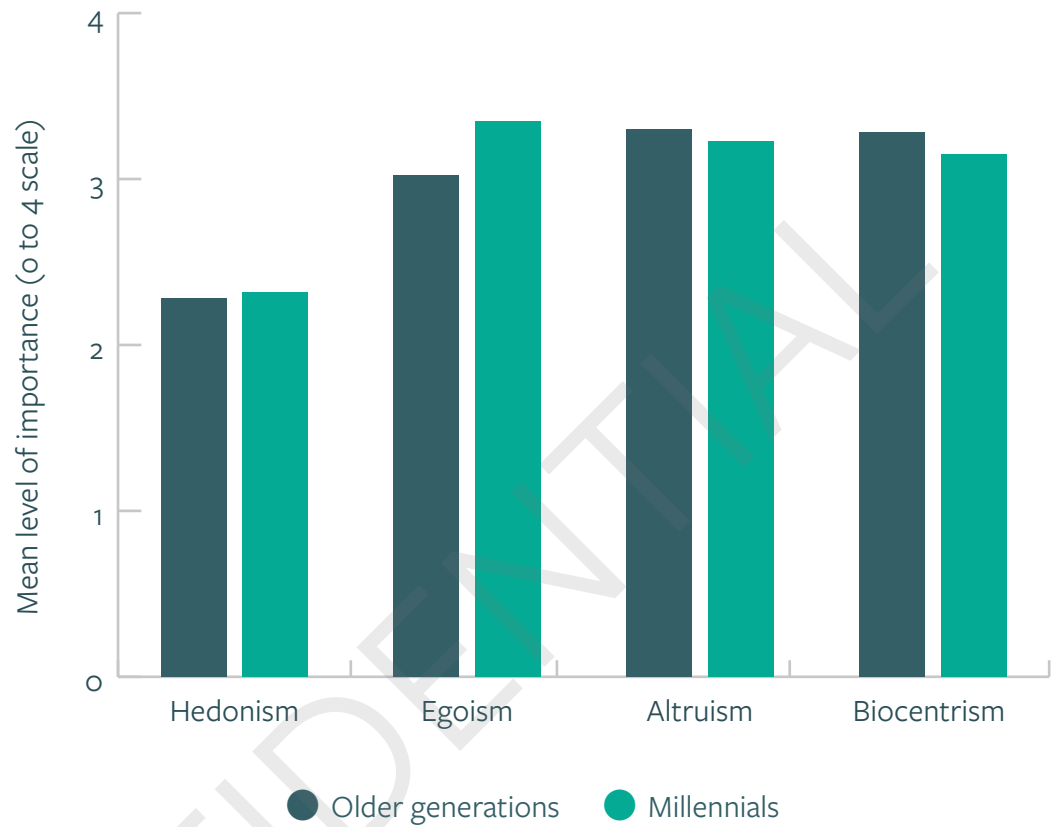
An important step in developing strategies to motivate young adults is to better understand who they are. Values are important in this respect. Understood as general goals toward which people strive in life, values are deep-rooted personal criteria on which people generally base their beliefs and actions (Schwartz 1992). Though these are less “proximate” determinants of behaviour than intentions, research consistently finds that personal values are a key determinant of a wide range of environmental beliefs and behaviours (De Groot and Steg 2007; Steg et al. 2012).

To this end, we examined four values that have proven to be most relevant in predicting environmental beliefs and behaviours: biocentric, altruistic, egoistic and hedonic (De Groot and Steg 2007; Steg et al. 2012). Biocentric values reflect a concern with the quality of nature and the environment for its own sake. They differ from altruistic values that reflect a concern with the welfare of other human beings. Conversely, individuals who endorse egoistic values are more concerned with personal achievements, including wealth and power. Finally, hedonic values reflect a concern for one’s own pleasure and comfort. The first two sets of values can be considered *self-transcending*, the latter *self-enhancing*.

Following Steg and colleagues (2012), we asked respondents to rate the importance of 16 values (reflecting the four categories presented above) as “guiding principles in their lives” on a 9-point scale ranging from -1 (opposed to my principles), 0 (not important) to 7 (extremely important). Respondents were encouraged to use different numbers in evaluating the importance of each value and to rate few values as extremely important. An additive index was then created for each type of values and rescaled so that each value predisposition ranges from 0 to 4.

Figure 5 plots mean level of importance for each type of value. This reveals generally modest but in some cases important differences. Relative to older generations (lumped together), Millennials are significantly more likely to endorse egoistic values, and to a lesser extent, hedonic ones. Meanwhile, the Silent Generation scores lowest on self-enhancement values. On the other hand, Millennials report the lowest mean scores of all age groups on Altruism and Biocentrism, while Boomers have the highest scores on these values.

Figure 5: Values by generation (General Population sample only)



In light of the previous results, it appears that Millennials are more engaged in pro-environmental behaviours despite showing the lowest concern for biocentric values. A view that paints Millennials as the greenest generation thus appears to require some nuance. Although Millennials generally exhibit more pro-environmental behaviours than older generations, they are more likely to be motivated by self-enhancement than by a desire to protect the environment. Future research may wish to dig deeper into the ways of making environmental problems personally relevant for youth in ways that are mindful of their hedonic and egoistic predispositions. (Here, though, one needs to be mindful of research by the UK-based Common Cause Foundation that shows that activating such values can suppress opposed, collective values that are critical to mobilizing people to address “bigger-than-self” problems (see References, Crompton and Weinstein).) Other research might look for ways to activate latent biocentric and altruistic values in youth.

3. Removing barriers to engaging youth

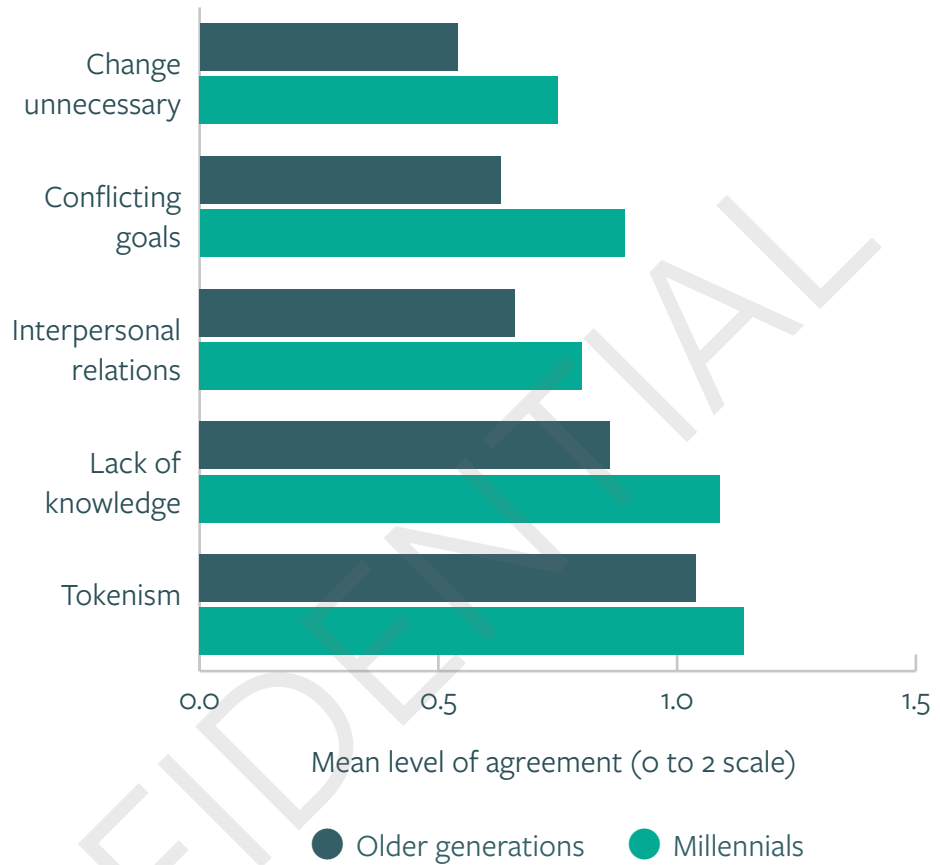
As values are relatively stable in time and thus not likely to change easily, a different strategy is to focus on removing obstacles that people commonly encounter when trying to adopt behaviours that protect the environment. In a widely cited study of psychological barriers to pro-environmental behaviours, Gifford (2011) identified 30 psychological barriers called the “dragons of inaction” that were then reclassified into five more general barriers (Lacroix et al. 2019). Using these categories as a baseline, we asked respondents to rate how strongly they agree with two statements on a 5-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Results were then standardized on a 0-1 scale and summed to create an additive index from 0 (strongly disagree) to 2 (strongly agree).

The first barrier, “Change unnecessary”, encompasses the belief that change is not necessary and that humans are powerless when it comes to saving the Earth. The second barrier, “Conflicting goals” accounts for the belief that lowering one’s environmental impact would interfere too much with other goals in life, as well as the concern that it will take too much time. The third barrier considers how “Interpersonal relations” may be an obstacle to acting pro-environmentally, including the fear of letting people down or being embarrassed about making a change to lower one’s environmental impact. The fourth barrier measures “Lack of knowledge,” including not knowing where to begin or being confused by the wealth of information. Finally, the last barrier is “Tokenism,” the belief that one’s environmental actions already make a difference and that it is not fair for individuals to change when really it is industry that is causing the majority of environmental problems.

As Figure 6 illustrates, Millennials report the highest mean level of agreement with each of the five barriers, compared to older generations. Furthermore, these differences are not only statistically significant, they are substantive. Moreover, the generational differences are systematic across all barriers, which appear to be negatively correlated with age. In other words, younger generations are more likely to relate to the “dragons of inaction”, while older generations are less likely to report them as troublesome.

Younger Canadians are more likely to be troubled by “dragons of inaction”

**Figure 6: Psychological barriers by generation
(General Population sample only)**



The most important barrier faced by Millennials is “Tokenism”, with a mean score of 1.14. More precisely, a majority of Millennials either agree (41%) or strongly agree (12%) with the statement: “my environmental actions already make a difference in lowering my environmental impact.” Over a third agree (21%) or strongly agree (15%) with the belief that “it is not fair for me to change when really it’s industry that’s causing the majority of environmental problems.”

Somewhat surprisingly, the second largest psychological barrier for Millennials is knowledge, with a mean score of 1.09. The plurality (relative majority) of Millennials agree (29%) or strongly agree (11%) with the statement: “there is so much information out there that I am confused about how to lower my environmental impact.” Moreover, most agree (33%) or strongly agree (11%) that they would like to lower their environmental impact, but that they are not sure where to begin. This is especially noteworthy, as one may have expected Millennials to feel more knowledgeable than their elders with respect to climate change and pro-environmental actions.

Perhaps due to the sheer volume of information Millennials face every day, these young adults are more confused than their counterparts when it comes to knowing where to begin to lower their environmental impact.

Millennials are also more likely than others to feel that lowering their environmental impact would conflict with their other goals and aspirations. About a third of them agree (20%) or strongly agree (7%) that lowering their environmental impact would interfere too much with their other goals in life. Although to a lesser extent, Millennials also report higher levels of agreement with the belief that change is unnecessary and to feel that changing their behaviours would threaten their Interpersonal relations. This feeling of Conflicting goals may be related to the relatively high importance of self-enhancing values for this age group, further suggesting that making the environment more personal is key for engaging youth.

Conclusion

If the world is going to solve environmental problems, including climate change, our worldviews, practices, behaviours and lifestyles will need change significantly. While the best way to trigger these changes remains a topic of debate, it is clear that governments have been slow to introduce the structures and incentives that would foster behavioural change in these areas. In this context, younger generations appear most ready to make changes to their lifestyles, likely because they have more at stake in the future, less of a stake in the status quo, and tend to be more open to change. If groups want to engage more with youth, they might consider engagement at the level of practices, which appear to be important to youth who are eager to be part of the solution. They might also engage youth by leveraging hedonic values (gratification using social media and new applications) or choose to nurture latent collective values of biocentrism.

Overall, this analysis suggests that Canada's environmental organizations have an opportunity to engage more with younger segments of society. Millennials seem particularly predisposed to civic engagement and political participation. A key to this may be removing the psychological barriers that get in the way of Millennials engaging more deeply.

Before continuing with conclusions, we need to remember some of the limits of the present analysis. As this analysis draws on cross-sectional data, it is not possible to determine whether differences between younger and older individuals are the

result of aging or generational effects. Ideally, we would like to observe engagement longitudinally, over the course of individuals' lives, so as to measure whether one engages more or less as a result of growing older. Future studies may benefit from employing longitudinal designs by investigating the influence of aging and generational effects on the relationship between age and environmental engagement.

As well, the present study is not concerned with determining how pro-environmental behaviours change as individuals grow older, but rather with the generational differences that exist at the present point in time.

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Recommendations

By better understanding the value predispositions of Millennials, as well as which psychological barriers affect Millennials most, groups may begin to “slay the dragons” through youth-oriented campaigns and programs. These efforts are likely to be most effective if designed and built in accordance with the values of young people.

1. **Take on tokenism:** Find ways to motivate youth to overcome assumptions about tokenism, the largest barrier affecting Millennials. These young adults are generally engaged with the environment. As a result, they tend to think they have done their part. Research suggests that once one has overcome some initial “dragons of inaction”, “Tokenism” can hinder further progress (Gifford 2011). Nevertheless, this barrier may be surmounted when environmental motivation, attitude and identity are stronger (Lanzini & Thøgersen 2014), suggesting groups have an important role to play in activating, strengthening, and mobilizing the environmental identity of youth.
2. **Go high-impact:** Provide information to overcome the “Lack of knowledge” about appropriate solutions among youth. Information should be communicated in a meaningful way, linking as much as possible to values we know Millennials endorse most. A constructive way of doing so may be to relate abstract threats to local environmental issues and personal concerns and emphasize the personal benefits of environmental protection, such as saving money, eliminating waste, or having an impact on other people. To avoid “Tokenism” and feelings of helplessness, groups may wish to highlight solutions that have a high-impact on climate change (such as healthy eating habits or limited consumption, rather than recycling or changing lightbulbs).
3. **Reward progress:** Find ways to provide feedback (and reward) progress made. Young people are motivated by personal achievement and may be more motivated to change their behaviours if they can measure whether they are doing their fair share or too little to protect the environment. (See note, below.)
4. **Normalize:** Tap into the power of social norms to address the “Interpersonal relations” barrier in a way that is consistent with youth values. Given that young people tend to consider social power and being influential as more important than helping others or protecting the environment, they may be more motivated to act pro-environmentally when they are acknowledged for doing so. One strategy may be to work together in advancing new norms of behaviour via social media and provide youth with more opportunities to communicate

via various media, as well as in person, about their adoption of such norms and to compare their performance with that their peers.

5. **Slay dragons, positively:** Try framing climate change and environmental engagement as a positive opportunity to overcome the “dragons of inaction.” Groups may want to consider these psychological barriers to action when designing their communications and campaigns, paying particular attention to messages that respond directly to these concerns. In turn, more research should directly test the efficacy of *dragon-slaying* strategies.

Note: A smart phone app now in development, for example, could help here. The work of a team of developers, designers and planners in Vancouver, led by Anna Bohn, the Lighter Footprint App uses ecological foot-printing data, and an attractive, gamified interface to help individuals and householders understand the impact of their consumption patterns, locally and globally. It also helps them plan to reduce their footprints and measure progress against their plans. For further information, contact anna@lighterfootprint.org.

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Methodology

The analysis in this briefing is based on the General Population Survey (n=3,458), which was fielded between May 30th and June 12th, 2019. The combined response rate for this portion of the fieldwork was 4%. Throughout the report, generational cohorts were computed based on respondents' age at the time of data collection. (Birth-date ranges for generations were as follows: Millennials: 1981–2012; Generation X: 1965–1980; Baby Boomers: 1946–1964; Silent Generation: 1928–1945.)

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