

Potential Institutions for Future Generations: What Do Current Generations Think?

Results from a Six-Country Public Opinion Survey

Malcolm Fairbrother



Global
Challenges
Foundation



Institute for
Futures Studies

Malcolm Fairbrother¹

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¹ Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm/Uppsala University, Sweden/Umeå University, Sweden/University of Graz, Austria. malcolm.fairbrother@uu.se

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Summary

Policymakers, civil society organizations, and academics are proposing the establishment of new institutions for better representing the right and interests of future generations. Interest in this idea has been rising for a variety of reasons, with some countries having already established new institutions aimed at improving long-term decision-making, and the United Nations likely soon to take similar steps at the multilateral level. Thus far, however, no research has been done on public attitudes towards potential new institutions for future generations (IFGs). We therefore surveyed people in six countries—Sweden, Brazil, India, Italy, Nigeria, and the United States—about their views of ten potential IFGs. We investigated in particular which IFGs are more versus less popular, and how the views of different kinds of people vary.

Comparing IFGs, we found that the following were more popular: expert councils; reserved seats in parliament/congress for members aged under 35; a rule requiring legislators to debate the consequences of new laws for future generations; and allowing for lawsuits against governments if they do not adequately protect the interests of future generations. In contrast, lowering the voting age to 15 was not popular, and nor was the principle of making future generations pay for government actions if they will be the beneficiaries. (The latter is the principle underlying proposals for states to pay for climate policies with public debt.) More punitive IFGs were especially popular in lower-income countries, possibly because of those countries' lower-quality institutions/government, and public perceptions that juridical processes can hold otherwise untrustworthy actors accountable.

Comparing individuals, we found that people who say they are more willing to sacrifice for future generations are more supportive of IFGs. So are those who are more supportive of redistribution; more concerned about the environment; more thoughtful about their actions' future consequences; more globally empathetic; and more collectivist. Differences between individuals on the (self-identified) political left versus right, and differences among different demographic groups, were not so pronounced and/or varied more from country to country. Individuals who are more trusting in existing political and social institutions are also, as existing social science research would predict, more positive about proposals for new IFGs.

We also asked people whether they think IFGs would really make much of a difference, and we used a simple survey experiment to investigate how support for IFGs might depend on which potential implications people think about. We found that most respondents thought the IFGs would make a difference, while our survey experiment did not have any notable impact on people's views.

Introduction

Existing political institutions tend to represent the rights and interests of living people, but not the rights and interests of future generations. Arguably, as a consequence, democracies have failed to enact ideal policies from a long-term perspective, and have not respected the rights and interest of future generations (Smith 2021). To correct for the short-termism of current policymaking, a variety of new institutions have been proposed for better representing the rights and interests of future generations. These institutions for future generations (IFGs) would, advocates say, help change what governments do, by changing the rules of the political game in a given society—establishing and/or empowering advocates of longer-term concerns, and discouraging short-termism. Proponents argue that these innovations would help protect future people against intergenerational injustices, most notably climate change and other forms of costly ecological degradation, excessive debt, and inadequate efforts to prepare for future risks.

Scholars (mostly political theorists and moral philosophers) have debated the pros and cons of different possible institutions (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016). Such scholars can take largely as settled the question of whether current generations have duties to take reasonable measures not to burden future generations (e.g., Caney 2022). We clearly do. But how to think through more specific questions related to intergenerational justice can be more challenging. For example, what values and principles ought to guide societal decisions about climate change, given that our choices will have consequences for future generations? It is a related open question among political theorists how future generations ought to be represented in decision-making today.

Yet questions about the feasibility and desirability of establishing IFGs, and which IFGs would be best, are not purely academic. The UN Secretary-General has announced plans to establish an Envoy for Future Generations, possibly as soon as next year at a planned Summit of the Future (Guterres 2022; UN n.d.). Some countries have already introduced some IFGs.

Till now, however, no academic or other surveys have examined public attitudes towards such institutions. And, for the sake of their legitimacy, any future institutions for future generations (IFGs) should enjoy widespread support, and so knowledge of public opinion about potential IFGs would be valuable. We therefore designed the first ever survey, in six countries, measuring relevant public attitudes. We sought to answer: To what extent do people support the establishment of IFGs? Based on simple descriptions of a variety of different IFGs, are some institutions preferred over others? What kinds of individuals are more or less positive about (some or all) IFGs? Do people think

new IFGs would really make much difference? And what kinds of implications of introducing IFGs might influence people's thinking about them?

The investigation was motivated in part by the fact that, as elaborated below, many people around the world are quite distrustful of many existing political and/or public institutions. This suggests that, even with all the best intentions, there is no guarantee that any decision policymakers might come to about the establishment of new IFGs would receive much public support. It could be the case that the public rebels, such as because the very purpose of most IFGs is to increase the weight allocated to the interests of future generations—at the expense of current generations, to some degree.

Until recently, there was barely any research at all on the politics of time—how policymakers and ordinary voters think about and confront trade-offs over time and the possibility of making decisions for the long-term (Jacobs 2016). That has begun to change, however, with increasing numbers of studies investigating for example what kinds of people are more or less supportive of long-term policymaking, and how existing political institutions influence the distribution of policies' costs and benefits across different generations. This survey contributes to this growing body of literature.

Background

There are a number of reasons why the rights and representation of future generations are now in focus. In the context of global climate change, and to some extent other environmental problems, the consequences of contemporary policies and actions for people who are not here to represent themselves are well recognized by area experts and policymakers. Many policy dilemmas confronting governments raise unavoidable questions about how to distribute costs and benefits over time, and among different generations (Jacobs 2016). Some general patterns of social change, such as population aging, also have significant implications for distribution across generations (Mason and Lee 2018). And, out of frustrations with governments' inconsistent if not generally poor respect for the interests and needs of future generations, some people have already taken action in those generations' names. For example, a number of legal cases have been brought against governments on the grounds that their failures to address climate change violate the constitutional rights of future generations (Gaillard and Forman 2020).

At the United Nations, there will be a UN Summit of the Future in 2024, and a recent major report, *Our Common Agenda*, proposed a Declaration on Future Generations. Proponents of the declaration have argued for establishing some sort of formal "voice" for future generations in the UN system (Hale et al. 2023). The Secretary-General has proposed to appoint a special Envoy for Future Generations. The envoy would, among other things, provide expert advice on intergenerational and future impacts of policies and programmes, and make better use of foresight methods. Representatives of Fiji and the Netherlands led a process that generated an Elements Paper for the Declaration for Future Generations. The Elements Paper argues for "Anchoring the interest of future generations at the national, regional or international levels through the establishment of new bodies, or, through the appointment of representatives to act on behalf of future generations."

Focusing on future generations is not exactly new at the UN, however. For example, UNESCO has previously proclaimed (in 1997) a Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations. The preamble of the original UN Charter mentioned "succeeding generations" in referring to the importance of avoiding future wars. In 1987, the UN Brundtland Commission, in their official report *Our Common Future*, famously defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." By some counts, nearly 400 General Assembly resolutions mention future generations (UN 2023).

There is also some tradition of IFGs at the national level (Lawrence 2022). As the Our Common Agenda report observed, “At the national level, some countries have established committees for the future or future generations commissioners who advise governments and public bodies.” For example, Wales has a Future Generations Commissioner, and Israel’s Knesset also established a Commissioner for Future Generations (in 2001; it was discontinued after one term of office, however). The Israeli commissioner for future generations reviewed legislation and defined areas of importance to future generations. Hungary has an ombudsman for future generations, with a mandate to protect the constitutional right to a healthy environment. The ombudsman has powers to obtain information, and to seek action from the Constitutional Court. And Finland has a committee for the future, as part of a wider foresight institutional framework, with a mandate to investigate major long-term policy issues. Its mandate also includes holding the government accountable for a report for the future it is constitutionally required to submit every term.

Nobody expects any of these institutions, or any of those under serious consideration for adoption internationally, to make a radical difference. But there is reason to believe that the representation of future generations, in some way, could be consequential. Though the institutions examined are different, some prior research already suggests reasons for thinking that institutions can really make a difference. Finnegan (2022) notes that countries with proportional representation, and mechanisms for policy concertation between industry and the state, have tended to enact stricter climate policies. This demonstrates how the institutional character of policymaking can make a difference to the ways that costs and benefits are distributed across different groups in society.

In the background of these proposals, however, lies a challenge. While the kinds of people with a special interest and connection to political and international institutions are generally positive about them, many ordinary people around the world are highly sceptical. There is in other words a significant gap between the beliefs of elites and experts, on the one hand, and those of laypeople, on the other (Dellmuth et al. 2022). Research suggests that people’s trust in existing institutions with which they are at least slightly familiar shape their trust in other institutions, such as at the international level (Dellmuth et al. 2022). In light of this, it is probably the case that when confronted with proposals for new IFGs, laypeople’s reactions will strongly reflect their trust in existing political and social institutions.

Some existing studies have already suggested that people’s institutional trust shapes their support for future-oriented policies. Fairbrother et al. (2021) found that variable levels of support for future-oriented policies are largely a reflection of individuals’ political trust. If people are confident about the functioning of political institutions, they will be more confident that sacrifices they make for the sake of future benefits will truly materialize. As Jacobs and Matthews (2012) have shown, trust in political institutions and officials leads people to feel more confident that long-term policies will actually yield their promised benefits. And it is a lack of such trust that leads people to discount potential future benefits, out of uncertainty. Rapeli et al. (2021) also found that political trust predicts more future-oriented political thinking.

Institutions for Future Generations

We asked about ten Institutions for Future Generations – IFGs in our six-country survey. We provide the exact descriptions shown to the respondents, with some explanation of why we chose these institutions, and the specific descriptions we provided of them. (All text was translated into Swedish, Portuguese, Hindi, and Italian, for the surveys in Sweden, Brazil, India, and Italy.)

The diversity of institutions we included in the survey reflects that there are major differences in the ways that potential IFGs could operate, be organized, and potentially affect decision-making. They could be more or less concerned with specific issues (e.g., climate and environment); they could be linked to a country's parliament/congress (or not); they could be consultatory, advisory, or decisional; they could rely on a single person or a group/committee; and they could have either a precise or more open mandate. Different institutions could be superior or inferior in terms of effectiveness, political legitimacy, fairness, and attainability (see Caney 2022).

1. Lower the voting age in national elections to 15 years, since young people might identify more with future generations.

Young people already alive today could serve as advocates of future generations, given that they will likely overlap more in time. We asked about changing the voting age to the arguably quite young age of 15, since in Brazil it is already 16, and we wanted the language of the item to be consistent across countries. Though some scholars have argued against seeing young people as representatives for future (unborn) generations, it is the case that a number of the lawsuits that have been brought against governments for (arguably) violating the rights of future generations have involved plaintiffs who were quite young.

2. Establish an ombudsman or representative for future generations. This would be a high-profile advocate who can investigate citizens' complaints and propose new laws. They would not be able to force the government to change its actions, however.

An ombudsperson or representative for future generations could investigate public agencies, and help hold them to account, potentially even prosecuting them for any failures to uphold laws for the protection of future generations (Beckman and Uggla 2016). They could raise the profile of issues of relevance for future generations, propose new laws, and use the right to request information from other state institutions. Given their profile, they could articulate consequential critiques of proposed laws and policies that threaten future generations, and put pressure on policymakers for any shortcomings in how they treat future generations (MacKenzie 2021). At the same time, being linked to the legislative branch would give them access and a public profile. And while their formal political power might be limited, that could be an advantage, as the state could feel threatened by an actor that is too powerful (and so refuse to establish or maintain it).

3. Reserve some seats in parliament/Congress for designated (elected) representatives of future generations.

With the same law-making powers as other legislators, some seats in the national parliament or congress could be reserved for special representatives of future generations. They could propose and vote for or against new laws. Though what is in the best interest of future generations might sometimes be contested, such representatives could certainly make lawmaking more favourable to them. Also, in principle, the logic of this proposal could apply more broadly—not just to national parliaments, but even for example to the UN Security Council (Caney 2022).

4. Reserve some seats in parliament/Congress for elected members who are under 35 years of age. They may be especially motivated to make good decisions for the long term.

Theoretically, younger parliamentarians might be more future-oriented, as they have more of a stake in long-term outcomes. One way of increasing the share of parliamentarians who are young is to establish a quota (see Bidadanure 2016). Youth quotas for parliament already exist in some countries, typically requiring the election of members of parliament under 35 or 40 years of age. There is some similarity between the logic behind this IFG and IFG1 (about lowering the voting age), insofar as both make use of younger people as representatives of the rights or interests of future generations.

5. Introduce a rule that parliament/Congress can only pass laws after debating their consequences for future generations. This would increase the attention given to the interests of future generations, but might slow down the process of passing new laws.

This proposal reflects that procedural rules, not specific individuals, could be the focus of efforts to protect future interests. One means could be providing a designated time interval ensuring sufficient time and attention are given to relevant information and discussion.

6. Create a publicly funded expert council for the future, with members from universities and other research centers. They would provide analyses of the likely impacts of government actions on future generations, and recommend what actions to take.

An independent counsel for the future could provide scientific counsel, from perspectives informed by natural and social sciences, and the humanities. Such a council could provide policymakers, public agencies, and political parties with reliable analyses. Arguably, the idea of such a council is not particularly innovative, in the sense that in many and perhaps most countries experts of various already advise governments, and they often do so with an awareness of the potentially long-term implications of decisions taken now.

7. Change the law to enable people to sue the government on behalf of future generations. If it is proven that some action by government is likely to cause unjustifiable harm to future generations, or violate their rights, the court could require a change.

National legislative frameworks may establish legal duties to future generations, and if so then the legal system can be used to hold governments to account. Potentially governments could be prosecuted by advocates for future generations. This has already

happened in some countries. For example, recently an administrative court in Germany ruled that the federal government must develop and immediately present a credible plan for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the transport and buildings sectors, in light of Germany's climate law (Packroff 2023).

8. Make future generations pay the cost of government programs or actions, if they will get most of the benefits. If there is a debt to pay, current generations would not have to pay it.

Here our rationale was to examine attitudes towards the principle behind what the economist-philosopher John Broome has called a “world climate bank.” This would be an institution capable of issuing long-maturity bonds for investments that would primarily benefit future generations (see Broome 2016; Broome and Foley 2016). Those future generations would, in turn, pay for the investments. The logic of this proposal is that the greenhouse gas emissions of current generations will negatively affect future generations, and any reduction of those emissions will also mostly benefit future generations. Especially since it is likely that future generations will have higher incomes and standards of living than ourselves (assuming no dramatic global breakdown), those generations will be in a position to pay for our efforts. It is worth highlighting that for this IFG, unlike all of the other nine, supporting it is in effect a vote for increasing some form of burden on future generations, rather than sacrificing for their benefit. This can nonetheless be considered an IFG, insofar as—at least according to its proponents—it could also help avoid a substantial problem for future generations. Politically, it seems very difficult to get current generations to pay for the green investments required to end greenhouse gas emissions—presumably because of the costs to current generations. This proposal would avoid having to ask current generations to sacrifice, and would make everyone better off than the alternative of no action.

9. Allow for the prosecution of crimes against future generations at the International Criminal Court, including crimes by individuals, corporations, and governments.

Here our rationale was to evoke a global judicial mechanism with powers to enforce binding laws on public and private institutions, and responsible individuals. Admittedly, survey respondents may know little or nothing about the International Criminal Court. But the name is fairly self-explanatory, and clearly conveys the idea that an international agency could hold individuals who violate the rights of future generations accountable. By some accounts, the existing ICC could already do this.

10. Have the World Bank and other global development agencies prioritize projects with greater long-term benefits, even if that means fewer benefits in the short term and takes some focus away from immediate problems.

This IFG is effectively a modest shift in emphasis, but we wanted to capture the idea of weighting longer-term benefits more heavily. International development agencies do have to choose their priorities, and how to spend their scarce resources, so the dilemma is a realistic one. And this item clearly captures the sense of a trade-off between near-term and longer-term benefits, thus measuring a commitment to future generations' well-being.

Individuals and households must choose between immediate consumption and sa-

crificing now for the future (saving/investing), and international development organizations also face dilemmas in weighing how much to assist poor people in need currently versus laying foundations for future prosperity.

Potential Factors Affecting People's Views of IFGs

With the aim of determining what kinds of people are more or less supportive of IFGs in general, and also individual specific IFGs, as we elaborate below our survey asked a number of questions about respondents' values, attitudes, and demographic characteristics. There are various possible dividing lines and underlying orientations that could affect people's preferences, and we build on a small number of prior studies that have investigated differences among individuals who are more or less supportive of focusing policies and/or policymaking on longer-term benefits, or priorities that would serve future generations (e.g., Busemeyer 2023; Rapeli et al. 2021; Jamróz-Dolińska et al. 2023).

Prior research has pointed to a variety of other characteristics of individuals who may be more future-oriented, willing to sacrifice for the benefit of future generations, and more supportive of IFGs. There is evidence for example that people who are more future-oriented in their everyday lives are also more so in the political realm (Rapeli et al. 2021). Such studies have relied on a scale designed to measure the degree to which individuals engage in "consideration of future consequences" of their actions. Knudsen and Christensen (2021) found that individuals scoring higher on the consideration of future consequences (CFC) scale are more likely to be politically engaged generally—particularly individuals with low political trust.

Other research suggests that politically left-leaning individuals are more likely to be future-oriented in their political thinking (Rapeli et al. 2021), though Barnett et al. (2019) found that people with politically conservative worldviews may be more concerned for future lives. Jamróz-Dolińska (et al. 2023) found that people's time perspectives are linked to various kinds of national identification, while Busemeyer (2023) suggests that attitudes towards future generations are linked to individuals' social value orientations (especially the so-called GAL-TAN dimension). Ladini and Maggini (2022) found that more individuals with more collectivistic orientations were more accepting in Italy of Covid-19 containment measures, suggesting that such orientations may influence attitudes towards a range of social decisions with consequences for other people.

Additionally, as explained earlier, there is some reason to think that people who are more trusting in existing national and international political institutions will also be more supportive of IFGs. Previous research has shown that political trust predicts support for future-oriented policies and a willingness to sacrifice for future generations (Fairbrother et al. 2021). Multiple studies have also found that trust in national institutions correlates with trust in international institutions (e.g., Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Dellmuth et al. 2022). The implication is that people extrapolate their trust to new institutions, though these prior studies' methods do not provide definitive evidence that changing someone's trust in one given institution causes changes to their trust in other institutions. Trust in supranational institutions, like the European Union, appears to emerge from individuals' trust in national political institutions (Harteveld et al. 2013). And that holds not just for ordinary people, but officials (Persson et al. 2019).

Given all the above, we measured a number of background attitudes: concerns about climate change; cosmopolitanism vs nationalism; left-right political ideology; attitudes toward immigration; attitudes toward redistribution; empathy toward humanity; general environmental concern. Attitudes towards immigration are a useful measure of individuals' social attitudes.

We asked about a number of demographics: gender, age, education, income, parenthood. Christensen and Rapeli (2021) found an individual's level of education was the strongest predictor of their views of policies whose benefits would materialize over different timescales.

Results

We present results as answers to a series of questions:

1. Which IFGs are more versus less popular?
2. Do people who support one IFG tend to support all the rest as well, or do people's views of different IFGs vary a lot?
3. What kinds of people are more versus less supportive of IFGs generally?
4. What kinds of people are more versus less supportive of specific individual IFGs?
5. Do people think these institutions would really work?
6. Does support for IFGs depend on what we say about their implications?

1. Which IFGs are more versus less popular?

Figure 1 provides an answer to this. People's preferences vary somewhat by country, but in general the following IFGs are popular: expert councils; reserving seats in congress /parliament for members under 35 years of age; a rule requiring discussion of consequences of legislation for future generations; allowing lawsuits on behalf of future generations. The following, in contrast, are not popular: lowering the voting age, and making future generations pay. Intriguingly, an expert council is quite popular in every country—it is the top choice in five countries, and fourth most popular in the U.S. Enabling people to sue was popular—third or second most popular in four countries, and somewhat less so in the U.S. and particularly Sweden. Lowering the voting age is one of the two least popular options in every country. Making future generations pay for policies that will benefit them is also quite unpopular—one of the two least popular IFGs in every country.

2. Do people who support one IFG tend to support all the rest as well, or do people's views of different IFGs vary a lot?

Table 1 shows how attitudes towards different IFGs correlate. The correlations capture the similarity of people's views of any two IFGs. In general, given that the correlations are all positive, it seems people who support one IFG tend also to support others. Attitudes towards different IFGs do tend to cluster.

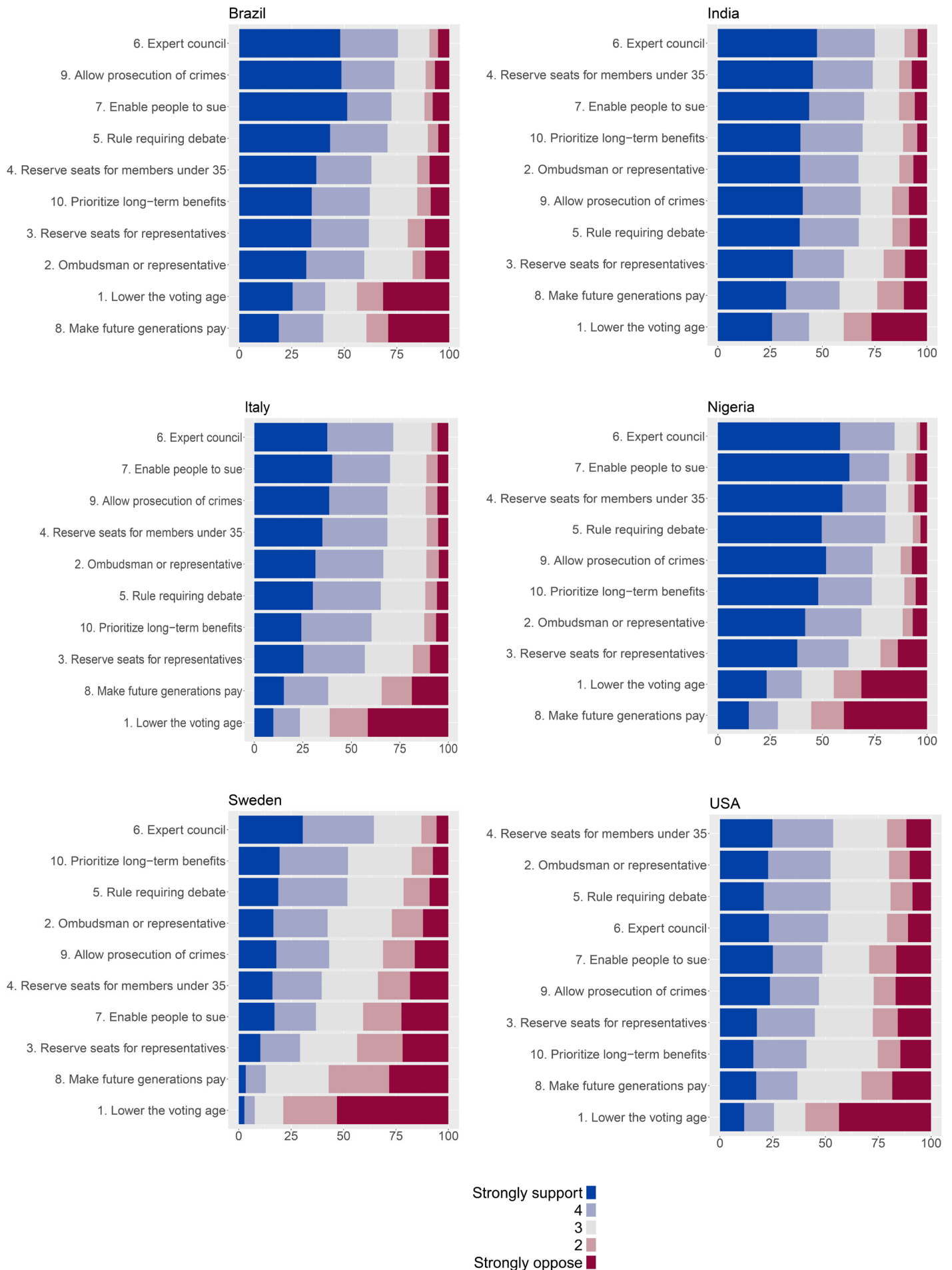


Figure 1: Support versus opposition for ten IFGs, ordered for each country by popularity.

Views of two IFGs are clearly less related to all the rest, however: those of IFG1 (lowering the voting age in national elections) and IFG8 (making future generations pay for programs or actions from which they will enjoy the most benefits). Attitudes towards these two IFGs are more distinct. That said, while the correlations are weaker, they are not dramatically weaker (and still positive overall). The mean correlations between views of these two and the other nine IFGs are weakest. It's also the case that most of the correlations, while positive, are not especially strong, tending to range from 0.2 to 0.5.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix

	IFG1	IFG2	IFG3	IFG4	IFG5	IFG6	IFG7	IFG8	IFG9	IFG10
IFG1	1.00	0.22	0.30	0.25	0.21	0.18	0.23	0.25	0.22	0.23
IFG2	0.22	1.00	0.42	0.38	0.38	0.44	0.37	0.23	0.38	0.32
IFG3	0.30	0.42	1.00	0.51	0.37	0.38	0.38	0.25	0.36	0.31
IFG4	0.25	0.38	0.51	1.00	0.34	0.38	0.37	0.20	0.34	0.32
IFG5	0.21	0.38	0.37	0.34	1.00	0.38	0.39	0.17	0.33	0.32
IFG6	0.18	0.44	0.38	0.38	0.38	1.00	0.39	0.15	0.37	0.38
IFG7	0.23	0.37	0.38	0.37	0.39	0.39	1.00	0.18	0.45	0.28
IFG8	0.25	0.23	0.25	0.20	0.17	0.15	0.18	1.00	0.20	0.20
IFG9	0.22	0.38	0.36	0.34	0.33	0.37	0.45	0.20	1.00	0.30
IFG10	0.23	0.32	0.31	0.32	0.32	0.38	0.28	0.20	0.30	1.00
Mean	0.21	0.31	0.33	0.31	0.29	0.30	0.30	0.18	0.29	0.27

Note: Averaging data from six countries. Means are for the correlations between each item and all of the other nine.

3. What kinds of people are more versus less supportive of IFGs generally?

Given the weaker relationship between IFG1 and IFG8 and all the others, but the consistently stronger correlations among all the other either IFGs, we can combine the latter and construct an index capturing overall support for new IFGs. We then ask what sorts of characteristics distinguish individuals who are more supportive from those who are not.

Based on that analysis, the following were characteristic of people reporting more support for IFGs (across all, or at least almost all, six countries):

- a greater willingness to sacrifice for future generations
- greater institutional trust
- more concerns about climate change and the environment generally
- a willingness to make an effort to live a more environmentally benign lifestyle¹
- greater support for redistribution

¹ Environmentalism was measured with: "Some people try to protect the environment in their personal lives. How much effort do you make to live an environmentally friendly lifestyle? 1 No effort at all 2 3 4 5 A great deal of effort." And support for climate action with: "How much effort do you think [COUNTRY] should make to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions compared to today?"

- higher scores on a psychological “consideration of future consequences” (CFC) scale²
- more concern about the living conditions of humanity as a whole
- more collectivist attitudes³

The higher an individual’s political trust, the more positive attitudes toward IFGs are. We use an index of institutional trust, corresponding to the average of the following items: University research centers, The news media, Business and industry, The national parliament/Congress, The local government where you live, The local police, The United Nations, International economic agencies, like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Health Organization (WHO). The trust gap was particularly notable in USA, Brazil, and India—see Figure 2.

Notable Non-Differences

Sweden is the only country where we see a clear difference in attitudes toward IFGs according to political ideology, with left-wing individuals more positive toward IFGs. Italy shows a similar, though weaker, pattern. In other countries, there is no such pattern. Intriguingly, in the U.S. the pattern is the opposite, with right-leaning people positive towards IFGs.⁴ Potentially this is a consequence of the fact that, in that country, political conservatives have frequently argued against public spending on the grounds that it imposes a debt burden on future generations.

Attitudes toward immigration are also associated with support for IFGs only in Sweden, and to a lower extent in Italy. In these two countries, but not others, individuals who are more negative about immigration tend to be more negative toward IFGs.

Demographic Differences

In contrast, demographic variables (gender, age, education, etc.) are not much associated with differences in support. In some countries—Sweden, USA, and Italy—younger people were more supportive. But in Brazil there was no clear age gap, and in Nigeria and India older people were more supportive of IFGs.

However, in every country, parents are more supportive of IFGs—though not by much.

There was no notable divide according to education level (though this was somewhat variable by country, as in some countries, somewhat surprisingly, support for IFGs was higher among individuals with less formal education).

There was also no notable gender divide. There was a slight gender gap in some

² The index corresponds to the average of the following items (variables: Q7r1 Q7r2 Q7r3 Q7r4 Q7r5): I consider how things might be in the future, and try to influence those things with my day to day behavior; I often engage in a particular behavior to achieve outcomes that may not result for many years; I only act to satisfy immediate concerns, figuring the future will take care of itself; I think it is important to take warnings about negative outcomes seriously even if the negative outcome will not occur for many years; I think it is more important to do things with important distant consequences than things with less important immediate consequences.

³ The index corresponds to the average of the following items: In a group, we should sacrifice our individual interests for the sake of the group’s collective interest; For the sake of national interest, individual interest could be sacrificed.

⁴ “In political matters people talk of “the left” and “the right”. How would you place your views on this scale?”

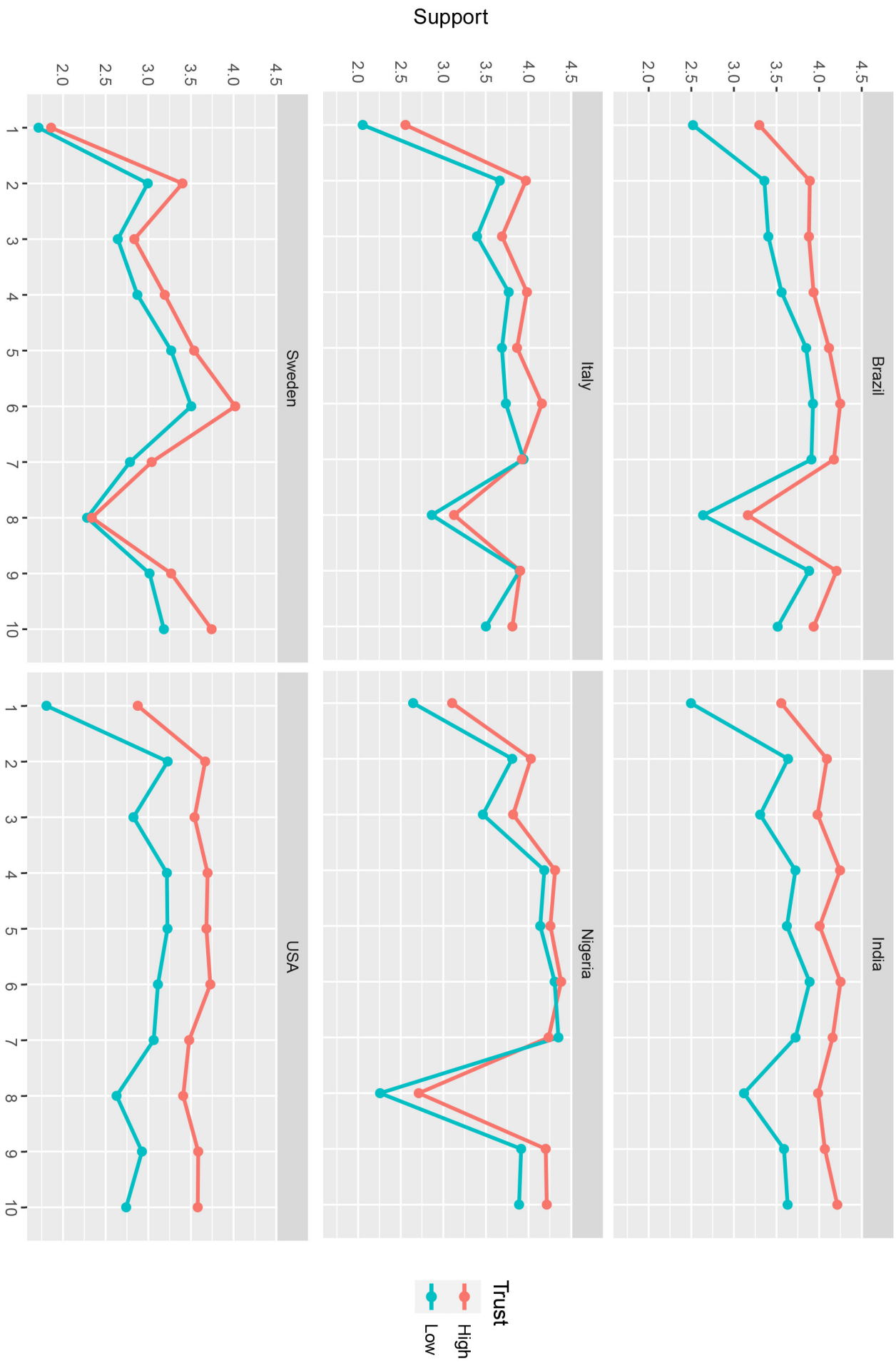


Figure 2: Support for each of ten IFGs, among respondents with high or low institutional trust, in each of the six countries.

countries, but the gap was generally minimal. Sweden was an exception here, in that women are much more supportive. And there was no notable income divide.

4. What kinds of people are more versus less supportive of specific individual IFGs?

Patterns of support for some specific IFGs were somewhat different than patterns of support for IFGs as a whole. For example, in some countries younger people were more supportive specifically of IFG1 (lowering the voting age in national elections). For IFG1, younger respondents were more supportive in most countries (India and especially Nigeria excepted). Potentially, had we surveyed respondents below the age of 15, we might have found strong support among them for this IFG. As it is, the fact that our respondents were only people above the age of 18 may explain the low support for reducing the voting age: all the people we surveyed would not benefit from this change.

5. Do people think these institutions would really work?

We took the institution for which each given respondent reported the strongest support (or in case of a tie we selected one of the individual’s strongest-supported institutions at random) and asked whether the respondent believed it would have an impact on decisions for future generations in their country, if it were introduced.

The results are shown in Figure 3. The large difference in response across countries is probably the most striking result here (with respondents in Sweden most sceptical). But this should be interpreted with caution, given that the samples are not fully representative. It may be that real cross-national differences are not so substantial, or very different from what we see here. The key result here is that, overall, we can see that most respondents believed that at least one IFG would make a genuine difference.

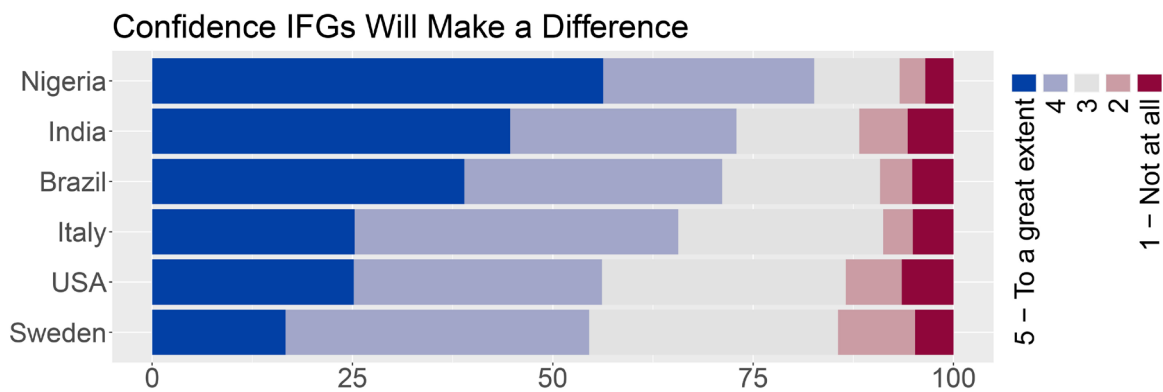


Figure 3: Respondents’ confidence that one of their most-supported IFGs would genuinely influence decisions for future generations in their country.

6. Does support for IFGs depend on what we say about their implications?

To answer this, we conducted a simple framing experiment. We randomly assigned respondents to read one of our possible messages:

1. Note that better representation of future generations would likely mean that we have to pay more for things that will benefit them.
2. Note that new ways of making decisions for the long term could help reduce some of the most serious, catastrophic risks threatening humanity.
3. Note that people alive today benefit from sacrifices made by previous generations. Many people's parents and grandparents made big sacrifices, and society as a whole paid for new technologies, infrastructure, and education. Some older generations fought for freedom.
4. Note that one way people alive today will affect future generations is through what we decide and do about climate change and other environmental harms.

The first of these four, in particular, emphasized that the introduction of IFGs is likely to impose a cost on present generations. We thought this message might reduce support for IFGs. In practice, however, we found the randomly assigned treatments had no detectable effect on responses. It is possible the treatment was simply not strong enough, or the different rationales did not make an impression on respondents.

Discussion

The results here provide some indication to policymakers how proposals they might make for new IFGs would be received by the general public. Based on the six-country survey, the public would be more receptive to proposals for new expert councils; reserved seats in parliament/congress for members under 35 years of age; a rule requiring legislators to debate the consequences of new laws for future generations; and additional mechanisms for governments to be taken to court if they do not respect the rights of future generations.

In contrast, it seems the public would be less positive about reductions in the voting age, and making future generations pay for policies or programs of which they would be the main beneficiaries. The later result is somewhat surprising, as the very purpose of such an IFG is to solve a political problem: how to achieve public investments of benefit to future generations, without triggering opposition by current generations. It seems that such an IFG is not a promising route to achieve such an outcome.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the survey was that people are surprisingly enthusiastic about punitive measures, especially in lower-inequality countries. That may be because such countries have lower-quality public administration, and more corruption, and people exposed to more corruption in their societies are likely to prefer coercive institutions (as found by Harring 2013), because of greater suspicions of others and a desire to punish free-riders. In some countries, courts and judicial processes may be regarded as checks on the power of untrustworthy politicians. (In Harring's study, policy attitudes vary by national context, according to quality of institutions/freedom from corruption.)

Who supports IFGs? We found that people who are more supportive of redistribution, more concerned about the environment, more thoughtful about their actions' future consequences, more globally empathetic, more collectivist, and more politically trusting are generally more supportive of IFGs. On the other hand, left-right and demographic differences are not so pronounced. And advocates of new IFGs should not assume a significant left-right divide. Though much of the interest in IFGs may be environment-related, and in many countries there is a left-right divide with respect to environmental protection, we have found evidence that people on the political right may be no less likely to support IFGs.

Overall public support for IFGs was relatively high. Judging by our results, if policymakers were to advocate the establishment of most IFGs, the public would be accepting of such proposals. Could support be increased yet more? As Dellmuth and Tallberg (2023) have argued, elites and civil society need to advocate for institutions. Negative

voices can easily drown out positive ones, but positive ones can be effective. IFGs therefore need prominent advocates who speak out in support of them, and emphasize them (positively) at least as much as any detractors do (negatively).

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Methodological Details

The data were collected by Kantar, through surveys of members of their online panels. We received data from 1000 complete interviews in each country, with individuals aged 18+ eligible to complete the survey. Kantar used quotas for gender, age, and region to increase the representativeness of the achieved samples, and offered the questionnaire in English, Swedish, Hindi, Portuguese, and Italian. Nevertheless, as respondents were Kantar web panelists, who are individuals who have voluntarily agreed to answer surveys in return for compensation, the achieved samples cannot be taken as fully nationally representative. They cannot be considered internationally comparable, either, especially as the achieved samples for India and Nigeria in particular include disproportionate numbers of younger, urban, more highly educated individuals.

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority confirmed that the study is consistent with Swedish law.

The survey was introduced to respondents with the following text: “This survey is about how societies and governments make decisions for the long-term. Many decisions will affect not just people who are already alive today, but also future generations. That means people who are not even born yet. Depending on what we do today, future generations could have worse, better, or similar opportunities and quality of life.

We would like to know your opinion about possible ways of improving decisions that will affect future generations. Please indicate how strongly you would support or oppose each of the following proposals. You do not need to have heard of them before to give an answer. We are interested in your initial response to each idea.”



INSTITUTE FOR FUTURES STUDIES

BOX 591, SE-10131 STOCKHOLM

PHONE: +46 8-4021200

EMAIL: INFO@IFFS.SE

WWW.IFFS.SE