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To cite this article: Ida Vikøren Andersen (04 Jan 2024): Seeking Consensus on Confusing and Contentious Issues: Young Norwegians' Experiences of Environmental Debates, Environmental Communication, DOI: [10.1080/17524032.2023.2299358](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2299358)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2299358>



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Published online: 04 Jan 2024.



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# Seeking Consensus on Confusing and Contentious Issues: Young Norwegians' Experiences of Environmental Debates

Ida Vikøren Andersen 

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen/NORCE Norwegian Research Centre, Bergen, Norway

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine how young people in Norway, an affluent nation in the global north with long traditions of acknowledging the young as citizens, articulate and negotiate agency and norms for practicing environmental citizenship. Combining focus groups and qualitative surveys, I explore how Norwegian youth experience and engage with public environmental debates. Results show that many perceive environmental issues, particularly climate change, as post-political issues beyond rhetorical contestation and debate. Moreover, expectations that environmental challenges are best solved through consensus-oriented debate and cooperation lead many to dismiss political opposition and activism as irrational and destructive forms of civic engagement. Consequently, while harboring doubts about the efficacy of their individual actions in driving change, they tend to restrict their agency to personal responsibilities aimed at advancing sustainability.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 May 2023

Accepted 20 December 2023



## KEYWORDS

Environmental citizenship; rhetorical citizenship; youth climate activism; agency; climate action (SDG13)

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing global awareness of young people's engagement with environmental issues. Youth-led environmental activism has established itself as a political force, particularly through Greta Thunberg and the global Fridays for Future-movement, which have mobilized millions of children and youth to protest for system transformation and climate justice (de Moor et al., 2021; Friberg, 2022b). The young protesters are described as "louder and more coordinated" than their predecessors (Dana Fisher, cited in Marris, 2019, p. 471), and their messages as "strikingly direct and unvarnished" (Matthew Nisbet, cited in Marris, 2019, p. 472). Beyond raising heightened public awareness and garnering support for the climate cause, the new cycle of youth-led environmental activism has sparked discussions about its potential to revitalize democracy by putting many young on the track to a lasting political engagement (de Moor et al., 2021; Fisher, 2019).

Today's youth face heightened vulnerability due to environmental challenges, including climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. As rights-bearing citizens, they should have access to participate in decision-making processes that wield significant influence over their lives and the planet they inherit. Moreover, the involvement of youth is increasingly viewed as indispensable for the success of environmental endeavors, especially in the context of ambitious and equitable climate measures (Ingaruca, 2022). Despite the heightened media and research attention on youth engagement in environmental issues, this attention has predominantly centered on a select group of

**CONTACT** Ida Vikøren Andersen  idaa@norceresearch.no, Ida.Andersen@uib.no  Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen/NORCE Norwegian Research Centre, P.O.B 22, Nygårdstangen, NO-5838 Bergen, Norway

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activists, leaving a gap in our understanding of how the broader youth population engages with these challenges.

This paper addresses this gap by investigating young Norwegians' civic participation in environmental issues. Rather than focusing solely on youth activists, I examine how diverse groups of high school pupils experience and engage in public debates about environmental matters. The study explores the question: How do young Norwegians perceive their roles in addressing environmental challenges, and what are potential barriers to their involvement? To do so, I use a combination of focus group discussions and qualitative surveys, which I approach through the conceptual, analytical, and critical framework of rhetorical citizenship (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). In this framework, citizenship is viewed as practice, and rhetoric serves as a medium for practicing citizenship. In the analysis, I pay particular attention to how the young articulate and negotiate their agency and norms for practicing citizenship. By doing so, the study offers novel insights into young people's attitudes and agency, which can inform efforts to encourage and enhance their involvement in environmental debates and decisions.

In what follows, I first discuss young people's capacities for practicing environmental citizenship through participation in civic life before discussing some contextual factors specific to Norwegian youths' civic participation. Then, I account for the material and method before presenting the analysis in three parts, each discussing dominant themes and discourses articulated in the focus groups and qualitative surveys. First, I discuss the youths' fatigue and frustration, relating this to their perceptions of environmental issues – climate change, in particular – as post-political issues beyond rhetorical contestation and debate. Then, I explore the ambiguities in the youths' discussions about their agency. While many doubt that their individual actions can effect change, they simultaneously restrict their agency to personal responsibilities to promote sustainability. In the last part of the analysis, I discuss how the youths' expectations that environmental problems are best solved through consensus-oriented dialogue and compromise cause them to dismiss political opposition and activism as irrational and destructive means to practice citizenship.

## Young people's agency in environmental debates and decisions

The scale and complexity of contemporary environmental problems have prompted reconsiderations of traditional notions of citizenship. The concept of "environmental citizenship" has emerged as a call to redefine citizenship, framing it as membership in non-territorial communities and characterized by responsibilities and obligations extending beyond fellow citizens within the nation state (Dobson & Bell, 2005; Hayward et al., 2015). Increasingly, the discursive aspects of environmental citizenship have been emphasized in discussions and studies of how environmental citizenship is constituted, negotiated, and challenged through rhetorical practice (Andersen, 2023a; Marti, 2021).

A rhetorical approach to citizenship views citizenship as membership in a political community and emphasizes that this membership is "dynamically crafted (constituted, defined, shaped) by rhetorical acts" (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 572). Citizens' experiences of being part of a political community and having meaningful roles within it are crafted and enacted through their encounters with public rhetoric and debate – when they are both actively participating and on the receiving end (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). Foregrounding the rhetorical, participatory aspects of citizenship, this framework carries normative expectations that citizens have access to participate in and influence civic life (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). Thus, rhetorical citizenship is inextricably linked to agency.

Approaching citizenship as practice and experience allows us to discuss young people's citizenship, characterized by the absence of full citizenship rights and obligations (e.g. voting, paying taxes, and so forth) (Hayward, 2021; Hayward et al., 2015). Although lacking full membership in the political community, young people enact rhetorical citizenship as recipients of public rhetoric and participants in public debates (Andersen, 2023a).

The recent cycle of youth-led environmental activism has demonstrated that children and youth practice citizenship by protesting environmental injustices and demanding system transformation (de Moor et al., 2021; Friberg, 2022b; Hayward, 2021). However, it is not only through participation

in activism that young people practice environmental citizenship; instead, they employ various strategies, operating both within and outside traditional political processes to challenge unsustainable systems (O'Brien et al., 2018). Moreover, young people practice citizenship when encountering and critically assessing diverse viewpoints and arguments about environmental issues, using the rhetoric they encounter as input as they try to find their own position on these matters.

In this paper, I examine how young people in Norway articulate and negotiate agency and norms for practicing environmental citizenship. Norway is a highly affluent nation in the global north with long traditions of acknowledging young people as citizens (Lorgen & Ursin, 2021, pp. 333–334). The nation's wealth is predominantly due to being among the world's largest oil and gas exporters. Simultaneously, Norway is a leading country in environmental issues with some of the world's most ambitious national targets for climate mitigation. This paradox is reflected in the nation's policies, media coverage, and public debate, where competing narratives are often voiced (Fløttum & Espeland, 2014).

Like other Nordic countries, Norway is a stable democracy with solid infrastructures for political debate and negotiations, high trust in institutions and the mass media, widespread political participation, and high electoral turnout (Skogerbø et al., 2021). The country has a multi-party parliamentary system marked by a tradition of cross-party compromise. This characteristic is evident in the country's political rhetoric, which is less inclined toward “catch-all” rhetoric, bipartisan hostility, and an emphasis on politicians' traits over their party's politics, as is often observed in two-party systems such as those in the UK and the US (Kjeldsen et al., 2021, p. 367).

Environmental concerns are found to be issues of great concern to Norwegian youth. Prior research has shown that young Norwegians are highly knowledgeable and motivated to act to address climate change, both by supporting political efforts to reduce emissions and by adopting sustainable lifestyle choices (Aasen et al., 2019; Fløttum et al., 2016; Fløttum et al., 2021). Young people have long been more inclined to support green political parties and environmental policies than the general Norwegian population (Aasen et al., 2019). Still, their engagement with environmental issues has primarily manifested outside established political arenas, notably through activities like school strikes and civil disobedience (Andersen, 2023b; Ursin, 2019).

Despite a recent surge in climate change-related extreme weather events both in Norway and globally, there is evidence from opinion polls and the results of the 2023 school election indicating a recent decline in environmental engagement among Norwegian youth (Aas & Murray, 2023; Skovdahl, 2023). Much like the broader population, young people have increasingly redirected their concerns toward issues such as personal finance and health,

suggesting that other challenges, like the pandemic and rising inflation, are perceived as more immediate and pressing (Aas & Murray, 2023). Another potential explanation for the diminishing environmental engagement among Norwegian youth is their lack of awareness of their opportunities for influencing environmental policy decisions (Fløttum et al., 2021; Selboe & Sæther, 2018). Furthermore, persistent discourses depicting young people as immature citizens-in-the-making may marginalize them from active participation in the democratic debate (Andersen, 2023b; Ursin, 2019). Their engagement may be further curtailed due to prevailing neoliberal forces in society, which primarily frame environmental citizenship in terms of personal responsibilities and obligations, thus undermining their capacity to envision collective agency (Hayward, 2021; Walker, 2017).

The sum of these features makes Norway a case that can provide valuable insights into the broader opportunities and barriers for young people in affluent nations' involvement in environmental agendas. It is crucial to do so, both because emissions resulting from the production of wealth and high-consumption lifestyles in affluent nations have far-reaching impacts on the lives and livelihoods of people worldwide and because many citizens in affluent nations, including the youth, have access to voice their opinions in public debates, enabling them to influence decisions affecting the environment and distant others (Hayward et al., 2015, p. 20).

## Exploring youths' views on public environmental debates

To examine young people's experiences with public environmental debates, I use a combination of focus group discussions and qualitative surveys. The method allows me to explore the youth's general experiences of the public debate, their assessment of specific contributions to these debates, their reflections on their agency, and their approaches to discussing environmental matters with others. The data collection complied with privacy regulations as advised by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).<sup>1</sup> The surveys and focus group discussions were conducted, the latter also transcribed in Norwegian. For this article, the material has been translated into English.

### *Focus group discussions*

The backbone of the study is a series of focus groups with a total of 64 informants, carried out in the period 2022–2023. The informants are high school pupils (16–19 years), some attending a school with approximately 1000 pupils in the center of a large Norwegian city, others a school with approximately 150 pupils in a small industrial village.

Mostly, pupils from general study programs leading to university studies (hereafter, general study programs) participated in the study. Twenty-nine were in their first year, and twenty-two were in their third year of the general study program. Additionally, thirteen pupils from vocational study programs participated in the study. Six were in their second year of the technical and industrial production program, and seven were in their second year of the electricity and electronics program. There are thirty-seven female and fourteen male informants from the general study programs and ten male and three female informants from the vocational programs. Each focus group consists of five to eight informants from the same class.

The focus groups were organized as discussions and structured around two main parts: The first part focused on the informants' experiences with public debates about environmental issues. Here, the informants were asked to discuss their thoughts about the environmental debate and assess their interest and possibilities to engage in these debates as recipients and participants. They were asked questions like: What are your thoughts on the public debate about environmental issues? What are your thoughts on your possibilities to speak and be heard in these debates? In your view, what characterizes a "good" public debate – and what obstructs a "good" public debate?

In the second part of the focus group discussions, informants were presented with recent examples from the public discourse on environmental issues and invited to discuss them. These examples encompassed statements and media coverage related to youth-driven environmental activism, such as protests against local encroachments in nature and political inaction regarding the global climate crisis. This part of the focus groups was designed to incite discussions regarding the role and norms governing citizen participation in democratic debate. The examples reflected the young voices that are often heard in the public debate about environmental problems, that is, those who participate in political opposition and activism and often do so by employing provocative rhetoric (Andersen, 2023c; Andersen & Fløttum, 2022; Bjerggaard Nielsen, 2021; Marris, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Focus groups are advantageous for exploring complex issues that are "not thought out in detail" (Morgan, 1997, p. 11) because they allow informants to negotiate meaning collectively, which resembles how the social production of meaning and opinion formation typically occurs. By interacting, thinking together, and reacting to each other's utterances – either through approval or negotiation – informants may discover and explore new aspects of the topic that they may not have discovered and explored if they were interviewed individually. The focus groups generate discussions that make it possible to observe both the meanings people read into the topic of discussion and the rhetorical interaction between people as they negotiate meaning, issues, views, and arguments with others (Kjeldsen, 2020, p. 145; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 96). Thereby, the focus group discussions offer insights into the mechanisms and norms at

play when people discuss something with someone. Moreover, the discussions can give an impression of how strongly people feel and think about the issue, as indicated by their will to defend their position when they are challenged or their eagerness to voice their views to the rest of the group (Vatnøy, 2018, p. 139).

### **Qualitative surveys**

The focus group discussions are supplemented with responses from qualitative surveys with the informants. The surveys consisted of open-ended questions, which invited the respondents to freely formulate their answers to questions about how they experienced voicing their opinions and debating in different situations. The informants were asked to write about how they experienced participating in the focus group discussions and how they experienced voicing and discussing their opinions in general. The surveys allowed the respondents to articulate their experiences in their own words, thereby yielding richer and more nuanced answers than fixed-response questions (cf. Fløttum et al., 2016, p. 1131). These survey responses serve as input informing the analysis of the focus group discussions.

### **Analyzing the youth's discussions and reflections**

The analysis is conducted in a hermeneutic movement between the focus group materials and survey responses, the public utterances and debates they commented on, my interpretation of the informants' discussions and answers, and the existing literature and theoretical concepts guiding this interpretation (cf. Kjeldsen, 2020). The analysis is of an exploratory character, as it searches for regularities and interesting irregularities in how the youth relate and react to public debates and specific utterances and rhetorical modes in them (cf. Bengtsson & Hoff-Clausen, 2020; Kjeldsen, 2020). I have searched for recurring patterns and tendencies in what the informants spoke about (thematic content), how they talked about it (patterns of arguments and discourses), and how meaning was negotiated within the group. I also searched for utterances and interactions that diverged from the recurring patterns and tendencies, which could offer insight into this informant's or group's views on public debates about the environment.

In the analysis, I approach the youth's discussions and survey responses through the framework of rhetorical citizenship (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). As an analytical and critical framework, rhetorical citizenship is anchored in rhetorical notions of deliberative democracy and agency, emphasizing "citizens' performance of civic discourse or other symbolic action and their reception of it" (Kock & Villadsen, 2017, p. 574). Following this, the analysis explores both how rhetorical practices in the environmental debate shape the youth's experience of being part of a political community and having meaningful roles to play within it and how they articulate, perform, and challenge norms of democratic membership in the political community (Andersen, 2023a; Kock & Villadsen, 2017). In particular, the analysis pays attention to text passages that reveal significant assumptions and views about citizens' agency and norms for their participation in environmental debates and decisions.

The ability to practice rhetorical citizenship in environmental issues is influenced not only by one's rhetorical skills and interactions; it is also conditioned by power structures like class, race, and gender, distributing both agency and environmental burdens unevenly (e.g. Callison, 2022; Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018; Reyes & Chirindo, 2020). While this study mainly focuses on the generational aspects of civic participation in environmental debates, it is crucial to recognize the risks of neglecting other injustices, such as those related to race, ethnicity, and gender. Upon analyzing the interviews and qualitative surveys, it becomes evident that gender did not significantly impact the thematic content, discourses, or interactions within the focus groups, which could be attributed to Norway's standing as one of the world's most gender-equal countries (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, as I will discuss in the analysis, despite Norway usually being considered an



egalitarian society, social class emerged as a factor, apparently shaping the roles the informants envisioned for themselves within the environmental debate.

Notably, most informants were ethnic Norwegian youth, and a more diverse sample might have revealed a more substantial role for factors such as race and ethnicity. For example, the results may have been different had they been conducted with groups of indigenous youth. In Norway, the Sami community has a long history of grappling with the negative impacts of renewable energy developments on their livelihoods and the environment (Anker, 2020), as aptly illustrated by the ongoing conflict over the windfarm in Fosen, deemed a violation of Sami reindeer herders' human rights by the Supreme Court.

The presentation of the analysis is structured into three parts, each dedicated to exploring themes and discourses that emerged across various groups. I begin by discussing the prevalence of expressions of fatigue and frustration. Then, I explore the ambiguities surrounding the young's sense of agency. Finally, I examine how they articulate the norms and ideals that shape their vision of the democratic debate.

### Feeling fatigue and frustration

Climate change was the dominant frame of reference from which the youth discussed their perceptions and views on environmental debates, reflecting how climate change is the environmental issue that has been the subject of most political and media attention in the past decades (Warde et al., 2018, pp. 96–99). Although many different views and experiences were voiced in the focus groups, the discussions were overall marked by feelings of fatigue and frustration.

Many said they are “a bit fed up” with hearing, speaking, and learning about climate change, which they view as a “quite boring” topic. Two factors contributing to fatigue materialize across the various groups' discussions. First, many emphasize the centrality of environmental issues in school as somewhat overwhelming. Secondly, many express dissatisfaction with the political handling of these issues, and an overall experience shared across all groups is that public debates about climate change fail to translate into political action. Recurring expressions in all focus groups are: “much talk, but little action” and “one keeps promising, but nothing happens.” Many have difficulties understanding why one must continue debating an issue they consider decided rather than translating the broad consensus that action is required into political action. An illustrative example is found in one focus group consisting of four females (F6–9) and four males (M3–6), all in their first year of a general study program in a city school:

- F6: Am I the only one who is a bit bored? By the climate- and environmental debate? Like, I am a little tired of it.
- M6: That is very controversial to say.
- [...]
- M4: No, but I am actu-, I agree. I agree with that, [I ...]
- F6: [You] are a little tired of it, right?
- M4: I am a bit tired of it because there is so much talk about it all the time.
- [...]
- M3: And people call it a debate and not a problem.
- M4: Yeah, that's true. Why are we [debating it?]
- M3: [It should not] be a debate, really.
- M5: It is quite straightforward, really.
- F7: Yeah, that's true.

The informants within this group suggest that political questions concerning how to address the challenges of climate change are “quite straightforward,” implying that they are self-evident and uncontested. Thereby, they treat climate change as a largely post-political issue, “where there isn't much to deliberate and decisions make themselves” (Rancière, 1999, p. viii), primarily through technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 6).

Perceptions of climate change as a post-political issue, already decided in the technical sphere of arguments (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981), come to view in many of the groups' discussions. The phrase "Why is it a debate?" appears in many of them, and many informants do not understand why it is necessary to argue about how to act rather than simply acting. Similar findings have been reported in prior studies, highlighting the challenge many young Norwegians face in comprehending why "we" – particularly politicians – are not taking more substantial actions to address the challenges of climate change (Fløttum et al., 2016; Fløttum et al., 2021, p. 2). As one of the female informants (F6) from the group cited above says later in their discussion:

I think it is, aah. It is, it is difficult to understand why a bigger change is not happening. That I find difficult to understand!

The youth's perception of climate change as a post-political issue beyond rhetorical contestation and debate leads them to experience the public debate as unnecessarily polarized and hostile. A recurring description of the public debate about climate change is that it is polarized between "two extremes." The youth tends to evaluate this polarization as unfavorable since it obstructs both action and their possibilities to use the debate as input to their opinion formation. While it is not always clear which groupings constitute the two extremes described, many speak about disagreements about future scenarios and claim that activists and the mass media "exaggerate" and "overdramatize" the consequences of climate change, whereas climate skeptics "underplay" them. An illustrative example is the following quote from a female participant (F19) in her first year of a general study program in a city school:

I feel that, in the climate debate, it is very much either-or. On one side, there are, sort of, the climate activists throwing paint, and on the other side, there are those who say that climate change does not exist. It is like very much two extremes.

Whereas none of the informants support climate deniers' views, many say that they think both the mass media and climate activists are conveying exaggerated apocalyptic future scenarios. For example, a female informant (F23), in her third year of a general study program in a rural school, says:

I remember when I was little, about 7–8 years, there was a news broadcast where they feared a new ice age. And it is not like I am a climate denier, but you start to think, sort of like, okay, I have lived for 18 years, and we have already, sort of, been through code red, ice age, and code red again.

A male informant (M13) from the same class says about the media's reporting about climate change: "They use very big words, but I sort of feel that the situation is not as grave as they make it out to be." About climate activists' rhetoric, a female informant (F1) in her first year of a general study program in a city school says: "Many exaggerate a lot. For example, climate activists exaggerate a lot when they speak about climate change."

The youth's experiences of the debate as polarized give rise to both fatigue and confusion. For example, the female informant just cited (F1) goes on to speak about how disagreements about the gravity of the situation make her unable to use the public debate as input to her opinion formation since she does not know what and whom to believe: "I don't know if it is just bullshit what they say but, like, I feel that there is a lot of disagreement and then one does not know what to believe." Similarly, the male informant cited above (M13) explains that the polarized debate makes it challenging to choose between conflicting political choices: "In my view, it is only the two extreme sides that get the most, eh, are the most visible in the media. And it's hard to pick a side when you don't agree with any of them."

The polarization observed among young people primarily stems from disputes over factual claims concerning future scenarios rather than conflicting interests and goals. From the perspective of these youths, these disagreements arise from some actors exaggerating the problems while others



downplay them. This results in an unnecessarily ill-tempered debate that hinders comprehension and hampers political action to address these issues.

The informants' discussions also reveal a sense of confusion regarding the contentious issue within the climate debate. They grapple with whether the disagreements they witness concern the factual aspects of the issue, its interpretation and definition, or the necessary actions to tackle it. On the one hand, most informants firmly believe in the existence of a climate crisis as an uncontested fact, which leaves them puzzled by the lack of substantial action taken to address it. On the other hand, many harbor doubts, suspecting that activists and mass media may be exaggerating the crisis, and this muddles in their understanding of the factual aspects of the issue and how it should be defined.

The young are also uncertain about how to address climate change and their own role in this effort. In what follows, I discuss how their dissatisfaction with political responses to climate change, doubts in their capacities to yield influence, and beliefs that civic participation should align with ambitions agreed upon through consensus-oriented discussions result in ambivalent accounts of agency.

### Ambiguity about agency

Many informants criticize the notion that the complex challenges of climate change can be resolved through individual adoption of easy and small-scale sustainability measures in daily life. At the same time, they struggle to break free from the discourse promoting a sustainable future enabled mainly by individuals' changed consumption. Despite urging political action and primarily holding political leaders accountable for climate change inaction, they thus tend to confine their own and others' agency to personal responsibility for consuming ethically. Several informants expressed concerns that there is excessive focus on individual responsibility for promoting sustainability in the public debate and their school curriculum, with insufficient attention given to the need for political facilitation and systemic transformation. One example is the discussions among a group of first-year pupils from the city, with six female participants and two males. The discussion takes place between two of the female participants (F3 and F5):

- F3: I feel that we talk very much about it, and it can be very demotivating that we always have to talk about it and hear about it, but nothing really happens. And, like, what can we even do? Because we are always talking about these small things that individuals can do but it is, like, we actually have [to ...]
- F5: [But ], like, they always ask us, like the teachers, or something like that, eh, always the teachers ask us, eh: 'think about something that you as pupils can do'. It is like: 'think about something', or 'propose something'.
- F3: And it is always the same things. It is, like, use [public transport]
- F5: [Like, pick litter], those kind of things. And then it never happens, sort of. So it was not, eh, and of course it helps but, sort of, those in power must do things. Like, even if we as individuals eat less meat, it is, like, it does not change the production.

These two informants criticize the school's emphasis on individual responsibility for promoting sustainability, deeming it insufficient for addressing the need for broader systemic changes. Their discussion also suggests they perceive it a paradox that the adult society, represented by the teachers, responds to the challenges of climate change by teaching the young to act rather than acting themselves. Many informants share these criticisms about the excessive focus on sustainability in their education, and their discussions suggest that many feel pressured to be agents of change (see also Walker, 2017).

A common sentiment among the informants is that their individual actions alone are insufficient to drive meaningful change; they emphasize the need for political solutions. However, when it comes to articulating their specific expectations from politicians, many find it challenging to express their demands clearly. They often find it easier to express their opposition to policy measures aimed at reducing emissions. For example, some informants disagreed with the idea of Norway

discontinuing its oil production, and others, especially those residing in rural areas, voiced concerns about high gasoline prices. Their difficulty pinpointing what they believe should be done politically could be attributed to a prevalent techno-optimistic perspective underpinned by the belief that the climate crisis can be solved through technological development, allowing societal development to continue largely as before. This outlook seems widespread among the broader Norwegian population (Nordø et al., 2023) and the younger generation (Fløttum et al., 2016). It also materialized in the focus groups. For instance, a female informant (F14) in a city school stated about measures to reduce car traffic that “technology will continue to advance. The world is progressing, but eliminating cars would mean regressing by centuries.”

While critiquing and negotiating individualized subject positions, these are also roles from which the young struggle to free themselves. Often, they limit not only their own opportunities but also those of others for practicing environmental citizenship to taking individual action to promote sustainability or encouraging their friends and family to do so (see also Fløttum et al., 2021, p. 9). For instance, a group of first-year high school students from the city recalls witnessing media reports about school strikers leaving litter, including their posters, in the streets. This behavior is seen as contradictory to political engagement for climate action. Within the group, they humorously comment on this perceived hypocrisy, with one of the female informants (F1) remarking, “It’s kind of ironic, the climate activists, those striking for the climate, and they litter in the streets!” Another group from the same class discusses what Greta Thunberg and the school strikers have achieved by asking whether the activists have taken individual action to reduce their emissions. As put by one of the female informants (F11) in the group: “... but all those young people, have each of them done anything? Have they, sort of, in their everyday lives, are they doing anything to improve the climate, to help the climate?”

The most apparent manifestation of an individualized understanding of environmental citizenship is expressed through the almost unison rejection of civil disobedience as an irrational and destructive means of influencing political decisions. Although most informants express dissatisfaction with political leaders’ response to the challenges of climate change, they often go far in depoliticizing climate activists’ system-critical actions. Among other things, some argue that environmental activists should get involved in the local community with efforts to promote sustainability and the community’s well-being rather than protesting. An example from one of the discussions of civil disobedience is the following quote from a male informant (M5) in his first year of general studies in a city school. The statement welcomed acclaim from all other group participants:

It would have been better if one did something that helped the climate. If they were doing something good. That they did communal work, sort of. They could, for example, clean beaches or save endangered animals.

As evident also from previous quotes, the informants exhibit some confusion when it comes to distinguishing between various environmental concerns and their appropriate courses of action, such as addressing waste pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Often, matters related to waste pollution become entangled with efforts to reduce emissions under the broader umbrella of sustainability. Thus, the youth’s uncertainty surrounding agency extends not only to their comprehension of collective versus individual action but also to their perception of the most effective measures to tackle various environmental challenges.

Furthermore, by evaluating the impact of the school strikes based on the extent to which the participants themselves actively promote sustainability in their daily lives and proposing that climate activists become involved in beach clean-ups instead of protesting, the youth endorse a neoliberal and system-loyal citizenship ideal, where citizens are expected to be functional, individualized, and consensus-oriented (Biesta, 2009). They primarily view environmental action as an individual responsibility, emphasizing personal lifestyle choices as the primary form of environmental engagement. However, individualism is not absolute; they speak warmly of cooperation but limit the scope of collective action to cooperation in the local community about shared problems.

Whereas the youth mainly discuss environmental citizenship in terms of individual responsibilities to promote sustainability, several groups also discuss the possibility of practicing citizenship through collective and political action. However, like their ambivalence about the effects of individual sustainability actions, they also consider collective action an inefficient means to seek influence in democracy. In addition to problematizing civil disobedience actions for creating negative attention that damages the case, several youths doubt the merits of participating in other forms of collective action, like school strikes, to make one's voice heard in the democratic debate. For example, when a group of first-year pupils in a general studies class in the city discusses their possibilities to make their voices heard, they question both membership in a political party, writing debate articles, and participating in school strikes as means to gain influence:

- F11: Like, I could join the Green Party, but if I do, it is limited how [much ...]  
 F10: [Yeah,] sort of, even if you join the Green Party, it does not mean that it will change anything.  
 F12: You could, write an article for the newspaper, and things like that, [but ...]  
 F10: [Yeah,] but I don't know if it makes a difference.  
 M7: You have to gain the audience's attention, sort of. That's kind of what is difficult.  
 F13: But Greta Thunberg managed to do so.  
 F11: But nothing happened. I mean, what has she achieved?

Some groups also discussed external constraints that limit their abilities to exert influence. For instance, a female informant (F21) from a rural area, in her third year of a general study program, highlighted the location of her and her classmates as a constraint on their capacity to gain influence by participating in school strikes. She drew a comparison between organizing a strike in the capital, Oslo, "where there are more youth and children," and where strikers "gain media attention," and organizing a strike in their local community, where "we are like five-six people, sort of. We would not receive any media attention and would likely face disapproving looks from people." She concluded that: "The place one lives has a lot to say, too."

Furthermore, the pupils from both vocational classes discussed their inability to participate in school strikes due to the denial of authorized absences. On the one hand, this can be viewed as an embodiment of system-loyal citizenship, where one seeks approval from authorities before engaging in political opposition. On the other hand, the pupils' concerns about missing school actualize questions of social inequalities in the access to civic life. Skipping school to participate in demonstrations can severely affect the weakest pupils with high absence rates, especially in vocational study programs where certain subjects have few teaching hours. By skipping school to strike for climate action, these pupils risk exceeding the acceptable absenteeism percentage, which, in the worst case, would require them to repeat the entire school year.

Another form of external constraint on young people's opportunities to participate in civic life became evident during discussions within the two vocational classes. In these groups, participants were reluctant to engage in assessment, argumentation, and discussions related to environmental debates. When I asked them about this, they explained that: "I'm not that politically engaged" (*male informant, Technical and Industrial Production*), or "I don't always, I don't think that much about it" (*male informant, Electricity and Electronics*). These informants' reluctance to participate in the discussions may indicate weak public connection, which can be related to class-based differences in the youths' rhetorical lifestyles and habitus (Hovden, 2022). These informants came from a rural village built around industry, where 69 percent of the adult population had high school or less as their highest education level (SSB, 2022) and were themselves enrolled in vocational study programs. Although Norway is usually considered an egalitarian society, there are significant social inequalities regarding public connection and participation. Citizens from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to avoid partaking in the world of politics, which they find too complicated and complex, and to stay silent in public debates, which they experience as irrelevant to their own lives and interests (Hovden, 2022). Thus, although most informants experienced limited agency in environmental debates and decisions, their social background may further limit some youths' abilities and possibilities to participate in civic life (Hayward, 2021).

Finally, the youths' discussions reveal a widespread understanding of environmental citizenship as limited to individual responsibility to promote sustainability in ways that comply with the common goals decided in the technical sphere of argument (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981). In what follows, I elaborate on this by discussing how the youths' expectations that environmental problems are best solved through consensus-oriented dialogue and compromise cause them to dismiss political opposition and activism as irrational and destructive means to influence decisions and bring about change.

### Consensus and compromise over conflict

Many informants view the purpose of debating as coming to an agreement. Their preference for consensus-oriented discussions is particularly evident in the qualitative surveys, where they recounted their experiences of encountering disagreement within their focus group.

Most informants reported that their discussions were characterized by broad agreement, which several appreciated. For example, one wrote:

It was nice that several people agreed with each other. Rather than arguing and discussing, it was possible to have a constructive debate. Of course, disagreeing is allowed, but then the debates often derail and become uncivil.

Although most reported being comfortable voicing their opinions and debating these with others, these positive experiences related primarily to situations characterized by agreement and contexts in which it feels safe to express one's opinion. For instance, one wrote: "I debate a lot at home, but it is not in a hostile manner, and I experience most of the discussions I have with others positively." Others wrote that they are usually confident and comfortable with voicing their opinion "but not if I know that someone strongly disagrees" and that debating "is fine if we have the same opinion, but it becomes less fun or comfortable if they have an opposite opinion."

While most reported that their discussions were characterized by broad agreement, which the transcripts from the focus groups also support, some did report instances of disagreement. Describing how they dealt with disagreement within the focus groups, the respondents often articulated an ideal that the discussion should be oriented to consensus, which they believed could be achieved through compromise or persuasion. One wrote: "It was totally fine to disagree, it is important that people have different views so that we can conclude together." Another wrote about a disagreement regarding a civil disobedience action, where activists had glued themselves to a painting to protest Norwegian oil extraction. The dispute concerned both the action and the message: "I disagreed with someone about the action taken against the painting and about what to do with the oil. It was perfectly fine and actually fun to see if they could get me to agree or understand their view."

The informants' preference for consensus-oriented discussions and compromise also manifested in their discussions of environmental activism. Many informants dismissed actors and actions that do not conform to the rhetorical community's dominant discourses and norms but instead engage in political opposition oriented as challenging and changing the status quo.

Although calling for more political action – and for more emphasis on environmental challenges as problems requiring political solutions – many informants go to great lengths to depoliticize and reject the system-critical actions of climate activists. They are particularly averse to civil disobedience, which they view as an inefficient and unethical means to seek influence in democracy. Indeed, some of the informants display a certain understanding that disruptive means such as civil disobedience may serve to attract public attention to an issue that most of them view as important. Still, they tend to evaluate such actions negatively both after instrumental and ethical standards. They argue that such acts make people annoyed, angry, and less sympathetic to the activists and the issue. For instance, one male informant (M4) from the city, in his first year of a general study program, explained that he had "gotten a worse impression of climate activists

because of what they do” because, in his view, “innocent people should not be affected by climate activists.”

In addition to dismissing environmental activists’ actions as counterproductive, some also dismiss the activists as irrational and incompetent “others.” For instance, one of the groups from the first year of general studies class in the city talked about an incident where climate activists had obstructed traffic in the following way:

- M4: I think it is very wrong that climate activists are obstructing traffic, especially since it is the electric cars that are trying to drive past.
- [Laughter]
- F6: But I also feel that they, in a way, they are young, and I feel they are a bit like, that they get incorrect information from time to time, [and ]
- M4: [They] often have blue hair and stuff.
- [Laughter]
- F6: They are a bit like, it is like they are doing it to find some more meaning in their lives.
- [Laughter]
- F9: And they re-dye their hair every week. That cannot be good to the environment, either.
- [Laughter]

Instead of trying to understand why the activists act as they do, the informants in this group ridicule them. They suggest they are incompetent and reduce their actions to mere self-expression rather than viewing them as political actions with motive and aim.

This rhetorical exclusion of oppositional actors and their actions can be seen as a natural consequence of the youth’s endorsement of individualized and system-loyal environmental citizenship. In this framework, citizens are expected to operate within legal frameworks established by authorities to serve their self-interest and maximize the impact of their actions to the best for the local and national community. This approach confines citizens’ roles to individual actions to promote the common good while placing the primary responsibility for solving problems on the authorities. The authorities are, in turn, expected to carry out broadly agreed-upon actions to further environmental agendas, preferably without any noticeable consequences for citizens’ day-to-day lives. These expectations make it difficult for the young to understand why one must keep debating how to act upon the challenges of climate change instead of simply acting. Moreover, these expectations diminish the prospects for influencing environmental decisions through collective action. They may also lead to cynicism and fatigue as politics, conflicts, and agency are entirely removed from view, thereby foreclosing possibilities for citizens’ critical engagement.

## Conclusion

Like many young people around the world, the young Norwegians studied here express dissatisfaction with the political handling of the challenges of climate change (e.g. Buhre, 2023; Friberg, 2022b; Hayward, 2021; O’Brien et al., 2018). As shown in previous studies, many young people publicly express their frustration with political responses to environmental problems and challenge post-political discourses about climate change by criticizing technological market solutions and promises of eternal growth (Friberg, 2022b). Moreover, young climate activists have challenged dominant perceptions of young people’s civic participation and established new roles for young people in the democratic debate as agents capable of acting and being influential (Andersen, 2023a, p. 9; Andersen & Fløttum, 2022; Buhre, 2023).

Youth engagement in environmental issues is often discussed as crucial for effective environmental efforts, especially in the context of ambitious and equitable climate measures (Ingaruca, 2022). Young people are often heralded as the hope of the future, entrusted with the responsibility to be agents of change and tomorrow’s leaders (Walker, 2017). However, as shown in this study, not all youth readily identify with these narratives that portray them as influential environmentalists.

Instead, the findings from this study suggest that Norwegian youth experience limitations in terms of agency and opportunities to impact environmental decisions. They lack confidence in their capacity to effect change through individual actions and their potential to influence political decisions through collective efforts. Moreover, their discussions on responsibility and influence reveal a significant ambivalence. While they criticize the overemphasis on individual obligations in educational settings and public discourse, they simultaneously limit their capacity for influence to promote sustainability in their everyday lives and local communities. While exhibiting dissatisfaction with political responses to address climate change, the youth primarily discuss it as a post-political issue beyond rhetorical contestation, depicting it as an issue upon which we simply must act. Although perceiving the public debate as polarized, they believe broad agreement exists on the issue and that it can be tackled through technological innovation, cooperation, and compromise. These understandings of climate action make it difficult for the young to understand why one must continue debating how to act instead of just acting.

Despite their dissatisfaction with the political handling of environmental issues and their calls for urgent action, the young struggle to pinpoint specific political solutions and sometimes underestimate the gravity of the problems. Their struggles to grasp both the problem and its appropriate actions suggest that while they have a theoretical understanding of the severity of climate change, this knowledge remains disconnected from their everyday political, social, and private lives – a phenomenon not unique to them but shared by many Norwegians (Norgaard, 2011).

Much of what the young informants say and do closely mirrors the reasoning of many adult Norwegians. They exhibit a techno-optimistic outlook and call for political action to address climate change, yet they are not consistently prepared to endorse climate policies. It appears, then, that the youth are adopting the views and arguments of adults as a convenient path to passivity. The youth also seem to inherit negative debate behaviors, including ridiculing those with whom they disagree or fail to identify. These observed similarities between young and adults call attention to the paradox of adults expecting the youth to demonstrate leadership and act as agents of change.

The findings suggest that to nurture active engagement and counteract fatigue among young people, adults must lead by example rather than placing unrealistic expectations on the young to outperform them. The task of safeguarding the younger generation's future cannot rest solely on their shoulders; instead, adults must also embrace their responsibility. Moreover, the findings suggest that it is essential to open up effective spaces for action. Within educational institutions and in the broader public domain, there is a need for a heightened emphasis on environmental citizenship as practice and collective action rather than solely as individual obligations and responsibilities. Such a reorientation involves exposing the young to the intricacies of politics and the conflicts that arise rather than focusing solely on fixing the problem through individual efforts, collaboration, and technological innovation.

More broadly, this study calls attention to more overarching challenges for rhetorical citizenship amidst the environmental crisis. At the core of the normative underpinnings of the framework of rhetorical citizenship is the assumption that fostering and sustaining a broad public debate, where diverse perspectives are voiced and heard, is essential for democracy. Furthermore, by viewing rhetoric as a medium for citizenship, the framework underscores that rhetoric transcends mere words; it constitutes actions with tangible real-world implications (Kock & Villadsen, 2017). In contrast, the widespread recognition of the need for immediate climate action, juxtaposed with an apparent apathy toward taking that action, highlights a growing gap between words and actions within the environmental debate. The potential for engaging citizens in a broad public debate about our shared environmental challenges is undermined if these discussions are perceived as futile because the spoken words do not align with a commitment to action. Furthermore, if citizens view the slow pace of democratic debate as incompatible with the urgency of the problems, it may imply a reluctance to keep the conversation going and an increased inclination to address the problems through non-democratic means. As such, a key task ahead for rhetorical citizenship studies is



finding ways to keep the democratic conversation going while ensuring that the words uttered in the environmental debate move beyond mere “talk” and genuinely commit to action.

Environmental problems, with their enduring consequences, are political issues where younger generations have more at stake than older generations. However, it is crucial to recognize that many Norwegian youths are relatively privileged compared to their global counterparts. After all, being “tired” of hearing and speaking of environmental problems is a relatively privileged perspective, as is the ability to believe that technology will eventually save us. Although this study draws attention to how rhetorical citizenship is socially conditioned, with age and social class shaping the roles citizens envision for themselves in the environmental debate, other power structures not explored here could also play significant roles. A more diverse sample might have revealed a more substantial role for factors such as race and ethnicity. For example, the results may have been different had they been conducted with groups of indigenous youth whose perspectives on the environmental debate, experiences of agency, and inclusion in the political community may differ substantially from those of the Norwegian majority youth. More research is needed to explore the implications of these and other social factors for rhetorical citizenship.

## Notes

1. The research has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) under approval number 704516. All informants have provided written informed consent forms.
2. The examples used were news stories about civil disobedience actions carried out by the organizations Natur og Ungdom, in protest against the dumping of mining waste in Førdefjorden (Bjerkestrand & Luoto, 2022), and Stopp Oljeletinga! in protest against Norwegian oil and gas policy (Tveten, 2022), a public statement by Harald Veland from Extinction Rebellion about the use of sabotage in climate activism (Ulvin, 2022), and an excerpt from a speech by Greta Thunberg, where she accused older generations and political leaders of failing the younger generations (Sanchez, 2019).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s[2022]).

## Funding

This research was funded by Norges Forskningsråd [grant number 301103].

## ORCID

Ida Vikøren Andersen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4141-5822>

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