

Who walks the green talk? Investigating who acts on their climate concern and who doesn't

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One in three people says they are very concerned about climate change. But many don't act like it. Recent data from 28 countries show that gender and generation may shape the gap between individual environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior.

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Even though one in three people are 'very concerned' about the environment, many continue to fly, eat meat or drive cars and avoid collective action such as protests or donations. This disconnect – the so-called *green attitude-behavior gap* – is well-known. People often fail to align their actions with their stated values, whether regarding health or sustainability. Understanding this gap is essential: if concern does not lead to action, public support for urgent climate policies risks remaining symbolic.

This analysis focuses on the most concerned respondents (those who chose the highest level on a 5-point concern scale) and examines how their behaviors align with their attitudes across ten distinct domains – from recycling and meat consumption to signing petitions and joining protests.

Measuring the gap: ten different behaviors

Pro-environmental behavior is assessed separately across ten dimensions, grouped into private (e.g., recycling, flying less) and public (e.g., protesting, donating) actions. A behavior is coded as “green” if respondents consistently choose the most environmentally friendly option – for example, not flying at all, not eating meat weekly, or not using a car.

Interestingly, the size of the gap varies: recycling and product boycotting are widespread, with relatively narrow attitude–behavior gaps. But public engagement, especially protesting or group membership, shows large gaps – even among the most concerned.

Same concern, different gaps

Not all behaviors translate equally from concern. Private actions like recycling are habitual, low-cost, and infrastructure-supported in many countries. Political behaviors, by contrast, demand more time, resources, or exposure – and are less common. For example, fewer than 10% of highly concerned individuals report protesting for the environment in the past five years. The size of the green gap thus reflects not just individual choices, but structural and cultural conditions that shape what is feasible and encouraged.

The green gender gap: a private–public divide?

Gender plays a clear role. Even when controlling for income and education, women are more consistent in private-sphere behavior: they recycle, eat less meat, avoid cars, and boycott more frequently than men. This aligns with research showing that sustainable practices are often culturally perceived as “feminine,” while behaviors like eating meat or driving remain tied to traditional masculinity.

However, this gender difference tends to fade in the public sphere, where actions like protesting or donating show no consistent gender gap. Yet some exceptions apply, as in the case of petition-signing, concerned women do emerge as more active than concerned men. This difference with the private domain may suggest that structural barriers – like time constraints or access to political spaces – may limit women’s engagement in the public domain.

Generational differences: citizens vs consumers

Younger generations, especially Gen Z, are more likely to engage in public action (e.g., protesting, signing petitions), but less consistent in private behaviors like air travel reduction or recycling. This reflects their socialization during a time of climate activism, where political engagement and demands for structural change are emphasized over individual consumption. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of genuine commitment, but most likely a different understanding of meaningful action – one that prioritizes systemic over personal change.

A final note on income and context

Income also shapes the gap. Higher-income individuals are less likely to reduce flying or meat intake, but more likely to donate or buy green products – behaviors that signal commitment but demand little sacrifice. Environmental action can thus reflect privilege only up to a certain extent.

National context matters too. Recycling and boycotting are more prevalent in Western Europe, where supportive infrastructure and norms are more consolidated. Public engagement is higher in Northern democracies with open civic spaces. In more restrictive contexts, low engagement may reflect political barriers rather than apathy.

Policy implications: bridging the green gap

Bridging the green gap requires more than awareness campaigns. It calls for policies that recognize social norms, economic inequalities, and structural constraints. This includes:

- Challenging gender stereotypes and enabling women's political engagement
- Supporting civic action across all age groups
- Using infrastructure, pricing, and incentives to make sustainable choices easier and more affordable

Only by aligning intention with opportunity can climate policy harness widespread concern and turn it into effective action.

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