



# From the Ballot Box to the Streets: A Comparative Analysis of Action Strategies in Environmental Politics

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## Abstract

This paper examines how young people challenge political ideas and institutions through Green Parties and the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement, two prominent forces in environmental politics. While Green Parties work within formal political structures to promote sustainability policies, FFF employs grassroots mobilization, such as school strikes and mass protests, to pressure governments. In the 2019 European Parliament elections, Green Parties saw a surge in support, particularly among young voters, securing over 20% of votes in Germany and a record 16.2% in Finland. Similarly, FFF has mobilized over 7 million people across 150 countries, with major strikes in 2019 drawing 1.4 million participants in Germany alone. Despite different approaches, both movements advocate for stronger government action on climate issues, highlighting a generational shift in political engagement. By analysing their strategies, effectiveness, and institutional interactions, this paper explores the evolving role of youth in shaping political change.

## Keywords

Politics; Political Institutions; Environment; Environmental Activism; Youths

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## 1. Introduction

Young people have been increasingly involved in politics in recent years, challenging traditional ideas and existing political institutions. From addressing the climate crisis—via movements like Fridays for Future (FFF)—to questioning systemic inequalities, their efforts are reshaping political landscapes worldwide.

In Europe, it is evident that young people are deeply involved in environmental politics. For instance, FFF led by Greta Thunberg and other young students, adopts a non-institutional, grassroots approach. It organises strikes and demonstrations to pressure governments into adopting new environmental policy ideas. In contrast, other youths are trying to challenge existing political ideas and institutions by working within institutional frameworks, such as the Green Parties across Europe. The Green parties enjoy widespread support from youths as they demonstrate commitment to ecological and environmental concerns. By agenda-setting these issues into mainstream political debates and discussions, they challenge existing political ideas and institutions from within.

By comparing the cases of the Green Parties and FFF, this essay examines the mechanisms by which young people challenge existing political ideas and institutions. To clarify, this essay adopts UN's definition that individuals aged between 15-24 are classified as young people (UNESCO, 2020). The structure of this essay goes as follows. Sections 2 and 3 are used to introduce how young people introduce political changes through entities such as Green Parties and FFF respectively. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the common and different ways that environmental ideas and political institutions were challenged by young people.

## 2. Green Parties

Nowadays, non-traditional political parties such as Green Parties, are attracting young people to vote and participate in institutional politics. Green Parties, according to Burchell (2002, p. 12), are a new type of political party that prioritizes “environmental protection” in traditional political institutions. Originating in the 1980s as a part of a global shift towards ecological and environmental concerns, Green Parties are more youth-friendly in their organizational structure and their decision-making process. In the UK, the Green Party is the only political party that has a wing for under-18-members (Mycock & Tonge, 2012, p. 144), which not only provides a forum for adolescents to discuss but also demonstrates that the party is not only captured by short-term vote-winning strategies. In addition, the Young Greens, the youth’s wing of the UK Green Party, formulated their manifesto to promote environmental and social justice as well as ‘real democracy’. Russell (2005, p. 568) argues that youth organizations play a significant function in attracting new young members for the Greens and provide an alternative which is different from traditional left-and-right wing ideology. Nowadays, an increasing number of young voters vote for environmental-focused parties such as the Green Party. For example, the Green Party in the UK received 6.7% of votes in the 2024 general election and 14% of individuals aged 18 to 24 voted for the Green Party.

The rise of Green Parties is significant in ways that go beyond seat changes in the legislatures. It is indicative of a shift in political discourse led by the younger generation that the current climate crisis should be properly and promptly addressed. They are increasingly disillusioned with traditional political parties and are seeking alternatives that take their pleas seriously. According to Burchell (2002, pp. 9-11), the Green Parties showed an emphasis on the well-being of people and the environment, which was inspired by new social movements such as environmental activism in the 1960s. It replaced traditional personal wealth and economic welfare concerns.

In addition, the success of Green Parties also comes from their decentralized organizational model and single-issue, environmental-concerned political ideas. By including and highlighting the participation of young people, the Green Parties aimed to be “a challenging opposition and an alternative to partisan politics” (Della Porta, Joseba, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017, p. 84). Melucci (1985, p. 815) argues they are characterized by independent, spontaneous, and anti-institutional strategies. Their comparatively decentralized organizational structures enable their decision-making process to capture the voice of the young people as well as from the grassroots level. This new organizational structure successfully challenged traditional political ideas and rejected the conventional left-right political divides in favour of ecological and environmental sustainability politics. This attracts youths, who are the most active supporters of Green Parties, reflecting a generational shift toward prioritizing ecological and social concerns over economic growth.

## 3. Fridays for Future (FFF)

In contrast, the Fridays for Future (FFF) political movement withdraws from traditional political institutions. It adopts means of contentious politics to challenge existing political ideas and institutions. Initiated in 2018 by Swedish student Greta Thunberg, who started a lone school strike to advocate for governmental action on climate change, the movement rapidly evolved into a worldwide phenomenon with millions of young students involved in school strikes. The movement critiques the failure of existing political systems to address the climate crisis and uses contentious strategies to force governments to respond and take action on environmental issues. Wahlström et al. (2019, pp. 9-11) argue that the movement was dominated by young females with high-education family backgrounds. De Moor et al. (2021, p. 622) suggest that FFF is different from the past environmental social movement. In FFF, young protestors contend that governments and companies emphasize economic expansion and profits at the expense of long-term environmental sustainability, intensifying the ecological crisis. It shows the movement significantly questions the traditional capitalist system while demanding governments respond to environmental issues by “listening to science” (Svensson & Wahlström, 2021, p. 2).

For FFF activists, the current climate crisis is not just an environmental concern, but a manifestation of a more extensive systemic failure caused by both fossil fuel companies and governments’ unyielding quest for profit and growth. This movement was influential among the youths as its leaders, such as Thunberg, captured the frustration of their generation and channelled it into decentralized and localised actions that are feasible to students around the globe. FFF’s approach to change draws heavily on Freire’s (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 2000, p. 51) “praxis” framework. It emphasizes the dialectical combination of critical reflection and action when organising and joining social movements. FFF reflected on the climate crisis and concluded the apolitical nature of past environmental movements and the government’s inaction are no longer suited for addressing the problem. Thus, the FFF, through their movements, attempted to reset the agenda and frame the main responsibility of addressing the crisis should “return to the

state” (De Moor, De Vydt, Uba, & Wahlström, 2021, p. 622). FFF also challenges the dominant capitalist ideology of the society as part of their action. They argue that people who are in a capitalistic society are deprived of achieving “capitalism realism” (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). This is because it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, FFF claimed that “we need to change this profit-prioritizing capitalist system if we are to act on the climate crisis” (Svensson & Wahlström, 2021, p. 2). What is new about the FFF is that they set up a framework “beyond politics” which values the identification of problems and provides alternatives instead of “blaming and shaming” (De Moor, De Vydt, Uba, & Wahlström, 2021, p. 623). Just as Holloway (2010, pp. 217-218) prefigurative politics says, that the new social movement is a process of moving from the cracks and rebellions in society to achieve the “against and beyond” of capitalism, and tells everyone alternatives are possible in modern political lives.

## 4. Comparative Analysis

### 4.1 Common in idea

The two political entities specialize in environmental concerns on top of producing a traditional political platform where all aspects are considered.

Currently, the public’s understanding of tackling the environmental problems is either a “collective irresponsibility” or the government should be a part, albeit undefined portion or position, of the solution. Both entities advocate for a larger extent of government intervention regarding environmental problems. As a result, the Green Parties channelled the voices of the youth into the establishment, to promote the government’s responsibility for environmental issues. The FFF’s “return to state” strategy also shows the youths behind the political movement are advocating for a heavier government presence in tackling the environmental crisis.

The above environmental ideas are also being channeled by FFF and Green Parties into public discussion. FFF organizes school strikes and protests in the public arena to make public notice of the environmental crisis. Green Parties work through the government and other political institutions, debating policies and laws in political institutions such as the legislature. Both entities use different platforms and tactics to raise public awareness about environmental protection and push for changes.

### 4.2 Difference in ideas

Although the FFF and Green Parties agree that the government, through its policies and regulations, is key to reversing and alleviating the environmental crisis, their framing about who has the most responsibility is different. As we mentioned above, FFF uses the praxis framework: after reflecting on the apolitical nature of the previous ecological political movements, FFF decided to “return [the responsibility] to the state” (De Moor, De Vydt, Uba, & Wahlström, 2021, p. 622). This is a young FFF leaders and supporters’ attempt to re-engineer the public mindset that governments should step up and lead the campaign to tackle the crisis. They argue that the government, on top of any other societal stakeholders, should be held accountable to a larger extent. On the other hand, the Green Parties are a part, or trying to be a part of the establishment, to bring about changes, they did not explicitly claim that the government should be held accountable any more than other stakeholders.

### 4.3 Common in institutions

Both of them comply with the current legal and political framework that leads to political change. The strategies adopted by both the Green Parties and the FFF are non-radicalized and widely acceptable by the general civil society. As a result, young activists’ behaviours do not disrupt current institutions any more than they should. Although the FFF leader, Greta Thunberg claims that they “need to change the system if we are to act on the climate crisis” (Svensson & Wahlström, 2021, p. 2) and reject the current representative political system, young activists still follow the legal framework and use non-radical methods such as school strikes, which can be considered as the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech. Green Parties, also follow the rules of election and political negotiation, working in the current political institution, and trying to reform it into “more democratic, transparent and decentralized political institutions” (Grimaldi, 2020, p. 181).

### 4.4 Difference in institutions

However, the extent of youth participation is different between the two entities. Young Green Parties supporters and members can be considered as part of the establishment, who participate in traditional political events to promote environmentalism. Green Parties, still act as a political party and participate in the political institutions and decision-

making process. For example, Die Grünen (Green Party Germany) participated in the coalition government from 1998 to 2005 in Germany (McBeath & Rosenberg, 2006, p. 74). Their single-issue nature is aligned with young people's interest in environmental issues. Their unique youth wing organizational design also enables them to easily open dialogue with their young supporters. Nevertheless, Green Parties are still mostly run by adults, thus, their extent of youth participation is not as deep as the FFF. This is because they still have the essence of political parties, working inside the system and seeking to reform the current political system under the current situation.

Compared to Green Parties, FFF is considered a youth-initiated and youth-led political movement: the launcher and majority of participants are students. FFF is not a part of the political system. Young activists initiate a series of grassroots movements outside the system and ask for change. The school strikes and protest strategies FFF uses can get public attention and ignite youths' passion for environmental issues on the political level. In addition, the "return to state" strategy makes youths put pressure on the government to force them to deal with environmental problems (De Moor, De Vydt, Uba, & Wahlström, 2021, p. 622) and change current environmental policies.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the cases of Green Parties and the FFF, this essay demonstrates how young people challenge environmental and political ideas and the institutions that bring policy changes. Compared to previous generations, young people demonstrated self-empowerment to take environmental issues into their own hands. They either participate in new political parties through voting and formulating policy solutions or engage in contentious politics such as protests and strikes. These strategies are non-radical and non-violent, such that they do not pose a threat of disrupting the current political institutions. However, this does not mean they are not successful in pressuring these institutions to change by putting their allies into power and opening up more future channels to efficiently capture the voices and demands of the young people.

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