

## The Older Activists Reshaping Europe's Climate Movement

Article by Simon Feisthauer Fournet

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Europe's climate movement is often portrayed as the domain of younger generations. Yet from landmark legal victories to everyday practices of sustainability, a different picture is emerging: older Europeans are proving to be among the most committed and effective climate actors. As the continent continues to age, could this overlooked demographic reshape how climate action is understood and mobilised across Europe?

In April 2024, a group of Swiss women, most of them in their 70s and 80s, stood on the steps of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, surrounded by a wall of microphones and cameras from around the world. They had just heard the verdict in one of the most significant climate cases in European legal history. The KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz had won.

The ruling [found Switzerland in violation](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights for failing to adequately protect its citizens from the effects of climate change. The judgment, formally known as Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz v. Switzerland, now sets binding legal precedent across all 46 Council of Europe member states. Switzerland has since pushed hard for the case to be closed, but the Committee of Ministers, which monitors its implementation, has refused the request twice.

The story of how about 3,000 Swiss women forced their country to one of the highest courts in Europe is striking in its own right. Yet it also points to something broader: a growing, largely invisible force within the climate movement that Europe's ageing democracies might not be able to overlook for much longer.

### Beyond the generational divide

The climate movement's most visible faces – such as activists Greta Thunberg in Sweden or Féris Barkat in France – tend to be on the younger (if not much younger) side, and it has become common to identify Gen Z as its most fervent defender. But researchers who study the intersection of ageing and environmental engagement argue that the mainstream perception of generations within the climate movement may be flawed.

“There is a slight tendency for younger generations to have opinions that are more favourable towards climate policy,” said Jan Rosset, a sociologist at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland who has studied climate engagement across age groups in Switzerland alongside political scientist Jasmine Lorenzini. “But all generations are very favourable to climate policies. There is no real generational divide.”

That finding echoes the conclusions of a [2025 study published by Parlons Climat](#), a French research organisation, which found that older adults take climate change and environmental degradation just as seriously as the rest of the population. The myth of a disengaged older generation does not seem to hold up to scrutiny.

What differs across generations, Rosset and Lorenzini found, is not the level of concern but the form that

engagement takes. Older adults are significantly more likely to buy local and seasonal produce for environmental reasons, to renounce air travel on ecological grounds, and to practice unglamorous household sustainability: buying second-hand, reducing electricity use, cooking from scratch. Younger people, on the other hand, might be more likely to adopt plant-based diets and participate in public protests. It should, however, be noted that the data is mixed.

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“On almost every indicator, it is people in mid-life, those between roughly 35 and 60, who engage the least,” Rosset says. “But that is not an ideological position. It’s a question of time and capacity; they have demanding jobs and family responsibilities. It is a life-cycle issue, not a generational one.”

Rosset and Lorenzini also found a consistent gender gap: across all age groups, but especially among older adults, women showed significantly more favourable attitudes toward climate action and higher levels of engagement than men.

“This gap was almost stronger than other socioeconomic factors, like income or education level,” Rosset said.

## **The case that set a precedent**

When Greenpeace Switzerland began exploring the possibility of legal climate action in the mid-2010s, it ran into an obstacle: Swiss law does not allow class actions. Any case would need to be brought by individuals who could demonstrate they were personally and particularly affected. The research pointed to one group. Studies following the 2003 European heatwave – which killed an estimated 70,000 people across the continent, with the elderly among the hardest hit – had shown that older women died in disproportionate numbers. More recent research has confirmed this vulnerability: a 2024 study by Penn State researchers found that older women reach dangerous heat thresholds at lower temperature and humidity levels than older men and that middle-aged women are as heat-vulnerable as men over 65.

Heatwaves increase illnesses, causing heat stroke, heart and lung problems, diabetes complications, mental health issues, and trouble with daily activities. The vulnerability of older generations is not just physical: many live alone, have limited mobility, or cannot easily access emergency services. People in cities face “heat island” effects, where concrete and asphalt trap heat, while rural residents often have fewer cooling centres or medical resources. Climate change also worsens air quality, raising levels of ozone, fine particulate matter, and other pollutants, which worsen respiratory and heart conditions. These combined factors make ageing populations especially vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change.

One senior activist who committed herself to the Swiss climate fight is Elisabeth Stern, a cultural anthropologist and board member of KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz. “It was clear that when I got retired, I would use my time in a climate group,” she said. “I tried a few that were not the right fit for me until I found the KlimaSeniorinnen, who I sort of met on the same eye level.”

Stern's fellow activist, Anne Mahrer, KlimaSeniorinnen's co-president, had spent years watching climate policy stall in parliament as a member of the Swiss National Council. When a colleague reminded her of the Urgenda case in the Netherlands, where a court had ordered the Dutch government in 2015 to cut emissions, the question became: could something similar be done in Switzerland? In August 2016, KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz was formally established to achieve that goal.

The Swiss courts, however, were not moved. At every level, the association was told it lacked standing. One court noted that the women were concerned not only about Swiss emissions but wanted to reduce them worldwide. Another placed winter tourism in the same category of climate-affected interests as the health of women threatened by heatwaves. The most striking argument, Stern recounts, was that the women might not still be alive by the time global warming reached 1.5 degrees and therefore could not complain. "If you follow their reasoning, climate action in court would only be possible when it's already too late," Mahrer said.

The European Court of Human Rights took a different view. It declared the application a priority case, engaged seriously with reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and referred the case to its Grand Chamber of 17 judges. "Unlike politicians, who do not listen to scientists, the judges listened to the scientists, and they took into account the third-party interventions in support of the case," Mahrer explained.

The court delivered its verdict on 9 April, 2024. It found Switzerland in violation of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – the right to respect for private and family life – which the court ruled encompasses a right to effective state protection against the severe effects of climate change on life, health, wellbeing, and quality of life. Switzerland was also found to have violated Article 6 – the right to a fair trial – for its domestic courts' refusal to hear the case on its merits.

The ripple effects spread quickly and travelled farther than anyone had anticipated. The ruling is now cited in climate litigation across Europe. In South Korea, groups of young activists successfully pursued a similar case. In the Netherlands, residents of the island of Bonaire have taken legal action against the Dutch state, drawing on the KlimaSeniorinnen precedent. The International Court of Justice, prompted by the small island nation of Vanuatu, issued an advisory opinion in July 2025 stating that governments which fail to protect their populations from climate harm are acting unlawfully, reinforcing the Strasbourg ruling and opening new avenues for litigation worldwide.

Across Europe, a generation of older activists has been following a similar model. European Grandparents for Climate, active in Belgium and Norway, and Omas for Future in Germany and Austria, are building on the same instinct: that people who have watched the world change across six or seven decades have both a particular stake in the future and a special capacity to act.

European Grandparents for Climate participates in demonstrations, writes letters to ministers, and monitors parliamentary votes on climate at both the Belgian and European levels. In Germany, Omas for Future joins Fridays for Future strikes, runs climate workshops in schools, and has organised nationwide campaigns such as the "Klimabänder" initiative, in which thousands of handwritten climate messages were bicycled to Berlin ahead of the 2021 federal election.

## **Sustainability by habit**

Beyond courts and campaigns, there is a quieter dimension to older adults' climate engagement, rooted not in ideology but in force of habit and the practical knowledge of generations who lived before the age

of mass consumption.

Serge Guérin, a French sociologist and author of *Et si les vieux aussi sauvaient la planète?* (“*And what if the Elderly Also Saved the Planet?*”), points to a kind of practical sustainability that older generations carry without naming it as such. They grew up returning glass bottles for a deposit, cooking whatever was in season, and mending rather than replacing. A startup working on bottle recycling, he recalls, found it far easier to explain the concept to older people because “When they were young, they used to return the milk bottle, the wine bottle, and get a few cents back. For them, it was totally normal,” he says.

Helene Blasquiet-Revol, a geographer whose research examines civic engagement among seniors in rural France, describes what she calls “ordinary” forms of climate engagement: practices so ingrained they are not even labelled as activism. For instance, she found that community gardens established by older residents in the Allier region gradually opened up to schools and youth workshops, transmitting practical knowledge in ways that were rarely planned or publicised.

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Researchers are increasingly identifying the potential for a form of intergenerational knowledge transfer that is already happening informally, and which could be deliberately cultivated. Rosset, for instance, found that among older climate activists, there was no statistically significant relationship between having children or grandchildren and the propensity to get involved, meaning people were not fighting for their own descendants. “It is really universal,” Rosset said. “It is a solidarity expressed towards future generations, towards all of humanity. We did not expect that result at all.”

## **Renewal needs the old**

Europe is ageing fast. According to projections from the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, the share of older adults across EU member states is growing steadily and will continue to do so for decades, driven by declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. This demographic shift also increases the need for climate-adapted healthcare, adequate urban planning, and social support systems for vulnerable seniors.

“There is a widespread idea that with generational renewal, the problem will be solved, that new generations will be more environmentally conscious,” Rosset said. “Our research shows this is not the case. And in addition, there will be more and more older people.”

Guérin also notes that designing urban environments, housing, and transport for ageing populations often produces outcomes that are better for both people and the planet. Accessible public transport means more people leave their cars behind. Shared housing models reduce per-capita energy consumption. Local services cut down the need for long-distance travel. And when older people are less isolated, they are in better health.

“When you reduce isolation, people use fewer resources, they are less at risk and share more,” Guérin said, adding that these shifts can lower both land use and carbon footprints. “When you take vulnerability

into account, you very often improve things for everyone. And it's really when people feel their capacity to act, especially at the local level, that things begin to move."

Stern sees the perception gap playing out in real time in media coverage. "There are certain media and certain politicians who want us to believe that interest in the climate has vanished," she says. "It is in their interest to tell people: 'It has vanished anyway, so you don't have to get involved, just enjoy life.' But the truth is, when you ask people what concerns them a lot, the climate crisis comes up either first or second."

The KlimaSeniorinnen continue to monitor Switzerland's compliance with the Strasbourg judgment, sending observations to the Committee of Ministers, lobbying ambassadors, and speaking at universities across the country. For Stern, meaningful compliance means confronting Switzerland's financial sector, which through continued investment in fossil fuels generates emissions many times greater than those in the country itself. [A documentary](#) about the association's decade-long legal journey recently toured cinemas.

Whatever the future of the climate movement and its coverage, it is clear that the generational conflict narrative is not accurate. The evidence from researchers points to something more complicated and more hopeful: a Europe where different generations, engaged in different ways, with different tools and different knowledge, are already working on the same problem.

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