

Considering Future Generations in Democratic Governance

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Abstract

Intergenerational issues encompass various future concerns ranging from climate change to government debt, which can potentially harm the well-being of future generations. Scholars have discussed intergenerational equity and justice, and efforts to incorporate future generations in decision-making in society have been growing, including establishing future-regarding institutions. Nevertheless, democratic governance often prioritizes short-term gains over long-term benefits. This thematic issue aims to present the current state of progress and academic discourse on incorporating considerations for future generations into current decision-making. The issue comprises 10 articles with a varied focus, including on young people and those who are yet to be born. Challenges such as misrepresentation and negligence in democratic deliberation are explored, along with legal obligations grounded in human rights. Proxies for future generations in political decision-making are examined, revealing limitations in enforcing their interests. The impact of political short-termism on government responses is discussed, and the role of narratives in moral philosophy is explored. Diverse cases, including climate litigation in the German Federal Constitutional Court, highlight the complexity of addressing future generations. These articles explore and identify challenges in incorporating consideration of future generations, which could be used to catalyze studies on actions that will be taken in the future.

Keywords

future generations; future-regarding institutions; governance; intergenerational equity; intergenerational justice; Pact for the Future; short-termism

1. Introduction

Intergenerational matters are relevant to many societal issues. For example, climate change requires current generations to invest in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Finnegan, 2022; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023) to lessen the financial burden and minimize the adverse impacts of climate change on future generations. The level of debt financing to cover current government expenditure also affects the financial conditions of future generations. In addition, many intergenerational issues require consideration from the perspectives of equity and justice. For example, economists have discussed intergenerational equity issues related to the allocation of exhaustible natural resources and capital used by multiple generations (e.g., Arrow, 1999; Hartwick, 1977; Ramsey, 1928), and philosophers have discussed intergenerational ethics and justice (e.g., Jonas, 1979; Rawls, 1971; Scheffler, 2013; Tremmel, 2014).

Nevertheless, democratic governance, as seen in many countries today, suffers from political “short-termism” as a structural problem of electoral democracy (González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2016; Jacobs, 2016; Smith, 2021) because governments, voters, and special interest groups can be reluctant to adopt or even oppose policies that entail short-term costs.

Moreover, human activities increasingly affect the entire planet (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Steffen et al., 2015) on a multi-generational scale. This view is aligned with the perception of multiple large-scale environmental crises (Andersen, 2020) and a recent report on global risks (World Economic Forum, 2024) that indicated that four of the top five global risks are environmental risks. Thus, the UN plans to convene the Summit of the Future this year (2024) and endorse a declaration for future generations.

Past UN statements about obligations to future generations include the following: “To defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations has become an imperative goal for mankind” (UN, 1972, para. 6) and “We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying...But the results of the present profligacy are rapidly closing the options for future generations”(UN, 1987, p. 24, para. 25–26). Furthermore, in the Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations and in the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, the following statements were made:

The present generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of present and future generations are fully safeguarded.

The present generations have the responsibility to bequeath to future generations an Earth which will not one day be irreversibly damaged by human activity.

The present generations have the responsibility to identify, protect and safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and to transmit this common heritage to future generations.

(UN, 1997, Articles 1, 4, 7)

What we agree today, will affect the sustainability of our planet as well as the welfare of generations for decades to come...We will work together with partners to strengthen coordination and global governance for the common future of present and coming generations.

(UN, 2020, p. 4)

Efforts are being made in some countries and regions to reflect certain considerations for future generations in current decision-making, and the academic literature on this topic is growing, including discussions about establishing “future-regarding institutions” that can reduce political short-termism (Boston, 2016; González-Ricoy, 2020; MacKenzie, 2021; Smith, 2021). Also, a group of legal and human rights experts has endorsed the principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations (Rights of Future Generations, 2023). There are, however, relatively few assessments of which current attempts to secure inter-generational equity and justice have been successful or that attempt to explain actual successes.

Ethical issues at the individual level, the question of representation for future generations, deliberation processes, cultural differences, modes of governance, and the roles of experts all play important roles in the consideration of future generations, but how and to what extent they do so is unclear. It is also unclear if an institution focused on dealing with climate change would also be able to address government debt crises at the same time.

Thus, this thematic issue was proposed to monitor the progress and explore the efforts that are being made to incorporate considerations for future generations into current decision-making, as well as examine how the academic fields of political science and economics are adapting their theories toward this end. In this thematic issue, “future generations” basically refers to both current younger people and the unborn, but the focus varies in some contexts.

2. Overview of the Contributions

This thematic issue comprises 10 articles that contribute to a better understanding of issues related to considering future generations during decision-making.

Most governance systems today do not properly take into account the future consequences of current decisions, which is a failure of these systems (Saijo, 2024). We therefore need to design mechanisms to reinforce systems that constitute today’s governance systems, namely democracy, the market, and science-technology, in a holistic manner. Saijo (2024) calls this concept “futurability.”

But how can we incorporate “futurability” in the real world? To begin with, we need to identify exactly who we are trying to consider. Some articles assume we should consider those who are yet to be born (Hartwig, 2024; Hiromitsu, 2024; Rose, 2024; Saijo, 2024). In other articles, young people in their teens, twenties, and perhaps even early thirties, are considered (Czuba & Muster, 2024; Ginesta et al., 2024). One can argue that not only the current young people and those who will be born in the future but also non-humans and nature should be considered when we are discussing ecological aspects of sustainability.

In other cases, the focus is not “who” should be taken into account, but rather “how” they should be taken into account. For example, Setälä (2024) discusses two problems about the representation of future generations, namely misrepresentation and negligence. The article argues that inclusive democratic deliberation is a remedy for misrepresentation, although its capacity to address negligence may be limited.

The legal system is an important part of the social system, but legal obligations to future generations are often rejected from the outset if there is no explicit acknowledgement or established doctrine. Obligations towards

future people and generations may be grounded in the relational character of human rights, which means that their positivity would not be a challenge in a legal order if the rights of future generations may reasonably be interpreted as acknowledging human rights (Behrendt, 2024).

Proxies are public bodies with institutionalized access to a government and/or parliament that can introduce the construed interests of future generations into the political decision-making process (Rose, 2024). In a comparative study, Rose (2024) focused on how proxies have been utilized in existing institutions and concluded that, while they are usually equipped with the tools to voice the construed interests of future generations, they often do not have the capacities to act as true watchdogs and can be ignored.

Multiple factors in current democratic systems are said to drive political short-termism, leading to delays in government responses to long-term policy challenges, such as global climate change. Ogami (2024) indicates some areas where political systems could potentially minimize short-term thinking.

Hiromitsu (2024) examines the role of narratives in moral philosophy in resolving intergenerational conflicts of interests by conducting a questionnaire survey in Japan. Harm-principle, world-survival, and chain-novel are narratives that proved to have power, whereas egalitarianism and utilitarianism had less. The survey also found that willingness to act is subordinate to appropriateness, which supports externalism, and that there is little difference between narratives in terms of ease of translation into action.

Institutions that consider future generations and the criteria used to measure the level of success of such institutions may differ from one issue to another, as well as from one country to another. Czuba and Muster (2024) examine three scenarios showing the relationship between the young precariat and democratic decision-making in Poland. The status of the young precariat in Poland can be better accommodated to society when the occurrence of one of these scenarios can be controlled by policy intervention under Polish conditions. In another example, the city council of Huelva, Spain, promoted a territorial brand to seek a new position for the city in tourism markets. Based on a case study of the brand Huelva Original, Ginesta et al. (2024) reveal the importance of millennials and Gen Z, as well as the political class in the construction and deployment of place branding.

Among the various issues for which consideration of future generations is needed, climate change is one of the most representative. Hartwig (2024) takes up the case of climate litigation at the German Federal Constitutional Court in March 2021. The article examines how the 2021 German climate verdict and constitutional provisions address the representation and protection of the interests of future generations concerning climate change and also discusses the potential of protecting fundamental rights of as-yet unborn future generations.

Huseby et al. (2024) examine another case from Germany about a climate club, which is a system where a small number of “enthusiastic” countries embark on ambitious mitigation efforts while encouraging other more “reluctant” countries to join. There are concerns about normative legitimacy in climate clubs’ use of incentives, particularly negative incentives, to attract members. The authors argue that even negative incentives for participation can be legitimate, assuming they meet a set of relevant legitimacy criteria and protect future generations from climate change impacts.

3. After the Summit of the Future

The UN recognizes that “young people, today and in the future, will have to live with the consequences of our action and our inaction” (UN, 2024, para. 15) and will attempt to adopt an ambitious, action-oriented Pact for the Future at the Summit of the Future held in September 2024. What remains to be found are ways to make the Pact more than just wishful thinking. The articles in this thematic issue add depth to this discussion by incorporating consideration for future generations in a better way while also identifying the difficulties in doing so. Intergenerational issues cannot be resolved purely by academia, so cross-disciplinary dialogues between practitioners and members of academia are needed. The editors hope that this thematic issue will catalyze such dialogues in society and promote empirical studies on actions that will be taken after the Summit.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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