*Empirical Research Paper*

# Mapping and Increasing Americans' Actual and Perceived Support for Initiatives Protecting Future Generations

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## Abstract

Across eight preregistered studies ($N$ = 6,464), we apply an approach informed by social norm theory to investigate perceptions and realities of support for Initiatives for Future Generations (IFGs)—institutions and policies designed to ensure political representation for and protection of future generations. We find widespread bipartisan support for IFGs alongside pluralistic ignorance: Americans vastly underestimate their peers' support. Correcting misperceptions enhances individual support, underscoring the role of social norms in shaping collective action. We also find modest—albeit mixed—evidence that interventions aimed at increasing intergenerational concern can boost support for IFGs without exacerbating pluralistic ignorance. These interventions may serve as a complement to norm-corrective approaches by engaging moral motivations alongside informational strategies. Beyond highlighting the value of correcting norm misperceptions in safeguarding future generations' welfare, we explore motivational explanations for pluralistic ignorance and emphasize that policymakers hold the power to implement IFGs with confidence and the public is behind them.

## Keywords

social norm theory, pluralistic ignorance, intergenerational ethics, policy attitudes, future generations

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Addressing societal challenges—from climate change and poverty to pandemics—requires coordinated solutions on a large scale (United Nations, 2021). However, implementing solutions effectively depends on individual awareness and collective action. It is essential for people to understand the issues at stake and work together to drive meaningful change. Existing theory and research suggests that "pluralistic ignorance"—where people tend to vastly underestimate others' concern for issues that require collective action to solve (Latane & Darley, 1968)—is central among the roadblocks that prevents engagement in collective action. Pluralistic ignorance is troublesome because people routinely fail to take initiative themselves if they perceive inaction on the part of their peers. Put differently, inaction spreads like a contagion, and extensive psychological research has demonstrated the significant barriers pluralistic ignorance imposes on developing solutions and fostering meaningful social change (Fischer et al., 2011; O'Gorman, 1986). Recently, this phenomenon has been shown to have particularly far-reaching implications for resolving the societal issue of climate change (Geiger & Swim, 2016). Despite widespread climate concern and support for climate-related policy reform, Americans across the political spectrum (Sparkman et al., 2022) and people around the world (Andre et al., 2024) experience a *false social reality*, drastically underestimating their peers' support for climate mitigation.

Climate change is just one of several existential risks threatening humanity's future. Pandemic diseases, nuclear warfare, global poverty, and advanced artificial intelligence also pose imminent dangers to life and livelihood unless mitigated urgently (Barnosky et al., 2011; Heuvel, 2023). These threats are projected to affect future generations most severely (Greaves & MacAskill, 2019; MacAskill, 2022; Moynihan, 2020; Ord, 2021), underscoring the need for collective action today to protect those who will inherit the world tomorrow. Consideration for humanity's future is increasingly influencing political discourse (United Nations, 2021). Some nations are even establishing initiatives, such as policies and legislative bodies, dedicated to defending the

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rights of future generations who cannot advocate for themselves (González-Ricoy, 2020; Jacobs & Matthews, 2012). Yet, despite widespread concern for the welfare of future generations (Law et al., 2023; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023, 2024a) and appeal for their protection under the law (Martínez & Winter, 2021, 2023), most countries, including the United States, have failed to enact comprehensive measures to safeguard the future. This inaction is particularly significant because concern for intergenerational issues tends to transcend the stark political and ideological divides that often hold back legislation on climate change (Law et al., 2025; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, Mah, et al., 2025). Drawing from "Social Norm Theory" (Abrahamse & Steg, 2013; Berkowitz, 1972), we propose that this disconnect may stem, at least in part, from a pervasive underestimation of public support for future-oriented institutions, which undermines collective action by diminishing perceived social consensus.

## *The Role of Social Norms and Perceptions in Addressing Future Generations' Challenges*

According to social norm theory (Berkowitz, 1972), people construct their subjective sense of reality through a social process, often relying on perceptions of the beliefs and behaviors of others to inform their own (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; Searle, 1995; Snyder & Swann, 1978). When inaccuracies distort perceptions of others' beliefs and behaviors, the social reality shared among a group, or even a society, can become disconnected from the true state of affairs. For decades, research in social psychology has explored how perceptions (and misperceptions) about social norms can drive action (and inaction) at the interpersonal level, in arenas spanning aggression and violence (Banyard et al., 2009; Lilleston et al., 2017) to bystander intervention (Fischer et al., 2011; Latane & Darley, 1968). Similarly, social norms play a pivotal role in addressing collective action challenges, such as climate change, where shared perceptions of societal priorities and responsibilities strongly influence individuals' motivation to engage in necessary actions (Carman et al., 2023; Kjeldahl & Hendricks, 2018). Recent findings from a nationally representative sample reveal that, while a supermajority of Americans support climate-related policy reforms, individuals across every state and political affiliation mistakenly believe that opposition to such policies is the majority view (Sparkman et al., 2022). This pluralistic ignorance in estimating normative support for climate policies also shapes global perceptions of climate change (Andre et al., 2024), which has serious implications for why, despite widespread support, most countries have yet to implement comprehensive initiatives to tackle this critical issue.

Here, we investigate whether pluralistic ignorance similarly characterizes Americans' perceptions of support for "Initiatives for Future Generations" (IFGs)—institutions and policies that have either been proposed or enacted in the real world aimed at safeguarding humanity's future welfare. Namely, among both convenience and representative samples of Americans, we (a) measure support for various IFGs, (b) assess perceptions of others' support to quantify pluralistic ignorance—the extent to which Americans underestimate the support of their peers, and (c) evaluate whether correcting Americans' underestimations of others' support can reduce pluralistic ignorance and enhance their own support. Concern about long-term threats like pandemics, wealth inequality, nuclear war, and artificial intelligence (AI) are growing (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a). These concerns are beginning to permeate international political discourse (United Nations, 2021) and broader societal conversations (e.g., popular fiction literature; Robinson, 2020). Some nations, including Hungary, Israel, and Wales, have established institutions for future generations—legislative bodies tasked with representing the needs of future citizens in policymaking (Lawrence, 2021). Even more nations have established policies to give future generations a voice. These measures include allocating legislative seats for younger representatives, incentivizing both individual and national contributions to global sustainability efforts, mandating reductions in nonrenewable energy consumption, and launching educational programs to raise awareness of and support for intergenerational equity (Cordonier Segger et al., 2021; González-Ricoy, 2020; von Knebel, 2023).

IFGs, like those discussed above, may be fundamental in addressing the most pressing challenges society will face in its future (see Table S2 in the Supplemental Online Materials [SOM] for a comprehensive list of proposed or enacted IFGs). But at present, the United States has limited formal mechanisms in place to ensure future generations' legal representation and a notably low ranking on Hofstede's long-term orientation index (Bukowski & Rudnicki, 2019; Hofstede, 2011)—a reflection of a society's prioritization of future objectives. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that the nation's future-oriented policies are out of sync with individual levels of intergenerational concern. Nearly, a quarter of American subjects in online convenience samples exhibit intergenerational attitudes consistent with what has been referred to as "Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence" (IIB)—exceptional levels of concern and personal feelings of responsibility for the welfare of future generations, no matter how far in the future they might exist (Law et al., 2023, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023; Syropoulos, Law, Amormino, & Young, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a). Moreover, many Americans are acutely concerned about rising catastrophic risks and show strong support for future-oriented policies (Hunter & Hewson, 2020; Koehler, 2023; Martínez & Winter, 2021, 2023). This apparent contrast between intergenerational attitudes and legal initiatives raises the question of whether Americans live in a false social reality where they underestimate others' support for institutions and policies benefiting the future. If so, insights from social norm theory may not only help to explain

the divide between attitudes and initiatives, but also critically inform scalable strategies for garnering the individual-level action necessary to inspire society-level change.

## *Why Pluralistic Ignorance May or May Not Emerge in the Intergenerational Domain*

As the present investigation marks the first application of social norm theory to the context of intergeneration governance, it is not obvious whether pluralistic ignorance misperceptions will occur around IFGs. On one hand, intergenerational issues are often less polarizing than climate change or other partisan debates, enjoying relatively broad bipartisan support (e.g., Law et al., 2025; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, Mah, et al., 2025). If pluralistic ignorance stems primarily from cognitive errors owing to forces, such as biased social sampling (where people infer societal norms from their immediate networks) or partisan narratives that distort the appearance of consensus (Miller, 2023; Miller & McFarland, 1991), then we might expect weaker misperceptions in this domain. Indeed, because support for protecting future generations spans political and demographic lines, individuals' networks and media environments should be less likely to misrepresent broader public sentiment.

At the same time, these typical forces may still operate in more subtle ways. For instance, if conversations about intergenerational issues are relatively infrequent, people may have limited cues to anchor their estimates of support. Moreover, it is possible that pluralistic ignorance is compounded by motivational dynamics. That is, individuals may find it psychologically easier to explain governmental inaction by assuming weak public support rather than confronting the possibility of systemic dysfunction. In this sense, pluralistic ignorance may not only suppress collective action and thereby limit policymaking, but may also emerge as a response to the absence of policy action on widely supported issues. This would align with system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Friesen, 2011), which suggests that people are motivated to preserve the legitimacy of existing institutions. Accordingly, we hypothesize that pluralistic ignorance will be evident even in this relatively consensual domain. Testing this possibility extends social norm theory to intergenerational governance and highlights the need for future work examining whether such misperceptions, and pluralistic ignorance more generally, reflect informational biases alone or deeper motivational barriers to collective action.

## *Integrating Pluralistic Ignorance into the Current Understanding of Intergenerational Concern and Future-Oriented Engagement*

Relatedly, because emerging research in the behavioral sciences aimed at increasing engagement in future-oriented protective behaviors (e.g., support for pro-climate policy reform, donations to future-focused charities) has largely overlooked the role of social norms, existing interventions have not yet sought to address pluralistic ignorance. Instead, research in this domain has tested interventions that target intergenerational concern directly to boost pro-future engagement through heightening levels of IIB among the populace (Coleman & DeSteno, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023, 2024b). But if pluralistic ignorance is rampant in Americans' perceptions of normative levels of support for IFGs, it will be important to address how personally held intergenerational attitudes, such as IIB, relate to pluralistic ignorance.

Consequently, beyond quantifying and combatting pluralistic ignorance, we also investigate whether Americans who exhibit IIB, relative to those who do not, report more support for IFGs, and whether they are more or less prone to pluralistic ignorance. The existing literature supports two possibilities: (a) consistent with "Social Projection Theory" (Krueger, 2010), individuals with exceptional levels of intergenerational concern may anchor their judgments of others' support to their own intergenerational attitudes, reporting less pluralistic ignorance and (b) alternatively, consistent with the "Better Than Average Effect" (Leviston & Uren, 2020; Xiao et al., 2021; Zell et al., 2020), individuals with exceptional levels of intergenerational concern—relative to those with more typical levels—may estimate that others' levels of concern are even lower than their own, reporting greater pluralistic ignorance. After ruling out the possibility that greater intergenerational concern might heighten pluralistic ignorance as an unintended consequence, we investigate whether support for IFGs can be fostered using interventions common in the existing literature that target intergenerational concern directly.

## *The Current Research*

In sum, across both large-scale convenience samples and nationally representative samples of Americans, we assess social norm realities and perceptions surrounding support for IFGs. Namely, we measure support for a range of IFGs, quantify the extent of pluralistic ignorance among the general population, and boost support simply by correcting misperceptions. As a secondary aim, we investigate whether exceptional levels of intergenerational concern, consistent with IIB, predict stronger support for IFGs. We also examine the relationship between these exceptional intergenerational attitudes and pluralistic ignorance, ruling out the possibility that increasing intergenerational concern—as commonly seen in the literature (Coleman & DeSteno, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023, 2024b)—might unintentionally exacerbate pluralistic ignorance by eliciting a better than average effect.[1] After ruling this out, we test the efficacy of a validated intervention designed to enhance intergenerational concern on IFG support.

All aspects of the main and pilot studies were preregistered (Pilot Study 1: https://aspredicted.org/3m4m-xh9k.pdf; Pilot Study 2: https://aspredicted.org/5d9w-d95k.pdf; Pilot Study 3: https://aspredicted.org/mvp6-hqbn.pdf; Pilot Study 4: https://aspredicted.org/ncm2-6gyv.pdf; Studies 1–3: https://aspredicted.org/nw3q-czyn.pdf; and Study 4: https://aspredicted.org/fpvk-4dk3.pdf). All relevant study materials (e.g., surveys, data, and code) for all studies are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF), https://osf.io/nurzd/?view_only=0134262ba06d4dcba00ed0145914c49a.

## Studies 1–3

In a representative sample of American adults weighted to approximate the national population, we first examined the public's reported level of support for IFGs—institutions and policies protecting future generations (Study 1). We also examined whether exceptional levels of intergenerational concern predict stronger IFG support. Then, in a second representative American sample, we measured subjects' perceptions of support for these IFGs among their compatriots to assess whether and how much people tend to underestimate the support of their peers (i.e., pluralistic ignorance; Study 2). In Study 2, we additionally assessed whether exceptional levels of intergenerational concern predicted more (consistent with the better than average effect; Leviston & Uren, 2020; Xiao et al., 2021; Zell et al., 2020) or less (consistent with social projection theory; Krueger, 2010) pluralistic ignorance. After ruling out the possibility that efforts to boost intergenerational action by increasing intergenerational concern—a strategy commonly employed in the existing literature (e.g., Coleman & DeSteno, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023, 2024b)—might unintentionally exacerbate pluralistic ignorance by eliciting a better than average effect, we tested the efficacy of a validated intergenerational-concern-based intervention to enhance IFG support.

### Method

#### Participants

*Recruitment Processes for Weighted Nationally Representative Studies (via Verasight).* A total of 1,000 U.S. adults per study were recruited to participate in Studies 1 to 3. Data collection for these studies was conducted by Verasight, a panel provider that collects nationally representative data. Data were collected in 2024 (July 10–16 for Study 1, July 31–August 6 for Study 2, and August 13–19 for Study 3). The data are weighted to match the June 2024 Current Population Survey on age, race/ethnicity, sex, income, education, region, and metropolitan status, as well as to population benchmarks of partisanship and 2020 vote. The margin of sampling error, which is calculated using the classical random sampling formula, is ±3.3%.

All respondents were recruited via email from the Verasight community, which is composed of individuals recruited via random address-based sampling, random person-to-person text messaging, and dynamic online targeting. All Verasight community members are verified via multi-step authentication, including providing an SMS response from a mobile phone registered with a major U.S. carrier (e.g., no VOIP or internet phones) as well as within-survey technology, including verifying the absence of nonhuman responses with technologies, such as Google reCAPTCHA v3. Those who exhibit low-quality response behaviors over time, such as straightlining or speeding, are also removed and prohibited from further participation in the community. Verasight community members receive points for taking surveys that can be redeemed for Venmo or PayPal payments, gift cards, or charitable donations. Respondents are never routed from one survey to another and receive compensation for every invited survey, so that there is never an incentive to respond strategically to survey qualification screener questions.

In line with our a priori power analysis (see preregistration), we obtained a sample size sufficient to detect an effect size of $d = 0.09$ for one-sample $t$-tests on pluralistic ignorance and $d = 0.22$ for tests comparing support for IFGs across individual differences, both with 0.80 power. For Study 3, with $N > 400$ per condition, we could detect an effect size of $d = 0.20$ with 0.80 power.

#### Materials and Procedures

*Measures.* Consistent across Studies 1 to 3 was our measure of IIB. To capture this construct, we measured intergenerational concern using the Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence Inventory (IIBI; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025). A set of seven items presented simultaneously four times (for four different timeframes: 1,000, 10,000, 100,000, and 1,000,000 years in the future) was presented to participants. Scores were recorded on slider scales spanning from 0 ("strongly disagree") to 100 ("strongly agree"). These items capture an obligation to protect future generations and perceptions that people in the present have the capacity to positively influence the lives of future people (e.g., "Positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time" and "There are things we can do to steer the long-term future to a better course"). For all studies, this measure was highly reliable (all Cronbach's αs > .96). To capture *exceptional* levels of intergenerational concern, for Studies 1 and 2, participants were subsequently categorized as endorsing IIB (and coded as "1") if their average scores across the seven items exceeded 75 for the closest timeframe without dropping below 75 for the three subsequent more-distant timeframes. Participants who did not meet these criteria were coded as "0." Existing work has validated this instrument (Law et al., 2023; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a) finding that 20% to 25% of the population scores in line with the IIB pattern, a finding also replicated across Studies 1 and 2.

Our main outcomes across studies captured personal and estimated normative levels of support for IFGs—institutions and (proposed or passed) policies protecting future generations. In our pilot studies, we generated a list of 50 proposed or already enacted measures, initiatives, or policies aimed at safeguarding the interests of future generations (the full text of these 50 items is provided in Table S2 in the SOM). For Studies 1 and 2, we selected 20 (see Table 1 for the full text of each) that were supported the most based on our pilot results (described in detail in the SOM). For Study 1, participants reported their *actual* support/opposition for these items assessed using 6-point Likert-type scales from 1 ("strongly oppose") to 6 ("strongly support"). The average score across the 20 items was reliable ($\alpha = .95$). In Study 2, participants were asked to *estimate* the percentage of Americans who support each of the IFGs included in Study 1 (0%–100% range; $\alpha = .97$). In Study 3, we selected the 10 items that were neither opposed nor supported the most (the average score in Pilot Study 1 was a score of "4," indicating partial support). We did this to ensure that the target outcomes were not already supported nor actively opposed (notably, only 2 of 50 IFGs were found to have support below 50% in our pilot studies). The average of level of actual support for these IFGs was our primary outcome in Study 3 ($\alpha = .94$).

Finally, as noted in the preregistration, additional measures of moral expansiveness (Study 1), obligation to future generations (Study 2), and future self-continuity and legacy concerns (Study 3) were included in the surveys as part of a separate project and were not analyzed for the current article.

*Intervention for Increasing IFG Support Through Increasing Intergenerational Concern (Study 3).* In Study 3 (and also in Pilot Study 4), participants were randomly assigned to either a (baseline) control condition, with no information presented beyond the measure of interest, or our intervention condition. In the intervention, participants engaged in a thought exercise adapted from William MacAskill's *What we Owe the Future* (MacAskill, 2022). Specifically, they were asked to imagine hiking in a forest when a glass water bottle they were carrying falls and breaks. They were then instructed to imagine hearing a child nearby, knowing the child would walk down the path where the glass shards were scattered. Participants were asked if they would pick up the shards and could respond "Yes" or "No." Regardless of their answer, participants were asked to elaborate on their response. Then, the following was stated: "In deciding whether to clean it up, does it matter when the child will cut herself? Should you care whether it's a week, or a decade, or a century from now? No. Harm is harm, whenever it occurs."

Subsequently, it was explained to participants that, if they agreed with the principle above and if they believe that they would have picked up the broken shards of glass to prevent anyone in the future from being harmed, then they probably would agree with the following principles from the philosophy of longtermism: (a) Future people, no matter when they live in the future, matter. Their lives have just as much value as our lives today. (b) An untold number of people will live after us. We have to think beyond the immediate or short-term consequences of our actions and consider how those actions might affect future generations. (c) We, the present generation, can make the lives of future people better. It is our moral responsibility to ensure that we do our best to protect future people who have no voice today. Finally, participants were told to reflect on these principles in a very brief 2- to 3-minute essay via the following prompt: "In the space below, please take 2–3 minutes to reflect on what you just read. Specifically, please write what you think you can do today to help ensure a better future for those who will come after you."

## Results

*Pilot Studies.* All pilot studies were conducted on Prolific. Detailed information on the sample size, demographics, and measures included in these studies are reported in the SOM. Results were largely consistent with our main studies, finding a high degree of support for IFGs (institutions/policies protecting future generations' welfare; Study S1) and consistent underestimation of support across political parties (Studies S2–S3). Furthermore, results also suggest that participants who exhibit IIB report greater personal IFG support (Study S1) and estimate greater/more accurate normative support (Studies S2–S3) for IFGs. Finally, Study S4 was identical to Study 3 and obtained similar results (as outlined below).

*Study 1: Americans Support IFGs.* Support was assessed on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly oppose* to 6 = *strongly support*. Supporting an initiative was operationalized as scoring at or higher than a 4, which corresponds to the scale anchor "Somewhat Support." These policies were selected based on a pilot study ($N = 600$) conducted on Prolific, a crowdsourcing website, in which we found that support for these 20 IFGs, as well as the others, was high (see Study S1 in the SOM).

Across the 20 proposed or existing IFGs, the rate of respondents who reported supporting each institution always exceeded 50% (see Figure 1 and Table 1). In fact, the lowest level of support for a given IFG was 69.9% across all Americans. Notably, support was higher for Democrats than Independents and Republicans. Among Democrats and Independents, majority support was noted for every IFG (i.e., at least 50% support), while Republicans reported majority support for 19 of 20, with the only exception being, "Congress should pass The Future Generations Protection Act to shift from using fossil fuels to using renewable energy.," for which support was noted at 47.9%.

*Study.* 1: Individual Differences in Intergenerational Attitudes Predict Increased of Support for IFGs

**Table 1.** Percentage of Respondents Indicating Support for Each IFG by Political Affiliation.

| Item no. | Proposed or existing initiative for future generations | Americans | Democrats | Republicans | Independents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Public Accounts Committee to ensure government expenditures on behalf of future generations are honest and successful | 86.8 | 91.2 | 83.6 | 83.2 |
| 2 | A reform plan for the social security program should be enacted to protect future generations through lowering the cost of living | 83.3 | 85.6 | 82.3 | 80.7 |
| 3 | Any performance indicators put in place by the government for future generations should track the attainment of long-term goals rather than only focusing on annual or yearly goals | 85.7 | 88.9 | 82.3 | 84.4 |
| 4 | Each of the 50 states should have an assessment tool to evaluate the effectiveness of long-term impact of legislation on future generations | 86.8 | 92.2 | 83.3 | 83.2 |
| 5 | Accountability reports should be conducted by Congress to review the long-term impact of legislation on future generations | 85.3 | 90.4 | 82.3 | 79.5 |
| 6 | We should give younger generations more opportunities to vote by making voter preregistration a more highly publicized option | 80.3 | 92.4 | 70.0 | 75.8 |
| 7 | A reform plan for the social security program should be enacted to protect future generations through conservation of resources, such as life insurance, stocks, bonds, and property | 80.1 | 83.8 | 77.3 | 78.7 |
| 8 | The Department of Transportation should coordinate transportation plans that preserve biodiversity for future generations | 79.0 | 90.7 | 66.6 | 75.8 |
| 9 | An assessment tool should exist for Congress to evaluate the effectiveness of long-term impact of legislation on future generations | 85.0 | 90.7 | 81.4 | 79.9 |
| 10 | We should give younger generations more opportunities to vote by making polling locations more accessible | 82.1 | 92.4 | 72.2 | 79.1 |
| 11 | The U.S. government should fund more research projects focused on how we can ensure a better life for future generations | 77.9 | 88.9 | 66.9 | 73.4 |
| 12 | The U.S. Institute for Sustainable Development should create programs that seek to protect the quality of life of future generations | 80.4 | 91.2 | 70.7 | 75.8 |
| 13 | Congress should pass the Future Generations Protection Act to shift from using fossil fuels to using renewable energy | 69.9 | 91.4 | 47.9 | 63.1 |
| 14 | There should be a mandated retirement age of 75 for all federal judges to reflect the values of the people more accurately | 77.6 | 85.1 | 70.7 | 74.2 |
| 15 | U.S. leaders should receive training sessions about effective policy outcomes for future generations | 83.0 | 88.4 | 78.9 | 79.5 |
| 16 | There should be a mandated retirement age of 75 for all U.S. officials to more accurately reflect the values of the people | 75.8 | 82.1 | 70.3 | 72.0 |
| 17 | An external Council for the future, with members from universities and other research centers, should be created to research and chronicle long-term trends and changes in policy directed toward future generations | 72.8 | 84.1 | 62.8 | 66.0 |
| 18 | The Federal government should more mindfully follow the Public Trust Doctrine, a doctrine that provides a framework for balancing economic and environmental interests for intergenerational equity | 79.6 | 89.1 | 70.3 | 75.4 |
| 19 | A semi-autonomous (i.e., appointed by, but working independently from the government) think tank of social policy researchers should be established to protect the rights of and advocate for future generations | 71.0 | 84.3 | 58.0 | 66.0 |
| 20 | The United Nations should host a conference focused solely on policy and goals for protecting future generations | 74.0 | 88.9 | 61.5 | 64.7 |

Emerging evidence suggests that individuals who endorse IIB—those who feel a heightened sense of responsibility for safeguarding the welfare of future beneficiaries without regard to how far in the future they might exist—tend to score higher on measures capturing prosocial attitudes toward distant others (Syropoulos, Law, Amormino, &

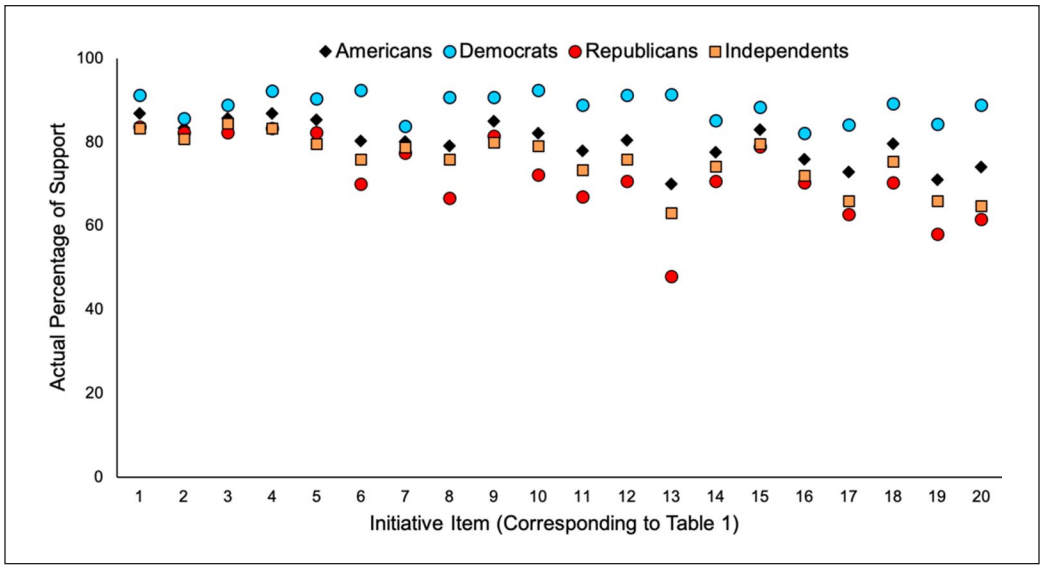


**Figure 1.** All Americans Report High Levels of Support for Initiatives for Future Generations.

Young, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a) and engage in more future-oriented behaviors aligned with combatting intergenerational issues, such as climate change (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024b, 2024c). Similarly, greater beneficence toward one's own descendants, often expressed as an obligation to protect future generations (Syropoulos et al., 2025; Syropoulos & Markowitz, 2024) or as a motivation to leave a positive legacy (Shrum, 2021; Syropoulos et al., 2023; Vlasceanu et al., 2024), predicts heightened motivations and behaviors in line with protecting future people. Thus, we hypothesized that individuals who endorse IIB would also report greater support for IFGs. To measure IIB, we utilized the IIBI (Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025), which allows us to meaningfully distinguish between those who endorse IIB and those who do not. A visual depiction of different patterns of intergenerational beneficence is provided in Figure 2.

Respondents who reported endorsement of IIB ($N = 226$, 22.6%; $M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.97$) expressed significantly greater support, $t(998) = 8.74$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$, for IFGs relative to those who did not ($N = 774$, $M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.97$). This effect was robust, remaining statistically significant after accounting for the effects of age, socioeconomic status, religiosity, and political conservatism (see Table S10 in the SOM).

*Study 2: Americans Severely Underestimate the Popularity of IFGs.* Evidence obtained in two separate Prolific samples (Study S2: $N = 587$ and Study S3: $N = 398$; see the SOM for full details) revealed a robust pattern of pluralistic ignorance where Americans drastically underestimated others' support for IFGs. In Study 2, we replicated this finding in a third nationally representative sample of Americans ($N = 1{,}000$). Namely, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of Americans endorsing each IFG from 0% to 100%. We contrasted these percentages to the actual percentage of support observed in Study 1 (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

We found that Americans severely underestimated the degree to which IFGs were supported by their peers (see Figure 3A). The level of underestimation ranged from 28.3 to 46 percentage points. Statistically expressed, evaluated via one-sample *t*-tests comparing perceived with actual levels of support, these differences were characterized by large effect sizes ranging from $d = 0.93$ to 1.70 (see Table S8). In fact, as illustrated in Figure 3B, this pattern of pluralistic ignorance was noticeable across the political spectrum, as both Democrats (underestimation ranged from 26.8% to 45.5% and effect sizes ranged from $d = 0.98$ to 1.80) and Republicans (underestimation ranged from 30.7% to 46.4% and effect sizes ranged from $d = 0.99$ to 1.67) severely underestimated support for these institutions/policies.

Emerging literature has been principally focused on boosting pro-future engagement by heightening intergenerational attitudes (e.g., exceptional levels of intergenerational concern consistent with IIB; Coleman & DeSteno, 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2023, 2024b). Yet, no research until now has examined the prevalence pluralistic ignorance in the intergenerational domain. Nonetheless, the severe underestimation of support for IFGs noted above raises the question of whether Americans exhibiting exceptional intergenerational attitudes, such as IIB, are more or less prone to pluralistic ignorance. Understanding whether or not high levels of intergenerational concern associate with greater pluralistic ignorance could inform intervention research going

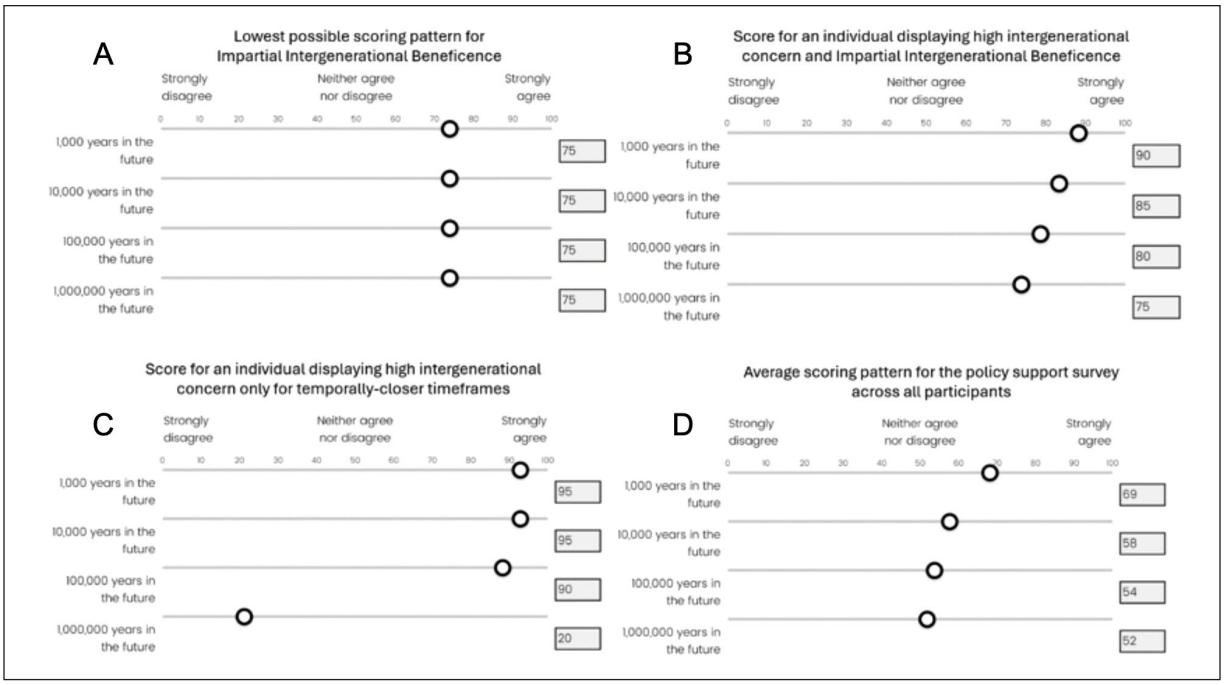


**Figure 2.** The Impartial Scoring Pattern on the Impartial Intergenerational Beneficence Inventory.

*Note.* Participants report their level of intergenerational concern for future generations depicted at four timeframes of varying distances from the present on the impartial intergenerational beneficence inventory (IIBI). Those who score at a 75 or above for the nearest timeframe without scoring below 75 for more-distant timeframes are classified as endorsing impartial intergenerational beneficence (IIB). In this way, the IIBI is used as a classification instrument to identify individuals who feel high and temporally invariant levels of concern for safeguarding future welfare. (A) The lowest possible pattern of scoring that warrants the IIB classification. (B) A hypothetical scoring pattern for a subject that expresses high intergenerational concern and endorses IIB. (C) A hypothetical scoring pattern for a subject who scores highly, but only with respect to more proximal timeframes, and thus would not be classified as endorsing IIB. (D) The average scoring pattern on the IIBI—levels of intergenerational concern that diminish as future generations become more distant from the present.

forward by elucidating whether interventions targeting intergenerational concern might elicit pluralistic ignorance as an unintended consequence.

In Study 2, consistent with self projection theory (Krueger, 2010), we found that participants who exhibited exceptional levels of intergenerational concern consistent with IIB ($N$ = 200, $M$ = 51.75, $SD$ = 26.85) reported lower levels of pluralistic ignorance, not more (as would be predicted by the Better Than Average Effect; Leviston & Uren, 2020; Xiao et al., 2021; Zell et al., 2020). Specifically, individuals exhibiting IIB perceived significantly greater, and thus more accurate, levels of support among fellow Americans, $t(260.14) = 6.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.54$, compared with the rest of the population ($N$ = 800, $M$ = 38.79, $SD$ = 20.36). This effect was robust, remaining statistically significant after accounting for the effects of age, socioeconomic status, religiosity, and political conservatism (see Table S10 in the SOM).

*Study 3: An Intergenerational Concern-Based Intervention Increases Support for IFGs.* Finding evidence that heightened levels of intergenerational concern consistent with IIB are unlikely to exacerbate pluralistic ignorance, we sought to test whether an established intervention (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024c) focused on intergenerational concern might boost support for IFGs. We first examined this in a sample of 975 Prolific workers (see Study S4 in the SOM). To guard against ceiling effects while also ensuring that the specific IFGs we sought to increase support for were not widely unpopular (see the SOM for the full list of policies), we chose 10 IFGs that were neither the most supported nor the most opposed. In a thought exercise, participants were introduced to the principles of IIB, drawn from the philosophy of longtermism (MacAskill, 2022), which emphasizes reducing harm for future generations regardless of when they exist. Figure 4 provides a summary of the intervention materials and procedure.

In Study S4, participants who were randomly assigned to undergo the intervention reported significantly higher levels intergenerational concern, $t(973) = 3.96$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.21$, and support for IFGs, $t(973) = 3.31$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.21$, relative to participants in a control condition where no information was displayed, even after accounting for demographic covariates, $b = 0.20$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = (0.07, 0.32), $\beta = .09$, $p = .002$. As predicted, increased intergenerational concern (measured as the average across all items on the IIBI) predicted increased IFG support, $b = 0.02$, 95% CI

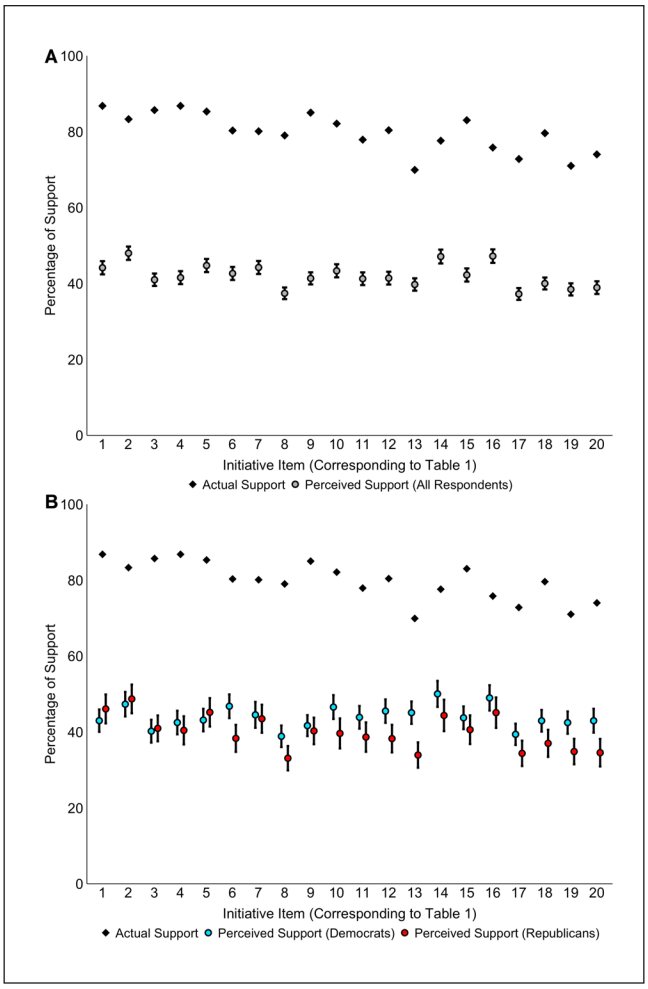


**Figure 3.** Actual Versus Perceived Support for IFGs. Error Bars Denote 95% C.I.
*Note.* (A) Perceived support is averaged across all respondents. (B) Perceived support is split by Democrats and Republicans. (A, B) Means and error bars factor in survey weights.

(0.02, 0.02), $R^2 = .31$, and mediated the effect of condition on IFG support, $b = 0.15$, 95% CI (0.08, 0.23); PROCESS Macro, Mode 4; 10,000 bootstrapped sample (Hayes, 2013). These effects were robust to the inclusion of demographic covariates, $b = 0.13$, 95% CI (0.06, 0.20).

In Study 3, using a weighted, nationally representative sample ($N = 1{,}004$), we sought to directly replicate this effect. Again, participants who were randomly assigned to the treatment reported significantly higher intergenerational concern, $t(998) = 5.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.32$, relative to controls. The effect on policy support, however, was not statistically significant, $t(929) = 1.01$, $p = .314$, $d = 0.06$.[2] Figure 5 provides a visual summary of these results.

Nevertheless, in an exploratory, and not preregistered analysis, the average effect size estimated via internal meta-analysis (Goh et al., 2016) across both studies was small but significant, $d = 0.134$, 95% CI (0.045, 0.222), $Z = 2.969$, $p = .003$. Increased intergenerational concern (IGC) predicted increased IFG support, $b = 0.02$, 95% CI (0.018, 0.022), $p < .001$, and mediated the effect of the treatment on support for IFGs, $b = 0.15$, 95% CI (0.09, 0.23). A total of 22% of the variance in IFG support was explained by increased IGC. This indirect effect was robust to demographic controls, $b = 0.14$, 95% CI (0.08, 0.20). Demographic covariates explained an additional 12% of variance in the outcome.[3] Sensitivity analyses using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) for the models testing the indirect effect without and with predictors, for a two-tailed test, and power of .80 indicated we could meaningfully observe effect sizes as small as .008.[4]

## Study 4

Having charted that institutions and policies protecting future generations (IFGs) are widely supported by the majority of Americans (Study 1), that levels of support can be modestly increased through brief thought experiments (note that this effect was significant in Study S4, nonsignificant in Study 3, and small but significant when testing the meta-analytic effect across both studies), and that Americans severely underestimate the degree of normative support for these initiatives (Study 2), we conducted a second and final intervention that sought to correct these misperceptions to examine the impact this may have on personal levels of support.

### *Method*

*Participants.* A total of 800 American adults were recruited through Prolific Academic to provide 80% power to detect effect sizes as small as $d = 0.20$ for between-subjects comparisons ($N = 800$) and $d = 0.14$ for within-subject tests ($N = 400$ within each condition). Prolific allows researchers to screen participants, so that a sample that meets quotas established by the U.S. Census Bureau can be met. We utilized the option that screens participants to meet quotas for gender, age, race/ethnicity, and political affiliation. Four subjects were excluded on the basis of our preregistered exclusion criteria for duplicate IP addresses, and thus, our final sample comprised $N = 796$ Americans.

*Materials and Procedures.* We selected the 10 IFGs for which the highest degree of pluralistic ignorance (i.e., misperception) was noted in our prior studies (see Study S2 in the SOM and results from Studies 1 and 2). Participants were randomly assigned to either see the actual level of support for each of 10 policies (intervention) or receive no corrective information (control). In the intervention condition, participants viewed bar graphs (see Figure 6) displaying the percentage of Americans supporting each IFG, based on our findings from Study 1, with the accuracy of this information explicitly communicated. Participants first estimated Americans' normative levels of support for each IFG, were then

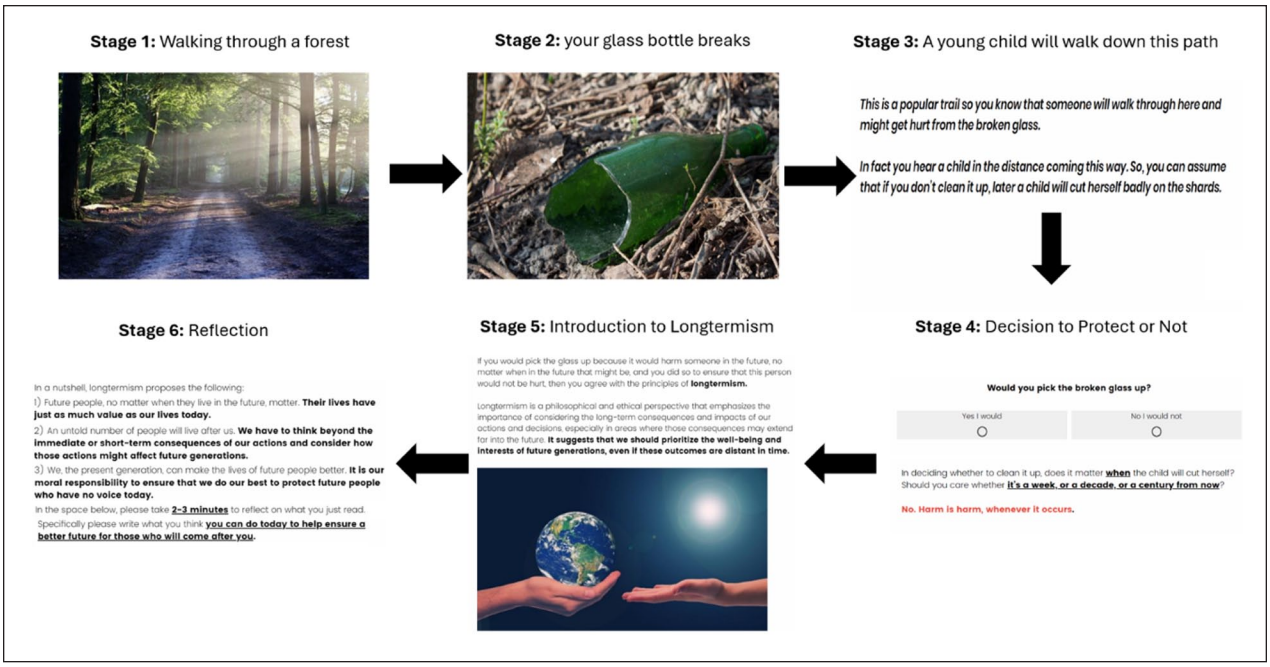


**Figure 4.** Thought Exercise Intervention Targeting Intergenerational Concern.

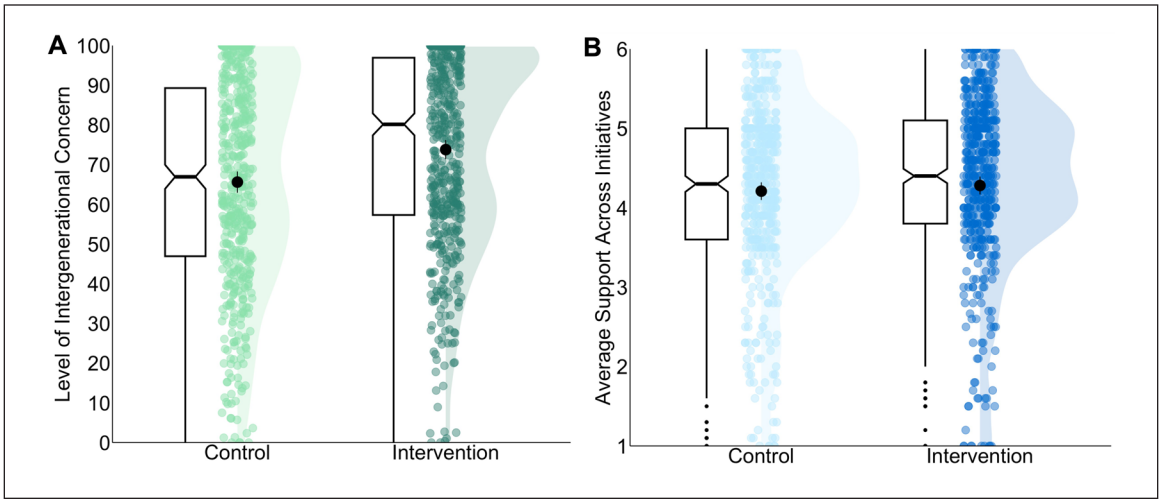


**Figure 5** Effect of the Intergenerational Concern-Based Intervention on Intergenerational Concern and Support for IFGs in Study 3
*Note.* Raincloud plots depicting (A) reported endorsement of intergenerational concern as measured by the IIBI and (B) reported levels of support for IFGs between the control and intervention conditions from Study 3. Colored dots correspond to individual data points and are jittered for readability, with split violin plots overlaid to show the relative distribution of scores across conditions. Error bars depict ± 1.96*SEM. Notched boxplots are included, with notches depicting a confidence interval around the median with a value of ±1.58*IQR/sqrt(*n*). Summary statistics factor in survey weights.

assigned to a condition, shown or not shown actual levels of IFG support (depending on condition), and afterward provided new estimates of normative support, followed by their own support levels.

The intervention utilized bar graphs to present participants the data obtained from the nationally representative sample (i.e., Study 1) which provided accurate information regarding actual levels of normative American support for each initiative. We selected the initiatives with the highest degree of underestimation (from results obtained from Studies 1 and 2). A full list of the items can be found in the SOM, and the stimuli are presented in Figure 6. This design allowed for both within-subject (pre- vs. postintervention—in the intervention condition only, as no preintervention measurement was captured in the control) and between-subject (intervention vs. control) comparisons. We also tested

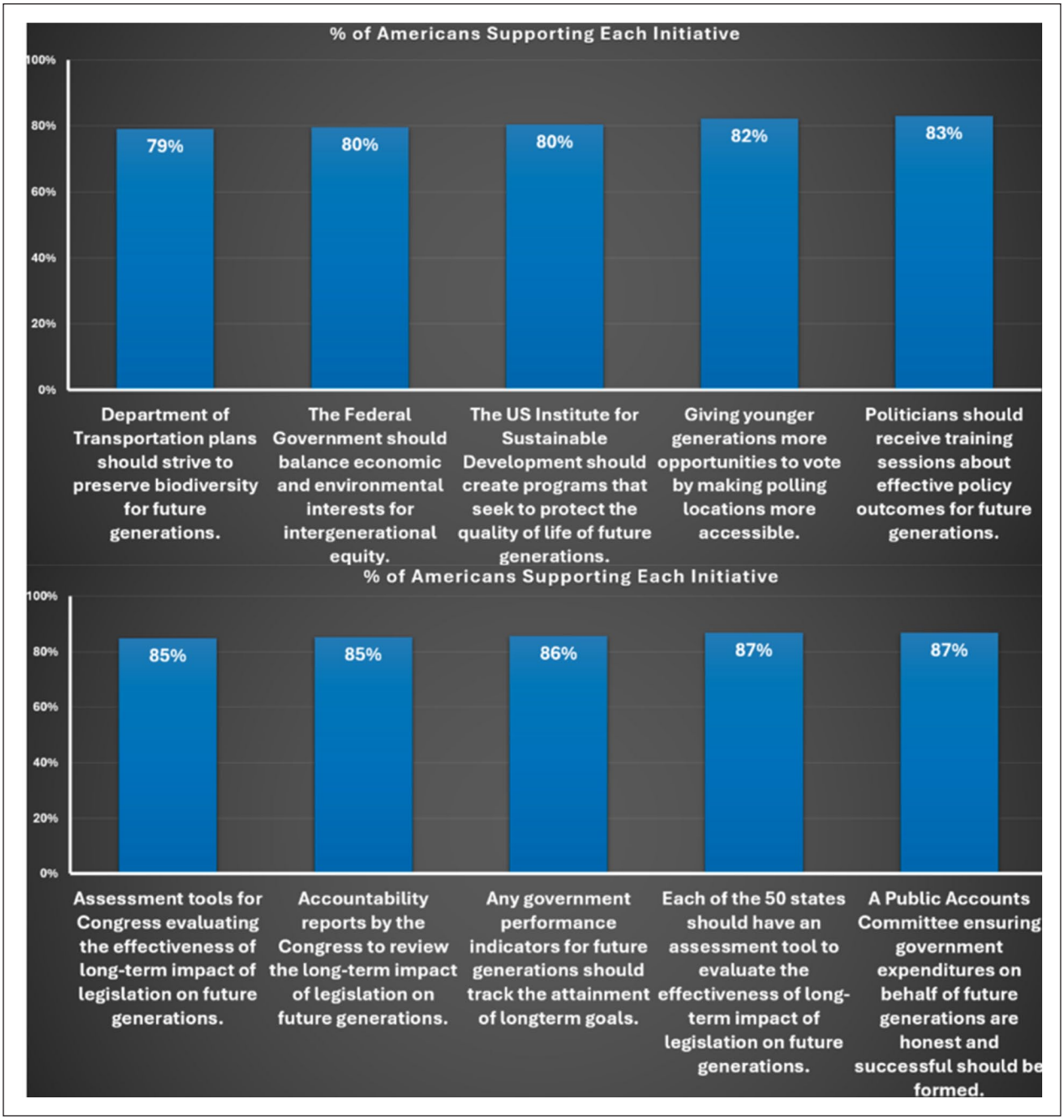


**Figure 6.** Intervention Information Displayed to Participants to Decrease Pluralistic Ignorance by Correcting Misperceptions of Normative Support for IFGs.

whether the previously observed pattern of pluralistic ignorance replicated in participants' preintervention estimates of normative IFG support.

## Results

*Merely.* Viewing Actual Levels of Peer Support for IFGs Boosts Americans' Own Levels of Support by Reducing Pluralistic Ignorance

First, replicating the findings from Study 2, prior to the intervention, Americans severely underestimated IFG support among their peers, with gaps ranging from 28.8 to 35 percentage points depending on the particular IFG in question (Cohen's $d$ values from 1.14 to 1.44; see Table S12 in the SOM for full analysis).

To test for within-subject differences, we looked at scores for only the treatment condition ($N = 394$). We estimated a difference score for each of the 10 policies by subtracting the

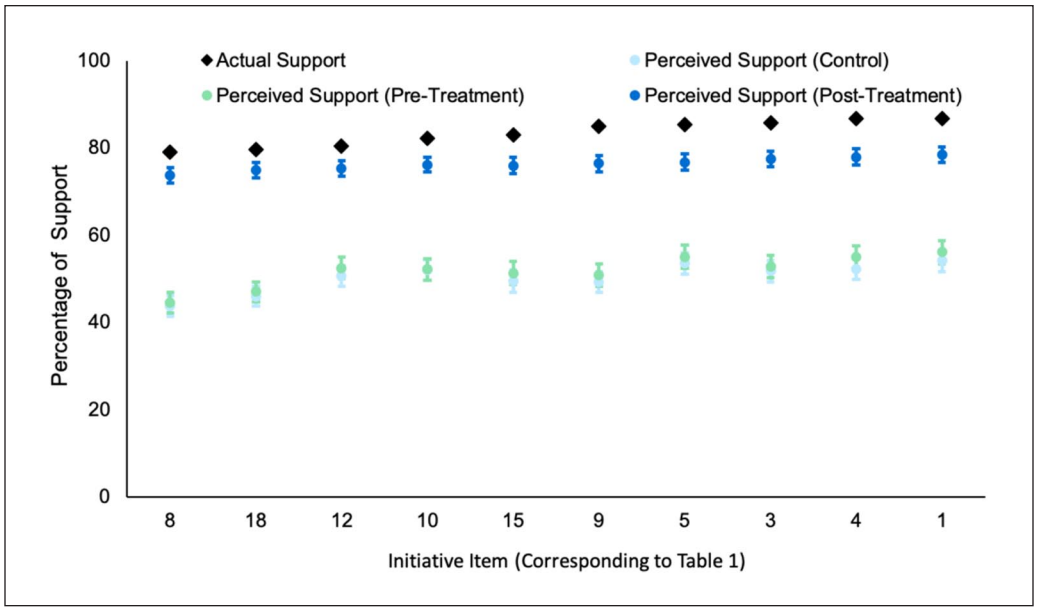


**Figure 7.** Evidence of the Treatment Correcting Pluralistic Ignorance Within and Between Subjects. Errors Bars Depict 95% CI.

preintervention score from the postintervention score. A random intercepts only mixed model with IFGs nested in participants found that viewing the intervention information increased perceived support by an average of 24.6 percentage points, $b = 24.55$, 95% CI (22.61, 27.48), $p < .001$, from an average preintervention estimate of 51.7% support across IFGs to an average postintervention estimate of 76.3% support across IFGs.

To test for between-subject differences, we compared the two conditions on estimates of support by estimating a mixed model with IFGs nested in participants. Random intercepts and the fixed effect of condition were estimated. The intervention increased perceptions of support by 26 percentage points, $b = 25.97$, 95% CI (23.40, 28.60), $p < .001$, $d = 1.37$. Participants in the treatment condition had an average postintervention estimate of 76.3% support across IFGs while participants in the control condition had an estimate of 50.3% support across IFGs (see Figure 7 for IFG-specific scores).

Importantly, we also examined whether correcting misperceptions would also have a spillover effect on participants' personal support for IFGs. A mixed model with IFGs nested in participants with random intercepts and the fixed effect of condition was estimated to evaluate this possibility. Indeed, participants in the treatment condition reported significantly higher levels of support, $b = 0.32$, 95% CI (0.20, 0.44), $p < .001$, $d = 0.37$, than participants in the control condition ($M_{\text{intervention}} = 5.03$; $M_{\text{control}} = 4.71$). Figure 8 provides a visual overview of these results. These results suggest that combatting pluralistic ignorance can be as simple as correcting misperceptions of normative levels of support for IFGs with factual information regarding actual levels of support. Moreover, combatting pluralistic ignorance can, in turn, boost personal levels of support for pro-future institutions and policies among the American populace.

## General Discussion

Across eight preregistered, highly powered studies conducted with convenience and representative samples of American adults, we find evidence that: (a) Americans across the political spectrum *widely* support IFGs (institutions and policies designed to provide political representation for future generations); (b) Americans exhibit robust patterns of pluralistic ignorance, *severely* underestimating the support of their peers for these initiatives; and (c) simply providing accurate information about actual support levels corrects these misperceptions, subsequently increasing individuals' own support.

To start, the findings indicate that Americans, across political affiliations, gender, age, race, and ethnicity, largely agree that the government has a responsibility to provide legal protections for future citizens, not just those living today. This consensus extends to institutions that are often portrayed as politically divisive ("This is what political division looks . . .," 2023), such as strengthening social welfare programs like social security, expanding voter rights, facilitating easier ballot access for current voters, imposing mandatory retirement ages for political authorities (e.g., federal judges and U.S. officials), and enhancing climate-related protections. These findings reveal that political divisions may not be as stark as they appear when it comes to the government's duty to safeguard future welfare. A vast majority of Americans agree that their government should do more to protect the country's future and its citizens.

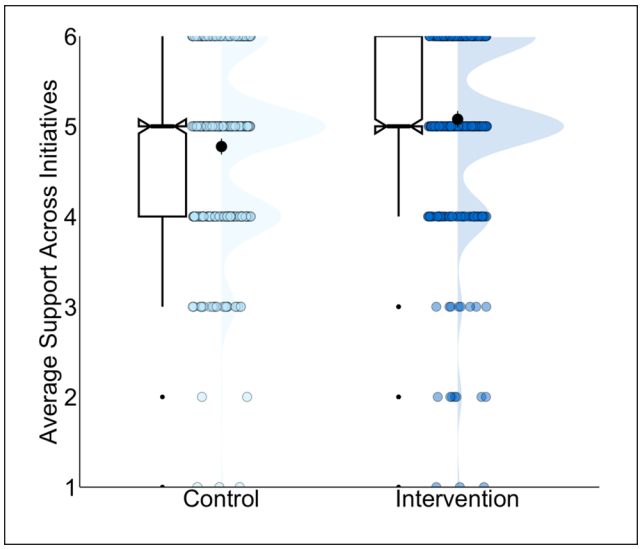


**Figure 8** Effect of the Norm-Based Intervention on Support for IFGs in Study 4

*Note.* Raincloud plot depicting reported levels of support for IFGs between the control and intervention conditions from Study 4. Colored dots correspond to individual data points and are jittered for readability, with split violin plots overlaid to show the relative distribution of scores across conditions. Error bars depict ± 1.96*SEM. Notched boxplots are included, with notches depicting a confidence interval around the median with a value of ±1.58*IQR/sqrt(*n*). Because the median can fall closer to the top or bottom of the interquartile range, the notches may visually appear truncated on one side, even though the interval is symmetric by definition.

Yet, echoing prior research demonstrating the influence of social norms in shaping support for pro-environmental policy reform (Andre et al., 2024; Geiger & Swim, 2016; Kjeldahl & Hendricks, 2018; Sparkman et al., 2022), our findings reveal that the widespread public support for IFGs is likely to surprise most Americans. Specifically, our results indicate that Americans are trapped in a false social reality characterized by pluralistic ignorance (O'Gorman, 1986); they vastly underestimate how much their peers support IFGs. Given that perceptions of normative support strongly influence collective action (Abrahamse & Steg, 2013; Choi et al., 2017; Cohen, 2003; Howe et al., 2021; Kjeldahl & Hendricks, 2018), this misperception may be a key factor explaining the lack of widespread vocal demand for governmental future-protective action. That is, our findings suggest that silence on intergenerational issues may stem not from a lack of private support but from public compliance with an illusory norm that undervalues intergenerational protections.

Importantly, this research marks the first application of social norm theory (Berkowitz, 1972) to the context of intergenerational governance, offering new insight into how underestimating peer consensus may stifle collective advocacy for long-term-oriented societal reform. Moreover, we demonstrate that simply correcting these misperceptions by providing individuals with accurate information about actual levels of support significantly increases personal levels of endorsement. This extends social norm theory by showing that perceived normative consensus can influence support not only for present-day behaviors and policies (e.g., Kjeldahl & Hendricks, 2018; Lilleston et al., 2017), but also for abstract, future-oriented institutional reforms with temporally distant beneficiaries. Future research grounded in Social Norm Theory should examine whether norm-based interventions can not only shift private attitudes, but also empower public advocacy and increase demand for structural change on behalf of future generations.

However, beyond their practical significance, our findings also advance theoretical understanding of pluralistic ignorance itself. As mentioned above, while some IFGs included in the present investigation are portrayed in public discourse as politically divisive (e.g., climate reform, voting rights; "This is what political division looks . . .," 2023), many others, such as ensuring that government expenditures on behalf of future generations are honest and effective, are not. Indeed, prior research shows that concern for future generations is relatively stable across the political spectrum and tends to garner broad bipartisan support (e.g., Law et al., 2025; Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, Mah, et al., 2025). Given this, one might expect people to assume widespread agreement on such issues. Yet, across the board, participants underestimated support, even for initiatives marked by high cross-party agreement and low polarization. This is particularly intriguing. While prior work has documented pluralistic ignorance in highly politicized domains like climate change (e.g., Sparkman et al., 2022), our findings show that norm misperception can persist even in depoliticized contexts with genuine consensus. This suggests that pluralistic ignorance surrounding support for public policy may not simply reflect partisan distortion of the true status quo (Geiger & Swim, 2016), but may function as a deeper psychological barrier to action, even in domains where ideological conflict is minimal.

To build on these findings, we consider one possible explanation for the emergence of pluralistic ignorance in this context that moves beyond traditional social-cognitive models toward a more motivational account. While pluralistic ignorance is often attributed to cognitive errors resulting from biased social sampling (i.e., the tendency to infer societal norms based on one's immediate social circle), partisan narratives, or a lack of public discourse (see, for review, Miller, 2023; Miller & McFarland, 1991), these forces are less clearly at play in the case of intergenerational governance, where public discourse tends to be relatively depoliticized, support is high across the political spectrum, and future-oriented challenges (e.g., pandemics and AI) are becoming increasingly salient in popular discussions (Koehler, 2023). As such, the magnitude and persistence of the misperceptions observed here suggest that they may not be purely informational in nature.

Instead, misperceptions may be sustained in part by psychological *motives*. Namely, in domains where consensus is strong but not reflected in policy outcomes, it may feel psychologically easier to attribute inaction to a lack of public support than to confront the more unsettling reality of structural dysfunction. This aligns with system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004; Kay & Friesen, 2011), which suggests that people are motivated to preserve the legitimacy of existing systems, even at the cost of accuracy (Hughes & Zaki, 2015; Kunda, 1990). From this perspective, pluralistic ignorance may not merely reflect errors in perception, but motivated beliefs that serve to defend against feelings of powerlessness or disillusionment. Testing this possibility directly in future research could expand theoretical models of pluralistic ignorance by accounting for alternative motivational forces that help sustain misperceptions. It could also point to the need for interventions that go beyond correcting descriptive norms, targeting deeper psychological barriers to collective action, since norm correction alone may produce only limited or short-term effects (see Paluck et al., 2016, 2021; Paluck & Green, 2009, for related findings). For example, restoring a sense of agency within political systems or fostering greater intergenerational concern (as we did in Study 3) could prove especially effective when *paired with* norm-corrective strategies.

Relatedly, the current research also makes strides in advancing knowledge in the growing body of inquiry into the causes and consequences of intergenerational concern within psychology (Law et al., 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a, 2024b) and behavioral economics (Frederick, 2003; Hauser et al., 2014; Wade-Benzoni, 1999, 2002; Wade-Benzoni & Tost, 2009). For one, the current findings suggest that efforts to boost intergenerational concern through interventions are unlikely to heighten pluralistic ignorance. We find that individuals who exhibit exceptional levels of intergenerational concern for all future generations, regardless of their distance from the present—a phenomenon known as IIB in the psychological literature (Syropoulos, Law, Kraft-Todd, & Young, 2025)—report higher and more accurate perceptions of normative support for IFGs compared with those with more typical levels of intergenerational concern. Rather than inferring that their own levels of concern far exceed what is typical (e.g., see research on the "Better Than Average Effect"; Leviston & Uren, 2020; Xiao et al., 2021; Zell et al., 2020), in a manner consistent with social projection theory (see Krueger, 2010 for review), individuals who exhibit IIB may instead anchor their estimates of others' support for IFGs to their own levels of concern for the future. This is important in light of the current evidence for widespread pluralistic ignorance and the field's focus on targeting intergenerational concern as a means to boost pro-future engagement. It suggests that efforts to heighten levels of intergenerational concern are not likely to carry the unintended consequence of heightening pluralistic ignorance.

Building on the findings above, we tested a brief, validated intervention targeting intergenerational concern, previously used in psychological research (Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a). Our results show that this intervention, rooted in a thought exercise from ethical philosophical discourse on longtermism (MacAskill, 2022), produced modest and somewhat mixed effects on Americans' support for IFGs. The intervention yielded a statistically significant increase in support in Study S4, was descriptively consistent but nonsignificant in Study 3, and showed a small but significant effect when results were meta-analyzed across studies. These findings suggest that fostering intergenerational concern may offer a viable pathway to boost support among the minority of Americans who do not already endorse such initiatives, though further research is needed to clarify the robustness and limits of these effects. Future research could also further explore whether similar interventions might also encourage more vocal support and collective action among those who already back IFGs.

The widespread support for IFGs observed in the present investigation additionally has significant practical implications for policymakers. Policymakers might interpret these findings as a strong indication that their constituents support the implementation of IFGs, potentially encouraging them to consider putting these initiatives into practice. As concerns over future threats to human welfare grow more urgent (Barnosky et al., 2011; Greaves & MacAskill, 2019; Koehler, 2023; MacAskill, 2022; Moynihan, 2020), the United States is falling behind other nations in addressing future-oriented risks and ensuring a brighter future (Cordonier Segger et al., 2021; González-Ricoy, 2020; von Knebel, 2023). Consistent with research from behavioral (Law et al., 2024; Syropoulos, Law, & Young, 2024a, 2024b) and political (Martínez & Winter, 2021, 2023) sciences showing high levels of intergenerational concern, our findings highlight an opportunity for governmental institutions to align more closely with the values of the American public—and with many countries around the world—by prioritizing the future.

Despite the strengths and implications of this research, there are notable limitations that open avenues for further inquiry. Some of these limitations pertain to the constraints of generality. For one, our primary objective was to examine support for IFGs, quantify pluralistic ignorance, and address these misperceptions within the American populace. However, future-oriented threats—such as climate change, pandemics, and AI—are global challenges that require coordinated international action for effective mitigation (Ord, 2021; Vlasceanu et al., 2024). Going forward, the present studies should be replicated in globally representative samples to explore whether IFG support, pluralistic ignorance and the efficacy of interventions to correct misperceptions and boost IFG support manifest evenly or differentially across nations around the globe. For instance, nations and cultures differ in the extent to which they prioritize long-term objectives (Bukowski & Rudnicki, 2019; Hofstede,

2011), and it is possible that pluralistic ignorance might be less pronounced in countries that have already implemented institutions and policies to provide representation for future generations, where pro-future norms may be more apparent, salient, and accessible.

In addition, this investigation did not encompass every IFG, whether proposed or enacted. Future research could examine levels of actual and perceived support across a broader range of initiatives. Moreover, some policy items were phrased in relatively general or idealistic terms (e.g., support for a "Public Accounts Committee to ensure government expenditures on behalf of future generations are honest and successful") or presented complex issues in simplified ways (e.g., "The Department of Transportation should coordinate transportation plans that preserve biodiversity for future generations" and "A reform plan for the Social Security program should be enacted to protect future generations through lowering the cost of living"). While this wording is consistent with prior research (González-Ricoy, 2020; Thompson, 2010; von Knebel, 2023), and while we are confident that participants understood these initiatives as efforts to benefit future generations, we acknowledge that participants' baseline levels of general political literacy (Federico, 2025) or the omission of potential trade-offs, competing interests, or greater explanatory detail more broadly may have influenced levels of support. Future research could build on these findings by testing whether support remains as high when trade-offs (e.g., economic costs or limitations to present-day development) are made explicit, when greater detail on a smaller range of IFGs is presented (to prioritize depth over breadth), or across levels of participant political literacy.

Finally, the effect sizes for interventions, particularly those targeting intergenerational concern, were small. Future studies could explore more immersive or long-term interventions, such as enhancing intergenerational concern through bonding and perspective-taking with future generations, potentially using large language models or virtual reality experiences to bring the future perceptually closer to citizens in the present. Yet, despite these limitations, we find that support for IFGs is already remarkably high among the American public, cutting across political ideologies and demographic groups. Furthermore, simply correcting for pluralistic ignorance has a significant impact on personal levels of IFG support. Thus, the most substantial benefit for future generations may come from policymakers implementing IFGs. Future research could explore pluralistic ignorance among policymakers themselves and assess whether correcting their underestimations of public support might foster greater willingness to enact these policies and establish the institutions the public already believes should be in place.

In sum, we apply an approach informed by social norm theory to better understand perceptions and realities surrounding public support for a range of governmental safeguards for the welfare of future generations. We find evidence of widespread support for these initiatives across demographics within the American public. Normative levels of support are severely underestimated, but correcting these misperceptions significantly increases personal support. Furthermore, interventions targeting intergenerational concern show promise for boosting support without exacerbating pluralistic ignorance, though targeting norm misperceptions directly may show even larger effects on personal levels of support. Nonetheless, we also consider the possibility that widespread underestimations of public support may reflect more than simple informational error; they may serve as a motivated coping response to the discomfort of feeling powerless in the face of policy inaction. As such, we conclude by emphasizing that the most impactful path forward lies in the hands of policymakers. By recognizing the true extent of public support and implementing IFGs, our political representatives have the opportunity to safeguard the long-term welfare of the nation and ensure a sustainable future—without alienating or inciting opposition from any particular demographics.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material is available online with this article.

## Notes

1. Although existing theory and evidence allowed for the possibility that increasing intergenerational concern could either increase or decrease pluralistic ignorance, we placed greater confidence in the hypothesis that it would reduce it. This directional expectation was preregistered and borne out in the data.
2. Analyses controlling for demographic covariates (age, socioeconomic status [SES], religiosity, and political ideology) noted a significant effect of the treatment on policy support: $b = 0.14$, 95% CI (0.02, 0.26), $\beta = .06$, $p = .026$.
3. Although we preregistered that no participants would be excluded, in an exploratory and not preregistered re-analysis of the data for Study 3, exclusions were implemented for participants who failed to provide written responses to our prompts or opted not to participate in the intervention altogether ($N = 69$). Results for these analyses are reported in the SOM.
4. Assuming partial mediation and considering the small-to-medium a path and small b path in our mediation model, as

well as our bootstrap method for testing the model, the analytic sample size is above the recommended threshold according to simulation studies (e.g., Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

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