

Climate change: Will the parties unite or divide?

John Curtice

A look at the views of their supporters

A key distinction that has long been drawn in the study of public attitudes is between ‘position’ and ‘valence’ issues.¹ A ‘position’ issue is one where people disagree about the objective of public policy. Brexit is an obvious example – some voters want the UK to be part of the EU, while others do not. A ‘valence’ issue, in contrast, is one where most people agree on the goal – nearly everyone, for example, is in favour of low unemployment. The difference has implications for the way in which political parties are able to compete with each other on an issue. In the case of a ‘position’ issue they can try to persuade voters that the policy objective they are proposing is better than that of their opponents. In the case of a ‘valence’ issue, in contrast, voters have to decide which party is best able to achieve the objective on which more or less everyone is agreed.

But where is climate change now likely to stand on this spectrum in Britain’s party political battle? Is stopping the warming of the planet an objective to which most voters are committed and where the only issue is which of the parties has the better ideas for addressing it? Or, is it an issue on which there are divisions within the electorate that could potentially see the parties taking different stances on mitigating climate change? Much research on attitudes towards climate change focuses on the willingness (or otherwise) of individuals and private organisations to adapt or change their behaviour out of concern for the climate. Our focus, however, is on attitudes towards the collective actions that the state may or may not take in order to address climate change. While the actions of individuals matter, it is governments that are uniquely placed to take collective action on the issue, including

1 Stokes D (1963) ‘Spatial models of party competition’, *American Political Science Review*, 57(2): 368–377

setting the legal and regulatory framework within which individuals and others take their decisions. Our evidence comes from a variety of surveys and polls conducted during the course of the past 12 months.

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AN ISSUE OF GENERAL CONCERN?

Climate change can only be a valence issue if, across all sections of society, most people believe that the warming of the planet is an issue of concern, and that it has arisen because of human activity that now needs to stop. It certainly seems to be the case that concern is widespread. For example, in the most recent of a series of Public Attitudes Tracker Surveys undertaken on a regular basis for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS),² as many as 80 per cent said that they were ‘concerned’ about climate change, including 33 per cent who said they were ‘very concerned’.³ These figures, obtained in March 2021, were largely replicated the following October by the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS) Lifestyles and Opinion Survey, which found that 75 per cent were ‘worried’ about climate change, including 32 per cent who said they were ‘very worried’.⁴ Meanwhile, in a poll it conducted in August 2021, Ipsos MORI reported that as many as 85 per cent were concerned about climate change and ‘global warming’, including 48 per cent who said they were ‘very concerned’.⁵

2 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021) *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 37*, GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/beis-public-attitudes-tracker-wave-37>

3 This survey was conducted in March 2021. The department also conducted a more recent survey in the autumn of 2021 using a new ‘push to web’ methodology. This found that 85 per cent were ‘concerned’ about climate change, including 44 per cent who were ‘very concerned’ (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021, *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Net zero and climate change autumn 2021 UK*, GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1040724/BEIS_PAT_Autumn_2021_Net_Zero_and_Climate_Change.pdf). However, caution needs to be exercised in assuming that the increase in the level of concern on that registered earlier in the year reflects a change in the public mood, rather than being occasioned by the change of methodology.

4 Office for National Statistics (2021) ‘Three-quarters of adults in Great Britain worry about climate change’, ONS website, 5 November 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/threequartersofadultsingreatbritainworryaboutclimatechange/2021-11-05>

5 Ipsos MORI (2021) ‘Ipsos MORI August 2021 Political Monitor’, conducted 30 July – 9 August. <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/high-levels-concern-about-climate-change-scepticism-whether-britons-will-change-behaviours>

Moreover, even though it has long been relatively widespread, the level of concern seems to have increased during the course of the past decade. Back in June 2012, the BEIS tracker survey reported that just 65 per cent were concerned about climate change, with just 20 per cent ‘very concerned’ – well down on the figures of 80 per cent and 33 per cent that pertain now. Equally, in 2013, Ipsos MORI⁶ found that a relatively modest 60 per cent were concerned about climate change, with just 21 per cent ‘very concerned’ – now, as we have seen, those figures are 85 per cent and 48 per cent respectively. The BEIS surveys suggest much of the increase in concern occurred between 2017 (when 71 per cent said they were ‘concerned’, including 23 per cent ‘very concerned’) and 2019 (when the proportion saying they were ‘concerned’ first reached the 80 per cent figure at which it stands now, and 35 per cent said they were ‘very concerned’). More recently, in contrast, the level of concern has changed little.

There is, however, rather less widespread acceptance that climate change is either ‘entirely’ or ‘mainly’ caused by human activity. In the most recent BEIS survey, 51 per cent expressed that view, although only one in ten said that it is ‘entirely’ or ‘mainly’ caused by natural processes – one in three (33 per cent) stated it is caused partly by both. To that extent, the concern and worry that people have about climate change is not necessarily translated into acceptance that the solution lies in changing human behaviour. Here too, though, attitudes have shifted considerably during the course of the past decade. Back in 2012, only 38 per cent said the warming of the climate was ‘entirely’ or ‘mainly’ caused by human activity; at that point the most popular view, held by 42 per cent, was that it was occasioned by both human activity and natural processes.

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But to what extent is this mood reflected across society? Climate change is often portrayed as very much a concern of younger people, an impression that is reinforced by the typical age profile of those seen demonstrating about the issue and the forceful activism of Greta Thunberg, who only turned 19 at the beginning of the year. Yet attitudes towards climate change do not always differ between the generations to anything like the

6 Ibid

extent often implied by this image. True, the most recent BEIS survey found that 57 per cent of those aged 16–24 believe that climate change is entirely or mainly caused by human activity, whereas, at 44 per cent, the equivalent figure is somewhat lower among those aged 65 and over.⁷ Moreover, in the ONS Lifestyles and Opinion Survey, at 34 per cent, the proportion of younger people aged 16–24 who said they were ‘very worried’ about the impact of climate change was rather higher than the equivalent figure of 24 per cent among those aged 70 and over.

However, even in these instances, younger people do not stand apart from all other age groups. In the ONS survey, 30 per cent of those aged 50–69 said they were ‘very worried’ about climate change, only a little below the 34 per cent among those aged 16–24. In the BEIS survey, 52 per cent of those aged 45–54 said that climate change is entirely or mainly caused by human activity – only a little below the proportion among the youngest age group (57 per cent). On other questions and in other surveys, young and old hold similar views. Again, in the BEIS survey, at 33 per cent, the proportion of young people aged 16–24 who said they were ‘very concerned’ about climate change was matched by the 34 per cent of older people aged 65 and over who expressed that view. Ipsos MORI too found that while 51 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds were ‘very concerned’ about climate change, so also were 56 per cent of those aged 65 and over.⁸ Concern about climate change at least is not the subject of a battle between the generations.

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Protecting the environment is also often thought to be a priority of relatively comfortable middle-class voters who have enjoyed a university education.⁹ However, in the BEIS survey, at 38 per cent, the proportion of those in the most middle-class jobs who said they were ‘very concerned’ about climate was only a little above the 30 per cent figure among other respondents. Ipsos MORI’s poll finds hardly any difference at all. There,

7 See also Craig S and Paynel O (2021) *Public Attitudes towards Climate Change in Great Britain: Before and since COVID19*, NatCen Social Research. <https://natcen.ac.uk/media/2064938/Public-attitudes-to-climate-change-in-Great-Britain.pdf>

8 Ipsos Mori (2021)

9 Inglehart R (1971), ‘The silent revolution in Europe: intergenerational change in post-industrial societies’, *American Political Science Review*, 65 (4): 991-1017.

though, is some evidence of somewhat higher levels of concern among university graduates.¹⁰ According to Ipsos MORI, 56 per cent of graduates are ‘very concerned’ about climate change, compared with 44 per cent of non-graduates. Meanwhile, in a survey Savanta ComRes conducted for King’s College London in August 2021,¹¹ 35 per cent of those with a degree agreed strongly that ‘climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental problems are big enough problems that they justify significant changes to people’s lifestyle’, compared with 26 per cent of non-graduates. Even so, these differences might still be regarded as relatively modest.

It seems, then, that concern about climate change is relatively widespread and is to be found in most demographic groups. At the same time, many accept that human activity is at least partly responsible for the warming of the planet. That suggests the foundations are in place for climate change to be a ‘valence’ issue, where virtually everyone agrees that action needs to be taken to curb the principal cause of global warming – the release of carbon into the atmosphere.

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POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

However, the fact that there is apparently relatively little demographic variation in the perceptions of the causes and potential consequences of climate change does not necessarily mean that those who vote differently largely share the same views. After all, the Conservative party has traditionally been associated with the view that entrepreneurs need to be given the freedom to manage their businesses and thus achieve the economic growth from which it is argued all benefit. Labour, in contrast, emphasises the need for collective action to protect people from the adverse consequences of the market. In so far as these stances of the parties are reflected in the views of their voters, we might anticipate that Conservative supporters are less keen than their Labour

10 See also Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39251/bsa35_climate_change.pdf

11 Savanta ComRes (2021) ‘King’s College, public polling – August 2021’, London, 2-9 August 2021. <https://comresglobal.com/polls/kings-college-london-public-polling-august-2021/>

counterparts on government intervention to limit carbon emissions that might be thought to have an adverse impact on economic activity.

Indeed, there is evidence that Conservative and Labour supporters differ in their attitudes towards climate change. Those who voted Conservative in 2019 are less likely than those who backed Labour to express a high level of concern about climate change. Ipsos MORI found that while two-thirds of Labour voters (67 per cent) said that they were ‘very concerned’ (as were 62 per cent of those who backed the Liberal Democrats), only one in three Conservative supporters (33 per cent) took the same view. Similarly, in three polls conducted last autumn, YouGov found on average that 43 per cent of Labour voters (and 40 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters) were ‘very worried’ about climate change, whereas only 14 per cent of Conservative supporters said that they were that concerned. Meanwhile, as we might also anticipate, the Savanta ComRes poll for King’s College London in August 2021 found that Conservative voters (40 per cent) are less likely than Labour supporters (60 per cent) to say that ‘environmental concerns should be prioritised over economic growth’.

So, despite the relative lack of demographic variation in concern about climate change – and, indeed, despite the importance that is being attached to the issue by the current Conservative leadership (although not necessarily uncontroversially¹²) – there is still a difference of outlook between the supporters of Britain’s two main parties on the issue. Parties do not, of course, always respond to the preferences of their supporters, but to some degree at least they have an incentive to do so – and it is one that could potentially see the parties take somewhat different stances on the issue.

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WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Still, there are many different ways in which climate change can be tackled by government. It can regulate economic activity, subsidise the transition to lower-carbon alternatives, tax goods and services that produce high levels of emissions, and even ban products that are bad for the environment. We might anticipate that some of these are more popular and less contentious than others. Relatively few people are likely to object to regulations that

12 See Ivers C (2022) ‘Bereft without Brexit, the Tories have a new bone to fight over: net zero’, *Sunday Times*, 16 January. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bereft-without-brexit-the-tories-have-a-new-bone-to-fight-over-net-zero-j9dv0szq7>

Table 1. Attitudes towards policies to tackle climate change

| | % support | % oppose | % support | |
|--|-----------|----------|--------------|--------|
| | | | 2019 vote | |
| | | | Conservative | Labour |
| Tougher regulation of packaging | 85 | 7 | 91 | 90 |
| Tax companies with big emissions | 82 | 8 | 91 | 91 |
| Invest in British production to reduce imports | 83 | 7 | 92 | 82 |
| Subsidise making homes more energy efficient | 84 | 7 | 84 | 90 |
| Scrappage scheme – cars | 59 | 10 | 61 | 63 |
| Scrappage scheme – boilers | 57 | 9 | 57 | 63 |
| Fund electric car charging points | 47 | 15 | 47 | 54 |
| Tax longer flights more | 51 | 36 | 50 | 56 |
| Tax air fares 50% | 34 | 51 | 31 | 41 |
| Tax meat | 32 | 55 | 20 | 46 |
| Tax new clothes | 32 | 55 | 25 | 44 |
| Tax gas | 23 | 60 | 17 | 31 |
| Ban petrol and diesel cars | 49 | 38 | 38 | 68 |
| Ban gas boilers in new homes | 34 | 43 | 27 | 44 |
| Ban leisure air travel | 18 | 70 | 17 | 20 |
| Ban meat and dairy products | 12 | 80 | 7 | 19 |

Sources: YouGov/Sky, March 2021; JL Partners/Onward, August 2021; YouGov/Internal, September and November 2021.

Note: In the JL Partners/Onward poll, respondents were asked to express their support on a scale from 0 to 10. Those giving a score of 7–10 were classified as ‘support’ and those giving a score of 0–3 were classified as ‘oppose’.¹³

ensure that companies emit less carbon but which do not require individuals to change their patterns of consumption. We might expect subsidies to be more popular than taxes – and that Conservatives are especially averse to taxes. Meanwhile, banning the sale of certain goods might depend on the popularity of those goods, but, it is, perhaps, an approach that is generally less likely to be supported by Conservative voters who dislike government intervention.

13 Blagden J, Like A and Tanner W (2021) *Thin Ice: Understanding voters’ support for net zero*, Onward. <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/thin-ice-attitudes-to-net-zero-onward.pdf>

Table 1, which draws on the evidence of four different polls conducted during 2021, shows the level of support and opposition among voters as a whole towards examples of all four of these types of governmental action. At the same time, it compares the level of support for each of them among those who voted Conservative at the 2019 general election with that among those who supported Labour. It shows that in many respects our expectations are fulfilled.

At the top of the table we can see that measures that affect companies rather than individuals are near universally supported, even though they might involve costs that could eventually be passed on to the consumer. Given the high levels of support, this inevitably means that these policies are not a source of division between Conservative and Labour, albeit that the idea of encouraging more manufacturing at home to avoid the carbon emissions potentially associated with imports is particularly appealing to Conservative supporters.

The second block of items in the table covers various ways of providing individuals with financial incentives to switch to more energy-efficient ways of going about their lives. Subsidising the cost of making people's homes more energy efficient is as popular as our various items focused on companies. Government-funded scrappage schemes for replacing a petrol or diesel vehicle with an electronic one – or to install a heat pump or hydrogen boiler in place of a gas boiler – are also relatively popular and there are relatively few differences between Conservative and Labour voters. Much the same is true of spending tax revenues on helping fund the installation of charging points for electric cars.

A rather different picture begins to emerge, however, when we look at attitudes towards increasing taxes in order to discourage consumer behaviour associated with higher emissions. True, it seems that many voters are willing to contemplate increasing taxes on long-haul flights, but a large tax hike on all air fares is only backed by around one in three. Much the same is true of taxing meat products or new clothes, while fewer than one in four contemplate the possibility of increasing taxes on gas. Despite the widespread levels of concern about climate change, voters are decidedly reluctant to accept the stick of higher prices rather than the carrot of subsidies.

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Moreover, we now begin to see a difference in the attitudes of Conservative and Labour voters. Although these proposals are by no means popular with

most Labour voters, more than two in five support the taxation of meat and new clothes, whereas only a fifth and a quarter of Conservative supporters, respectively, back these ideas. The relative reluctance of Conservative voters to contemplate tax increases¹⁴ is, then, also evident in the climate change debate.

Meanwhile, banning the sale of items is also relatively controversial. True, nearly half back a ban on the production and sale of petrol and diesel cars, perhaps because people think that electric cars provide an alternative – certainly in the same poll only 14 per cent supported a ban on all cars. But rather more people oppose a ban on the installation of gas boilers in new homes while few indeed are willing to support a ban on air travel for leisure purposes or a ban on the sale of meat and dairy products. And while these last two items are so unpopular that, once again, Conservative and Labour voters are largely at one on the issue, in the case of banning petrol and diesel cars or the installation of boilers in new homes, Conservative voters are less likely to be in favour. Indeed, it seems that the future of the internal combustion engine is a particular dividing line between the two sets of voters.

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So, the widespread concern about climate change does not necessarily translate into consensus for measures designed to address the issue. Voters are seemingly willing for economic activity to be regulated so that fewer emissions are produced and are ready to accept subsidies that will enable them to switch to less carbon-generating forms of energy. However, they are reluctant to be taxed to save the planet, and are not necessarily willing to see carbon-generating products removed from the market – at least in the absence of an acceptable alternative.

Meanwhile, there are some notable differences between Conservative and Labour voters. Conservative voters are markedly less likely to support higher taxes on carbon-generating forms of consumption, while they are also less inclined to support bans on the production and sale of goods. The issue of climate change has the potential to reflect and reinforce the traditional

14 Curtice J (2010) ‘Thermostat or weather vane? How the public has reacted to New Labour government’, in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Phillips M, Clery E and Butt S (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 26th report*, Sage Publications.

division between Conservative and Labour about how best to manage economic activity.

THE NUCLEAR QUESTION

The role that could and should be played by nuclear power is an issue of particular controversy in the debate about how to tackle climate change. Nuclear power potentially provides a means of generating low carbon energy – but it produces highly radioactive waste for which, at present at least, the only solution is to bury it deep underground, while there is also a risk of radioactive contamination of the environment if a nuclear reactor malfunctions. Indeed, these latter risks have meant that many environmental activists who are concerned about climate change are also opposed to nuclear power.¹⁵ However, given it might be able to fill the gap in the supply of energy created by moving away from coal and gas, nuclear power might be thought a relatively attractive option by voters, such as Conservative supporters, who are concerned to minimise any potential economic damage that might arise from attempts to limit climate change.

Table 2 shows the results of recent polling on attitudes towards nuclear power, and how support for its use differs between Conservative and Labour supporters. All three polls present a picture of a public that is both divided and in many cases ambivalent about its use. YouGov found in March that slightly more opposed than supported the building of nuclear reactors, but at the same time around one in four (26 per cent) said they

Table 2. Attitudes to nuclear power

| | % Support | % Oppose | % support | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----|
| | | | 2019 Vote | |
| | | | Con | Lab |
| Build more nuclear reactors | 35 | 39 | 42 | 34 |
| Need more nuclear power stations | 37 | 25 | 48 | 32 |
| Subsidise more nuclear power | 35 | 21 | 40 | 37 |

Sources: YouGov/Sky, March 2021; JL Partners/Onward, August 2021; JL Partners/Daily Mail, October 21. See also note to table 1.

¹⁵ Corner A, Venables D, Spence A, Poortinga W, Dermski C and Pidgeon N (2011) ‘Nuclear power, climate change and energy security: exploring British public attitudes’, *Energy Policy*, 39(9): 4823–4833

did not know. In contrast two other polls, both conducted by JL Partners, found rather more in favour than against; however, in one instance 38 per cent either said that neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposition that ‘the UK needs more nuclear power stations’ or that they did not know, while in the other, as many as 44 per cent gave a score of between four and six out of 10 to reflect their view on the proposition that taxes should be used to ‘subsidise the building of nuclear power stations in the UK’. Meanwhile, a similar picture was painted by another YouGov poll in September, which found that 34 per cent believe that nuclear power should play a major role in attempts to reduce the carbon footprint of electricity generation, and only 12 per cent that it should not play any role at all – while 31 per cent said it should play a minor role and 21 per cent did not know.

Given that Conservative and Labour voters tend to diverge on climate change policies where the public as a whole are split, we should perhaps not be surprised that there are indications that the two sets of supporters diverge on nuclear power too. However, whereas Conservative supporters are less likely to embrace divisive policies that involve taxing or banning goods, they are rather more inclined than Labour voters to be in favour of nuclear power. True, this divide is not apparent in the responses to a question about subsidising nuclear power (but we have seen that subsidies do not divide the two sets of voters on other issues). However, it is apparent on both the other two items in Table 2, and, indeed, on the proposition that nuclear power should play a major role in reducing the carbon footprint of electricity generation. Just 27 per cent of Labour voters support this stance, compared with 45 per cent of Conservative supporters.

The difference of outlook between Conservative and Labour supporters on climate change does not simply extend to one group being rather keener than the other on some of the measures that could be taken. Conservative voters, who otherwise appears less accepting of some possible approaches emerge as relatively willing to embrace nuclear power. If the views of their supporters are a guide, there is scope for the parties to disagree not only on how much should be done to mitigate climate change but also on what should be done.

“they are reluctant to be taxed to save the planet”

CONCLUSION

Despite the widespread concern about climate change and the role that human activity is playing in the warming of the planet, we should not assume that the issue is simply going to be a ‘valence’ issue in British politics. Despite the relative lack of demographic variation in attitudes towards climate change, Conservative voters are both less likely than Labour supporters to be concerned or worried about climate change and less willing to see taxation and the banning of products to be deployed as a strategy for reducing carbon emissions. Yet at the same time they are more likely to back the use of nuclear power. There is, it seems, scope for the parties to take different positions on the priority given to climate change and on the measures that should be taken to tackle it.

This should not be surprising. For the debate about how to address climate change is one that in many respects is but another instance of the long-standing debate between ‘left’ and ‘right’ about how best to run a market economy. Those on the right look to a low-tax economy that prioritises economic growth, while those on the left prefer a more highly taxed society that protects people from immediate harm. While there might now be a scientific consensus about climate change,¹⁶ this will not necessarily translate into political consensus about the action that should be taken to mitigate it.

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¹⁶ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2014) *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis report: Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (core writing team, Pachauri RK and Meyer LA (eds)), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>