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Temperatures Rising? Avoiding Division on Net Zero

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Our Future of Britain initiative seeks to reinvigorate progressive politics to meet the challenges the country faces in the decades ahead. Our experts and thought leaders will set out a bold, optimistic policy agenda across six pillars: Prosperity, Transformative Technology, Net Zero, Community, Public Services and Britain in the World.

Executive Summary

As action on climate change becomes ever more urgent, it requires ever greater public action. The next stage of the transition to net-zero emissions demands changes to the vehicles we drive, the way we heat our homes and our choices as consumers. Broad public support will be critical. But while public concern and support for action are at an all-time high – a high that has proven resilient to both the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis – cracks are appearing in the political consensus.

Maintaining a broad coalition of support is essential for both the success and cost of tackling climate change. The net-zero transition cannot be delivered through government decree or public-sector action alone. Reaching net zero requires rapid innovation and the mobilisation of vast amounts of capital – both on a scale that can only be delivered by the market economy. This approach has already led to green revolutions that have exceeded expectations in solar and wind energy, batteries and electric cars.

These successes were driven by different combinations of entrepreneurship, policy and public support. But they were all underpinned by one thing: confidence. This is the key component of change and the more confident markets are about where we are going, the faster and the cheaper it will be to get there. Conversely, uncertainty creates huge problems. It leaves markets dithering, trying to tentatively pick a profitable path through divergent public opinion, climate science and government policy – instead of being able to drive forwards.

Confidence is key, but it is also fragile. It relies on a degree of consensus that can be hard to attain in modern politics and even harder to maintain. The end of Boris Johnson's tenure as prime minister and the risk of net zero becoming a political football in the contest for a new Conservative Party leader may have ramifications for years to come, irrespective of the outcome. That the commitment to net zero is being openly challenged by would-be leaders only serves to undermine the confidence that has been carefully nurtured over the last few years.

The reality is that net zero is the solution to our current energy crisis, not the cause. It is not simply domestic policy, but the result of global agreement. Commitment to net zero will be increasingly

important to Britain's standing in the world, from our diplomatic influence to our ability to trade. Those seeking to undermine it may be successful in delaying the transition but they cannot hold back the tide. And with delay will come higher costs, missed opportunities and a prolonged crisis.

So, how can we maintain broad support in the face of these threats? We know that climate concern is on the rise, yet we know little about the underlying reasons for concern among people and what they think on policies to address this issue. We know even less about how these concerns vary across different demographics. Maintaining political and public consensus requires a deeper understanding of these factors, particularly in the face of rising challenges – from the cost-of-living crisis to the UK's changing post-Brexit political landscape.

To examine this, we conducted a survey among a representative sample of around 2,000 members of the British public in March 2022. Our previous report, *Polls Apart? Mapping the Politics of Net Zero,* found that while concern about climate change was widespread and rising, there was an emerging gap between people with culturally liberal "open" and culturally conservative "closed" values. This values divide was strongly reflected in the Brexit referendum and the 2019 general election and is therefore a potential fault line of the net-zero consensus. We have focused on understanding how underlying concerns on climate change differ between these groups, what risks to the consensus they may imply and what progressive politicians can do about it.

Key Findings

- **Consensus on concern.** There is a lot of common ground: more than **80 per cent** of the public is somewhat or very concerned about climate change. This has been sustained throughout the pandemic, the current cost-of-living crisis and across almost all groups of voters.
- **Resonating risks.** Direct impacts like habitat and species loss motivate **four times** as many respondents as indirect benefits like green jobs and UK global leadership. Across the political spectrum, voters are primarily concerned about the direct and local impacts of climate change on their children and grandchildren, species, the weather and habitats.
- **Cost implications.** There are differences across the open-closed divide on costs and behavioural changes that will prove difficult for policymakers. Those holding culturally closed values are almost **twice** as likely to be concerned about personal costs than those holding culturally open values. But the reverse is true for concerns on distributional impacts.
- **Divided on diet.** Respondents holding more culturally open values were relatively more comfortable with the action of eating less meat, compared to other climate actions. The same is emphatically not true of closed-value (or middle-value) respondents; **25 per cent** of whom (15 per cent for those with middle values) said they were relatively uncomfortable with reducing their meat consumption than said they were relatively comfortable.

- **Pessimism problem.** While there is broad acceptance on the role that state intervention and new technologies will play, there are worrying signs of defeatism as the public doesn't believe that governments, in the UK and around the world, will follow through on their promises or that their policies will solve climate change. Only **25 per cent** of respondents believe that the UK will achieve net zero by 2050, yet this is twice the amount who believe that China or other less-developed countries will achieve it.

There remain considerable risks of division and defeatism in public attitudes. Risks that could easily escalate and set back support, undermine confidence and ultimately undo the consensus around climate action and net zero.

Avoiding this dynamic should be the primary concern of policymakers and politicians committed to making net zero a reality. We propose six recommendations on how to build and maintain a broad consensus for climate action:

1. **The public urgently need reliable, impartial and practical information.** The UK government must do more to ensure the public has good information. Its response to Covid-19 and our proposed Home Energy Service provide potential models.
2. **Public dialogue and demonstration are essential to consent.** More work is required to ensure the public can see the benefits and feedback their concerns. Demonstration, piloting and deliberative public engagement are critical methods for embedding support, improving the approach and finding out what works.
3. **Government must provide an honest but optimistic vision of net zero.** While the scope of climate change is daunting, there is reason and a need for optimism. Technology and global cooperation are moving quickly in the right direction and a positive narrative will help combat defeatism about the scope of the problem.
4. **Policies should target multiple benefits but not hide behind secondary ones.** Policies and messaging should be targeted at people's primary environmental concerns and aspirations, not be hidden behind claims of green jobs and global leadership.
5. **Politicians cannot avoid discussions on costs and fairness.** The government needs to take a clear position on costs and its approach to fairness. This should include the renewed debate about the role for borrowing in funding the costs of the net-zero transition. Silence is likely to lead to assumptions that costs are worse than reality.
6. **Divisive issues require pragmatic, not purist positions.** Policymakers should communicate clear positions on issues that concern less supportive closed and middle-values voters, even if this means ruling out action on the most divisive issues, like meat consumption.

Introduction

Even through two years of a global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis, voter concern about climate change is at its highest-ever levels and shows no sign of abating. Despite the difficult conditions posed by the current energy crisis, there also appears to be a broad and resilient political consensus around net zero as a target. Although the recent Conservative Party leadership campaign has seen that consensus publicly challenged, it does appear to be holding.

But despite this, the government has struggled to convert climate targets into meaningful policy, especially beyond the electricity system. There are genuine difficulties with ambitious action, which sceptics often cite as reasons to go slow: it's too expensive, it's hard to know what to do and individual action feels futile – especially given the global scope of the problem. The reality of getting to net zero means that policymakers face difficult choices without certainty or foresight about what works.

This is a major challenge because successful climate action relies on the ability to create confidence. Confidence to invest, confidence to innovate and confidence to act are the essential components of a market-driven transition. And confidence, in turn, requires certainty and stability. The higher the risk of division over net zero, the higher the costs of transition will be – from the cost of the capital required to build a new wind farm or nuclear plant, to the speed and scale of innovation in new electric vehicles and heating technologies, to the consumer demand for greener products that underpin economies of scale and bring down prices.

Without confidence that the public is onboard and the political consensus will hold, inertia will take the place of progress. We will end up in a damaging cycle where lack of consensus leads to low confidence, driving higher costs, which further erodes consensus and confidence.

But such cycles can work in reverse. As we have seen in the power sector, confident government leadership and global cooperation can lead to huge investment and massive innovation, bringing the cost of renewable technology down faster and further than anyone thought possible, leading to governments setting even more ambitious targets. These are the conditions we need to strive for across the net-zero transition. But they will not always be easy to achieve.

To make matters harder, political coalitions have been shifting in recent years, with realignment of voters and within major political parties. Politicians may be less secure in understanding how different types of policies will play to their electorate. While the primary axis of political competition in previous decades was a left-right economic divide, in the wake of divisions over European integration, immigration and ultimately the Brexit referendum, cultural issues have moved to the forefront of British politics. This

results in a widening divide between those holding liberal, cosmopolitan, open values and those holding more conservative, nationalistic, closed ones.

In our previous report *Polls Apart*, we found that cultural values had become central to climate-change attitudes, with those holding closed attitudes being less likely to be concerned about climate change and to support actions to address it, than those holding open attitudes. Nevertheless, voters across the values spectrum still supported climate action.

But are voters across the values spectrum concerned about climate change for the same reasons? Are they more concerned about today's weather or their grandchildren's future? Do they care about green jobs or local habitats? Are they concerned about the costs to themselves or the world's poorest countries? And do they trust governments at home and abroad to follow through on their climate commitments?

To investigate these issues, we commissioned a survey through JL Partners. We polled a representative sample of just over 2,000 people living in England, Scotland and Wales in March 2022. We asked approximately a dozen questions designed to identify the underlying motivations behind concern, both about climate change and climate policy, as well as a variety of questions on demographics, voting behaviour and cultural/economic values.

If people with different values have different reasons for concern about climate change or different anxieties regarding climate policy, this may impede policymakers' ability to sustain the cross-party coalition that will be necessary to make the difficult adjustments. In the worst-case scenario, disagreement over the reasons for action and types of action could cause policymakers to pursue divisive policies and messaging, which would draw climate policy into the fractious political-culture wars. With that, each side could retreat to its extremes, with the left pursuing an anti-growth, anti-markets approach to green policies and the right potentially dropping the ambition to decarbonise altogether. This could be a death knell to the confidence that net-zero transition requires.

Avoiding this scenario requires a greater understanding about the nature of climate concern, the extent of support for action and the fault lines that risk dividing us. With the help of the latest polling, this paper explores these fault lines and attempts to shed some light on how policymakers may start to bridge them.

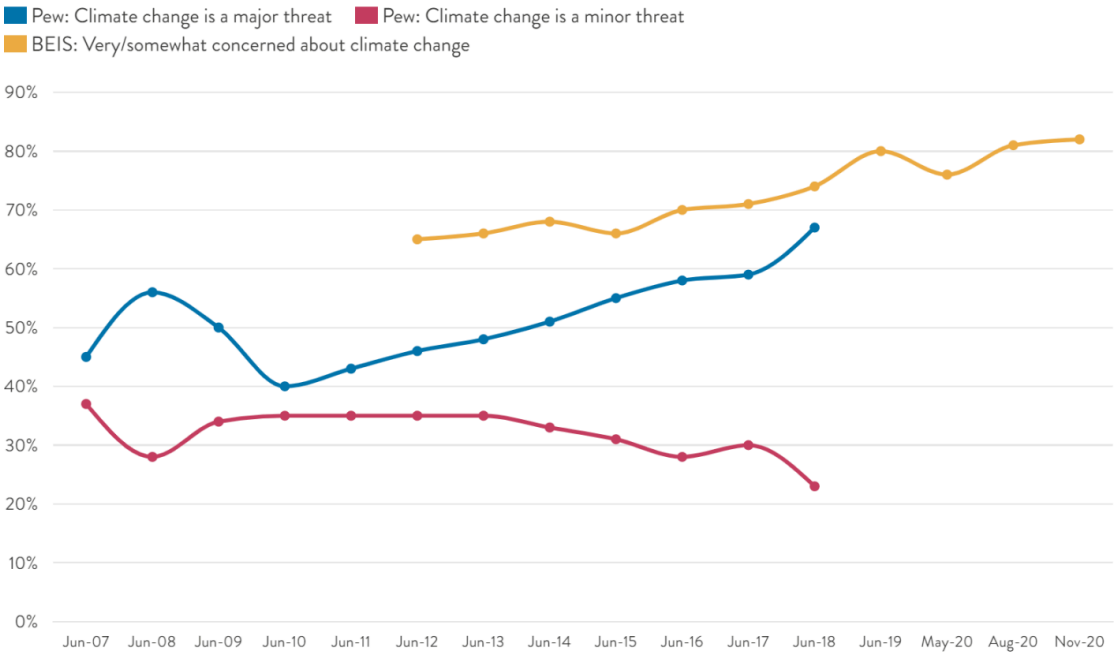
Common Ground: Concerns About Climate Change

Much has been said about the public's concern over climate change. On one side of the debate, it is argued there is clear, almost universal concern and that more ambitious policy is therefore a political no-brainer. On the other hand, it is noted that concern about climate change does not mean the public supports the likely costs of the net-zero transition and that support will decline as the costs become more apparent. Both arguments have their merits, making political judgement difficult. We must drill down deeper to understand what is driving concern, what we agree on and what divides us.

In this section, we look at what sits beneath the top level of concern: why people are concerned and how do they think government should respond? Of course, these details can differ across the population, and we examine them later, but there is an encouraging amount that unites us.

Concern is high and here to stay. When we published *Polls Apart* in March 2021, we wrote that concern about climate change has been increasing over time and that, as shown in Figure 1, this growing concern did not diminish through the Covid-19 pandemic. This was somewhat surprising because concern about climate change dropped sharply and did not recover for several years after the 2008 financial crisis.

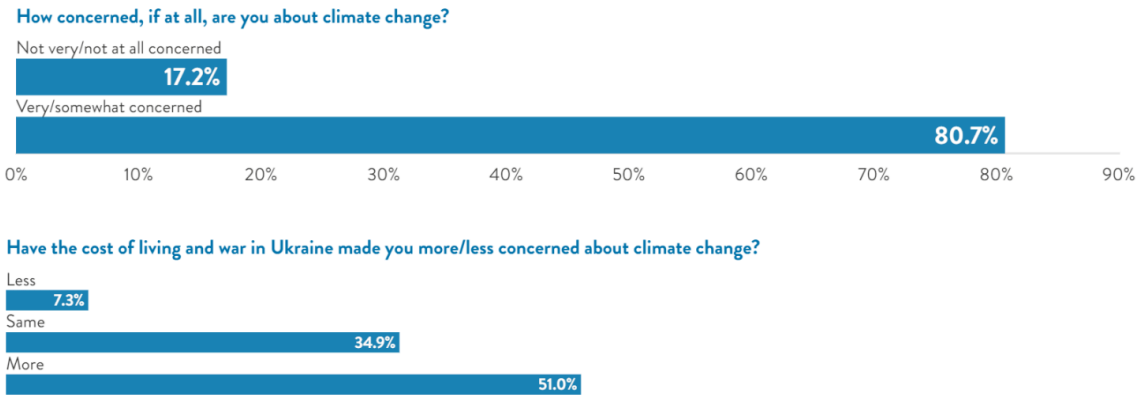
Figure 1 – Levels of concern about climate change



Source: Polls Apart, Pew Global Attitudes, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Public Attitudes Tracker

Concern is resilient to external shocks. A year on, we can see that this resilience has continued against the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis and Russia's war in Ukraine. Concern about climate change is anything but fickle, remaining over 80 per cent. When we ask respondents whether the cost-of-living crisis or the war in Ukraine has affected their level of concern about climate change, a majority said these events had made them *more* concerned about climate change. So, public concern is high and, judging by its resilience to two major shocks, likely to stay high.

Figure 2 – Concern about climate change has increased among the majority of polling respondents since the cost-of-living crisis and war in Ukraine

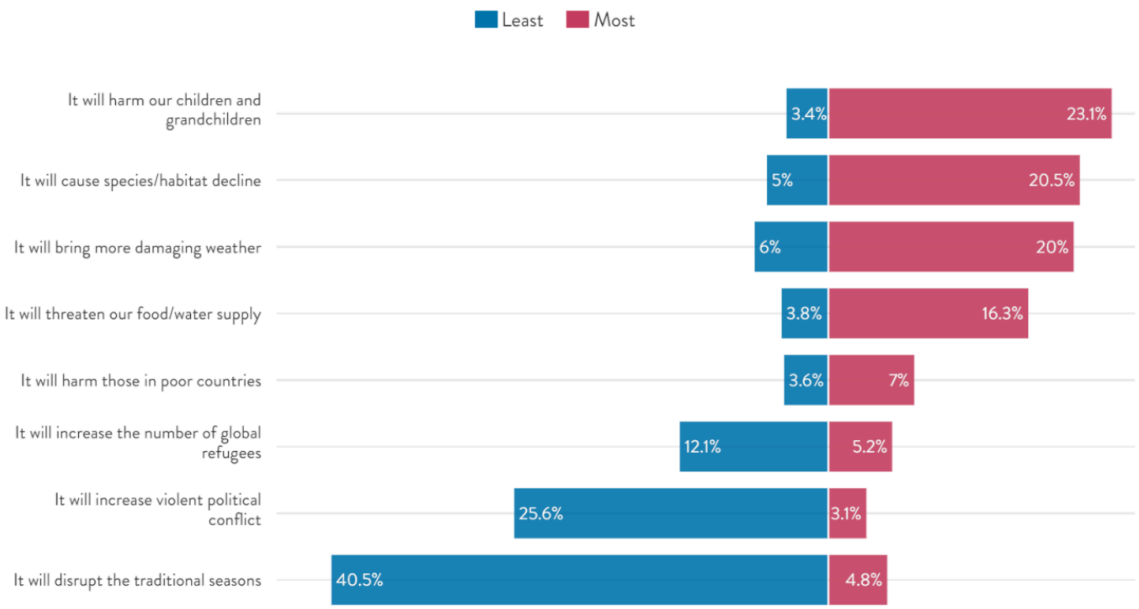


Source: JL Partners

To get a better sense of what concerns people, we asked them to identify the "most important" and "least important" causes for climate concern from a list. The more people select something as "most important" and the fewer as "least important", the more salient that cause for concern is (and vice versa). More telling, which we discuss in the next section, is when lots of people select something as "most important" but lots of people also select it as "least important". This suggests that the cause for concern is divisive.

Concern about climate change is personal and close to home. Figure 3, which plots the percentage of respondents listing a concern as either the "most important" or "least important" about climate change, shows that the greatest concerns are about direct impacts that hit close to home, such as the effects on respondents' children and grandchildren, the decline in natural habitats, the increase in extreme weather, and the potential consequences on food and water supply. A high percentage of respondents listed these as the most important concerns relative to those who listed them as the least important. Conversely, more global or indirect consequences like future political conflict, refugees or the impact on poorer countries were seen as less important.

Figure 3 – Which of the following concerns about climate change do you feel is most important?

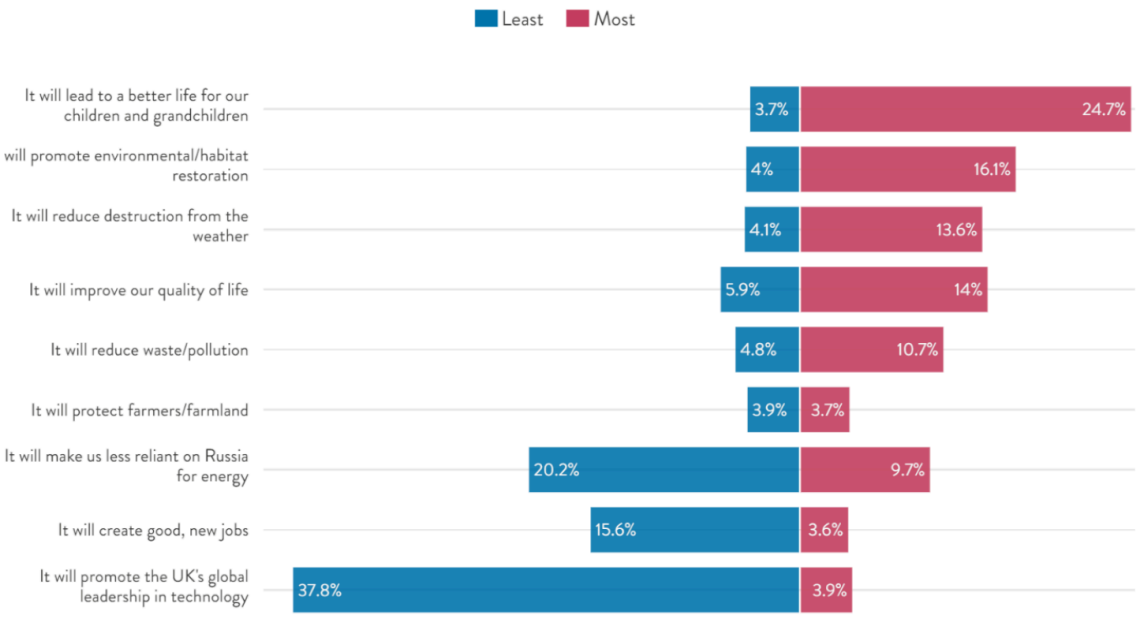


Source: JL Partners

People want solutions to the primary problem, not to secondary ones. Similarly, when we ask people to select their most and least-favoured reasons for climate-change action, we see an intuitive but often overlooked trend. As we see in Figure 4, respondents believe that action should address primary concerns – healthier natural habitats, calmer weather and a better world for their children. They care less about some of the often-touted claims of job creation or the potential for UK leadership on this issue. Interestingly, even with public support for ending imports of Russian oil and gas following the invasion of Ukraine, it fails to register as a leading motivation for action.

The message seems clear: concern about climate change is personal and close to home, and people want to feel that action is addressing these concerns directly. While it is hard to claim that UK action alone can solve climate concerns, this should not stop the direct benefits of climate action being an aspiration. A political premium should be placed on solutions that people can see and feel improve the environment they inhabit. In this context, the current trend of wrapping green policy in justifications of export opportunities, green jobs and geopolitics seem misguided.

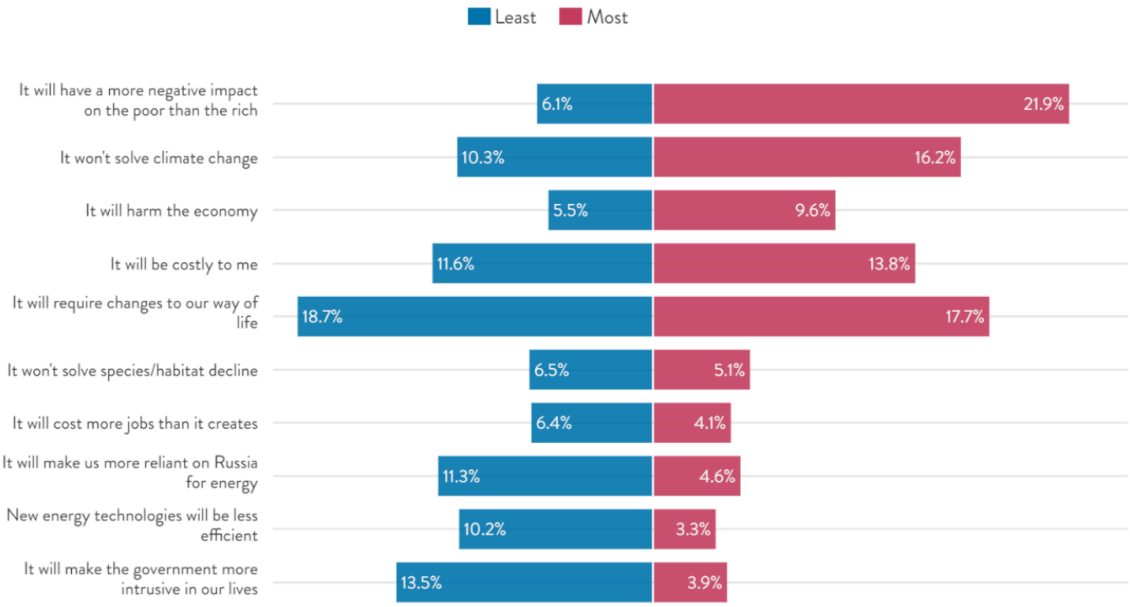
Figure 4 – What do you think is the top reason that the UK should take action to reduce climate change?



Source: JL Partners

Costs are a concern, but how they are shared is more of a concern. When we examine concerns about potential climate action as shown in Figure 5, we find that respondents are relatively comfortable with the role of state leadership, new technology and economic changes, but they are concerned about costs and their distribution. Research has found that support for action is sensitive to information on the personal cost of policies, revealing a concern that is seldom reported in polling headlines. We find there is even greater concern about the distributional impacts – in other words, how poorer households could be affected the most – of climate change and climate action (although only in a UK context).

Figure 5 – Which do you think is the top concern about the UK taking action to reduce climate change?



Source: JL Partners

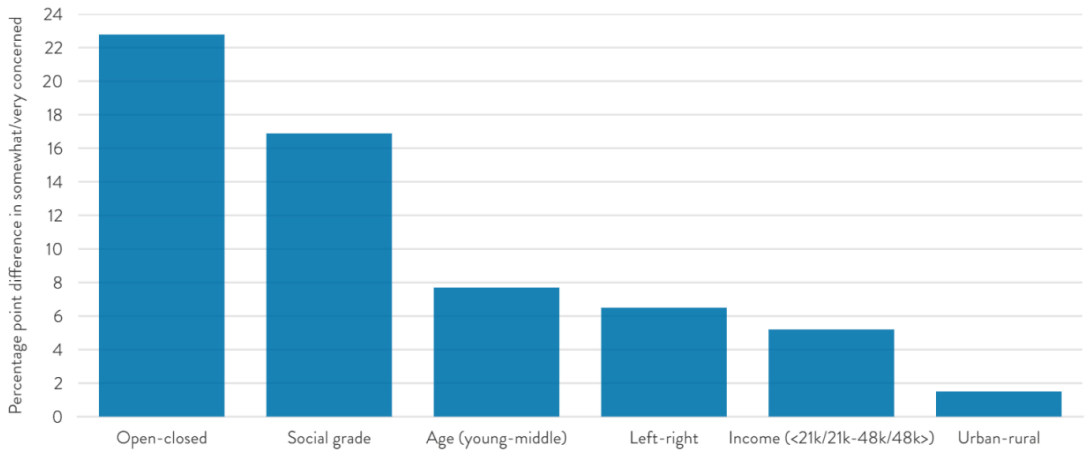
Risks of Division: Crossing the Open–Closed Divide

While concern about climate change is high and there is much that the public agrees on, the risks of division are real. Recent attempts by the likes of the campaign group Net Zero Watch and a handful of supportive MPs to pin the cost-of-living crisis on net zero have so far failed to cut through with the public, but climate progressives should not rest on their laurels. While voters are unlikely to confuse a fossil-fuel crisis for a net-zero cost, concerns about cost, fairness and the personal impact of the transition may polarise opinion. This is especially concerning if these differences fall along the cultural-values divide that was so salient in the Brexit referendum and subsequent UK general elections.

In this section, we examine the potential sources of that division. We consider how the responses to the questions in the previous section differ concerning open-closed cultural values [1], left-right economic values [2] and four demographic variables: age, income, social grade and whether the respondent lives in a city, town or village. [3] Our open-closed scale is designed to capture the respondents' degree of cultural conservatism across several salient political issues. It is closely related to and correlates highly with the liberal-authoritarian values scale, although the latter focuses on attitudes about punishment and how to raise children.

As we can see in Figure 6, [4] the open-closed gap in climate-change concern is much broader than that across the left-right divide or demographic factors, except for social grade. There is a 23 percentage-point gap in concern between open- and closed-values respondents, with 93 per cent of the former being very or somewhat concerned about climate change but only 70 per cent of the latter being somewhat or very concerned.

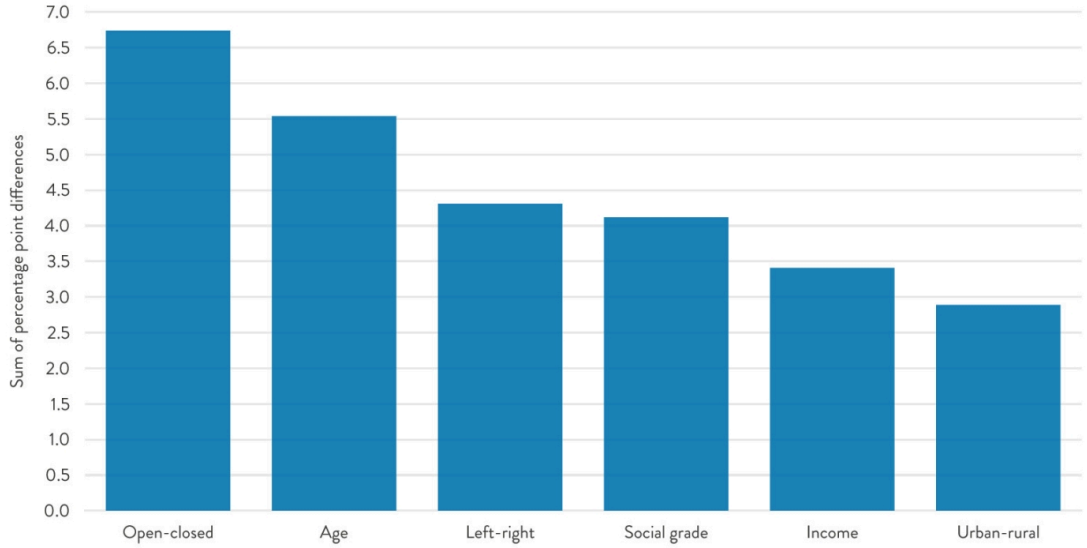
Figure 6 – Differences in climate-change concern by values and demographics



Source: JL Partners

But top-level concern only tells us so much. To take a closer look, we developed a "divisiveness score" to determine the level and subject of division in climate concern across demographic factors and values. And as shown in Figure 7, the open-closed cultural values divide is the greatest source of division.[5] In the subsequent section, we focus primarily on differences in reasons across the open-closed divide but note when there are important differences in other variables, such as age (it should be noted that division within age groups is not characterised by a simple young/old divide).

Figure 7 – Differences in responses to climate-change questions



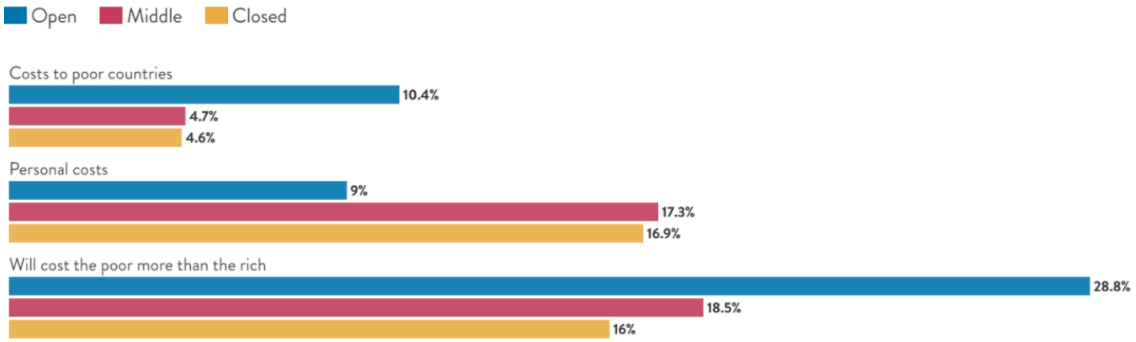
Source: JL Partners

Everyone is concerned about costs but in different ways. We found in the previous section that there were two types of concern about costs: the burden of costs on the poor and personal costs. The first

concern was shared while the latter appeared to be more divisive. We find that the open-closed divide is the source of some of this division.

In Figure 8, we take the difference between the percentage of respondents who think that a reason for concern is the "most important" and those who say it is the "least important". The percentages are all positive and thus respondents across all values groups show net concern with these different aspects of cost. But open-values respondents are more concerned about the effects of climate action on those living in poverty, both at home and abroad, while closed- and middle-values respondents are more concerned about personal costs. Distributional impacts are still among the most important concerns for middle- and closed-values respondents, but the concern is weaker than among open-values respondents.

Figure 8 – Differences in concerns about the distribution of costs



Source: JL Partners

This suggests that policymakers must be sensitive to concerns about costs and recognise that if poorer voters face significant transition costs, they may lose support from even the more fervent supporters of climate action. On the other hand, personal costs are a critical issue for those less inclined to support climate action, so policymakers need to tread carefully on policies that may be seen as increasing the cost burden on the average voter.

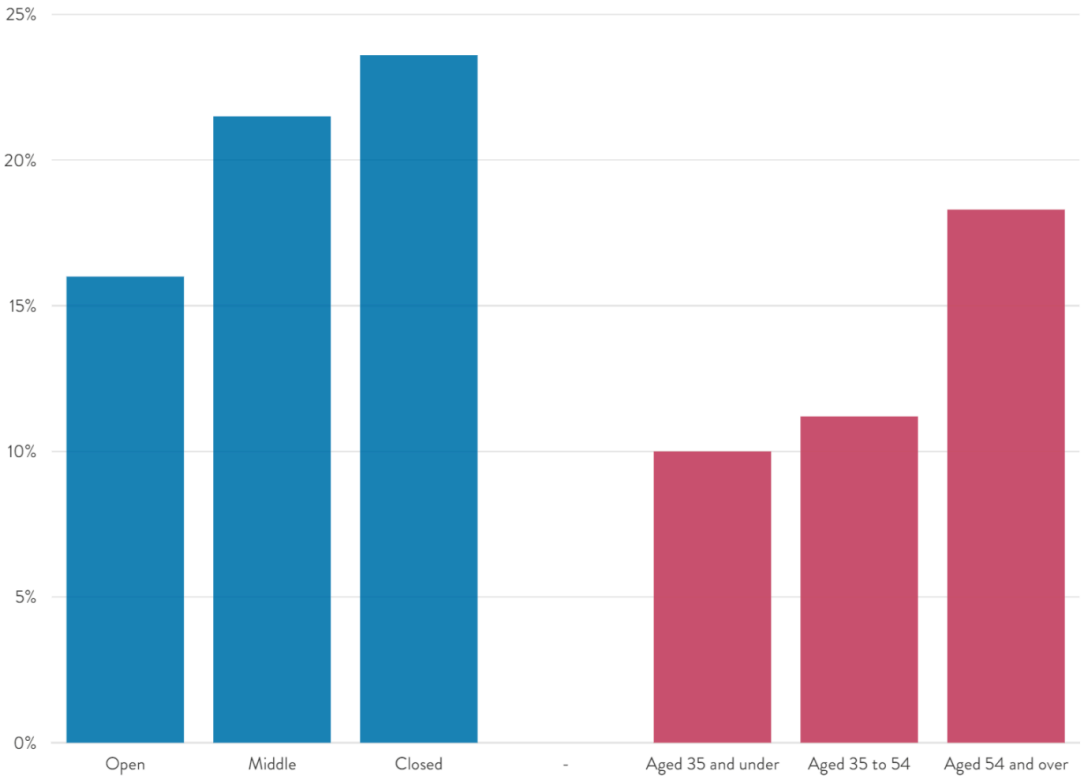
This points to a tricky balancing act. There are limits to the extent that policymakers can absorb these concerns through action on costs alone. Voters likely know this. Pretending that the costs are not there or hiding them (as some MPs have accused the government of doing in relation to policy costs levied through energy bills) is unlikely to work.

But policymakers can help themselves. First, they can minimise the costs by creating and maintaining market confidence, then make sure costs are well distributed and clearly set against the benefits, with a greater emphasis on intergenerational fairness and a considered approach on the role of government funding and borrowing.

Damaging weather is a significant motivator for closed-values voters. The weather is a serious concern around the world as countries become more prone to heat waves, flooding and destructive fires. This is the tangible face of climate change, which the public has seen more frequently in recent years.

We find substantial differences of opinion in concern about damaging weather both by cultural values and age. Perhaps out of a concern for the personal costs and impacts they will have to incur, closed-values respondents are much more concerned about damaging weather relative to other matters than open-values respondents. The same is true for older respondents relative to younger ones.

Figure 9 – Damaging weather is one of your top two concerns



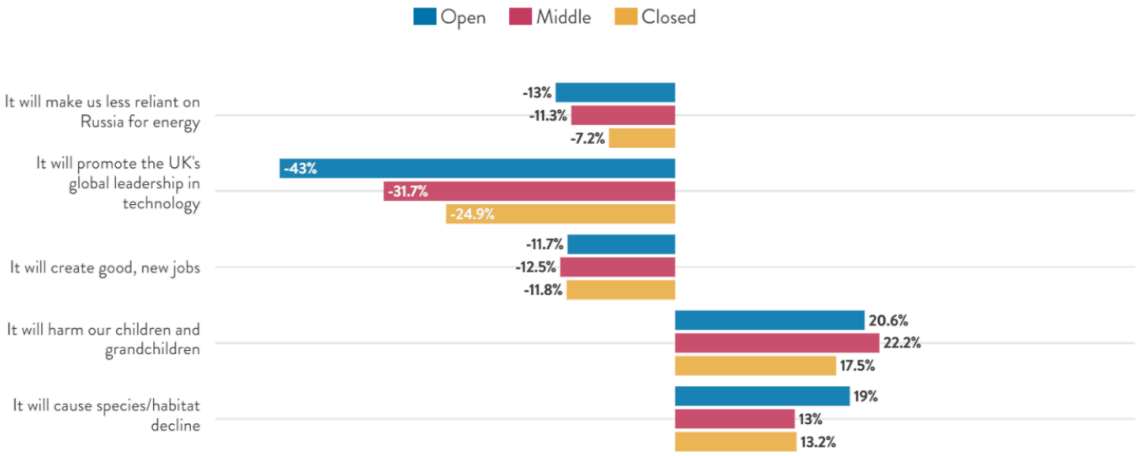
Source: JL Partners

Concern about damaging weather was the only concern that was relatively higher for closed- rather than open-values respondents. This suggests that climate action could resonate better with closed-values respondents by being positioned in the context of more extreme weather. But action to reduce UK emissions alone is unlikely to speak to these concerns directly, so policymakers should ensure that policy goes beyond mitigation and incorporates a degree of adaptation to the effects of climate change. It is one thing to say that "by insulating our homes, we can reduce our contribution to more extreme weather". It is more convincing to say that "by improving our homes, we can shield ourselves from more extreme weather while simultaneously reducing our contribution to it". It is especially likely this will resonate during periods of extreme weather, such as the heatwave in sumer 2022.

Such an approach should be more than rhetoric – by combining interventions (for example, home-cooling technologies and flood defences with home retrofit), policymakers can confer more direct benefits to sceptical voters.

Aspirational, local change will resonate with closed-values voters and keep open-values voters engaged. When it comes to the opportunities of climate action, we see issues that are close to home such as habitat restoration and children/grandchildren topping the list (Figure 10). While there is a stronger belief in the opportunity for habitat restoration among open- rather than closed- or middle-values respondents, it is the second most important for each. This echoes recent findings in British climate opinion research. But such findings contrast with existing climate messaging, which tries to bridge the divide between climate progressives and sceptics by deflecting messaging onto secondary benefits such as jobs, UK global leadership and reducing energy dependence on Russia. The reality is that all values groups share relative apathy on these issues.

Figure 10 – Concerns about climate change and climate-change action



Source: JL Partners (Note: Percentages are the difference between the percentage of those who think that a concern is the "most important" and those who think it is the "least important" reason for concern about climate change or climate-change action)

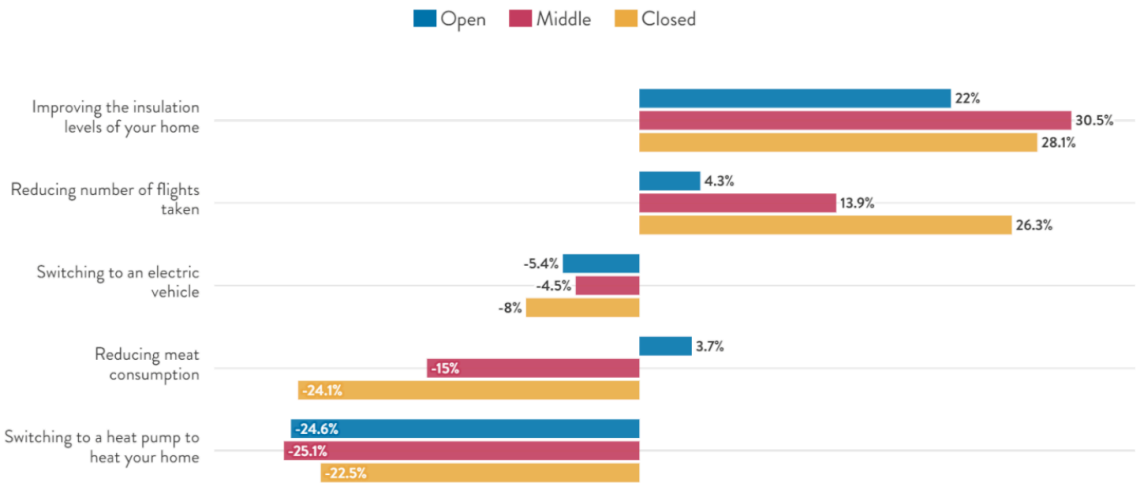
The risk is that this rhetoric drives polarisation. While we found that everyone is left cold by headlines of green jobs and UK leadership, it particularly alienates open-values voters who are anxious to hear that the government is taking ambitious action. Disguising climate action behind economic or geopolitical headlines doesn't just miss the intended target of appealing to closed-values voters, this approach also raises concerns with open-values voters about climate action not being genuine.

A more impactful approach is one that people can see and feel: quieter, cleaner roads; warmer, comfier homes; and more natural, accessible local areas. This will pay dividends with voters on both sides. But voters take little on faith and claiming such benefits will require a bolder approach to showcasing what

change can achieve. Aspiration that local climate action is about building a better world for the citizens of today and tomorrow is key.

Personal lifestyle changes require political diligence. As we noted in a previous report, future steps to address climate change will require behavioural changes from the public. Some of these behavioural changes are quite divisive, especially reducing meat consumption. As we see in Figure 11, reducing meat consumption is net positive for open-values respondents but is the least-preferred option for closed-values respondents – even compared to more expensive changes. Meanwhile, flying less is divisive in the opposite direction: open-values respondents are less comfortable with this than middle- or closed-values respondents.

Figure 11 – Which potential action are you most comfortable with?



Source: JL Partners (Note: Percentages are the difference between percentage who think that a concern is the "most important" and those thinking that it is the "least important" reason for concern about climate change or climate-change action)

This may suggest that while policies such as a meat tax should be avoided in favour of helping develop quality, low-cost meat alternatives, policymakers could be more open to pursuing policies to reduce frequent flying. Although it is far less popular with open-values respondents, their support for net zero is highest and they would likely be the most willing to make such a behavioural change. Previous surveys indicate support for graduated taxation for multiple flights taken in a year, which would "internalise" carbon costs for frequent fliers while exempting those who take the occasional flight.

Whatever policy approach is taken, divisive issues require clear policy positions. Uncertainty on issues that are divisive and strongly felt creates fertile ground for a culture war and is an open goal for anyone looking to undermine public support for net zero.

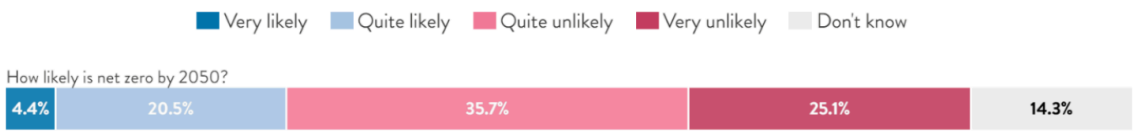
The Defeatism Challenge: Beliefs About Obstacles to Successful Action

Alongside risks of division, another aspect of the climate debate that could undermine confidence is whether the public believes that actions to reduce climate change will be effective. There are two potential issues here: the first is that the public doubt the government will follow through on its plans and the second is that even if the government does follow through, its actions will not do much to reduce climate change.

This is a problem because long-term benefits and concerns motivate voters most. We found that one of the top concerns is that domestic action alone won't solve climate change. This creates an issue of efficacy for the government's actions even if it does follow through. It also raises another problem – if we keep doing the work, but climate change keeps getting worse, will we lose faith?

Everyone is concerned about follow through on pledges. How confident is the British public that the government will follow through on its net zero by 2050 pledge? Not too confident. Only 25 per cent of respondents find this likely, with the majority finding it unlikely. But a significant percentage don't know, which suggests that although policymakers have not yet convinced them, they may be able to convince a majority of the public with the right policy and messaging.

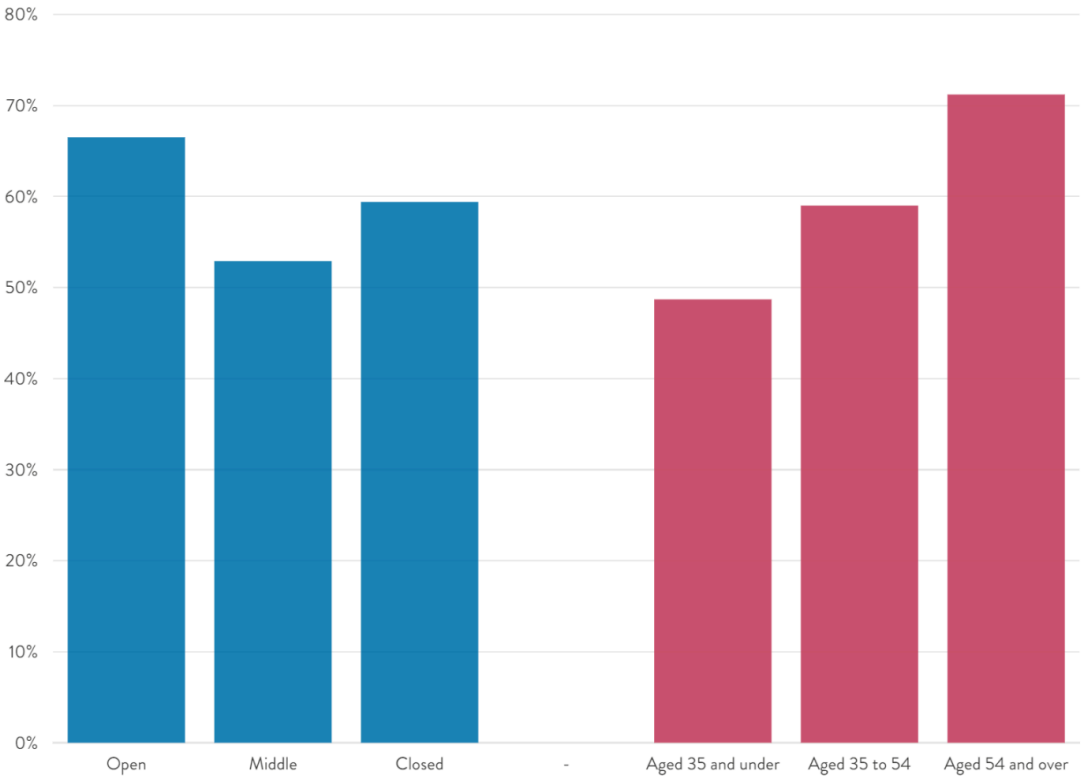
Figure 12 – How likely is net zero by 2050?



Source: JL Partners

Are these views about the UK achieving net zero by 2050 divided? Not so much by open-closed attitudes; we see in Figure 13 that a majority of open-, middle- and closed-values respondents find achieving net zero somewhat or very unlikely. We find a greater division by age, suggesting that policymakers should do more to connect with older voters.

Figure 13 – Is net zero by 2050 somewhat/very unlikely?



Source: JL Partners

Global progress matters as much as domestic progress. One of the most substantial charges from those who oppose net zero is that it doesn't really matter what the UK does. The argument runs that the UK only accounts for 1 per cent of global emissions and whether climate change will slow or not is determined by the United States, China and developing countries. By claiming that these countries are less willing to act than the UK, sceptics suggest that serious global emissions reduction will not happen.

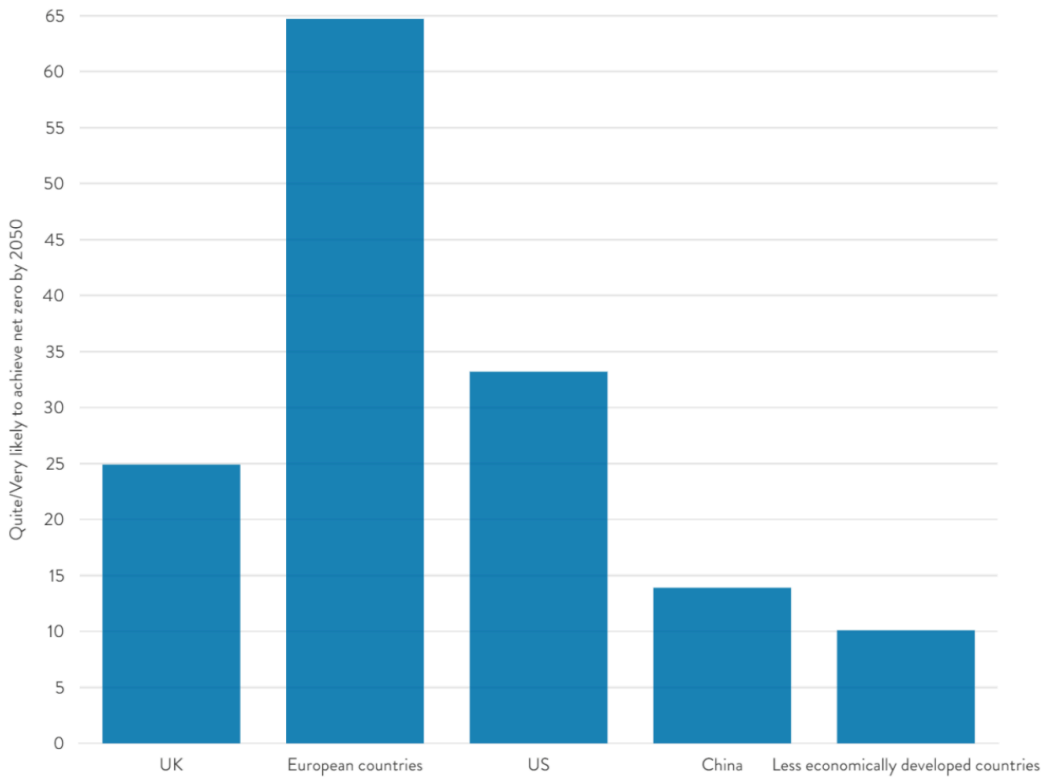
In Figure 14, we plot the percentage of respondents who think it is "very likely" or "quite likely" that different parts of the world will achieve net zero by 2050. It tells an interesting story – one in which the EU is seen as the climate leader, but the rest of the world is considered unlikely to take sufficient action.

Very few people think China or less economically developed countries will achieve net zero by 2050, which also came through in other questions as a major source of scepticism about whether climate action will work. Perhaps this is a result of an informed public knowing that China's official policy is net zero by 2060 rather than 2050, but it seems likely that a more fundamental defeatism is taking hold here. One line of argument that resonates is, "what's the point in UK action if China is building new coal plants every week?".

There may be some basis for this concern and, clearly, China's efforts will be hugely important in determining whether global action is sufficient. But the country is by far the world's leading investor in

clean energy, and as a producer of much of the goods consumed by the West, it may not be a fair or helpful characterisation.

Figure 14 – Likelihood of countries achieving net zero by 2050



Source: JL Partners

In any case, it should be concerning that the public thinks achieving net zero is unlikely, either by the UK or other countries. The upshot is a serious risk that defeatism about climate action sets in and support declines. Given the complex and costly changes we need to make to get there, such defeatism taking hold could prove fatal. Furthermore, this defeatism could fuel further division, forcing open-values voters to call for ever more extreme interventions, while closed-values voters conclude that it is an expensive lost cause.

Against this backdrop, it is little wonder that opponents of net zero are increasingly voicing their opposition about the costs of moving too fast. At a time when science is demanding acceleration, we need a countervailing narrative.

Recommendations: Picking a Path for Policy and Messaging

The public is united in their concern about climate change, which is good news for climate progressives looking to implement ambitious action. But concern about climate change is not the same as support for action. And the transition towards net zero will bring unprecedented tests of that support, especially in the face of a well-organised opposition.

The risks of public division and defeatism are genuine, especially as new and more ambitious policies are adopted. It is far from inconceivable that missteps or bad luck could send support into a downward spiral – one in which division fuels a sense of defeatism that stokes further division, quickly eroding the confidence needed to transition successfully and affordably.

For any politician or policymaker serious about achieving net zero, this risk should be first and foremost in their minds. Without overwhelming public support, no government can deliver effective change at the scale required by the net-zero ambition.

Below, we outline six recommendations that can help maintain high support even as the transition gets harder.

Recommendations

1. The public urgently need reliable, impartial and practical information.

The transition to net zero cannot work without action from the public. The media debate around net zero is characterised by misinformation and uncertainty. The public has legitimate questions about net zero. What does climate science tell us about the future? What changes will net zero require of our homes? What is causing energy bills to rise so fast? Will net zero require us to give up meat?

These questions have one thing in common: they are pivotal to public support for net zero. Support will not be maintained without clear answers to these questions. In many instances, providing the information will be a win-win as a more-informed public can make better choices. This is why, for example, we advocate a new Home Energy Service.

Information provision has its challenges and the government needs a strategy. It could learn a lot from its Covid-19 response: information campaigns, behaviour change, scientific advice and the use of public services were all successful in creating a better-informed and responsive public. The government not only enabled difficult policy, but also made it a national mission. Of course, it is important that information is

independent and that its provision does not give a sense of bias. Either a new institution or a new role for an existing institution is needed so that it can be trusted to provide transparent, impartial and objective material accessible to the public.

The Climate Change Committee's role, for instance, is critical in providing objective advice to the government, parliament and Whitehall. But the public needs it too. Crucially, better information needn't be a source of doom and gloom, but a source of pragmatic, balanced and practical information. Not everyone will use it, but by setting a gold standard of public information, the government could put a much-needed stake in the ground for public discourse.

2. Public dialogue and demonstration are essential to consent.

Information in politics is a two-way street. While policymakers must inform the public, they must also be informed themselves about the public's views on different policy options. This is especially true given that the next stage of climate action will require significant behavioural changes. The transition to net zero has so far been categorised by energy-system changes that (apart from the odd wind farm or solar roof) are largely invisible to the public. Policy has therefore been constructed through formal consultation with big industrial players.

This approach simply will not work for consumer-facing interventions like phasing out boilers or changing behaviours – interventions that will feel a lot more like social policy than economic policy or investment decisions. Countries such as France and Ireland have approached similar challenges with increased deliberative research, working with members of the public through the design and implementation of policy to understand its impacts, and their views. While recent efforts around heat pumps are a good start, this agenda must be expanded. Not only can such an approach improve design and decision-making, it can also help to legitimise difficult policy.

But better dialogue is not enough. The government will need to increasingly demonstrate value. The public wants to see policies that improve lives and reduce risks, and they need to be convinced of the benefits of an action before they take it. Piloting and demonstration are essential tools to prove that interventions work and are beneficial. But they are woefully underused. Imagine the power of a showcase net-zero town during today's energy crisis to demonstrate how we can stay warm and pay less.

3. Government must provide an honest but optimistic vision of net zero.

Positivity is a great motivator. People are more likely to contribute to solving a problem if they think it is solvable and are given concrete ways to help. Politicians can help create this through honest and aspirational visions. This is not to say that policymakers should try to ignore or explain away challenges, but they should accompany any discussion of challenges with a discussion on how they are working to solve them or how technology will enable us to better address them in the future.

One of the most important things to remember is that when it comes to emerging technologies and markets, major innovations can happen quickly. Few people had heard of the internet in 1995, but ten years later it was part of everyday life. This is likely to be the case with many net-zero technologies. Battery technologies have developed rapidly in the past few years with breakthroughs that will allow rapid charging of car batteries. There are several ways to generate renewable energy that are now significantly cheaper than their fossil-fuel equivalents, creating possibilities to transition whole sectors at a much lower cost. While we have shown that voters are wary of focusing too much on the secondary benefits of climate-change action, it is important to remind the public that there is great reason for optimism about technology, and many of these innovations will improve the lives of their children and grandchildren.

4. Policies should target multiple benefits, but not hide behind secondary ones.

Politicians may think that voters want to hear about job creation or the UK's global leadership. But these are among the least important reasons for climate-change action across the political spectrum – in fact, they turn many people off. There is no harm in talking about secondary benefits, but voters tend to be suspicious when they are positioned as the primary motivation for policy.

A better approach is to focus on policy solutions that target multiple primary concerns, particularly those that resonate across values or with voters who hold closed cultural values. Forest and marshland restoration, for example, addresses several concerns: it would reduce net emissions while at the same time restore habitats for native plants and animals, and provide a buffer against flooding and erosion. It would also restore traditional landscapes that haven't existed in some locations in generations, tapping into a conservative nostalgia that may resonate with closed-values respondents. It would allow today's children and grandchildren to enjoy them, which would resonate with all. Yet oddly, these policies lag behind the rest of the net-zero transition.

Policymakers should consider how they can bundle climate actions with other policies that the public support. For instance, try to join the dots between conservative closed-value concerns about the local environment with more contemporary concerns such as mental-health policy. Similarly, it should be possible to link climate goals like the electrification of heat and transport with closed values such as energy independence.

5. Politicians cannot avoid discussions on costs and fairness.

In their policy messaging, policymakers must honestly address the costs and changes different groups will face. They must address the concerns of open-values voters on distributional impacts (the burden on poorer households) and that of middle- and closed-values voters on personal costs. The mounting criticism among climate sceptics claims that policymakers are not honest about the costs of climate-change policy. Ignoring the issue of personal costs quickly leads to middle- and closed-values voters moving away from a progressive climate coalition. Progressive climate policymakers cannot give any latitude to the accusation that there is a conspiracy of silence about costs.

The good news is that the costs of net zero are likely to be lower than many sceptics suggest, especially when weighed against the benefits. But there are costs, and when policies impose costs on individuals and firms, policymakers must be clear about the extent and the timeframe for making personal changes, and any financial support available to make them. They must speak to different groups' concerns about the distribution of these costs. While ensuring that poorer households will receive the greatest amount of support – which is very important to open-values voters – it must not mean that everyone else is unsupported.

For example, the government's current approach to homes is potentially divisive: phasing out new oil boilers nine years before gas boilers, for instance, could prove controversial. These approaches are likely to stoke division and where possible, should be rejected in favour of more universal policies. There is broad support for helping the poorest, but distribution is best done through taxation and spending rather than through climate or energy policy.

An important consideration is the role of borrowing to fund the transition. Intergenerational fairness is at the heart of the climate debate and the public has a legitimate concern that they are paying for a transition designed to benefit future generations. While this argument is nuanced, politicians may find some common ground in finding fiscal space for decisive action.

6. Divisive issues require pragmatic, not purist, positions.

Policymakers cannot afford to shy away from some of the thornier issues because silence often drives suspicion, especially when it comes to lifestyle changes increasingly being positioned as "the next thing" by net-zero sceptics.

Achieving net zero will require changes that some people will be reluctant to make and some changes that, if forced, could backfire spectacularly. Efforts to reduce meat consumption may fall into this category. Strongly held opposition to this policy is found among closed-values respondents, so it may be better to rule out moves that restrict meat consumption rather than risk it being a source of division and opposition to net zero. The same may not be true of measures to reduce flying, where opposition from open-values respondents is less likely to signal a backlash against net zero. Here, a well-explained policy may be possible.

Similarly, politicians must not ignore concerns that UK action alone cannot tackle climate change, nor do they need to. Instead of lauding the UK as being ahead of the pack, they should concentrate on messaging that strikes a humbler and more encouraging tone. It is important to remind the public that we are acting alongside other countries as part of a global effort that can fix climate change. For example, while there may be legitimate concerns about the expansion of Chinese coal power, we should also recognise that China is the world leader in clean-energy investment. Fostering a more balanced view of international cooperation can enhance public support and avoid defeatism.

Conclusion

Public concern about climate change is at an all-time high. The Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis have not diminished this concern. But concern does not necessarily translate into support for action, especially if that action comes at an unacceptable cost or does not respond to people's anxieties. Net zero will require market confidence and public action that can only be achieved through maintaining political consensus and positive public consent.

Climate sceptics are targeting that consent, focusing on the high costs and uncertain returns of net-zero policies. Progressive policymakers must raise their game. They will need to be braver. Brave enough to engage with the public on facts and explanations, brave enough to acknowledge the challenges and the need for collaboration, and brave enough to hear what the public has to say in return.

Such an approach will not be straightforward, but it is essential. The good news is that climate change is not politics as usual, and a famously fickle electorate seems, for now, to have made up their minds. They expect to be shown the way to net zero, not the way out of it.

Footnotes

1. ^ We generate our open-closed scale from the average response to five questions in the British Election Study: (1) Young people today don't have enough respect traditional British values; (2) For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence; (3) Equal opportunities for gays and lesbians have gone too far; (4) Immigration is bad for the economy; (5) Equal opportunities for ethnic minorities have gone too far.
2. ^ We generate our economic left-right scale from the average response to five questions in the British Election Study: (1) Government should redistribute income; (2) Big business takes advantage of ordinary people; (3) Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth; (4) There is one law for the rich and one law for the poor; (5) Management will always try to get the better of employees.
3. ^ We group each variable into three categories: open/middle/closed, left/centre/right, age <35/35-54/55>, income , qualification AB/C/DE, whether you live in an urban/town/village or rural area. Open-closed and left-right variables are based on percentile scores, with each category set as close to 1/3 of total respondents as the data allows.
4. ^ We plot the difference here between the highest and lowest percentage response categories. For all the variables except age, the greatest difference between the lowest subcategories (open-closed, left-right, high income-low income). For age, the highest concern is among the young while the lowest concern is among the middle age. For income, high-income respondents have the greatest concern and low-income respondents the lowest.
5. ^ The relevant information in Figure 7 is the relative magnitude of the differences across the six variables. There is no meaningful substantive interpretation of the scale values.

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