

# Opinion on climate change policy during the 2024 general election





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# Foreword

Chris Venables, director of  
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**Most people,  
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The UK’s centre-left government finds itself isolated on the world stage as right wing populism surges, notably following the US election of President Trump. In this context, political and media attacks on the environmental agenda are increasing, and there is concern in the environment sector that the public mandate for decisive action on the climate and nature crises is weakening.

The political saliency of environmental issues has been slowly dropping since 2019, particularly due to competing pressures on the public finances. The risk of backsliding on promised action is a reality.

Here, we report on polling undertaken by researchers at CAST (the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformation) in June 2024, in advance of the last general election. If we cast our minds back to that time, when parties were vying with each other for our votes, the spotlight was very much on net zero as an apparent vote winner or loser, with politicians who once strongly backed ambitious climate action retracting their support believing it would attract votes.

However, as the poll results show, the picture was more nuanced about what voters thought at the time about climate policy. And, despite the pressures, politicians should take heart that most people, whatever their politics, favoured climate and nature policies, with few strongly opposing them. There is no indication that anti net zero policies swayed the election result.

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**Acting on the  
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Green Alliance’s own research demonstrates that acting on the environmental agenda strengthens the economy, protects national security and increases health and wellbeing. Over the course of the next four years, the UK government has a choice: succumb to short term pressures and reverse progress on climate action or forge ahead, confident in the strong public support there is to build a better society and world. We think the choice is clear.



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# CAST's polling

**“CAST used the 2024 election as a focal event to study whether parties' green pledges resonated with voters.”**

The general election in July 2024 was a moment of political change for the UK with a landslide victory for the Labour Party. But will this change translate into greater climate action? Projections by the Climate Change Committee suggest that the country's interim 2030 emissions reduction target is at risk, and that it is “off track for net zero” by 2050.<sup>1</sup>

To address concerns that scaling-up green policies could result in electoral backlash, CAST used the 2024 election as a focal event to study whether parties' green pledges resonated with voters.

Public opinion polling took place on 28-30 June 2024, when political debate was peaking a few days before the general election. YouGov's omnibus online survey panel was used, receiving responses from a nationally representative sample of 2,095 British adults.

People were asked if they agreed or disagreed (on a five point scale indicating strength of feeling) with the following six environmental policy statements:

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Climate change is an urgent problem that requires substantial and far reaching government action.   |
| 2. | The windfall tax on oil and gas company profits should be increased.  |
| 3. | Legislation should be passed to significantly increase the size of protected woodland and wildlife habitats.  |
| 4. | If Britain takes steps to reduce climate change, it will cause energy prices to rise.   |
| 5. | Ultra Low Emission Zones (ULEZ) - in which high polluting vehicles are charged for using roads in urban areas – should be banned by national legislation. |
| 6. | Oil and gas needs to remain part of Britain's energy mix to ensure energy security.   |

The survey included a ‘candidate choice’ experiment that simulated a constituency election situation. Respondents were presented with randomly generated profiles of two hypothetical candidates whose positions varied on a set of key issues. They were asked to choose which candidate they would vote for. This approach allowed a more direct inference of the motivations that led people to choose one candidate over another, compared to more standard responses offered on questionnaire scales, broken down by respondents' voting intention.

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# Broad support for climate action

**“  
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The polling revealed broad support for climate policy. Despite Reform’s claims during the election campaign that net zero should be scrapped, or the Conservative’s manifesto pledge that a “more pragmatic” transition towards net zero might be required, there was little evidence that such approaches were popular with the public.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Of those polled across all voting intentions, 63 per cent supported climate change as an urgent problem that requires substantial government action, with just 16 per cent disagreeing.

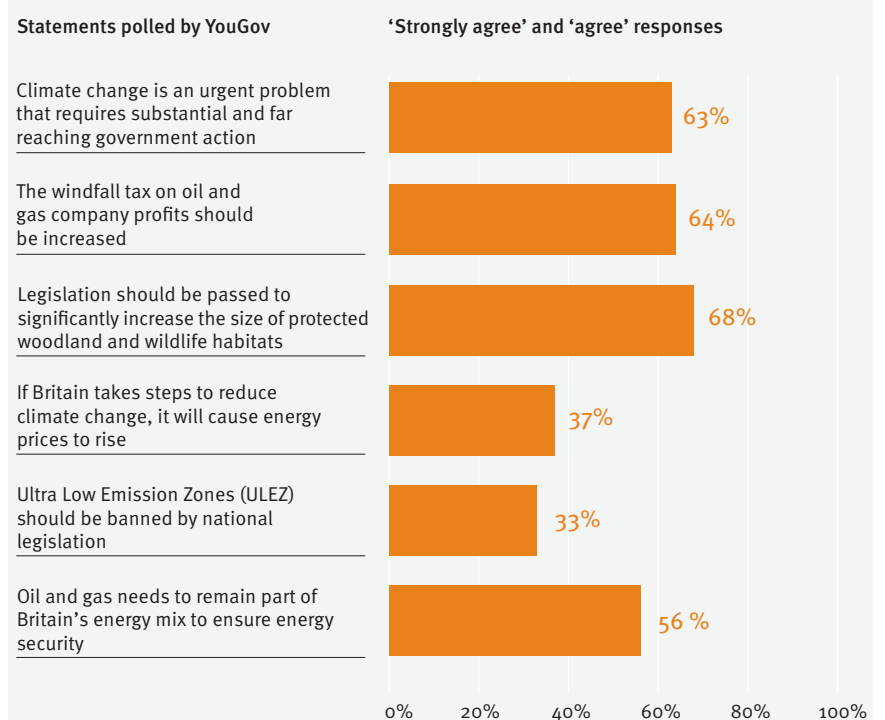
Sixty four per cent of respondents agreed the existing windfall tax on oil and gas company profits should be increased, while 68 per cent supported legislation to increase protections on woodland and wildlife habitats.

During the election campaign, Rishi Sunak claimed Labour’s plans to reach net zero would impose unacceptable costs on the country.<sup>5</sup> Politicians of all parties have continued to suggest this.<sup>6,7,8</sup> But the poll findings demonstrate that the public were not convinced by this narrative in 2024, with only just over a third of respondents believing that such action would push up energy bills.

The 2023 Uxbridge by-election instigated climate policy rollback by the previous Conservative government, in response to protests against the Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ). But only a third of those polled said they would like to see the ULEZ banned.

Asked whether oil and gas should remain part of Britain’s energy mix, 56 per cent thought they were necessary for energy security. Although, as other research has shown, many who want the government to transition quickly to a completely renewable energy system also believe fossil fuels are still required in some shape or form.<sup>9</sup>

## British voters demonstrated clear support for environmental policies



# Some doubt the urgency but specific policies have wide support

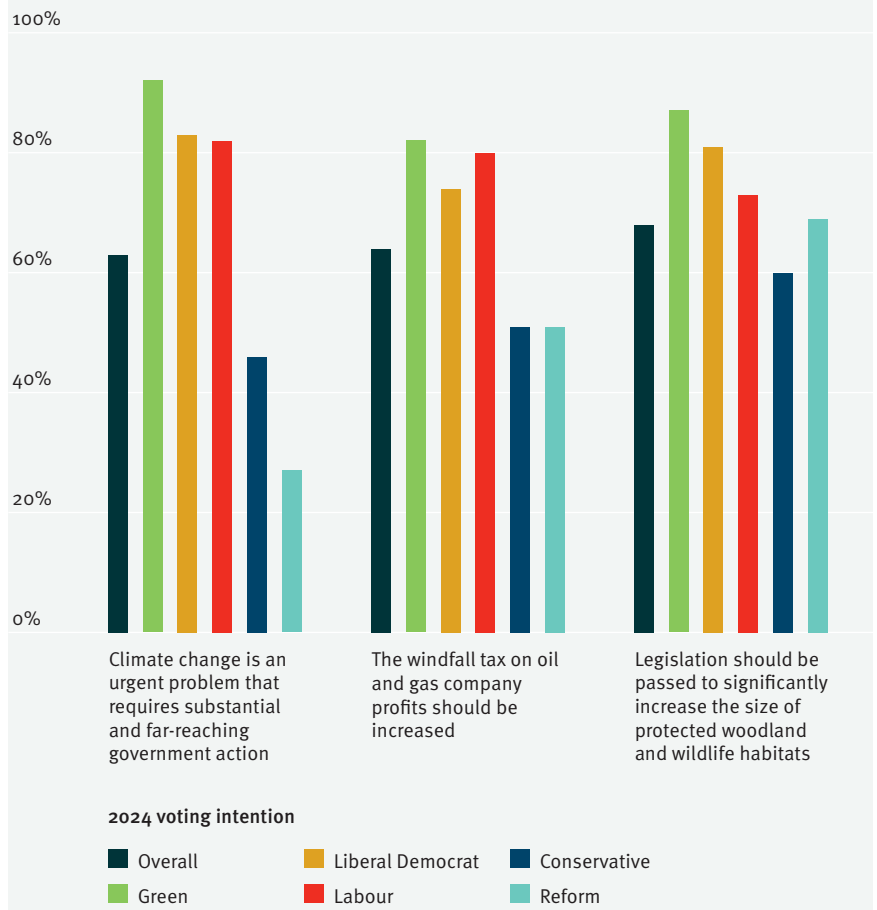
**“In the absence of ‘urgency’ framing, Conservative and Reform voters were more supportive.”**

On the urgency of far reaching action, there was more division between those of different voting intentions.<sup>10</sup> The overwhelming majority of Green, Liberal Democrat and Labour voters were behind urgent action, Conservative voters were divided and Reform voters were vehemently against it.

Yet, in the absence of this ‘urgency’ framing, although still more sceptical than other voter groups, Conservative and Reform voters were more supportive. For instance, at least 50 per cent of all voting intentions, including Conservative and Reform (each 51 per cent), favoured higher windfall taxes on oil and gas profits. And, on the expansion of woodland and wildlife habitats, 60 per cent of Conservative voters and a 69 per cent of Reform voters agreed with it.

Support holds up across all voters for some policies

‘Strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ responses

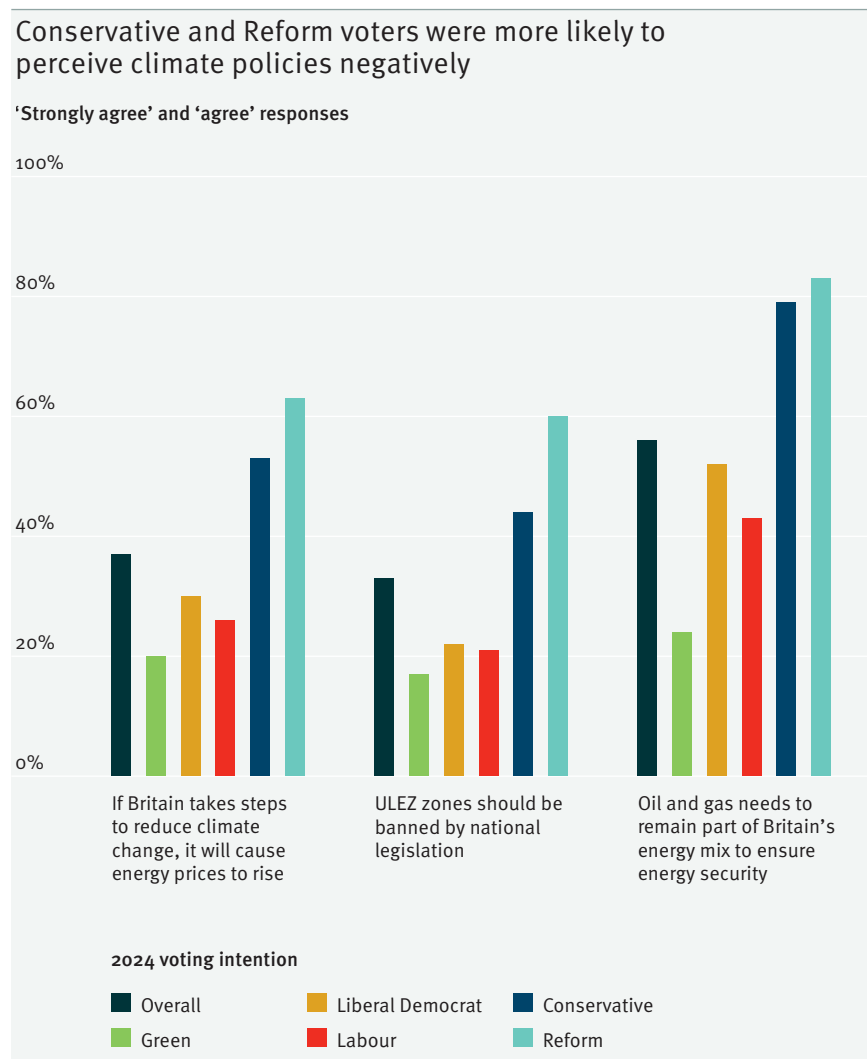




**“Differences narrowed substantially when specific climate-friendly policies were considered.”**

Conservative and Reform voters were the most likely to perceive the downsides of the decarbonisation of the energy sector. Around 80 per cent of both groups believed that oil and gas are necessary to ensure energy security, and most voters in these groups perceived that energy prices will rise if the government takes action to mitigate climate change.

Although these groups were more in favour of banning ULEZ than Labour, Liberal Democrat or Green voters, a significant percentage were on the fence or disagreed that ULEZ should be banned.



To summarise, although there was a marked difference in response to the idea of urgent and far reaching climate action, such differences narrowed substantially when specific climate-friendly policies were considered, with voters of all stripes well aligned on some.

# Scepticism isn't driving electoral outcomes





























**“Rollback of net zero policies would not have led to tangible electoral gain in the 2024 election.”**

In line with public opinion patterns revealed by the standard polling method, CAST's 'candidate choice' experiment, presenting two hypothetical candidates, showed that campaign stances indicating a rollback of net zero policies would not have led to tangible electoral gain in the 2024 election.<sup>11</sup>

## Being pro North Sea oil and gas licensing did not change electoral fortunes

On North Sea oil and gas licensing, hypothetical candidates campaigning on more fossil fuel extraction received no additional electoral support from voters of any party, except Reform.

Although hypothetical candidates campaigning to stop oil and gas extraction were less favoured by Conservative and Reform voters, such a position did not change candidates' electoral fortunes in aggregate. Despite concerns about energy security, there was no indication people would have voted strongly based on candidates opposing the long term phase out of oil and gas extraction in the North Sea.

Candidate campaigning message	Aggregated net gain or loss	Voter groups					
		Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Reform	SNP	Green
No stance on North Sea oil and gas licensing							
Supports new North Sea oil and gas licensing							
Opposes new, but would maintain existing, North Sea oil and gas licensing							
Opposes new, and would scrap existing, North Sea oil and gas licensing							

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There was no sign  
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### ULEZ objection was not a vote winner

Likewise, candidates campaigning on anti-ULEZ stances were only marginally rewarded by Reform voters. This was counterbalanced by higher numbers of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters who did not favour such candidates. Conservative voters were neither drawn towards or away from anti-ULEZ campaigning messages. In aggregate, there was no sign that an anti-ULEZ stance would return any more or less votes for candidates. Instead, CAST’s candidate choice experiment indicated that the broad coalition in support of ULEZ continued to hold before the general election 2024, rather than turning against candidates advocating it.

Candidate campaigning message	Aggregatenet gain or loss	Voter groups					
		Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Reform	SNP	Green
No stance on ULEZ							
Ban high polluting cars in urban centres							
Charge high polluting cars in urban centres							
No additional charges for high polluting cars in urban centres							











































- Respondents were statistically more likely to vote for a hypothetical candidate that held this position
- Respondents were statistically less likely to vote for a hypothetical candidate that held this position
- No statistically significant relationship for or against candidates that held this position was found.

## Green taxation would have shifted the dial

The only campaign stance that significantly changed electoral outcomes for the hypothetical candidates was a green tax proposal: increasing the windfall tax on excess oil and gas profits and investing the revenues either into renewable energy or the NHS were seen positively. Reinvestment in renewables was a Labour party manifesto commitment. CAST added the hypothetical option to reinvest the funds in the NHS.

Candidates proposing to use the tax to fund the NHS were rewarded by voters for most parties, including Reform.

**“The only campaign stance that significantly changed electoral outcomes was a green tax proposal.”**

Candidate campaigning message	Aggregated net gain or loss	Voter groups					
		Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Reform	SNP	Green
No stance on windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits							
Abolish windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits							
Maintain windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits							
Increase windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits							
Increase windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits, invest revenues in NHS							
Increase windfall tax on oil and gas excess profits, invest revenues in renewables							



Respondents were statistically more likely to vote for a hypothetical candidate that held this position



Respondents were statistically less likely to vote for a hypothetical candidate that held this position



No statistically significant relationship for or against candidates that held this position was found.

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# Conclusion

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**Politicians can be confident that there is underlying public support for environmental action.”**

This polling reflects other surveys conducted in recent years, indicating overwhelming support for action on the environmental agenda.<sup>12</sup> In this case, it shows that there was less dividing voters’ opinions on environmental policies around the 2024 general election than might be imagined. Far from the negative scenario that parts of the media and some politicians present, support for policies that will protect people and the planet now and in the future are popular with voters.

The poll’s results do reveal that the public mandate for climate action cannot be taken for granted. Concerns about energy security and costs erode support among some. Politicians and environmental campaigners must remain sensitive to the harsh reality facing millions of people. The question is how best to convey the message about the need to maintain environmental action, and its benefits to society, in a way that resonates well with British voters in the face of current economic pressures. But, as the polling shows, politicians can be confident that there is underlying public support for environmental action.

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# Endnotes

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- 9 J Kenny et al, 17 January 2024, 'Public opinion is divided on oil and gas expansion', UK in a Changing Europe, [ukandeu.ac.uk/public-opinion-is-divided-on-oil-and-gas-expansion/](http://ukandeu.ac.uk/public-opinion-is-divided-on-oil-and-gas-expansion/)
- 10 The sample size for vote intention in our survey is as follows: Conservative: 317; Labour: 595; Liberal Democrat: 212; Reform: 289; Scottish National Party: 41; Green: 117.
- 11 The technical details of the experiment can be consulted in the pre-registration document of our study at [doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VQKZ8](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VQKZ8)
- 12 For example: Survation for Greenpeace, September 2023, 'How will environment and climate influence the next election: what the public really think'; Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2024, 'Public attitudes tracker: net zero and climate change, Spring 2024, UK'





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## **Opinion on climate change policy during the 2024 general election**

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### **About CAST and this report**

This report presents the findings of research undertaken by CAST affiliates at the University of East Anglia, in collaboration with Green Alliance.

CAST is a global hub for understanding the crucial role that people play in fighting climate change. It is a cross institutional research centre with world leading expertise in environmental psychology, behaviour change, public engagement, policy, governance, education, communications and more. Its core partners are the University of Bath, the charity Climate Outreach, the University of Manchester, University of East Anglia and Cardiff University and it is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (grant number ES/S012257/1).

### **Green Alliance**

Green Alliance is an independent think tank and charity focused on ambitious leadership for the environment. Since 1979, we have been working with the most influential leaders in business, NGOs and politics to accelerate political action and create transformative policy for a green and prosperous UK.

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