

Institute for Public Policy Research



# **APATHY AND OPPOSITION**

**UNDERSTANDING THE REAL  
THREATS TO NET ZERO**

**Becca Massey-Chase,  
Steve Akehurst  
and Sam Alvis**

March 2026

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# SUMMARY

Climate action is under siege from populist and far-right actors. Delivering under that pressure demands fresh confidence and commitment from government. Watering down ambition offers no electoral advantage; a strong, progressive agenda on climate action remains broadly popular with the public. The government must:

- increase its focus on climate impacts when talking about mitigation
- support the uptake of clean consumer technologies that lower costs
- manage upfront energy costs as the UK rebuilds its energy infrastructure.

Without action, there will remain two big threats to net zero.

First, there is a risk of a **misguided strategy of accommodation from the left in the face of right-wing attacks**. This isn't happening yet, but the government should do more to own and confidently shout about the progressive climate policy it's delivering. Failing to amplify this in communications is actually harming the government's wider agenda. Electorally, climate action is very safe territory for progressives to be proactive on.

Second, the **dropping salience of climate change among the general public makes the issue more vulnerable to partisan 'sorting'**. Reform and Conservative voters are becoming less supportive of net zero because of party allegiance and elite messaging. Communicating about the impacts of extreme weather and its cause – climate change – is effective in increasing salience, as it is grounded in a threat these voters feel now. This raises the public's support for policies and willingness to bear costs and makes people more resistant to elite cues from the right.

## THERE IS NOT A WIDESPREAD PUBLIC BACKLASH

Elite opinion on net zero is highly polarised, with a precipitous drop in support on the political right since the general election in 2024. This is not mirrored in public opinion, where support has remained steady and is much higher than politicians credit. Labour has lost confidence in their democratic mandate on this issue. At least 57 per cent of Labour MPs assume support is lower than it is, and their confidence in the electoral advantage of net zero policies has almost halved in the last few years. There has been no concomitant drop in public support. The notion of a wide-spread public backlash against net zero in the UK is a largely exaggerated one, amplified by right-leaning media. In 2025, online news coverage was 260 per cent more negative towards net zero than public sentiment.

Most anti-net zero arguments do not have significant reach or plausibility for most people right now. The arguments with most traction tap into a mood of distrust and low confidence. Only one anti-net zero argument has high reach and believability and is hard to rebut: that “net zero by 2050 is simply unrealistic, asking for sweeping changes that politicians promise but cannot deliver”. Climate action needs to boost public confidence – and it is within its gift to do so through fair and effective decarbonisation policies.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The aim of this research was to understand the threat of right-wing, primarily populist, arguments against net zero to ambitious climate policy in the UK. As we discuss below, ‘net zero’ carries associations beyond the goal of emissions reductions and is a loaded term. We are interested both in this term and the drive for emissions reductions that it represents.

In this report, we discuss the state of elite opinion on this topic, examine the reach and effectiveness of anti-net zero messages with the public, explore why particular arguments might be deployed due to the feelings and concerns they are designed to trigger, and the efficacy of counterarguments. We look at the primary risks to public opinion on net zero and make recommendations for insulating ambitious climate policy from attack.

Our findings, conclusions and recommendations are based on: a literature review; interviews with academics, MPs, political influencers, campaigners, and journalists; a workshop with UCL Policy Lab; a workshop with Climate Citizens; new public opinion polling by Persuasion UK and YouGov in December 2025; a review of longitudinal public opinion data sets; focus groups with voters from left and right who are considering voting Reform; and interviews with people who have changed their mind on net zero in the last few years to become either more oppositional or more apathetic. We read arguments being made about net zero by right and far right politicians in the UK, and in the media. We also looked at the arguments made by commentators, bloggers and activists creating content on platforms like YouTube and X and their own dedicated websites, and what the public engaging with this content say below the line and on social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit and Mumsnet. See appendix A1 for more details on our methodology.

## CLIMATE CONTEXT

The year 2024 was the first year that global average temperatures exceeded 1.5 degrees above those of the pre-industrial period. The Climate Change Committee (CCC) has told the UK government it now needs to prepare its economy, citizens and built environment for a “two-degree world” (CCC 2025a). The UK is struggling to cope with the impacts of climate change at current temperatures and is “inadequately” prepared for increased severity and frequency of flooding, heatwaves, storms and drought (ibid). Government is already dealing with the knock-on effects, with children losing days of schooling and hospitals cancelling routine operations. Climate change is directly impacting British supermarket prices (Barnes 2025). Extreme drought and flooding in consecutive seasons have harmed farmers, who saw their largest drop in output in 2023–24 (Defra 2025) – and this is expected to decrease again by 15 per cent this year (Farmonaut 2025).

Governing effectively requires dealing with these impacts now, and doing what is possible to reduce the likelihood and severity of future shocks. The UK has already halved its emissions, and some future reductions are baked in through electrification and transitioning to renewable energy. The CCC’s assessment is that net zero by 2050 remains achievable (CCC 2025b).

## INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

Trump is not simply withdrawing from collective climate action; he is attempting to prevent it. However – despite a fragmented and contested political landscape – the global direction of travel is moving towards the creation and strengthening of climate policies, especially in Asia and emerging economies. Despite political headwinds, the EU remains on track to meet its 2030 climate target (European Commission 2025).

The ‘global right’, an increasingly interconnected group of radical conservative, nationalist, and right-wing populist actors, has long been organising around climate change. The common thread in recent years has been a movement away from scepticism of the science towards criticism of the policies. In European countries, the early 2020s saw an increase in public protests about carbon reduction and environmental policies, covering issues from windfarms to carbon taxes, combustion engine vehicle bans to VAT rates on solar panels. While the tactics and concerns of the global right are visible across these distinct events, the way the issues played out in each place was different. While there are lessons to learn, the idea that “resistance to green policies has broken out across Europe” (Tasch 2024) is at risk of being overinterpreted in a UK context (Abou-Chadi et al 2024).

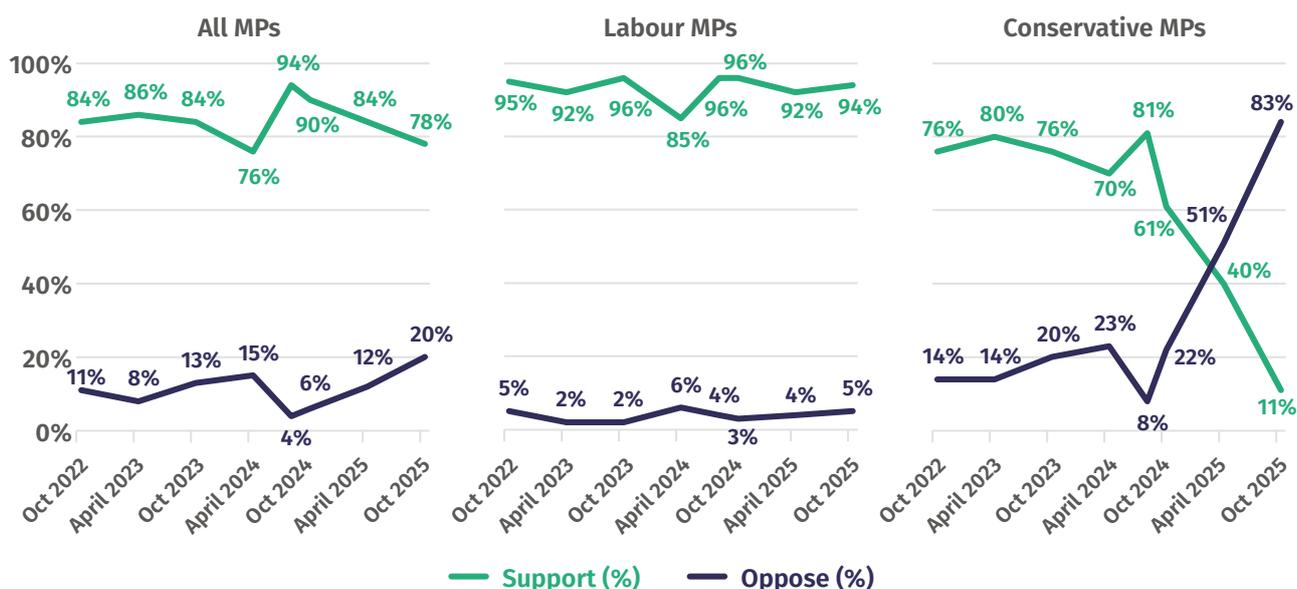
## 2. ELITE OPINION ON NET ZERO

### UK PARTY POLITICS

In 2019, the UK’s net zero target was enshrined into law by a Conservative prime minister, Theresa May, with support from all major parties. The years between then and now, particularly from early 2022 onwards, have seen a volte-face in the Conservative party position. There is now a clear dividing line on net zero, with the Conservatives and Reform sitting on one side and all the other major parties on the other.

This issue is highly polarised at the level of elite politics. In contrast to the views of the general public – which tend to change quite slowly and do not conform neatly to left and right ideologies – elite opinion tends to be both more engaged and more partisan, making it susceptible to sudden ideological ‘sorting’ based on peer dynamics (Cakir 2025). In addition to this partisan division, confidence in net zero among MPs is falling across the board. As figure 2.1 shows, support for net zero among Conservative MPs started to drop in 2023 (following the Uxbridge and South Ruislip by-election), rebounded slightly around the time of the general election, then collapsed completely in its aftermath. For Labour, support for net zero is and has been steadily high, but belief in the electoral advantage of strong climate policy almost halved between April 2023 and October 2025 (figure 2.2).

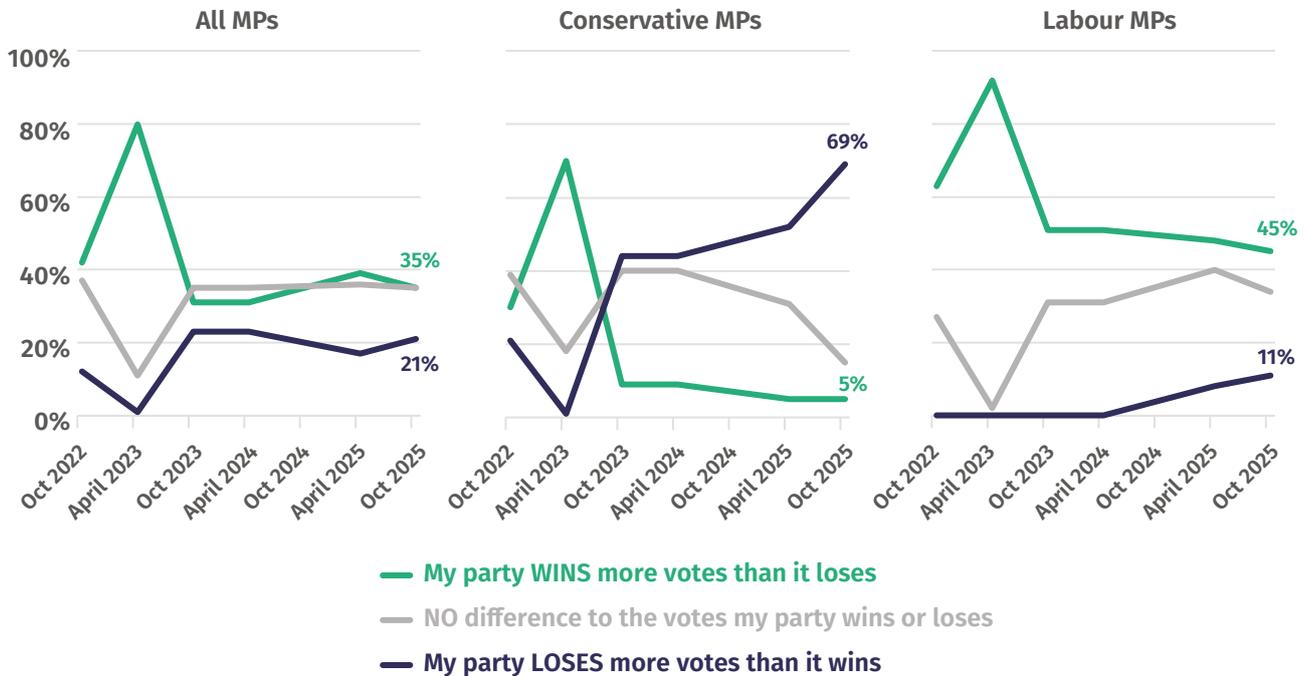
**FIGURE 2.1**  
**Support for net zero among Conservative MPs dropped dramatically following the general election**  
*Support for net zero among MPs over time*



Source: Persuasion UK 2025  
 Note: Survey of MPs conducted by YouGov for Climate Barometer from October 2022 to October 2025. Sample size=103-120 per wave, weighed to be representative of Parliament on party, region and cohort.

**FIGURE 2.2**

**Belief in the electoral advantage of strong climate policy has waned for Labour MPs**  
*Belief in electoral advantage of net zero policies among MPs over time*



Source: Persuasion UK

Note: Survey of MPs conducted by YouGov for Climate Barometer from October 2022 to October 2025. Sample size=103-120 per wave, weighed to be representative of Parliament on party, region and cohort.

Drops in support and confidence are unsurprising in the face of loud and persistent anti-net zero sentiment from some politicians and commentators. However, as we discuss in chapter 3, the shift in political mood has not been reflected in a concomitant shift in public opinion over the same period (see figure 3.4).

**WHAT HAS DRIVEN THE FRACTURING IN POLITICAL OPINION ON NET ZERO?**

In the political framework of the UK’s far right, net zero represents a threat to national autonomy: an imposition driven by global consensus rather than by British interests. Across the broader political right, those with fiscally conservative, anti-regulation and/or libertarian instincts can see net zero as a form of large-scale state planning – an example of government overreach that runs against free market principles. Net zero’s association with progressive cultural politics also ‘sorts’ it into a category of policy that is instinctively mistrusted by some. It then gets narratively grouped with issues such as immigration and gender:

*"There will have to be a new type of politics. To take on the bureaucratic class means to ditch radical environmental politics, unpick identity politics, focus on a strong positive national identity, limit migration, streamline HR, compliance, sustainability, planning, to focus on bringing down the cost of the welfare state and much more."*

Kemi Badenoch, Conservative party leader

The conviction that decarbonisation is not compatible with cheap energy has driven a lot of right-wing elites to turn away from net zero. This is a misreading of the facts (as laid out by the CCC and others), underpinned by an attachment to the

prevailing social and economic systems – including a fossil fuel-based economy which has, in some ways, served Conservatives well (Bright 2025). Conservative instincts are to conserve; this is at odds with an energy system which, after years of underinvestment, needs renewal.

There are those in Reform and the Conservative party who are opposed to net zero on these ideological grounds. As we discuss in chapter 4, they have constructed a claim to voters that their opposition is on the side of the everyman, the ordinary voter, positioned against a distrusted elite (Atkins 2022, Paterson et al 2024). The success of a populist message around Brexit, plus significant financial backing from the fossil fuel industry and climate sceptics (Barnett and Bright 2024), makes this an appealing topic and approach for those on the right of UK politics.

Adopting the strategies of some of their European counterparts, Reform may have seen electoral advantage in attempting to make net zero a wedge issue. Research by Dickson and Hobolt (2024) finds that challenger parties are typically “issue entrepreneurs” that seek to politicise new issues to expand their voting appeal, and that this is particularly successful when they spark intraparty or intra-coalition divisions. In the run up to the 2024 UK general election, Reform could court anti-net zero voters – who are found across all parties – without fracturing their voter coalition. Meanwhile, climate dropping down the list of issues voters care about reduced the threat of electoral punishment among pro-net zero voters.

However, this strategy relies on voters being *mobilised* by opposition to climate policy; whereas, as we discuss in chapter 3, net zero is actually not much of a vote mover. The primacy of net zero in Reform’s communications may not be risky for them, but may also not be especially effective in courting votes.

### THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

UK media is dominated by right-leaning outlets. The increasing turn of right-leaning media towards an anti-net zero disposition has therefore led to overall media coverage of this issue skewing in a negative direction. In 2025, for the first time, there were more UK newspaper editorials opposing climate action than supporting it (Carbon Brief 2026).

**FIGURE 2.3**

**For the first time, there were more UK newspaper editorials opposing climate action than supporting it in 2025**

*Number of editorials that supported more/less climate action*



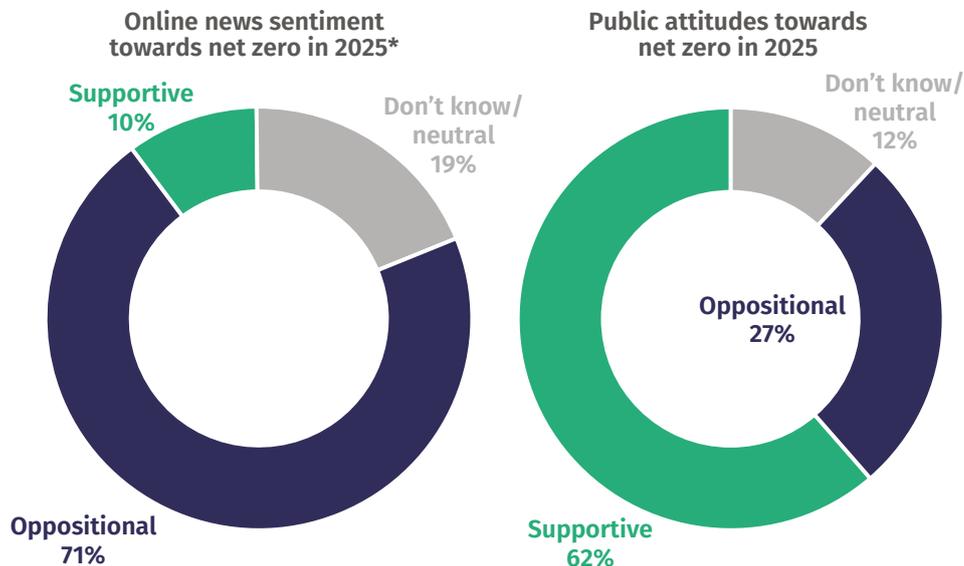
Source: Carbon Brief 2026

Media hostility to net zero far outweighs public negativity. Sentiment analysis conducted by Persuasion UK in December 2025 found that online news coverage of net zero was around 260 per cent more negative than public attitudes towards the issue (figure 2.4). The volume of broadcast coverage and discussion around climate change also falls significantly under the level of public concern, unlike topics such as crime and international conflict which receive disproportionately high media attention relative to public concern (Sandauer 2025).

**FIGURE 2.4**

**Negativity towards net zero is 260 per cent higher in the UK news media than among the public**

*Online news' sentiment vs public sentiment on net zero*



Source: Persuasion UK 2025

Note: Media sentiment was established via sentiment analysis using Brandwatch.<sup>1</sup> Public sentiment was established through an online YouGov survey carried out for LCEF in December 2025, and is based on responses to the question “‘Net zero’ is a target set by government to reach zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 at the latest, balancing any carbon emissions that are produced with carbon-reducing measures, in order to reduce the risks from climate change. From what you know of it, do you support or oppose net zero?”

Major UK newspapers increasingly discuss net zero without mentioning climate change (Vowell 2026). This lack of context may in part be due to assumed understanding, but it is particularly stark in anti-net zero outlets like *The Times* and the *Telegraph*. The technical language around ‘net zero’ is an easier target for opponents than the principle of climate action. Context is important, particularly for Conservative 2024 voters who may have higher exposure to anti-net zero messaging. For these voters, contextualising net zero boosts support by around 16 per cent (compared to an average boost of around 7 per cent).<sup>2</sup>

### THE PERCEPTION GAP

The echo chamber of elite opinion has led to a disconnect between politicians and voters, with MPs significantly underestimating public support for climate policies (Westlake and Willis 2025, Climate Barometer 2026). When asked to guess public support for the plan to achieve net zero by 2050, Conservative MPs understate public support by about 18 percentage points (Climate Barometer 2025a). They assume support is slightly higher than their Conservative peers do (ibid), but at

1 Persuasion UK identified 1,141 online articles across major UK news outlets in which net zero was the main focus of coverage in 2025. Each article was then manually coded by Persuasion UK as portraying net zero as positive, negative or neutral. Underlying data and coding available at: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Yhe\\_TjprTuYze7kjrB9CNUUpKuVeCeb/edit?gid=1496890518#gid=1496890518](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Yhe_TjprTuYze7kjrB9CNUUpKuVeCeb/edit?gid=1496890518#gid=1496890518).

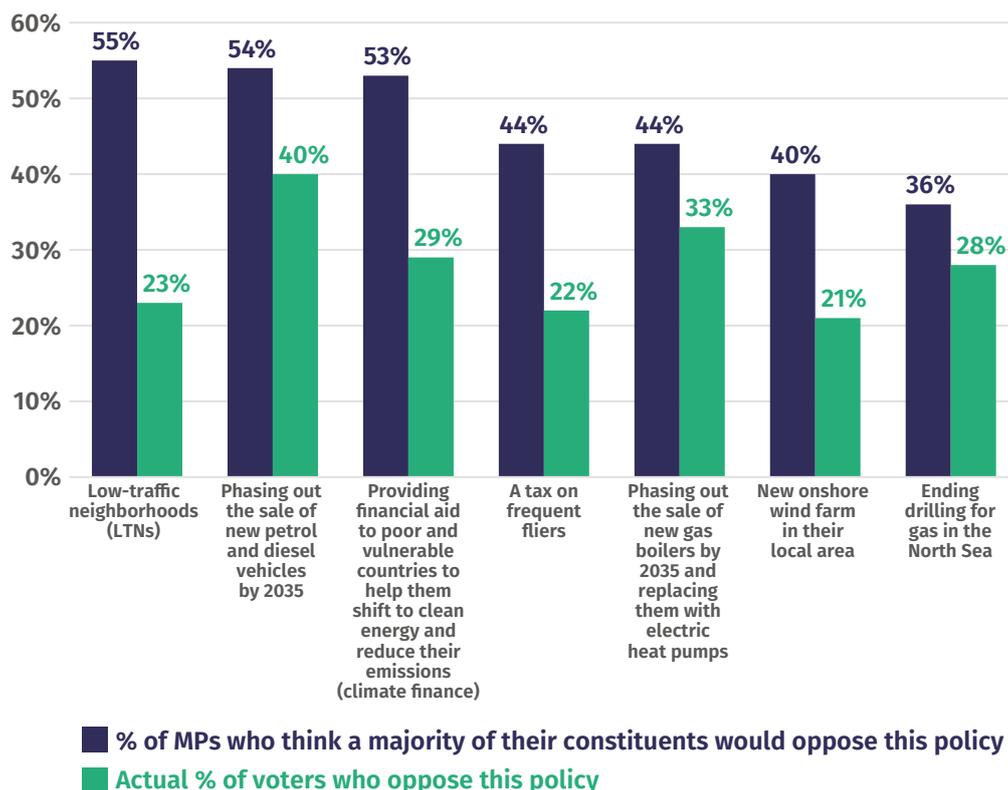
2 This finding is from a split sample test in August 2025 by YouGov. One half of the sample were asked whether they support or oppose net zero generally, without being told what ‘net zero’ means; the other half were given a detailed, neutral explanation.

least 57 per cent of Labour MPs still underestimate public support.<sup>3</sup> MPs also tend to overestimate public opposition to local clean energy infrastructure projects, and significantly underestimate public support and willingness to accept the financial impacts of climate policies (Climate Barometer 2026, Tanase et al 2025).

**FIGURE 2.5**

**MPs assume higher than actual opposition on climate policies**

*Policies MPs think voters will oppose vs actual percentage of voters who oppose this policy*



Source: Persuasion UK 2025

Note: Surveys of MPs and the public conducted by YouGov for Climate Barometer in October 2025.

Sample size for MPs=103-120 per wave, weighed to be representative of Parliament on party, region and cohort. Sample size for GB adults=2,636.

There is strong cross-country evidence that the public themselves also underestimate public support for climate policies, by over 20 per cent (Andre et al 2024). Elite cues seem to have impacted *perception* of public opinion, but to what extent has elite polarisation filtered through to impact the opinions themselves? The following chapter draws on new polling and longitudinal data to set out some key findings on the public’s views of net zero. Chapter 4 then explores how these views might be shifted.

3 Climate Barometer’s October 2025 wave of MP polling asks: “What proportion of the UK public do you believe SUPPORTS (either strongly or somewhat) the UK’s current plan to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?” Around 7 per cent of Labour MPs guessed support at 21–30 per cent, c.9 at 31–40, c.13 at 41–50 and c.29 at 51–60. The actual level of support was 63 per cent.

### 3. PUBLIC OPINION ON NET ZERO

Public opinion on climate change is complex, varying across three dimensions: belief, issue salience, and support for government action.

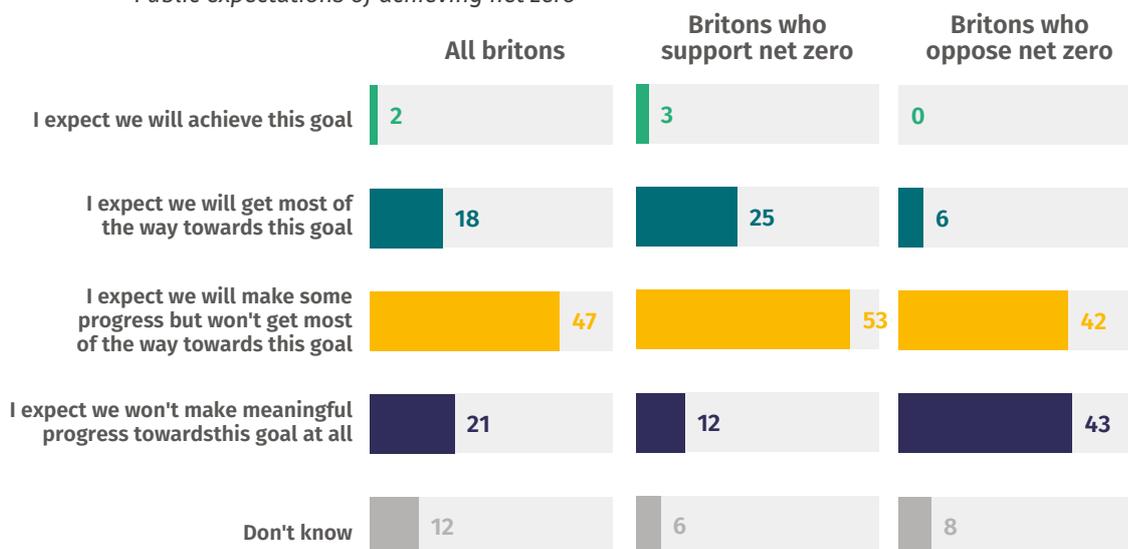
- **Belief** is high – only 5 per cent of Britons do not believe the climate is changing, and 22 per cent believe climate change is not caused by human activity (YouGov polling for LCEF in December 2025).
- **Salience** has dropped. “Climate and the environment” has slid down the issue agenda: just 17 per cent of Britons see it as one of the top problems facing the country, compared to 40 per cent in November 2021 (YouGov polling for LCEF in December 2025, YouGov 2025a).
- **Support** for government action is high, in principle. In 2024, IPPR found that every constituency in the country, bar two (Clacton and Boston), shared the view that the government should be moving faster on climate change (IPPR 2024). In practice, support varies by policy. Deliberative work with mini-publics, such as citizens’ panels, finds that support is high but conditional – affected by cost and disruption to lifestyle for example (see Environmental Justice Commission 2021 and Ainscough et al 2024).

Public support for the net zero target is at 60 per cent (YouGov 2025b): a comfortable majority, but not a strong endorsement. However, most doubt that net zero will be delivered, with only 3 per cent of Britons who support net zero expecting we will achieve this goal (figure 3.1).

**FIGURE 3.1**

**Only 3 per cent of Britons who support net zero believe it will be achieved**

*Public expectations of achieving net zero*



Source: YouGov 2025b

Note: Online survey of GB adults conducted by YouGov between 4–5 November 2025. Sample size=2,083.

New polling conducted by Persuasion UK and YouGov in December 2025 enables us to identify a set of relatively coherent attitudinal segments among voters based on their views on the net zero transition.<sup>4</sup> It shows us four main segments.

1. **A core support of about 40 per cent.** These voters consistently take supportive positions on net zero-related debates and core policy questions.
2. **A core opposition of around 24 per cent.** These people consistently take hostile positions on the clean energy transition at both a narrative and policy level and tend to oppose the principle.
3. **A ‘cross-pressured’ or ambivalent group of around 25 per cent.** These voters are split on net zero. Many support the principle – albeit in a fairly soft way – and they are usually pro-renewables and support a ban on fracking. However, they tend to oppose policies like the 2030 phase out of petrol and diesel cars and an end to drilling for oil in the North Sea.
4. **An indifferent group of 12 per cent.** They consistently answer “don’t know” or “neither support nor oppose” on most net zero questions.

When you exclude party loyalty, the most powerful predictors of anti-net zero sentiment are the following.

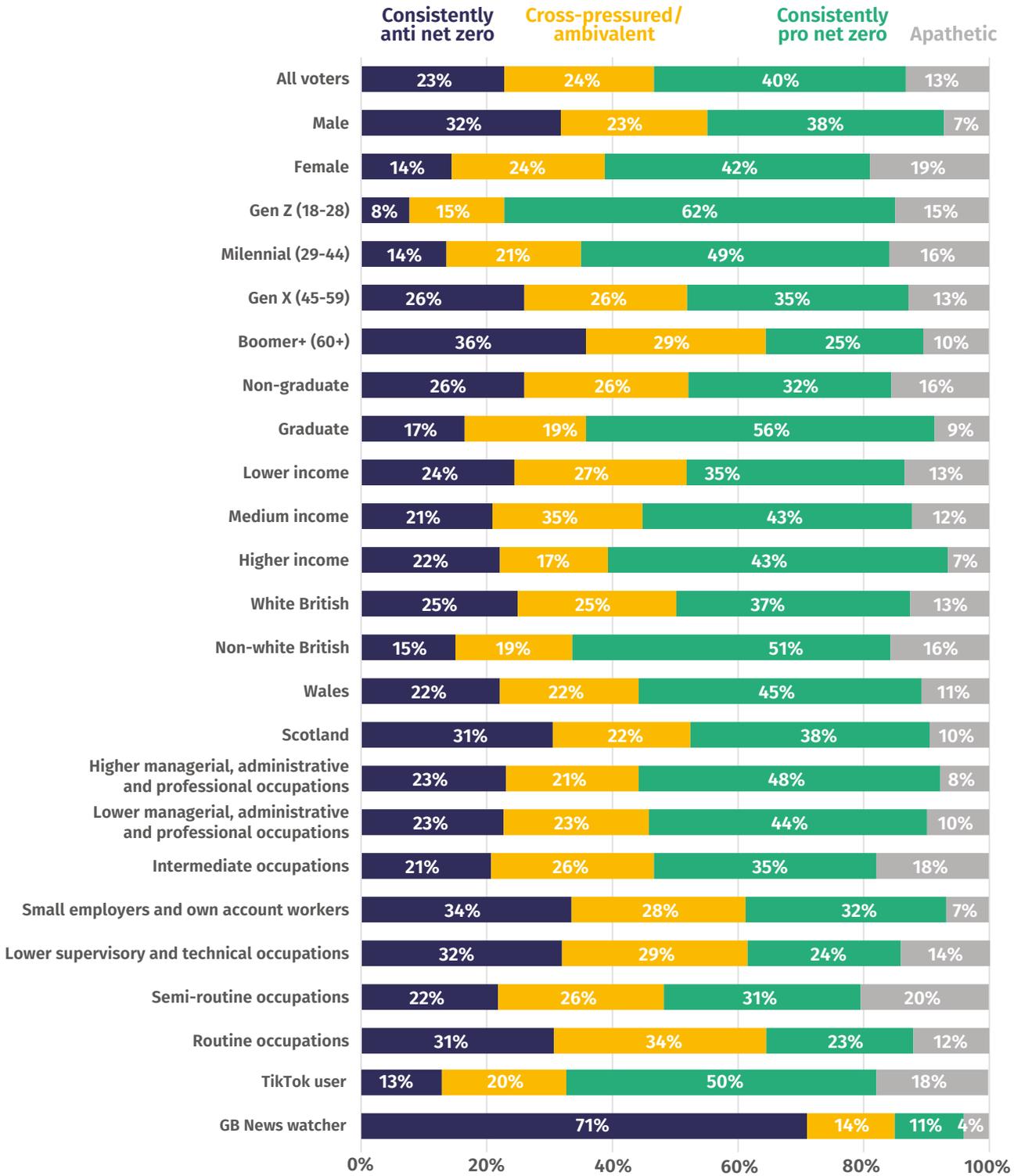
- **Demographics**
  - **Age:** those under 45 are significantly more likely to be consistently pro net zero; older voters – especially over 60s – are far more likely to be consistently anti net zero.
  - **Gender:** men are more likely to be more hostile or ambivalent towards net zero than women.
- **Views**
  - **Redistribution:** those who believe that the government should not redistribute income from the most well off to the least well off are more likely to be opposed to net zero.
  - **Role of the state:** the more you believe the state should “stay out of the way and respect people’s freedom” (versus should “step in and protect people”), the more likely you are to be consistently hostile to net zero.
- **Media**
  - **Trust in the BBC:** there is a high correlation between trust in the BBC and support for net zero.
  - **GB News viewer:** most people who watch GB News are anti net zero.

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<sup>4</sup> To create these segments, Persuasion UK used two-step clustering analysis, based on people’s answers to nine core sympathy questions: topline support for the net zero 2050 policy (prompted explanation); paired statements on the cost of action versus inaction; UK global leadership, energy security and energy bills; plus four policy questions on fracking, North Sea oil, petrol and diesel car phase out, gas boiler phase out and incentives for EV uptake.

**FIGURE 3.2**

**While there is variation, support for net zero is found across all demographics**  
*Segmentation on net zero position, by demographics*



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

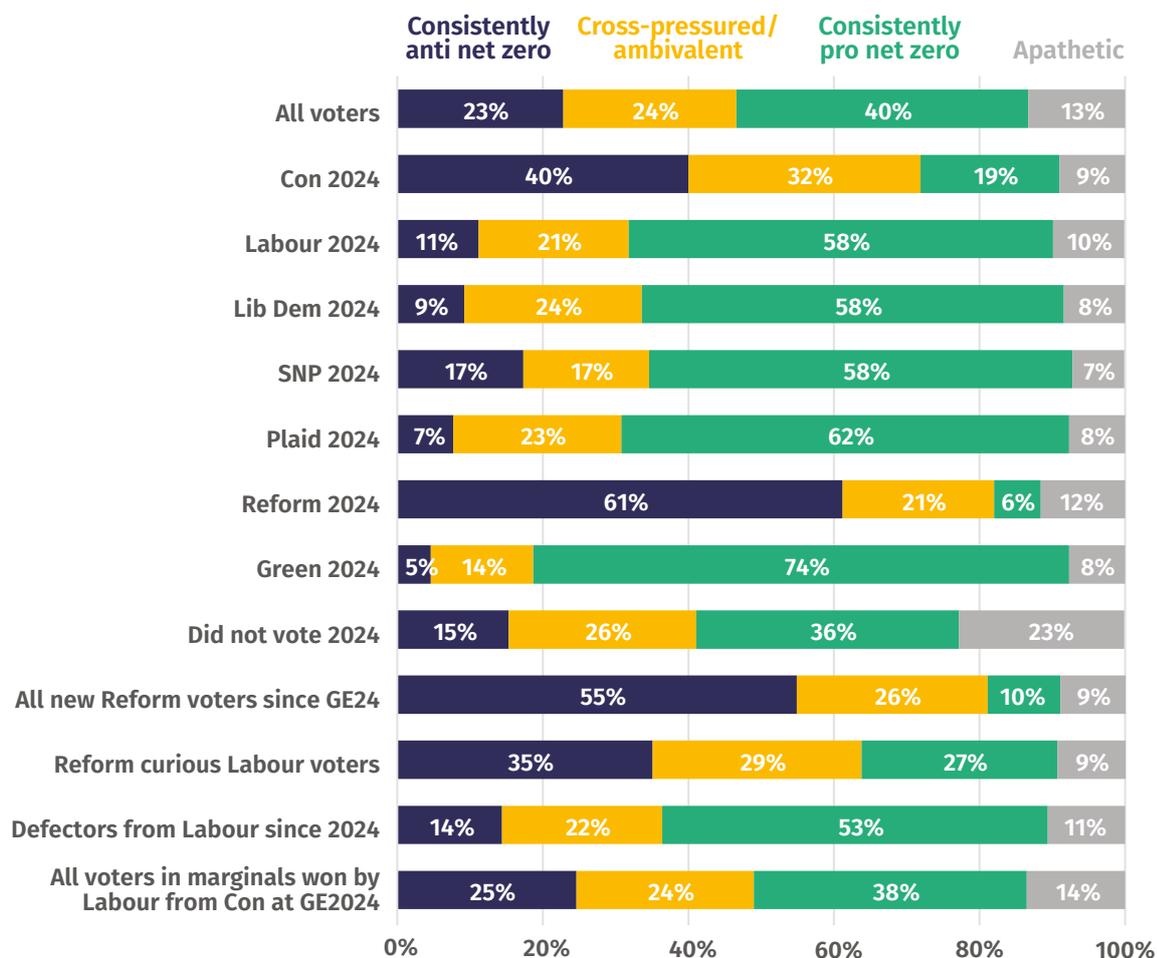
Note: YouGov online survey of UK voters, January 2026. Sample size=6,000. Support, opposition, ambivalence and indifference are determined by attitudes to core sympathy metrics (as discussed above).

Voting behaviours are the strongest predictor of someone’s net zero position, with 2024 Reform voters the most oppositional and Green voters the most supportive.

**FIGURE 3.3**

**2024 Reform voters are the most oppositional to net zero**

*Segmentation on net zero position, by political party support*



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: YouGov online survey of UK voters, January 2026. Sample size=6,000. Support, opposition, ambivalence and indifference are determined by attitudes to core sympathy metrics (as discussed above).

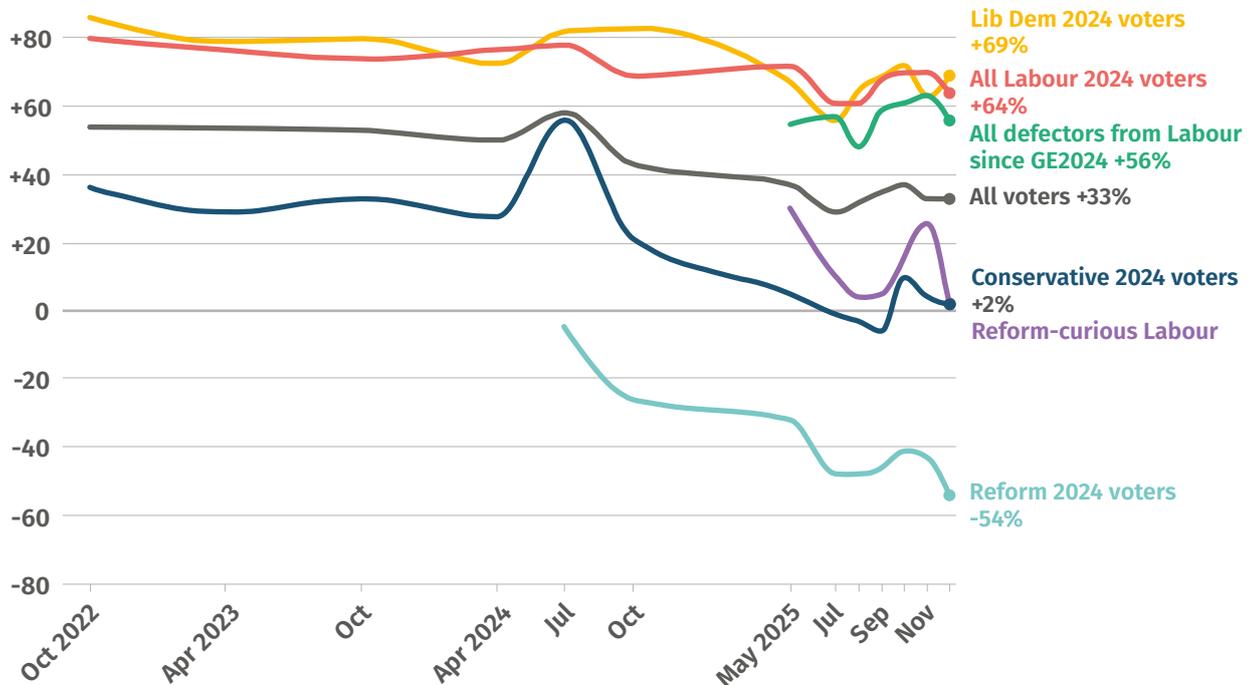
Those who switched their votes from Conservative to Labour or the Liberal Democrats at the 2024 general election were generally strong supporters of net zero (73 per cent supportive) (Johnstone 2024a). For those who voted Conservative in 2024, research suggests that support for net zero has since softened and there is now a split in their coalition (figure 3.4).

Voters who have left Labour since the last election remain overwhelmingly pro net zero. Of Labour to Liberal Democrat or Green switchers in 2025’s May local elections, 60 per cent said they would be more likely to support a party that pledged to go faster on policies to tackle climate change and reach net zero (Johnstone 2024b). Labour to Reform switchers also remain pro net zero (ibid, Persuasion 2025, and figure 3.4).

**FIGURE 3.4**

**There is net support for the UK's net zero target across all voter groups except for 2024 Reform voters**

Support for net zero, by votes at the 2024 general election



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: YouGov online survey of UK adults. Sample size=2,000+ per wave, last wave December 2025.

Based on the question: "The net zero target is a target set by government to reach zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 at the latest, balancing any carbon emissions that are produced with carbon-reducing measures, in order to reduce the risks for climate change. Do you support or oppose the UK's target of becoming net zero by 2025?" Net support = all those who support net zero by 2050 minus those who oppose it.

### INVESTIGATING THE CHANGING ATTITUDES OF 'REFORM-CURIOUS' LABOUR VOTERS

In our research, 63 per cent of 2024 Reform voters come out as consistently anti net zero. It is a different story for Labour 2024 voters who are now open to Reform; this group is still supportive of net zero. While they are less sympathetic on this issue than other parts of the Labour coalition, they are not hostile, and it generally has very low salience for them in either direction (Persuasion UK 2025).

There is *some* evidence that Reform-curious Labour voters have become less supportive of net zero over the last year. Because this is a very small group within the electorate – about 3 per cent – data on them is quite volatile. Our qualitative research captured a single point in time rather than a trend, but suggested that, while these voters were broadly supportive of the ambition, there was a high degree of scepticism towards government's competence and intentions with the policies.

Reform-curious Labour voters could be being persuaded by anti-net zero arguments, and may be being exposed to more of these arguments as their

voting intentions shift. More likely, elite polarisation has started to filter through to more partisan anti-Labour voters. Tracking data shows that, over the last year, Reform-curious Labour voters have become more hardened in their intention to vote Reform and more hostile to Labour. For voters hardening against Labour, net zero might now feel too ‘Labour-coded’ – like a reverse Midas touch. Policy opinions can be downstream of party loyalty. Reform-curious Labour voters who are still open to voting Labour are much less hostile to net zero than those who have hardened against Labour (see appendix, figure A1).

Net zero is a low salience issue for most, which makes it more vulnerable to partisan influence. If something is really important to someone, they resist elite cues (Cavaillé and Neundorf 2023). However, because of this low salience, the key takeaway on Reform-curious Labour voters is that – whatever their opinion of it – net zero has almost no impact on their voting behaviour.

Support for net zero is very low on the list of reasons Labour defectors give for their current unwillingness to vote Labour at the next election. More people say they “don’t know” (see appendix, figure A2). Among voters who have gone from Labour to Reform, only 4 per cent choose it as a reason for explaining their defection. Similarly, ECIU found that in the 2025 May local elections, the issues that determined the voting decision of those intending to vote for Reform UK were immigration and asylum (at 66 per cent), health care and the NHS (39 per cent), and the economy (39 per cent) (Johnstone 2024b). Only 12 per cent selected energy policy and 4 per cent climate change and environmental issues (ibid).

## 4.

# UNDERSTANDING THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST NET ZERO, AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

As set out in chapter 3, around 24 per cent of the public oppose net zero and related policies, about 40 per cent support it, 25 per cent are ambivalent (supporting some elements) and 12 per cent are indifferent. Particularly for those whose views are softer, what do we know about what does and could shift their opinion in either direction? What experiences do people need to have, whether practical or emotional, to change their opinions or make this issue more important to them?

Below, we have tried to capture some of the most common anti-net zero storylines we heard in our research and have attempted to unpack when and why they might resonate with members of the public. Our analysis of these arguments shows that the public's anxieties about net zero are focused on trust, fairness, and cost – and in this way, they don't treat net zero differently to many other policy areas.

Across all parties, 87 per cent of Britons have either not very much trust in politicians or none at all; almost three quarters of people believe that the government doesn't have things under control (Tryl et al 2025). People who distrust politicians and governmental institutions, believing they are dishonest, corrupt and/or incompetent, doubt that their government can or will create policies that are socially beneficial. Low trust in government makes it hard for the public to believe in long-term outcomes and to bear any costs for a future benefit they don't believe will arrive. Disaffected voters have lost faith in legacy parties' capacity to deliver on their priorities and distrust many of the institutional arrangements of the state and governing norms of the main parties (Hopkin 2020). Distrust in political institutions, and a general sense of exhaustion and low confidence in positive change, can lead people to feel that we are too weak as a society to overcome systemic challenges (Patel et al 2025). As one interviewee put it:

*"Well, to be fair, I haven't heard anything much about what the government are doing, but because I don't trust the government or the politicians or anything, I think it would probably be a very weak kind of little wishy-washy thing that they're going to do ... In the last five years I think I've got a little bit more jaded. I've got more trust issues about what people tell you, which is like I said before, you know, half rotten ... So I think, with that, it's very, very difficult to have that hope that the situation is going to improve, because I can't see how it can myself."*

Janet,<sup>5</sup> interviewee, December 2025

Low trust in government is particularly problematic for policy areas where the public is asked to act, and, according to the Climate Change Committee, over 60 per cent of the measures needed to reach net zero will require behaviour change by consumers (CCC 2023).

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5 All interviewee names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Net zero can be seen as technocratic, opaque, distant from ordinary people's lives, and privileging the opinions and priorities of a narrow group of experts (Atkins 2022). As we heard in one of our focus groups with Reform-curious voters:

*"It feels like they're in a little silo, coming up with ideas, pitching them, doesn't work, scrapping it, do another one ... It's just a case of they want to do it."*

*"It's the concept of the net zero thing, it's very non-transparent and unclear."*

Progressives repeatedly identify 'fairness' as both a substantive design principle and a communications priority for net zero. The concept, however, is hard to pin down, with some finding it easier to point to unfairness (such as elite impunity) than to provide a positive definition. Political appeals to fairness tend to rest on different framings, with right-wing politicians talking about fairness in relation to very clearly defined groups, such as taxpayers and hard-working families, and conceptualising it in terms of responsibility and transparency (Snell 2024). The left tends to opt for an equality and justice framing (ibid). At an individual level, people can have very different, and internally inconsistent, ideas about what is 'fair'. The idea of 'fairness' can also be a proxy for general acceptability. In one poll, 26 per cent of Reform voters said "nothing would make net zero fair" (Climate Barometer 2025c). Of course, net zero is not unique in being held to unclear standards of 'fairness'.

In this context, we found it helpful to think about fairness as coming with a certain level of predictability and legibility – whereas perceived unfairness generates social threat and uncertainty. We saw in our interviews with the public, and comments on social media, that feeling that things are unfair and being constantly alert to these injustices is exhausting. It is hard for policymakers to meet everyone's differing standards of what constitutes fairness, but there is a clear opportunity to make net zero policies more legible – ensuring they are easy to understand, make sense, and are designed so that their outcomes can be anticipated. Not everyone will agree that these are the correct outcomes and not all these outcomes will align with people's values. But the biggest own goal for net zero policy is unintended consequences which could have been predicted through the policy design process.

When people worry about fairness, they don't only worry about their own experiences; it often translates as concern for the vulnerable (or a group of vulnerable people they have sympathy for, such as elderly people). For example, people may worry that "people who can't afford it will have to pay." This isn't just about those on the lowest incomes, but also those "normal families" who are "just about managing", who do not qualify for support, but find it hard to make ends meet. This idea of ordinary people paying the price for changes imposed by government, while the rich and powerful just carry on as they like, is ripe for populists to amplify. It speaks to those who have a genuinely held belief that people in positions of power don't care about them, don't consider them in decision making, and would pursue an agenda that could make them worse off. Trust and fairness are symbiotic – when people feel decisions are not being made in their interests or alive to their concerns, trust erodes.

## OUR ANALYSIS OF THE ANTI-NET ZERO NARRATIVES THAT POSE THE GREATEST RISK TO CLIMATE POLICY

We tested 10 common anti-net zero arguments for their believability and reach (see appendix, figure A3). We also wanted to see which attacks can be neutralised by rebuttal and which are 'stickier'.<sup>6</sup> Of these 10, only three have more than 50 per cent of people who believe they could be or definitely are true across the population. These are "net zero by 2050 is unrealistic", "UK efforts on net zero are pointless because of China and the US" and "net zero is pushing up energy bills". These also have high levels of awareness. Only one, that net zero is unrealistic, wasn't successfully rebutted in our testing.

**FIGURE 4.1**  
Authors' analysis of the risk level of 10 key net zero arguments



Source: Authors' analysis

Below, we discuss in more detail the efficacy of the top six of these arguments. For details on the final four, see appendix A2.

### CAN'T BE DONE

**Argument tested: "Net zero by 2050 is simply unrealistic, asking for sweeping changes that politicians promise but cannot deliver"**

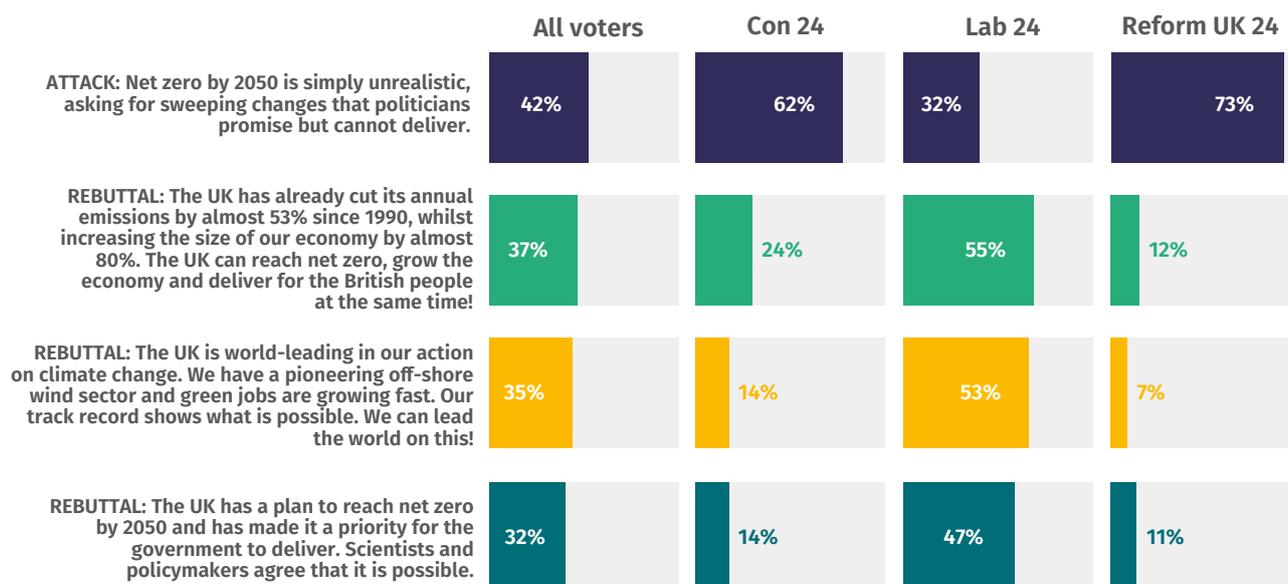
The argument that net zero is "impossible" is a priority message for both the Conservative party and Reform UK; it's also heard from some on the left, such as the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, who have called the current strategy

<sup>6</sup> To do this we constructed a conjoint message testing experiment. Every respondent saw a popular anti-net zero attack line on the left-hand side. On the right-hand side, they saw just one randomised pro-net zero rebuttal to the attack message. They were asked which was most convincing. The percentage results reflect how many times a given message was chosen over its opposite. It is important to test any argument in a competitive context since simply asking people if they "agree or disagree" with a pro- or anti-net zero statement only tells you how plausible an argument is to people – not whether it beats an opposing argument. Many voters are amenable to mutually exclusive arguments, especially on subjects of limited importance to them. We tested eight of our 10 anti-net zero messages in this way. The two we didn't test were on adaptation and climate scepticism.

“doomed to fail” (Fursman 2025). More than half of those we polled had heard the message the net zero is unrealistic and found it believable. For right-leaning voters in particular, this argument was very effective, and no rebuttals landed for them. In fact, this was the only argument we tested where no rebuttals were able to garner more support than the attack across all voters.

**FIGURE 4.2**

**No pro-net zero message beat the message that net zero is unrealistic**  
*Attack vs rebuttal message testing*



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: Online survey of UK adults by YouGov for Persuasion UK, January 2026. Sample size = 6,227. Attack and a rebuttal does not sum to 100 per cent because experiment included a “don’t know” option.

Question: “On the left is an argument some people have made against the UK’s transition to renewable energy and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (‘net zero’). On the right-hand side is an argument responding to this argument. Which do you find most convincing?”

The climate crisis is a big, overwhelming, systemic issue, and when presented with the argument that reducing emissions by 2050 can’t be done, many may not have the confidence or knowledge to disagree. The impossibility of net zero can also be a story about ‘experts’ lacking a sense of ‘realism’ or ‘commonsense’ – positioning “it can’t be done” as a pragmatic and sensible argument.

The idea that net zero is unrealistic plays into a sense of resignation or disinterest that is compounded by a drop in climate salience. While an argument that taps into feelings of fatalism, futility and weariness might strike at the mood of the nation, these feelings are not set in stone – they are moveable. Moving them is much more important for the consumer-side of net zero policy than for clean energy. A lack of public confidence does not stand in the way of immediate progress on shifting to renewables. It is much more of a challenge for the consumer side: people are less likely to change their behaviours if they don’t believe it is worth it.

The Conservatives and Reform often combine this argument with one about costs and living standards:

***"Net zero by 2050 is impossible [and] cannot be achieved without a significant drop in our living standards, or worse, by bankrupting us."***

Kemi Badenoch, Conservative party leader

The facts can be contested, but in tapping into the public mood, these are potent arguments for populists.

### **GLOBAL FUTILITY**

***Argument tested: "Net zero won't make a real difference, because countries like China and the US carry on polluting regardless"***

The argument that UK efforts are pointless because of the actions of other countries had the highest levels of reach and believability of all those we tested. We also heard it brought up several times in focus groups and interviews with the public:

***"We're a tiny little island. People like Trump, he's completely turned his back on green energy. As a global thing, net zero, is it going to be possible? And then you've got China..."***

We see this storyline as posing a significant risk because of its potentially broad appeal and because it can animate feelings of futility and powerlessness. It can also be combined with, and possibly strengthen, other anti-net zero arguments.

It is also a much more compelling argument if you believe that the policies associated with net zero are only a 'cost' to the UK, ie not something we would do anyway. The potential co-benefits of climate policies – such as energy independence – could have a useful role here in shoring up the case against net zero as simply a cost.

Reminding people of the impact of extreme weather in the UK, and the importance of influencing other countries to protect ourselves, just about beat the futility argument in our message testing. This was also true for a message which included the idea: "if every country starts using others as an excuse to do nothing, we'll be dooming future generations".

Net zero supporters could be more bullish in making the argument that China is in fact reducing its emissions, that the products it is making are directly helping other countries reduce theirs, and newly built coal mines are being used less as solar and wind outcompete coal. There is also a positive global leadership story to tell: many countries around the world are using the policies and financial tools built in the UK. However, at the moment, these arguments may not resonate as much as the feelings of hopelessness and mistrust prompted by the global futility narrative.

### **ENERGY BILLS**

***Argument tested: "Net zero has pushed up energy bills, leaving families paying more just to heat their homes and keep the lights on"***

Our stakeholder interviews suggested that this is the argument progressive elites see as the most concerning. This is understandable when cost of living is the number one stated priority by the public. Forty-three per cent of Britons have little confidence that the government will reduce energy bills and this failure is undermining their confidence in Labour's ability to bring the change they promised at the general election (More in Common 2025).

However, while the importance of energy bills to the public is high, we found that the link between these bills and net zero hasn't (yet) landed. Blaming net zero for high energy bills does not have the reach or believability you might expect given its prominence in elite discourse:

***"Our success at reducing emissions has also come at a significant cost: the highest electricity bills in the developed world."***

Kemi Badenoch, Conservative party leader

***"There is a direct link between the cost of all these subsidies to ... the renewables industry and your bills."***

Richard Tice, deputy leader of Reform UK

Reform's YouTube channel says: "Net Zero means we'll be Net Poorer and Net Colder this winter" (Reform UK 2022). However, we find that only 15 per cent of voters name net zero as one of the main culprits in rising energy bills, with more traditional explanations around profiteering, privatisation and dependence on foreign gas dominating. For Reform-curious Labour voters, net zero does not make the top three explanations for rising bills. The only group for whom this message has really stuck is 2024 Reform voters, of whom 40 per cent blamed "too many government environmental/net zero initiatives" as a reason for high energy bills in December 2025.

Voters who say we "can't afford to take action on climate" are more likely than others to point to energy bills as a cost they associate with net zero. Across all voters, however, "businesses using green initiatives as an excuse to increase cost" was a more popular concern (see appendix, figure A4). This taps into an anxiety that elites are using net zero as a money spinner.

Most people, across all incomes, do not feel that net zero has a negative impact on their daily life (Climate Barometer 2025b). As shown by the low level of attribution of net zero policies to energy costs, cost association with climate policies is not high – but it does impact support. Support for climate policies goes up and down in line with cost considerations; as cost and inconvenience grow, climate messages lose their traction (Project Tempo 2026, Ipsos 2022). However, there is also evidence to suggest that the public may be less transactional and more values driven than this argument credits. Forty-one per cent of those who think net zero will leave them personally worse off nevertheless support it (YouGov 2025b). If people care enough about the goal, they are prepared to tolerate some costs.

For those who are struggling, cost arguments align with their lived experience. For them, it is not an ideological or theoretical issue, but a deeply practical and personal one:

***"I'm thinking of me and mine, like, you know, we're all struggling to live and survive, put food on the table ... I'm sat here, I can't even afford to put my heating on at the moment, you know, because I'm too scared because the bills have gone so high."***

Ian, interviewee, December 2025

For progressives, there is a clear consensus that decarbonisation is the route to cheaper energy. But the economic story of the UK's energy system is not a straightforward one, which makes this view easier for critics to challenge and harder for the public to understand. The UK has an ageing electricity grid which needs upgrading and our energy system requires investment, whatever source is powering it. At the same time, as we move to renewable energy, bills are going up. Although this is caused primarily by other factors, the correlation is challenging for net zero defenders.

## JUST ADAPT

**Argument tested: "Instead of Britain wasting time trying to stop climate change, we should focus on adapting, strengthening defences and protecting communities"**

The argument that the UK should focus on adaptation instead of mitigation has gained elite currency:

*"The doomsday outlook is causing much of the climate community to focus too much on near-term emissions goals, and it's diverting resources from the most effective things we should be doing to improve life in a warming world."*

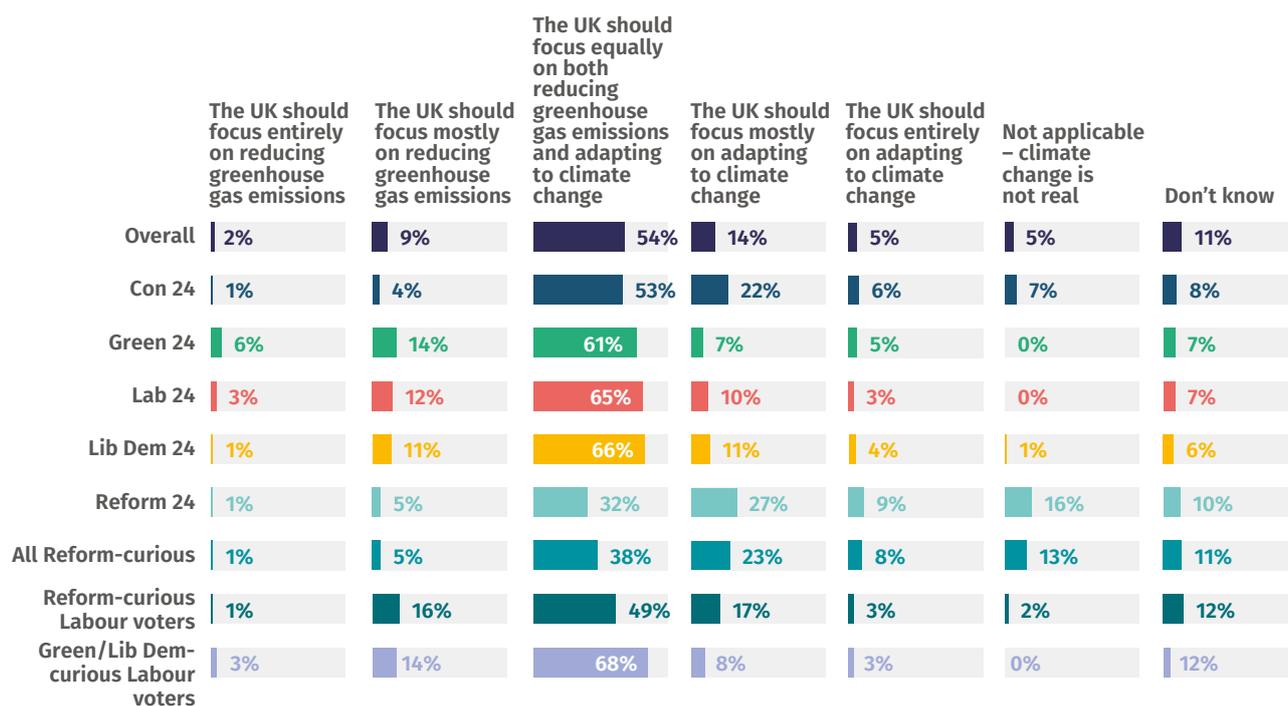
Bill Gates

However, recent polling by Persuasion UK found that only about a quarter of the public (27 per cent) held the view that the UK government is doing too much emissions reduction and not enough adaptation. Most people – including Labour/Reform swing voters – do not buy the trade-off between adaptation and mitigation; they want both.

**FIGURE 4.3**

### Public want action on adaptation and mitigation

*The public's views on adaptation vs mitigation*



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: YouGov online survey of UK adults, including a MaxDiff experiment, run in October 2025. Sample size = 3,000, weighted to be nationally representative.

While this argument has little public buy-in at present, we still see it posing a threat. In failing to either make progress or command the narrative on adaptation, the government has left political space that could be commandeered by the right. There are places in the UK facing a convergence of deprivation, low trust, and severe climate impacts. Eight out of 10 of England's most flood-prone constituencies are set to vote Reform at the next general election (Global Witness 2025). A lack

of investment in protecting communities from severe weather could lead to increased political disaffection, which is not a helpful condition for climate policy.

### **MONEY-MAKING SCHEME**

**Argument tested: “Net zero is a money-making scheme for government, with households hit by new taxes, charges and green levies”**

While the reach of the argument that net zero is a government money spinner is low, it is not outright dismissed, and taps into a not uncommon cynicism around politicians’ motivations. Our research found this to be a more popular argument in the press and on social media than the choice line of political figures. It is an argument that ranges from cynical distrust to stories of deception and corruption, with net zero portrayed as a ‘shady’ scam. Critics point to money flowing from private interests and philanthropic foundations to green campaigning organisations, and suggest that politicians are in the pockets of the renewables industry. The story focuses on how money flows in and out of government – and a lack of transparency and accountability around this. A more mainstream associated narrative is that net zero is bureaucratic, wasteful and expensive, driven by pen-pushing civil servants. We heard versions of these arguments come up quite a lot in our focus groups with Reform-curious voters:

*“I do often think that it’s just another way to tax and line the pockets of politicians, a bit like the Covid-19 pandemic. A lot of people made a lot of money out of that.”*

*“I think what most governments fail on is that they’re obviously in it for themselves.”*

*“The government do this to you to lure you in, and then slowly, the little taxes start coming out of nowhere, and then it’s ridiculous.”*

However, we didn’t find this argument had much cut through with voters overall and was successfully countered with the rebuttal that not acting will cost more in the long term. Its importance is perhaps not in how it relates to people’s views on climate, but how it speaks to the wider story of a lack of trust and confidence in institutions.

### **INDUSTRIAL DECLINE**

**Argument tested: “Net zero is driving industrial decline, hollowing out British manufacturing and sending jobs overseas”**

As well as being a threat to specific individuals, industry closures can be tied to a broader narrative about British people losing out to global competitors and a decline in opportunity for people who were born in the UK. Some jobs also have strong cultural significance. A local threat can represent a national concern.

Our message testing found that the argument that net zero is driving industrial decline currently has some traction with right-leaning voters but very low resonance with Labour voters. All voters, but Labour voters in particular, were much more likely to agree that clean, home-grown renewables are an economic opportunity, that industrial decline is driven by historic political choices and failure to back British, and that lowering energy bills through a shift to renewables will be good for British industry.

We also found that voters – including Welsh voters – do not currently blame net zero for the closure of steelworks, such as in Port Talbot and Scunthorpe. The preferred explanations for these closures are the economic rise of China making Britain less competitive and high energy costs. Generally, people are more likely

to say “don’t know” than blame environmental or net zero initiatives for steelworks closures.

### **WHICH ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE PRO-NET ZERO MESSAGES?**

Arguments for and against net zero resonate when they make (emotional) sense of people’s lived experiences. To work, they need to feel coherent with other stories people tell themselves and are told. For the general public in 2026, the arguments against net zero are often capitalising on a collective malaise. They are designed to provide the listener with an explanation for why their life feels so hard, stoke fears of insecurity and promises of greater control and certainty, and create a sense of belonging through connection over shared frustrations or resentments. The arguments that work in favour of net zero can also speak to feelings of insecurity, in promising energy independence, for example – one of the most effective pro-net zero messages (Climate Barometer 2025d). On the more positive side, they can also effectively reflect concern for future generations and a sense of collective responsibility (ibid, Climate Outreach 2025).

Salience has a crucial role to play in any campaign that involves trade-offs, inconvenience to vested interests, or significant demands on finite resources like money or political will. Voters who choose climate as a top three issue are more likely to support net zero policies, even if it may inconvenience them, and bear costs for the transition (Akehurst and Murphy 2022). The rise in salience in 2019–21 in the west, especially Northern Europe and North America, led directly to large-scale net zero policy being adopted by major parties in those places. To raise issue salience, the public need to hear the message and the message needs to resonate. It must speak to what people care about and make sense in their lives, as well as with their ideas of how the world works. Luckily, there is a huge body of evidence out there on how to do this (ibid, Climate Outreach 2025).

Most voters are alarmed by the threat of climate change, and advanced message testing consistently suggests that highlighting its current and future impacts increases both salience and sympathy for clean energy policy. Messages combining climate impacts and future generations are the most effective at raising salience. We also tested the message that “climate change is already hitting people in their wallets” due to climate impacts: “tackling climate change ... is a part of tackling the cost-of-living crisis”. This message also worked to increase salience and is potentially a useful way of squaring first principles arguments about climate with the “here and now” of affordability.

As always, government and campaigners should be cautious about the level of uplift you can get from a message alone (Voelkel et al 2026). Sets of well-crafted words need to be reinforced by what government are doing as well as what they are saying.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The notion of a wide-spread public backlash to net zero in the UK is a largely exaggerated one, amplified by right-leaning media. However, it is not a total confection, and some level of scepticism has increased slightly in the last year or so. Meanwhile, falling issue salience among those broadly supportive of the agenda is a more striking trend and a threat to policy support. Net zero's primary problem is with elite opinion on the right rather than public opinion. But that negative elite opinion does have an impact in a) shaping what all politicians believe is politically possible, b) partisan 'sorting' effects on the public, and c) further eroding public confidence in institutions' ability to tackle big challenges.

With this in mind, we make four recommendations for insulating climate policy from right-wing populist attacks.

### RECOMMENDATION 1. MAKE A POSITIVE CASE FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Electurally, climate action is safe territory for progressives to be proactive on. Pro-net zero signaling helps Labour stem defections to its left, without costing it votes to the right (Persuasion 2025). It is sensible to care about both flanks: Labour is losing more votes to its progressive flank, but these are generally geographically concentrated, whereas its right-leaning voters are more geographically dispersed. But it holds that reneging on net zero would be one of the most vote-losing positions Labour could adopt with its 2024 voters (ibid). Climate policy could be a clear and effective dividing line with the right for a progressive party. A strategy of accommodation from the left, conceding ground to the right on this issue, would be misguided. The public want ambitious climate policy; the democratic mandate is there, and it would be electorally beneficial for the government to deliver that.

While anti-net zero attacks might not be meaningfully moving public support for climate action, they could erode support for the government, and that limits the likelihood of progress on any objectives of a progressive government. These attacks must therefore be robustly challenged – speaking to people's feelings and experiences as well as the facts, and making the positive case for action, rather than just a defensive one.

There is substantial evidence that a strong, progressive agenda on climate action would be popular with the public. However, the politicians must want to do it; the issue isn't sufficiently salient at the moment to force their hand. There is a clear progressive case for climate action to prevent devastating impacts, and a political leader who is convinced of this can craft a compelling claim for voters (Willis 2018). This is easier if progressives also work together to raise the salience of climate policy.

### RECOMMENDATION 2. GET CLIMATE IMPACTS UP THE AGENDA

People have opinions on lots of things; they care about far fewer. It is what people prioritise that shapes what they give time or money to, and what they punish and reward politicians for. When an issue is salient to someone, their tolerance for cost, inconvenience and investment increases. There is a huge body of work on what works in net zero and climate communications (Climate Outreach 2025), including strong findings that communicating climate impacts

raises salience. Our research shows that combining this with a cost angle on the financial hits from flooding and extreme heat is effective in bringing together longer-term outcomes and the immediate concerns of the public. Climate impacts can also feel immediate and tangible for some and effectively animate both climate concern and threat perception, which speaks to voters from left to right. There are signs that the far right is increasingly weaponising the need for adaptation against policies to mitigate emissions. Progressives need to seize the narrative on adaptation in response.

In recent years, there has been a strong focus on highlighting the co-benefits of climate policies – building support for net zero by championing the improvements it brings, such as warmer homes and cleaner air. This risks downplaying the big ‘why’: the avoidance of catastrophic climate impacts. However, delivering net zero is such a big challenge that it requires systemic change, creating an opportunity to tackle the inequalities embedded within those systems. Climate policies have the potential to deliver social outcomes – outcomes which could also signal ‘fairness’, and in doing so build trust.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3. BUILD TRUST THROUGH EFFECTIVE, PEOPLE-FACING POLICIES**

Disaffection with politics, especially in combination with challenging economic conditions, contributes to low trust, cynicism and pessimism about the future. Climate policies that require public participation – such as through their behaviours or purchasing decisions – would particularly benefit from an uplift in public confidence. Effective people-facing policies, local strategies and community schemes all have a role to play in building trust and confidence (LCEF and Cooperative Party 2025). There is also good evidence that public engagement in policy design can help improve policy legibility and fairness. This will be essential for building trust through effective consumer-focused policies, in particular.

The cost of living is by far the number one priority for the public right now. There are two ways climate policy can and should tackle the cost pressures people are facing. The first is to support the uptake of clean consumer technologies that lower costs – for example, with social leasing schemes for electric vehicles and providing capital to help low-income homeowners switch to solar. These actions would build a series of cohorts who have then directly benefitted from clean technology – individuals who could advocate to friends and family and act as case studies for government to shout about. The immediacy of these benefits can also help build the case for the future benefits of longer-term policies.

The second way to tackle cost of living pressures is to manage upfront energy costs as the UK rebuilds its energy infrastructure. The cost of offshore wind, for example, is likely at its peak, so costs could be reduced by procuring less now and more later. The country’s decrepit electricity grid needs to be rebuilt, regardless of the energy it is carrying. To keep the costs down, the government could compel transmission operators to consider flexibility first, explore a claw back mechanism when public finance is not spent directly on assets, and monitor for investment in maintenance (not just building new).

Climate policy is not – and should not be – the only mechanism available for bringing down household costs. But it can play a role in reducing energy bills, and it can reduce the policy costs of renewables. We recommend that future infrastructure levies should not be loaded onto bills, and some existing ones should be phased into general government spending. For example, it is hard to justify the expenditure on carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and green hydrogen, given their low importance to the transition. Legacy renewable costs, such as the Renewables Obligation, should be treated like the innovation

spending they are, and paid for entirely by the exchequer, building on the recent announcement at the budget.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4. FUTURE PROOF POLICY**

In addition to tackling the public's concerns around cost, trust and fairness, we recommend the government takes steps to future proof climate policy against threats. Public weariness and low trust do not stand in the way of a progressive government committed to net zero delivering on clean energy now. This is a policy area that the government can deliver on, and perhaps even act as a proof-point for their competence. It is also an area of net zero policy that is harder to dismantle in the future. In 2021, Marine Le Pen announced that she would "take down wind turbines if elected" (De Clercq 2021) but the reality is that there would be far too high a political and economic cost to halting at least 8 per cent of the country's electricity production, even if she or her allies were able to stand. Right-wing populists can pick these targets, but the legacy effect of the investment in renewables is very hard to undo. It's not foolproof – see Trump's America – but investment in energy infrastructure is often too costly to negate. Hungary has had more than a decade of a right-wing populist, anti-climate political leader, yet the country has seen a major growth in solar power, because it is cheap and popular – there is more political risk in opposing it. While Reform voters in the UK are more likely than any other group to support oil and gas, they also tend to support renewables – seeing them as an investment in both our economy and energy security.

There is a growing body of academic literature that identifies the importance of policy durability to decarbonisation (Jordon and Moore 2020). In addition to the government focusing on projects that would carry political and financial risk if dismantled (ie energy infrastructure), policy durability could also be supported by the wider climate movement building and amplifying a moderate centre-right voice on climate – helping to reduce partisanship around this issue.

There is an ongoing debate on how and where the term 'net zero' should be used. In terms of future-proofing decarbonisation policies, there is a balance to be struck. On the one hand, some climate policies should be delivered in a way that is not too "net zero coded", so that they are less vulnerable to being loudly dismantled by a future right-wing populist party. On the other hand, it is important to ensure that there is some positive public noise about the term, so that there is a base level of positivity and understanding in the worse-case scenario that there is a referendum on net zero.

Finally, we have seen the partisan effects on people's views on net zero as they move further to the right. Taking a step back to consider the wider context in which this has occurred, there is clear evidence that austerity and the degradation of our social infrastructure has led to increased loneliness and isolation, which is correlated with far-right views (Peterson et al 2025, Lubrano 2025). Tackle the other reasons people are drawn to right wing populists and the shadow these players are able to cast on climate policy is reduced.

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# APPENDIX

## A1. METHODOLOGY FOR OPINION RESEARCH

### *On public opinion*

- A review of existing datasets, including:
  - ongoing tracker polling of UK public opinion by YouGov for LCEF, commissioned and run by Persuasion UK throughout 2025 up to December of that year (five waves in total)
  - ongoing tracker polling of UK public opinion by YouGov for Climate Barometer running from October 2022 to October 2025 (eight waves in total)
  - opinion tracker polling of public opinion by Pollfish for Meliore Foundation across 24 key countries, including the UK, from January 2022 to July 2025.
- 10 half-hour qualitative interviews with people who have changed their mind on net zero, both a) those who are newly oppositional to net zero, and b) those for whom it has become less salient. These were identified and recruited using Opinium's longitudinal survey panel based on their survey answers to net zero related questions over time.
- Two one-hour focus groups with 'Reform curious' voters – ie those who did not vote for Reform at the 2024 general election but who are open to doing so at the next election (placing themselves >5/10 on a willingness to vote scale). One of these groups was comprised of Labour 2024 voters and the other non-Labour 2024 voters.
- A fresh round of polling among 5,000 UK voters via YouGov.
- Two new message testing experiments in the format of a conjoint and RCT experiment conducted among 3,000 UK voters via YouGov.

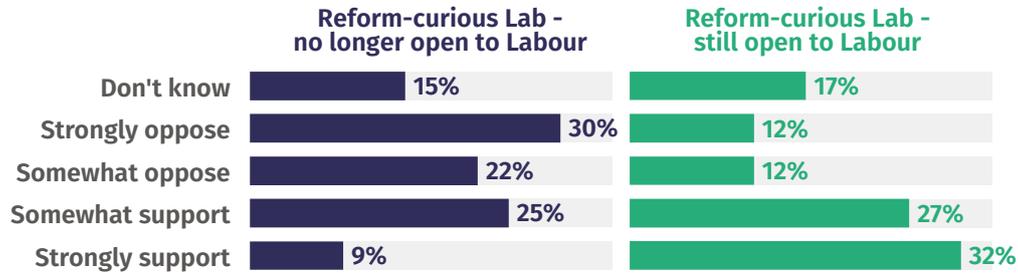
### *On elite and media opinion*

- A review of ongoing tracker polling of MPs in the UK Parliament by YouGov for Climate Barometer running from October 2022 to October 2025 (8 waves in total).
- Dedicated media analysis and social listening conducted by Jack Mulholland of the Audience Insight Hub at the Meliore Foundation.
- A review of evidence collected by others, especially ECIU and Climate News Tracker.

**FIGURE A1**

**Reform-curious Labour voters who have not yet totally turned away from Labour are more supportive of net zero**

Support for net zero among Reform-curious Labour voters, split out by their willingness to vote Labour next time



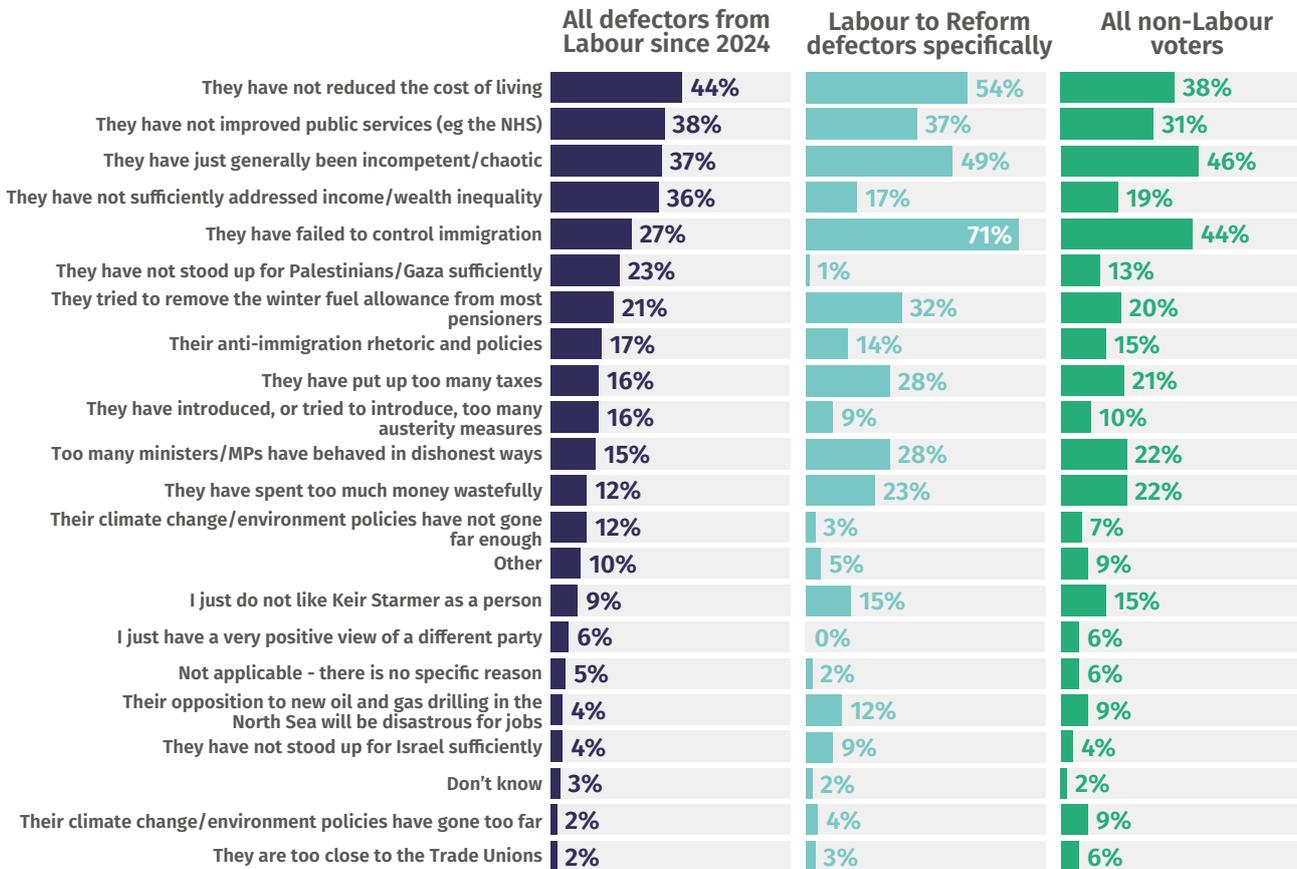
Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: YouGov for Persuasion/LCEF, January 2026, n=289 Reform-curious Labour voters, defined as Labour 2024 voters who place themselves at a six or above out of 10 on willingness to vote Reform.

**FIGURE A2**

**People are not defecting from Labour because of their climate/environment policies**

Q: Why are you not currently planning to vote Labour?



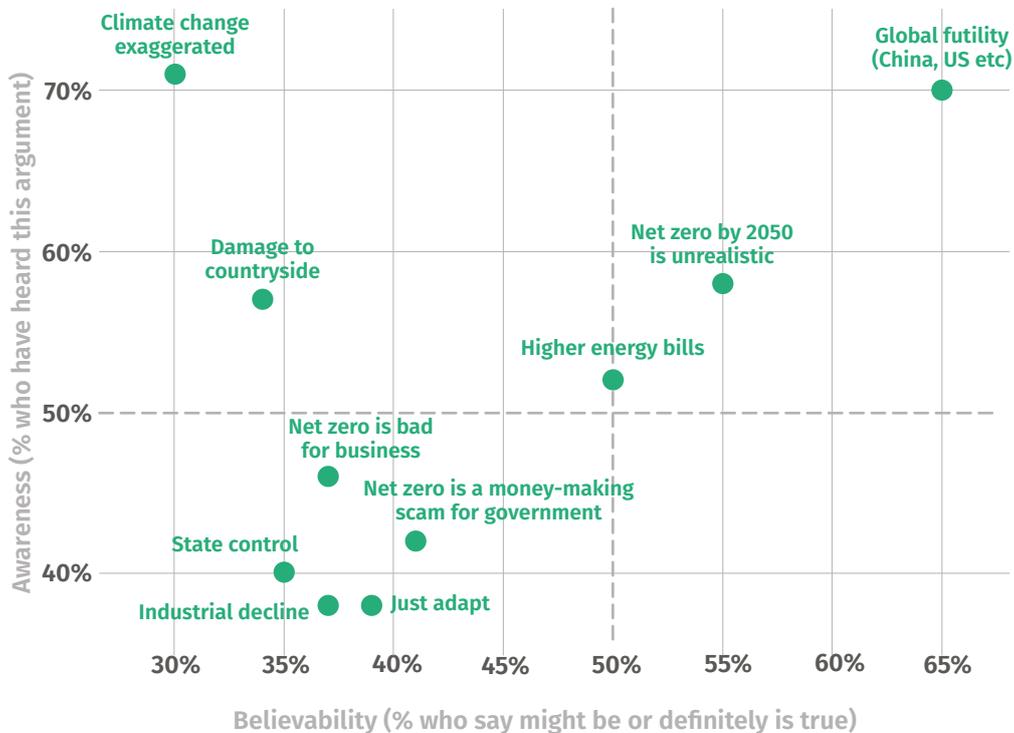
Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: Online survey of GB adults conducted by YouGov for Persuasion UK/LCEF, December 2025. Sample size = 3,000, nationally representative.

**FIGURE A3**

**Awareness and believability of anti-net zero arguments**

Q: Have you heard this argument against net zero before? To what extent do you think it is true?



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: Our assessment of the argument’s risk level in chapter 4 was also shaped by the ease of rebuttal and other research findings.

**A2. ADDITIONAL MESSAGES TESTED**

**Bad for business**

Argument tested: “Net zero is bad for business, piling costs and red tape onto companies and making it harder for Britain to compete”

The left is sometimes perceived as anti-business or lacking business instincts (see the former chief economist of the Bank of England’s recent criticisms of Labour).<sup>7</sup> This makes an anti-business argument more of a challenge for a Labour government delivering climate policy than it would for a right-wing one. However, the argument that net zero is bad for business currently lacks credibility and is easily countered by the economic case for home-grown renewable energy: it can boost the UK’s global competitiveness and reduce the volatility of energy prices, which pose a bigger threat to business.

**State control**

Argument tested: “Net zero is a way for the state to control how people live, from what cars they drive to how they heat their homes”

The argument that net zero policies are a form of state control is a story about government over-reach and interference. These concerns about restrictions on

<sup>7</sup> Alencar M (2026) ‘Andy Haldane: Labour has ‘no nose for business’, article, City AM, 26 January 2026. <https://www.cityam.com/andy-haldane-labour-has-no-nose-for-business>

liberty are particularly pertinent to household decarbonisation and demand reduction – such as low traffic neighbourhoods, the ZEV mandate, reducing meat consumption, and fears of enforced blackouts. They are often seen alongside anti-vax/anti-lockdown positions, as part of a wider set of conspiracy theories.

A particular challenge for the current government is that the left is more vulnerable than the right to criticisms of paternalism and “nanny state regulations”. In contrast, the right is often given more license by their supporters to tell people what to do and what to believe, particularly from a moral perspective.

These concerns did come up in one of our focus groups with Reform-curious voters:

***"When we're talking about what people can eat, where they can drive and stuff, at the end of the day, we should all have our freedom. That is supposed to be the foundation of our country, actually having that freedom. People fought for years in the war and stuff to fight for our freedom."***

We found the most effective rebuttal to this argument was that the British public care about looking after the planet and want laws and regulations in place to make it easier to do the right thing. Our qualitative research suggests that there is public ambivalence on being “told what to do” and potentially quite a high tolerance for having choices limited and ‘bad’ options taken away, as long as they trust the decision maker and messenger.

#### **Damage to the countryside**

*Argument tested: “Net zero is ruining the British countryside, carpeting it with ugly and disruptive wind farms and solar panels while hurting the livelihoods of everyday farmers”*

British countryside can be symbolic, representing not just landscape but also cultural heritage: “England’s green and pleasant land”. Local changes to the countryside caused by building renewable energy infrastructure, such as solar farms or pylons, can – for some – represent an overarching failure of the government to value what ‘most people’ think is important. This is a narrowly held view, and while loud and vocal opposition can be mobilised at a very local level, we don’t see this being an effective argument for national mobilisation. Opposition to infrastructure doesn’t seem to pick up much support from people who aren’t directly affected. Many people are aware of this argument – more than 50 per cent of those polled – but believability is low: people have heard it, but they don’t buy it. The argument that net zero is ruining the British countryside was easily overcome for most by messages including the threat of extreme weather to nature and our countryside.

#### **Climate change scepticism**

*Argument tested: “Claims about climate change are exaggerated, used to scare the public into accepting extreme policies”*

Criticisms that climate change is exaggerated challenges the mainstream scientific consensus on climate change – they include disbelief about man-made climate change and the view that climate change won’t have any negative impacts. At the more extreme end of the scale, fears are raised about the silencing of dissenters – suggestions that dissenting opinion has been excluded from public broadcasters, news media, and civil society. For a narrow group of people, their low trust in traditional media and institutions prompts them to seek out alternative sources of information that they feel are more validating of their beliefs and feelings. They may be drawn to movements that create an in-group identity, satisfying their need for connection by uniting them against a common ‘establishment’ enemy.

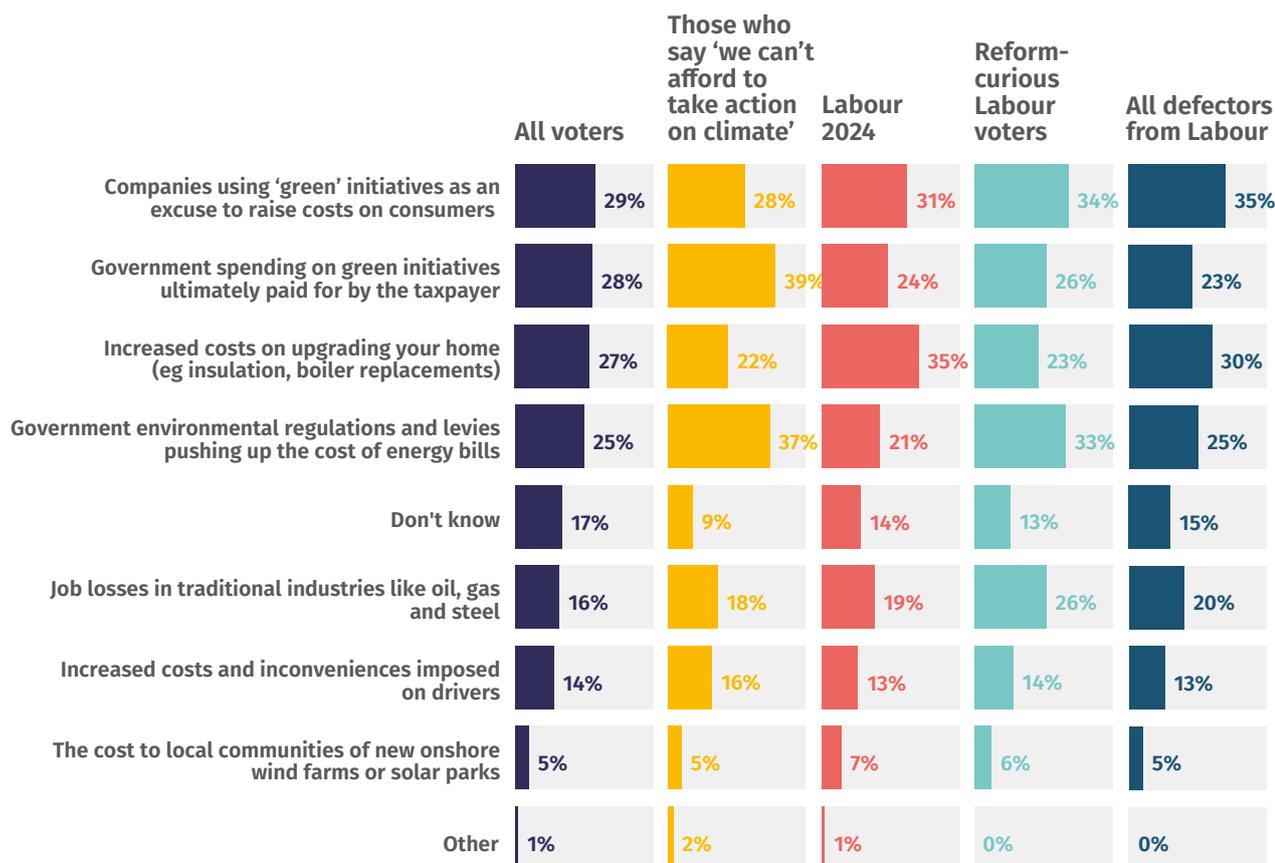
Whereas all the other arguments we tested spoke to some potential legitimate concerns that people might hold, outright rejection of climate change falls into a

post-truth category and is a minority position (about 5 per cent of people). Twenty-three per cent of Britons think claims about climate change have been exaggerated, rising to 61 per cent of Reform voters.<sup>8</sup> While climate change as an exaggeration has been heard by most, it is also dismissed by most. Reform voters are the notable outliers here.

**FIGURE A4**

**Association of costs with net zero**

*Q: Which of these costs do you most associate with net zero? Choose up to two*



Source: Persuasion UK 2026

Note: YouGov online survey of UK adults for Persuasion UK, January 2026. Sample size = 6,000.

8 YouGov (2025) 'Earth Day 2025: where do Britons stand on climate change?', article, 17 April 2025. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/52033-earth-day-2025-where-do-britons-stand-on-climate-change>



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