

# Taking the temperature

Has the political climate changed  
on Net Zero?



**ONWARD** 

**PUBLICFIRST** 

# About Onward

Onward is a modernising think tank whose mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity and strengthen communities in all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are not affiliated to any party but believe in a mainstream conservatism. We recognise the value of markets and support the good that government can do, and believe that a strong society is the foundation of both. We want to seize the opportunities of the future while preserving the accumulated knowledge of the past. We believe that most people are hard-working, aspirational and decent, but that many do not have the opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Our goal is to address the needs of the whole country: young as well as old; urban as well as rural; in all parts of the UK – particularly places that feel neglected or ignored in Westminster – by working with ordinary people directly and developing practical policies that work.

## Thanks

This report was produced in collaboration with Public First, who conducted two GB nationally representative polls on 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February and 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April of 4,021 and 2,008 people respectively. We would like to thank Rachel Wolf, James Frayne, and Seb Wride for their comments and support.

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# About Getting to Zero

Established a year before COP26, Onward's Getting to Zero programme is dedicated to developing practical and politically possible ways for the UK to meet its net zero ambitions and lead the world in decarbonisation.

It is led by Ed Birkett and Alex Luke, and the steering group is co-chaired by Rt Hon Caroline Flint and Dame Caroline Spelman.



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# Summary





On 24 June 2019, the House of Commons approved the UK's target of reaching Net Zero carbon emissions by 2050 without a single objection. Six months later, every major political party committed to Net Zero in their manifestos at the General Election. Less than two years later, Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP politicians competed to out-green each other at COP26 in Glasgow. The UK's conversion from industrial revolutionary to environmental champion is ostensibly complete.

But proponents of the Net Zero target must not be complacent. There is a noisy campaign on the right of British politics, including from Nigel Farage, for greater accountability over Net Zero policies. Heat pumps and electric vehicles are getting cheaper, but voters have not forgotten the costly diesel cars or combi boilers that previous governments told them to buy. The Treasury is concerned about the fiscal implications of Net Zero: taxes are already at their highest for several decades.

This paper asks what voters think and where the electoral fault lines might be. Have people heard of the Net Zero target and, if they have, do they support it? How important is Net Zero compared to other issues? What motivates voters to support Net Zero and what aspects of the transition are they most worried about? How might voters react to politicians changing their stance on environmental issues? Would there be an electoral prize or penalty for a party diluting its Net Zero target? What do Conservative voters really think about this issue?

## **Key findings:**

### **1. Net Zero is overwhelmingly popular**

Three fifths (60%) of voters support the UK's plan to reach Net Zero by 2050. This is six times the share (10%) who say they oppose the policy. And 55% of people agree that "The UK should keep its plan to reach Net Zero by 2050, even if it's going to be expensive, as we need to stop damaging the environment", more than double the level (25%) who think the UK should scrap the plan if it is too expensive.

## **2. Working class Tories (C2DE) are more supportive of investing in renewable energy**

And they are also more optimistic about new job opportunities in renewables, and confident in the UK's leading role in the science and technology needed to reach Net Zero, than more affluent Conservative voters (ABC1).

## **3. There is no North-South divide among Conservatives**

Northern Tories are slightly more likely to support keeping the Net Zero target than Tory voters in the South (51% compared to 48%, respectively). And Northern Conservatives are also more likely to agree that "There is no good reason to get rid of the Net Zero target."

## **4. Ditching Net Zero is a vote-loser**

Nearly half (46%) of voters say they would be less likely to vote for a party that pledged to get rid of the Net Zero target. Only 15% say it would make them more likely to vote for such a party. Ditching Net Zero is unlikely to win back those 2019 Conservatives who say they no longer support the party. Among this group, 51% say they would not vote for a party that got rid of the Net Zero target; only 18% said they would vote for such a party.

## **5. Messaging matters**

Support for Net Zero increases if the discussion focuses on the long term. Preserving the world that we leave behind for our grandchildren finds equally strong support from both Labour (79% agree) and Conservative (78% agree) voters. But, where phrases like "climate action" and "going green" galvanise younger graduates, they fail to gain much traction among other groups; opinion diverges by age, class, and education.

## **6. Voters' support for Net Zero remains strong following the Ukraine crisis and rising fuel costs**

In a second poll, conducted on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April, we found that a majority (55%) think the conflict means we should move faster rather than slower (28%) on Net Zero. The public overwhelmingly prefer investing in renewables (68%) as the best way of securing the UK's energy supply.

Support is widespread but not universal. For proponents of the Net Zero target, convincing the unconvinced is more important than preaching to the choir. The polling in this report implies four key lessons for how politicians and campaigners should talk about Net Zero in order to maintain the currently high levels of support:

- 1.** People are motivated by personal impact. Voters, especially older generations, overwhelmingly care about the impact of environmental damage on the lives of their children and grandchildren.
- 2.** Populist arguments cut through; voters want politicians to stick to their promises and are sceptical of big energy companies making big profits.
- 3.** Voters respond to the UK's role as a world leader in science and technology and the job opportunities that arise from growing sectors like renewable energy.
- 4.** While voters of all ages care about protecting the environment and investing in renewable energy, many older and working-class voters are put off by the language of “tackling climate change”.


Public First carried out polling online from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2022. Respondents were 4,021 UK adults. To update our findings in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Public First carried out a second poll of 2,008 people from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2022. Results were weighted to be nationally representative, by interlocked age and gender, region and social grade. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.



# Hot or cold?

How does support for Net Zero vary  
between groups?





This chapter explores the salience of climate change and Net Zero. How concerned are voters about climate change, how aware are they of the Net Zero target, do they support taking action, and how much weight do they give to these issues when it comes time to cast their vote?

## The importance of climate change as an issue

The cost of living has solidified as the most important issue facing voters today: 61% of voters list it as one of the most important issues facing the country and 70% say it is one of the most important issues facing them and their family. This is considerably higher than any other issue, including the quality of the NHS and the state of the economy, which typically rank second and third.

Beyond these three, there is a broad consensus among voters that the “threat of climate change” is one of the most important issues we face. For the average voter, climate change is ranked as the top issue “facing the world”, the third-most important issue for “the future lives of your children and grandchildren”, the fourth-most important issue “facing the country”, and the fifth-most important facing “you and your family”.

While there is some variation between different voter groups on these questions, it is very limited:

- While climate change tends to be a lower priority for Leave voters, C2DE voters and non-graduates, it is invariably ranked within the top six most important issues (out of a possible 15), and higher than housing, tax, crime and welfare. Similarly, while climate change is typically higher among older, graduate and AB voters, it is usually by only one or two places.
- One in three voters (35%) choose climate change as an issue that they have “begun to take more seriously in the last few years”, behind only the cost of living (57%) and the quality of the NHS (43%). Among Conservative voters, climate change is ranked 4th (32%), just behind the state of the economy (33%). Even 27% of Brexit Party voters agree with this, the same share who say they have begun to take the “level of taxation” more seriously.
- Age is not a major dividing line in the way it can be for other issues, such as Brexit. Both 18-24s and over-65s rank climate change fourth in terms of importance for the UK, with younger voters rating it as of broadly equal importance as housing availability and the state of the economy (~21%). For

older groups, the ranking is similar, but the economy represents a considerably higher priority.

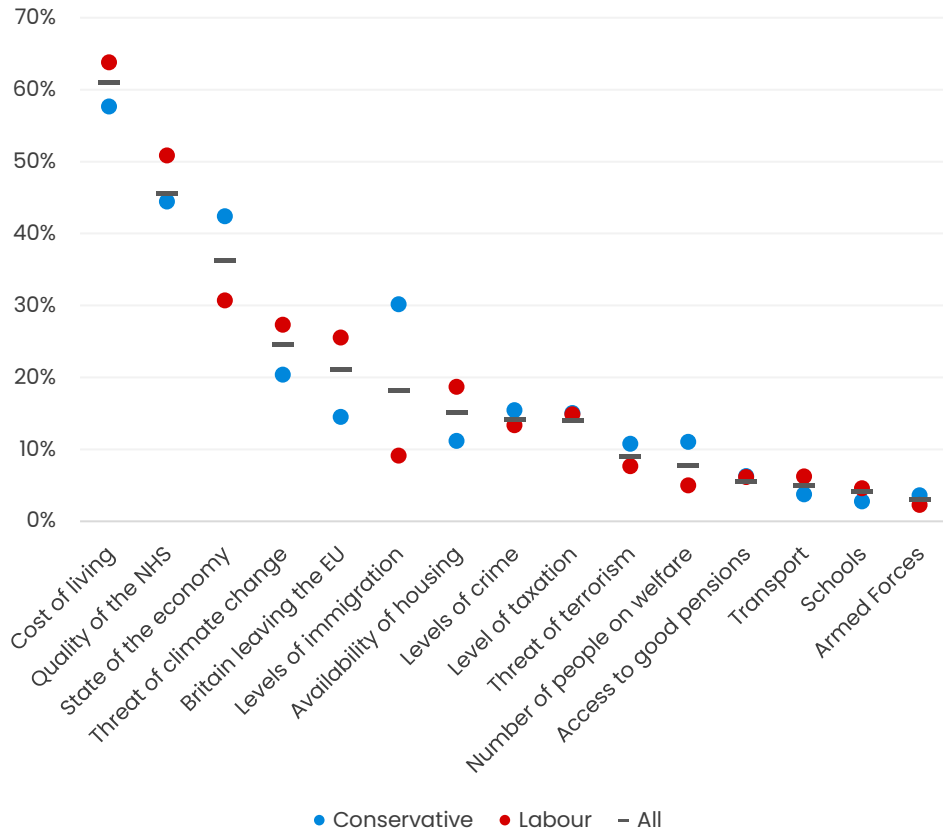
- Even those who do not say it is an immediate priority for the UK think that climate change is a priority in other ways. For those who did not put climate change among their top three issues facing the UK, nearly a third (32%) place it among the top three issues facing the world, roughly in line with poverty and food shortages.

But, while climate change is ranked a high priority among all voter groups across different parameters, it is much more important *politically* for some voters as opposed to others. For example:

- A third (33%) of voters want politicians to take climate change more seriously, behind only the cost of living, the NHS and the economy. But climate change is a lower priority among current Conservatives: just 24% want politicians to take climate change more seriously, placing it 8th on their list of priorities behind crime, tax, housing and welfare. Among Labour voters this is 36%, and it ranks 3rd.
- Similarly, when asked what issues would be “most important for a political party to focus on in order to get your vote”, 24% of voters choose “the threat of climate change”, ranking it fourth behind the cost of living, the NHS and the economy. But the equivalent figure for the Conservatives is 19%, and ranked 6th behind tax and immigration. This compares to 4th for Labour (25%) and Liberal Democrat (35%) voters.
- This partially reflects different parties’ electoral coalitions: university graduates and Remain voters are over fifty percent more likely to say that climate change would sway their vote compared to Leave voters and those educated to GCSE-level or below. But this variation does not extend to age: the same proportion (25%) of 18-24s and over-65s say a focus on tackling climate change would be important for a party to get their vote.

**Figure 1: Which do you think are the most important issues facing the country?, ranked by all voters and 2019 vote**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



Note: Respondents could choose up to three options

Taken together, this suggests that while all voters care about the threat of climate change, especially to the world and future generations, it is more important as a motivating factor for progressive voters than for conservative voters, who tend to be motivated more by issues of economics such as the level of taxation or state of the economy, or immigration.

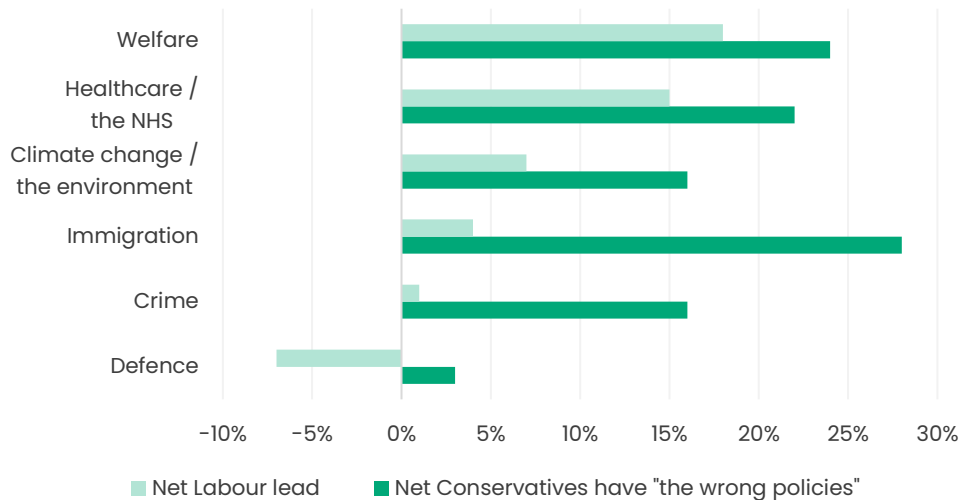
## Party ownership and policy approval

Climate change is an important issue for voters of all stripes, even if it is less likely to galvanise conservative voters at an election. But which party do voters think has the best policies on the issue of climate change - and how does party ownership vary among different groups of voters?

- Labour had a clear lead on every issue we tested aside from Defence, where the Conservatives continue to hold a 7% lead. This includes large Labour leads on both traditional Labour-owned issues such as welfare (18% lead), the NHS (15%) as well as smaller leads on traditional Conservative-owned issues such as crime (1%) and immigration (4%). This reflects the wider state of the polls and the Conservatives' weak national performance but provides important context for climate change.
- Climate change has traditionally a Labour-owned issue, although this has started to change. Labour's lead was noticeably smaller than for other issues, at just 7% (27% to 20%). However, this masks a high degree of variation: Labour have a double digit lead among people under the age of 45 years old, while the Conservatives are 11 points ahead among over-65s and Leave voters. More voters believe that neither party has the best policies (31%) than choose either of the main parties, rising to 37% among older voters. The public doesn't think anyone is doing well on the environment, so there appears to be an open field for political competition on Net Zero.
- When asked whether the Conservatives have "the right policies" or "the wrong policies", voters say the Conservatives have the wrong policies on every issue we tested. However, the margin was much smaller on climate change, where 27% of voters said the right policies versus 43% who said the wrong policies (net 16% wrong) compared to welfare (net 24%), the NHS (net 22%) and immigration (net 28%). Even on defence, more voters said the Conservatives had the wrong policies (35%) than the right policies (32%).
- Interrogating this further, we can see that the voter groups who think the Conservatives have the "wrong policies" on climate and the environment are disproportionately from higher (ABC1) social grades, voted Remain, and went to university - suggesting that their antipathy is driven more by a desire for the Conservatives to go further on Net Zero than a desire to slow the pace of the transition.

## Figure 2: Party ownership and policy approval for select issues

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



## Awareness and support for Net Zero

Even if voters care about climate change and are motivated to vote based on the issue, that does not mean that they support the commitment to reduce UK carbon emissions to zero by 2050 – or even that they have heard of it. To what extent is Net Zero well-understood by voters and to what extent do they support it?

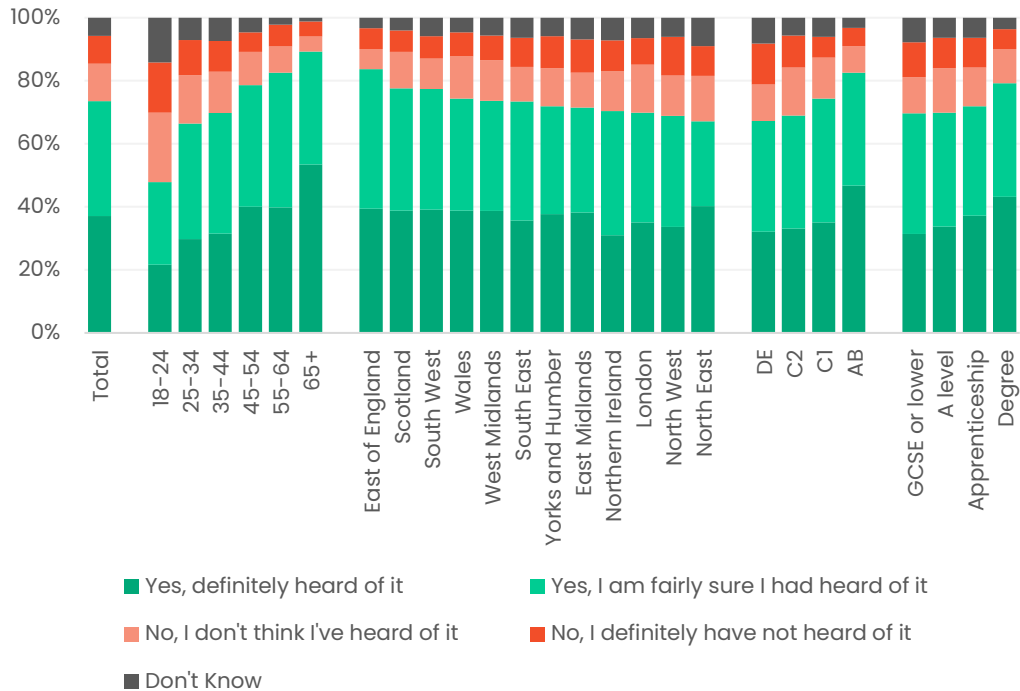
Overall, nearly three in four (73%) voters say they have heard of the Government’s plan to achieve Net Zero by 2050, around half of whom say they have “definitely heard of it”. However, awareness of Net Zero is heavily skewed by different demographic and political markers. For example:

- Awareness is strongly correlated with age, with more than 8 in 10 over-55 year-olds saying they have heard of Net Zero compared to fewer than half of 18-24 year olds (48%). Voters aged 18-24 years old are nearly four times more likely (38%) than over-65s (10%) to say they have not heard of the Government’s plan to reach Net Zero, and three times as likely to say they have definitely not heard of it.
- There is considerable variation by education and social grade. Only 31% of people with GCSEs or lower have definitely heard of the Government’s Net

Zero plan, compared to 43% of people with a University degree. Meanwhile AB voters are 15 percentage points more likely than C2DE (47% to 32%) to say they have definitely heard of the Government's Net Zero plan.

### Figure 3: Net awareness of Net Zero, by demographics

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

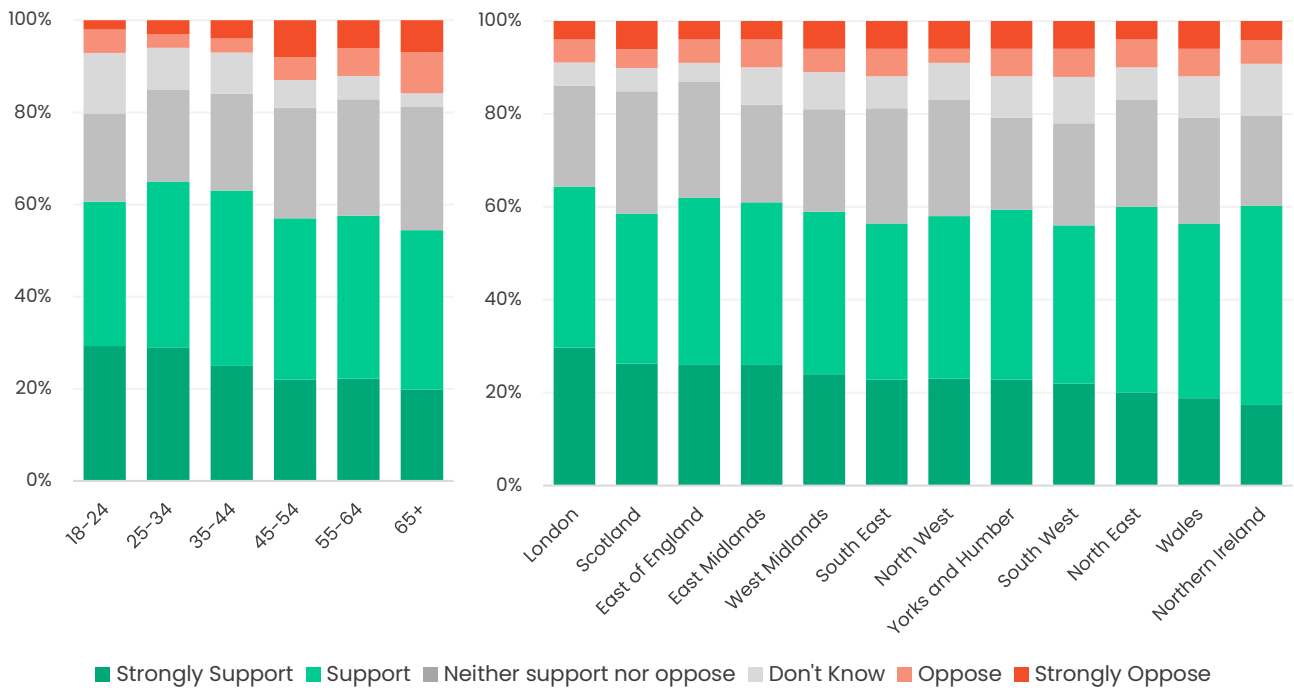


- Politically, it is notable that a high proportion - more than 80% - of Leave voters and Conservative voters say they have heard of the Government's Net Zero plans. This is higher than Remain voters (79%) and Labour voters (71%). Those who did not vote (56%) are least likely to have heard of the Net Zero plan.
- When asked whether they support or oppose the UK's plan to reach Net Zero by 2050, three fifths (60%) of voters say they support the plan. This is six times the share (10%) who say they oppose the policy. We found that no demographic group or political affiliation had more than 20% of voters opposed to Net Zero, and no group or affiliation aside from the Brexit Party had fewer than 40% of voters in support of the policy.

- This level of support does not vary wildly by different demographic markers. Support is marginally higher among younger, better-educated voters and higher social grades and lower among voters who are older, less-educated and from lower social grades, but the difference is limited. Net support is nearly twice as high among Remain voters (65%) as Leavers (34%) and 75% higher among Liberal Democrats (72%) compared to Conservative (41%) voters.

**Figure 4: Net Zero support by age and region**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

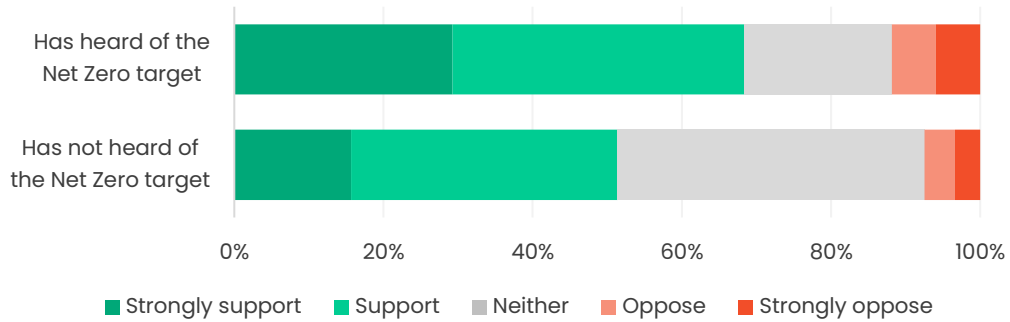


Those who said they had already heard of the Net Zero target were more likely to support it than those who had not heard of Net Zero. Among those who knew what Net Zero was, 29% strongly support the target and a further 38% are mildly supportive. Just 12% are mildly or strongly opposed. Those who had not heard of the target were more likely to say they neither support nor oppose the target than to pick any other option. But net support (the proportion who support Net Zero minus the proportion who oppose) is strongly positive for both groups - +55% for those who had already heard of Net Zero and +38% for those who had not.



### Figure 5: Level of support for Net Zero, by whether respondents had heard of the target prior to taking the survey

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



Note: The two questions were asked in the following order: (1) The Government has announced plans to achieve Net Zero in the UK by 2050. Prior to taking this poll, had you heard of this plan? (2) The Net Zero target is a target to reach zero greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, balancing any carbon emissions that are produced with carbon reducing measures, in order to reduce the risks from climate change. Do you support or oppose the UK plan to reach Net Zero by 2050?

### Costs and trade-offs

Even when forced to confront the trade-offs between costs of Net Zero and environmental damage if we do not act, people remain strongly supportive of the 2050 target:

- 55% of people agree that “The UK should keep its plan to reach Net Zero by 2050, even if it’s going to be expensive, as we need to stop damaging the environment”, more than double the level (25%) who agree that “The UK should scrap its plan to reach Net Zero by 2050, even if it’s going to be damaging to the environment, as it is going to be too expensive.”
- Conservatives are more divided, but do still tend to lean in this direction, with 48% supporting Net Zero even if it is costly, compared to 38% who think Net Zero should be scrapped. Among all groups, ABC1 Conservatives from 2019 are the closest to the opposite view at 46% to 37%.
- Nearly half (48%) of people agree that there is no good reason to get rid of the Net Zero target, compared to fewer than one in five (18%) who disagree with this statement. Even among those who prioritise ensuring the Government does not spend more than it earns there is clear agreement

(48% to 25%) that there is no good reason to abandon Net Zero, although the margin is smaller.

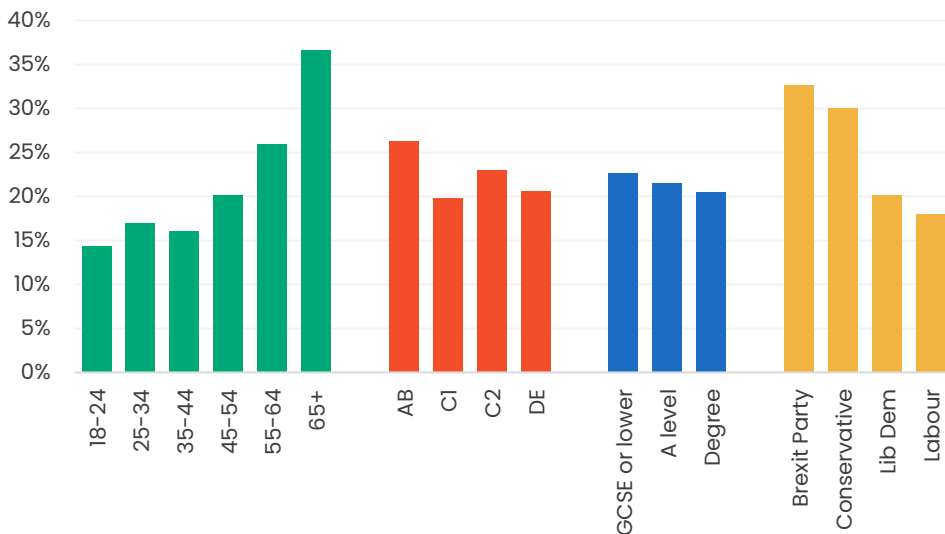
- Support for Net Zero holds up very well in the face of high costs. But, despite this, there is genuine concern over how expensive the transition will be. The most common reason to take less action on climate change is “it is costing too much money”.
- Over a third (38%) of voters agreed that “going green is too expensive” compared to 29% who disagree.

There is very low overall support for cutting environmental levies from energy bills. When we asked voters about ways the Government could cut the cost of living, only 22% preferred reducing environmental levies on energy bills. As an option, it ranked 5th behind various tax cuts and capping energy bills.

But older voters are more than twice as likely to support cutting environmental levies than younger voters (37% of over-65s compared to 14% of 18-24s). Unlike the steep age curve, opinion hardly varies by social grade or education level, as Figure 6 shows below.

**Figure 6: Proportion of people who selected “Reducing the environmental levies on energy bills, sometimes called ‘green taxes’” as a way of reducing the cost of living**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

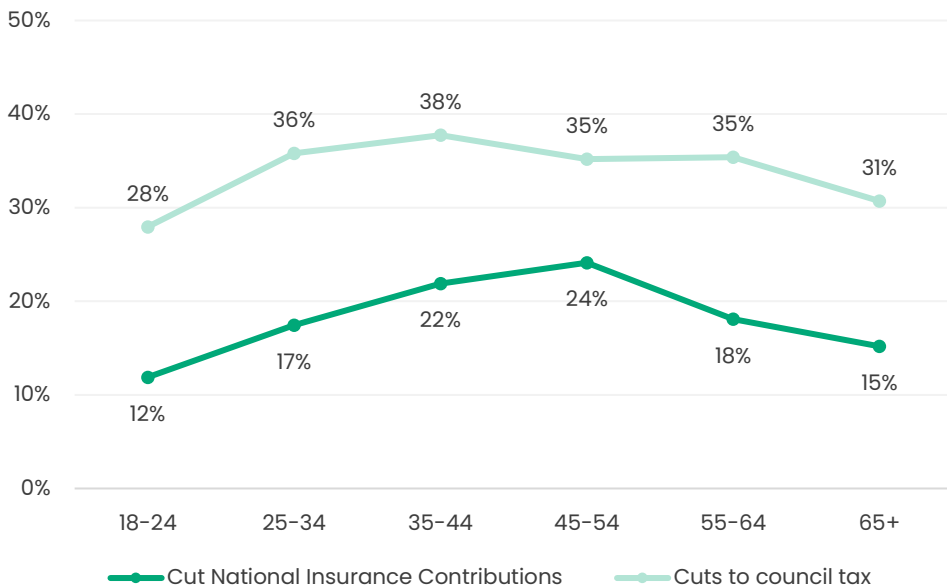


Of the other options, young people are the least likely age group to prefer cuts to VAT or council tax or limits on domestic energy bills. But our data suggests that younger voters will be far more pleased with the recently announced cut to income tax than older voters. Cutting income tax ranks second for 18-24s at 28%, just behind limits on domestic energy bills (29%). Only 16% of over-65s chose cuts to income tax, ranking as the sixth most popular option.

An age gap persists for other options too. The youngest voters are 4 percentage points more likely than older voters to choose “Reverse the cuts to Universal Credit” and 11 points more likely to choose “Controls on rent levels”. But cutting National Insurance and council tax finds the strongest support among more middle-aged voters. Those aged 35-44 are the most in favour of cutting council tax and those aged 45-54 are most in favour of cutting National Insurance Contributions.

**Figure 7: Support for cutting National Insurance and council tax, by age group**


Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



# Electoral impact

What effect could different positions on  
Net Zero have on the next election?





This chapter explores the possible political consequences of the Net Zero target. Given the growing calls from some quarters for politicians to revise their Net Zero ambitions, we wanted to understand the potential electoral gains or losses associated with changing a party's position on Net Zero, and how different groups of voters in different parts of the country would react.

We find that ditching Net Zero is a massive vote-loser for the Conservatives. They would lose support in Red Wall constituencies and among those who backed the Tories for the first time in 2019.

### **How would voters react to a party abandoning Net Zero?**

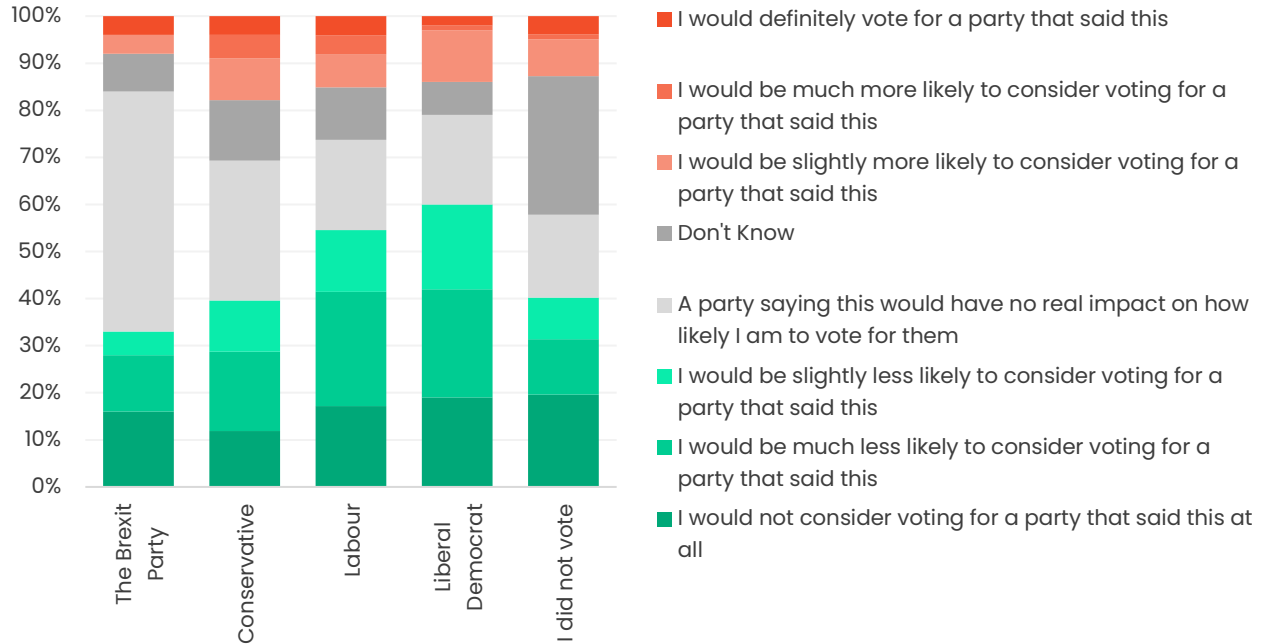
Overall, when asked “if a political party said they were going to get rid of the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for this party if at all?”, nearly half (46%) of voters say that it would make them less likely to vote for that party. Only one in seven voters - 15% - say it would make them more likely to vote for such a party.

This varies somewhat between different groups. Younger voters say they would be less likely to vote for a party that ditched Net Zero than older groups; 53% of 18-24 year-olds say they would not vote for such a party, compared to 44% of over-65 year olds. The age group most supportive of ditching Net Zero is 35-44 year-olds, of which 23% say they would be more likely to vote for a party that had ditched Net Zero. Every education cohort and social grade would on balance be less likely to vote for an anti-Net Zero party, with more educated voters and higher social grades being the least likely.

Politically, Conservative voters are most likely to favour a party that ditched Net Zero, although only relatively speaking. A strong plurality still say they would be less likely: twice as many (39%) of 2019 Conservatives say that they would be less likely to vote for a party that ditched Net Zero than say they would be more likely to do so (18%). This ratio is more than three times for Labour (54% less likely versus 15% more) and the Liberal Democrats (60% versus 14%) respectively.

**Figure 8: If a political party said they were going to get rid of the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for this party if at all?**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



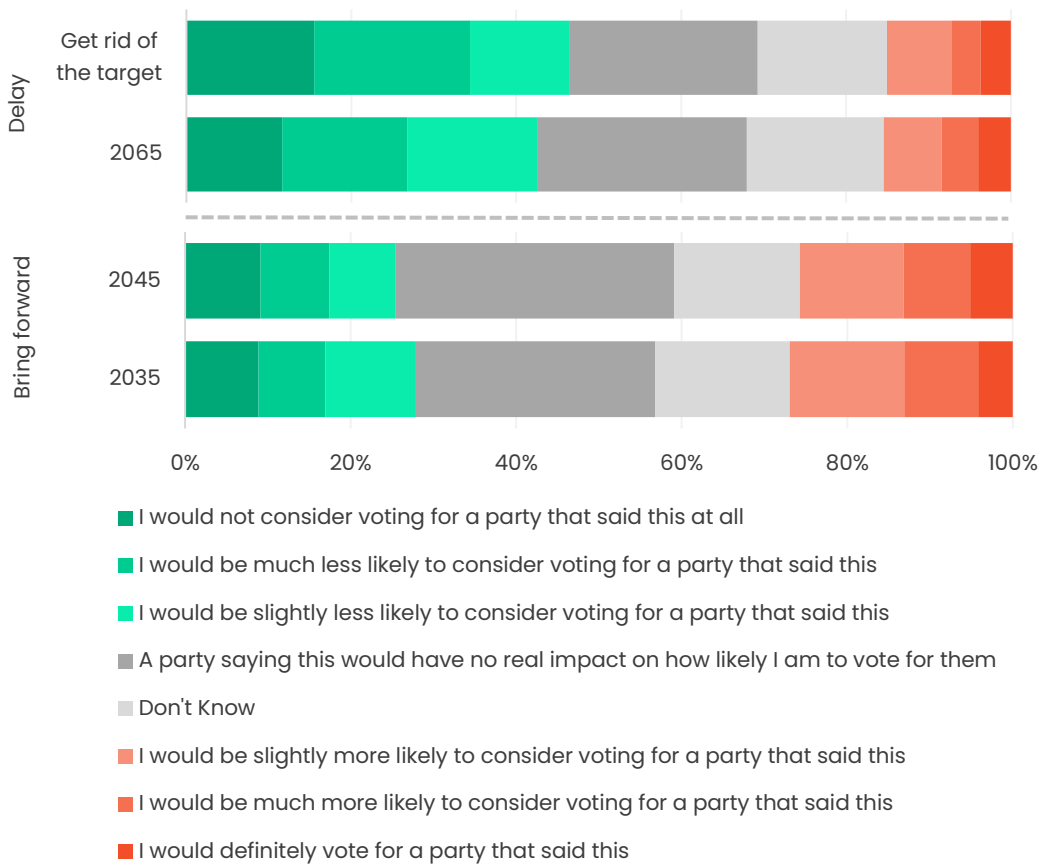
When asked about different possible changes to the Net Zero target, voters tend to support the existing 2050 target or an earlier target.

- Nearly twice as many voters (27%) would be more likely to vote for a party that brought Net Zero forward to 2035 than for a party that pushed it back to 2065 (15%).
- Younger voters are strongly supportive of an earlier target, with 39% of 18-24s saying they would be more likely to vote for a party that committed to a 2035 Net Zero deadline. 30% of over-65s say that such a policy would make them less likely to vote for that party.
- Among Conservatives, more voters would be more likely to favour a party that brought the target forward to 2045 (21%) than delay the target to 2055 (18%), although more would be likely to favour a 2065 target than a 2035 target. More than half (53%) of Labour voters say they would be less likely to vote for a party that pushed Net Zero back to 2065.

- The public generally feels the Government should do more on climate change. 66% of those who feel the Government has the “wrong policies” on the environment also think that the Government should do more on climate change (the belief that the policies are wrong is more about the Government not going far enough than going too far).

**Figure 9: If a political party said they were going to bring forward/delay the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions to X, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for this party if at all?**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



Conservative voters in general are less supportive of Net Zero, but the electoral cost of ditching or diluting Net Zero pledges is considerable. Consider the following questions from our survey:

1. If there was a general election in which the Conservative party ran with a promise to remove the UK's target to reach Net Zero by 2050, how do you think you would vote?
2. If a political party said they were going to get rid of the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for this party if at all?
3. You said that you would vote Conservative if there was a general election. If the Conservatives stated before the next election that they wanted to get rid of the UK's Net Zero target of 2050 as it was too expensive, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for them?

These questions taken together, which are substantively quite similar, give us a more complete picture of the scale of Conservative losses from rowing back on Net Zero commitments. The results suggest that abandoning the Net Zero target could lose the Conservatives between 20% and 30% of their current supporters. That is in addition to those 2019 Conservatives who have since turned away from the party.

When those who would vote Conservative today were asked how the party dropping Net Zero because it was too expensive would impact their likelihood to vote, only 68% say they would still vote Conservative. And 21% of those who currently intend to vote Conservative say they would “probably” or “definitely” not vote for the party if they pledged to drop the Net Zero target at the next election. Only 60% of those who say they would vote Conservative, and that the UK should keep the Net Zero plan, say they would still vote Conservative if they got rid of it. Almost a fifth (18%) say they don't know how they would vote in this scenario.

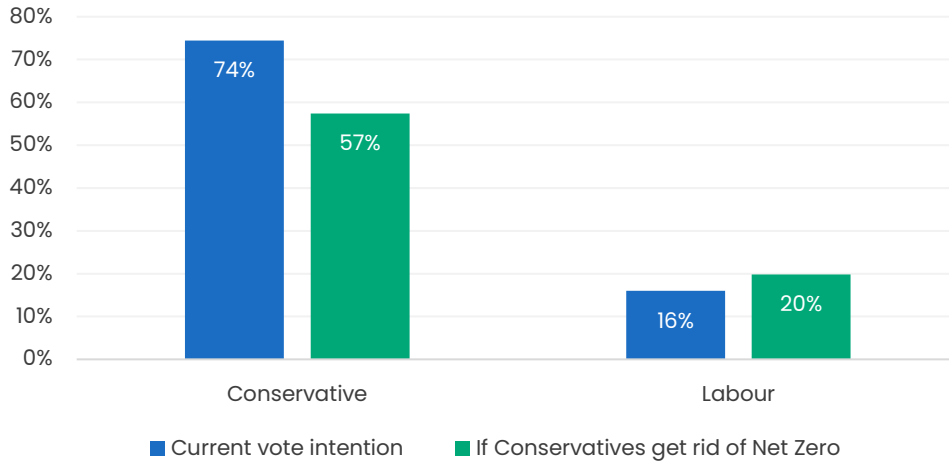
Abandoning or diluting Net Zero support risks further alienating younger voters, even those who supported the Conservatives at the last election. 62% of those aged 18-34 who voted Conservative in 2019 support the Net Zero pledge, compared to 47% of those aged 65 and over. 46% of under-35s who currently intend to vote Conservative say would not do so if the party pledged to get rid of the Net Zero target at the next election. Among under-35s who voted



Conservative in 2019, 74% still intend to back the party if an election was held today. But this figure falls to 57% if the Conservatives pledged to get rid of the Net Zero target.

**Figure 10: Current vote intention among under-35s who voted Conservative in 2019**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

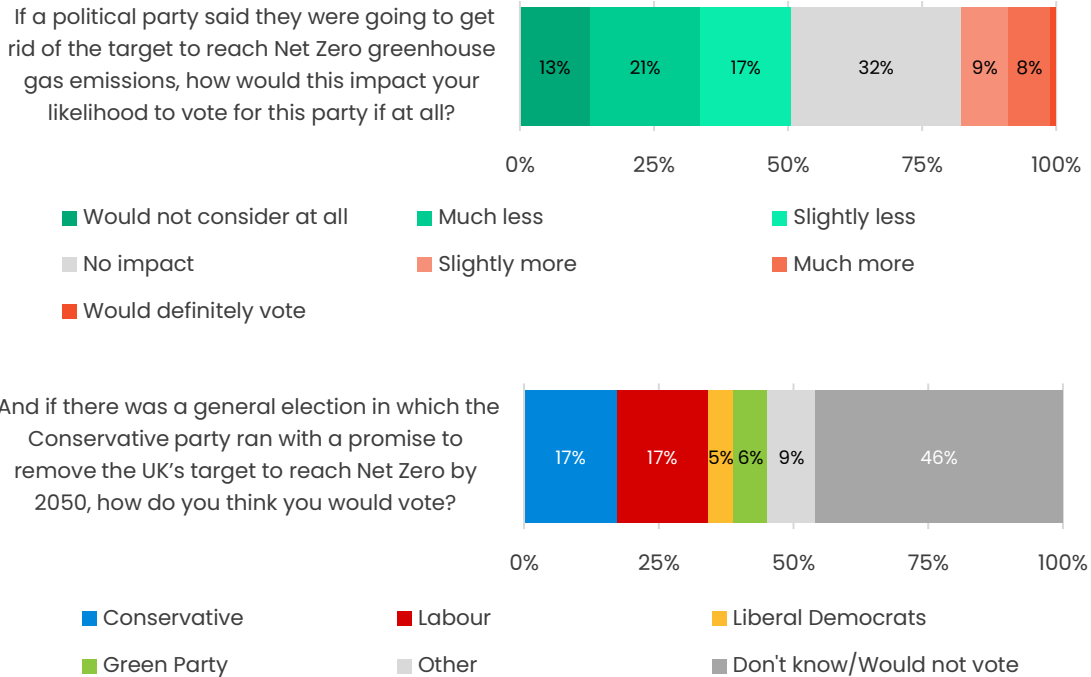


The potential prize of voters is also limited. Only 14% of those who originally said they would not vote Conservative, and that Net Zero should be dropped because it was too expensive, say they would vote Conservative in the scenario that they scrap the target. The number of votes that could be gained by rowing back on the Net Zero pledge is far outweighed by the number of voters who would abandon the party in disappointment.

Ditching Net Zero is unlikely to win back those 2019 Conservatives who say they no longer support the party. Among this group, 51% say they would not vote for a party that got rid of the Net Zero target; only 18% say they would vote for such a party. When asked a different way, only 17% say they would vote Conservative if the party ran with a promise to remove the Net Zero target at the next election.

**Figure 11: Views on ditching Net Zero among voters who backed the Conservatives in 2019 but say they no longer support the party**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



If we look at those voters who switched to the Conservatives in 2019, only 43% say they would vote Conservative tomorrow (excluding don't knows and those who would not vote). If the Conservatives ran with a promise to remove the Net Zero target, only 36% would vote Conservative. So, support among this group of 2019 converts is already very low and removing the target lowers it even further.

Putting this together, getting rid of the Net Zero target would see overall Conservative support (among those who backed the party in 2019) fall by 48% rather than 38%. They could win back 927,000 of those disaffected voters who do not currently intend to vote Conservative. But, of those who would vote Tory, only 73% would still do so if they scrapped the Net Zero target. This translates into a loss of 2.3 million votes. This would result in a net loss of 1.4 million votes.

## How does opinion vary in different areas?

Next, we look at public opinion in key constituencies and among key voter groups. We find that ditching Net Zero is not a major vote-winner anywhere.

We first consider the 'Red Wall' and seats the Conservative gained in 2019. Electorally important and the main battleground seats at the next election - these will be hotly contested as the Conservatives seek to consolidate their hold and Labour fight to regain their heartlands. What do voters in these seats think about the Net Zero target?

Voters in these new seats strongly support Net Zero. Enthusiasm is lower than it is generally across the country, but voters are not sceptical of Net Zero. There is no large coalition that stand against decarbonisation or protecting the environment. They are concerned about the environment, want the government to stick to its targets, and are optimistic about the benefits of Net Zero.

- 53% think that climate change is one of or the most important issue of our time, compared to 56% nationally.
- Net agreement that the Government should be doing more to tackle climate change is +38%, compared to +44% nationally.
- And support for the 2050 Net Zero target is incredibly high. 60% of voters in 2019 gains say they support the target, compared to just 11% who are opposed. This means that net support is +48%, hardly different from the +51% UK-wide.

So there is no large group of voters in key 2019 gains who stand opposed to Net Zero. Public opinion in these seats favours the emissions target. Misjudging the public mood on Net Zero, and assuming widespread scepticism, would be a mistake.

Voters in the Red Wall are more likely to want parties to focus on immigration and crime than on climate change. For all voters, the threat of climate change is the fourth-most important issue that they want parties to focus on to get their vote, at 24%. Climate change ranks sixth for Red Wall voters, at just 16%.

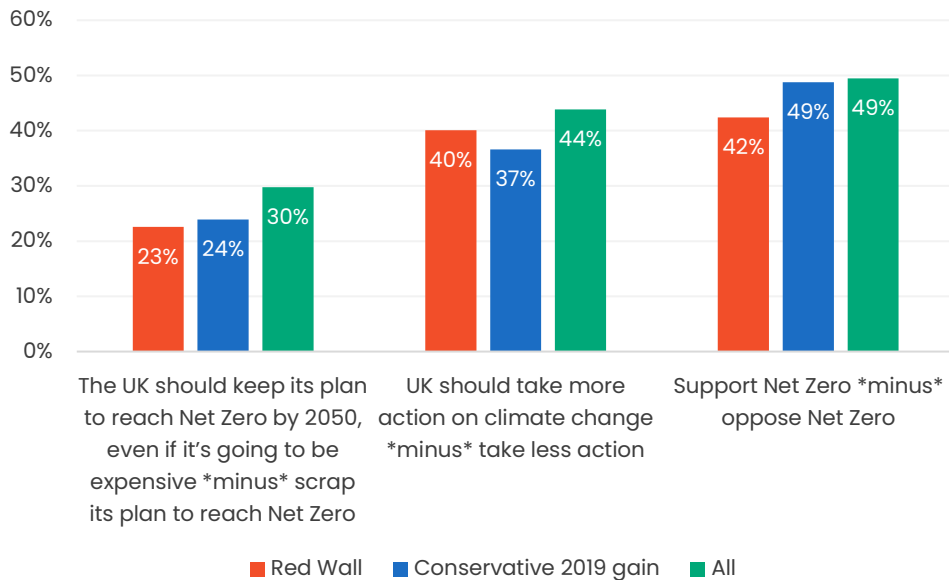
To be clear, this does not indicate opposition to Net Zero. But it does suggest that voters in the electorally-crucial Red Wall are less concerned about climate change than the average voter and also less likely to be motivated to vote for a party on the basis of its stance on the environment.

Onward’s previous research has shown that a resurgent “NewKip” could be highly costly for the Conservatives. So we also look at the priorities of 2019 Brexit Party voters. This group is highly motivated by the cost of living (63%) and immigration (49%). But, closely aligned with the views of Red Wall voters, only 18% of Brexit Party supporters picked the threat of climate change as a top-three issue.

A majority of Red Wall voters (54%) support the 2050 Net Zero target and only 11% oppose it. Almost half (49%) agree that the Government should keep to this target, even if it is going to be expensive. 27% think that the target should be scrapped “even if it’s going to be damaging to the environment, as it is going to be too expensive.”

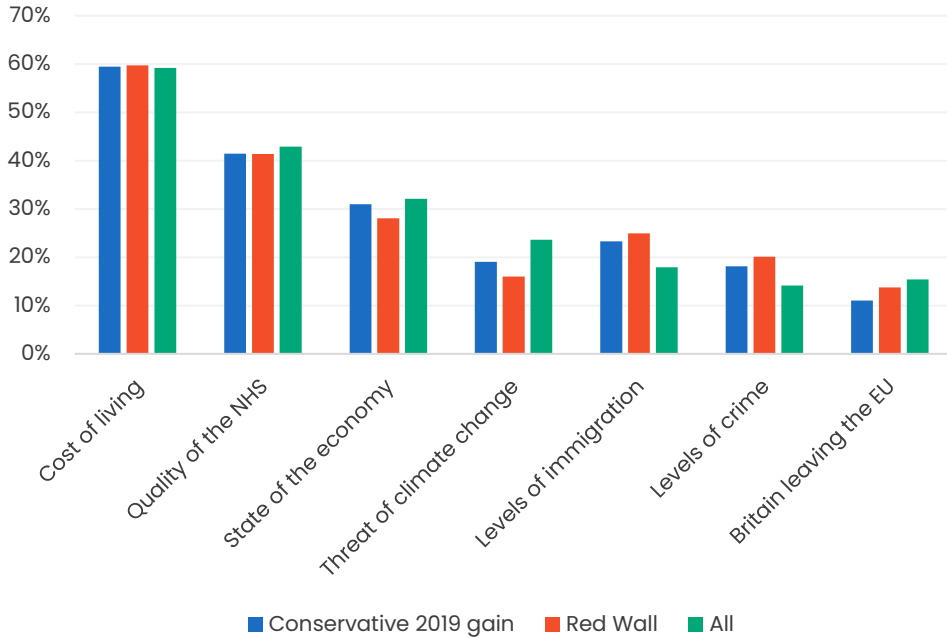
**Figure 12: Views on the environment and Net Zero, in Red Wall seats and 2019 Conservative gains**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



**Figure 13: Thinking about the next General Election, which of the following would be most important for a political party to focus on in order to get your vote?**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



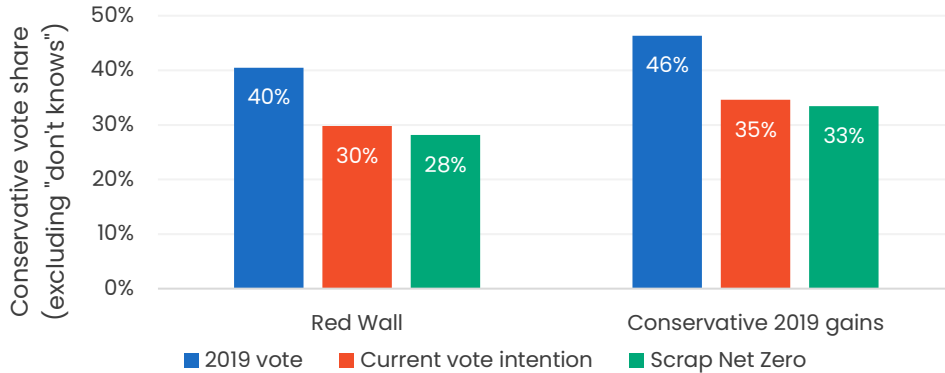
How might this play out at the ballot box?

Compared to current vote intention, scrapping Net Zero has almost no impact on Conservative vote share in their 2019 gains. Excluding “don’t know”, 35% of people in these seats say they would vote Conservative if an election was held tomorrow. This figure falls slightly to 33% if the Conservatives ran on a promise to scrap Net Zero. Looking at seats in the Red Wall, we see a similar effect. Conservative vote share would fall marginally from 30% to 28%.

Ditching the 2050 Net Zero target is unlikely to save Conservative gains in the Red Wall. If anything, the data tells us that it makes these seats slightly more likely to fall at the next election.

**Figure 14: The impact of scrapping the Net Zero target on Conservative vote share in the Red Wall and 2019 Conservative gains**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

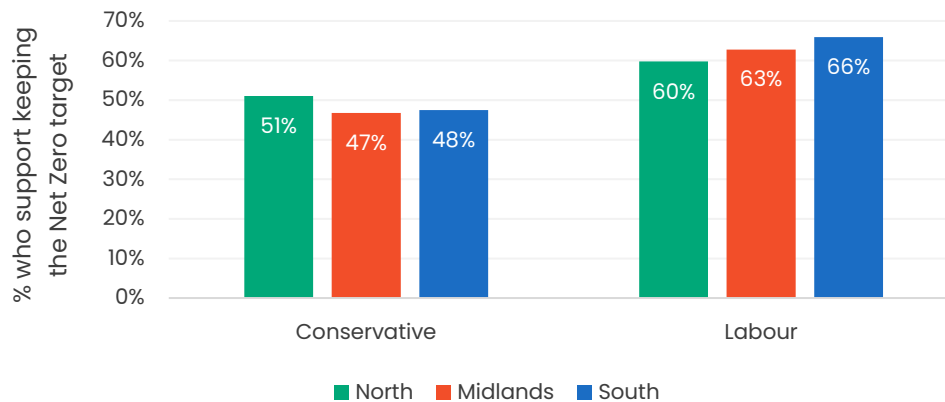


Is there a tension between Tory voters in the North and South of England?

Northern Tories are more likely to support keeping the Net Zero target than Tory voters in the South. 48% of Tory voters in the South of England are in favour of keeping the target rather than scrapping it. But 51% of Northern Tories are in favour of keeping the target. Labour’s north-south gap is slightly larger, and inverted. 66% of southern Labour voters support keeping the 2050 target, compared to 60% of their northern voters.

**Figure 15: Proportion of voters who support keeping the 2050 Net Zero target, by 2019 vote**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis

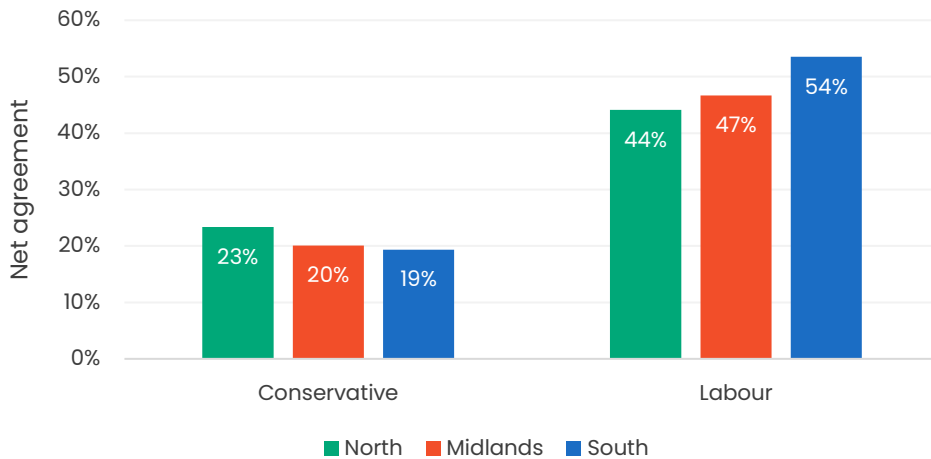


Note: North = NE+NW+Yorks, Midlands = WM+EM, South = Lon+SE+SW

We find the same pattern when we ask respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement: “There is no good reason to get rid of the Net Zero target”. Conservatives are more in favour than against, but far less enthusiastic than Labour voters. And whereas Northern Tories more strongly agree than Southern Tories, Labour’s regional gap is twice as large and inverted.

**Figure 16: Proportion who agree that “There is no good reason to get rid of the Net Zero target” minus the proportion who disagree (net agreement)**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



But Conservative voters in the North of England are twice as likely to base their vote on a party’s stance on immigration than on climate change. Over a third (36%) of Northern Tories picked “levels of immigration” as a top-three issue, compared to just 17% who picked the “threat of climate change.” Tories in the North are also more likely to be motivated by levels of crime than by climate change when casting their vote.


This reinforces our findings in *No Turning Back*. We showed that the 2019 Conservative coalition is more united across a broad range of economic and social issues than Labour’s voter coalition. This was the key to victory at the last election and breaking Labour’s Red Wall. Knowing this, it is not surprising that 2019 Conservative voters in different parts of the country share similar views on Net Zero. It also shows that turning against the Net Zero target is not a winning strategy in defensive Red Wall seats.

# Messaging

What works and what doesn't?







We know that Net Zero policy is popular. Concern about the state of the environment is high, as is support for the Government's emissions target, which holds up even when faced by the prospect of high costs and pressure on living standards. But the way that proponents talk about Net Zero is important. What language garners the most support? What polarises and what unites?

## **Support for Net Zero increases if the discussion focuses on the long term**

Over three-quarters of people agree that: “We have a duty to care for our planet and the environment to ensure our grandchildren can live comfortably.” And protecting the environment for future generations is one of the few non-partisan issues. Preserving the world that we leave behind for our grandchildren finds equally strong support from both Labour (79% agree) and Conservative (78% agree) voters.

Older voters, aged 65 and over, are far less likely to say that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time than 18-24 year-olds (net +11% and +27%, respectively). But when rephrased in the language of leaving the world a better place for your grandchildren, this pattern reverses. Over-65s are more likely than 18-24s to say that the threat of climate change is a top-three issue facing the country when prompted to think ahead “to the lives of your children and grandchildren” (44%, compared to 34% of 18-24s).

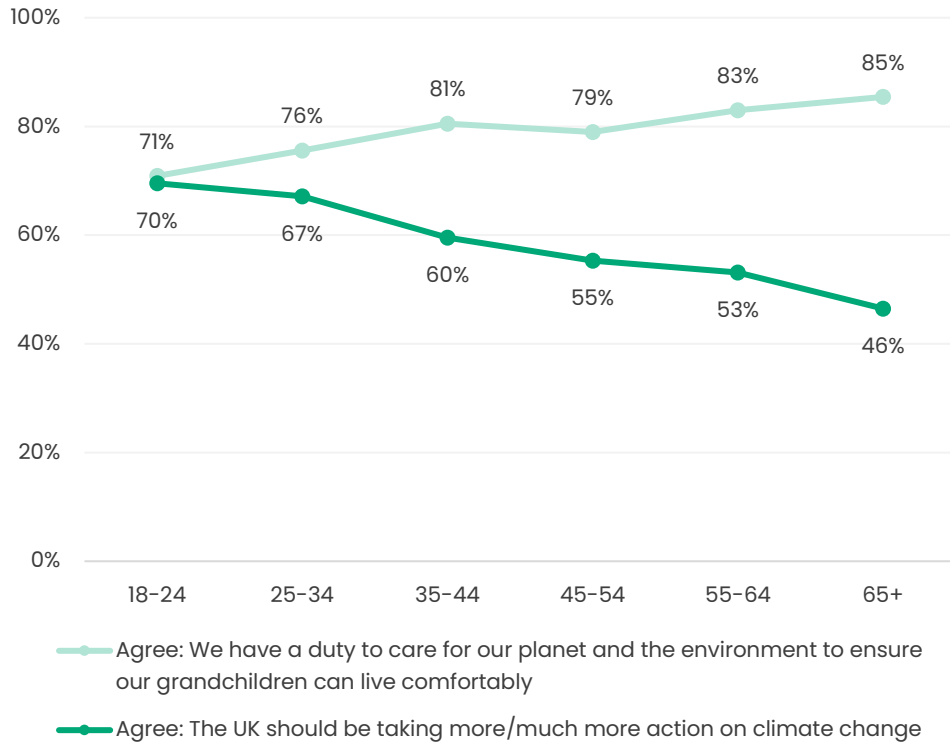
This finding is consistent across multiple questions in our survey. Compare the following two statements:

1. We have a duty to care for our planet and the environment to ensure our grandchildren can live comfortably.
2. The UK should be taking more/much more action on climate change.

Opinion among the youngest voters remains unchanged. 7-in-10 agree with the statement. But for those aged over-65, support for protecting the environment almost doubles from 46% when phrased as “taking action on climate change” to 85% when phrased in terms of ensuring a good quality of life for one's grandchildren.

**Figure 17: Older people are more concerned about the environment when it is framed as an issue for their grandchildren**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



## Net Zero is most popular when it plays into patriotism and opportunity

Of the economic arguments we tested for the Net Zero target using neutral language, the following was the most popular (72% agreed): “Working to prevent climate change plays into the UK’s strengths in science and technology, and the UK could become a world leader in this area.” The suggestion that preventing climate change “does not play into the UK’s strengths” and that the UK would fall behind other countries who are “better placed to work in this area” struggled to gain any traction at all, with only 28% of people saying the UK is not well-placed to prevent climate change.

Working class Tories are more supportive of investing in renewable energy and more optimistic about new jobs in manufacturing than affluent Tories. Net

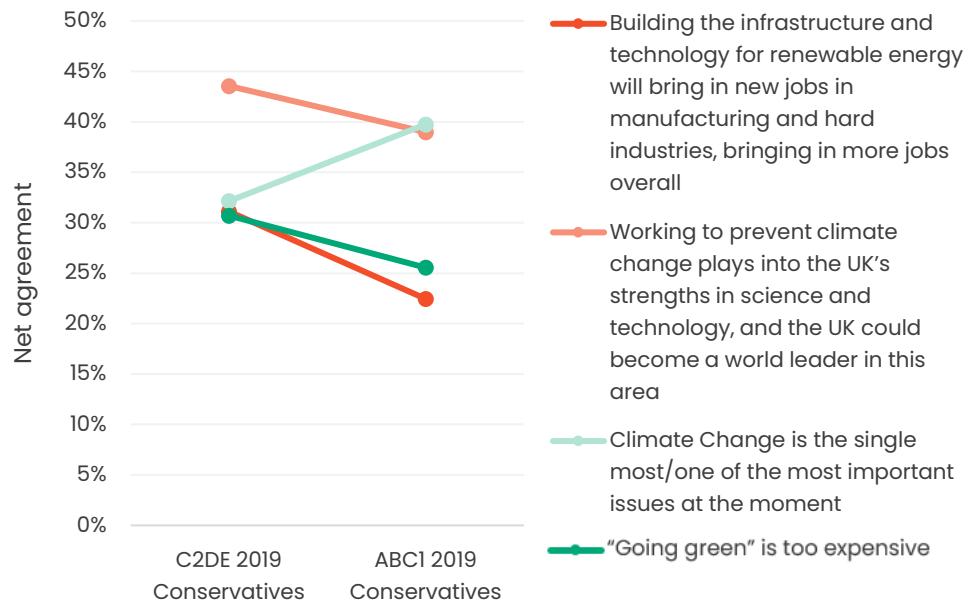
agreement with the following statement was +31% and +22% for each group respectively: “Building the infrastructure and technology for renewable energy will bring in new jobs in manufacturing and hard industries, bringing in more jobs overall.” Any assumption that the Conservatives’ working class voters are particularly sceptical about the benefits of Net Zero would be completely unfounded, according to our data.

Working class Conservative voters are also more positive about the UK playing a leading role in the science and technology needed to reach Net Zero (+44% net agreement compared to +39% for ABC1 Conservatives). But they are also more likely to agree that “Going green is too expensive” (net +31% vs +26%) and less likely to think that climate change is the one of the most important issues of our time.

There is a clear distinction between general arguments around going green and tackling climate change on one hand - which find muted support - and patriotic arguments that instead focus on the UK’s strengths in certain sectors and the opportunity for new, good jobs.

**Figure 18: C2DE Tories are more optimistic about the economic benefits, but less interested in “climate change” and “going green”**

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



## **The public see ditching Net Zero as typical of a politician – changing their mind and buckling under pressure**

People are cynical about the reasons for politicians opposing the 2050 Net Zero target. The most supported reason given was that “they want to avoid being held accountable for missing a target” (37%) whilst the least cited was that they want to save ordinary people money (21%). Voters are twice as likely to think that politicians who oppose Net Zero “have been bought out by fossil fuel companies” (36%) than disagree with that statement (15%).

Among those who personally oppose Net Zero, 46% believe that politicians who want to scrap the Net Zero target are doing so to save them money, while 26% say that politicians are worried about being held accountable for missing a target. Open responses to this question included mentions of how it was pointless for the UK to take action without other countries doing so.

We found strong support for actions to hold big business to account - including for the statement that “Politicians should tax the massive profits of energy companies to fund a tax cut for working class families to meet rising costs” (69% agree, 6% disagree). This resonated more with working class Conservative voters (net +66% for C2DE Tories) than their more affluent supporters (net +55% for ABC1 Tories).

## **Focus less on the language of climate change and going green, and more on the economic benefits of Net Zero**

In earlier chapters we have shown that some groups are significantly more supportive of Net Zero when phrased in terms of playing to the UK’s strengths, bringing good jobs to an area, and leaving the world in a fit state for our grandchildren. What language should proponents of Net Zero use to avoid polarising the electorate?

Compare the following two questions from our poll:

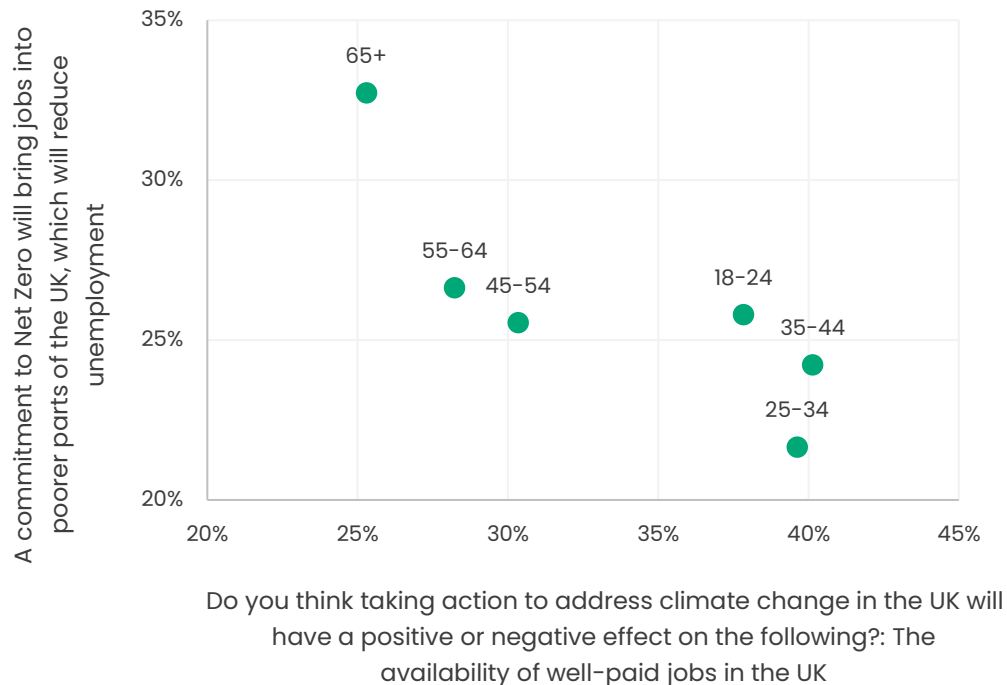
1. Do you think taking action to address climate change in the UK will have a positive or negative effect on the following? The availability of well-paid jobs in the UK.
2. A commitment to Net Zero will bring jobs into poorer parts of the UK, which will reduce unemployment.

There is little difference in the substance of these questions. Both are essentially asking for respondents' levels of optimism about new employment opportunities from the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. The main difference is semantic, specifically the use of the phrase "action to address climate change", which seems to irk older voters and galvanise younger voters.

Over-65s are the least likely to think that "taking action on climate change" will bring more jobs to the UK but are the most likely to think that the Net Zero commitment will boost jobs and reduce unemployment.

### Figure 19: Comparing optimism about Net Zero jobs, but varying the language used in the question

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



We see a similar effect for social grade and education. The gradient that exists for the first question does not exist for the second. The gap between AB voters and DE voters falls from 12 percentage points in the “action on climate change” question to just five percentage points in the neutral question.

Similarly, the gap in net agreement between those with a postgraduate degree and those with GCSEs falls from 21 percentage points to just one percentage point.

The statement that uses the phrase “taking action on climate change” only really appeals to voters with higher levels of education and generates polarisation that need not exist.

Most members of the public are clearly in agreement that new industries in growing sectors like renewable energy can boost job opportunities, especially in poorer parts of the UK.

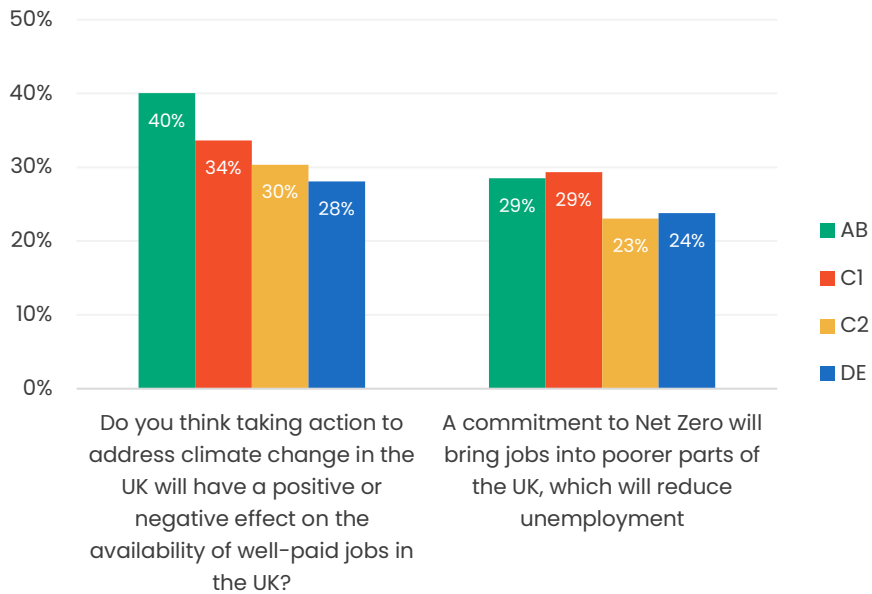
Some messaging resonates more with the Conservatives’ working class base than their more affluent supporters. The party’s 2019 C2DE voters are more likely than their ABC1 voters to think:

1. Politicians should tax the massive profits of energy companies to fund a tax cut for working class families to meet rising costs (net +66% vs +55%).
2. Politicians who want to stop Net Zero are only interested in helping big fossil fuel companies make money (net +16% vs +12%).

But, compared to ABC1 Conservatives, C2DE Tories are also more likely to agree that “Going green is too expensive” (net +31% vs +26%). So the language of “going green” and “climate action” seems to irk some voters who would otherwise happily support Net Zero policies.

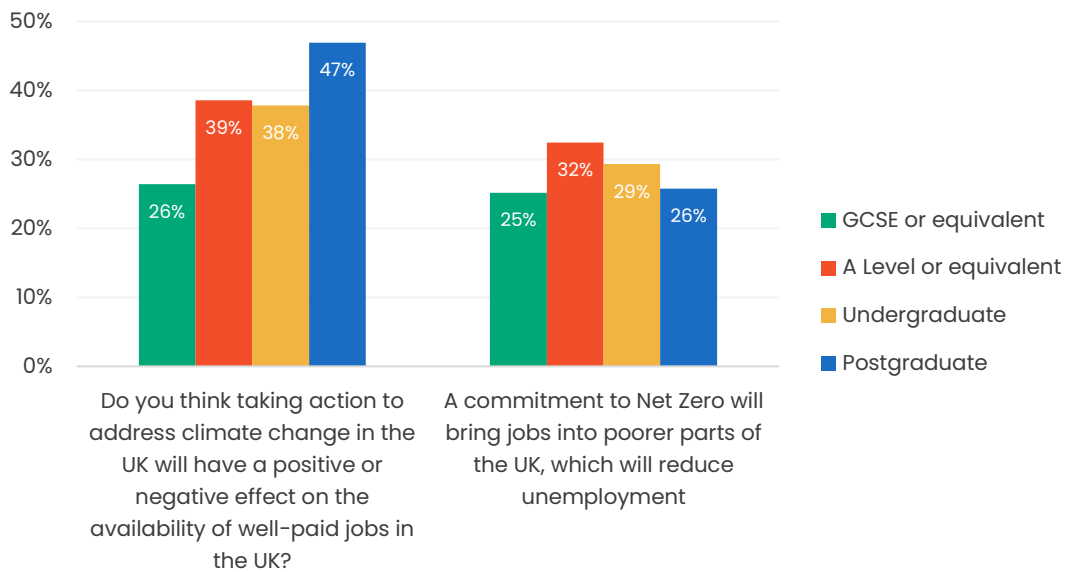
### Figure 20: Net agreement with the statement, by social grade

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis



### Figure 21: Net agreement with the statement, by education

Source: Public First, 15<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> February, Onward analysis




# The Ukraine conflict

Has public opinion changed since the  
outbreak of conflict in Ukraine?







In a second poll, conducted on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April, we tested whether the Ukrainian conflict and rising energy costs mean that voters would rather scrap the Net Zero target and focus instead on tackling the high cost of living and shoring up the UK's energy supply, regardless of any environmental damage.

We find that the public's view on Net Zero has not softened since February. The “threat of climate change” is still the fourth-most important issue facing the country, with 24% of people selecting it, compared to 25% in February. And climate change has remained stable as the top issue “facing the world”.

Support for the Net Zero target has increased slightly since our first poll. Net support (those in favour minus those opposed) is +55%, compared to +49% in February. By two-to-one, the public think that the conflict means we should move faster (55%) rather than slower (28%) on Net Zero. And 68% think that the UK should restrict the import of Russian gas even if it makes bills more expensive.

People overwhelmingly expect the conflict to increase costs of gas (91% agree) and electricity (88% agree). But they are less likely to think it will lead to shortages; 58% think it makes power shortages very or somewhat likely, with houses losing power and lights going out.

More than 7-in-10 people (72%) agreed that the conflict means the UK's energy is less secure. The solution to this, in the public's view, is investing in renewable energy like offshore wind and solar. 68% of people selected investing in renewables as one of the most effective ways to secure the UK's energy supply. Nuclear energy came second at 47%, but only 29% of respondents selected coal and fracking.

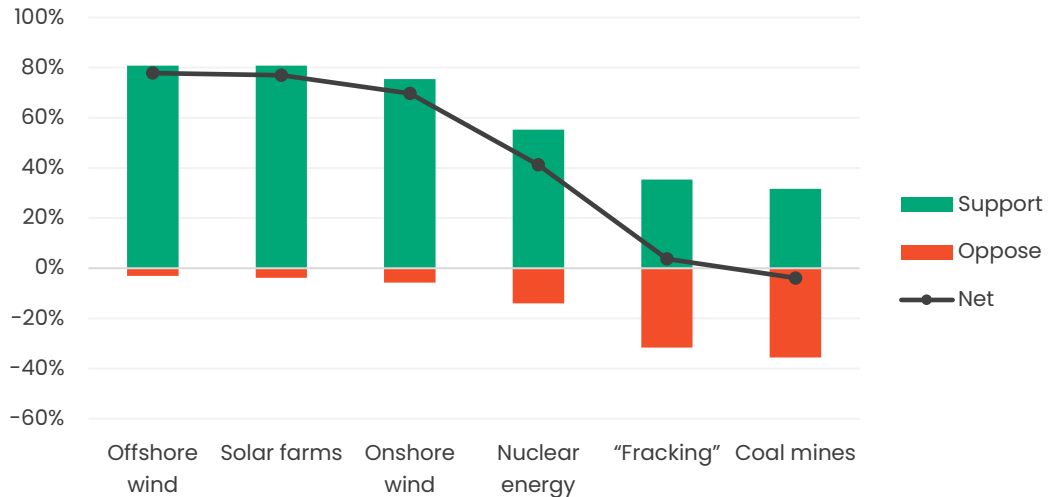
Despite being popular overall, nuclear is highly divisive. Net support for the UK investing in nuclear energy to reduce reliance on Russia is +55% for men but falls to +28% for women. The gender gap is large, but the age gap is far larger. Among the youngest voters (aged 18-24), net support is 19%, rising to +59% for those aged over 65.

The public are generally very positive about having renewable sources built in their area. Large majorities say they would support a windfarm or solar farm being built in their local area (72% and 75%, respectively). But opinion is more torn on the issue of nuclear power stations; 35% would support one being built

in their area and another 35% would oppose it. Public opinion is clearly against fracking rigs and coal mines, with net support at -18% for fracking and -20% for coal mines.

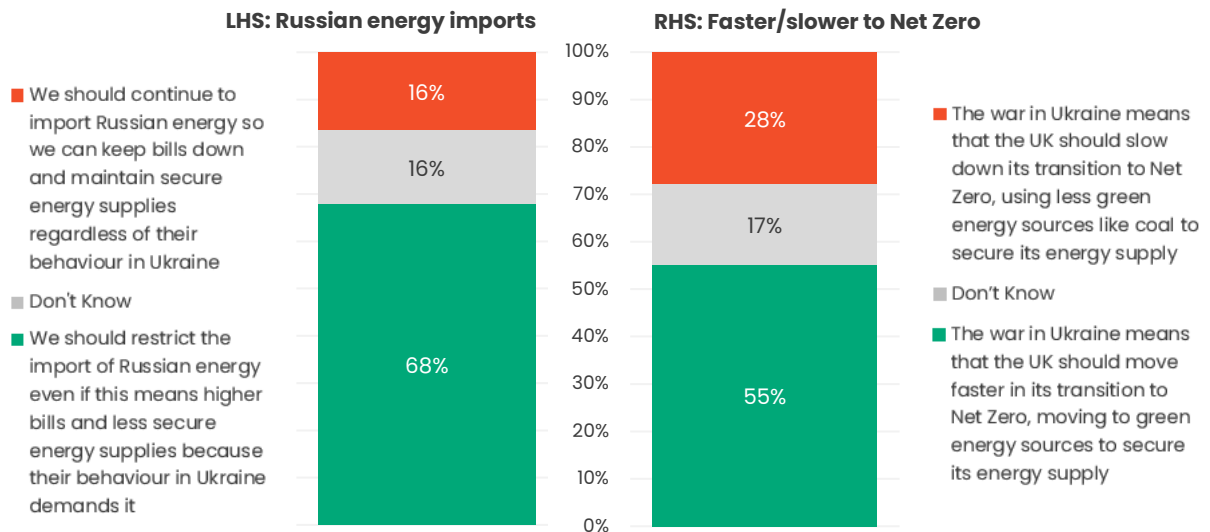
**Figure 22: Would you support or oppose the UK investing in and building the following sources of energy, to reduce the reliance on imported energy from Russia?**

Source: Public First, 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April, Onward analysis



**Figure 23: How does the conflict in Ukraine affect attitudes towards the UK's energy supply and Net Zero target?**

Source: Public First, 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> April, Onward analysis



Only 35% of those who currently intend to vote Conservative say they would “definitely” still do so if “the Conservatives stated before the next election that they wanted to get rid of the UK’s Net Zero target of 2050 as it was too expensive.” A further 35% say they would “probably” still vote Conservative. Almost 1-in-5 (19%) say they would not vote Conservative if they dropped the 2050 Net Zero target.

These hypothetical defections would disproportionately come from working class Conservatives. C2DE voters who currently intend to vote are the least likely to stick with the party if they row back on Net Zero. Around a third (65%) say they would still vote Tory, compared to 75% of middle class ABC1 Conservative voters. This has hardly changed since our first poll in February, in which 69% of C2DE Tories said they would still back the party if they pledged to remove the Net Zero target and 70% of ABC1 Tories said the same.

Overall, if the Conservative party “ran with a promise to remove the UK’s target to reach Net Zero by 2050,” this alone would give Labour a 2-point poll boost. Their lead over the Conservatives would rise from 6.3 points to 8.3 points.

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