



ONWARD ➤

Vote Blue, Stay Green

The Conservative politics of Net Zero

RESEARCH NOTE

By James Blagden and Will Tanner

Introduction

The Conservative Leadership race has exposed different views about the UK's commitment to Net Zero within the Conservative Party's MPs and membership.

While all candidates committed to tackling climate change in some form, none has been as forthright in their support for Net Zero as the current government and there is a latent assumption that Conservative voters are not motivated by Net Zero. Is this true?

To test the Conservative politics of Net Zero, Onward and Public First conducted a GB representative poll of 6,548 voters between 13-17 July. Public First, in conjunction with Electoral Calculus, ran a MrP analysis on the results to understand the political geography of Net Zero and the implications of different policy positions for seat distribution.

Given the depressed nature of the Conservative vote, we have taken particular interest in the voters the Conservatives need to either win back or retain to gain a majority in 2024. These groups are:

- Conservative voters intend to vote Conservative at the next election.
- Wavering Conservative voters intend to vote Conservative but rate their likelihood of doing so as less than 10 out of 10.
- Strong Conservative considerers don't know who they plan to vote for, but rate their likelihood of voting Conservative at 6 or more out of 10.
- Conservative considerers do not indicate their vote intention as Conservative (either saying they currently plan to vote for another party, or Don't Know how they would vote) but rate their likelihood of voting Conservative at 6 or more out of 10.
- Conservative-to-Don't-Knows voted for the Conservative Party in 2019 but say they don't know who to vote for if an election were held tomorrow.

The results reinforce once again the extent to which support for tackling climate change is now heavily engrained within the broader Conservative electorate and how environmentalism is now essential to the Conservatives' electoral chances.

Our key findings are as follows:

1. Climate change remains one of the top issues for Conservative voter groups

When asked about the most important issues facing the country at this time, the cost of living is first among every group by a wide margin. 73% of Conservative voters put this in the top three issues. This rises to 75% among wavering Conservative voters and 79% among strong Conservative considerers, reinforcing the extent to which the Conservatives' electoral fortunes are now tied to the cost of living.

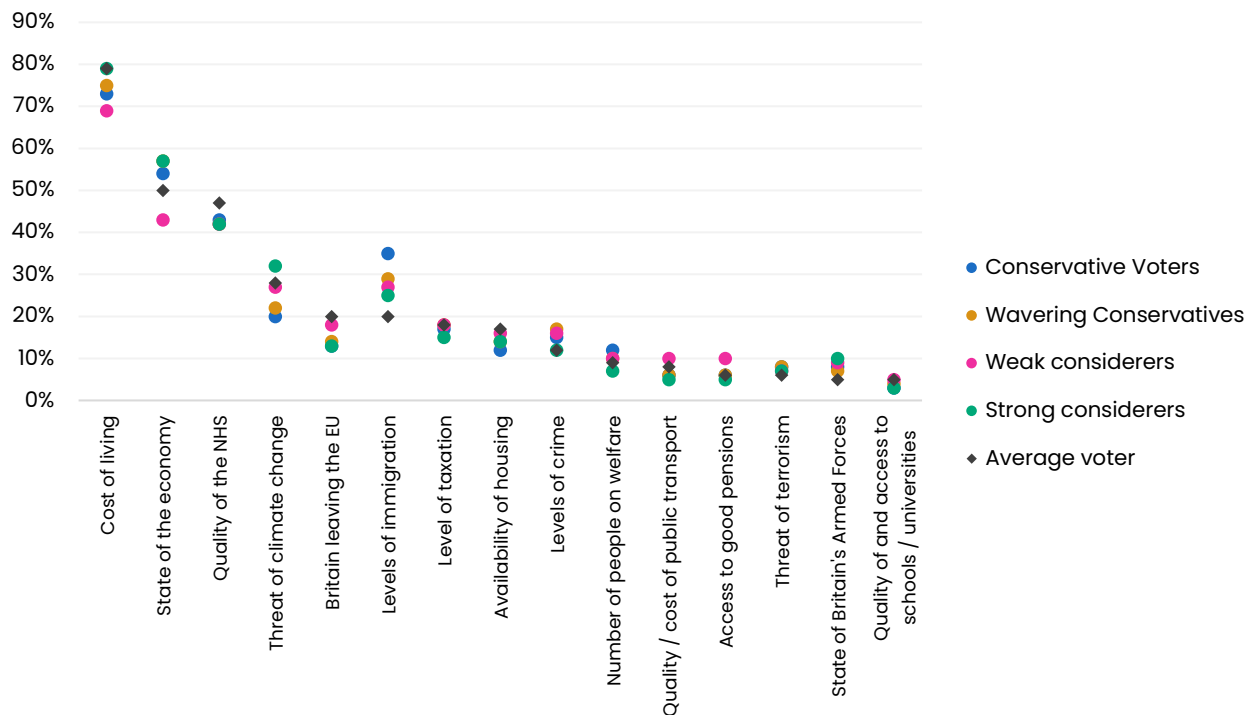
But this has not led to declining salience of environmental issues. "Tackling the threat of climate change" ranks fifth among current Conservative voters, behind the cost of living, the economy, the NHS and immigration and above crime, housing and Brexit. This is also the case for voters who voted Conservative in 2019 but are currently undecided who they will vote for, and for C2DE conservatives. Nor has this order of prioritisation changed since our previous poll on 6-7 April.¹

As Figure 1 below shows, the salience of climate change rises among groups that the Conservatives should be targeting, with strong and weak Conservative considerers ranking it as their fourth priority, with 32% and 27% respectively rating it as one of their top three issues.

¹ James Blagden and Will Tanner, *Taking the temperature*, (Onward, 2022)

Figure 1: Which do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

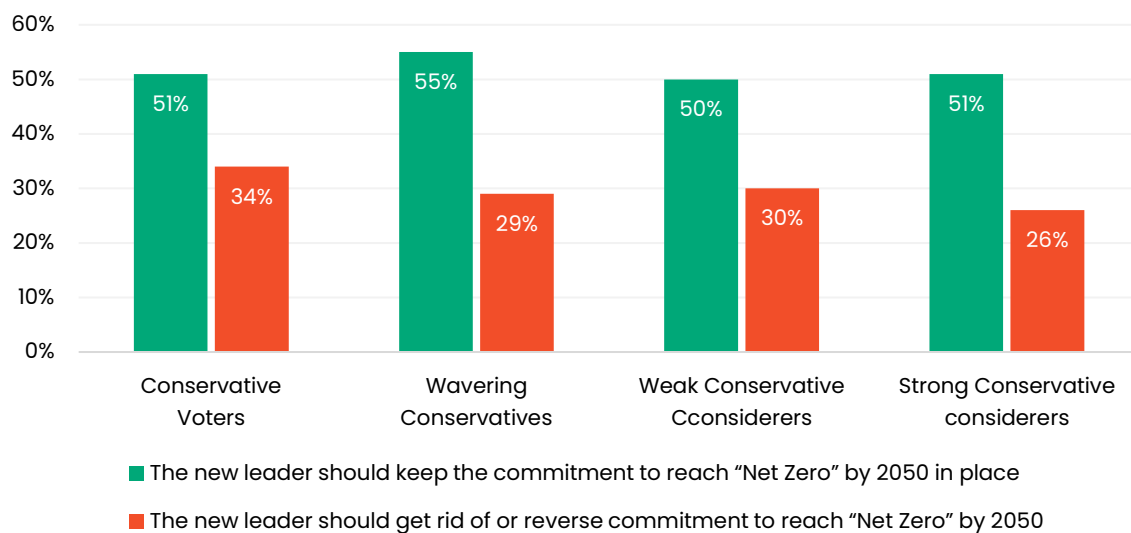


2. All Conservative groups support, and want to keep, the 2050 Net Zero target in principle

When asked whether they would like to see the new leader of the Conservative Party keep the commitment to reach “Net Zero” by 2050 in place, or get rid of it, 51% of Conservative voters want it to remain and 34% want it scrapped (net +17).

Figure 2: Support for keeping or getting rid of “the commitment to reach Net Zero by 2050”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Net support for keeping the 2050 target in place is even higher among strong Conservative considerers (+24%) and wavering Conservative voters (+26%). When asked directly if they support or oppose the Net Zero target, more than twice as many Conservative voters (52%) and strong considerers (48%) support the Net Zero target than not (23% and 18%, respectively). This is even higher among wavering Conservatives (56%).

3. Conservative voter groups believe cost of living is rising due to global events rather than Net Zero

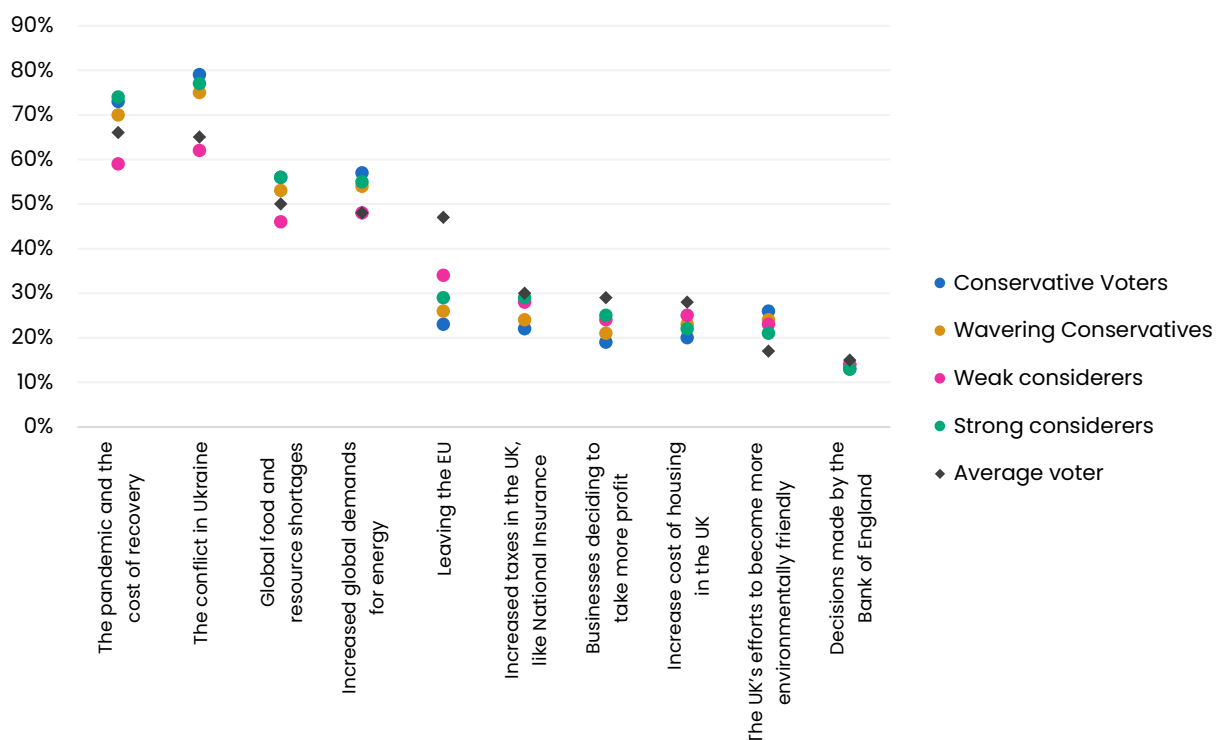
When asked, “In your view, what are the main reasons for the increasing cost of living in the UK?”, all voters, including Conservative voter groups, tend to blame other issues before climate change measures.

While the average voter is most likely to rank “the pandemic and cost of recovery” top, Conservative voter groups rank “the War in Ukraine” top with the pandemic second. In third and fourth place for all the voter groups we studied are “global food and resource shortages” and “increased global demands for energy”, although the order changes between groups.

Current Conservative voters are marginally more likely to rank “the UK’s efforts to become more environmentally friendly” higher up the list than other groups. Among Conservative voters, this is rated 5th most important, on average, compared to 9th most important for strong Conservative considerers. But as Figure 3 below demonstrates, the actual share of Conservatives believing Net Zero is to blame for the cost of living does not vary enormously from the average voter.

Figure 3: “In your view, what are the main reasons for the increasing cost of living in the UK?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



4. Proposing to drop Net Zero risks losing nearly a quarter of current Conservative voters

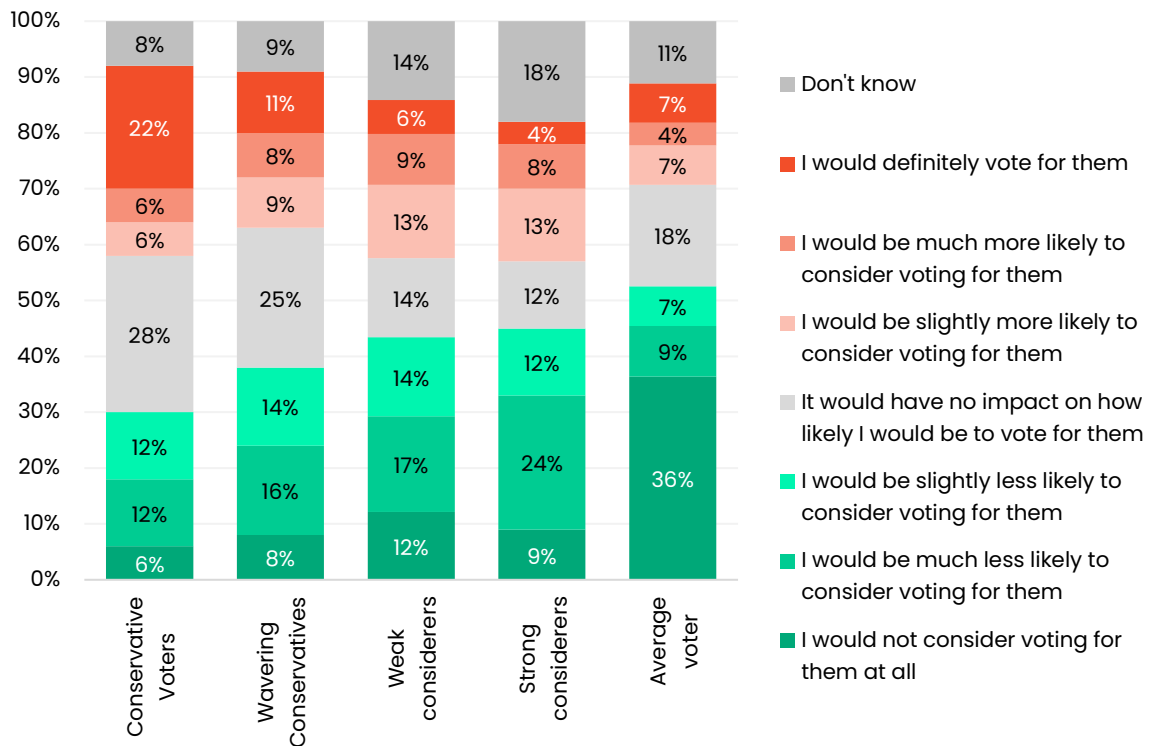
Nearly a quarter (24%) of current Conservative voters say that they would vote for other parties or say they don't know who they would vote for "if there was a general election in which the Conservative party ran with a promise to remove the UK's target to reach Net Zero by 2050". Only 68% of Wavering Conservatives would vote for the party if they ditched Net Zero, and only a third of strong Conservative considerers (31%) and current Conservative considerers (27%).

This effect would be amplified if Labour opposed the policy and committed to Net Zero. For example, if the Conservatives dropped Net Zero "saying it cost too much money" and Labour committed to it in order "to make the world a better place for our children and grandchildren", 7% of current Conservative voters would switch directly to Labour. If Labour went further, and committed to double wind power, 10% of Conservative voters would switch directly to the Labour Party.

When asked how a Conservative pledge to remove the Net Zero pledge would affect likelihood to vote, 34% of Conservatives say they would be more likely to vote Conservative, against 30% who say less likely. But almost half (45%) of strong Conservative considerers would be put off by such a pledge.

Figure 3: "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?"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



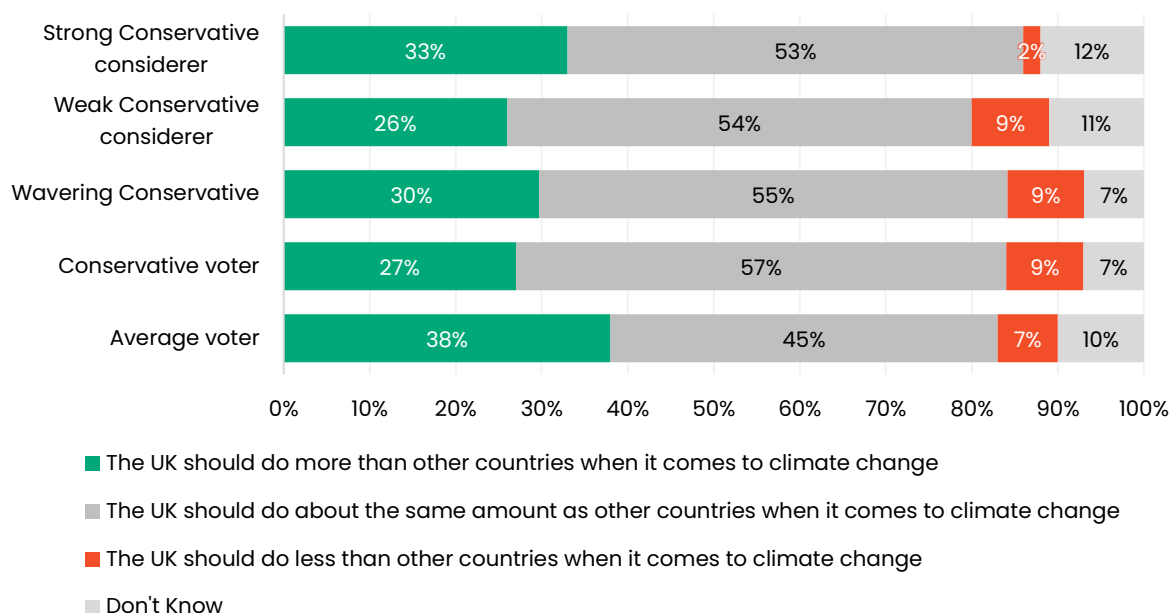
5. Voters want the UK to do at least as much as other countries on climate change

Only 9% of Conservative voters want the UK to be doing less than other countries on climate change and 27% want the UK to be doing even more. Overall, 30% of wavering Conservatives and 33% of strong Conservative considerers think the UK should be doing more than other countries.

Conservative voters are finely split between agreeing (41%) and disagreeing (40%) on whether “the war in Ukraine means that the UK should move faster in its transition to Net Zero, moving to green energy sources to secure its energy supply”. However net agreement is much higher among wavering Conservatives (+9%), weak Conservative considerers (+7%) and strong Conservative considerers (+21%). Among all voters, 48% believe Ukraine means we should be doing more.

Figure 5: Which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

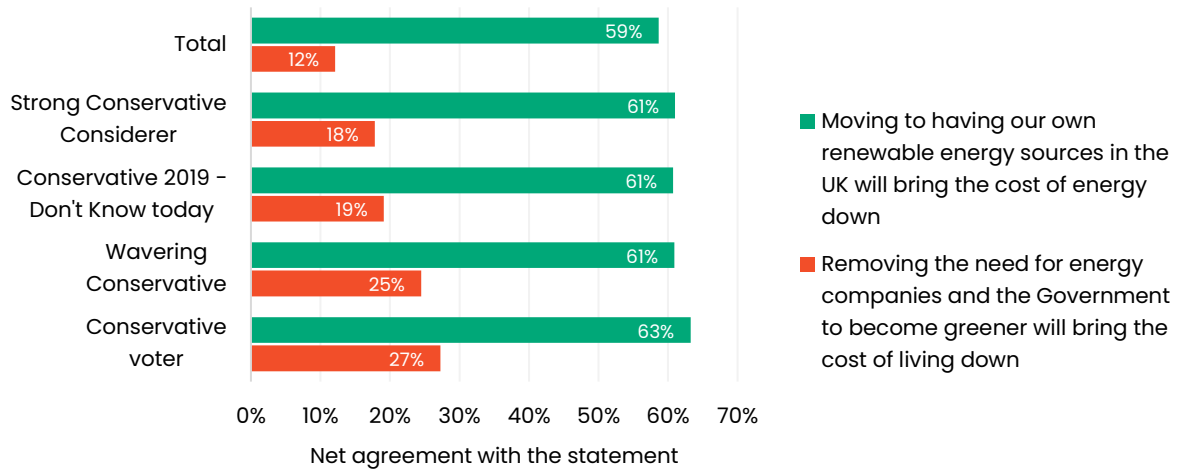


6. Voters are a lot more optimistic about investing in renewable energy to reduce the cost of living, rather than cutting environmental levies and regulations

Whereas 41% of strong Conservative considerers agree that removing the need for companies and the Government to become greener would bring down the cost of living, 23% disagreed with this. And contrast this with the 68% who agree that “Moving to having our own renewable energy sources in the UK will bring the cost of energy down”, with just 7% disagreeing. Figure 6 shows a clear preference for investing in renewable energy sources over relaxing environmental regulations, in terms of what would effectively lower the cost of living.

Figure 6: Do you agree or disagree with the following?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



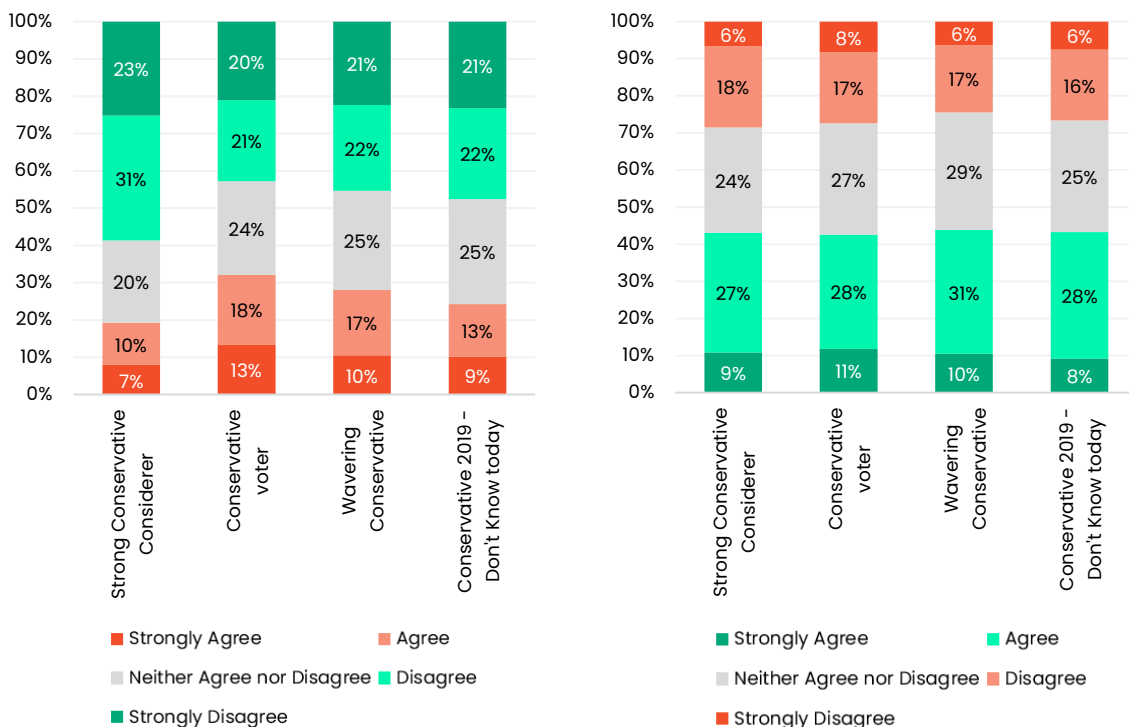
Conservative considerers and waverers tend to agree that “getting rid of Net Zero won’t actually help with the increasing cost of living” and they disagree that “Net Zero was a bad idea.” Over half (54%) of strong Conservative considerers disagree that the Net Zero target “was a bad idea”, and only 18% agree. Conservative waverers are almost twice as likely to think that getting rid of Net Zero won’t help with the cost of living as they are to think that it will help.

Figure 7: Conservative voter groups think that Net Zero was a good idea and that ditching it won’t help with the cost of living

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

Do you agree or disagree with the following?:
The “Net Zero” target was a bad idea

Do you agree or disagree with the following?:
Getting rid of “Net Zero” won’t actually help with the increasing cost of living



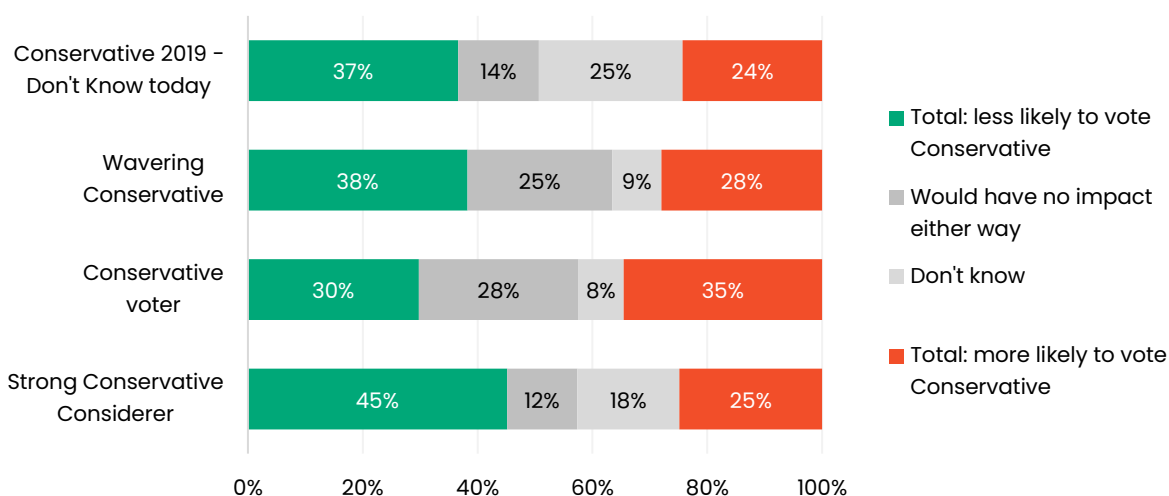
7. Ditching Net Zero, even on grounds of cost, is a vote loser

An election pledge to get rid of the Net Zero target would risk alienating 30% of current Conservative supporters. Only 35% said they would still vote Conservative, with the rest undecided. Defections would be even higher among waverers, who are already uncertain about their support for the Conservatives.

For those who voted Conservative in 2019 but now say they don't know who to vote for, 37% would be less likely to vote Tory if the party pledged to “get rid of the UK's Net Zero target of 2050 as it was too expensive”; just 24% say they would be more likely to vote Tory, and a further 14% say it would have no impact either way.

Figure 8: 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?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

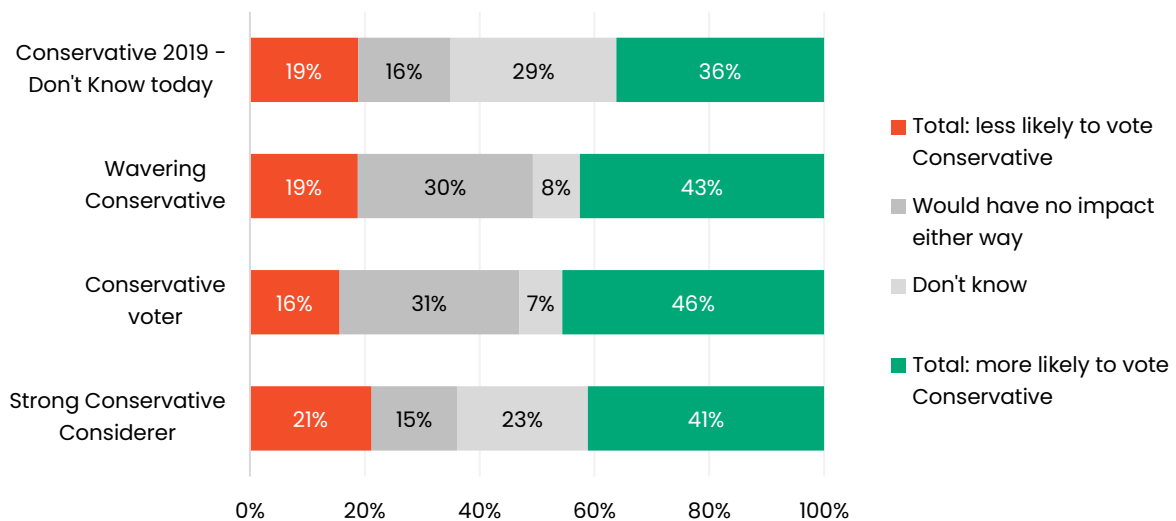


9. Sticking to the Net Zero target is popular among the voter groups that the Conservatives need to win over

Keeping the Net Zero target in order to “reduce the amount of expensive gas the country needs to import from Russia” is a popular reason and would see a significant portion of 2019 defectors and considerers could turn back to the party. 36% of Conservative-to-don't know voters say they would be more likely to vote Tory again if they kept Net Zero as a way of cutting back on Russian gas. And 41% of strong Conservative considerers also say they would be more likely to vote Tory under this condition. Only 16% of current Conservatives say they would be less likely to vote Conservative if they kept Net Zero.

Figure 9: If the Conservatives stated before the next election that they wanted to keep the UK’s Net Zero target of 2050 to reduce the amount of expensive gas the country needs to import from Russia, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for them?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Conservative voters, considerers and waverers are more likely to take a harsher stance on Russian gas imports than the average person. Three-quarters (75%) of current Tory voters say that we should “restrict the import of Russian energy even if this means higher bills and less secure energy supplies because their behaviour in Ukraine demands it.” 72% of strong Conservative considerers and 70% of Conservative waverers agree, but this falls slightly to 66% for the general public.

The groups that the party needs to win over are also more supportive of keeping the Net Zero target “even if it’s going to be expensive, as we need to stop damaging the environment.” The preference is for environmentalism, despite the financial cost. Half (50%) of strong Conservative considerers would rather keep the target in order to protect the environment versus 26% who want to scrap it. Similarly, 46% say they would be less likely to vote for a party that pledged to get rid of the 2050 target; only 18% say they would be more likely to vote for such a party.

Conservative waverers also have a clear preference for keeping Net Zero. By 50% to 36%, this group would rather keep the target than scrap it. Almost half (49%) say they would be less likely to vote for a party that pledged to get rid of Net Zero, but only 18% say it would make them more likely to vote for that party.

Figure 10: Which of the following comes closest to your view?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

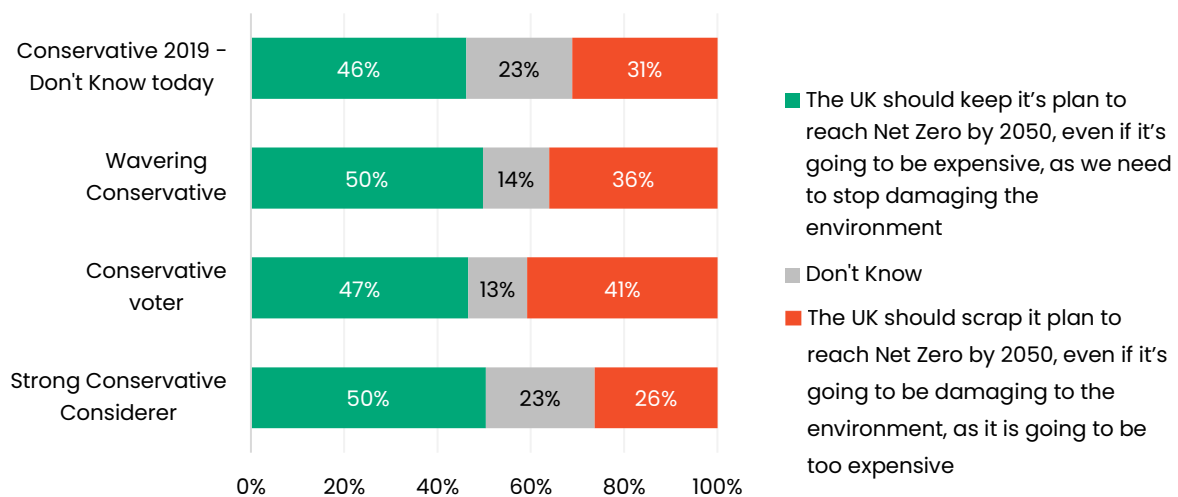
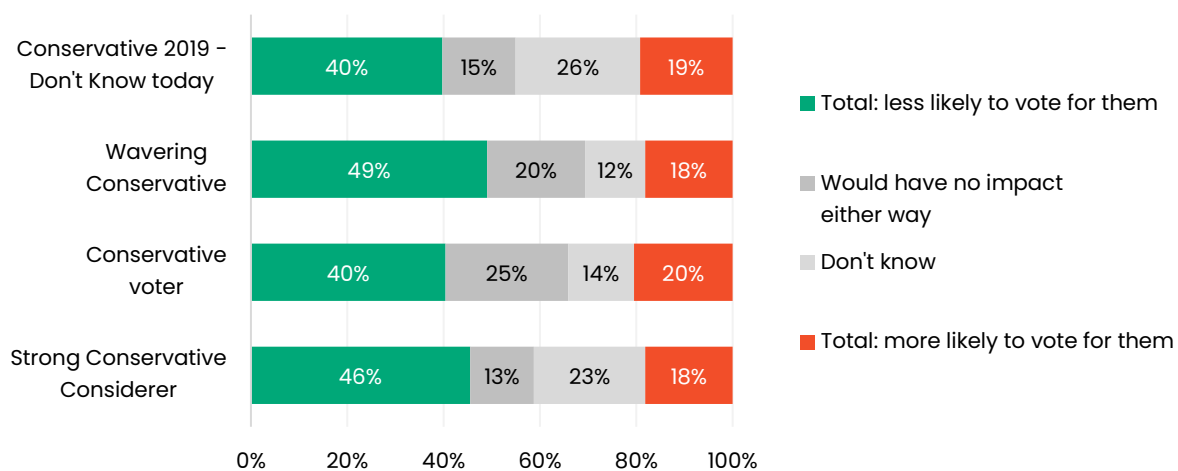


Figure 11: If a political party said they were going to get rid of the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions, how would this impact your likelihood to vote for this party if at all?

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

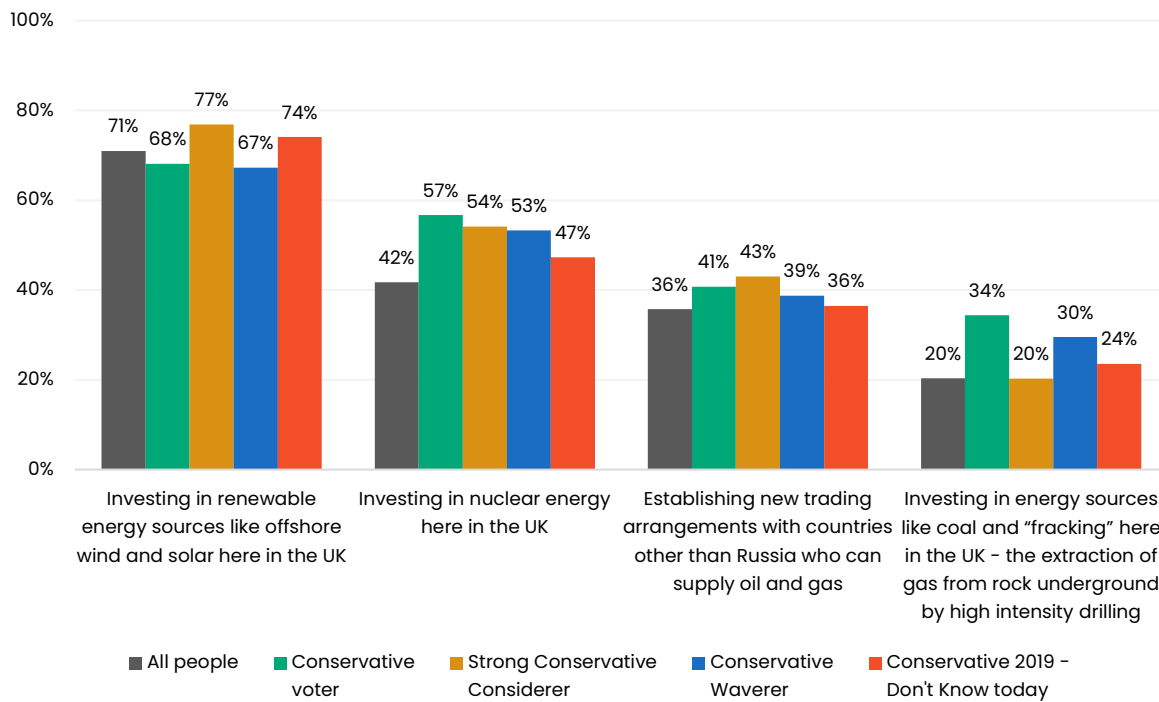


10. Energy security matters to voters and Net Zero is the way to achieve it

We tested various options for making the UK’s energy supply more secure. For every group, “investing in renewable energy sources like offshore wind and solar here in the UK” was the most popular choice. 67% of Conservative waverers think renewables would be among the most effective ways to make the UK’s energy supply more secure, as do 77% of strong Conservative considerers. But it isn’t just renewables that are popular. Both of these crucial voter groups are more likely to believe nuclear energy would be effective than the average person (53% and 54%, respectively, compared to 42% of the general public).

Figure 12: Which of the following, if any, do you think would be the most effective ways for the UK to make its energy supply more secure? Select as many as apply

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



II. Sticking with the Net Zero target is popular in marginal seats, and dropping the target severely damages the Conservatives' electoral prospects

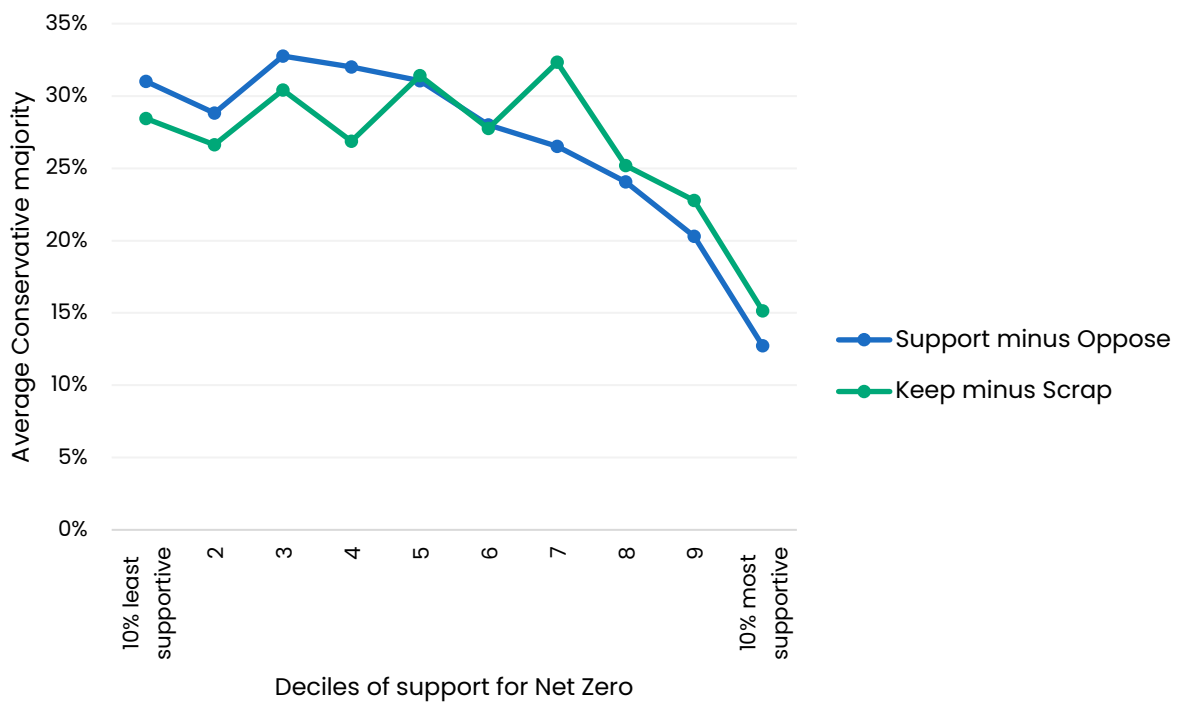
Public First, in conjunction with Electoral Calculus, ran an MrP analysis on the results to understand the political geography of Net Zero. The first question we tested was: "Do you support or oppose the UK plan to reach Net Zero by 2050?" Conservative seats where support for the 2050 Net Zero target is highest also have smaller majorities. Among the top 10% of seats for Net Zero support (36 constituencies), the average Conservative majority in 2019 was 12.73%. But among the 36 least supportive Conservative seats, the average majority was 31.01%, which makes them more than twice as safe as the most pro-Net Zero Conservative seats.

For the question asking whether the UK should keep or scrap its plan to reach Net Zero by 2050. We find the same pattern again. Among the top 10% of 2019 Conservative seats where people prefer keeping the target over scrapping it by the largest margins, the average majority was 15.15%. But among the 36 Conservative seats most in favour of scrapping the target, the average majority was 28.45%.

The figure below shows that Conservative constituencies that are more favourable towards Net Zero are also more marginal. Rowing back on environmental commitments risks alienating the electorate in key seats that will be targets for other parties.

Figure 13: Average Conservative majority for deciles of support for Net Zero, based on Public First MrP

Source: Public First, Electoral Calculus and House of Commons Library; Onward analysis.



Public First also tested which party might win under different electoral conditions. It is important to understand the nature of MrP analysis and its uses, particularly in projects like this which focus in detail on a single policy area. The idea is not to give predictions on what would happen; rather, it is to show the relative strength of feeling within the electorate on the issue in question – in this case, Net Zero. As you will see, the results fluctuate a lot depending on the wording of the question, but doubling down on renewables investment is far more popular than delaying or scrapping Net Zero.

If the Conservatives pledged to drop the Net Zero target at the next election, the model suggests they would win 202 constituencies, which is an increase of 10 seats on current vote intention (which would see the Conservatives reduced to 192 seats). If Labour opposed this move, and committed to reducing emissions, the model suggests that the Conservatives would win only 125 seats. So, dropping the 2050 target could produce a result somewhere between a small net gain of +10 or a large net loss of -67. Again, this is not intended to provide a serious prediction; rather to show the relative attractiveness of policy choices.

On the other hand, keeping the target and pledging to increase investment in renewable energy like wind power could bring the Conservatives back up to a level between 317 seats and 365 seats. Compared to current vote intention, that is an increase of 125 or 173 seats and could keep the party in government. Based on this analysis, the electoral calculation is clear: ditching Net Zero is not a path to victory.

Figure 14: Seat projections under different electoral conditions

Source: Public First, Electoral Calculus; Onward analysis.

