

Hotting Up

How we get to net zero in a way that brings
people with us

Adam Hawksbee

ONWARD >

About Onward

Onward's mission is to develop bold and practical ideas to boost economic opportunity, build national resilience, and strengthen communities across all parts of the United Kingdom. Our vision is to address the needs of the whole country: young and old, urban and rural, for all communities across the UK – particularly places that have too often felt neglected or ignored by Westminster.

We believe in an optimistic conservatism that is truly national – one that recognises the value of markets, supported by a streamlined state that is active not absent. We are unapologetic about standing up to vested interests, putting power closer to people, and supporting the hardworking and aspirational.

We do so by developing practical policies grounded in evidence. Our team has worked at high levels across Westminster and Whitehall. We know how to produce big ideas that resonate with policymakers, the media and the wider public. We work closely with policymakers of all parties to build coalitions of support. Most importantly, we engage ordinary people across the country and work with them to make our ideas a reality.

Thanks

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About this report

Public opinion research for this report was conducted by Public First, who undertook a 4,010 person poll between 8th and 15th August 2023 and convened eight focus groups in Bexley, Derby, Dudley, Esher, Oldham, Rushcliffe, Wakefield, and Watford.






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Executive summary





The Prime Minister has announced a new, pragmatic approach to net zero. The Government remains committed to the net zero by 2050 target and achieving the fourth, fifth, and sixth carbon budgets. But Ministers have emphasised “pragmatism” and “proportionality” in delivering the UK’s climate goals.

This is understandable. A significant portion of the general public and a majority of 2019 Conservative voters were already concerned about the 2030 ban on new petrol and diesel car sales. The bans on oil and gas boilers and the hurried installation of heat pumps were not well understood by voters. There was concern and resistance about moving too fast without the right financial support.

Given the shift in approach was grounded in the concerns of voters and consumers, it is important to understand the nuances and contradictions in public attitudes to net zero. Onward and Public First polled 4,010 adults between 8th - 15th August and conducted eight focus groups with 2019 Conservative voters from across England.

What emerges are three lessons to guide the next phase of net zero. As the Government recalibrates its position and announces further policies to meet interim targets, it should bear these lessons in mind.

First, voters remain overwhelmingly supportive of net zero and expect bold Government action to reach it:

- The net zero by 2050 target enjoys strong support from the British public (56%) and 2019 Conservative voters (49%), far outweighing opposition (13% and 20% respectively).
- The public and 2019 Conservatives ranked the threat of climate change as the fifth most significant issue facing the UK (23% and 18% respectively put it in their top three issues), ahead of availability of housing, crime, Brexit, taxation, and schools.
- 43% of Conservative voters think tackling climate change is the most serious challenge facing the world, ahead of war (38%) and mass migration (38%).
- A total of 60% of the public and 69% of 2019 Conservatives feel more positive about the Government when they hear that the UK is almost halfway toward its net zero ambitions - although almost two thirds (60%) of voters don’t believe this fact.
- 53% of voters aged under 44 say that scrapping the net zero target would make them less likely to vote for the political party that did it, compared to 44% of those aged 45 and over.

Second, voters will see changes in net zero targets or policies through the lens of “anti-politics”:

- The most common response among both the public and Conservative voters to the Government dropping their net zero pledge was concern for future generations: 33% and 28% respectively. The next most common responses for the general public was trusting the government less (26%) and taking future pledges less seriously (22%). For Conservative voters, further responses were more mixed - 27% would feel the Government were taking the cost of living crisis seriously and 22% would think they were sensible, but 18% would trust them less and take future pledges less seriously.
- Conservative voters felt that a political party that got rid of its net zero target was more out of touch than in touch (net +14), stupid instead of sensible (+10), and short sighted instead of long sighted (+10). But Conservative voters also marginally felt that they would be selfless instead of selfish (+3), moderate instead of extreme (+2), and that they care about the economy (+1).
- 50% of Conservative voters felt that dropping the net zero target would be "embarrassing" compared to 21% that disagree. Among the public, 57% felt it would be embarrassing vs 14% who disagree.
- A total of 51% of voters felt dropping the net zero pledge would be incompetent, compared to 18% who disagreed. Conservative voters were more divided: 38% agreed and 31% disagreed.

Third, the public is cautious about the costs of net zero, but optimistic about the benefits:

- 53% of the public are willing to accept costs to tackle climate change, while 40% are not - roughly the same as tolerance for improving the education system (52% accept, 40% do not) and higher than creating jobs (43% accept, 47% do not). Among Conservative voters, 50% are happy to accept costs compared to 45% who are not.
- 48% of the public think the financial benefits of net zero will outweigh the costs compared to 34% who think otherwise.
- Almost half of 2019 Conservatives are also in favour of net zero by 2050 (47% vs 23%) with the costs in mind, because a third of those who think there will be more costs than benefits think it is still worth doing to have an environmentally sustainable economy.
- Among ten reasons provided for higher taxes and 11 for the higher cost of living, 2019 Conservatives put net zero second-to-last in both cases, behind debt due to Covid (51%), British support for Ukraine (35%), and mistakes by Liz Truss (32%).

- Focus group participants were overwhelmingly negative about the ULEZ expansion to Greater London, which they saw as an unjust tax on the poor disguised as an environmental policy.

The Government has said its priority is to take the public with it on the path to net zero. This is the right approach. But, given the need for action to meet interim targets, what does it mean in practice?

The primary public concern is the upfront costs of switching to green technologies or insulating their homes. People know rooftop solar, heat pumps, and electric vehicles can help to reduce household bills. But they cannot pay for them right now and cannot imagine they will be able to in the coming years without government support. This makes people feel they will be forced to change before they are financially ready, even if policymakers are optimistic about reductions in cost.

The 50% expansion to the Boiler Upgrade scheme is a good example of policy that will help the UK to meet its climate targets and support households. But given some of the sticks of interim targets and phase-out deadlines have been shifted, the Government needs bigger carrots. These incentives and investments will require a long-term commitment from the Government, especially the Treasury.

There are several policies that have strong public support:

- Building renewable energy like offshore wind (+63 net support), onshore wind (+53) and solar farms (+59).
- Automatic community benefit payments to people living near new renewable energy infrastructure, as recommended by Onward in its *Power to the People* report (+29 net support).
- Energy efficiency measures, including financial support for low-income families to insulate their homes (+50 net support) and tax incentives to persuade landlords to make rental properties more energy efficient had (+45).

These practical steps to help people go green and build support for new infrastructure should be central policy announcements in the run up to the 2024 election. Reaching net zero will require action that is both pragmatic and bold, proportionate and ambitious. The public sees no contradiction in these positions. Nor should the Government.

Chapter 1

Voters expect ambition from the government alongside pragmatism



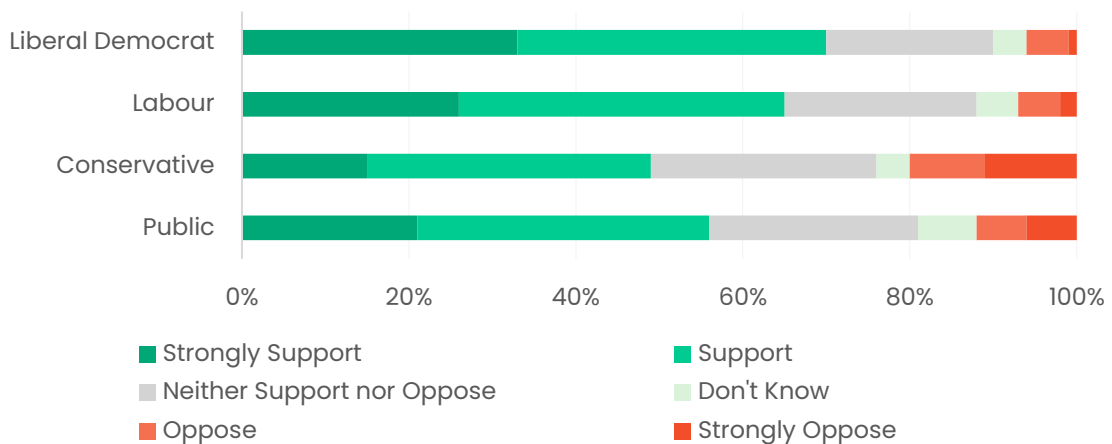


Both the general public and Conservative voters remain supportive of net zero. Public First explained in its poll what net zero by 2050 meant - “balancing any remaining carbon emissions that are produced with carbon reducing measures (like tree planting), in order to reduce the risks from climate change” - and asked whether respondents support this policy.

Of the three major parties, Conservatives were least likely to support net zero, but there was still a strong majority in favour. 55% of the public and 49% Conservative voters supported it, while 13% and 20% opposed it, respectively. Figure 1 shows that net zero polls less well among Conservatives compared to the public, even if support still significantly outweighs opposition.

Figure 1: “Do you support or oppose the UK’s plan to reach Net Zero by 2050?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



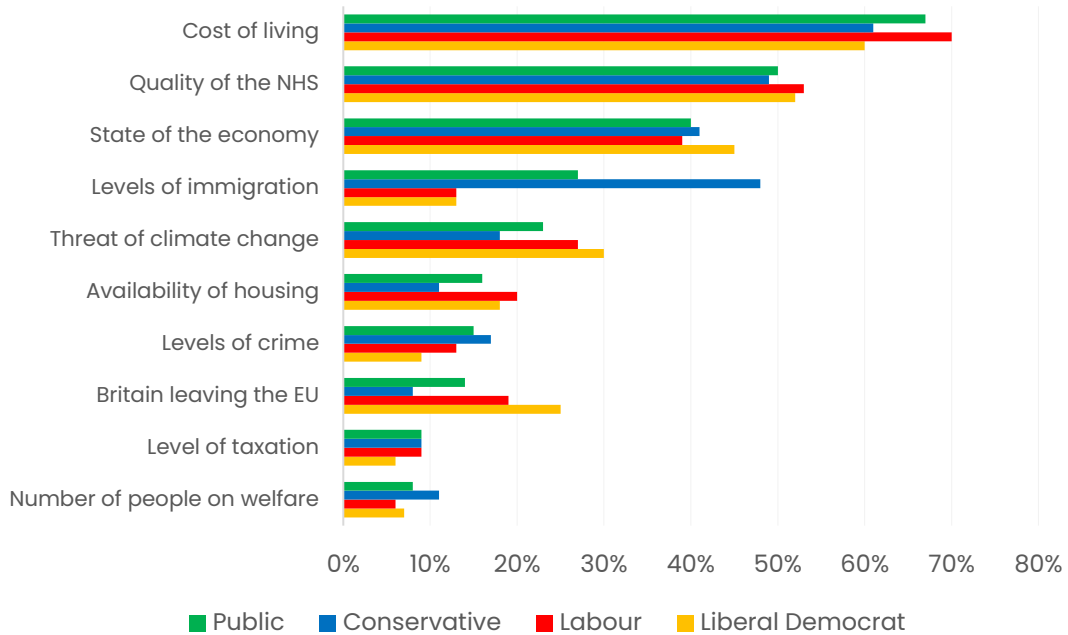
Voters prioritise the climate – but less than the economy and NHS

When asked about the top issues facing the country, the “threat of climate change” came fifth among both the public (23%) and 2019 Conservatives (18%). Among the public, the availability of housing came sixth at 16%, while crime was sixth for Conservatives at 17%.

But climate change is not as salient among voters as more immediate issues. Much more of a priority among the public is the cost of living (67%), the NHS (50%), and the state of the economy (40%), followed by immigration (27%) in a distant fourth. Among 2019 Conservatives, the difference in salience is even more pronounced: climate change is the fifth priority at 18%, significantly lower than immigration (48%) and the state of the economy (41%).

Figure 2: “Which do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please select up to three.”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



“I think [net zero] is a good idea considering what we’re going through at the moment. But I think if you were to ask ‘we can do the economy or we can do net zero’, most people would say the economy. But you can see the wildfires in Greece and Europe, it is a long-term thing we need to do.”

Charlie, IT consultant, early 50s, Watford

“It is important, of course it is important, but I think it is probably at the back of people’s minds because of what’s going on at the moment.”

Julie, bank clerk, mid 50s, Dudley

“Yeah, it is important but at the minute it hasn’t even crossed my mind at all, especially with everything else that’s going on.”

James, clerical assistant, late 30s, Dudley

“I don’t really worry about the environment; I’ve got enough things to worry about.”

Sue, cleaner, early 50s, Oldham

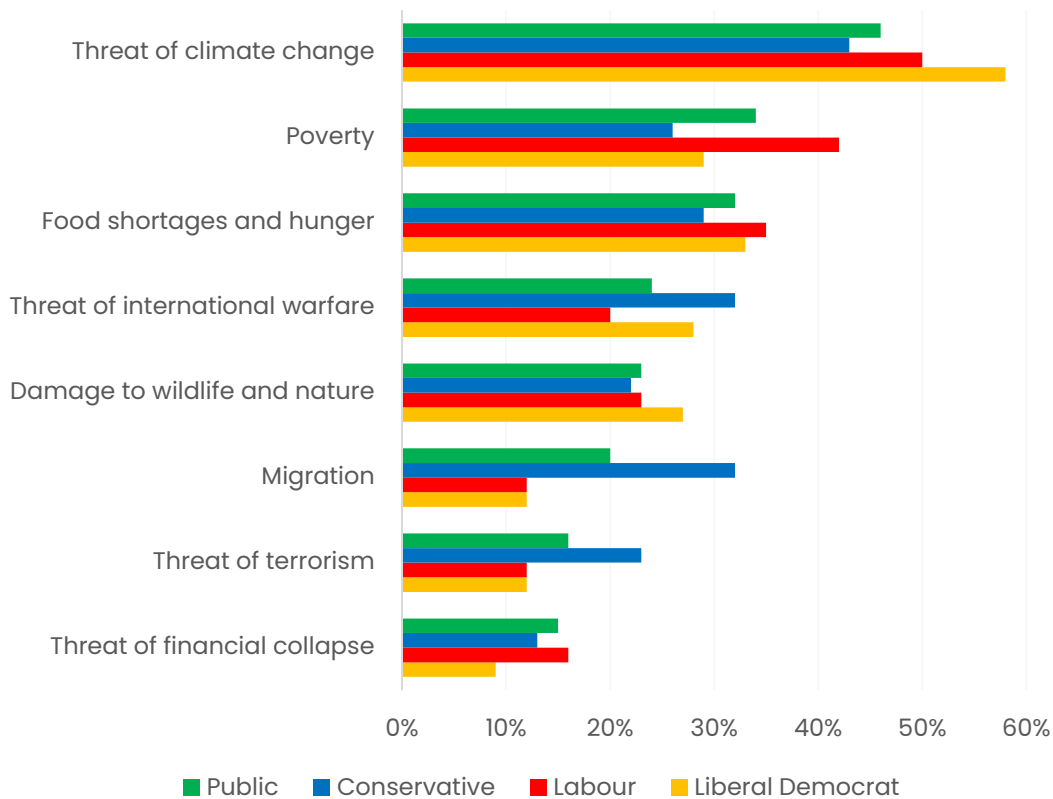
“We have got to take care of our planet. Yeah, Spain’s been hot before and it will be hot again. But I do believe we’re killing our planet.”

Daniel, communications worker, mid 50s, Bexley

When asked what the most important issues facing the world are, the threat of climate change was by far considered the most serious by Conservative voters at 43%. The threat of warfare and mass migration came joint second with 32% each. Over a fifth of Conservatives chose damage to wildlife and nature (22%), almost as many as those who chose terrorism (23%).

Figure 3: “Which of the following challenges facing the world do you think are the most serious? Please select up to three.”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

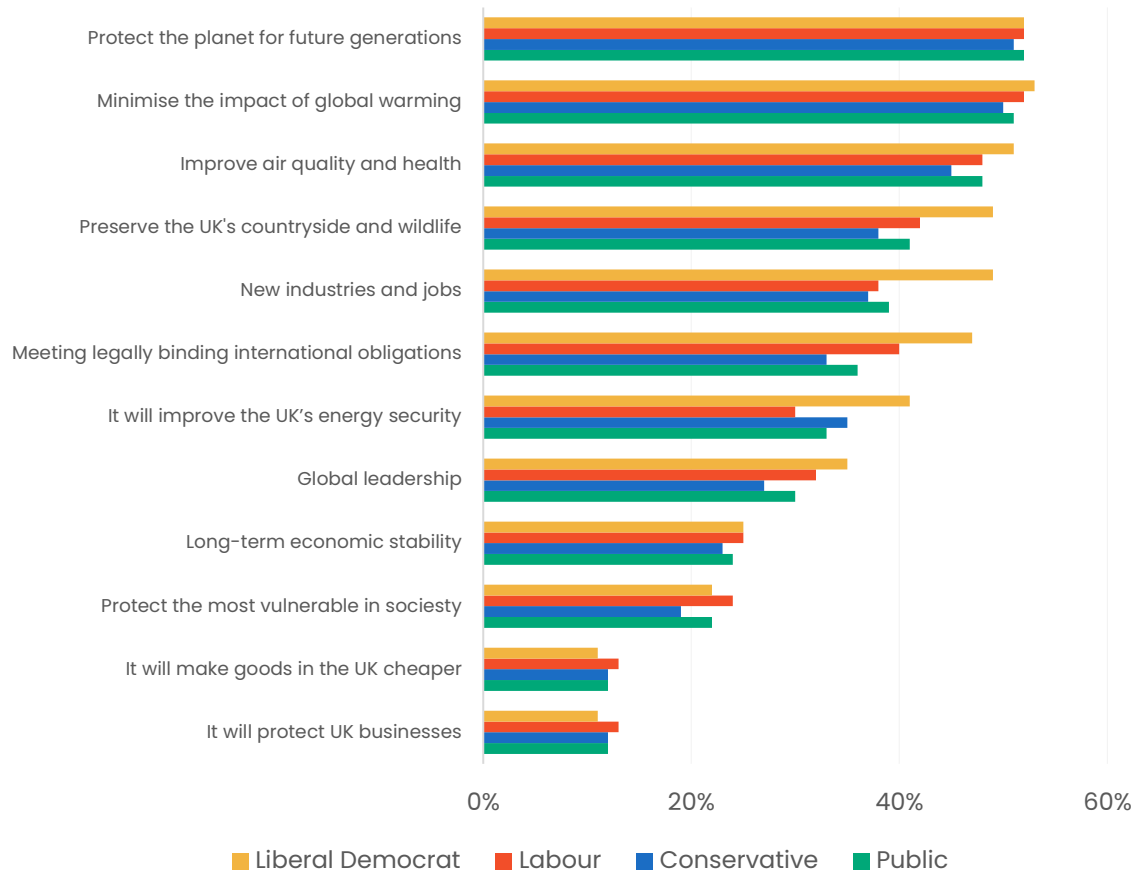


2019 Conservatives worry about future generations and the environment

When provided with 12 reasons why it is important to reach net zero, the public prioritised future generations and the environment over other more materialist or political reasons. While arguments of economic advantage and national security are often provided as a reason why the UK should embrace the net zero transition, voters primarily want to do it because they see the environment as valuable and want to protect it for future generations.

Figure 4: “In your opinion, why is it important that the UK is working towards the Net Zero target, if at all?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Among Conservatives, global leadership comes eighth out of 12 options for reasons why getting to net zero is important. In focus groups, the question of the UK’s ability to make a noticeable difference frequently arose. It was often said that there was little use in the UK doing net zero by itself and there was a sense of foul play from politicians, world leaders, and celebrities who urged climate action but did not demonstrate commitment to cutting greenhouse gas emissions themselves.

“The cost of living is the most important thing at the moment. What can I do about [climate change] when China and India are doing what they’re doing? It was top priority but now it is probably mid-priority.”

Aiden, health care worker, mid 30s, Wakefield

“We’ve got to look at it worldwide; God knows what China is burning. I don’t know where to go with electricity and gas for our bills. It is frightening.”

Murray, retired company director, early 70s, Watford

“I’m still recycling, still rinsing my jam jars out and my tins, then you see that state of China and America pumping billions of tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere and think ‘what’s the actual point?’ to a large degree but you still carry on.”

Peter, environmental health worker, early 40s, Oldham

“China is opening up coal power stations left right and centre. The more and more we reduce the more they increase. So, it is almost as if we’re doing it as a favour to them. But I think we certainly need to keep the policy to keep things going, otherwise we’d be as bad as the rest of them.”

Paul, manager, mid 50s, Rushcliffe

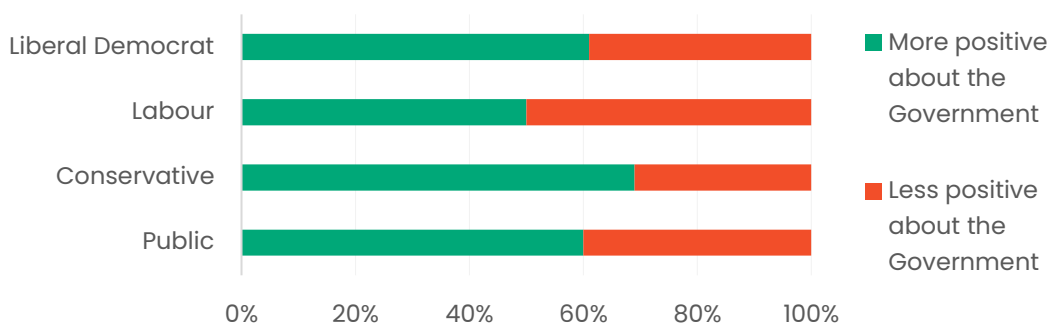
“We’re being begged to reduce our carbon footprint, but other people are not following the rules. Not just politicians but world leaders and celebrities.”

Ken, car detailer, mid 30s, Rushcliffe

Progress on emissions makes voters feel more positive about the Government. When told that the UK was almost halfway to net zero with a 48% reduction in carbon emissions since 1990, 60% of the public and 69% of 2019 Conservative voters felt more positive about the Government. 69% of the public and 62% of Conservatives felt this meant that “our efforts are paying off, we should keep going”.

Figure 5: “Official statistics show that the UK is almost halfway (48%) towards reaching its net zero target. Does this make you feel more or less positive about the Government?”

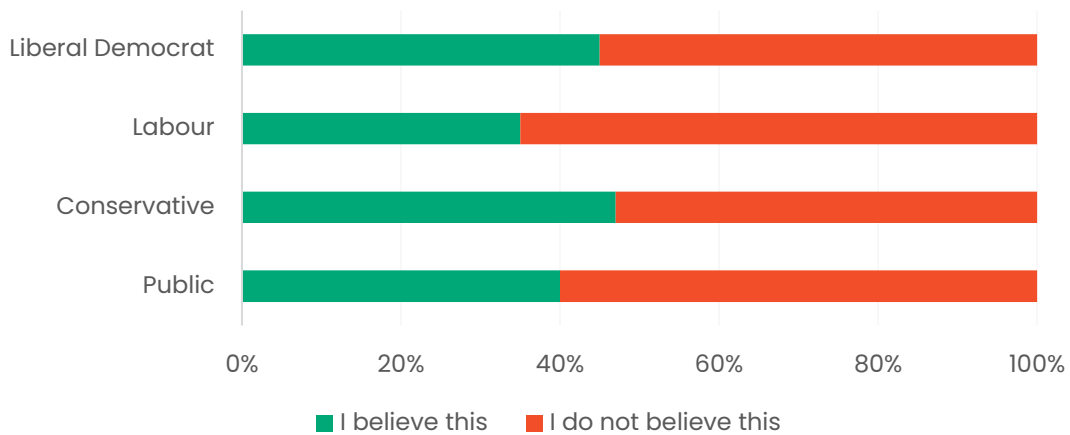
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



But the Government faces a credibility challenge. 60% of the public and 53% of Conservatives do not believe statistics about the Government's progress, denting any positive sentiment they might create.

Figure 6: "Official statistics show that the UK is almost halfway (48%) towards reaching its net zero target. Do you or do you not believe this statistic?"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



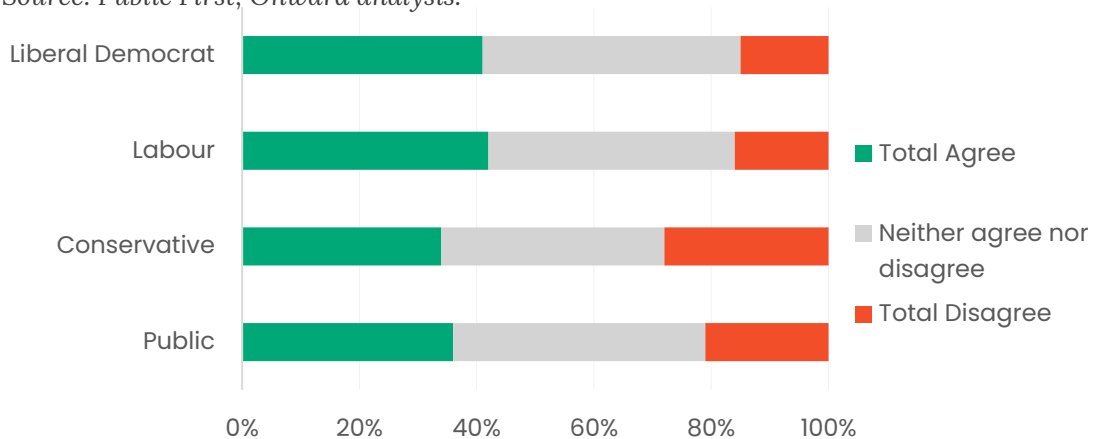
"I was curious to hear we're the best performing country in the western world. It feels hard to believe. But yeah, it is encouraging that it is 48%. Let's press on and make it better."

Simon, company director, late 60s, Esher

2019 Conservatives were more likely than not to think net zero is one of the best things the Conservatives have achieved since coming to power in 2010: 38% agreed compared to 28% who disagreed.

Figure 7: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The "Net Zero" target is one of the best things to come out of the Conservative government."

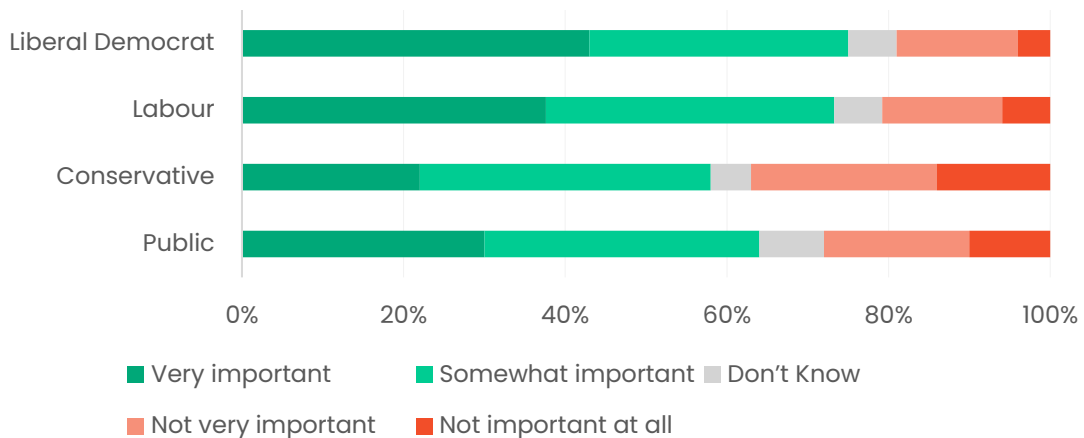
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Respondents were asked how important it was for the Government to meet the net zero by 2050 target. 22% of Conservatives thought it was very important compared to 14% who thought it was “not important at all”. Together, 64% of 2019 Conservatives thought it was important to reach net zero by 2050, compared to 37% who did not agree.

Figure 8: “How important is it to you that the UK meets its target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?”

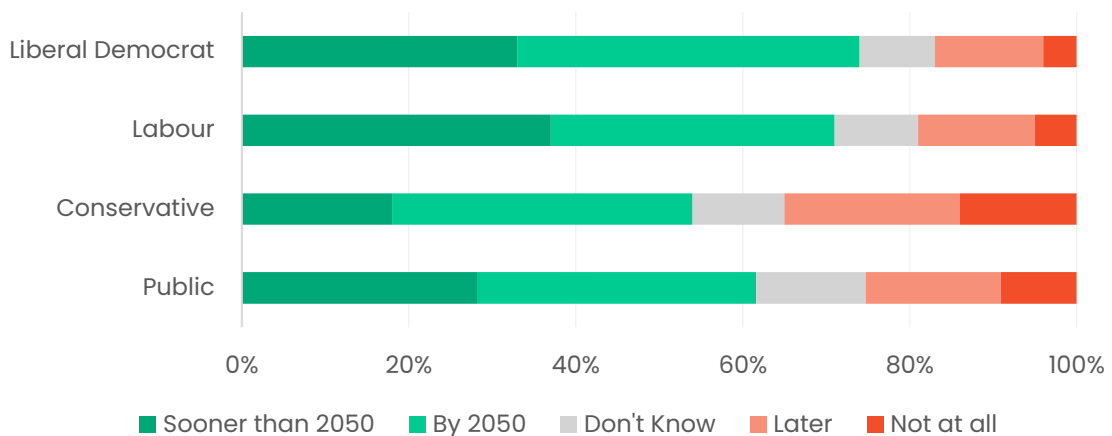
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



2019 Conservatives are more likely to think the UK should aim to reach net zero before 2050 (18%) than not at all (14%). Conservatives are more cautious than the general public, but a majority think the UK should live up to its commitment of net zero either by 2050 or sooner (54%), while 21% think the UK should still reach net zero but at a later date.

Figure 9: “Which of the following comes closest to your view? The UK should reach net zero...”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

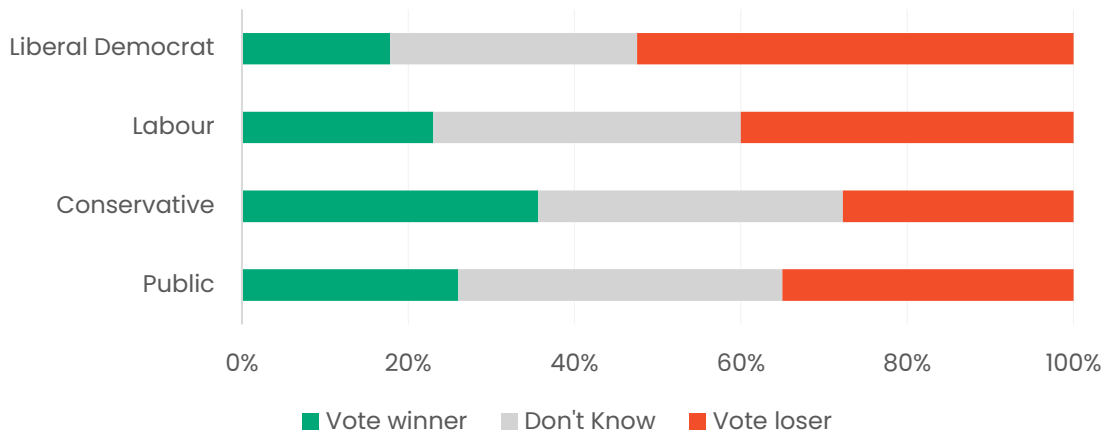


Some Conservative voters think dropping net zero would be a vote winner...

When Conservatives are asked about whether getting rid of net zero is a vote winner or loser, the results are inconclusive. Responding to the statement “dropping the net zero target would be a vote-winning decision by a political party”, the largest proportion of Conservatives say “don’t know” at 37%. 36% think it would be a vote winner, with 28% seeing it as a vote loser.

Figure 10: “If the Conservatives drop the Net Zero target would they win more votes?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

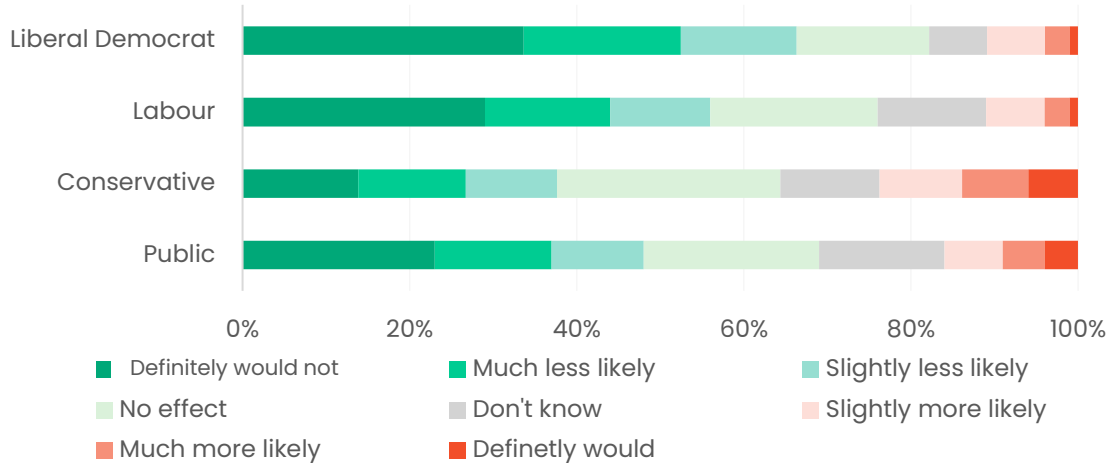


...but when asked about themselves say it would be a vote loser

When presented with the idea of an unidentified political party ditching net zero, more Conservatives (14%) said this would definitely lose their vote than those who said it would secure it (6%). More than a third (38%) of Conservatives would be less likely to vote for a party that gets rid of net zero compared to just under a quarter (24%) for whom it would have a positive effect on their vote. The results were starker among the public: 23% of voters said they would certainly not vote for a party that promised to ditch net zero compared to 4% who said they definitely would vote for that party.

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?”

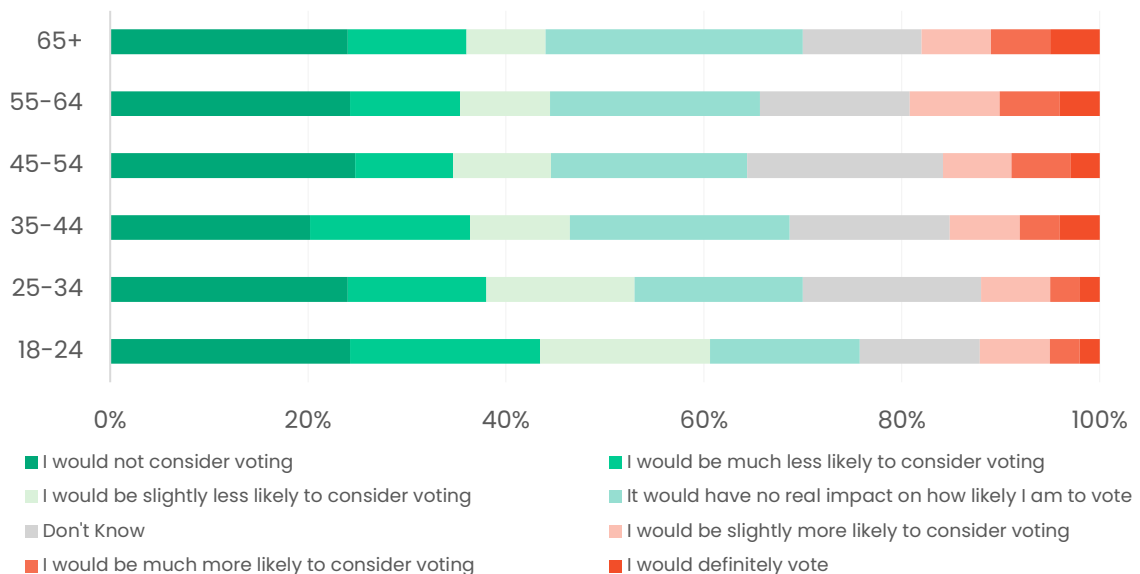
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Getting rid of net zero burns bridges with younger voters with no substantial gains from older voters. It would have a negative impact on the votes of 60% of 18–24-year-olds, including 24% who would certainly not vote for a party that got rid of the target. It would have a slightly less negative effect on older voters (44% for both 55–64-year-olds and 65+ year olds). It is more likely to have no effect on the votes of those over the age of 64 either way than a positive one: 24% said it would have “no real impact”, and just 18% would see it positively.

Figure 12: “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

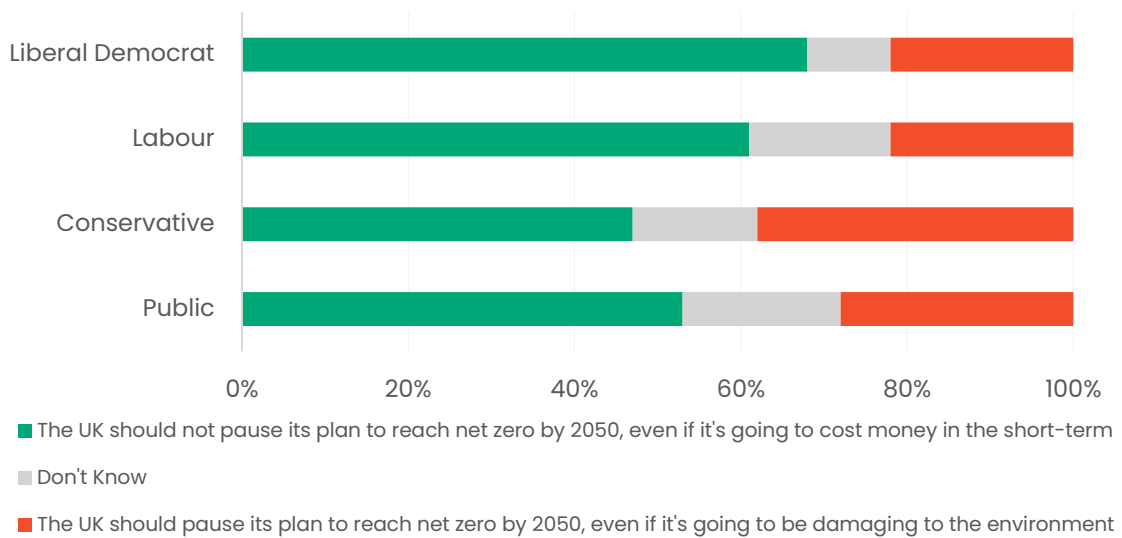


2019 Conservatives who would prefer a pause on net zero do not prioritise it when voting

Conservative voters were more likely to feel positively about pausing net zero than the public, but a pause does not directly translate into votes. Figure 13 shows Conservatives are more likely to think the Government should “pause” net zero by 2050 than the public or voters for other parties. In focus groups, those who were pro-pausing net zero would not consider it sufficient to win their vote.

Figure 13: “Which of the following comes closest to your view?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



“I think it wouldn’t make any difference. There are more important things on the agenda. That’s my concern right now.”

Lisa, secretary, late 40s, Wakefield

“It won’t make any difference. They didn’t do anything about it before anyway, so they won’t be doing anything else.”

Osborne, senior manager, mid 60s, Esher

“All the policies need to be viable to make me vote. I won’t vote just on one topic, if they haven’t dealt with the cost of living.”

Graham, company director, late 60s, Esher

Chapter 2

Voters see shifts in net zero policy
through the lens of “anti-politics”

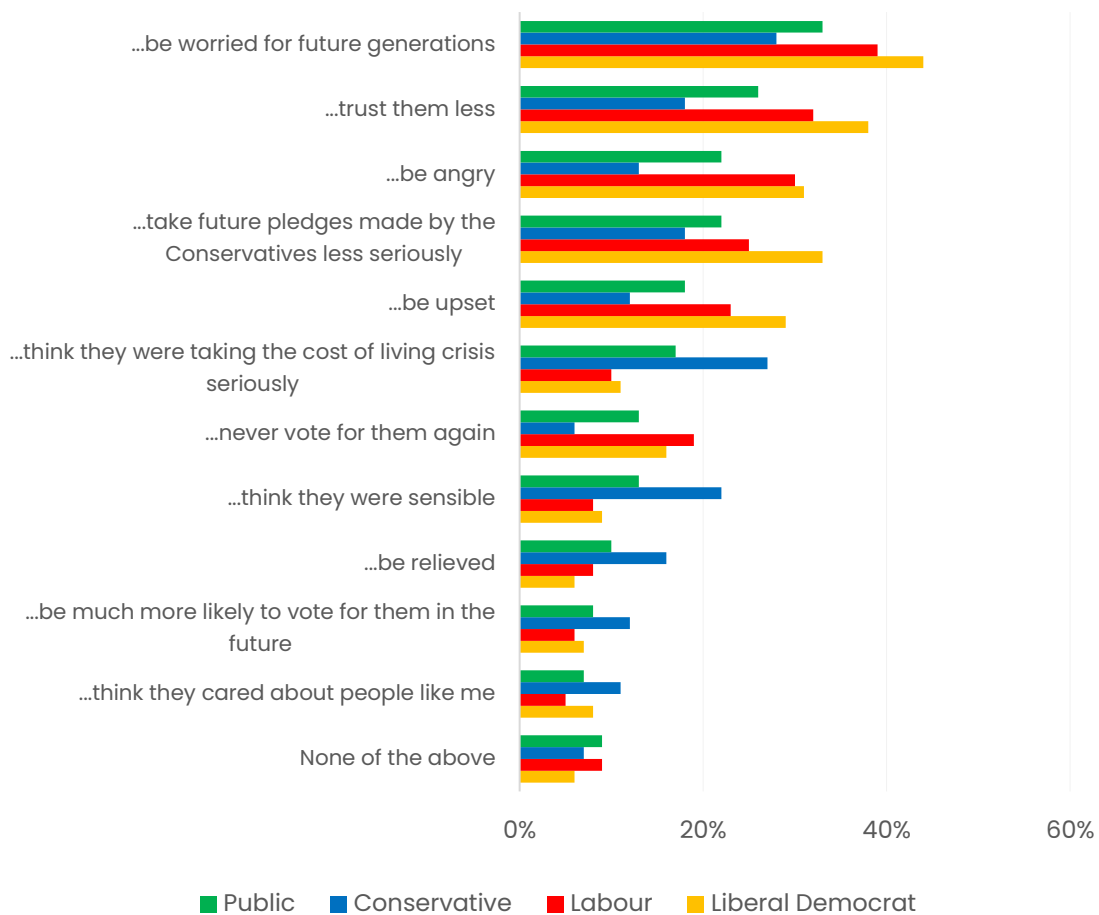


The most common responses among the public if the Government was to get rid of the net zero target is that they would be worried about future generations and would consider the Conservatives to be untrustworthy.

With 2019 Conservative voters, the picture is more nuanced. The highest response was still that it would make them worried for future generations (28%). But Conservatives were more likely to think the Government was taking the cost of living crisis seriously (27%) or that it was sensible (22%). But like the public, many 2019 Conservatives would trust the Conservative Party less (18%) or take future pledges from them less seriously (18%).

Figure 14: “Which of the following, if any, would happen if the Conservative government decided to get rid of the “Net Zero” pledge?”

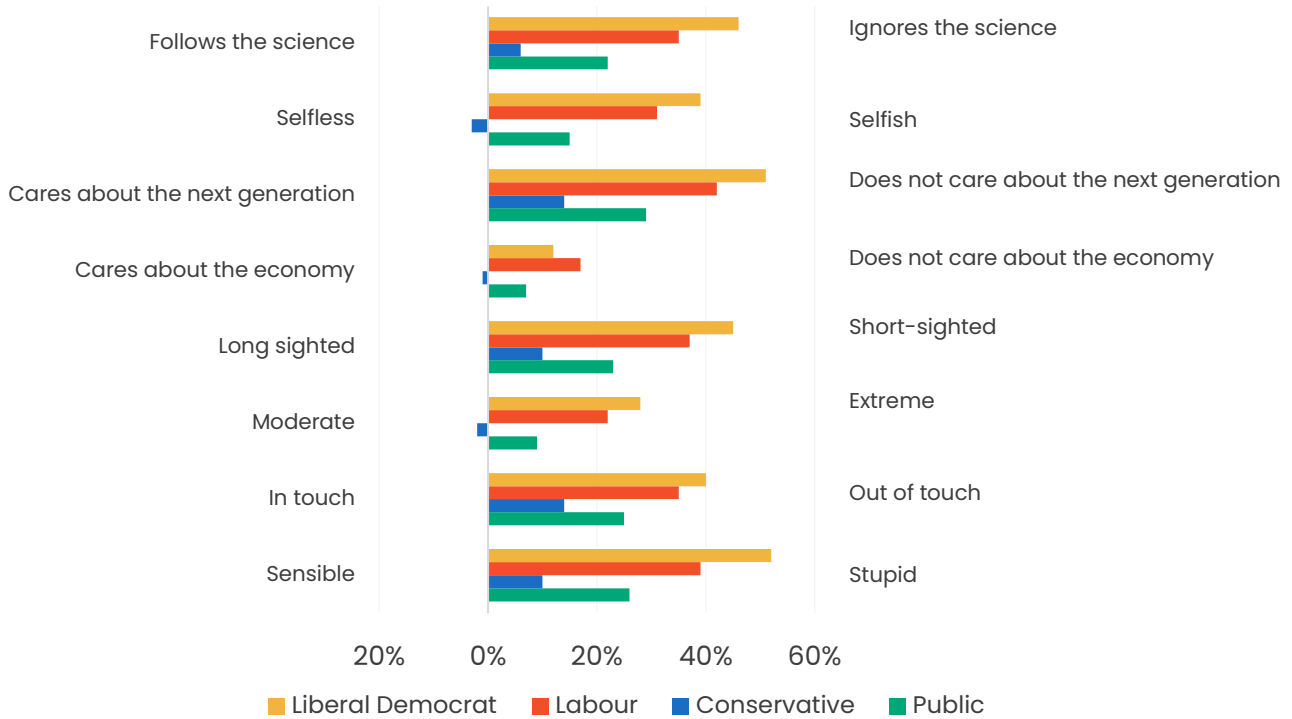
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



When asked to describe a party that promised to get rid of net zero, the general public used generally negative descriptions, which are on the right of Figure 15. Conservative voters were marginally more likely than not to think it as selfless, moderate, and caring about the economy. But they were much more likely to think it would be out of touch, stupid, short-sighted, uncaring for the next generation, and unscientific.

Figure 15: Voters' opinions of a political party that said they were going to get rid of the target to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions.

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

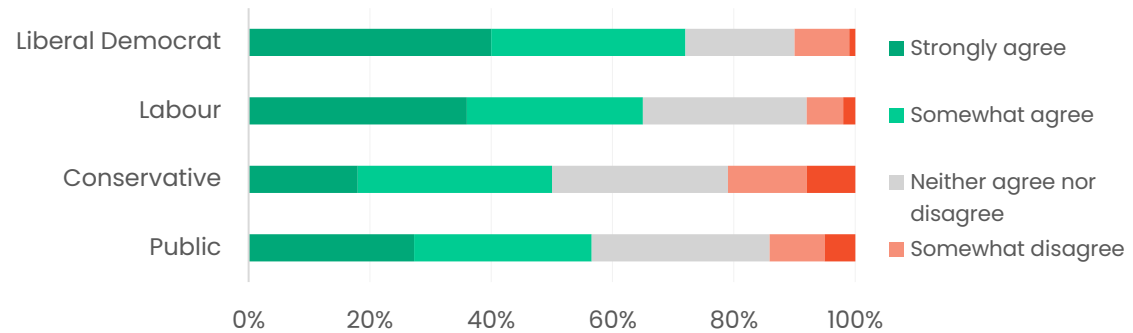


Half of 2019 Conservatives think dropping net zero would be embarrassing

Half (50%) of Conservative voters would consider it to be embarrassing to drop a target that was so far away. Only one fifth would not, and 29% were not sure. Among the public, the sense of embarrassment would be higher (57%). This sentiment was repeated in the focus groups: participants were sometimes surprised that the Government's main policy for tackling climate change was based so far in the future.

Figure 16: "Do you agree or disagree that it would be embarrassing for the Conservatives to drop a target so far away (2050)"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



“To say they’re thinking of 2050 is ridiculous. It’s 27 years down the line. They promise things. They commit themselves to things. But it never materialises. It’s all to give themselves a good name. ‘Look at what we’re doing. Look how much we care for people, for wildlife.’”

Jen, electrician, late 50s, Bexley

“A good idea, although 27 years is a long time. If anything, they should cut it down quite a bit.”

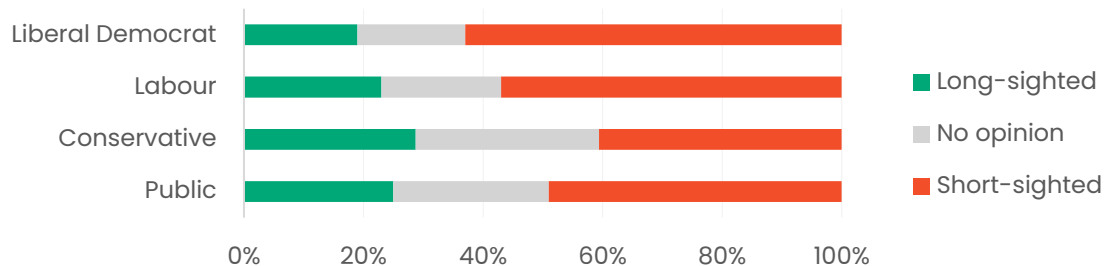
Maurice, car dealer, early 50s, Watford

Some 2019 Conservatives think changing net zero policy would be short-sighted

Some focus group participants, including those who were sceptical of net zero, felt dropping the target would be evidence of the Government’s inability to think long-term. When asked about the sector-based targets for heat and petrol and diesel vehicles, there was some fear over the deadlines but also concern that the Government does not see anything through or plan for longer than the election cycle.

Figure 17: “If a political party said they were going to get rid of the target to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions, do you think this would be long-sighted or short-sighted?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



“It is quite scary that at some point you’re going to be confronted with these things. Heat pumps are a massive job. But having said that, people in places like Sweden have had them for 30, 40 years and it is all fine there. But we don’t plan long-term. We never have long-term plans; it is always five years.”

Simon, company director, late 60s, Esher

“It feels like we never see anything through or actually achieve anything.”

Georgina, catering company director, early 40s, Watford

“I wouldn’t feel too much because it is expected for politicians to backtrack on things. They can’t promise what they’re doing in a couple of years, let alone 30.”

Paul, technician, late 50s, Bexley

Even voters who are less enthusiastic about net zero would see ditching the target as a sign of dishonesty: it would be considered as “yet another promise broken”. There was also some scepticism about the reason Conservatives would drop the target, with participants saying it would be more to do with winning votes than helping people.

“A lot of people have made the commitment to go electric and help the environment, so those people that have already started it while the rest of us are with diesel and petrol cars, so it is going to divide us even more. And people that have already started it are going to be more pissed off.”

Peter, environmental health worker, early 40s, Oldham

“It might be a realistic timeline, but it is just words. They’re all the same, all politicians. They’re saying they’re going to do this, that, and the other, and most of the time they never do.”

Lee, builder, late 20s, Dudley

“I’d be more positive than negative if they scrapped it because it is an unworkable target. But they do this on purpose. They’ll pee people off then give a bit back to make people feel ok.”

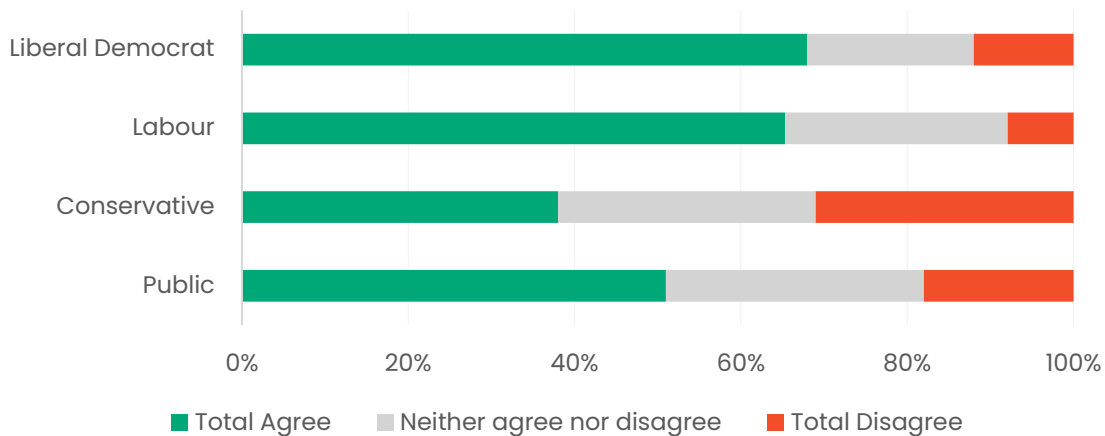
Alan, designer, late 60s, Esher

Voters see scrapping or delaying net zero targets as incompetent

Figure 18 shows that 38% of Conservative voters and over half of the public agreed or somewhat agreed this would make the Conservatives look incompetent. 31% of Conservatives did not agree.

Figure 18: “Do you agree or disagree that dropping the “net zero” target would show the Conservatives were incompetent?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



“I wouldn’t feel very confident if they u-turned at all. They’d have decided something is too difficult, so they want to change the goal posts.”

Philomena, business consultant, early 60s, Watford

“If they backtracked, I’d see it as a negative. They pulled the grants for electric cars. If they decide to move the date out, I’d just see it as another thing they backtracked on.”

John, retired bank manager, early 60s, Bexley

Chapter 3

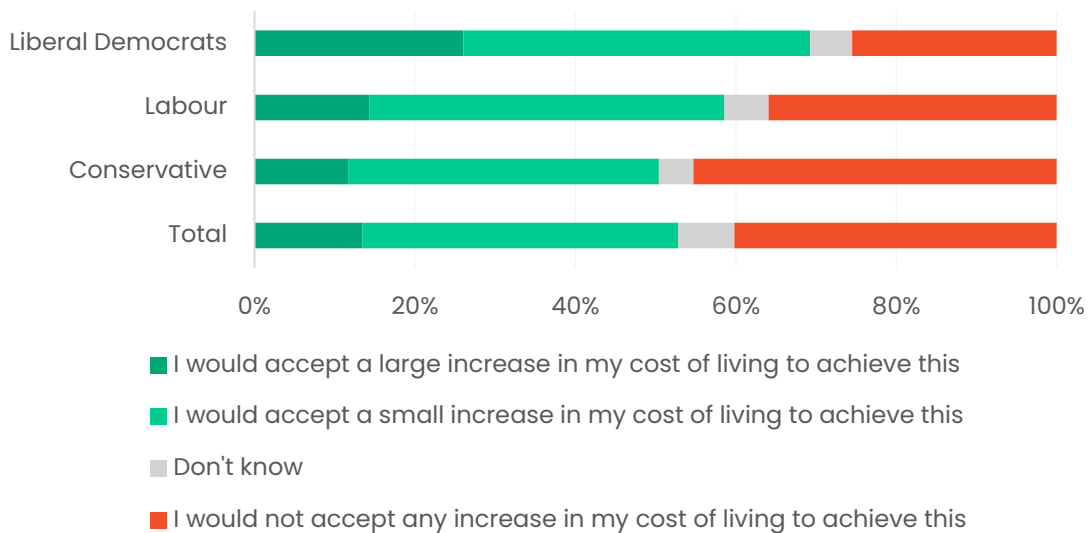
Voters are cautious about the costs of net zero, but optimistic about benefits



The debate about net zero is often framed in terms of costs. Commentators and politicians observe that the public supports net zero - until they have to pay for it. But net zero and the environment are no different to any other area of policy in this regard. In fact, Focaldata found that slightly more Conservatives (53%) are willing to accept either a small or large increase in their cost of living for effective action on climate change than not (50%).

Figure 19: “Imagine that taking effective action on climate change required some increase to the cost of living in order to achieve it. To what extent, if at all, would you be willing to accept this as the price?”

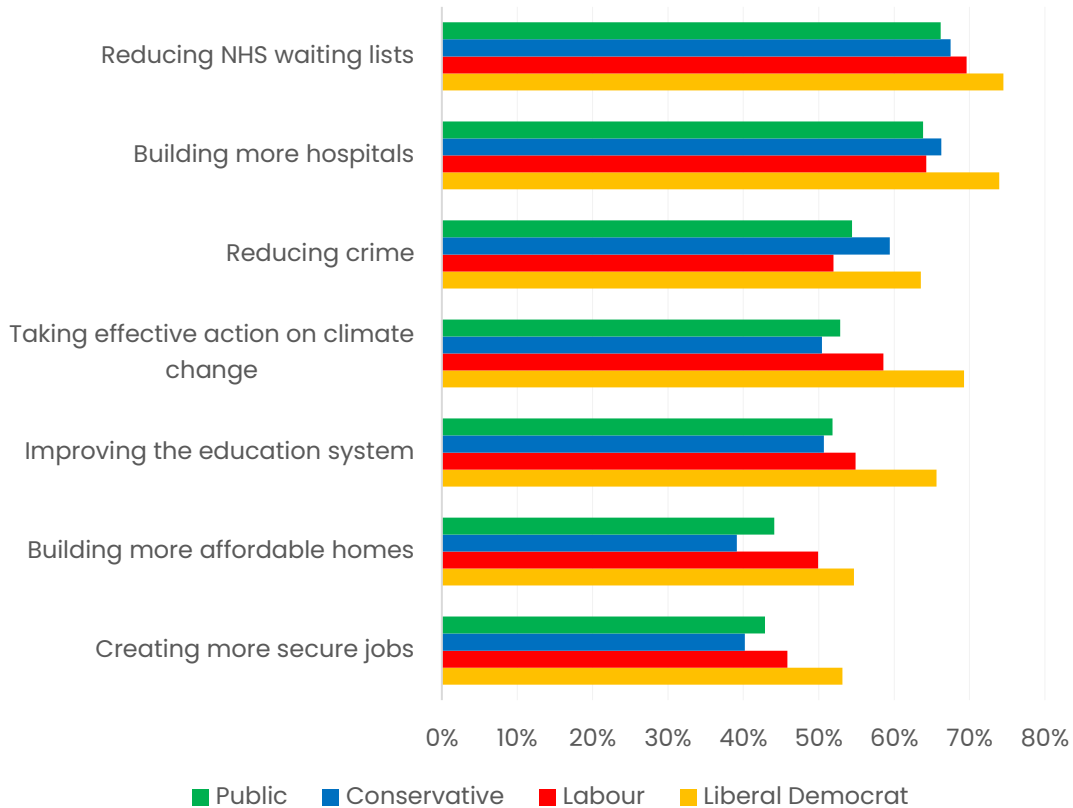
Source: Focaldata



A reduction in support once financial costs are introduced is not unique to net zero and environmental policy. Focaldata found that, among seven policy options, “taking effective action on climate change” was the fourth preference for respondents overall in terms of willingness to bear financial costs, with 53% prepared to accept costs and 40% not. It came below investment in healthcare (66%) and tackling crime (54%), but above improving education (52%) and building more homes (44%). Conservatives are also more likely to accept costs (50%) than not (45%).

Figure 20: Imagine that taking effective action on the following areas required some increase to the cost of living in order to achieve it. To what extent, if at all, would you be willing to accept this as the price of action?

Source: Focaldata



Net zero is not felt as a major tax burden nor a contributor to a higher cost of living

Very few people think net zero is the reason for taxes going up. Of ten reasons for higher taxes on offer, net zero was the last reason for the public (16%), and ninth among Conservative voters (24%) - Brexit came tenth with 21%. Far more likely to be blamed by Conservatives for higher taxes was Covid-19 and lockdowns (51%), the welfare state (36%), British support for Ukraine (35%), and mistakes by Liz Truss (32%). When asked if they expected part of their taxes to go towards fighting climate change, +39 net of the public and +32 net of Conservative voters agreed.

Figure 21: “Which of the following reasons best explains why the overall tax burden has gone up? Please select all that apply.”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

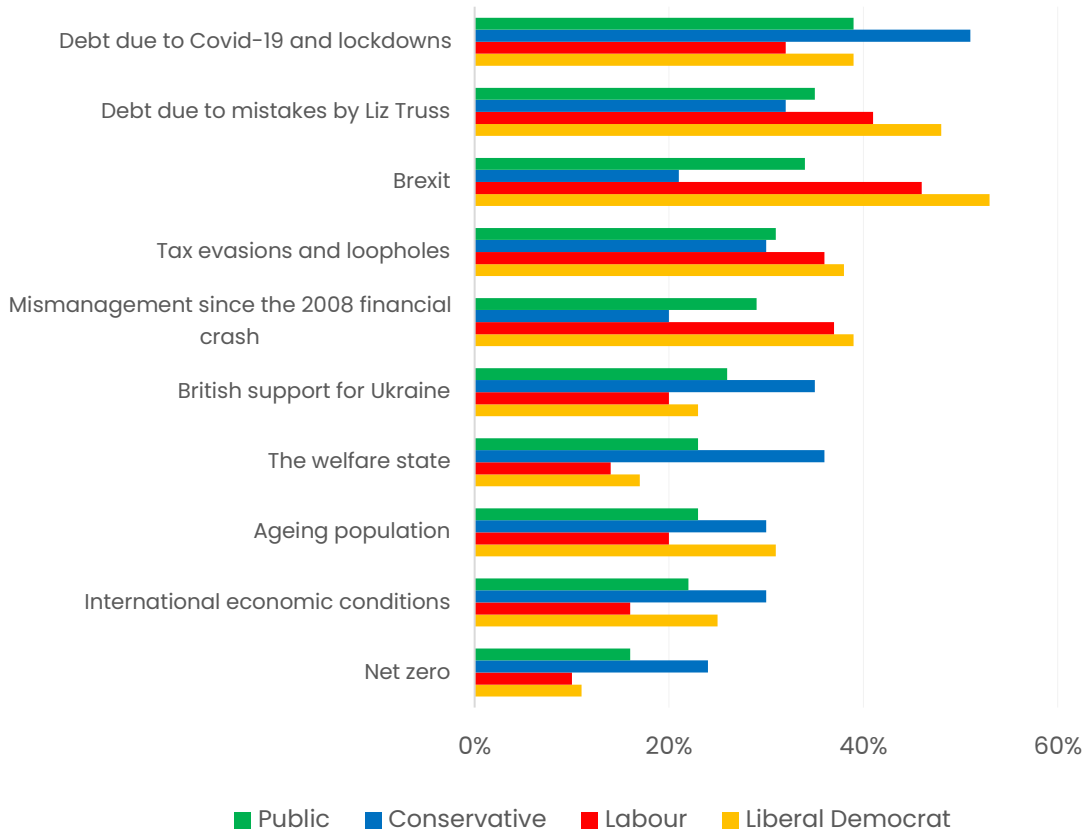
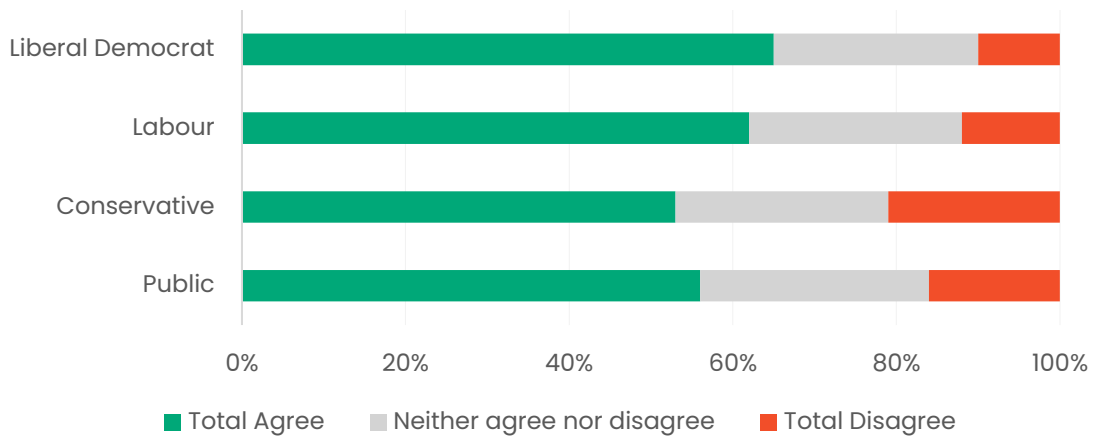


Figure 22: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? I expect part of my tax bill to go towards tackling climate change.”

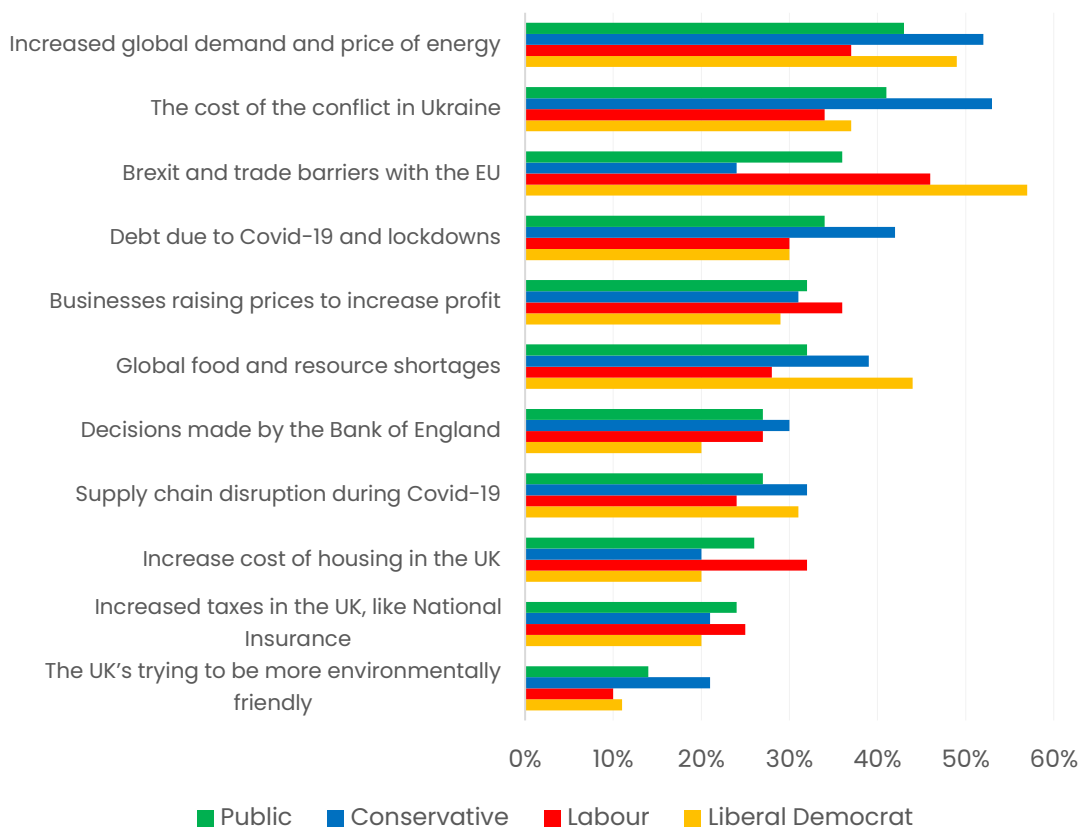
Source: Public First; Onward analysis



The UK trying to become more environmentally friendly was also not considered as a reason for the cost of living becoming higher recently. Of 11 reasons offered, it was the last chosen reason among the public (14%), ten percentage points behind the next option, increased taxes (24%). Conservatives were more likely to blame environmental policies than the public or voters of other parties, but it was still only joint-ninth with increased taxes (21% each). Increased house prices came last among Conservatives at 20%. Focus group respondents never blamed net zero or related “green policies” for the rise in their costs of living.

Figure 23: “Thinking broadly, in your view, what are the main reasons for the cost of living crisis in the UK?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.

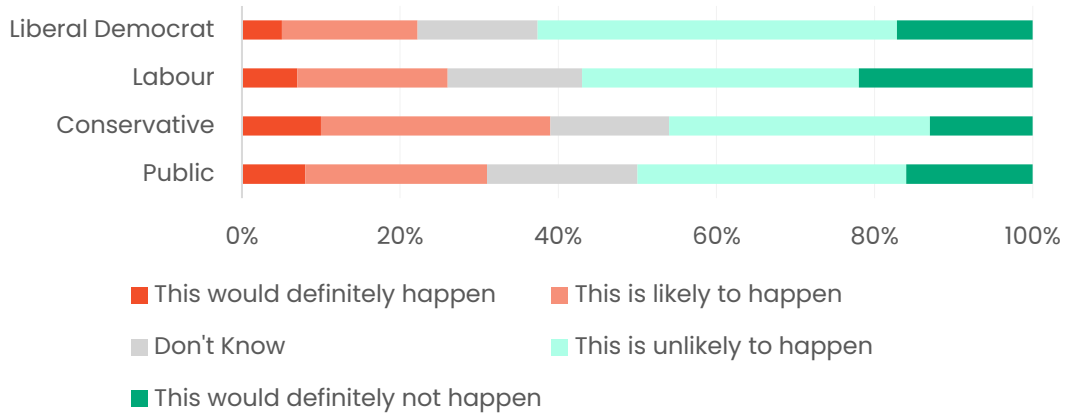


Conservatives do not think ditching net zero would lower energy bills

Neither the public nor Conservative voters think they would have lower energy bills if the Government ditched net zero. 29% of the public thought ditching net zero would certainly or likely lead to lower bills compared to 50% who thought it would not. Conservatives are a little more optimistic, but far from convinced: 39% thought it would or might and 46% thought it certainly or probably would not.

Figure 24: "Do you think the average person in the UK will save money on their energy bills if the Conservatives drop the net zero target?"

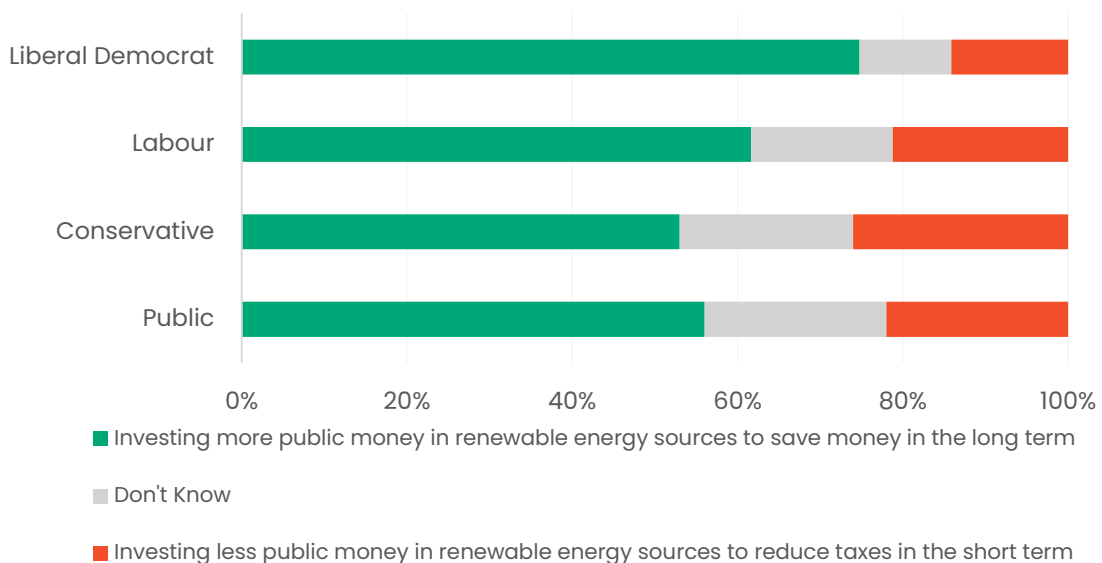
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Voters thought that greener forms of energy were cheaper. Over half of the public (56%) and Conservative voters (53%) thought that investing in wind and solar would bring their energy bills down. Just over a fifth of the public (22%) and a quarter of Conservatives (26%) thought investing less into renewables would lead to a lower cost of living. Most respondents did not think removing green levies on bills would help: just 13% of the public and 21% of Conservatives chose removing green levies from energy bills as one of three ways to help with the cost of living.

Figure 25: "Which of the following do you think is the best way to bring down the cost of living in the UK?"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



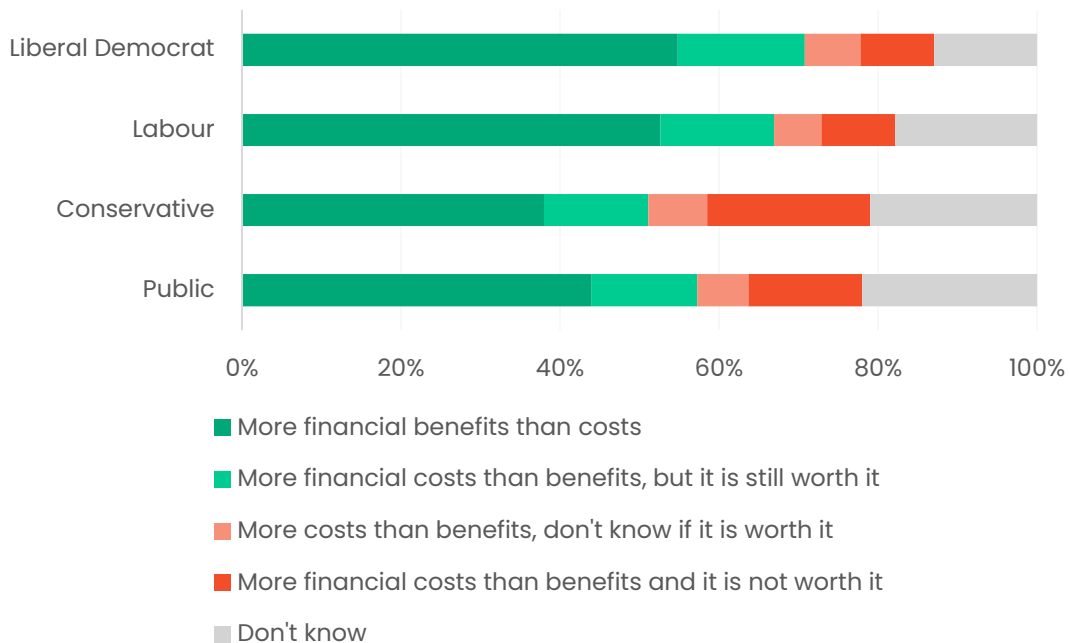
Voters think the financial benefits of net zero are greater than the costs

The public recognise there will be costs, as with all policies, but significantly more believe that these costs will be outweighed by benefits as opposed to the other way around. 44% of the public think that, overall, there will be more financial benefits than costs, while 34% think the opposite. Among 2019 Conservatives, though, a slight majority (41% vs 38%) believe there will be more costs than benefits.

But, as Figure 26 shows, among the 38% who said there would be more costs, around a third (32%) still think it would be worth reaching net zero to have a more environmentally sustainable economy. That means 47% would support moving to net zero overall (assuming those Conservatives who think it would be profitable think it is a good idea), and 23% would not.

Figure 26: “Reaching net zero means making the economy more environmentally sustainable, which will have financial costs and benefits. Which of the following is closer to your view?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Voters want to go green, but struggle with the upfront costs

Voters know that “going green” - switching to cleaner transport and heating options - brings financial savings, but they worry about or cannot afford the upfront costs. One focus group participant said he “was not the biggest environmentalist”, but switched to an electric vehicle because it was cheaper to run (and because “a Hyundai is less likely to be stolen than a Range Rover”).

“I’m not the biggest environmentalist. I’ve got an electric car, but that’s more because I was fed up with putting £100 worth of petrol in my car every week. So, I was looking for a cheap alternative, not really an environmental point of view.”

John, retired bank manager, early 60s, Bexley

“I do of course think it is a good idea. Who doesn’t want to breathe in clean air, no oil, no gas, but realistically I don’t think it is achievable. If I can afford it, yes, I would put heat pumps and solar panels in my house.”

Jen, electrician, late 50s, Bexley

“We have to invest for long-term savings. One example of that is solar panels. But it is out of the reach of a lot of people. I don’t think we do enough. The Government talks about lots of schemes to help out, but I always fall through the gap.”

Georgina, catering company director, early 40s, Watford

“We’ve recently looked into solar panels because our neighbours have them but I didn’t realise the cost implications of it, because we did enquire. it is really, really expensive and yeah it is good, but I think it was £12,000 to have them installed.”

Sarah, nurse, mid 40s, Dudley

But, as Figure 28 shows, the most common reason given for slow progress on net zero was members of the public being unable to afford the changes, followed by people not wanting to change their lifestyles. Focus group participants backed up the polling (see Figure 2) in prioritising the cost of living and the economy over net zero and the environment. Although protecting the environment was generally considered important, participants said that people “on the breadline” cannot afford to make the changes they were being asked to do, like install heat pumps or insulate their homes.

“If any government wants people to lower their emissions, they have got to sort the economy out first. People on the breadline, worried about where the next meal is coming from, they’re not going to think about the environment – they’re thinking about the immediate.”

Julia, teacher, early 60s, Esher

“I would love an electric car but who shells out for one? Who’s got the money for the car? Then there’s the high cost of electricity when you plug it in. So, in the short term yes this is costing us, but I suppose if we do this all in the short term, we might not have so many problems in 10, 20, 30 years’ time.”

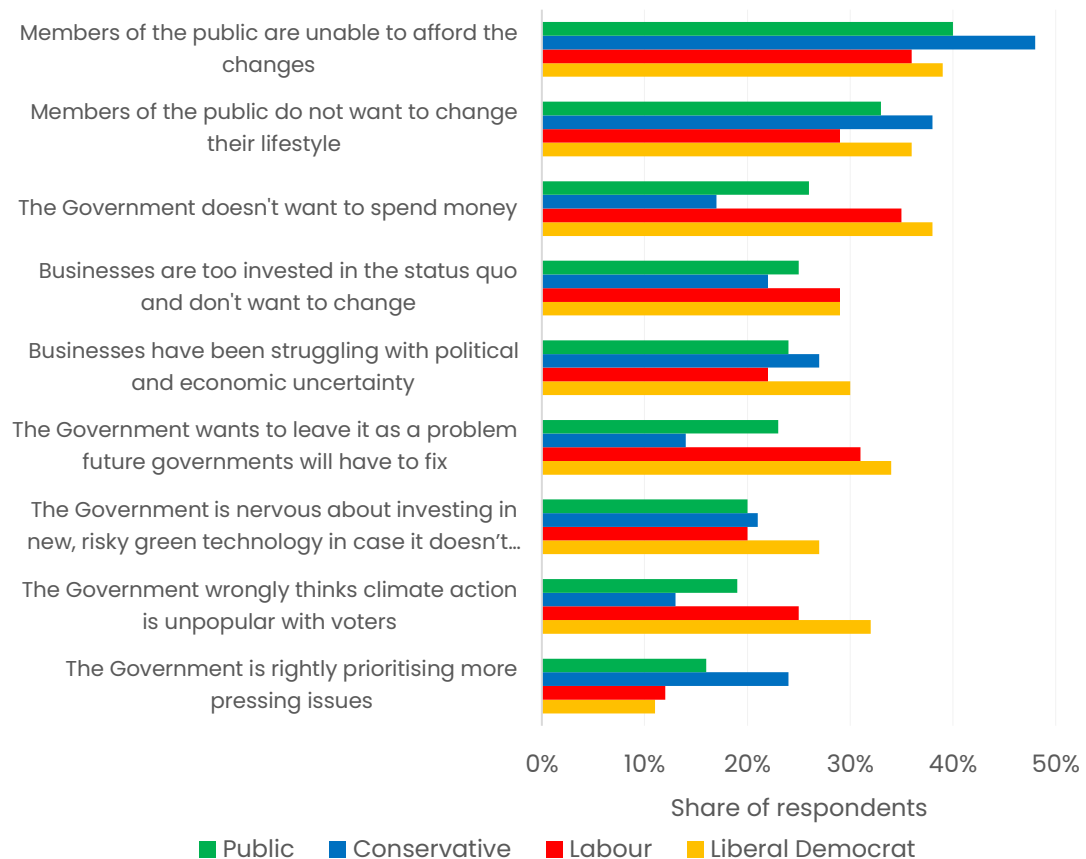
Natasha, sales assistant, late 20s, Dudley

“I can’t afford to replace my car. it is all at a cost to us at what is already a difficult time. I think everybody is living hand to mouth at the moment – I can’t give that initial outlay to start with. People are struggling to pay their mortgage and now winter’s coming so energy is going to go up.”

Julie, manager, early 50s Wakefield

Figure 27: “In your view, which of the following factors, if any, are slowing down how quickly the UK is able to reach net zero?”

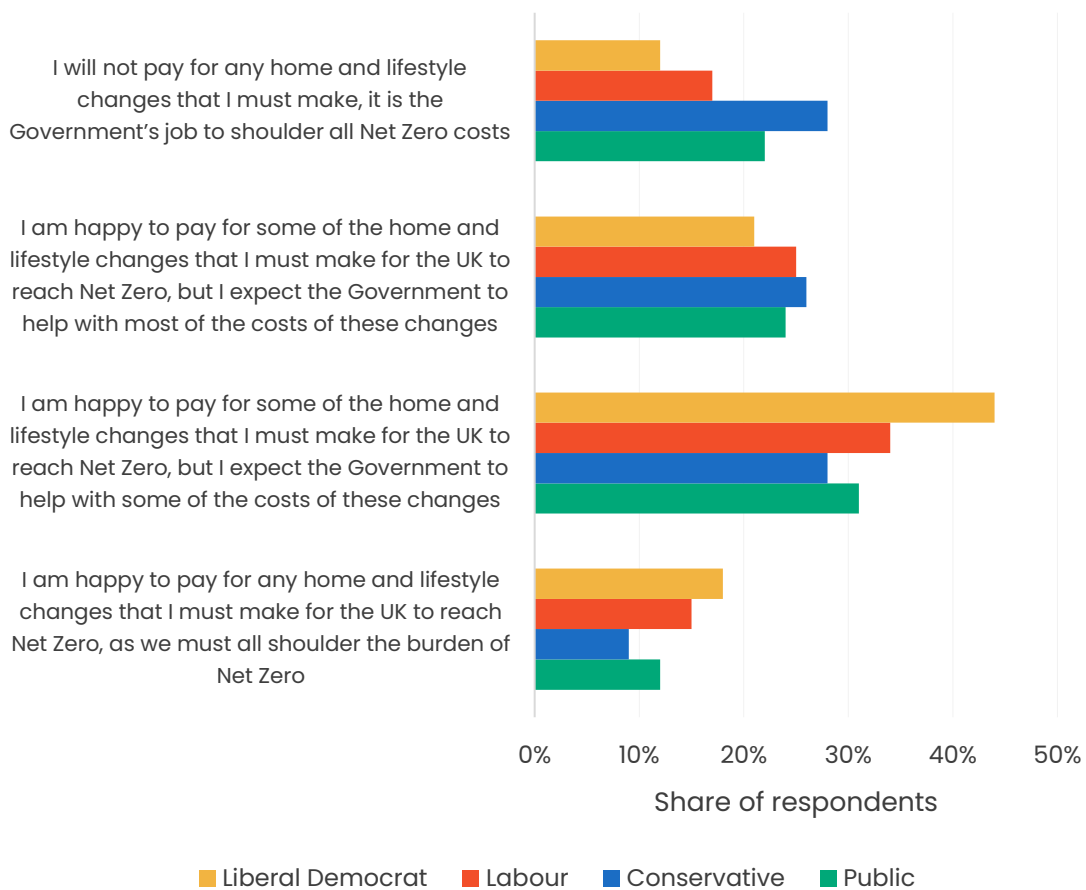
Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Most people do not want to cover the costs of going green entirely by themselves. As Figure 28 shows, respondents felt the Government should help to shoulder at least some, if not most, of the financial burden. Conservatives were the most likely to feel that the Government should cover all the costs.

Figure 28: “As part of the UK’s commitment to net zero, consumers may have to make changes to their lifestyle such as switching to electric vehicles and/or paying levies on their energy bills to invest in renewable energy. Which statement comes closest to your view?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Voters prefer a “carrots and sticks” approach to net zero

Three broad options for reaching net zero requiring varying degrees of government intervention were tested with respondents::

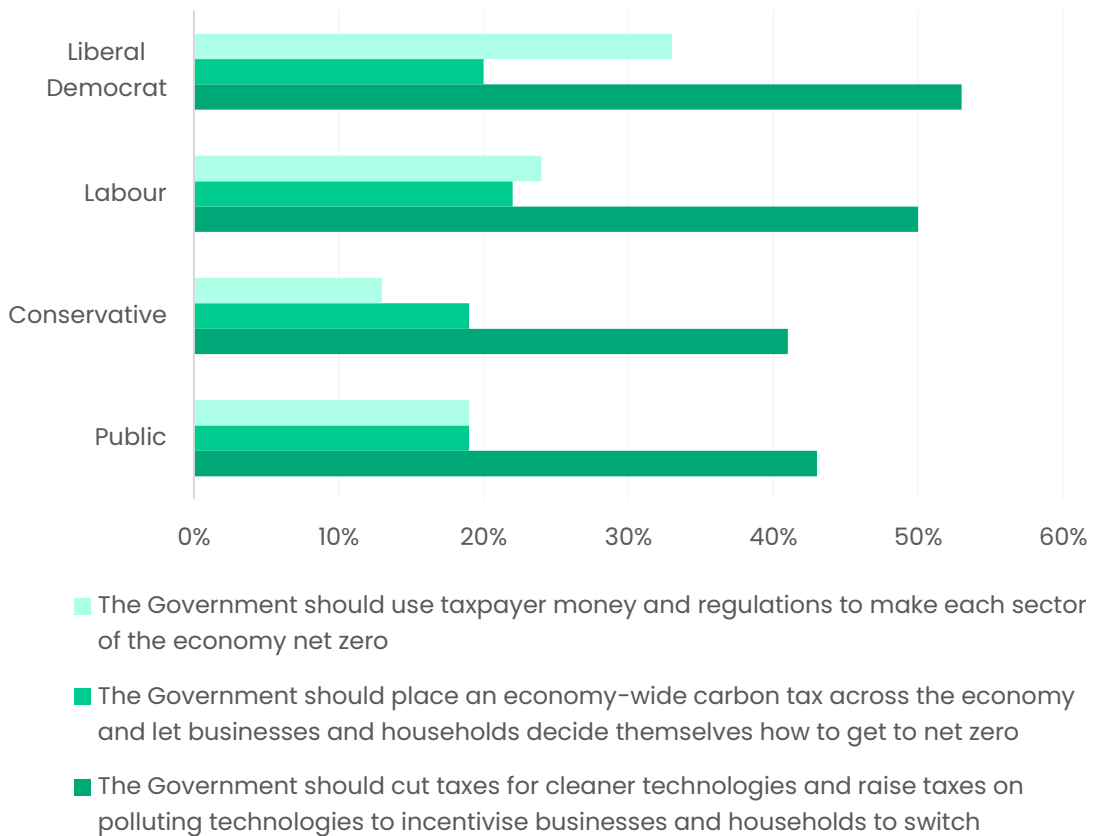
- The Government should cut taxes for cleaner technologies and raise taxes on polluting technologies to incentivise businesses and households to switch (the “carrots and sticks” approach).

- The Government should place an economy-wide carbon tax across the economy and let businesses and households decide themselves how to get to net zero.
- The Government should use taxpayer money and regulations to make each sector of the economy net zero.

With the public and all three of the mainstream parties, by far the most popular choice was cutting taxes for cleaner technologies and raising them on polluting technologies to incentivise businesses and households to switch – the “carrots and sticks” approach. Conservatives prefer a simple carbon tax (19%) over a tax and spend approach (13%), but the carrots and sticks approach has roughly double the support of those two options combined (41%).

Figure 29: “The Government is responsible for the UK reaching net zero, but private businesses and households will all have to make changes to get there. How do you think the Government should get the UK to net zero by 2050?”

Source: Public First; Onward analysis.



Chapter 4

Voters support policies which help
them to go green

The Prime Minister's decision to ease the 2035 new gas boiler sale ban and delay the 2030 sale ban of new petrol and diesel cars has the support of a majority of 2019 Conservatives. The former had -12 net support among 2019 Conservatives, the latter had -6 net support.

Figure 31: "Do you support or oppose phasing out the sale of new gas boilers by 2035 and replacing them with electric heat pumps?"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis

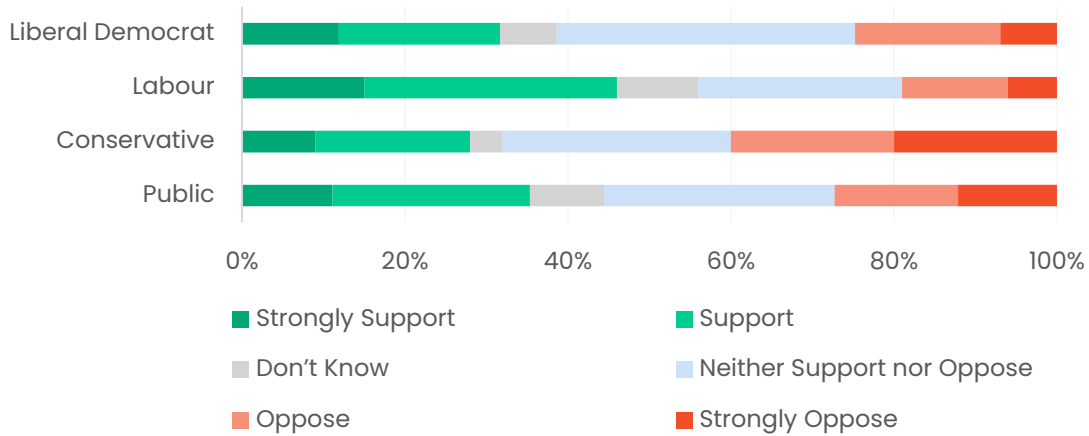
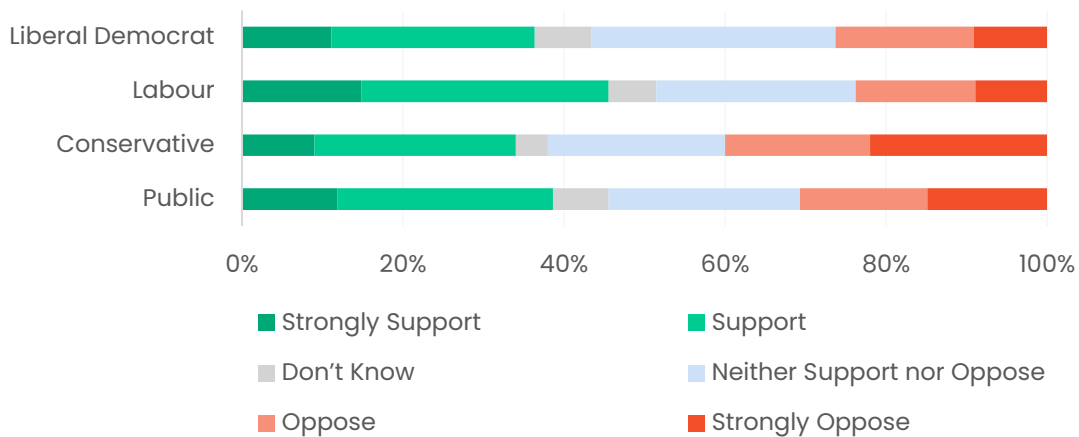


Figure 32: "Do you support or oppose phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030, but allowing second hand car sales to continue?"

Source: Public First; Onward analysis



Public First and Onward tested the support of 24 policies which would cut greenhouse gas emissions. Some are already government policy, others are not. The green policy league table, which lists these policies in order of popularity, can be found in the appendix.

Overall, there was consistent strong support for home upgrades and renewable energy, across the three main parties, and among the Conservative voter focus groups. There was also support for planting trees, investment in public transport, and policies to help people switch to electric cars.

Importantly, opposition is to targets and deadlines rather than the technologies. There was interest in switching to electric vehicles, heating, and rooftop solar in the focus groups to unlock lower energy and fuel bills among focus group participants. And the polling shows that the policies to help people switch to cleaner technologies enjoy strong support from voters.

Renewable energy is popular with voters

Renewables enjoy strong support. The most popular policy among both the public and Conservative voters was building offshore wind farms, with +63 net support in both cases. Building more solar farms also enjoyed strong support, with +59 net support among the public and +49 among Conservatives, despite some controversy over their spread. Electricity market reform so that the marginal price of power is not set by the price of gas, again a government policy, is also popular, with +58 support among the public and +59 among Conservatives.

Building more onshore wind farms also has strong support: +53 net support from the public and +43 among Conservatives. This supports the findings and conclusions of Onward's recent report, *Power to the People*, which advocated for lifting the de facto ban on onshore wind. The Government recently announced some changes that would make it easier to build onshore wind farms following a backbench campaign from Conservative backbenchers, although it did not lift the de facto ban completely. Automatic community benefits for communities which host new wind and solar farms, a policy advocated for in the *Power to the People* report to boost support for lifting the de facto ban,² received +29 net support from the public and +20 from Conservatives.

Focus group participants provided some reasons why renewables might be so popular with the public. Participants across all groups saw renewables as cheap and effective, with no downsides to building more projects. They were seen as the cheaper option compared to gas and the issue of intermittency was not raised. But there were some concerns about their sustainability, given the need for precious metals to build wind turbines and solar panels.

"I don't think they're doing anything. They're very good at talking about it... the energy companies are making billions and billions of profit, the Government doesn't tax them. And that could be being put into the bigger picture... like let's get help with solar panels and alternative energy."

Paul, media sales worker, late 40s, Dudley

"They've got to try and do something. The world's only going to get worse, the climate is only going to get worse. If someone said there'll be a wind farm or a solar farm near me, I'd be all up for it. Energy is dear enough as it is already but if I thought it was going to save the planet for my grandchildren, great-grandchildren, I would be up for doing it."

Daniel, communications worker, mid 50s, Bexley

"I love wind farms; we need more of that. We might have thought about solar panels if they were less expensive. But I don't know how long it'd take to see a return on it."

Susan, retired library worker, late 60s, Bexley

"We're an island. We've got wind energy, wave energy, hydrogen. We should be trying to lead the pack on that. it is setting the goals for the next 50 to 100 years. And we were world class engineers as a nation. it is quite an opportunity if we just get everyone together."

Michelle, office manager, early 50s, Rushcliffe

"[Net zero] should save us money. The more energy you create the less you have to import. If you put more wind turbines up it should bring our energy costs down. Of course, gas is running out, so we've got to do it sometime."

Paul, manager, early 50s, Rushcliffe

Ending oil and gas exploration licences for the North Sea and slowly winding down existing operations enjoyed net support among the public (+16). Surprisingly, there was also strong support (+24) for ending licences among 2019 Brexit Party voters, reflecting the complicated politics around oil and gas due to the high profits of producers. Conservatives were only marginally opposed to winding down operations, with -5 net support.

Table 1: Net support for energy infrastructure policies which cut greenhouse gas emissions

Source: Public First; Onward analysis

Policy	Public	Con	Lab	LD
Building more offshore wind farms	+63	+63	+63	+78
Building more solar farms	+59	+49	+66	+78
Ensuring the cost of energy is set by the cheaper price of renewables not the more expensive price of gas	+58	+59	+63	+72
Building more onshore wind farms	+53	+44	+60	+79
Automatic community benefit payments to people living near new renewable energy infrastructure	+29	+20	+40	+30
Ending new licences for oil and gas extraction in the North Sea and slowly winding down existing operations	+16	-5	+32	+30

Policies to help people make their homes greener are in demand

The Prime Minister has announced a delay to the 2026 new oil boiler sale phaseout for off-gas grid homes and a weakening of the 2035 new gas boiler phaseout ambition. This is sensible - it would be unfair to ask those enduring the harshest fuel poverty in rural areas to move first in switching to heat pumps before the costs of the technologies had fallen significantly.

The Government's 2035 gas boiler phaseout ambition has been a particularly strong theme of the net zero debate. The ambition held a majority in support among the public (+8), 2019 Labour voters (+27), and 2019 Liberal Democrat voters (+7), but not among 2019 Conservative voters (-12).

And the reality was the Government is not on track to meet its wider gas boiler phaseout ambition due to a low take-up of heat pumps. That is why it is welcome the Government has expanded the Boiler Upgrade Scheme by 50%, providing £7,500 in subsidy for households to make the switch when their boilers come to the end of their life.

Focus group participants were interested and unhostile to heat pumps, although aware of the sometimes high upfront costs of installation. Some said they were unaffordable now, and frequently asked why the Government was not supporting people to install them. This suggests the Government's Boiler Upgrade Scheme is not well known.

But there is still more to be done. Wariness of the 2035 ambition does not directly translate to a scepticism of green home upgrades, which are popular including among 2019 Conservatives. This is particularly true for energy efficiency upgrades, which often enable the installation of heat pumps.

The most popular policy was reducing VAT on home upgrades (+55 net support among the public and +58 among Conservatives), which the Prime Minister did as Chancellor in the 2022 Spring Statement. The second most popular was higher energy efficiency standards and mandatory rooftop solar for new builds (+54 among the public and +51 among Conservatives), which the Government has not done. Financial support for low-income families so they can afford green home upgrades, in other words the Energy Company Obligation, gained +50 net support among the public (although it had a significantly lower score of +34 among Conservatives). Tax incentives for landlords to make rental properties more efficient are also popular.

Mandating rooftop solar and higher energy efficiency standards for new homes was one of the most popular policies. Among the public and Conservative voters, this has +54 and +51 net support respectively. Energy efficiency was popular among focus group participants who knew it would deliver energy bill savings, although there was hesitation about the upfront costs. Zero interest loans from the Government had a great deal of interest, although there was then some anxiety about debt, especially from participants from the less wealthy areas focus groups were held. Participants often felt if the Government wanted people to make their homes more energy efficient, it should cover the costs either partially or completely.

“Putting in new windows was a big investment, but overall, it has brought down my energy bills. If I had the money, I would always invest to bring costs down. it is a more comfortable way to live, not having to worry about bills going up.”

Philomena, business consultant, early 60s, Watford

“The interest free loan would be quite good, because then maybe we could afford to get stuff done.”

Sarah, nurse, mid 40s, Dudley

“I would love work done on my home to make it more efficient, but ultimately even if you gave us a 0% deal, why should I have to pay, get myself into debt for something I can’t really afford?”

Natasha, sales assistant, late 20s, Dudley

“If the Government wants you to do these things, why should it come out of your own pocket? We’ve got enough to fork out at the minute with all the gas, electric, everything like that. I mean I like the interest free loans maybe, but I still think it is down to the Government really to pay for it.”

Sue, cleaner, early 50s, Oldham

Table 2: Net support for energy efficiency policies

Source: Public First; Onward analysis

Policy	Public	Con	Lab	LD
Reduce VAT on energy efficiency improvements	+55	+58	+57	+58
Higher energy efficiency standards and mandating rooftop solar for building new homes	+54	+51	+58	+64
Providing financial support for low-income families to afford ‘green’ home upgrades like insulation	+50	+34	+63	+59
Tax incentives to persuade landlords to make rental properties more energy efficient	+45	+41	+53	+44
Moving taxes from being levied on all electricity to just being levied on gas energy in order to make it cheaper to use greener energy	+31	+23	+40	+35

2019 Conservatives were wary of the 2030 ban on new petrol and diesel cars, but most people are supportive of electric vehicles

The polling shows there was some wariness regarding banning of selling first-hand petrol and diesel cars in 2030, but focus group participants were positive about the benefits of going electric. The ban was unpopular among Conservative voters (-6 net support), although it enjoyed net support among the public (+7).

But there was strong support for policies that enable the switch to electric vehicles. The idea behind zero emissions vehicle mandate, to incentivise manufacturers to make more electric cars, has +18 support among the public and +4 among Conservative voters. Investing in incentives and charging infrastructure for electric cars had +31 and +29 net support respectively. Reducing VAT on electricity from public car chargers received +30 and +24. Introducing an electric vehicle leasing scheme, where low-income households pay a reduced monthly fee to lease an electric car, had strong support from the public with +26 net support, although less among Conservative voters at just +10. A diesel car scrappage scheme received +34 net support among the public and +27 among Conservatives.

CAZs have support from the public (+13 net support), but not from Conservatives (-2 net support). Focus group participants made their scepticism and dislike of taxes on driving more polluting cars clear, often using ULEZ and Clean Air Zones (CAZs) as an example. Participants felt taxes on motorists are a way to extract money from them rather than protect the environment. They were particularly concerned about the relatively larger impact on the poorest during a cost of living crisis, who tend to drive less efficient or older cars. They felt it also meant that the richest could continue to pollute as they could afford to, entrenching existing socio-economic divides.

"[Mayor Sadiq Khan] says it is about our children being able to breathe clean air but as long as you can afford £12.50 you can pollute all you want."

Sue, payroll assistant, early 60s, Bexley

"There is no doubt that the climate is being affected by what is going on. But I kind of feel they're using it as leverage to get more tax. This ULEZ has got nothing to do with emissions, it is about TfL going skint."

Derrick, manager, early 60s, Bexley

"Clean air zones wind me up. What is the point? We had to go to Bradford, our car got away with it. But if we had an older car, we had to pay to go one way, and then pay to come back again. We're killing the planet by having an older car, but if we pay now, that's fine?"

Lindsay, warehouse worker, late 40s, Wakefield

Low traffic neighbourhoods, which the Prime Minister recently ordered a review of, had net support among all the voter groups. It enjoyed +5 net support among Conservatives, and pedestrianisation was well received in the focus groups.

Investment in electric buses was popular for polling respondents, as is investment in public transport more generally among the focus group participants. More electric buses received +45 and +42 net support from the public and Conservative voters. While there was unanimous agreement in the focus groups that more public transport would be a good thing, one participant said it would only work if the prices came down and bus services were no longer cut.

“They want us to use public transport more, but the cost of it is too high, and they’re always pulling bus services... they tell us what they want us to do but make it harder and harder to do it.”

Tabatha, cook, late 40s, Dudley

“It would be good if the public transport was better. In Amsterdam, they’re always on time, they’re really, really fast, they’re clean and they’re not any more expensive than our buses. But they built the infrastructure for it, they literally built a road for the bus, there’s no cars on it. That’s long-term thinking, and everything with our government is short term.”

Mike, electrician, early 30s, Dudley

Table 3: Net support for transport policies which cut greenhouse gas emissions or air pollution

Source: Public First; Onward analysis

Policy	Public	Con	Lab	LD
Funding for more electric buses	+45	+42	+53	+57
Introducing a diesel scrappage scheme, where low-income households and small businesses are given financial assistance to get rid of their diesel vehicles	+34	+27	+44	+44
Reduce VAT on electricity from public car chargers	+30	+24	+39	+36
Introducing an electric vehicle leasing scheme, where low-income households pay a reduced monthly fee to lease an EV	+26	+10	+41	+43
Introducing low-traffic neighbourhoods, where motor traffic is significantly reduced but residential access is maintained	+20	+5	+36	+28
A target for car manufacturers to produce an increasing number of electric cars	+18	+4	+32	+28
Introducing clean air zones, requiring the most polluting vehicles to pay a charge if they drive into it	+13	-2	+25	+30

People support nature restoration and more sustainable farming

Tree planting and more sustainable farming are popular policies. Incentivising farmers to reduce their carbon footprint and support the restoration of nature, the idea behind the Government’s Environment Land Management schemes, was the sixth most popular existing policy among the public (+46 net support), and fourth among Conservatives (+45). Planting trees was also universally popular in the focus groups.

“Definitely where we are, more trees being planted, more green areas. If they’ve got to build new houses, build them on existing sites. Don’t take away green areas to do it. We just seem to be losing more and more of nature.”

Tabatha, cook, late 40s, Dudley

“I applaud what they’re doing. But we need to start looking at planting more trees. Everyone knows trees are the lungs of the world. But how can I trust a government that is hacking down ancient woodland like there’s no tomorrow for HS2?”

Derrick, manager, early 60s, Bexley

Appendix

The green policy league table



Table 4: Net support for policies which cut greenhouse gases

Source: Public First; Onward analysis

Policy	Public	Con	Lab	LD
Building more offshore wind farms	+63	+63	+63	+78
Building more solar farms	+59	+49	+66	+78
Ensuring the cost of energy is set by the cheaper price of renewables not the more expensive price of gas	+58	+59	+63	+72
Reduce VAT on energy efficiency improvements	+55	+58	+57	+58
Higher energy efficiency standards and mandating rooftop solar for building new homes	+54	+51	+58	+64
Building more onshore wind farms	+53	+44	+60	+79
Providing financial support for low-income families to afford 'green' home upgrades like insulation	+50	+34	+63	+59
Funding for more electric buses	+45	+42	+53	+57
Tax incentives to persuade landlords to make rental properties more energy efficient	+45	+41	+53	+44
Incentivising farmers to reduce their carbon footprint and support the restoration of nature	+44	+45	+47	+55
Introducing carbon taxes to incentivise businesses to reduce emissions and transition to cleaner technologies	+36	+31	+42	+58
Introducing a diesel scrappage scheme, where low-income households and small businesses are given financial assistance to get rid of their diesel vehicles	+34	+27	+44	+44
Investing in incentives and charging infrastructure for electric cars	+31	+29	+41	+52
Moving taxes from being levied on all electricity to just being levied on gas energy in order to make it cheaper to use greener energy	+31	+23	+40	+35
Reduce VAT on electricity from public car chargers	+30	+24	+39	+36
Automatic community benefit payments to people living near new renewable energy infrastructure	+29	+20	+40	+30

Introducing an electric vehicle leasing scheme, where low-income households pay a reduced monthly fee to lease an EV	+26	+10	+41	+43
Introducing low-traffic neighbourhoods, where motor traffic is significantly reduced but residential access is maintained	+20	+5	+36	+28
Introducing a tax on frequent fliers	+18	+10	+34	+22
A target for car manufacturers to produce an increasing number of electric cars	+18	+4	+32	+28
Ending new licences for oil and gas extraction in the North Sea and slowly winding down existing operations	+16	-5	+32	+30
Introducing clean air zones, requiring the most polluting vehicles to pay a charge if they drive into it	+13	-2	+25	+30
Phasing out the sale of new gas boilers by 2035 and replacing them with electric heat pumps	+8	-12	+27	+7
Phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030, but allowing second hand car sales to continue	+7	-6	+23	+10

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A commitment to transparency

Onward is committed to transparency and will publish the names of individuals and organisations who give us more than £5,000 of support each year. This is published on our website twice a year.

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