



BRIEFING | 013 | 03 OCTOBER 2021

BLUE IN GREEN

Approaches to tackling the climate crisis

AUTHORS: WILL GRIMOND | ADARSH RAMCHURN



60 SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 Ahead of COP26, the RSA looked at public attitudes to past, present and future climate change damage, with a focus on the views of Conservative voters.
- 2 There is little evidence of a left-right ‘culture war’ on the environment: both sides strongly support action, and denialism is completely fringe. But support for the *type* of action does vary on political lines.
- 3 26 percent of Conservatives have “definitely” or “likely” seen their home or garden damaged by climate change. 65 percent say they have seen the effects of climate damage globally, while 56 percent say they have seen damage in the UK.
- 4 74 percent of Conservatives voters think the UK should play a leading role in the conference; 67 percent think the conference will be a big test of the Prime Minister’s leadership; and 46 percent think it will affect how they vote at the next election. A further 46 percent say that COP26 will have an impact on the lives ordinary Brits.
- 5 There is a ‘British bounce’ among Tory voters for UK leadership on the climate crisis. This effect vanishes for Labour voters, who tend to support action on the same levels whether it is framed in the UK or the global context. This ‘British bounce’ is so strong that Conservative voters become even more likely than Labour supporters to back climate action.
- 6 In response, the RSA is calling for a ‘carbon dividend’, climate assemblies, a green transition fund, and street-by-street net zero plans.

BACKGROUND

This November, the UK is hosting the 26th meeting of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26). As world leaders flock to Glasgow to decide on future measures to control temperature and sea level rises, we wanted to find out what the British public think about climate policy.

Together with Savanta-ComRes, we asked a representative sample of the population a range of questions about whether people had seen climate change, whether they could influence it, and what policies they would like to see to tackle the climate crisis. This included a weighted sample of 1,000 Conservative voters, as we were particularly interested to understand the views of those who voted Conservative in the 2019 election – given that the party has been less keen to adopt climate measures in its recent manifestos, and will call the shots on UK climate policy at least until the next general election.



Our findings demonstrate a degree of consensus between different groups on climate change, with differences at times coming down to how the debate is framed. We also found that people need more tools to be able to tackle climate damage, which is increasingly evident in the UK.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Concern about climate change is widespread across all demographics

Across different ages, income levels, and political persuasions, the public are worried about climate change. Those who do not feel that climate change is a pressing issue are a small minority – it does not seem like climate change denial has a strong foothold in the UK.

68 percent of respondents said that they have definitely or likely seen climate change have an impact across the globe. Surprisingly, 30 percent say that they have definitely seen damage as a result of climate change *in the UK*, and a further 29 percent say that they likely have – while just 20 percent say that they haven't. The impacts of climate change are no longer seen as something happening abroad, or a problem confined to the Global South – on the news and in person, we are increasingly seeing climate change on our doorstep.

Among Conservative voters, 26 percent have definitely or likely seen their home or garden damaged by climate change. 65 percent say they have seen the effects of climate damage globally, while 56 percent say they have seen damage in the UK.

2. We have relatively little faith in 'technocratic' approaches to climate change

Just 37 percent of people said that international agreements and new technologies alone would be sufficient to limit emissions, compared to 30 percent who do not. In comparison, 71 percent say that we will have to make changes to the way we live to tackle climate change – perhaps showing that we have more faith in consumer action than global politics.

This does not mean that the British public is against international cooperation wholesale. We're supportive of helping the developing world to create low carbon & renewable energy systems (68 percent agree, compared to 8 percent disagreeing) and feel that developed western economies have a duty due to historic levels of emissions (67 percent vs 9 percent). Young people are also likely to have more faith in the power of international agreements and new technologies - 45 percent of 18-34 year olds agreed these alone would be sufficient, compared to 28 percent of respondents aged over 55.

In terms of what forms of consumer action the public believe would help tackle climate change - 70 percent of respondents said that we should try to drive less, and 72 percent believe that we should try to walk, cycle or take public transport more. A further 71 percent agree that that we should buy less clothes and recycle fabrics



for environmental reasons. But we're split on whether we should pursue climate action that increases the cost of living - 34 percent are in favour, with 36 percent against.

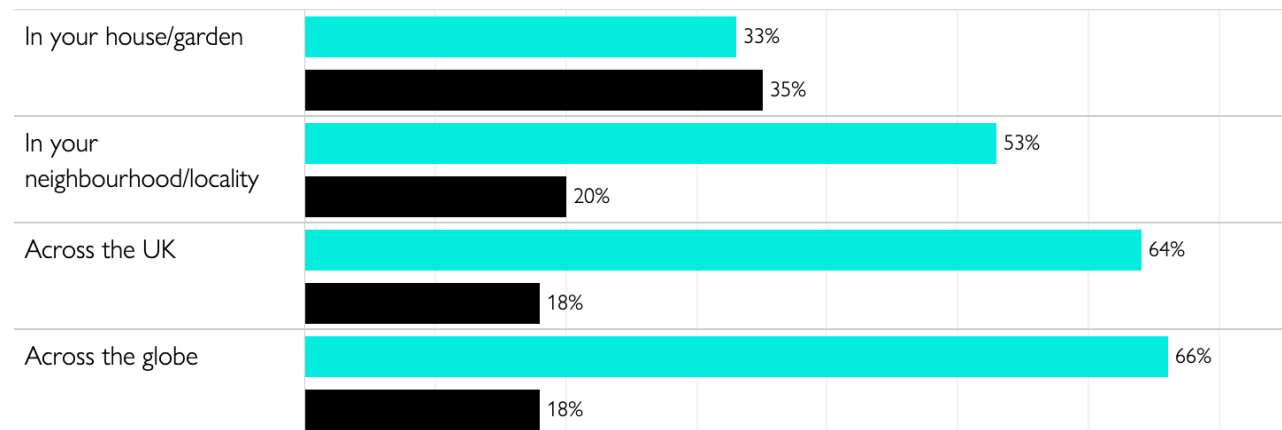
In general, Conservative voters are less willing to change their lifestyles in order to tackle climate change - 24 percent of Conservative respondents disagree with the idea that we should all eat less meat and import less food from overseas, compared to 8 percent of Labour respondents that disagree. 82 percent of Labour respondents agree that we should drive less, compared to 67 percent of Conservative respondents.

The public also wants more action from the private sector - 46 percent of respondents strongly agreed that corporations should try to minimise the harm they do to the environment.

3. We need new, local tools to tackle climate change

The public feel that they have little influence in countering the damage caused by climate change on a global, national, and even a local level – only feeling that they can make a difference to damage that's happened to their own property. 66 percent of respondents feel that they do not have any or much influence in restoring environmental damage around the globe.

How much influence would you say you have in tackling climate damage...



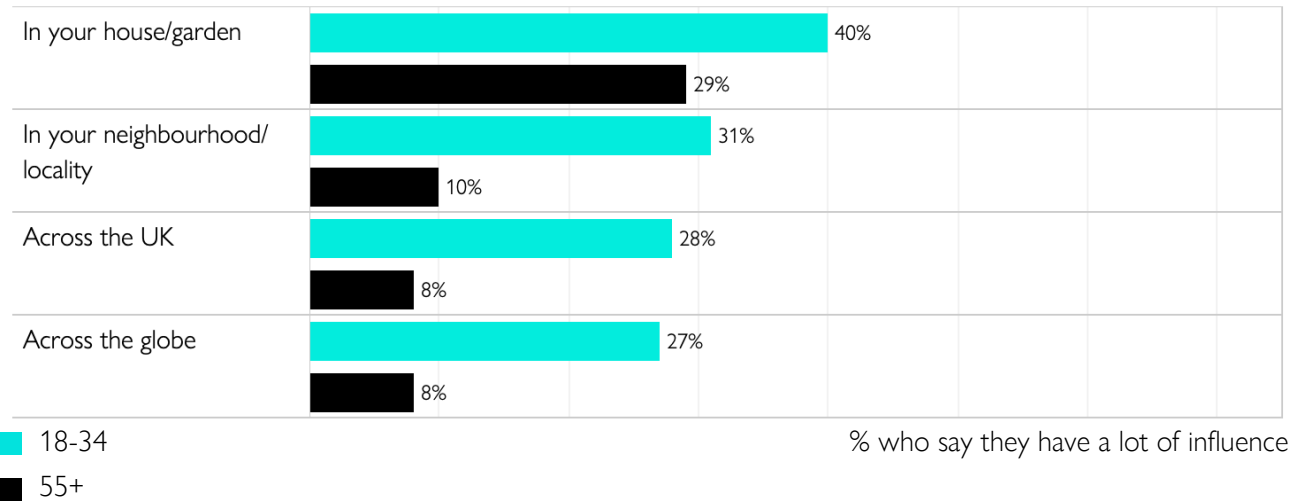
I do not have any or much influence

% of the public agreeing

I feel I have a lot of influence

Young people are more optimistic about their role in tackling climate change - they were consistently more likely to say that they could have an impact than older generations.

How much influence would you say you have in tackling climate damage...



5. The public want the UK to play a leading role in the talks

The public told us that they are broadly aware (55 percent) that the conference was taking place prior to taking part in our survey. This rose to 67 percent among Scottish respondents, where the Glasgow-based conference has played a much larger role in the news agenda.

The public are split on the impact of the conference itself – only 44 percent feel that it'll make a difference to the lives of ordinary Brits, including 46 percent of Conservatives. 40 percent feel that it will impact how they vote, but 38 percent neither agree nor disagree that it will.

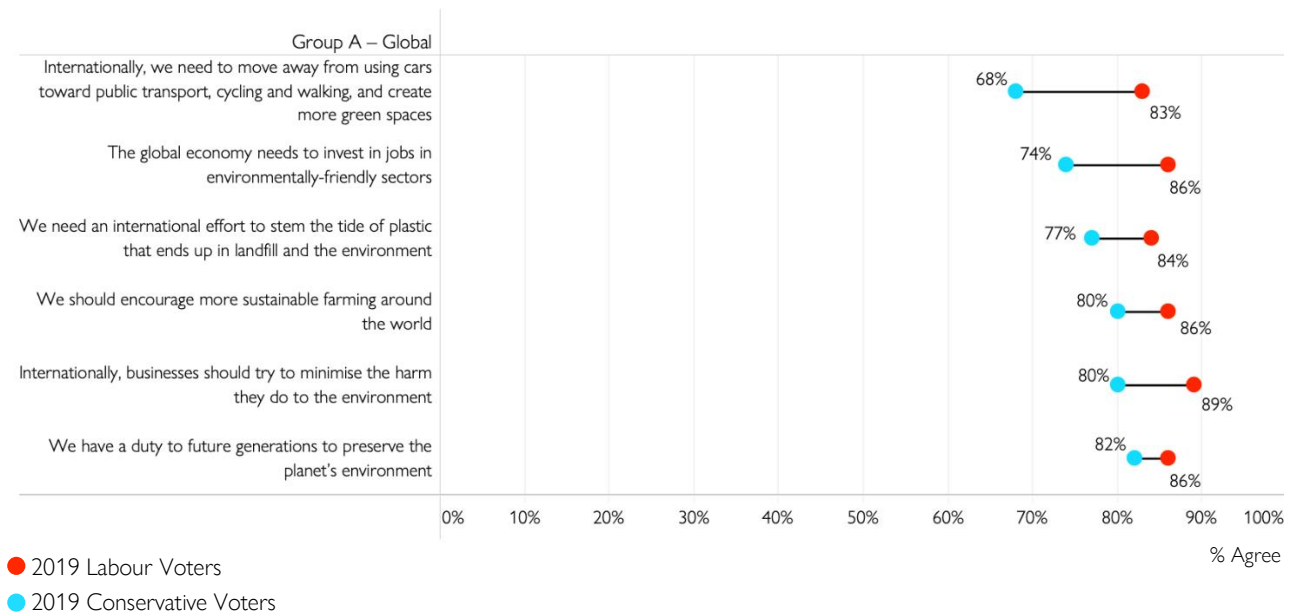
However, the public want the UK to play a leading role (69 percent) and feel that the conference will be a test of the Prime Minister's leadership (62 percent, rising to 67% among Conservatives). The public are also in favour (72 percent) of the conference focusing on restoring and repairing the climate & biodiversity, rather than just slowing down or halting environmental damage.

The government should be assured that there is large spread public support for the vital talks. 74 percent of Tory voters think the UK should play a leading role in the conference; and 46 percent think it will affect how they vote at the next election.

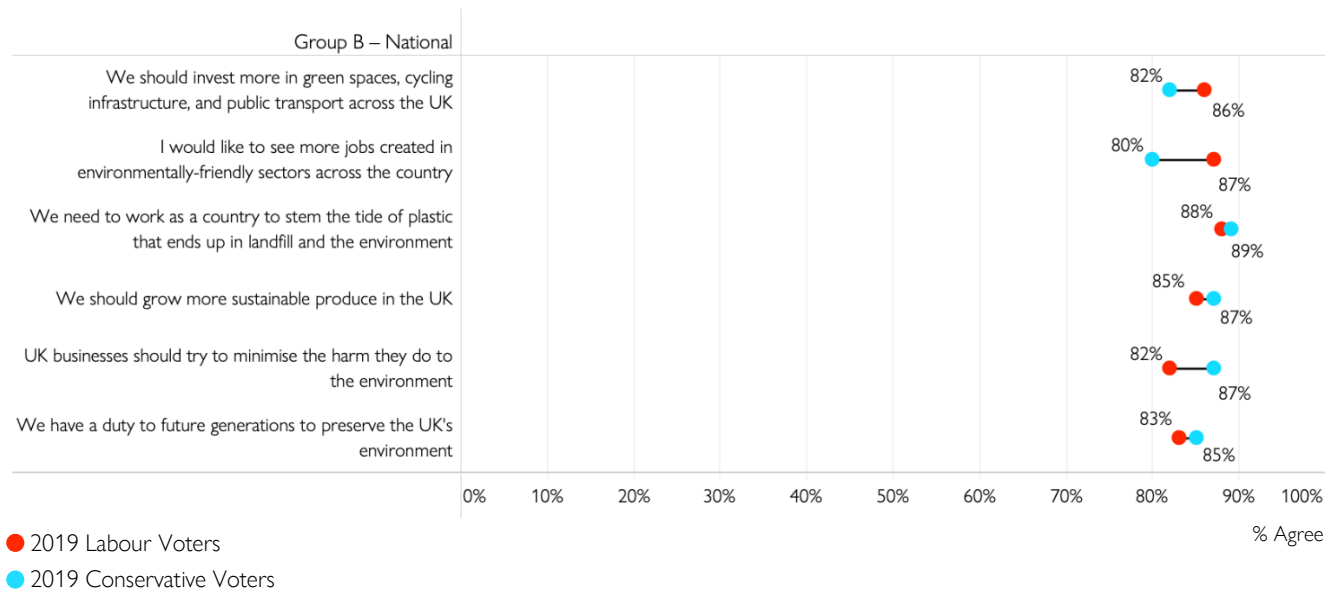


6. Conservatives respond better to climate action in a national, rather than global context

As part of this study, we split our sample into two groups in order to test responses to different statements on the same issue. For one group, we asked about international action: either on trying to enact change on a global level, or in terms of collaboration with other countries, for the other, national approaches. Our findings suggest that Conservative voters respond better to a 'national' framing when it comes to climate issues.



But when it comes to dealing with the same issues in the UK, the picture is more mixed – and in many cases, Conservatives are even more green than Labour supporters. The idea of a duty to future generations in preserving the UK's natural environment scored particularly highly among Conservatives, alongside UK businesses reducing their environmental impact. Labour voters were particularly keen on minimising the harm from businesses, alongside creating environmentally friendly jobs (at home and abroad) and investing in green spaces, jobs and sustainable farming.



This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced looking specifically at Conservative responses – for instance, 43 percent strongly agreed with the statement ‘We should grow more sustainable produce in the UK’, compared to 32 percent for the notion that ‘We should encourage more sustainable farming around the world’. 38 percent of Conservatives strongly agreed that ‘We need an international effort to stem the tide of plastic that ends up in landfill and the environment’, but this rose to 52 percent when instead framed as ‘working as a country’.

NEXT STEPS

Our findings suggest that action on climate change has the backing of diverse groups in the UK. Voters drawn apart by other issues – such as values, attitudes to welfare, economic policy, or immigration – still support tackling the crisis.

One of the key lessons of this research is that framing is important – the visibility of climate change within the UK, and the comparative support from Conservative voters towards preserving the UK’s environment in particular, means there is a solid case for fighting for presenting climate change as a national threat, rather than a global one. We also need greater tools for tackling climate change in our localities – one of the more disheartening findings of our poll is that respondents felt that they have little influence in dealing with climate damage in their area.

While our poll presents mixed evidence on the extent to which people are prepared to pay more for climate action, there is strong support for creating green jobs, and businesses taking more responsibility for their footprint. Policymakers should avoid talking solely in the language of treaties and technology, and more in the



benefits to ordinary people. Greater restrictions on driving and polluting activities should be matched with positive changes, such as investment in sustainable industries and green space.

In response to these findings, we recommend:

1. A Canada-style '**carbon dividend**', which would place a tax on carbon to be redistributed across the population at large. This policy has been pioneered in Canada and Switzerland, with 'carbon dividends' provided to the population in a similar manner to a basic income.
2. **Community assemblies**. Our findings suggest that the British public do not feel empowered to combat climate change in their local areas. Participatory, democratic bodies could help communities make an impact.
3. A **green transition fund**, to help level up left behind areas and provide economic as well as environmental transformation. We've found that there is widespread support for creating new jobs in environmentally-friendly sectors, and investment in new infrastructure and skills training programmes could aid efforts to tackle climate change within the government's 'levelling up' agenda.
4. For local authorities to prepare **compulsory, street-by-street plans for meeting net zero** in their areas. This will involve prioritising environmentally-friendly infrastructure, and encourage councils to reduce the ecological impact of the services they provide.

For more information, please contact Will Grimond, will.grimond@rsa.org.uk.

Methodology:

Savanta ComRes interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,087 people, with a further boost of 1,000 Conservative voters, conducted online between 3rd and the 5th of September 2021. Savanta ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

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