

'Fairness' in UK climate advocacy

A USER'S GUIDE



About Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists passionate about widening and deepening public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations engage diverse audiences beyond the usual suspects. We focus on building and sustaining cross-societal support for climate action, overcoming political polarisation, and turning concern into action. We have nearly two decades of experience working with a range of international partners including government, international bodies, media and charities.

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Cover: Friends sharing some take-away chips. *Photo:* Sol Stock / Getty Images

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A busy supermarket store. The cost of living is rising rapidly in the UK. *Photo: Jim Holden / Alamy*



Executive summary

Support exists across UK society for action on climate change. But that is not the same thing as universal enthusiasm for the changes a green transition will require. Delivering on net zero means bringing about widespread and rapid changes to fundamental aspects of people's everyday lives: how we heat our homes, whether and what we drive, what jobs we do, where our money goes, and what the towns and cities we live in look and feel like.

Achieving this requires a sense across society that it is fair: as many politicians have learned over the years - to their cost - new government policies that are perceived as unfair can be fundamentally undermined. Perhaps worryingly, many people in the UK hold the view that life is not particularly fair, and are inclined to distrust grand claims from campaigners that action on climate action will change that. And despite the ever-greater attractiveness of energy saving and renewable power as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, opponents of net zero are attempting to derail the UK's wider climate ambitions by weaponising this wider cynicism.

'Fairness' is a sometimes polarised, and often highly emotionally charged, concept at the core of public and political debate. The good news is that there is more shared ground around what the public thinks about fairness than may sometimes seem to be the case. But carelessness about or indifference to what different communities hold to be 'fair' - and why - can derail not just individual campaigns but wider public support for the low-carbon transition. It is essential that climate advocates and campaigners navigate this complex terrain with authenticity and empathy.

This report recommends that climate advocates:

① Ensure fairness is embedded in campaign planning and development.

Fairness is too charged and fundamental an issue, and the pitfalls of getting it wrong are too great, for it to be dealt with as an afterthought. While not every policy change can - or even necessarily should - be fair to everyone, successful communications need to understand and attempt to empathise with different perspectives from the off. In particular, big differences exist between left- and right-leaning audiences' perceptions of what fairness really means.

② Find out whether your campaign messages will be perceived as fair, and by whom.

What people think about 'fairness' in the abstract can be extremely complicated and messy, but it is likely to be more defined when reacting to specific ideas and proposals. Ask not only the campaign's intended audiences, but also people who may not so readily agree, what they think about what is being called for, in practice. Left- and right-leaning audiences often have different perceptions of whether fair means treating people differently according to their circumstances, or treating them the same.

- 3 Call for local and national governments to give people a meaningful say in how policies are designed and who they benefit.

Evidence from citizens' juries and public assemblies shows that an engaged public that has been genuinely listened to is more likely both to support climate action and to feel that it has been devised in a fair way. If possible, advocates could model this approach to participation in their own campaign development, perhaps by building in mini citizens' juries.

- 4 Don't duck the difficulties that some people may face during the transition, but 'pass the mic' to trusted messengers who can reach audiences and communities that activists cannot.

Many audience segments, particularly those that feel that governments and elites don't work in their interests, don't trust rosy, abstract promises of a 'fair transition'. Allow real and tangible benefits to be described by diverse voices that represent 'people like me', who are able to bring to life climate impacts, empathise with the fears about net zero policies and authentically speak to how those policies are in fact benefiting them.

- 5 Ground communications in commonly held views that the less well-off should pay less, and future generations matter.

Use areas of consensus to create fairness messages that will appeal to a wide audience.

- 6 Present the potential for the climate transition to act as a counter to the unfairness of life in Britain today.

Many net zero policies, like insulating the homes of the fuel poor, can be presented as a way to address inequality.

- 7 Be aware that the British public does not instinctively share the same sense of deep unfairness that drives climate justice campaigners.

People are, however, open to many of the key principles that lie behind climate justice analysis. Countering this is likely to require focusing on awareness raising around how, and why, climate change has a disproportionate impact on certain groups.

- 8 Position accelerated UK action and leadership as something we should be proud of, no matter what countries like China or India are doing.

Net zero opponents often describe UK action as 'unfair' if others aren't pulling their weight. But the impetus to move away from Russian gas will help position more renewables, insulating homes and reducing energy waste as in the national interest. This will particularly appeal to highly patriotic audience segments such as Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives.

Background – the current political context



For many of the people who took part in this research, the economy is experienced personally in terms of everyday costs and disposable income. Many reported widespread worry that climate change will cause a rise in their bills in the next ten years.”

–Climate Outreach research into public perceptions of net zero, 2022¹

The UK government’s commitment to reaching net-zero emissions by the middle of the century is underpinned by long-standing cross-party agreement and support from the general public. Polls – including Climate Outreach’s Britain Talks Climate (BTC) research – show this widespread public support across different audiences and social groups for addressing climate change, in principle.²

However, top-line support for climate action is different to the reality of what new government policies, economic changes or industrial transformation might mean for people, and their support for it. A strong long-term economic case – for example, that delivering on net zero will be good for GDP, or will save the ‘average household’ money – says little about how the impacts might fall, or be perceived to fall, on individuals, communities or industries in the here and now.

Over the last decade the significant measures taken to cut emissions – like replacing coal generation with renewables – have often happened without the public really noticing or needing to be involved. That is now changing. As the Committee on Climate Change makes clear, getting to net zero emissions now means we have to make changes to our homes, how we travel, what we eat and the jobs that we do.³ Achieving this requires active public support – core to which is a sense that the measures being taken are fair.

Top-line support for climate action says little about how the impacts might be perceived

Fairness is fundamental to the climate change debate, and has many different lenses. At a time of worsening climate impacts, the communities most at risk are minority and marginalised communities where historic injustices have unfairly shaped people’s vulnerability to risks and access to opportunities. In the UK, the impacts of climate change – such as homes that become dangerously hot in summer – also fall most directly on those who are least able to adapt.

Government ministers also know all too well that perceived unfairness can derail policies (like the Poll Tax), underpin protest (such as the Gilet Jaunes movement in France in 2018/19), and shape the agenda – for example, the furore around gatherings in Downing Street during the Covid-19 lockdown. As Will Snell at the Fairness Foundation argues, “the public have a veto over the net zero transition and will stop it if it isn’t fair and they see no benefits.”⁴

This situation is now compounded by big rises in the cost of living, particularly following the shock – and aftershocks for global energy policy – of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Millions of British families are facing dramatically higher energy bills, alongside other rapidly rising essential costs, with the head of one major energy company estimating that 30–40% of its customers will fall into fuel poverty in 2022.⁵ Many net zero policies, in particular insulating homes, are a logical response to an energy price rise crisis.



The 'walk to work' gantry of the Esvagt Alba ship is connected to a turbine at the Moray Offshore Windfarm East, off the Aberdeenshire coast in August 2021. Photo: Jane Barlow / Getty Images

But some commentators argue that now is not the time to impose costs or changes on households already struggling to get by. Those latter voices are part of a small but noisy backlash against net zero commitments. They include influential national media outlets and a small number of Conservative MPs who criticise net zero goals and policies as too costly and the distribution of costs as falling unfairly on people with lower incomes. This argument, which is built around the idea of (un)fairness, also suggests that the UK should not be taking costly action when it currently accounts for 1% of global emissions.

These arguments underscore the importance of perceived fairness for the reception of climate policies in practice. Fairness is core to a lasting and widespread political mandate for *anything* – and given the systemic nature of climate change impacts and solutions, this is very much the case for net zero policies.

**Fairness is core to a lasting
and widespread political
mandate for anything**

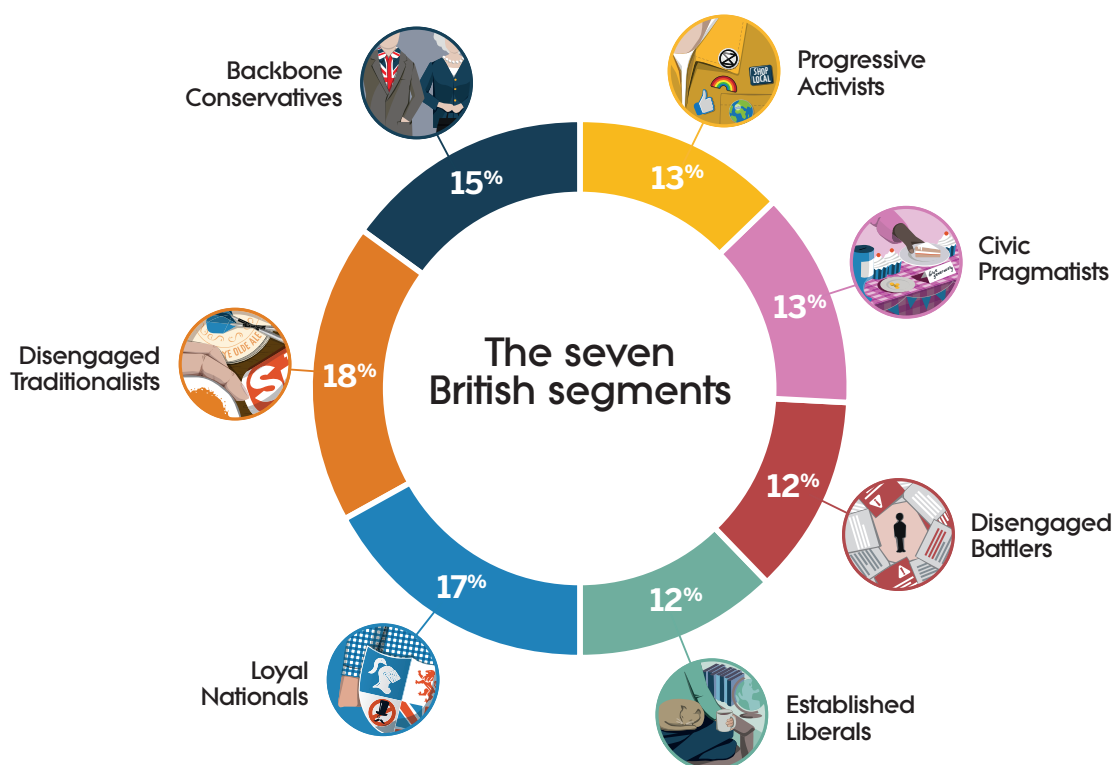
About this report

This report draws on a range of previous research to present a set of insights and recommendations for UK campaigners looking to engage effectively on fairness in climate campaigns. Using recently published data,⁶ and informed by structured conversations with participants in the Climate Engagement Lab,⁷ it aims to help advocates navigate a turbulent period with regards to energy and climate change.

The report draws particularly on the following evidence:

- Audience segmentation work by More in Common's Britain's Choice project, which underpins Climate Outreach's Britain Talks Climate project and resources. The seven audience segments into which British society is divided are based on shared core beliefs, including in relation to political ideology, trust and political engagement (see below).
- Recent reports from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), the Fairness Foundation and Climate Assembly UK, as well as various polls, which explore, in different ways, British attitudes to fairness in public policy.

The **Britain Talks Climate (BTC)** seven audience segments are illustrated below:



For further information, see the Britain Talks Climate toolkit and More in Common's Britain's Choice report.⁸ The BTC research was a collaboration between Climate Outreach, More in Common, the European Climate Foundation (ECF) and YouGov. More in Common led the research project, integrating their model of understanding people's core beliefs with ECF and Climate Outreach's issue expertise. YouGov undertook the field research and collaborated with More in Common and Climate Outreach in the data analysis.

Principles for communicating around fairness in the context of UK climate policy

- 1 Ensure fairness is embedded in campaign planning and development
- 2 Find out whether your campaign messages will be perceived as fair, and by whom
- 3 Call for local and national governments to give people a meaningful say in how policies are designed and who they benefit
- 4 Don't duck the difficulties that some people may face during the transition, but 'pass the mic' to trusted messengers who can reach audiences and communities that activists cannot
- 5 Ground communications in commonly held views that the less well-off should pay less, and future generations matter
- 6 Present the potential for the climate transition to act as a counter to the unfairness of life in Britain today
- 7 Be aware that the British public does not instinctively share the same sense of deep unfairness that drives climate justice campaigners
- 8 Position accelerated UK action and leadership as something we should be proud of, no matter what countries like China or India are doing

1

Ensure fairness is embedded in campaign planning and development



Fairness is ... fundamental to public support and must be embedded throughout policy. Only a transition that is perceived as fair, and where people, places and communities are well-supported, will succeed."

—Committee on Climate Change, Sixth Carbon Budget Report⁹

Fairness matters to people on a profound level. At only one year old, children already start to develop an innate sense of what is and isn't fair,¹⁰ and by age three what developmental psychologists call "inequality aversion"¹¹ is already present. Across different cultures, a sense of fairness is as close to a human universal as it is possible to find.¹²

It is not surprising, therefore, that perceived fairness has an impact on support for climate policies. A recent meta-analysis¹³ of 89 studies in 33 countries found that, more than knowledge, demographic factors or even people's values, the strongest predictor of support for climate policies, particularly regulations, was that those policies were perceived as fair. Fairness was one of the defining themes and focal points of the 2019/20 UK Climate Assembly.¹⁴ When policies are viewed as unfair, for example because subsidies or taxes are seen as being unfairly distributed within or between different groups, this is strongly related to a lack of public acceptance.¹⁵ People particularly instinctively feel that the poorest in society should not bear the costs of climate action.¹⁶

This is important because the breadth of net zero policies means that public support is essential for them to succeed.¹⁷ Technological advances, regulations and laws are necessary for tackling climate change, but these won't work in the long term without the active engagement and buy-in of citizens.¹⁸ Whether people broadly believe that changes are fair is core to building and maintaining this support – and if policies are perceived as unfair, this has significant potential to derail them.

➔ Recommendation

Ensure fairness is embedded when planning engagement campaigns, programmes and policies. This means more than simply creating a communications strategy to deflect charges of unfairness: it means taking the time to understand how fair or unfair the policies may be perceived to be, and by whom. It means investing time and energy in empathising with any legitimate concerns that the messaging or proposals may prompt, and consulting with people who see the world differently. Not all campaigns have to be (or even can be) seen as fair by everyone – and perceptions of what is 'fair' can change over time. But understanding responses and legitimate concerns is a crucial first step.

Find out whether your campaign messages will be perceived as fair, and by whom

“ *Talking about fairness tended to result in inexact, instinctive and fairly intense reactions.*”
 –Climate Outreach BTC research into public perceptions of net zero, 2022¹⁹

Although most people agree on fairness as a principle, in practice it is a highly subjective concept. In fact, the pluralistic way in which people understand and seek to regulate fairness is one of the fundamental drivers of differences between different social groups²⁰ and political schools of thought.²¹ As a result, personal definitions of fairness vary widely.²² This leads to disagreements between different actors in the public debate about what it really means to say that a policy is ‘fair’.²³

To provide some key examples:

In understanding fairness, people who are left-leaning tend to focus more on **equalities of outcomes**, rights and social justice.²⁴ From this perspective, a fair society is one without significant inequalities between rich and poor, within a framework of fundamental human rights. For people who lean right politically, fairness is more about **equality of opportunity**, a sense of personal responsibility, and of things being balanced. From this perspective, fairness in a given situation is a question of whether people have every opportunity to make the best of their lives.

Another related tension is the difference between whether fairness means **everyone playing by the same rules**, or **special rules** being applied to people in different circumstances – to remove some of the barriers to opportunity faced by disadvantaged people, or conversely address the fact that some groups are more responsible for particular harms than others, and to provide some form of recompense.²⁵

This has implications for how different aspects of climate policy are understood. Advocates calling for a ‘fair’ or ‘just transition’, often mean that some people or communities should receive special treatment as a way of addressing unfairness. Some groups are more affected than others by climate change and/or efforts to reduce emissions, so advocates may call for a ‘just’ transition or ‘climate justice’ approach that puts their needs at the centre.

The pluralistic way in which people understand fairness is one of the fundamental drivers between different political schools of thought

But not everyone who is directly impacted by the transition to low-carbon economies necessarily agrees with this approach of balancing power and redressing inequities. For example, in focus groups involving communities with connections to the fossil fuel industry, carried out by Climate Outreach in collaboration with New Economics Foundation, many participants felt that fairness meant everyone being treated the same.²⁶

In BTC research, Progressive Activists – who are highly over-represented among professional climate campaigners – are more strongly in favour of the idea that ‘special rules’ should be applied to high-emitting businesses and individuals over any other audience segment. A slight majority of the population support the idea overall, but conservative-voting segments are less supportive. Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists are more in favour of ‘sameness’ when considering how low-carbon rules and regulations should be applied to individuals and businesses.

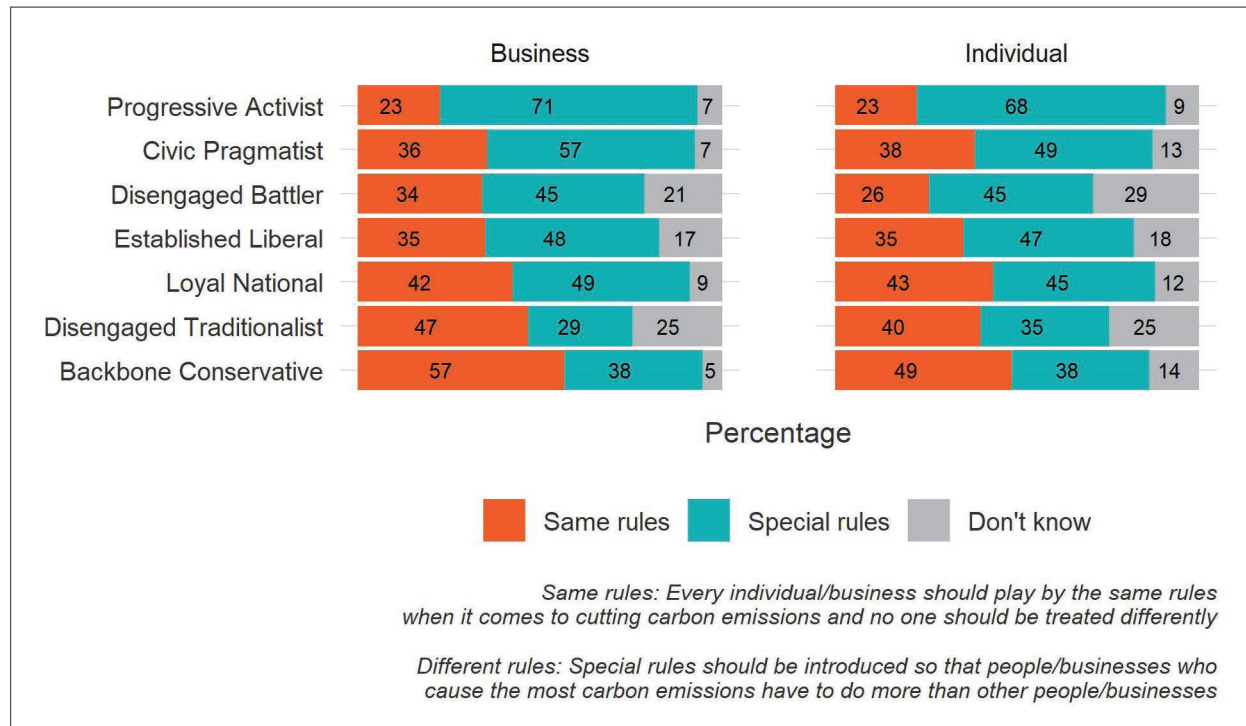


Figure 1: General preference for having the same rules or special rules for businesses and individuals in cutting carbon emissions, by segment. Data: Jan 2022.²⁷

Fairness also covers a broad range of topics and aspects of the climate debate. IPPR’s Environmental Justice Commission held citizens’ juries and deliberative democracy events in communities facing significant challenges around the UK – including in the Tees Valley and County Durham, the South Wales Valleys and Thurrock – on the topic of what the green transition should look like. Its 2020 final report, “Fairness and opportunity: A people-powered plan for the green transition”²⁸ calls for a ‘fairness lock’ in environmental policy, which would guarantee:

- procedural fairness, with people being fully involved in decision-making, including those from most disadvantaged groups
- a fair distribution of costs for consumers and taxpayers
- that all policies are assessed for how they involve, and impact:
 - i) **different communities** – on key markets including geographic, socioeconomic, political history, ethnic makeup – across the UK
 - ii) **different people within communities** including by income, age, gender, race and disability
 - iii) **future generations**
- that help is in place to allay anxieties ahead of change
- that the UK makes a fair contribution internationally, recognising the varying responsibilities, historic contributions and capabilities among different countries across the world.

→ Recommendation

Ask your audiences what fairness means to them, in the specific context of your campaigning. Ground campaign messages in data about what people perceive as fair about specific climate policies. Seek to understand what fairness frames different arguments are speaking to and how they might affect both intended and unintended audiences. It is particularly important to understand the difference in approach between people being treated the same and differently, as this is perceived differently by left- and right-leaning audiences.



A woman pushes a shopping trolley past a closed shop in Newport, Wales, in February 2022.
Photo: Matthew Horwood / Getty Images

Right-leaning segments compared: where there is agreement and disagreement on how 'fairness' is designed

Established Liberals see fairness as being about ensuring equality of opportunity to ensure that people of different circumstances have an equal chance.

Loyal Nationals have strong fairness concerns, expressed through a sense of injustice directed towards elites and big businesses setting one rule for themselves and another for the average person. Net zero and fairness tend to be seen through the lens of their feelings of victimisation and their fear of unfair treatment. They are pessimistic about the potential positive impacts of the transition to net zero on jobs, on the gap between rich and poor, and on societal divisions.

Disengaged Traditionalists view life as fundamentally unfair. Fairness is something that is up to individuals to achieve for themselves, rather than something to be provided by the system, by the government or by any other institution. Disengaged Traditionalists appear to hold the view that environmental taxes and benefits are generally unfair, no matter whether they are for the rich or for the poor. They believe it's especially unfair for high-income households to receive government grants or tax benefits for environmentally friendly changes, but they don't see these measures as fair for low-income households either.

Backbone Conservatives believe that fairness means treating everyone the same and everyone playing by the same rules.

Overall, research suggests the four right-leaning segments agree on the following issues:

- ensuring "big businesses face fines for breaching climate regulations"
- ensuring "people are re-trained to work in industries that do not rely on coal and gas"
- tapering the cost of home insulation, gas boilers and renewable energy so that the poorest households receive grants to cover the costs, but not wealthier households
- a frequent flyer levy – a majority support the principle of a flight tax after their second or third flight, though not all agree (see box below)

Data taken from the BTC toolkit.²⁹

CASE STUDY: Plane travel & a Frequent Flyer Levy

Support for a ‘Frequent Flyer Levy’ illustrates fundamental questions about perceptions of fairness – and where it gets complicated. Because 15% of the UK population takes 70% of all flights, the proposal to make flights incrementally more expensive, after a non-taxed single flight per year, speaks directly to the question of how demand-side changes on aviation emissions could take place fairly.

The Climate Assembly UK considered a version of the Frequent Flyer Levy proposal, in contrast to carbon taxation levied on all flights. Assembly members felt the idea of taxing all flights discriminated against low income families and was ‘blunt’ and unfair. In comparison, many participants described the Frequent Flyer Levy proposal as fair or fairer.

In recent BTC data, a majority of people were willing to pay a flight tax after their second or third flight, with highest support from Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists and Established Liberals. Established Liberals were both the most likely segment to fly and third most willing to pay for a flight tax, perhaps indicating a willingness to pay more to maintain their way of life.

Opposition to the idea, however, rises amongst groups that are less likely to fly multiple times a year. 35%–40% of Disengaged Traditionalists, Disengaged Battlers, Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives oppose it, despite the fact that most of them do not fly often enough to be affected. The hesitation stemmed from concerns about risking higher costs, for instance in exceptional and taxing family circumstances that require more flying. Some also expressed doubt about how such a policy might be policed fairly.

This seeming contradiction points to the complexity in perceptions of fairness – and how it crosses over for example with questions of aspiration and trust when applied in practice.

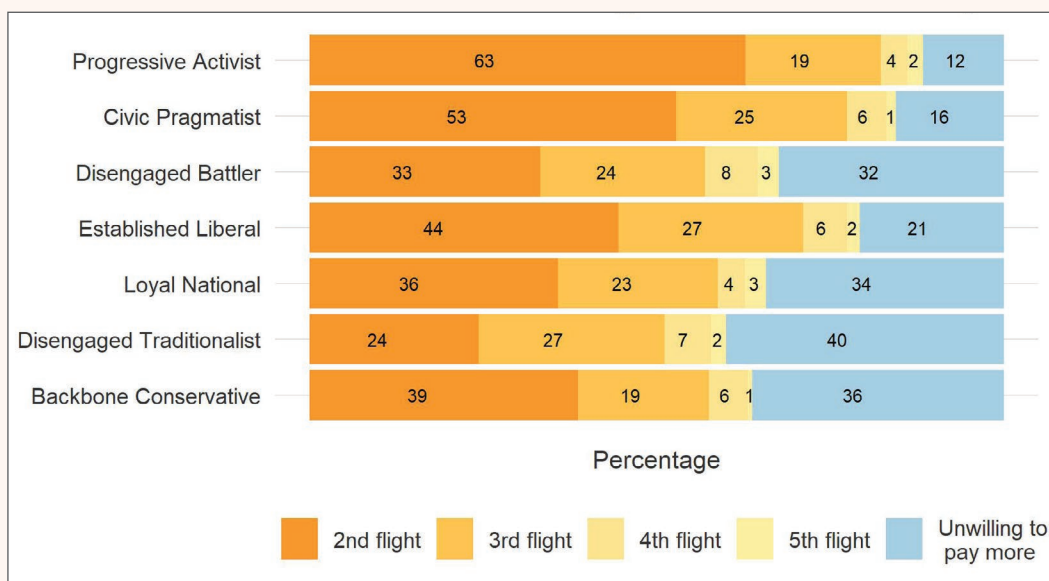


Figure 2: Willingness to pay an additional flight tax on or after a certain number of return flights per year, by segment. Data: Jan 2022.

Call for local and national governments to give people a meaningful say in how policies are designed and who they benefit

When people talk about fairness and ‘playing fair’ they are often referring to the notion of **procedural fairness** – which is not about the outcome reached, but the fairness of the process itself.

The Centre for Justice Innovation, for example, argues that it is not enough for courts to simply act impartially: they must also be seen to be fair. This is less about the decisions that courts take and more about the way that they take them.³⁰

Most people agree that meaningful public consultation is one way to ensure that climate policies are developed and rolled out fairly – in both the UK Climate Assembly’s and the Environmental Justice Commission’s citizen juries, greater public consultation and scrutiny were popular among public audiences. The Commission’s ‘fairness lock’ would guarantee that people are fully involved in decision-making.³¹

Greater consultation on how to get to net zero will be crucial

The public currently has little sense of procedural fairness in climate policy, according to Climate Outreach research.³² Greater consultation on the specifics of how to get to net zero will be crucial. UK audiences express low political trust, and despite the government going into the 2019 election with the promise of reaching net zero by 2050, this is not seen as a sufficient mandate to move forwards and to act without consulting the public. Loyal Nationals in particular are keen to know more about what may be in store, and to have their say.

For civil society organisations, engaging the public in transparent and open public consultations may help to rebuild trust among audiences who have lost faith in the processes of the UK’s institutions and political system.

➔ Recommendation

Call for more public engagement on the detail of net zero policies and, where possible, model this approach – for instance, by involving the public in policy development, for example, through mini citizens’ juries. Respond to bad-faith calls for a ‘referendum on net zero’ by calling for more, not less, scrutiny and public engagement on net zero policies.

4

Don't duck the difficulties that some people may face during the transition, but 'pass the mic' to trusted messengers who can reach audiences and communities that activists cannot

People do not always believe promises of fairness, particularly when promised in the abstract by people they don't believe to have their best interests at heart – including environmental activists.

Trust matters. Some groups in British society (Disengaged Battlers, Disengaged Traditionalists and Loyal Nationals) are unlikely to have much trust in the idea of the benefits of the green transition being distributed fairly, and in particular in the idea that the promised gains of decarbonisation will be seen by 'people like them'.³³ An overly positive, idealised, image of net zero as a solution to many societal challenges is easily rejected by these audiences.

In focus groups³⁴ involving people with connections to the fossil fuel industry, ideas like re-skilling and re-training were supported in principle, but were also met with a lot of cynicism. Participants cited local trends in the opposite direction – highlighting, for example, the recent closure of further education colleges – as reasons to be wary of grand claims about training for green jobs. These doubts are not just held by right-leaning audiences – for example, some trade unions do not trust that promises of a 'just transition' will materialise in practice for workers in high-carbon industries, given historical precedents.³⁵

We all have greater trust in messages about climate benefits when they come from 'people like me'

Appealing to macro-level arguments – for example, about the impact on the 'average household', or the long-term benefit to GDP of action – can be perceived as sidestepping and ignoring legitimate concerns about impacts on specific groups of people. This approach potentially opens the door further to charges of metropolitan elitism,³⁶ and can be weaponised by opponents of net zero.

A core principle in effective engagement around fairness is that we all have greater trust in messages about climate benefits when they come from 'people like me', and when they feel authentic and honest. It is important not to make grand claims that the green transition will be nothing but positive for everyone: rather, it is useful to 'pass the mic' to people and communities across society that are already experiencing and potentially benefiting from policies like warmer homes. This way, a wide range of people's voices are being heard, and this resonates as authentic because they are telling their own stories in their own words.

Local examples and stories that show the transition in action, led by diverse people and communities who embody and represent the green transition, are a powerful way of setting positive social norms, and building a sense of agency, efficacy and ownership among audiences. These examples should not ignore the reality of squeezed local authority budgets, or underinvestment in many areas. Instead, they should acknowledge this reality while positioning green jobs and opportunities as something that are already bringing genuine benefits to people and places that most need them.

→ Recommendation

It is important to be honest about the challenges as well as the opportunities in getting to net zero. Acknowledge that millions of jobs will be affected and not always in a straightforwardly 'better than before' kind of way. Use tangible, credible examples to show how the green transition really can benefit groups - especially the Disengaged segments who are the least convinced by the green transition - who feel they are not generally treated fairly. 'Pass the mic' to local projects, spokespeople and communities who can talk authentically about their tangible experiences of both climate impacts and the benefits of action.



A woman on cycle route 72 stops to take an image of the Willington Dene railway viaduct at Wallsend, Tyne and Wear. *Photo: Lucentius / Getty Images*

5

Ground communications in commonly held views that the less well-off should pay less, and future generations matter

In addition to the differences laid out above, research also demonstrates some significant areas of common ground across British society around perceptions of fairness and climate policies.

The less well-off should pay less

Most people broadly agree with the underlying principle that ‘being asked to do more than your share’ is unfair, and so the rich should pay more for climate policy than the poor.

There is agreement across political perspectives that additional taxes on the poor to finance climate policies would be unfair. Most audience segments agree that government grants to the rich to pay for low-carbon upgrades to their homes would be unfair. And across the segments, people express increasing levels of support for home insulation grants as households become poorer.³⁷

This same pattern is reflected in the level of support and willingness to pay expressed across different income groups for net zero policies. Graduates and high-earners are extremely supportive of net zero policies, and willing to pay higher taxes and prices, while non-graduates and people from lower socio-economic groups are more hesitant, according to 2021 polling by the centre-right thinktank Onward.³⁸ Put simply, those more able to pay view the ‘asks’ being made of them by net zero policies as fairer than those with less ability to do so. According to Onward’s results, voters identified as working class, lower-middle class, non-graduates, and renters, were all net opposed to the idea of paying higher taxes or prices.

Most people broadly agree that ‘being asked to do more than your share’ is unfair, and so the rich should pay more than the poor

This does not mean that large swathes of the public reject net zero policies. Working class Conservative leave voters support the net zero target by 53% to 14%, compared to the national average of 60% to 10%, according to polling conducted in April 2022.³⁹ But it does clearly show the importance of the costs of the transition being perceived to fall in fair ways, in order to maintain public support in practice.

This is also in line with the principle that wealthier people account for significantly more emissions than the least wealthy, and so could reasonably be expected to pay more. One study estimated that the wealthiest 1% of the population in the UK each produce 11 times the amount of carbon emissions of someone in the poorest half of the population.⁴⁰

Messaging in this area needs to be approached with care, however. Support for the idea that ‘poor and vulnerable communities’ should be ‘taken care of’ is higher in the two groups that are less likely to contain such communities (Left-leaning Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists) and joint lowest among one of the groups most likely to fit this description (Disengaged Traditionalists).



Fridays for Future youth climate march in Glasgow Scotland on the day of the COP26 climate commit specifically focused on youth and public empowerment, 5 November 2021. Photo: Jeff J Mitchell / Getty Images

People who are coded by others as being part of ‘vulnerable groups’ may not see themselves that way, and the idea of ‘being taken care of’ clashes with a worldview that may be held amongst some people that life is about “hard work not handouts”.⁴¹

Intergenerational fairness

The idea that climate change is unfair on future generations is a concern that is typically endorsed across the political spectrum, and so seems to come close to a fairness or justice concern that is unifying. All audience segments place their worry for their children’s future high on their list of concerns about climate change.⁴²

At the heart of some of the most prominent campaigns on climate change in recent years – the School Strikes in particular – is a powerful moral claim that the idea of an intergenerational contract has been broken.⁴³ As the Intergenerational Commission report titled “A New Generational Contract” puts it: *“The intergenerational contract works because everyone puts in and everyone takes out. We are happy to support older generations – indeed we feel obligated to do so – because we believe and expect that we will be treated the same when we are old. And we support children as they develop just as we were supported and nourished when we were young.”*⁴⁴

Care must be taken, however. Stating that something is in the interests of generations to come does not in itself deal with more specific, contemporary concerns about who should ‘win’ and ‘lose’ in the here and now. This argument is best seen as a useful frame for the moral case for action on climate change.

➔ Recommendation

Use areas of consensus to create fairness messages that will appeal to a wide audience. There is broad support for the idea that those who have the least ability to pay should benefit the most, and that government grants – for example, home insulation grants – should be targeted at poorer households. Messaging in this area should emphasise agency and autonomy for those affected, rather than focus on the idea that people need to be ‘taken care of’, which is likely to be perceived as patronising. Intergenerational fairness is also a well-supported concept that will help bolster the case for climate action generally.

6

Present the potential for the climate transition to act as a counter to the unfairness of life in Britain today

“ A majority of every one of the seven segments believes that inequality is a somewhat or very serious problem in the UK today.” –More in Common – Britain’s Choice⁴⁵

While most people wish to see more fairness in society,⁴⁶ some of the highest levels of agreement around fairness relate to widespread concerns that society is, in fact, often unfair.⁴⁷ Conservative-leaning audience segments in particular are cynical about society treating them fairly, and some – particularly Disengaged Traditionalists – do not expect the world to be fair.⁴⁸

The British Social Attitudes Survey, for example, found in 2020⁴⁹ that a majority of people believe that wealth differences in society are unfair, and less than 40% agree that “justice prevails over injustice” or that people get what they deserve. These trends are more pronounced among disadvantaged and politically disengaged citizens.

People also largely support the idea that an unfair society is a problem. 73% of people in the survey underpinning the BTC toolkit identified inequality as a serious problem.⁵⁰

The story is not entirely straightforward, as people’s political perspectives affect how comfortable they are with the idea of some inequality being inevitable, and whether they believe it can be tackled.⁵¹

Conservative voters are more likely than left-leaning voters to attribute success to meritocracy – the idea that people are rewarded on the basis of merit, rather than factors outside of their control like wealth or family connections.⁵² So-called ‘luck egalitarians’ also believe that society should take steps to correct inequalities arising from good or bad unearned luck – like being born into poverty – but not inequalities that arise from good or bad ‘earned’ luck (for example, poor decision-making as a young adult). This belief is visible in contemporary political discussions around ‘strivers versus skivers’ and the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

➔ Recommendation

The evidence suggests that there is ‘negative common ground’ in the UK around a commonly held belief that society is unequal. This could be a risk if it encourages cynicism and disengagement, but offers an opportunity to position net zero policies as a way to address the inequality most people agree is a problem – for example, that affordable or free home insulation can help the fuel poor while cutting carbon emissions. The idea that ‘life is unfair’ would resonate as a starting point for most audiences, although it is important to consider how to generate this starting point carefully. Two key considerations are: i) not all people will agree that it is possible to fix this situation, and; ii) right-leaning audiences are more likely to attribute inequality to the actions of individuals rather than systems.

7

Be aware that the British public does not instinctively share the same sense of deep unfairness that drives climate justice campaigners

Climate justice brings different questions to the climate debate – structural, ethical, moral and redistributive. This analysis recognises that those who are most affected by climate change are, typically, the least responsible. It also points to the evidence showing that being marginalised in society – by poverty, sexism, racism, ableism (and more) – can increase the likelihood of someone experiencing climate change-related harms, by creating structural barriers to accessing support⁵³ and affecting people’s chances of benefitting from or even being consulted on solutions.

The climate justice analysis advocates for solutions that address systemic power and exclusion, by: recognising that different actors have different responsibilities and burdens from climate change; supporting affected people to address the burdens; centering the most affected communities in solutions; and ensuring the benefits are not shared unevenly – so redistributing some of the benefits to those who are most affected.

UK citizens, however, do not widely recognise that climate change multiplies existing inequalities, according to recent research; nor do they readily draw connections between being marginalised in various ways and being impacted by climate change. In the BTC research, people struggled to give examples of groups who might be worse off due to climate impacts.⁵⁴

For many, climate change ‘happened by accident’ – and colonialism and racism are not in the picture at all

On an international level, people in the UK also do not generally see how climate change relates to colonialism or histories of resource extraction and exploitation. For many, climate change ‘happened by accident’ – and colonialism and racism are not in the picture at all.

This suggests that the general public does not currently share the sense that climate impacts are deeply unfair – a concept which is a core part of effectively building support for climate justice aims. Instead, many see climate change as a physical, environmental phenomenon which will affect everyone.

People in the UK are open to many of the core tenets of climate justice: recognising the need to protect vulnerable communities around the world; agreeing with the idea that governments and business bear responsibility; and agreeing with the ‘polluter pays’ principle. But significant knowledge gaps exist as to how the impacts of climate change are ‘unfair’ and what the terminology of ‘climate justice’ means.⁵⁵

→ Recommendation

Campaigners for climate justice must contend with a general public that does not instinctively share the sense of deep unfairness that drives them. It is important, at this point, to raise awareness of the unequal impacts of climate change on marginalised groups and countries in the global South. This should be done in language and approaches which make sense to and engender empathy from and with different audience segments. For some key campaign audiences – for example, Loyal Nationals – engagement with issues like climate change tends to come through their experience of localised environmental issues, like air pollution and fly tipping, meaning that tangible UK-based examples are likely to be more powerful for them.



A family and their flooded home in Sirajganj, Bangladesh. *Photo: Moniruzzaman Sazal / [Climate Visuals Countdown](#)*

Position accelerated UK action and leadership as something we should be proud of, no matter what countries like China or India are doing

Net zero opponents often describe UK action as ‘unfair’ if others aren’t pulling their weight. But the current context, although presenting its unique challenges, also offers opportunities to shift some of the narrative about what’s in the national interest. For example, the impetus to move away from relying on Russian gas may highlight that investment in renewables, insulating homes and reducing energy waste is in the national interest. This is likely to particularly appeal to highly patriotic segments, such as Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives.

Opponents of emissions reductions sometimes claim that it is unfair for Britain to implement ambitious measures on climate change while others – particularly China and India – are not ‘doing their bit’.

This argument does not appear to be in line with public concerns, according to BTC data. The majority of almost every segment (except for Disengaged Traditionalists) agree that the UK should be one of the most ambitious countries in the world on climate action, regardless of what other countries do.

Socially liberal segments are much more likely to say that richer countries should pay to help poorer countries. Established Liberals are alone among conservative-voting audiences in supporting this principle.

The majority of almost every segment agree that the UK should be one of the most ambitious countries in the world on climate action

→ Recommendation

Make it clear that China and India are actually doing a lot, in their own ways, on climate change action: for example that they are global leaders in renewable energy expansion. Make the national benefits of taking action clear and tangible – as this is an argument that attracts national support across different audiences.

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