

Poll finds British public largely supports strong climate policies

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The UK's Tory government is rolling back climate legislation and is continuing to fund the expansion of domestic oil and gas reserves. Our new research suggests this might be based on a misreading of public

opinion.

Since winning a July 2023 by-election in the London suburb of Uxbridge, the UK government has made polarizing voters on climate policy one of its main strategies. The Tory campaign had focused on opposing a new low emission zone for cars, and prime minister Rishi Sunak took its victory as vindication of a clear "pro-motorist" and anti-climate policy stance.

The apparent lack of public [support](#) for strict climate policies such as a ban of fossil-fueled cars is now being used as an excuse to roll back policies urgently necessary to [reach net zero targets](#).

In a recently study in the journal [Climate Policy](#), we demonstrate that, by betting on a public tired of stringent climate policies, the government is backing the wrong horse.

We asked 1,911 people that are representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender and ethnicity to indicate the extent to which they support different climate policy instruments. Almost two thirds support the most stringent climate policies, while others receive even higher support.

In short, people in the UK favor all kinds of policy instruments to tackle climate change, even the most stringent ones. There is a lesson here for the opposition too, which should put forward more effective climate policies, and not shy away from regulation.

A vote in favor of UK climate politics

In our study, we asked people about actual policy proposals by UK government bodies and political parties (as opposed to hypothetical ones).

We put each into one of four categories based on the type of policy instrument: regulation (such as banning the sale of fossil-fuel-powered cars or stopping drilling for oil and gas), market instruments (carbon trading, stopping fossil fuel subsidies), informational tools (consumer labels, [advertising campaigns](#)), and voluntary initiatives (carbon offsets, non-binding product standards).

Contrary to the government's rhetoric, our findings point towards a more optimistic view of the UK's future climate politics—at least from a voter perspective. A large majority supports strict regulations that mandate or prohibit specific behavior. An even larger share backs market-based initiatives (78%), information tools (86%) and voluntary measures (87%).

While the important thing here is that the UK public wants a package of different policy instruments to decarbonize the economy and reach net zero, one could rightly argue that more still needs to be done to increase support for stricter measures. So what drives public support for climate policies?

Drivers of public support

In line with [previous research](#), our study found that [free market](#) and environmental beliefs have the biggest impact on whether someone supports climate policies.

The more people believed that a free market acts in the interests of the public, the less they supported all climate policies. Similarly, people that believe nature is important voiced stronger support for all policies.

Interestingly, support for regulatory and market-based policies didn't change according to a person's income. This is important because the current government usually tries to appeal to working class voters in its

attempts to demonize ambitious climate policies.

These are important findings that highlight the need to challenge free market ideologies by publicly and repeatedly scrutinizing their validity for a functioning and just society. We also should start recognizing their detrimental effect on climate policy preferences.

Regional variations in public support

However, only looking at national results might hide important differences. Our research found important regional variation, with London often being an exception compared to the rest of the UK.

People living in other regions were about 30% less likely to support regulatory and market-based climate policies compared to people in Greater London, for instance.

Drivers of these differences are both ideological and structural. People living in Greater London tend to believe less in the free market system compared to people in regions which had significantly lower support for climate policies. This indicates that neoliberal ideology favoring free markets is discouraging climate action.

Yet it is not only what people believe in. Those in more rural regions with higher emissions show less support for stricter climate policies. These tend to be regions with less access to [public transport](#) where people have to rely more heavily on high-emitting cars.

More needs to be done to improve public infrastructure in rural areas. This will require investment in affordable, low-carbon transport networks rather than championing the continuation of the combustion engine.

How the media may shape policy support

Of course, our study only captured a snapshot of people's policy preferences. We are constantly confronted by news stories, particularly through social media.

These often act as echo chambers to reinforce existing ideologies (and by extension, [policy](#) preferences), thereby strengthening existing polarisations. This will make it harder to engage people with contrasting beliefs in a discussion on climate policies.

On the other hand, being [repeatedly confronted](#) with particular views and ideas can shift one's beliefs. In psychology, this is referred to as "repeated priming". In Germany, we have seen how newspaper campaigns against the slow phase-out of gas boilers have further [undermined public support](#) for this specific [climate policy](#).

Could something similar happen in the UK? To avoid the gradual weakening of support by particular news outlets, the UK opposition parties need to be consistent and persistent in their communication of [climate](#) policies and their effects.

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