

Ready to deal with another crisis?

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*Prospects for attitudes towards climate change in the
post-Covid-19 world*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has served as a salutary reminder of the potential fragility of our relationship with nature. It has forced us as individuals to accept unprecedented constraints on our ability to go about our everyday business, including not least our ability to travel long distances by car or on a plane, while governments have found themselves intervening in the economy in a fashion not seen since wartime. The decline in air pollution that has occurred in the wake of less movement across the globe has reminded us of the impact that our economic activity has on the environment. Yet, despite the fact that there is widespread concern in Britain about the impact of climate change, it will not necessarily be easy in the post-Covid world to persuade voters to take the individual actions or support the collective policies that are widely thought necessary to reverse the increase in global temperatures.

This article examines recent attitudes towards climate change as revealed by a number of polls and surveys conducted during the course of the past decade. We begin by examining how many voters are concerned about climate change and whether concern has become more commonplace. It

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then turns to the crucial issue of the extent to which people believe that climate change/global warming is the product of human activity, and where responsibility for taking action to deal with it is thought to lie. Thereafter, we examine both people's attitudes towards the collective and individual actions that might be taken to counteract global warming, and the extent to which these attitudes reflect their level of concern about the impact of human activity on the climate. We conclude by considering the implications for dealing with climate change in the post-Covid world.

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CONCERN

During the past decade, there have been many reminders of the apparent impact of climate change. There has been more than one instance of severe flooding in parts of the UK, while some recent summers have seen the country bask in record or near record temperatures.^{1,2} Meanwhile, climate change protests organised by the environmental movement, Extinction Rebellion, protests that brought traffic in a number of cities to a halt, have attracted considerable publicity. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, even though the level of concern about climate change was already relatively high, more than one survey has uncovered an increase in this concern during the course of the past decade.

For example, regular surveys commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and conducted by Kantar have found that the proportion who are ‘very concerned’ about climate change/global warming has increased from 20 per cent in June 2012 to 35 per cent now. Over the same period, the proportion who say that they are concerned at all has risen from 65 per cent to 76 per cent.³ Meanwhile, occasional polls conducted by Ipsos MORI have reported an even greater increase in the proportion saying

1 Madge G (2020) ‘2019 record temperatures conclude a decade of records’, Met Office website, 3 January 2020. <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/about-us/press-office/news/weather-and-climate/2019/record-breaking-year-concludes-record-breaking-decade>

2 Williams S (2020) ‘Expert analysis of record-breaking February floods’, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology website, 17 March 2020. <https://www.ceh.ac.uk/news-and-media/news/expert-analysis-record-breaking-february-floods>

3 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020) *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 33 – key findings*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884028/BEIS_PAT_W33_-_Key_findings_Final_.pdf

that they are ‘very’ concerned – from just 22 per cent in 2011 to 52 per cent last August; while over the same period, the proportion expressing at least a measure of concern rose from 63 per cent to 85 per cent.⁴ Indeed, so great is the current level of concern about climate change that many voters – 67 per cent according to Ipsos MORI – accept that it represents as serious a crisis as Covid-19.⁵

CAUSE

Concern about climate change is, however, no more than a starting point to securing public support for action that might counteract global warming. What then matters is where responsibility is thought to lie. Recognition that climate change is happening does not necessarily translate into acceptance that the explanation lies primarily in human activity. In practice, most people believe that what humans do is part of the explanation – but it looks as though no more than half feel that the cause lies wholly in that direction.

In interviewing conducted in 2016, the European Social Survey (ESS) found that just 36 per cent of people in Britain reckon that climate change is caused mainly or entirely by human activity. A majority (53 per cent) think that it is caused in equal measure by both human activity and natural processes.⁶ Meanwhile, in its most recent survey in March, BEIS found that just 17 per cent believe that climate change is wholly caused by human activity, and that, although up on the 38 per cent who expressed the view in 2012, less than half (47 per cent) reckon that it is at least mainly caused by human activity. Just as many (47 per cent) say that climate change is at least as much a consequence of natural processes as it is of human activity. In short, there is far from universal acceptance by the public that human actions are primarily responsible for climate change.

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4 Dickman A and Skinner G (2019) ‘Concern about climate change reaches record levels with half now “very concerned”’, Ipsos MORI website, 12 August 2019. <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/concern-about-climate-change-reaches-record-levels-half-now-very-concerned>

5 Ibid

6 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

Indeed, there is a noticeable social division on the issue. Climate change may represent a threat to all humanity, but the role of humans in giving rise to global warming is recognised more by some groups in the electorate than others. It has long been argued that concern about the environment is particularly the preserve of younger generations and the better off, whose material needs are largely satisfied and who are focussed more on improving their quality of life.⁷ This pattern can certainly be found in current attitudes towards climate change.

For example, according to the ESS, nearly half (48 per cent) of those who have a degree think that climate change is caused wholly or primarily by human activity, compared with just 28 per cent of those whose highest educational qualification is a GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) or its equivalent. Similarly, while nearly half (48 per cent) of 18- to 34-year-olds hold that view, only around a quarter (27 per cent) of those aged 65 and over do so.⁸ Meanwhile, according to the BEIS survey, 55 per cent of those in the 'AB' social grade of professional and managerial workers reckon that human activity is primarily responsible, compared with only 40 per cent of those in the least well-off 'DE' group.⁹

RESPONSIBILITY

Even if voters do believe that human activity has played a key role in global warming, the question still arises as to where people think responsibility lies for taking action to counteract it – with individuals or with the government. In practice, voters do not necessarily believe that the responsibility primarily lies with them. Just one in four told the most recent BEIS survey that 'the general public, by making changes to their lifestyle', have most responsibility for tackling the effects of climate change. Nearly twice as many (47 per cent) said that responsibility lies primarily with the government, 'by introducing more policies to reduce the level of carbon emissions'. Just 11 per cent reckon the responsibility lies with business, 'by doing more to reduce their impact on the environment'.¹⁰

7 Inglehart R (1977) *The Silent Revolution: Changing values and political styles*, Princeton University Press

8 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) 'Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour' in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

9 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020) *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 33 – key findings*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884028/BEIS_PAT_W33_-_Key_findings_Final_.pdf

10 Ibid

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This mood is also reflected in the ESS research. In this survey, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 0 to 10 how much responsibility they feel they personally have to reduce climate change. On average, respondents gave themselves a score of six – only a little above the mid-point of five that signifies that individuals neither do nor do not have much responsibility.¹¹ There is, perhaps, more of a wish among voters that governments will enable them to be virtuous and less a sense of determination that this is an issue that they need personally to address.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Meanwhile, although voters are most likely to look to the government to take action, they seemingly do not necessarily regard it as a high priority in the battle for resources from the public purse. One indication that this is the case is to be found in a poll YouGov conducted for Cambridge University in January, in which voters were asked to choose across a number of policy areas between reducing taxes and spending less or increasing taxes and spending more on those areas. In the case of the National Health Service (NHS), no less than 62 per cent opted for increasing spending, while 48 per cent said the same in respect of the police and 40 per cent in terms of education. However, when voters were presented with the same choice about climate change, just 35 per cent opted for more spending.¹² The attention focused on the NHS during the Covid-19 pandemic seems likely to mean it will remain a much higher priority than alternatives such as action on climate change.

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11 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

12 YouGov-Cambridge Centre for Public Opinion Research (2020) YGC GB environmental behaviors. https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/y3tuexuu9l/YGC_GB_environmental_behaviours.pdf

It has been suggested that the scale of the intervention by government to deal with the pandemic will create a precedent for similar action on climate change.^{13,14,15} However, the economic and fiscal pressures created by the fallout from Covid-19 will not necessarily make it any easier to move the issue up the ladder of voters' priorities. When Ipsos MORI recently asked voters whether 'government should focus first on helping the economy to recover first and foremost, even if that means taking some actions that are bad for the environment', voters proved more or less evenly divided between the 46 per cent who agreed and the 43 per cent who disagreed.¹⁶

At the same time, while voters may be happy for government to create inducements for them to behave in an environmentally more sustainable manner, there is a marked reluctance to accept measures that might have a direct impact on their own pockets. Thus, while the ESS found that as many as 68 per cent are in favour of 'using public money to subsidise renewable energy such as wind and solar power', only 36 per cent back increasing taxes on fossil fuels, while 37 per cent are opposed to this. Labour supporters (42 per cent in favour) are little different from their Conservative counterparts (35 per cent) in this respect, suggesting that such a step would not necessarily be significantly easier for a Labour administration to take.¹⁷ Meanwhile, although well up on the 13 per cent who expressed the view in 2013, still only 27 per cent told the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey in 2017 that they backed making car users pay higher taxes for the sake of the environment, well below the 45 per cent who were opposed to this.¹⁸

13 Chassagne N (2020) 'Here's what the coronavirus pandemic can teach us about tackling climate change', *The Conversation*, 26 March 2020. <https://theconversation.com/heres-what-the-coronavirus-pandemic-can-teach-us-about-tackling-climate-change-134399>

14 Igoe M (2020) 'What does Covid-19 mean for climate action?', Devex website, 22 April 2020. <https://www.devex.com/news/what-does-covid-19-mean-for-climate-action-97054>

15 Roth S (2020) 'Here's what a coronavirus-like response to the climate crisis would look like', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 March 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2020-03-24/what-coronavirus-like-response-to-climate-crisis-would-look-like>

16 Ipsos Mori (2020) *Climate change in a Covid-19 world*. Report. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ipsos-nz-climate-change-and-covid19-april-2020.pdf>

17 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) 'Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour' in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

18 Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

The relatively low priority that individuals give to their own role in helping to stop climate change is reflected in an apparent reluctance to change their behaviour on account of the issue. According to the 2017 BSA survey, only 22 per cent agree that they are willing to reduce the amount that they travel by plane, while rather more people – 34 per cent – disagree. (Indeed, according to the YouGov/Cambridge University poll, slightly more people (24 per cent) increased the amount of air travel they undertook in 2019 than reduced their plane journeys (20 per cent).)¹⁹ Meanwhile although 38 per cent of car drivers say they would be willing to reduce the amount that they travel by car, just as many take the opposite view. There has been little sign that either reported willingness to avoid flying or propensity to cut down on driving has become more widespread in recent years in the wake of the increased concern about climate change.

True, people seem to find it easier to take some actions than others. According to a YouGov poll in February, only 9 per cent said that over the course of the next year they would reduce the amount that they travel by air. In contrast, as many as 65 per cent said that they would cut down on the use of plastic and non-recyclable products. But, of course, the argument for the latter course of action rests primarily on wider concerns about the impact of plastic on the environment rather than because of concerns about climate change. Meanwhile, the results of the BEIS survey suggest that, in so far as people do report activities that might be thought to help reduce global warming, such as using a car less to get about or reducing their use of energy at home, they most commonly say that they do so for reasons other than climate change – of which, perhaps, price and cost are often of more immediate concern.

CONCERN AND ACTION

Why is it that voters' concern about climate change does not necessarily translate into a willingness to take action? One possibility is that much depends on whether voters believe that human actions are primarily responsible for climate change. After all, we would seem unlikely to be willing to change our behaviour unless we think that climate change is being caused by what we have been doing in the first place. But perhaps it is also the case

¹⁹ YouGov-Cambridge Centre for Public Opinion Research (2020) YGC GB environmental behaviours. https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/y3tuxuu9l/YGC_GB_environmental_behaviours.pdf

that even if we do acknowledge the role of human activity in bringing about climate change, this perception does not necessarily translate into support for or willingness to engage in actions to mitigate global warming.

There is some evidence that those who believe that climate change is primarily caused by human activity are more likely to support forms of collective action. Among those who do take that view in the ESS survey, as many as 50 per cent support increasing taxes on fossil fuels while only 27 per cent are opposed. In contrast, only 31 per cent of those who reckon that humans are responsible for no more than half of climate change back such a tax hike, while 42 per cent are opposed. That said, even those who believe that climate change is mainly caused by humans are much more likely to back the inducement of subsidised renewable energy (80 per cent) than they are increased taxes on fuel.²⁰

Meanwhile, the link between perceptions of climate change and willingness to change individual behaviour often appears to be relatively weak. True, the BEIS survey does suggest that those who think climate change is at least primarily caused by human activity are somewhat more likely to report engaging in at least one of a set of possible changes in behaviour on account of concern about climate change. But even among this group, the proportion who report having undertaken at least one such change is, at 44 per cent, well under half – and is not much higher than the equivalent figure of 30 per cent among those who do not take that view. Less than one in five (17 per cent) report making three changes in their behaviour and thereby might be thought to have taken significant action.²¹

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Elsewhere, the evidence of a link is even weaker. The ESS reports that only a half (50 per cent) of those who say that climate change is at least primarily the result of human activity either ‘always’ or ‘very often’, do things to reduce their everyday use of energy such as ‘switching off

20 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

21 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020) *BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 33 – key findings*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884028/BEIS_PAT_W33_-_Key_findings_Final_.pdf

appliances that are not being used, walking for short journeys, or only using the heating or air conditioning when really needed’, a proportion that is almost matched by the equivalent figure of 46 per cent among those who take a different view of the cause of climate change.²² Meanwhile, according to the 2017 BSA survey only 22 per cent who say that human actions are at least partly responsible for climate change are willing to reduce their air travel to reduce the impact of climate change – much the same figure (20 per cent) as is to be found among the minority who do not believe climate change is caused by human actions at all.²³

How might we account for this apparent disjuncture between perceptions of the role of human activity in climate change and willingness to do anything about it? According to the ESS survey at least, the explanation appears to lie in a perception that there is not much any one individual can do about it. Asked to use a score of between 0 and 10 to indicate how much they felt that limiting their own individual use of energy would help reduce climate change, on average people responded with a score of 4.4, which is well below the mid-point of five. Even when they were asked about the possible impact of large numbers of people doing so, the resulting score was no more than 5.8.²⁴ In short, climate change may well be regarded as so big a problem that many people are unsure that they have the ability to do much about it. The experience of a pandemic could simply reinforce that perception.

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CONCLUSION

There is widespread concern about climate change. Indeed, many think it represents as much of a crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic. But so far at least,

22 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

23 Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf

24 Fisher S, Fitzgerald R and Poortinga W (2018) ‘Climate change: social divisions in beliefs and behaviour’ in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. <https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/climate-change.aspx>

this has not galvanised the public into backing many of the actions that are widely thought necessary to bring it to a halt. Many people remain to be persuaded that human activity is primarily responsible for global warming. In so far as it is, people are seemingly inclined to look to the government to find a solution that will not prove too painful for their own pockets – and which indeed will not require too much of the public purse. At the same time, even those who accept that global warming is primarily the product of human activity are not necessarily convinced that this means they need to take actions as individuals.

It is far from clear that the Covid-19 pandemic will change this picture. The threat that the pandemic poses to economic wellbeing seems unlikely to help persuade voters to focus on the quality of the environment. The pandemic may also have reinforced the apparent perception that there is not a lot that individuals can do to solve a global problem. Government may be set to play a more significant role in our society thanks to the pandemic – but there will be plenty of other calls on its resources. True, we may have learnt that we do not need to travel as much as we did – but in so far as we do find the need to do so, travelling by car could well come to seem safer than using public transport. Those who advocate the need for taking action on climate change should not assume that the pandemic will deliver a Damascene conversion to their cause among the general public.

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