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Public attitudes to climate change in Great Britain

Before and since COVID-19



Authors: Sylvie Craig, Oliver Paynel

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NatCen Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX
T 020 7250 1866
www.natcen.ac.uk

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1 Introduction

In recent years, a growing spotlight on climate activism has raised questions about whether the steps countries are taking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions go far enough. In November 2018, April 2019 and October 2019 actions in the UK by environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion saw over 1,500 arrests¹ and areas of London brought to a standstill. In May 2019, the group achieved one of their central goals when parliament declared a climate emergency².

Today, the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on people and economies are at the top of the political agenda for most of the world. However, 2021 could yet remain pivotal in the global effort to tackle climate change. At the COP26 United Nations climate summit, countries are expected to set out plans to step up their action on climate change. Following its departure from the European Union, the UK will for the first time bring forward its own nationally defined contributions to the summit. As host, the UK has a significant role to play in animating an international effort to implement the Paris Agreement and accelerate joint action to reduce global carbon emissions.

At a time when increased international pressure to step up climate action contends with the unprecedented challenges brought on by COVID-19, how concerned are the general public in Great Britain about climate change, and how confident are they in the path ahead? Who do they hold responsible for addressing climate change, and what do they really think about climate activism? And lastly, how has COVID-19 reshaped public attitudes on the issue?

These were the questions put to a nationally representative sample of the British public using the high-quality NatCen Panel. This random probability panel is formed of people recruited from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey which has been critical in gauging public opinion for nearly 40 years. The first wave of fieldwork ran from 21st November to 11th December 2019 and 2429 Panel members took part. The second wave of fieldwork ran from 2nd July to 26th July 2020 and 2413 Panel members took part. For both waves, Panel members were interviewed online and over the phone to ensure full coverage of the population and to optimise responses.³

¹ <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2019/10/16/1600-arrests-extinction-rebellion-fights-right-protest-uk/>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48126677>

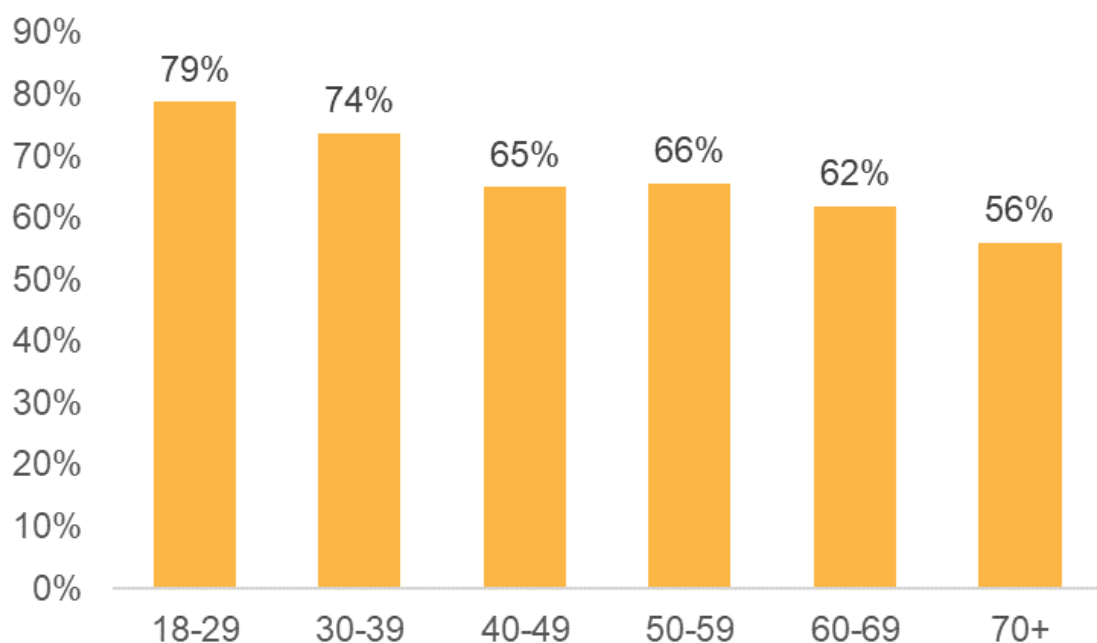
³ <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-expertise/methods-expertise/surveys/probability-panel/>

2 Public concern and opinions on the causes of climate change

At the time of our first survey in December 2019, two-thirds of the British public (67%) said that climate change over the past 100 years is mainly or entirely caused by human activity. Around a quarter (23%) of people said that climate change is caused roughly equally by natural processes and human processes and 7% said it is mainly or entirely caused by natural processes. Only a very small minority (3%) didn't think the climate has been changing.

As shown in Figure 2:1, younger people (those aged under 40) were significantly more likely to think that climate change was mainly or entirely caused by human processes than those aged 40 or over.

Figure 2:1 Percentage who think climate change is mainly or entirely caused by human processes, by age



% who think climate change is mainly or entirely caused by human processes. Base: All GB adults (18+): 18-29 (236), 30-39 (362), 40-49 (414), 50-59 (433), 60-69 (487), 70+ (471)

Despite some variation in opinion about the causes of climate change, most of the public are concerned about the impacts. In March 2020, the government's BEIS (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) Public Attitudes Tracker found 76% of the public were either 'fairly' or 'very' concerned about its impact⁴.

Yet despite steadily increasing concern since 2015, this figure – from interviews carried out between 11 and 17 March 2020 – represents a slight decline in public concern from the year before, when 80% of people in the BEIS survey reported being 'fairly' or 'very' concerned about the impacts of climate change. This could reflect a shift in public concern away from climate change and towards the public health crisis presented by COVID-19, a possibility we discuss further in Section 6.

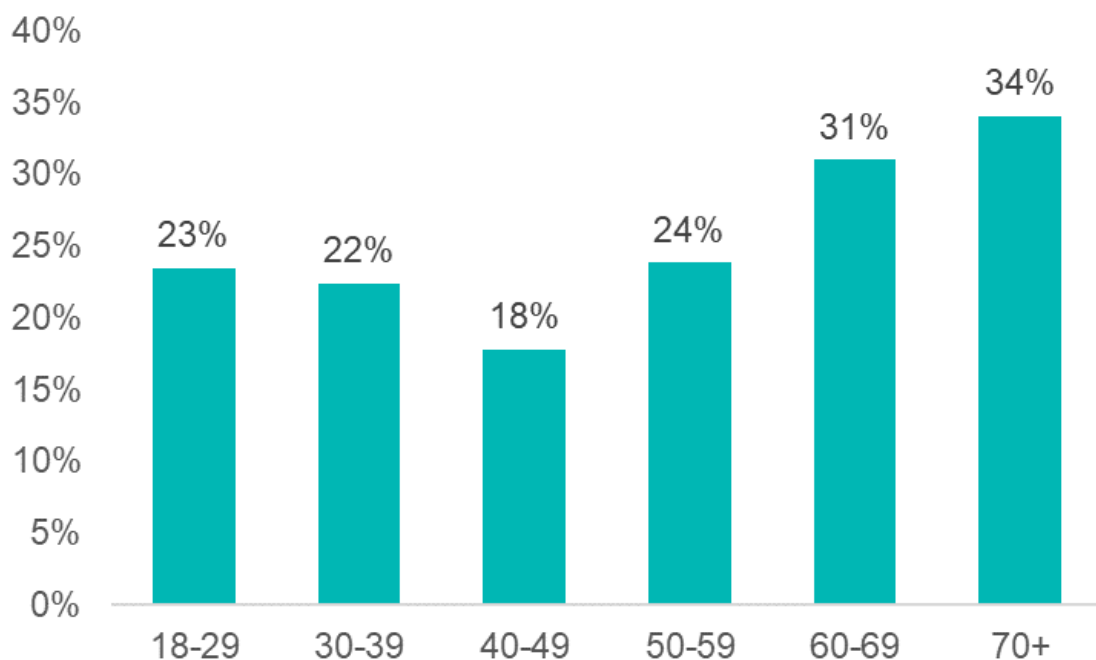
⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884028/BEIS_PAT_W33_-_Key_findings_Final_.pdf

3 Do the public have confidence in media reporting on climate change?

To better understand the contexts in which attitudes to climate change are formed, NatCen Panel members were asked whether they thought that the media exaggerated the risk posed by climate change and global warming. Our findings suggest that, for the most part, the public do not feel that the risks being reported are exaggerated, with just over half (52%) of people disagreeing with this idea, compared with a quarter (25%) who agreed.

Notably, over a fifth of the public (22%) strongly disagreed that the media exaggerate the risks posed by climate change. People are more likely to disagree that the media exaggerates the risks posed by climate change than to agree. That said, education level, age and gender are all associated with differences in viewpoint. Men were more likely to believe the media exaggerates the risk of climate change than women (30% vs. 21%), as were people without formal qualifications (36%) compared to people with a degree-level education or higher (17%). People in their sixties and seventies were also more likely than younger adults to feel the media exaggerates the risks of climate change, as shown in Figure 3:1.

Figure 3:1 Percentage who agree that the risks related to climate change are exaggerated by the media, by age



% who strongly agree or agree with statement: The risks related to climate change are exaggerated by the media. Base: All GB adults (18+): 18-29 (236), 30-39 (362), 40-49 (414), 50-59 (433), 60-69 (487), 70+ (471)

To further understand perceptions of reporting on climate change, we looked at the association with frequency of internet use.

Our analysis found that people who use the internet more frequently were less likely to think the media exaggerates the risks posed by climate change. Twenty-one percent of people who use the internet several times a day said the risks of climate change were exaggerated by the media, compared with 29% of people who use the internet on a daily basis and 38% of people who use the internet weekly or less – an association that holds true even when we account for the differences in internet use across age groups. The association also persists, albeit weakened, when also controlling for level of educational qualification, reflecting the fact that people with higher levels of education – a group on the whole more trusting of media reporting on climate change – use the internet more often.

This all suggests that, despite concerns about online misinformation about climate change,⁵ using the internet more frequently is still a characteristic associated with believing the risks of climate change reported in the media are proportionate and credible.

But how might we begin to move from understanding public concern about the risks posed by climate change to understanding what action people are willing to accept, or indeed to take themselves, in order to tackle climate change? Our first step towards answering these questions is to examine who the public feel is responsible for addressing climate change.

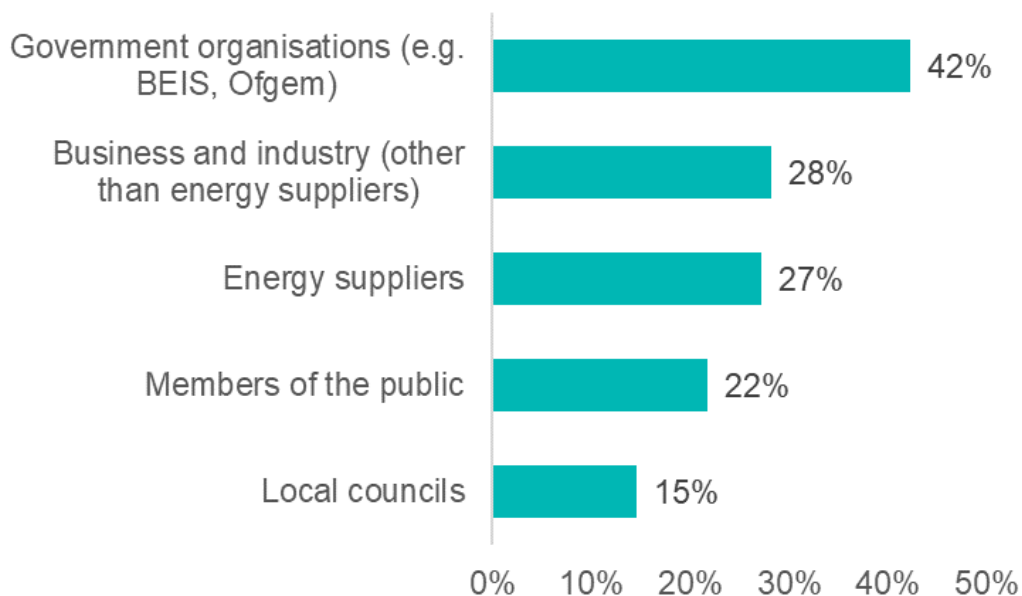
⁵ Treen, KMd, Williams, HTP, O'Neill, SJ. Online misinformation about climate change. *WIREs Clim Change*. 2020; 11:e665. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.665> (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/wcc.665>)

4 Responsibility for taking action

Who is responsible for addressing climate change?

The public view the government as having the greatest responsibility for acting to address climate change. Asked to rank a list of potential actors, forty-two percent of people said government organisations had the most responsibility, followed by business and industry (28%) and energy suppliers (27%). Local councils were least likely to be chosen (15%). Only around a fifth of people place high importance on the role of personal action, with 22% saying that the public was the group most responsible for addressing climate change.

Figure 4:1 Percentage of people selecting organisations or groups as having the most responsibility for addressing climate change in the UK



From most to least, in what order do you think each of the following groups are responsible for addressing climate change in the UK? Base: All GB adults (18+): 2361. Participants were able to assign highest level of responsibility to more than one group, meaning data in this chart does not sum to 100%. For the purposes of calculating percentages, only those participants who provided a ranking for all 5 organisations/groups have been included.

That the public comes out towards the bottom of the rankings in terms of responsibility for addressing climate change may indicate that people are not convinced that whatever action they themselves take could make a difference, and/or simply that they feel the onus for action lies with government, and private industry, rather than with members of the public.

Support for the former hypothesis can be found by looking at previous data from the European Social Survey, which asked people if they thought limiting their own energy use would help reduce climate change. On a scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 meant that it would be not at all likely to help reduce climate change, and 10 meant extremely likely)

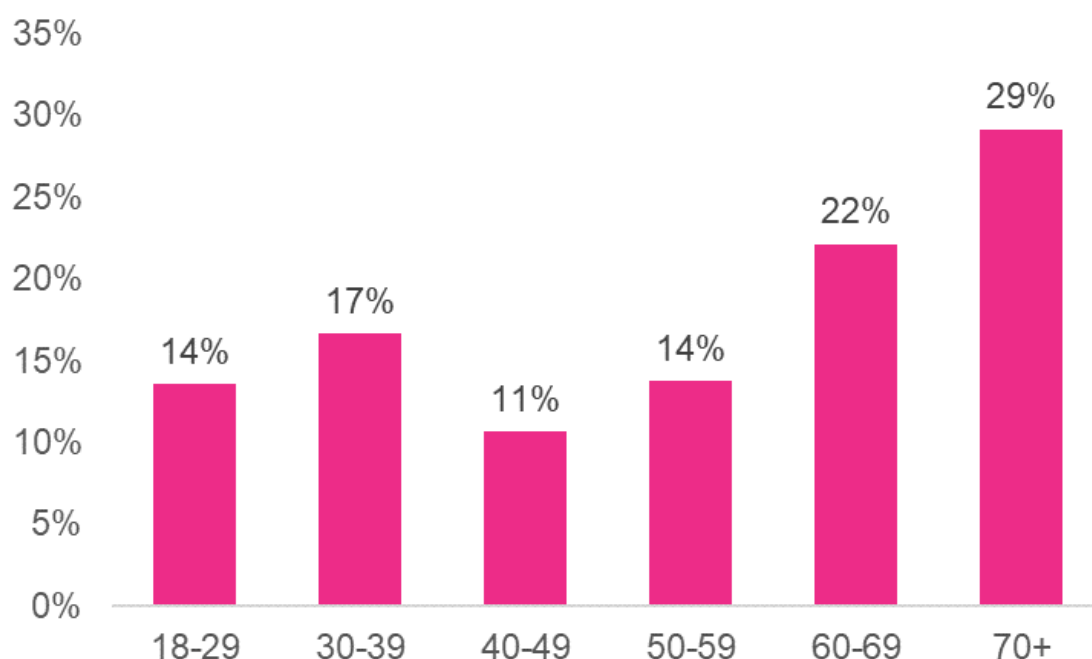
the average score was 4.4, suggesting a relatively low level of confidence in the efficacy of taking personal action.⁶

Is the government doing enough?

Participants were asked to say how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘the UK Government is doing enough to address climate change’. Responses to this offer a way to assess the second hypothesis – that people feel the burden of responsibility lies with those who have the power to enact structural change. For the majority of the population, the answer to the question of whether the government is doing enough to address climate change is ‘no’. Sixty-two percent of people either disagree or strongly disagree that the government is doing enough to address climate change, while only 18% feel the government is doing enough (twenty-one percent neither agree nor disagree). Within these groups, around a quarter (24%) of people strongly disagree that the government is doing enough to address climate change, while only a small minority (4%) take the opposite view and strongly agree that the government is doing enough.

Age and gender are both associated with attitudes to government action, with men considerably more likely than women to think government is doing enough (22% of men compared to 14% of women), and the older age groups more likely than younger ones to think the government is doing enough, as shown in Figure 4:2 below.

Figure 4:2 Percentage who agree/strongly agree that the UK government is doing enough to address climate change, by age

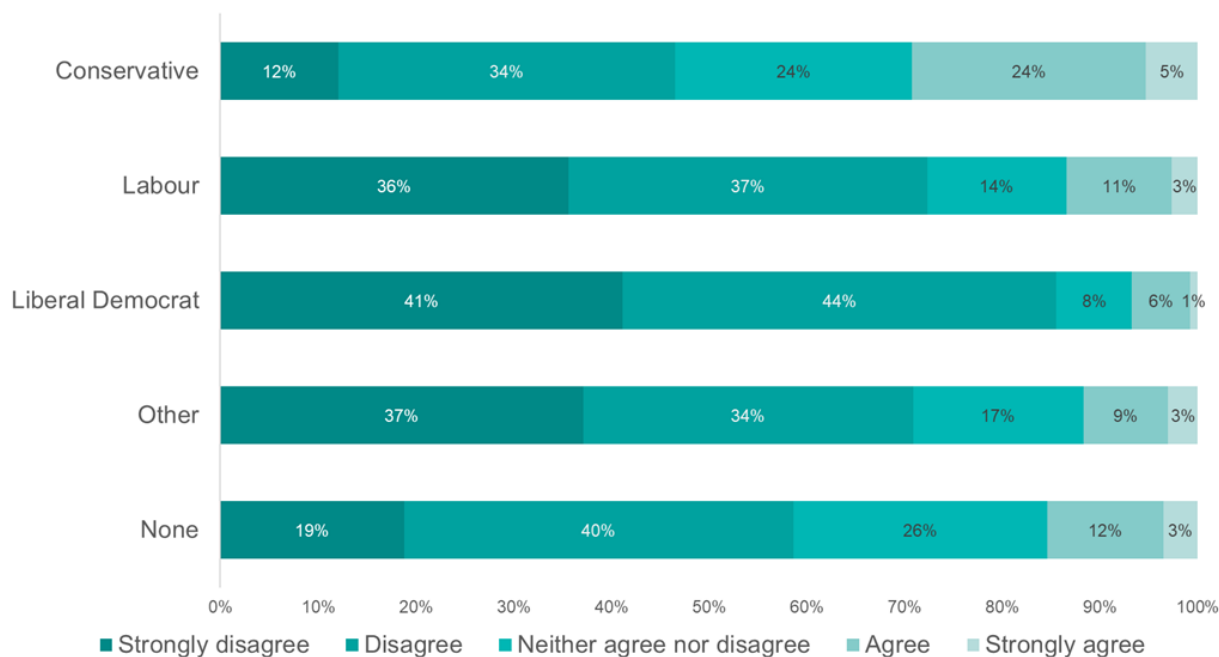


How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The UK Government is doing enough to address climate change. Base: All GB adults (18+): 18-29 (237), 30-39 (361), 40-49 (414), 50-59 (431), 60-69 (488), 70+ (475)

⁶https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39251/bsa35_climate_change.pdf

As might be expected, people's views on party politics are also associated with whether the government is doing enough to address climate change. As shown in Figure 4:3, Conservative party supporters are most likely to agree the government is doing enough. Yet even within this group of voters, people were still more likely to disagree (47%) than agree (29%) that the government is doing enough to address climate change.

Figure 4:3 Percentage who agree or disagree that the UK government is doing enough to address climate change, by political party identification



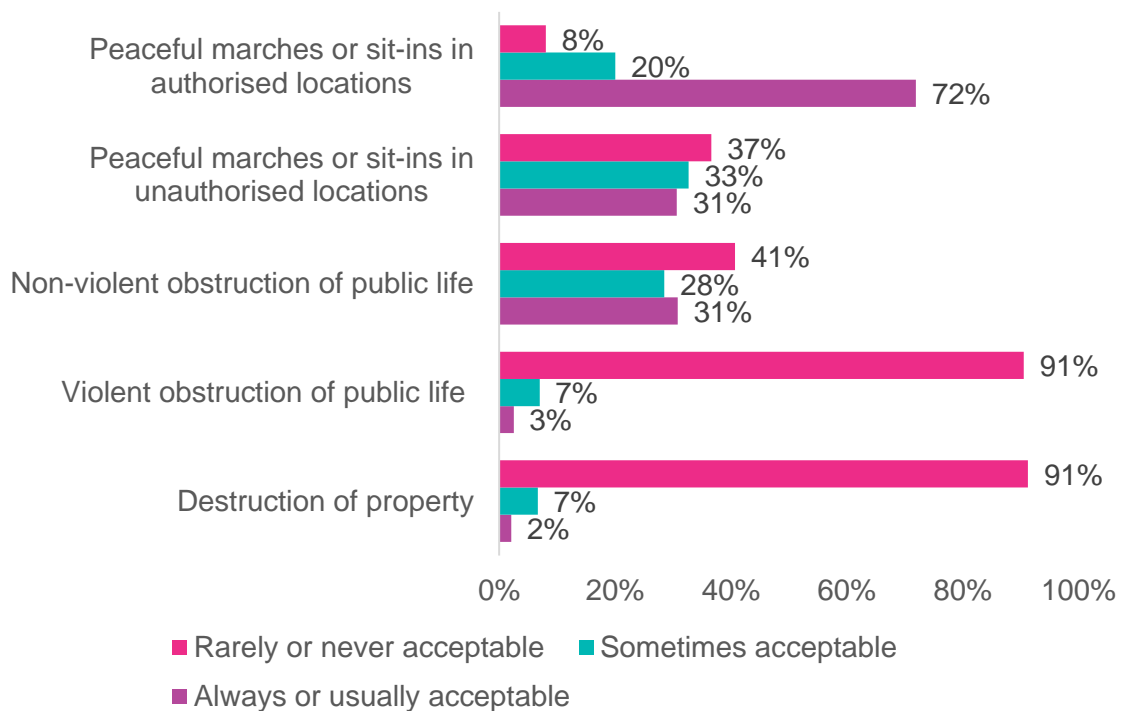
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The UK Government is doing enough to address climate change. Base: All GB adults (18+): Conservative (692), Labour (550), Liberal Democrat (224), Other (211), None (714)

5 Climate activism

We have seen that people are most likely to say the government hold the greatest responsibility for addressing climate change, and that a sizeable majority of the public do not think the government is doing enough. This may suggest that the public are also sympathetic towards protests and climate activists who advance the issue and call for greater action from governments and industry.

Our data suggest that the public is indeed relatively supportive of a range of direct actions that have the goal of galvanising stronger action on climate change, though whether actions are considered acceptable depends heavily on how drastic the action is. Almost all participants (92%) consider marches and sit-ins in authorised locations to be acceptable in some circumstances, with a majority also approving of unauthorised marches and sit-ins and non-violent obstruction of public life in some circumstances (63% and 60% respectively). Destruction of property and violent obstruction of public life are far less likely to be viewed as acceptable, with only around one in ten people considering these kinds of actions to be acceptable in some circumstances.

Figure 5:1 Percentage who think the following forms of protest are acceptable to call for stronger actions to address climate change



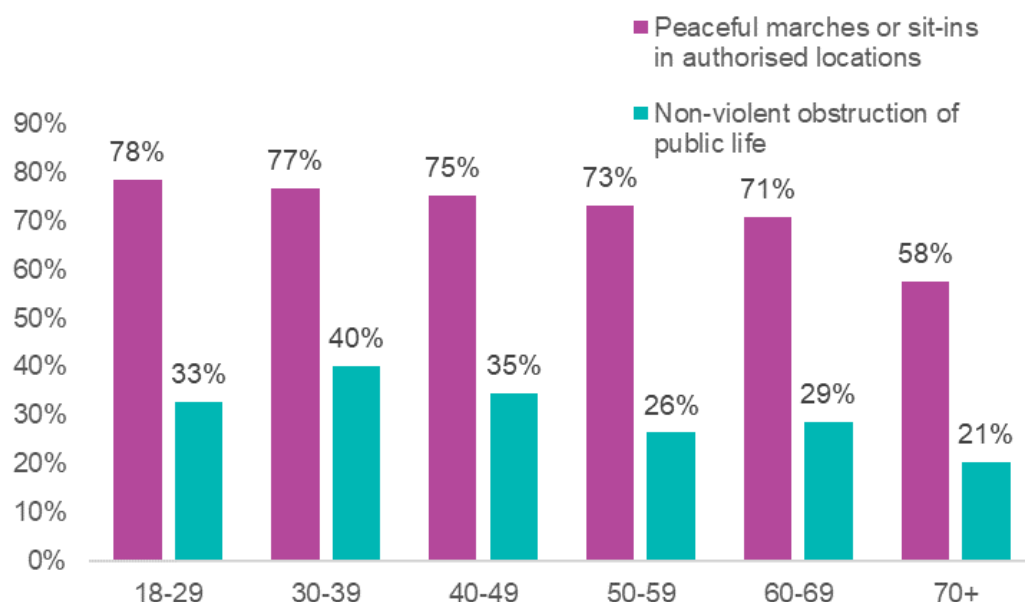
To what extent do you think the following forms of protest are acceptable to call for stronger actions to address climate change?. Base: All GB adults (18+): 2418-2425

While most forms of protest are considered to be justified 'sometimes' by most of the population, stronger levels of support for direct action tend to be more prevalent among younger people than among older people.

Seventy-eight percent of young adults age 18 to 29 think peaceful marches and sit-ins in authorised locations are 'always' or 'usually' acceptable, a figure that falls to 58% for people over 70. Non-violent obstruction of public life, another form of peaceful protest and key strategy of prominent climate activist groups such as

Extinction Rebellion, tends to have slightly more mixed support across different age groups, but generally remains more acceptable to people under 50 and somewhat less acceptable to people over 50.

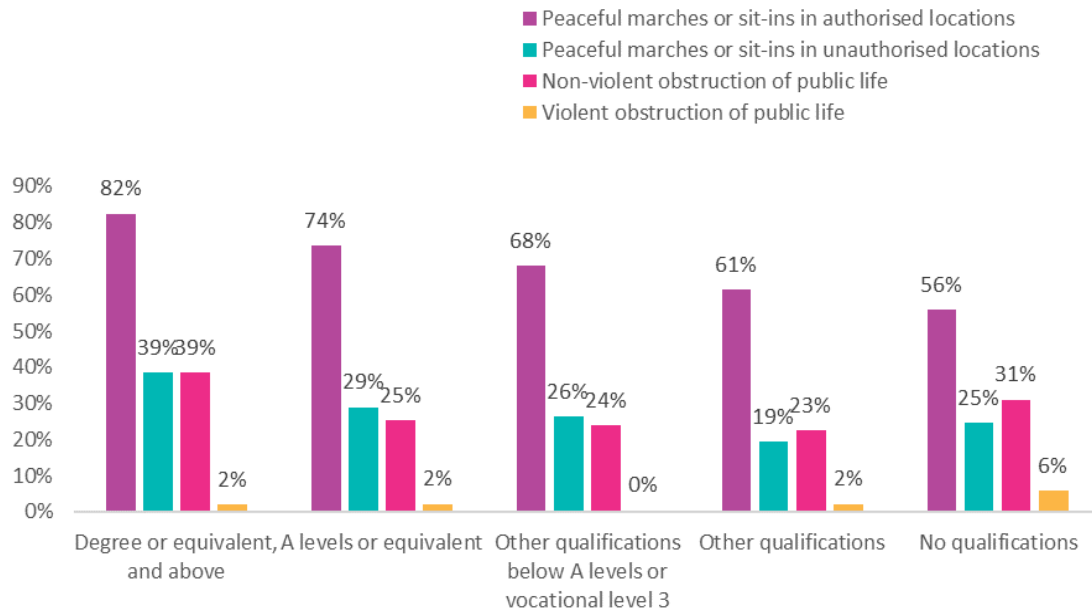
Figure 5:2 Percentage saying peaceful/non-violent modes of protest are 'usually' or 'always' acceptable, by age group



To what extent do you think the following forms of protest are acceptable to call for stronger actions to address climate change?. Base: All GB adults (18+): 18-29 (236-237), 30-39 (362), 40-49 (414), 50-59 (431), 60-69 (486), 70+ (472-476)

Clearly, age plays a part in attitudes towards protest calling for stronger action on climate change. It is also notable that support for non-violent obstruction of public life and unauthorised sit-ins and marches are higher among people who are university educated than among people with A-levels, other qualifications or no qualifications (Figure 5:3).

Figure 5:3 Percentage who consider different forms of protest ‘always’ or ‘usually’ acceptable, by education level



To what extent do you think the following forms of protest are acceptable to call for stronger actions to address climate change?. Base: All GB adults (18+): Degree or above (1057-1061), A Levels or equivalent (510-513), Other qualifications below A levels (393-394), Other qualifications (180-181), no qualifications (271-273)

6 How have attitudes to climate change shifted during the coronavirus pandemic?

The data reported on so far were collected in December 2019, before the coronavirus outbreak in Britain. To understand whether attitudes to climate change had changed as a result of the impacts of the first wave of COVID-19 on life in Britain, we asked additional questions to the NatCen Panel in July 2020, at which point there had been over 40,000 coronavirus deaths in Britain⁷ and it was clear that the economy was heading into recession.⁸

As noted above, in March 2020 the government's BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker registered a slight decline in public concern about the impacts of climate change, with 76% of people saying they were 'fairly' or 'very' concerned about the impacts, compared with 80% in March 2019. In July, lockdown measures had begun to ease, but it was evident that the pandemic would have drastic and long-term effects on the economy, and likely that the public were thinking differently about Britain's priorities. To gauge this, we asked participants again whether they agreed or disagreed that the government was doing enough to address climate change.

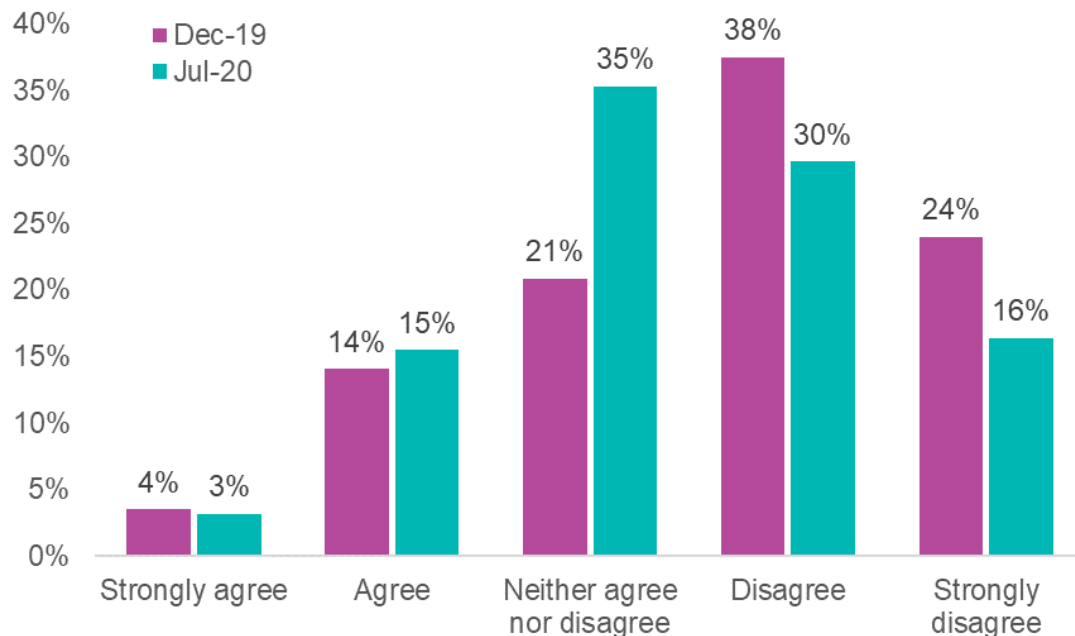
Post-lockdown attitudes to government action

We found that, overall, the public was less critical of the level of government action on climate change in July 2020, compared to before the pandemic. As shown in Figure 6:1, people were less likely to disagree that the government is doing enough to address climate change (46% compared to 62% in December 2019). However, they were no more likely to agree that the government is doing enough than they were just before the pandemic – instead, we found that people were substantially more likely to say they 'neither agree nor disagree' that the government is doing enough to address climate change (35% compared to 21% in December).

⁷ <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/deaths>

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/articles/coronavirusandtheimpactonoutputintheukeconomy/june2020>

Figure 6:1 Percentage who agree or disagree that the government is doing enough to address climate change, December 2019 and July 2020



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? The UK Government is doing enough to address climate change. Base: All GB adults (18+): Dec-19: 2423. Jul-20: 2403.

This may reflect an acknowledgement that the pandemic has dominated the political sphere, potentially leaving less time or resource for addressing other issues. It could also indicate a general weakening of public opinion around climate change, as the issue has moved away from the centre stage.

Does this mean climate change is less of a priority for the public since coronavirus?

If the public are less critical of government action on climate change, does this reflect a downgrading of climate change as a priority for the public, as Britain faces the challenges posed by coronavirus?

As global travel and economic activity slowed dramatically in response to the pandemic, the connection between human activity (in particular commuting and taking flights) and global warming was made more explicit than ever. One study into the effects of the global response to the pandemic on emissions and air pollutants estimates that, during April 2020, global nitrogen oxide emissions declined by as much as 30%. This phenomenon attracted considerable media attention, but scientists were pessimistic that this brief period of economic

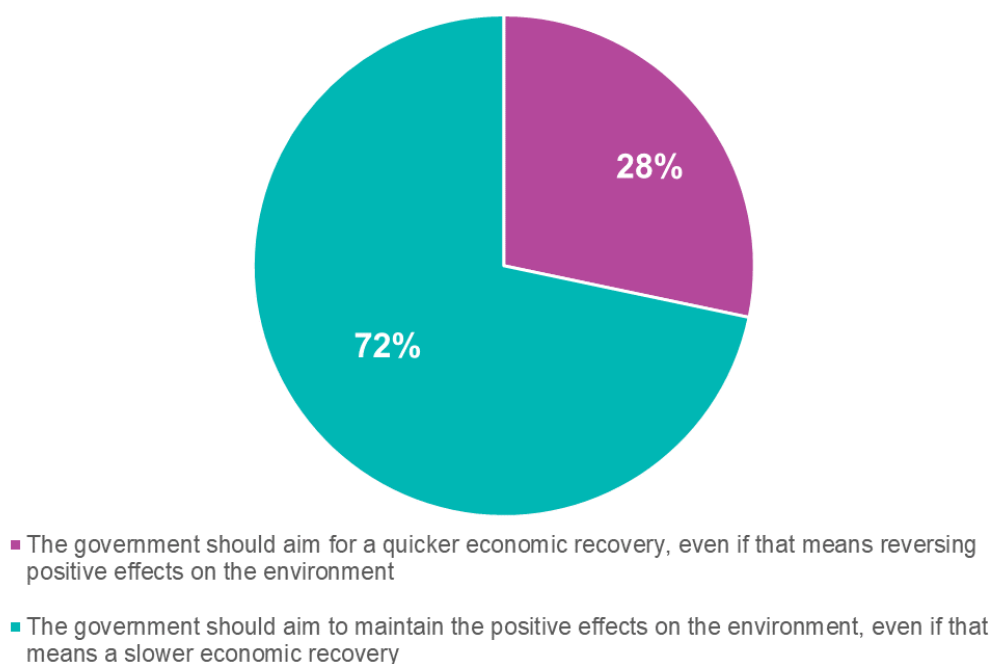
shutdown would have any lasting effects on emissions in the absence of long-term climate policies, such as those which aim to reduce fossil fuel consumption.⁹

To gauge the extent to which climate change is a priority for the public in the national recovery from coronavirus, we asked participants to consider the future of Britain and its economy after the coronavirus outbreak and choose a preference between the following options:

1. The government should aim for a quicker economic recovery, even if that means reversing positive effects on the environment
2. The government should aim to maintain the positive effects on the environment, even if that means a slower economic recovery

We found that overall, nearly three quarters (72%) of people would prefer the government to maintain the positive effects on the environment, even if that means a slower economic recovery.

Figure 6:2 Percentage who prefer the government to maintain positive effects on the environment or prioritise a quicker economic recovery



The coronavirus outbreak has caused significant harm to the British economy. However, changes in behaviour have also led to some positive effects on the environment, such as less pollution. Thinking now about the future of Britain and its economy after the coronavirus outbreak, which of the following comes closest to your opinion? Base: All GB adults (18+): 2382

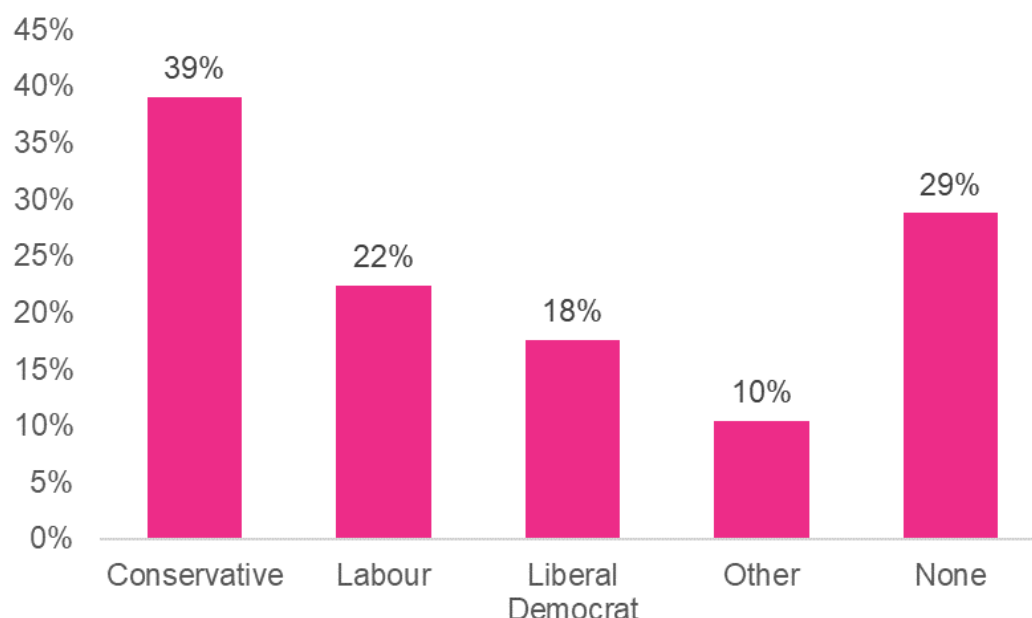
Women were more likely than men to choose this (75% and 68% respectively), but there were no significant differences found across any socio-economic measures (equivalised household income, how participants felt they were doing financially, or qualification level) or across those in and out of work. Nor were there significant

⁹ Current and future global climate impacts resulting from COVID-19, Forster et. al
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-0883-0>

differences between ethnic group categories. This suggests that, even amongst the groups hit hardest by the effects of the pandemic, and therefore most vulnerable to the negative effects of a slow economic recovery (those from BAME backgrounds and those struggling financially)¹⁰, support for policy which protects the environment is high.

We do, however, see differences in the proportion preferring a quicker economic recovery according to political party identification. People who identify as supporters of the Conservatives were substantially more likely to favour a quicker economic recovery, even if that meant reversing the positive effects on the environment than Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters: 39% of Conservative supporters, compared to 22% of Labour supporters and 18% of Liberal Democrat supporters. Those from 'other' parties (which includes supporters of the Green party) were least likely to favour a quicker economic recovery at the expense of environmental protection – only one in ten (10%) did.

Figure 6:3 Percentage who prefer a quicker economic recovery, even if that meant reversing the positive effects on the environment, by latest political party identification (grouped)



The coronavirus outbreak has caused significant harm to the British economy. However, changes in behaviour have also led to some positive effects on the environment, such as less pollution. Thinking now about the future of Britain and its economy after the coronavirus outbreak, which of the following comes closest to your opinion? Base: All GB adults (18+): Conservative (745), Labour (575), Liberal Democrat (156), Other (166), None (722)

¹⁰ <https://wellcome.org/reports/wellcome-monitor-2020-COVID-19-study>

7 Conclusion

We have seen that, prior to the pandemic, the majority of people in Britain thought the risks of climate change reported by the media were at least proportionate, and the majority thought that government were not doing enough to address the issue. As might be expected, given that the government is seen as most responsible for tackling the issue, we also saw that the public are generally supportive of peaceful climate protests, with a majority saying that non-violent obstruction of public life is 'sometimes' acceptable to call for greater action on the issue.

We have seen that critical views of government action weakened over the pandemic period, but without any signs of an increase in positive views on government action on the issue. Accordingly, nearly half of the British population still think the government is not doing enough to address the issue.

Furthermore, a substantial majority of the public want to retain the positive effects that lockdown restrictions have had on the environment, even at the expense of a quick economic recovery. These findings suggest that there is indeed public appetite for a growing focus on climate change action from the government.

At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the weakening of attitudes towards government action on climate change will continue as the country continues to grapple with COVID-19. Now that the public has experienced the most drastic alterations to the economy that most will have seen in their lifetime, will structural changes in the name of emissions reductions seem more feasible? Or will the need to rebuild the economy and protect jobs overtake any longer-term climate considerations?