

Britain Talks Climate

Executive Summary

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Britain Talks Climate is an evidence-based toolkit designed to support any organisation that wants to engage the British public on climate change. It makes clear that there is currently no 'culture war' on climate change in Britain. But building narratives that resonate with a diverse range of values and everyday concerns is critical for the long-term goal of deepening public engagement – and keeping it there.

Britain Talks Climate groups the population into seven different segments based on people's core beliefs. It provides an evidence-based, shared and strategic understanding of the British public and – against a backdrop of growing concern about polarisation – identifies ways to to engage across the whole of society.

Britain Talks Climate - key insights

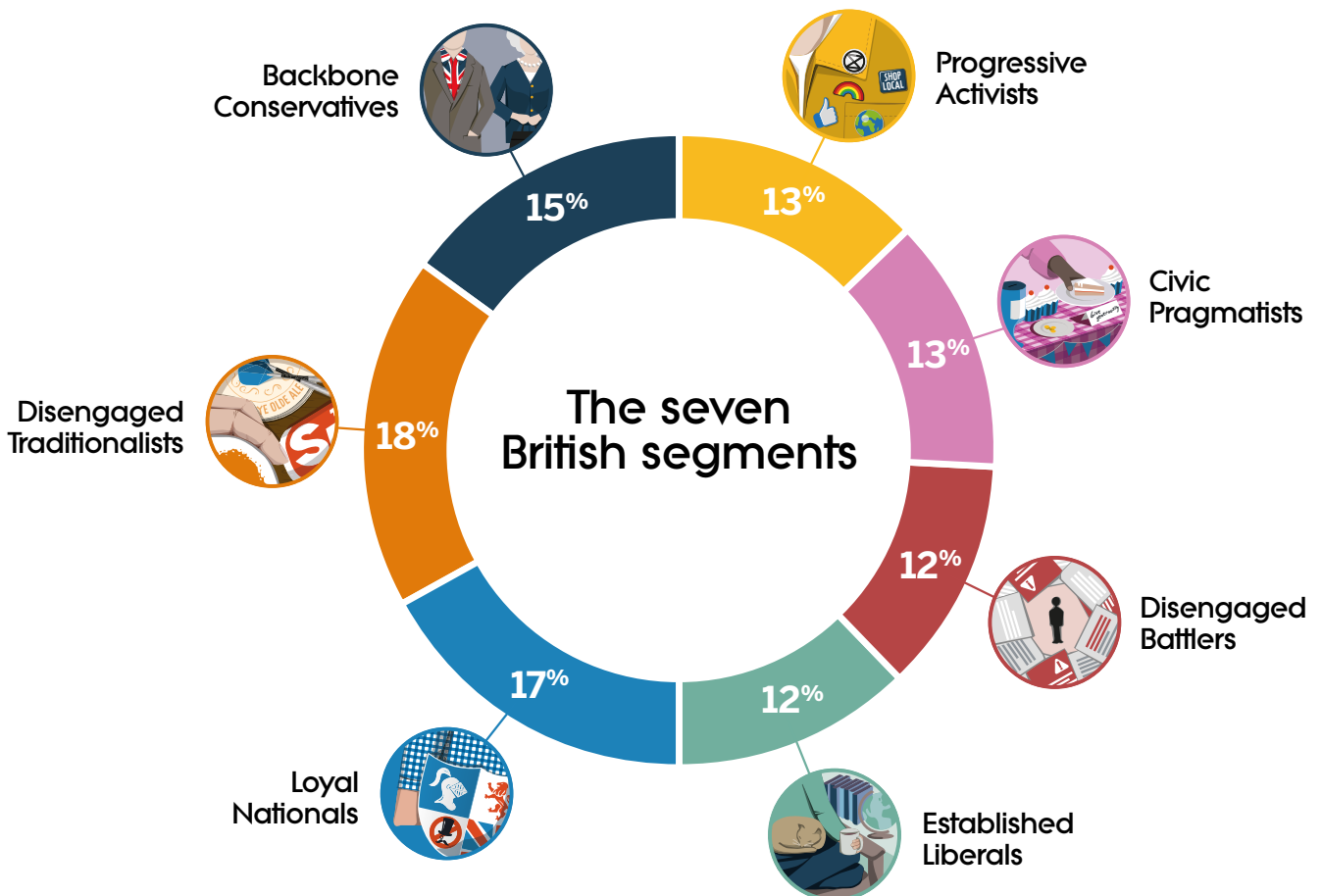
- **Britons know that climate change is real and that humans are causing it.** None of the seven segments are defined by strong, ideological scepticism towards climate change. All segments agree that we are already feeling its effects across Britain, and they share the understanding that the threat requires a global (rather than purely national) response.
- **Climate change is consistently seen as a concern for 'everybody'**, not just rich, white, middle class or left-wing people (pointing to little evidence of a 'culture war' – i.e. an entrenched opposition between groups with different ideals and values). And there is widespread recognition that the UK should be one of the most ambitious countries in the world in tackling climate change, and that doing so could unlock new economic opportunities and jobs.
- **Certain values and ideas have almost universal resonance across Britain:** protecting future generations, creating a healthier society and preserving the countryside in ways that end our throwaway culture.
- **All segments acknowledge some (unintended) positive aspects of the Covid-19 lockdown** – for example, fewer vehicles on the roads leading to cleaner air and louder birdsong – and have become more aware of the need to protect ourselves against future climate impacts, as well as the need to protect our healthcare system against 'double' catastrophes (such as a heatwave during a pandemic). Other messages have become more salient during this time, with every segment agreeing that our recovery from Covid-19 offers opportunities to create new green jobs, bolster British manufacturing and hold businesses to higher sustainability standards.
- **Strikingly, no-one wants to go back to 'normal' after the worst of the pandemic is over.** Social systems usually resist radical change, but people don't want to come out of this crisis the wrong way, and recognise that a window of opportunity for fundamental change has opened up.

Britain Talks Climate also points to noticeable differences between different groups of the British population.

The findings described in this toolkit come from a collaboration between Climate Outreach, the European Climate Foundation (ECF), More in Common and YouGov. Climate Outreach led the Britain Talks Climate project with the support of ECF, integrating their issue expertise with More in Common's model of understanding people's core beliefs. All project partners collaborated in the analysis of the field research undertaken by YouGov. Britain Talks Climate follows on from More in Common's [Britain's Choice](#) report published in October 2020.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods were deployed through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. All project partners collaborated on the survey design and fieldwork. The data generated through the initial quantitative survey was then analysed to identify distinctive segments within the British population, based on More in Common's core belief model.

- Original survey: 10,385 British adults (February-March 2020)
- All subsequent surveys were conducted among recontacted subsets of this initial group:
 - 2,010 British adults (May 2020)
 - 2,060 British adults (September 2020)
- Qualitative research: 12 focus groups and 35 in-depth interviews (April-August 2020)



The seven segments



Progressive Activists

Vocal and passionate, politically active but pessimistic about the direction society has taken, climate change is central to Progressive Activists' identity and politics. They are despairing about governments' moral failings on the issue, which they believe will make all other challenges and inequalities worse.



Backbone Conservatives

Conservative, patriotic and optimistic, Backbone Conservatives take pride in tangible success stories about British environmental achievements and care deeply about food, farming and the rural economy. But they are more sceptical about grand claims of global leadership, or the 'virtue signalling' of (what they sometimes see as) symbolic lifestyle changes.



Civic Pragmatists

Moderate and tolerant, Civic Pragmatists are anxious about the future, with climate change contributing to that fear. They try to follow a low-carbon lifestyle, but feel demotivated by a lack of political ambition on climate change and other social issues. Reflecting their pragmatic nature, they are likely to look past their opinion of the government of the day and support progressive climate policies when they see them.



Established Liberals

Confident and comfortable, Established Liberals have a global outlook driven more by their professional networks than a sense of solidarity with communities around the world. They don't necessarily view climate change as something that will affect them personally, but they do want to hear how low-carbon solutions will drive economic resilience and growth.



Disengaged Battlers

Feeling unheard and unrepresented, Disengaged Battlers are nevertheless broadly convinced of the need to take action on climate change. However, they do not yet believe the transition will benefit them, and are too busy surviving from day to day to give it more of their attention.



Disengaged Traditionalists

Disillusioned and sceptical, Disengaged Traditionalists recognise tangible environmental risks like air pollution, but are far from 'sold' on the need for action on climate. They are more likely to see it as a problem for foreign governments to deal with.



Loyal Nationals

Traditional and proud to be British, Loyal Nationals feel threatened and are galvanised by issues such as crime, immigration and terrorism. They believe the UK is already living with the reality of climate change, but they understand it as an issue linked to localised (rather than global) inequality and environmental degradation. Their relatively high political participation is driven by moral outrage about a system that supports corporate greed over everyday working people.

What does Britain Talks Climate provide?

Britain Talks Climate provides an **evidence-based, shared resource** that can be used to anchor climate campaigning and communications in a deeper understanding of the British public's core values and beliefs. It offers:

Something shared

Individual organisations rarely campaign under a single banner or overarching strategy. They have distinct theories of change and target diverse public constituencies. Many different roles come into play in any transition towards change, and this diversity is a strength. But the better we understand the British public – the tensions among different segments, and the communal beliefs and values that unite us – the better equipped advocates will be to design work in a way that ensures the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Something that deepens understanding

By checking assumptions against an expanded and rigorous evidence base, we aim to help improve the effectiveness of engagement on climate. One-off polls can be useful and influential – but they only ever capture a moment in time. By focusing on core beliefs, which underlie many habitual behaviours, thoughts and feelings, and which are less likely to change over an individual's lifetime, we can get much closer to the real drivers behind public opinion.

Something challenging

New insights invite challenges and sometimes force us to re-evaluate the answers we thought we already had. They raise questions about not only the content of climate messages, but also the credibility of climate messengers for different segments.

Something necessary

As a critical decade gets underway for curbing carbon emissions, the momentum on public engagement that was felt in 2018 and 2019 may stall or even be reversed by the direct and indirect impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It's not hard to imagine how this crisis could send us down an even darker path. The promise of 'building back better' will only be realised if a broad social mandate is established for a green future. To do this, advocates must campaign sensitively and in 'surround sound', with different organisations creating coherent, compatible content for their audiences.

Why 'Britain Talks Climate'?

By creating a shared, strategic understanding of the British public, Britain Talks Climate aims to equip campaigners and communicators with the tools they need to strengthen the whole of society consensus for climate action and avoid a culture war on climate change.

Early engagement with the sector (a webinar with around 100 representatives of different organisations held on 30 June 2020) suggested that advocates are consistently reaching some segments of the British population but not reaching others. As the findings show, there are widely held stereotypes about environmental campaigners that – beyond the 'usual suspects' – can pose a barrier to wider engagement. Like any sector, without a commitment to checking assumptions and instincts against an evolving evidence base, there is a risk of confirmation bias driving decision-making.

Based on a stakeholder consultation and research – a 10,385-person survey plus focus groups and in-depth interviews – Britain Talks Climate is grounded in More in Common's [Core Beliefs model](#) and builds on the extensive research base on climate communication. It goes beyond simple, uni-dimensional accounts of public opinion (e.g. left versus right, leave versus remain, north versus south) to uncover seven more nuanced and complex segments in Britain.

These are based on an understanding of people's deep-seated beliefs about what is right and wrong, important and unimportant, and how these internalised beliefs reflect their vision of what a good society looks like, directing and justifying their attitudes and behaviours towards climate change. Messages about the benefits of a low-carbon transition, for example, are heard very differently by audiences who feel more or less represented by society. The richness of this data, in both quantity and quality, allows the differences as well as the commonalities between segments to emerge.

We took this approach for two reasons. Firstly, knowing that climate drivers, social issues and health impacts intersect and overlap, and that inequalities are often mutually reinforcing, requires us to take a deeper and more holistic view. If anything reveals this interaction and interdependence, it's Covid-19. Secondly, although the left/right divide continues to define electoral choice in Britain, this divide is evolving as old distinctions and certainties start to blur. The left does not have a monopoly on liberal cultural views, conservatism can underpin climate concern, and disaffection links segments together that otherwise have little in common (demographically or in terms of voting behaviour).

Understanding commonality and difference on climate

The better we understand the British public – the tensions among different segments, and the beliefs and values that unite us – the better equipped campaigners and communicators will be to engage people in a way that ensures the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Drawing on a shared, strategic understanding of the British public's views on climate change will enable advocates to campaign sensitively and in 'surround sound', responding to different segments' hopes and needs as we enter a critical decade for climate action.

The segmentation underpinning Britain Talks Climate reveals a public that is fractured but not deeply polarised, with climate change emerging as an issue that has the potential to unite us.

There are of course certain issues where the segments are not at all compatible: Loyal Nationals and Progressive Activists are in stark opposition on immigration. But these same two segments share a high concern about climate change and the need to hold businesses to account for their carbon footprints.

All are concerned about climate change (a situation that is unchanged by the Covid-19 pandemic), but the two 'Disengaged' segments and Backbone Conservatives are consistently the least worried about climate change and other environmental issues. The two 'Disengaged' segments are the least likely to engage in low-carbon behaviours, although they are also likely to have among the lowest carbon footprints.

Every segment blames the big polluters for causing climate change, and chiefly holds them and the UK government responsible for leading our way out of it, but there is significant variation across the segments in terms of an international framing of responsibility. Backbone Conservatives are sceptical of international institutions and multilateralism, while Disengaged Traditionalists lay the responsibility for leadership on climate action at the feet of foreign governments.

When it comes to active engagement, Progressive Activists are alone in voting for a political party because of its climate change policy and in regularly talking about the issue with friends and family (a critical component of public engagement).

Certain policies are divisive – like preventing airport expansion, taxing meat and dairy products, replacing gas boilers, banning the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and changing farming practices and rural landscapes to cut emissions.

Despite an almost even split between those who feel fearful and those who feel hopeful about the future, this masks some big differences between the segments, and perceptions of Covid-19 and lockdown policies vary substantially. The more financially secure, left-leaning segments tend to agree that climate change should be 'prioritised' in the recovery from the pandemic, even if it costs more in the short term, whereas the disengaged and right-leaning segments show less support for this approach.

Building cross-societal engagement

In the wake of the changes forced into existence by Covid-19, and with the critical UN climate summit (COP26) still ahead of us, now is the time to take stock, to question our assumptions and to design communications to start from 'where people are' rather than 'where we want them to be'.

Britain Talks Climate is designed to help light the way towards a low-carbon vision of society that is genuinely inclusive. All segments are 'persuadable' on climate if campaigns are designed carefully, and it is possible to work with, not against, their differences by building on messages that have a common currency. Few campaigns are likely to engage every single segment at once, but being aware of how different segments think and feel – even if they are not the target audience – is valuable strategic knowledge.

Mapping these segments onto politically important groups and constituencies will be an obvious next step for many campaigners. However, part of the motivation for this project was that voters do not sit neatly along party political or other demographic lines. Although some segments exhibit clear-cut positions, most represent more complex groupings of values.

In terms of demographics, Progressive Activists and Disengaged Battlers trend the youngest, but – with an average age of 41 and 42, respectively, and with large variation in every segment – these are not the only segments where young voters are found. Similarly, a higher percentage of Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Traditionalists live in the midlands and the north of England, the so-called 'Red Wall', but these biases are very small. In this way, the segmentation resists stereotypes of the young as automatically 'progressive' and of northern voters as mostly older or Leave-voting, for example.

Looking for majority Conservative-voting or Labour-voting groups is easier but, again, far from straightforward. It is clear from the segments that the Conservatives have a broad-based values coalition across Established Liberals, Disengaged Traditionalists, Loyal Nationals and Backbone Conservatives. Meanwhile, Labour still wins the liberal-left (Progressive Activists and many Civic Pragmatists), but this is quite a small part of the electorate.

Although strongly rooted in class, race and gender divides, we believe this values-based approach is more powerful than looking at any single socio-demographic divide alone. It offers a stable campaign tool that is robust to fast-moving changes in public opinion and behaviour and that has lasting strategic value. It challenges us to build coalitions of support among diverse groups, while also helping us to understand where engaging the values of one segment may lead to losses elsewhere.

What seems clear is that the frontier of public engagement on climate change is moving in a positive direction, despite a backdrop of societal polarisation and the chaos unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The challenge is now to maintain the non-partisan nature of climate change, avoid the culture war dynamics that bedevil so many other social issues, and transform public concern into action and commitment.

Project team & acknowledgements

Project Team

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Contact us

We hope you find this toolkit useful for the work that you and your colleagues do on climate change. Please let us know how you're using it, and what we can do to improve the resource, by contacting britaintalksclimate@climateoutreach.org.

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