How to talk climate change with the centre-right

An election guide
About COIN

The Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN) is a charity focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 10 years of experience helping our partners to talk and think about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, trades unions, business and faith organisations.

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About COIN’s Centre-right programme

This is the most recent publication in COIN’s centre-right programme. For further reading:

A New Conversation on Climate Change with the European Centre-Right
January 2015

A New Conversation with the Centre-Right about Climate Change
June 2013

Project team

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Why is this guide needed?

1. The election is a rare opportunity for public debate and will set policy agendas.
2. Climate change is hardly being mentioned in political campaigning or speeches.
3. This is an issue that should involve everyone but there are political divides: centre-right voters are currently less likely to be committed to climate action than centre-left voters.
4. There is still no clear, distinct and positive story about climate change for the centre-right.
5. Climate change could be a key election issue for engaging undecided voters and young people.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for communicators and campaigners from across the political spectrum. Although some centre-right voters identify with the Conservative Party, many others with “small c” conservative values do not, and all the main political parties have centre-right policies to appeal to them. A note on terminology: we use the term “conservatives” for all people with right-wing political values. We use the term “centre-right” for political ideologies and voter groups that are distinct from centre-left and far-right ideologies and groups.

What does this guide say?

Communication is key to catalysing action on climate change. Climate change transcends politics; it is something that people of all political stripes have a stake in. Unfortunately, climate change as an issue has become increasingly politicised. It is considered the preserve of the left and associated with particular environmental ideas and values. Not surprisingly, those on the centre-right have become far less likely to be passionate about climate change than those on the left.

Whilst there are differences in opinion around the policy implications of climate change, there can be little argument that a wider audience needs to be engaged.

Drawing on strong research evidence, this guide argues that those on the centre-right (just like anyone else) pay most attention to communicators they trust and who use language and stories (narratives) that speak to their values. Communicators must establish this sense of trust and demonstrate that taking action on climate change is consistent with centre-right values.

Centre-right narratives about climate change must respect the underlying science. But until centre-right communicators start talking about climate change in a way that resonates with the values of their audience, robust cross-party support for tackling climate change will remain out of reach.
WHAT THE CENTRE-RIGHT THINKS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

There is a marked difference between left-wing and right-wing voters. Labour and Lib Dem voters are consistently more concerned about climate change and 70% accept that it is human-caused.

Among conservatives who express an opinion, fewer than 10% do not accept that the climate is changing at all. Sceptics are often very outspoken, and people of all political persuasions overestimate their number.¹

The real split on the centre-right is between those who believe that climate change is natural (40%) and those who think it is human-caused (just over 50%).² A small majority therefore accept that our actions are changing the climate.

Although many UKIP supporters lean towards a position that is further to the right on other issues, their levels of concern about climate change are very similar to mainstream conservatives.³, ⁴

ELECTION SITUATION

Climate change is a low profile issue in the 2015 election. Polls show that the key issues for voters are the economy, immigration, healthcare, education, benefits and foreign affairs.⁵

However, politicians and parties would be wrong to assume that climate change is not a concern for voters. It is important to break through the social ‘silence’⁶ around climate change and challenge the idea that it is not relevant to the election. Overcome the natural ‘distance’⁷ of climate change by talking about the ‘here and now’ and how climate change is starting to affect concrete, tangible things like the way we travel, the way we heat our homes, and the crops grown by farmers.

Climate change is especially important for younger voters. People under 40 are far more likely to accept that we are changing the climate than people over 60. In one poll of conservative voters under 25 years old, 40% said they “could not vote for this party without a strong climate policy”. The same poll found that 68% of voters overall wanted to see the party they vote for have a ‘strong policy’ on climate change.⁴ Surveys consistently show that people want and expect the government to take the lead on climate change.

CENTRE-RIGHT VALUES & FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

The strongest influence on people’s attitudes to climate change is not how much they know about the scientific evidence. People form their views on the basis of the social norms around them, and whether the climate change ‘story’ fits with (or challenges) their existing values.⁸

Certain values are found consistently among people with centre-right politics.⁹ These values can be brought to life using words and phrases – known as ‘frames’ – that provide a clear social signal that “this is something that people like me care about and should pay attention to”. The table below describes 8 key centre-right values, plus ‘frame words’ derived from an analysis of centre-right speeches, interviews and news media articles.¹⁰

Taken together, these values underpin the centre-right belief system. However, people from across the political spectrum may identify with individual values - talking about climate change with the centre-right does not mean excluding others from the conversation.
Why the current climate change story doesn’t work for the centre-right

Most of the existing stories (referred to as narratives) around climate change are a poor match with the values listed above. Existing stories usually present a threat of instability and destruction (clashing with conservative values of maintaining the status quo, closure, purity and avoidance of negativity). Traditional climate solutions that extend state control do not fit well with centre-right values of freedom and ‘enjoying life’. People tend not to accept narratives that challenge their values. The typical story about climate change may encourage centre-right voters to focus on the uncertainty inherent in all scientific research including climate change, and close ranks against ‘outsiders’ whom they view as scaremongering for political ends.

However there is no inherent reason why conservatives will not become mobilised around climate change, providing that they hear narratives and stories from trusted communicators who speak coherently to their values. In Germany there is no political division in attitudes because there are trusted centre-right communicators, such as Chancellor Angela Merkel. She uses narratives around group loyalty and freedom, focusing on reconstruction in the energy sector, creativity, technical leadership and independence.

4 NARRATIVES THAT CAN WORK

The following narratives are composed from previous research by COIN (including our two previous reports on the subject), communications research in the US as well as centre-right political speeches and media articles. Each narrative embodies a conservative value and is composed using relevant frame words (highlighted in bold). Direct quotes from centre-right communicators are clearly indicated.
NARRATIVE 1: The positive opportunity of energy transition

**Defence of status quo**
“Our dependence on fossil fuels is a heavy burden. These resources are becoming increasingly difficult, expensive, and dangerous to extract. Relying on fossil fuels makes us vulnerable and insecure.”

**Purity**
“Air pollution contributes to nearly 30,000 premature deaths a year.” One million children have asthma, related directly to ozone and particulates from vehicle pollution. “1,600 deaths in the UK can be attributed to the pollution from filthy coal fired power plants.” Wasting energy is simply wrong - we are just throwing it away.

**Prosperity**
Clean, renewable sources of energy offer a reliable and secure energy supply, fuel national prosperity, and secure long-term jobs.

**Freedom**
British energy is changing, but it is up to all of us to decide what our energy future should be. We have choices, and we should make them wisely.

**Happiness**
Through energy efficiency we can all have more comfortable homes and afford to keep them warm and cosy.

**Patriotism, loyalty to group**
Britain has creativity, world-leading technology, the world's highest tides and Europe's strongest winds. Half a million home owners already have solar panels on their roofs, generating their own power and providing a steady dependable income for their owners.

But now other countries are moving far ahead of us. Our competitors, Germany and Denmark, have built billion dollar industries out of wind and solar power. The US and China are moving fast.

NARRATIVE 2: Climate change is a threat to conservative values

**Threats to purity, youth, life**
Doctors and the British Medical Association tell us that climate change will increase asthma, heatstroke and allergies, with serious impacts on the health of the youngest and oldest people.

**The “unfairness” of weather damage**
Last year's floods destroyed billions of pounds of property. Homes that people had worked hard and saved for all their lives were ruined. Some people's livelihoods have been ruined.
Acting on climate change
the same as caring for
the local environment

The condition of the pavements, vandalism and crime, litter, and the quality of the air we breathe are all environmental issues. Air pollution from vehicles alone kills more than 13,000 people a year, so reducing our carbon emissions is good for our health and our communities.

Local landscape as the key “environmental”
value, not polar bears or rainforests

The British countryside could change for ever - with new diseases killing off traditional trees, rising sea levels eroding our coastline and extreme weather drying or flooding our cherished landscapes.20

Climate change as
a “threat multiplier”

The strategists in the Armed Forces have no doubts about the threat of climate change and take it very seriously. They describe it as a “threat multiplier”21 because it can make existing problems like famine and poverty worse, and make regions more unstable.

An example of putting it all together

“The landscape and countryside of Britain is something we should all be proud of, and work together to protect. Over the years, we have cleaned up our rivers, banished smog from our cities, and protected our forests. Climate change poses new dangers to the countryside we value so much: more frequent and extreme flooding, coastline erosion, and disruptions to the seasons. The only responsible course of action is to reduce the risks we face from climate change. We owe this to our children and grandchildren - but also to the millions of people who live and work in the countryside right now.”

NARRATIVE 3: Your centre-right values require you to respond to this issue

Emphasise protecting and defending tradition and the status quo

“We are called Conservatives with good reason. We believe in conserving what is best – the values of our way of life, the beauties of our countryside [that] has shaped our character as a nation.” (Margaret Thatcher) 22

There are sacred values to defend

“Our planet has the unique privilege of life. It is our duty to safeguard our world. The more we master our environment, the more we must learn to serve it.” (Margaret Thatcher) 23

The ‘Burkean contract’ between the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born is a key centre-right concept

We are living beyond our means. Climate change is like a debt that we pass on to our children. And you can never pay it off - the burden lasts for ever.
We are a proud, stubborn, stoical, people. We become indignant at injustice. Too many people, including many pensioners, are being forced to choose between food and fuel. Making it easy to save energy could be the quickest way to lift people out of fuel poverty, so there’s no time to waste.

Climate change cannot be solved by any single approach, it requires us to all pull together and contribute what we are good at. But, let’s face it, if anyone is going to sort out this problem, it will be us. We are the backbone of this country. Climate change can only be dealt with through intelligence, discipline and hard work - and that is why we need to lead.

We are not people to rush into each new fad. We like to weigh things up carefully, and balance the evidence. But when we chose to act we are strong and decisive. After twenty years the scientists are now more certain than ever. Now is the time to act.

The challenge of climate change is too important be left to ‘hair shirt and sandals’ hippies. Creating a modern, efficient and productive low-carbon future is the responsibility of business leaders and entrepreneurs - the people who get things done in society.

Dealing with climate change can bring us together

Facing up to this challenge can strengthen our country and give us a new national objective. We have lost our sense of focus and self-discipline. Rebuilding our outdated energy system and making it fit for the 21st century is something we can all rally around.

For many people, the Second World War is the defining metaphor for British resilience

During the Second World War everyone, whatever their politics, pulled together to defend our way of life and our freedoms. We won the war because we are a strong, proud nation and when the chips are down, we always come through. And we will again.

Adapting to a changing climate is a good entry point for engaging people who are sceptical about mitigation

Our weather is starting to change, and not for the better. We’ll face more extreme weather, more often. But if we start dealing with climate risks now, rather than waiting until it’s too late, we can defend our livelihoods and protect our property - coming through all the stronger.

We cannot be left behind by other countries who are taking the lead

We can learn from countries like Germany that are way ahead when it comes to making sensible long-term decisions about energy. There are hundreds of small and medium-sized energy enterprises where people share in the profits and have a real sense of pride, ownership and responsibility for the energy they produce and consume. There’s no reason we couldn’t do the same – or better.
WHAT NOT TO SAY

People do not just define themselves by who they are - they also define themselves by who they are not. People with centre-right values are especially loyal to their group and alert to the differences between themselves and other groups.

The people who initially took strongest ownership of climate change had centre-left or environmentalist politics. They built the narratives and images of climate change around their own values, which included a critique of capitalism and conservatism. A major reason for the indifference of the centre-right to climate change has been their rejection of this left-leaning ‘story’.

Speaking effectively to the centre-right means dropping the territorial language of the left and concentrating on the language of common ground and shared values.

Lose the eco-jargon

Avoid the eco-jargon below, which marks climate change as a left-wing and environmentalist issue:
- words such as green, eco, planet
- images such as polar bears and melting ice caps
- attacks on oil company greed
- moral appeals to ‘save the planet’

Avoid left-wing frames

Like the right, the left use words to frame their identity. Those to avoid include:
- social levelling (equal, entitled, alliance, unified, ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’)
- political terms that suggest rapid and radical change (capitalism, revolution)
- moralistic judgment (caring/uncaring, compassion, greed)

Avoid distancing

Those with centre-right values (like most people) are strongly invested in their current needs, community and locality. Therefore avoid language that presents climate change as a future problem that will affect foreign countries or other species. Focus on people’s immediate area to explain both the impacts and the potential opportunities, and expand outwards from there.
GLASS HALF FULL, NOT HALF EMPTY

Research shows that people who say that climate change is natural do not hold this view with a great deal of certainty, and often have ‘mixed feelings’. Many are holding this position as a safe ‘halfway house’ on a divisive issue.

People take their cues about what to believe about climate change from their sense of the “social norms” among people around them. One of the challenges for communicators is therefore to emphasise that accepting the science is now the normal position for large numbers of centre-right voters.

THE HALF-EMPTY GLASS

Avoid talking about:
- splits and divisions among conservatives
- the dominance of the left wing on the issue
- derogatory stereotypes of conservative ‘climate deniers’

THE HALF-FULL GLASS

Emphasise:
- the large majority of centre-right voters who agree that the weather is changing
- the many millions of centre-right voters who fully accept the science and are deeply concerned about the issue
- the role of Margaret Thatcher in championing the issue

ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATOR TRUST

Trust in the communicator of a message is crucial. Trust is based on a sense that the communicator is knowledgeable, honest, and, above all, shares at least some of the values and concerns of the target audience.

Consider your appearance and presentation
Because ‘conscientiousness’ is an important value, many centre-right voters will expect a clean and tidy appearance and good grooming. Manners and respect are similarly important.

Emphasise common ground
Emphasise the experiences and values you have in common. Even if you do not have centre-right politics, you may have similarities of background, location, age, work or parenthood, and many centre-right values are echoed across the political spectrum.

But do not fake it
People are rightly suspicious of a salesman pretending to be their friend. Attempts to mimic values and attitudes will be easily spotted.

Hold your own conviction
Honesty is displayed through personal integrity and sincerity. Even if you do not have common experience or political values, you can build trust by openly and honestly holding your personal conviction.

Speak from the ‘I’
Rather than depending on dry scientific arguments, take personal ownership of your views and show the process by which you formed them: “I have seen huge changes in the weather. I trust the scientists. I was unsure but now I am personally convinced.”

Respect sceptics
Although a minority, sceptics can be very assertive with their views. They are often well educated. Respect their intelligence and their right to form their views, but concentrate on the conviction with which you hold your own views. Observe that large numbers of their fellow centre-right peers agree with you, as well as many institutions they respect (church, royalty, armed forces, business leaders and scientists).
ELECTION TIPS

Speaking with centre-right voters

A climate-aware candidate is a good person, with strong moral credentials
You can trust (our candidate) because s/he really cares about the big issues that are important for us all…such as climate change.

Name the silence
Is climate change something that you talk or think much about?

Break climate out of the green box
Climate change is much more than an “environmental” issue. It is vitally important for people’s health, the economy, energy bills, transport… all key issues that people are debating in the election.

Make it ‘here and now’
The weather is starting to change; climate change is already happening. We need political action and leadership now, and the worst thing to do would be to wait until we can’t control what happens.

Speaking with centre-right politicians and candidates

As with any group, politicians need narratives that speak to their values and worldview. Despite their ideological differences, professional politicians of all parties share values of commitment to public service for their constituency and country, positive change and personal achievement. At election time they are motivated to support issues that will win votes (and not lose them). The challenge is to show that a strong position on climate change can speak to all these long-term and short-term motivations.

Stress common ground and shared values
Climate change can be an opportunity to all come together with a combined purpose and rebuild the country.

Speak to political ambition
This is the biggest issue of our times - a historically critical moment. We need strong leaders who, like Winston Churchill, are prepared to speak the truth and lead from the front.

Say that centre-right voters expect strong climate policy
In polls, over two thirds of conservative voters expect their party to have a strong policy and their leader to take a lead internationally.

Emphasise that there are available votes
I am undecided about who to vote for. This is a tight election and for me, this issue will play a huge role in determining who I will vote for and support.

Make it a trust issue
I will only trust a candidate who has a strong position on this issue. A party without a strong position is not suited to govern or represent the UK internationally.

Speak for your wider voter group
We young people/grandparents/women/Asians/teachers (etc.) are deeply concerned about climate change (give personal anecdotes, offer individual stories, and explain why).

If you are young, emphasise the importance to your generation
For people my age, this is a huge issue, and it will decide who we vote for now and in the future - or whether we vote at all.
REFERENCES


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