From green crap to net zero: Conservative climate policy 2015–2022

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Abstract
This article outlines the Conservative Party’s approach to climate change from 2015 to 2022; focusing on its governing policy record and the wider political considerations that shaped it. During this time, the Conservatives’ mixed performance reflected competing political incentives for its leaders and internal party division on the issue. A detailed exploration of Conservative climate policies allows for two broader contributions. European centre-right parties often face common strategic challenges, such as competition from the radical right, but the UK Conservative Party case study shows that responding to these challenges does not necessarily demand the abandonment of climate commitments. We also find evidence that in this period climate change embodied characteristics of both a positional and a valence issues.

Keywords Climate change · UK climate policy · Conservative party · Party politics · Centre-right parties

Just as David Cameron flipped between championing the environment and wanting to ‘get rid of all the green crap’ (Carter and Clements 2015), Boris Johnson’s farewell speech as prime minister revealed the continuing contradictions and inconsistencies in the Conservative Party’s approach to climate change. While boasting of his government’s ‘colossal road programmes from the Pennines to Cornwall’, he then acclaimed the role of offshore wind in providing UK electricity (Gov.uk 2022a). Likewise, Liz Truss came into office intent on stopping people ‘filling fields with paraphernalia like solar farms’ but also quickly sought to relax the planning restrictions on onshore wind farms (O’Neill 2022).
This article explores these tensions by examining Conservative climate policy from Cameron’s re-election in 2015 to the end of Truss’s brief premiership in October 2022. It was a dynamic period in UK climate politics, during which governments both dismantled climate policies and ramped up the UK’s targets, but there was also substantial continuity: the Conservatives remained committed to tackling climate change, while persistently failing to address several gaps in the delivery of a net zero emissions strategy.

In addition to providing an overdue update to Carter and Clements (2015) account of Conservative environmental policy, the article contributes to two wider debates about the politics of climate change. First, European centre-right parties face electoral challenges to attract voters with liberal, post-material values as well as those with opposing values, who are often sympathetic to radical right parties (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021, p. 22; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2021, p. 73). So far, analyses of such strategic considerations do not appear to have explored how the issue of climate change interacts with them. This omission is particularly pertinent because several studies have highlighted the hostility of radical right parties to climate policies (e.g., Lockwood and Lockwood 2022). However, we find that Conservative leaders have had various electoral incentives to pursue climate policies, and their accommodation with a radical right party (UKIP/the Brexit Party) has not in itself created significant pressure to abandon their commitment to net zero.

Secondly, the European party politics literature typically identifies the environment as a classic valence issue where there is agreement on the need to protect the environment, with competition primarily over the competence of parties to do so; whereas in Australia and the USA, the environment, especially climate change, is regarded as a positional issue characterised by sharp partisan differences (Tranter 2013; Dunlap et al. 2016; Carter and Little 2021). In the UK during the 2015–2022 period, climate change retained characteristics of a valence issue principally because the Conservatives maintained the cross-party consensus on the need to address it. However, partisan divergence over specific aspects of the delivery of net zero and internal Conservative dissent over its importance contradicts the categorisation of climate change as a classic valence issue.

In section “Conservative climate policy 2015–2022”, we summarise the mixed climate policy record of Conservative governments between 2015 and 2022. In section “Explaining conservative climate policy”, we identify a set of key factors that have shaped their approach. Finally, in section “Party politics and climate change”, we discuss how our analysis of these Conservative governments contributes to contemporary debates about the centre-right in European politics and climate change’s status as a valence or positional issue.

**Conservative climate policy 2015–2022**

**2015–2017**

Climate change barely figured during the 2015 general election campaign because, in an unusual move brokered by the Green Alliance environmental group, the three
main party leaders—Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg—pledged to maintain action on climate policy whatever the result (Green Alliance 2015, p. 4). According to then Green Alliance Executive Director (Matthew Spencer, personal interview), this initiative also had a defensive motivation because environmental leaders were worried that if climate change became a contested election issue, the Conservative Party might backtrack on its commitment to climate targets in the face of hostility from UKIP, climate-sceptic backbenchers and the right-wing press.

However, following a narrow election victory, and despite the prime minister welcoming the Paris Agreement, the Cameron government did appear to rein in its climate ambitions. A tranche of decarbonisation policies were weakened or dismantled, including stopping subsidies for onshore wind, slashing them for solar power, and abandoning the failed Green Deal home insulation scheme (Burns and Tobin 2017). Cameron did, however, promise to phase-out coal power stations by 2025.

Climate change played a minimal role in the Brexit referendum campaign, although the outcome raised questions about future UK environmental protection (Farstad et al. 2018). Such concerns prompted the formation of Greener UK, a coalition of leading environmental NGOs (ENGOs), dedicated to preventing the UK weakening environmental protections previously provided through the EU (Greener UK 2022). Yet, when Cameron was replaced as prime minister by Theresa May in July 2016, it initially prompted little change in approach as Brexit continued to dominate the political agenda. Two notable early developments were the disbandment of the Department of Energy & Climate Change (DECC)—integrated into a new Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)—and Parliament’s approval of the fifth carbon budget, covering 2028–2032.

2017–2019

Climate change again hardly featured in the 2017 general election campaign, but May’s failure to secure an overall majority sparked post-mortem concerns about declining Conservative support among younger and women voters. Party strategists saw electoral benefits in strengthening the Government’s environmental credentials (Barwell 2021, p. 90), a shift undoubtedly helped by the departure of Nick Timothy as Joint Downing Street Chief of Staff, who had previously described the Climate Change Act (CCA) as a ‘unilateral and monstrous act of self-harm’ (Mance 2016).

May astutely appointed Michael Gove as Secretary of State at the Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, where he rapidly brought his customary energy to the job. Gove’s promise of a ‘Green Brexit’ involved a broad commitment not to weaken environmental or animal welfare standards (Gov.uk 2017); his achievements included the publication of the overdue 25-year Environment Plan and the launch of a legislative programme including bills on fisheries, agriculture and the environment. These draft bills contained measures with direct implications for climate change, such as the proposal for ‘public money for public goods’, whereby farmers would be paid for environmental initiatives such as restoring habitats, planting trees and improving soil quality.
Alongside this flurry of activity progress on climate change was pedestrian. After conducting a review of the proposed Hinkley Point nuclear power station, May soon approved it. The publication in October 2017 of the overdue Clean Growth Strategy laying out the Government’s plan to meet the fourth and fifth carbon budgets failed to put the UK on track to meet its long-term targets. The Climate Change Committee (CCC) suggested that, while there were some ‘higher-level proposals’ in the strategy, such as target dates to stop selling petrol and diesel cars and installing high-carbon heating systems, with potential to contribute significantly to meeting the UK’s climate targets, ‘[d]etailed new policies were few’ (CCC 2018, p. 17).

The power sector contributed substantial emissions reductions during this period, due to earlier investments in renewable energy made during the Labour and coalition governments, and milestones were reached in electricity generation mix and the price of renewables (CCC 2019a, p. 27; Brown 2017; Carbon Brief 2017). However, the lack of emissions reductions or concrete initiatives in other sectors, such as buildings, prompted persistent warnings from the CCC about the gap between the policies in place and those required to meet the UK’s targets. For example, in 2019, the CCC highlighted that only one of their 25 headline policy recommendations from 2018 had been fully implemented and only seven of their 24 underlying indicators of progress were on track (CCC 2019a, p. 11).

May’s most significant climate policy initiative was to strengthen the UK’s 2050 emissions target to net zero. The background to this decision was a request to the CCC by Claire Perry, Minister of State for Energy and Clean Growth, for advice about the compatibility of the UK’s pre-existing domestic targets with the 2015 Paris Agreement (CCC 2018, p. 19). Meanwhile, there was a focused campaign for a net zero target, led by a Conservative MP and ENGOs, which combined with wider protest activity and rising public concern about the environment (The Climate Coalition 2022). This rising political salience prompted a Labour motion declaring a climate and environment emergency that was endorsed by Parliament in May 2019 without a vote, after May instructed Conservative MPs not to oppose it. Once May announced her resignation as party leader, the net zero target was also part of a conscious attempt to deliver ‘legacy’ reforms (Barwell 2021, p. 386).

2019–September 2022

Climate change was largely ignored during the 2019 Conservative leadership election campaign, although both Johnson and Jeremy Hunt, the two leading candidates, committed to action on it (Walker 2019). The early Johnson premiership was dominated by the Brexit process, however, in October 2019, he announced that he would chair a new Cabinet Climate Change Committee, later split into the Climate Action Strategy and Climate Action Implementation Committees, the latter chaired by Alok Sharma (Gov.uk 2022b). Johnson then declared a moratorium on fracking (Gov.uk 2019), a move that accurately anticipated the high profile of the environment in the upcoming general election. Thus, the major parties sought to demonstrate their green credentials and their manifestos displayed a renewed competitive consensus around the need for radical action on climate change. While opposition
parties offered bold promises including earlier net zero targets, a Green New Deal and major infrastructure investments, the Conservative manifesto had green rhetoric and a commitment to delivering net zero, but many of its proposals were vague or relatively unambitious. Ultimately, during the campaign, environmental issues were overshadowed by Brexit and had limited impact on the election outcome (Carter and Pearson 2020).

Prior to the election, Johnson’s attitude towards climate policy was unclear. His record of climate-sceptic commentary and his decision not to attend the first televised party leaders campaign debate on climate change were countered by positive initiatives such as the low emission zone he had introduced as Mayor of London (DeSmog 2022). But with Brexit secured, public concern about the environment at historically high levels and the UK due to host the Conference of the Parties climate summit (COP26) in November 2020, Johnson soon demonstrated a new-found interest in the issue. In January 2020, Claire Perry was sacked as COP President and replaced by Alok Sharma, who was also appointed Secretary of State for BEIS (he later resigned this role to concentrate on the Presidency, but retained his Cabinet seat until Rishi Sunak formed his first Cabinet in October 2022).

Inevitably, the Covid-19 pandemic crowded out climate change, with COP26 postponed to November 2021, although government rhetoric emphasised the ambition to ‘build back greener’, implying the inclusion of climate-friendly measures in an economic recovery programme (Edie 2020). These ideas fed into the ‘Ten Point Plan for a green industrial revolution’ published in November 2020, setting out the government’s strategy to stimulate the economy by mobilising £12 billion of government investment (and much more private investment), especially on infrastructure, to create ‘up to 250,000 green jobs’ (Gov.uk 2020). A month later, Johnson announced an ambitious new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), linked to the Paris climate agreement, of a 68% reduction in annual UK carbon emissions by 2030. Then in April 2021, the government approved the sixth carbon budget (for 2033–2037), which required an emissions reduction of 78% by 2035 (Gov.uk 2021a).

These ambitious overarching net zero initiatives were accompanied by a flurry of announcements and policy documents in the lead up to COP26. The Net Zero Strategy included commitments to support the ending of sales of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030, power the UK through clean electricity by 2035, create a new Boiler Upgrade Scheme and triple the rate of woodland creation in England (Gov.uk 2021b). The UK also increased the level of climate finance paid to support developing countries to £11.6 billion over the 5 years to 2026 as its contribution to the annual target of $100 billion to be paid by developed countries (Gov.uk 2021c). Johnson delivered several passionate speeches before and during COP26, while Sharma was widely lauded for his efforts to achieve an ambitious agreement. Assessments of the conference outcomes were varied, though many commentators felt moderate but important progress was achieved albeit set against low prior expectations (for example: Jacobs 2021).

The final months of Johnson’s premiership were characterised by a series of crises, which left limited room for further climate policy activity. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the associated energy crisis, provided the impetus
for a renewed focus on energy policy. Thus a new Energy Security Strategy (Gov. uk. 2022c) included plans to scale up the deployment of offshore wind and nuclear power, while—in a shift in approach—also taking a ‘pragmatic view’ of domestic hydrocarbons through increasing oil and gas production and reconsidering policy on fracking (Morgan 2022). In his last major policy, initiative days before stepping down Johnson promised £700 m investment in a new Sizewell C nuclear plant.

Eventually, Johnson’s overt enthusiasm for action on climate change more than matched that of his Conservative predecessors and, having inherited a commitment to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, he signed up to further challenging medium term climate targets. However, there remained a major gap between the government’s climate policy commitments and the measures in place to achieve them (CCC 2022, p. 14). For example, the much-trumpeted Ten Point Plan promised £12 billion of public investment, yet it was criticised for only including around £4 billion of new funding (Carbon Brief 2020). It also listed many previously announced policy measures, while it was projected that those new initiatives it did contain would reduce by no more than 55% the gap in meeting the UK’s fourth and fifth carbon budgets (Carbon Brief 2020). Although the rate at which the UK has cut greenhouse gas emissions compares favourably with other major economies (CCC 2021, p. 8), its mixed record of policy delivery remained broadly similar throughout both May and Johnson administrations. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a short-term, temporary drop in overall emissions in 2020 (CCC 2022, p. 91).

The CCC has suggested that the UK has developed ‘a solid Net Zero strategy’ (CCC 2022, p.14). However, in July 2022, some ENGOs successfully legally challenged the government on the grounds that the strategy did not satisfy the government’s obligations under the CCA to produce detailed climate policies to meet the UK’s legally binding carbon budgets (ClientEarth 2022). An analysis published by BEIS in October 2022 suggested that, based on existing policies, the UK should stay on course to meet the fourth carbon budget covering the period 2023–2027 (Gov.uk 2022d, p. 15), although the CCC stated that there were still uncertainties over whether this would be achieved (CCC 2022, p. 23). But the BEIS report projected that the existing policy framework would mean emissions reductions would underperform what is required for the fifth carbon budget (2028–2032), with a very substantial gap projected for the sixth carbon budget covering 2033–2037 (Gov.uk 2022d, p. 15). The CCC (2022, p. 22) has also highlighted the significant risk that the UK will fall short of its ambitious NDC 2030 target.

The CCC concluded in 2022 that, although there was still scope for improvement, sound policies were in place to decarbonise electricity supply and surface transport (CCC 2022, p. 26). By contrast, policy frameworks were clearly insufficient in all other areas. Two examples demonstrate the challenging issues involved. To cut emissions from buildings the government stated that it expected 600,000 heat pumps to be installed annually by 2028 (55,000 were installed in 2021), but the existing grant scheme would only support the installation of up to 90,000 through to 2025 (CCC 2022, ch. 4). There was also no ‘dedicated Net Zero delivery plan or strategy’ (CCC 2022, p. 304) for agriculture and land use. The delayed common agricultural policy subsidy replacement scheme, Environmental Land Management—or ‘public money for public goods’—would not be fully rolled out until 2025. Where
sectoral targets do exist—for example, tree planting and peat restoration—they were not being met. Meanwhile the government resisted adopting radical food policies designed to reduce food waste or transform diets (CCC 2022, ch. 8).

**September 2022–October 2022**

The race to replace Johnson as Conservative leader saw much more discussion of climate change than during the 2019 contest, with the contested nature of this issue within the Conservative Party on show. During the early stages of the process, decided by MPs, some candidates openly flirted with the idea of abandoning the 2050 net zero target, although the Conservative Environment Network (CEN) organised a dedicated environmental hustings in Parliament and convinced Truss, Sunak, Penny Mordaunt and Tom Tugendhat to sign up to a set of environmental pledges. During the final stage, decided by members, Truss and Sunak committed to achieving net zero by 2050 while sounding a cautious tone about the dangers of moving too fast in this area.

Truss’s turbulent and short period in office included a series of mixed signals on net zero. She appointed Jacob Rees-Mogg as Secretary of State for BEIS, who had a history of questioning climate science, but made Graham Stuart Minister for Climate (attending cabinet), seen as a pro-environment figure, and announced a review of net zero led by Chris Skidmore, one of the leading voices in the party for further climate policies. Once in post, Rees-Mogg stated his desire to ‘get every cubic inch of gas out of the North Sea’, while also going out of his way to declare his support for net zero and increased deployment of renewables (Mavrokefalidis 2022; Rees-Mogg 2022). Truss also appeared to change her mind about COP27 in Egypt: it was reported she would not attend and then announced that she would. Truss did not survive long enough in the job to do so, with the final catalyst for her removal being a House of Commons vote on fracking.

**Explaining Conservative climate policy**

How can we explain the tension between the ratcheting up of climate ambition under successive Conservative-led governments and the failure to implement the policies needed to deliver these targets? This section identifies some of the key factors which shaped the approach taken.

**Conservative prime ministers**

During this period, much of the strategic direction coming from prime ministers on climate policy was shaped by how this issue interacted with their broader political objectives. Cameron had already shifted from championing the environment when in opposition to becoming more ambivalent in government (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 205), and when no longer constrained by a coalition partner significant policy retrenchment became possible. May showed little interest in climate change before
it was identified to have useful electoral opportunities after the 2017 election. After placing significant focus on the environment up until early 2022, there were some signs of reduced emphasis on it in the final months of Johnson’s tenure as his position became more vulnerable and he was possibly wary of antagonising the small but vocal group of backbench MPs critical of the net zero target (Spencer and Yorke 2022). Truss prioritised reshaping British economic policy, which perhaps explains her aforementioned contradictory approach to climate change. Johnson suggested he went on a ‘road to Damascus’ journey on climate, crediting the briefing he received from government scientists shortly after becoming prime minister in 2019 (Carbon Brief 2022), perhaps reinforced by the influence of family environmentalists (father and wife). Similar briefings, alongside increasingly stark climate data and frequent extreme weather events through this period, seem to have persuaded many ministers of the seriousness of the issues.

**Voters**

An important factor influencing politicians’ attitudes to climate policy has been its growing salience. Coinciding with high-profile protest activity, public concern about the environment rose through 2018 and 2019 to reach record levels approaching the general election (Kirby 2022; Carter and Pearson 2020, p. 746). After plummeting during the Covid-19 pandemic its salience rose once again, reaching a new record level around the COP26 summit in Autumn 2021 (Ipsos 2022a). Since 2012, there has been a steady rise in the proportion of people describing themselves as concerned about climate change across age groups, classes and income brackets (Onward 2021, pp. 8–9). Such attitudes are also widespread across different parts of the country, for example there is little difference between support for environmental protection in ‘Red Wall’ constituencies and the national average (Centre for Towns 2020, p. 13).

There is, however, evidence that Conservative voters are generally less concerned than supporters of other parties. During the 2010–2015, coalition government survey evidence showed Conservative Party supporters to be less worried than Labour supporters about climate change and less supportive of the deployment of onshore wind technology (Carter and Clements 2015, pp. 217–220). Subsequent polls have consistently found Labour supporters to be more concerned about climate change than Conservative supporters and generally more enthusiastic about further action on the issue, but not by a huge margin (Fisher et al. 2018, pp. 165–167; Bright Blue 2017, p. 24; Onward 2021, p. 11). Between 2015 and 2020, British Election Study indicators on attitudes to the environment generally, and climate change specifically, reinforce this view of Labour voters showing higher levels of concern than Conservative voters. Even so, during the 2019 election campaign, Conservative supporters who thought environmental measures had not gone far (or nearly far) enough, outnumbered those who thought that they had gone too (or much too) far by almost 5:1 (Fieldhouse et al. 2020). In short, most Conservative voters want the government to act on climate change.
There is differing evidence as to how far this support stretches to specific policy measures. Since 2019, YouGov have tested views on sectors of the economy that the public think government spends too much on, finding a consistent pattern up to July 2022: 10–20% of adults in general have selected ‘environment and climate change’, but this figure breaks down into 5–10% of Labour voters and 20–30% of Conservative voters (YouGov 2022a). Yet in 2022, 73% of Conservative voters said they either supported reducing emissions to net zero before 2050 or that the target date was about right (Ipsos 2022b). Similarly, while a tracker of attitudes to different energy technologies since 2019 shows Labour voters exhibiting more positive views of wind power (onshore and offshore not differentiated) than Conservative voters (YouGov 2022b), other polls consistently show a majority of Conservative voters support (in principle at least) the deployment of onshore wind (Bright Blue 2017, p. 49; CEN 2019a).

Since the 2016 referendum, remain supporters have been found to be more concerned about climate change than leave supporters, though generally majorities of both sets of voters agree it is a serious issue and support action to tackle it (Bright Blue 2017, pp. 28–30; Fisher et al. 2018, p. 164; Onward 2021, pp. 11–13). Similarly, while there is evidence of a left–right split in attitudes to climate change, still the majority of right-wing British voters identify it as a major threat (Pew Research Centre 2020). Although the left–right divide appears less important than the difference between voters on the open-closed (social liberal–social conservative) values spectrum, which is closely linked to remain and leave votes (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2021, p. 14). Conservative leaders have therefore been aware that public support for climate action spans the political spectrum.

**Conservative party members**

Conservative members appear to be less enthusiastic about progressive climate policy than the general public. During the Cameron era, grassroots members seemed underwhelmed by his wider green agenda (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 208) and little has changed since then. In 2019, a fifth of members were found to want less emphasis on the environment or climate change (YouGov 2019, p. 23). A year later, although half of members agreed that ‘global warming is happening, and human activity is driving it’, about one third denied the cause was human activity and almost 10% denied it was even happening while over half were against the party’s moratorium on fracking (Conservative Home 2020a, b). In 2021, two thirds of members rejected the view that there is a climate emergency (Conservative Home 2021). During the 2022 leadership contest, polls revealed that 37% of members thought that the government was overreacting to climate change and that members considered net zero policy to be the least important among a list of ten possible factors determining their choice of leader (Twitter 2022a; Grylls 2022). Even though polling (ECIU 2022) suggested over 70% of Conservative Party members favoured further deployment of onshore and offshore wind, and solar, their generally unenthusiastic attitudes seem likely to have restrained Conservative climate policy (given their role in candidate and leadership selection).
Conservative MPs

There is considerable variety in Conservative MPs’ attitudes towards climate policy, although ad hoc polling evidence reveals a consistent message that significant numbers show little concern about the issue. In 2014, when given a series of statements about climate change, almost a fifth of the Conservative MPs polled suggested that ‘Man-made climate change is environmentalist propaganda for which there is little or no real evidence’ was the closest to their view (PR Week 2014). In 2021, a poll found 7% of Conservative MPs considered climate change to be a myth (Forrest 2021). Specific issues provoke particularly strong feelings. A 2014 poll found that 78% of Conservative MPs opposed the development of onshore wind power, though 75% of Conservative MPs were supportive of solar energy (Bennett 2014).

Conservative MPs also demonstrate less enthusiasm than Labour MPs for action on climate change. In 2021 32% of Conservative MPs agreed with the statement ‘Irrespective of Covid-19, the climate crisis should be the top issue on the Government’s agenda’, compared to 76% of Labour MPs (Cavendish Advocacy 2021). A 2022 poll found that 84% of Labour MPs said achieving net zero will be a campaign issue for them at the next general election, compared to just 33% of Conservative MPs. A quarter of Conservative MPs even said they ‘will be campaigning against prioritisation of Net Zero over other issues’ (Cavendish Advocacy 2022). Though some of this polling suggests hostility to climate policies among parts of the parliamentary party, significant numbers of Conservative MPs have also campaigned for more ambitious climate policies in recent years.

The politicisation of net zero

Since the implementation of the Climate Change Act (CCA) in 2008, and the updated net zero ambition in 2019, the UK’s largest parties have remained committed to these targets. However, there are sharp divisions among Conservative MPs over net zero and significant internal dissent has emerged over specific aspects of climate policy. These divisions have been institutionalised by the formation of two factional party groupings: over 130 MPs have joined the Conservative Environment Network’s (CEN) caucus while the Net Zero Scrutiny Group, which is providing opposition to climate policy action, claims to have 58 MPs signed up (Horton 2022).¹

CEN was founded in 2010, but grew in prominence by developing its parliamentary caucus and significantly increasing its staff, notably from 4 in 2019 to 13 in 2022, who have coordinated a programme of events and publications (CEN 2019b, p.v; CEN 2022). There is also a wider pro-environment network encompassing several prominent Conservative-leaning think tanks, such as Onward, Policy Exchange, Bright Blue and the Centre for Policy Studies, with streams of work on climate policy. However, in 2021, some Conservative MPs and right-ring commentators

¹ CEN’s caucus of MPs often fluctuates as only backbenchers are allowed to join.
began a concerted campaign against the UK’s net zero target in a manner reminiscent of the backlash against climate policies seen among similar groups during the 2010–2015 coalition government (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 216). A key development was the formation of the aforementioned Net Zero Scrutiny Group, led by Craig Mackinlay, but there were numerous articles about the dangers of pursuing net zero in right-wing outlets such as the Spectator and the Daily Telegraph (Ward 2021). The longstanding climate-sceptic lobby group the Global Warming Policy Forum also relaunched itself as Net Zero Watch (Desmog 2021).

Such campaigning sought to draw on the familiar idea of a trade-off between the economy and the environment, including suggesting a re-appraisal of net zero in light of the rise in energy bills following the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (for example Mackinlay 2022). One reason why these groups were unsuccessful in convincing Johnson to reverse the net zero commitment was that the energy price rises were due to increases in the wholesale price of fossil fuels whereas the price of renewable power generation had tumbled in the preceding years (Gov.uk 2022c). It is also notable that whereas the 2010–2015 period saw ‘no sustained attempt by Conservatives sympathetic to the green agenda to resist the growth of this critical discourse or to offer an alternative centre-right, pro-green growth discourse’ (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 217), recently such a reaction was more apparent, including through the formation of a Net Zero Support Group by Chris Skidmore and in action coordinated by CEN (Twitter 2022b).

There have been longstanding tensions around specific issues including onshore wind, green levies and fracking. During the 2010–2015 coalition government, there was significant public hostility among Conservative MPs towards onshore wind farms (Carter and Clements 2015, pp. 216–217). Once the Conservatives secured a majority in 2015, they implemented their manifesto commitment to end subsidies for building onshore wind farms and introduced stringent planning conditions in England. The effect of this action was dramatic: in England there were 237 applications submitted for onshore wind farms between 2011 and 2015, but between 2016 and 2020 only eight were submitted (Windemer 2020). Industry groups and ENGOs have since campaigned heavily to reverse these decisions, principally on the basis that onshore wind is one of the cheapest sources of electricity. Despite some movement—in 2021 onshore wind was included in the Contract for Difference subsidy budget for the first time since 2015—the main constraint on its development in England (planning restrictions) remained in place (Weightmans 2021). The April 2022 UK Energy Security Strategy, which followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, included no significant policy changes in this area (Gov.uk 2022c). However, leaked documents revealed an earlier version with much more substantial proposals to support onshore wind. The watering down was widely attributed to political opposition from within the cabinet and some backbench Conservative MPs (Waugh 2022).

Anti-net zero campaigners demanded an end to the moratorium on fracking and a scrapping of levies on bills to pay for environmental schemes (Baker 2022). The Johnson government appeared to soften its stance on fracking, on energy security grounds, by announcing an ‘impartial technical review’ (Gov.uk 2022c), but the green levies were kept in place. On these two issues Truss was more receptive to critics of the net zero target, declaring her support for fracking and her intention to
move green levies onto general taxation (though the latter move is not damaging to the climate and is a less regressive way of raising money). Thus, although there have been increasingly vocal Conservatives campaigning for climate policy in recent years, there has also been persistent opposition within the party. Such hostility has created an environment which is less conducive to Conservative leaders bringing forward further policies to deliver net zero.

Brexit and Covid-19

Opposition to progressive climate policy has formed an important component of a wider Conservative framing that is anti-EU, anti-tax and anti-regulation (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 217). The Brexit referendum also had a powerful effect on electoral politics and affected the make-up of the Conservative parliamentary party (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). As the Conservative Party squeezed support for UKIP (and the Brexit Party) after 2016, it attracted voters who had displayed little concern about climate change from a party whose leaders had been openly sceptical about climate change (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 220). Yet while leave voters tend to be less concerned about climate change than remain voters, a complete polarisation along leave and remain lines on the issue did not emerge—perhaps because the latter part of the Brexit process coincided with record increases in concern about climate change.

On the elite level, there is an association between being pro-Brexit and opposing climate policy. Twenty members of the Net Zero Scrutiny Group signed an open letter in January 2022 and eighteen had supported leave (The Telegraph 2022). The right-wing media organisations which have demonstrated significant hostility to net zero are invariably pro-Brexit while Reform UK (previously the Brexit Party) pivoted to focus on opposition to net zero (Youtube 2022, 2:56:00). There are, however, notable Brexiteers who have demonstrated more positive attitudes to environmental protection, most obviously Johnson and Gove, but also figures such as Zac Goldsmith and Simon Clarke (a key campaigner for the net zero target).

With the CCA in place, climate change was an obvious policy area where the UK could advertise its post-Brexit global leadership, committing to net zero before the EU and bidding successfully to host the COP26 summit. By contrast, despite the rhetoric of delivering a Green Brexit and a flurry of legislation, including a new Office for Environmental Protection, campaigners argue that the UK environment is less well-protected post-Brexit (Greener UK 2022). One additional impact of the Brexit process on climate policy under May and Johnson’s tenures was its demands on government attention. For example, a total of 532 BEIS civil servants were seconded to work on Brexit (Kuzemko 2022, p. 239). An even larger distraction followed in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic.

On balance, since Brexit the elite cues emanating from Conservative leavers have been mixed, and sometimes positive, and there are clearly significant concerns about the issue even among leave voters. This dynamic arguably helped prevent more significant climate policy dismantling.
Limited climate mainstreaming across government

Despite initiatives such as the new cabinet committees, Conservative policies throughout this period demonstrated a continuing failure to mainstream climate change across government. One obvious example was the £10 billion in tax relief for oil and gas companies between 2016 and 2020 to encourage new North Sea exploration and production (Green Alliance 2022). Others included the 2019 general election promise to spend almost £30 billion on expanding and improving Britain’s roads, and the later decision to halve air passenger duty on domestic flights.

An important dynamic in this regard has been the often weak issue engagement from departments outside BEIS (previously DECC), which has primary responsibility for climate change (Lockwood 2021, p. 36). For example, the 2015 decision to scrap the zero carbon homes standard in new build homes had important implications for climate change but DECC was fairly peripheral to this process, with the policy overseen by the Department for Communities and Local Government and its abandonment announced in a Treasury document (House of Commons Library 2016, p. 10).

More generally, one of the most glaring gaps in UK climate policy is building energy efficiency. For example, insulation installation rates declined hugely after 2012 (when some related support measures finished) and never recovered (CCC 2021, p. 112). One contributory factor is that BEIS (and DECC) have struggled to convince the Treasury of the case for public investment in energy efficiency (Sasse 2022). The Treasury has made some changes to its approach to climate policy in recent years including creating new climate change-focused positions and releasing a major review of the ‘key issues as the UK decarbonises’ (Institute for Government 2020, p. 42; HM Treasury 2021). Yet, since 2010, successive Conservative chancellors have avoided making climate change one of their priorities: for example, George Osborne resisted the government approving the fourth carbon budget, Philip Hammond emphasised the potential costs of a net zero target and Sunak barely mentioned the issue in major fiscal events (Carter and Clements 2015, p. 220; Pickard 2019; Lucas 2022).

The Conservatives’ mixed climate policy record, combining genuine achievements and a continuing commitment to net zero with inadequate delivery, has thus reflected division on the issue within the party and competing political incentives for its leadership. In the following section, we reflect on what the British Conservative Party’s approach suggests for the broader understanding of climate change as a political issue.

Party politics and climate change

European centre-right parties, the Conservatives and climate change

Literature on mainstream European centre-right parties emphasises that many of them have struggled electorally in recent years (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021, p. 2). One explanation for these difficulties resides in a dual strategic challenge: they have
been trying to respond to both the silent revolution, which saw the rise of liberal, post-material values among electorates, and the backlash to it, the silent counter-revolution (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021, p. 22). This backlash has been associated with radical right parties, which have provided particularly serious competition to centre-right parties (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2021, p. 73). So how do these broad strategic calculations, which appear to be occupying the attention of these parties, inform their approach to climate change?

In some ways, the UK hosts an atypical case study of a European centre-right party. Most obviously, the distinctive plurality electoral system has a profound effect on the party system the Conservatives operate in. Another difference is that the Conservatives’ recent electoral success, including increases in its share of votes and seats at the 2019 general election, has involved substantial changes in its electoral coalition, whereas their European counterparts have tended to maintain continuity in the profile of their voters (Harteveld 2021, p. 39; Hayton 2022, pp. 48–50). Nonetheless, the party has had to ‘grapple with the dilemma presented by the silent revolution and the reaction against it’ so its approach to climate change is of wider relevance (Hayton 2022, p. 49). In this section, we briefly discuss what the UK experience suggests about the role climate change plays in European centre-right parties’ political positioning.

Firstly, a centre-right party can take significant steps to accommodate a radical right party’s agenda, and capture their voters, without necessarily abandoning the idea of tackling climate change. Conservative competition with UKIP and the Brexit Party in recent years represents a response to the silent counter-revolution, and the party has arguably moved closer to a radical right party since the Brexit referendum (Hayton 2021, p. 270). Given the consistent hostility of radical right parties to climate policy it is notable that this period has coincided with a ratcheting up of the Conservative Party’s emphasis and ambition on climate change (Lockwood and Lockwood 2022).

This shift was possible partly because climate change was fairly peripheral to the competition between centre and radical right. Although UKIP voters (and leaders) exhibited hostility towards climate policy, this issue was not the primary basis for their support nor was it central to the Conservatives attracting them. So far, the Conservative approach to climate change has reflected the characteristic pragmatism of European centre-right parties, which have in recent years often shifted to the right on some issues, such as immigration, while taking up more liberal positions in other areas, such as LGBT rights (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021, p. 29). Yet, as outlined, there are several areas of climate policy which have not been effectively addressed by the government. A more comprehensive delivery of net zero might have provoked more extensive conflict on the right of British politics over specific climate change policies.

Secondly, changes to centre-right parties’ electoral coalitions are not inherently problematic for climate policy. Capturing UKIP and Brexit Party voters was only part of a broader realignment in British electoral politics after the Brexit referendum (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). At the 2017 and 2019 general elections, the Conservatives won support in unfamiliar places and their voter profile became more occupationally working class, less educated and even older (British Election Study 2021).
If this represents a longer-term shift in the profile of Conservative support, however, it is too early to say conclusively how they will seek to reposition themselves in the light of it. May and Johnson’s premierships represented the first attempts to position the party under this new voter coalition and while their vision for doing so was not hostile to net zero, subsequent leaders could be. Indeed, some party figures have articulated a future for a more blue collar Conservative Party which includes a more hostile approach to climate policy (for example: Mance 2016).

Thirdly, there can be electoral incentives for centre-right parties to address and emphasise climate change. In the UK in recent years, this has most obviously come from the widespread public concern about the issue, but positioning on climate change and the environment has also been an important part of the Conservatives’ attempts to attract specific groups of voters. Cameron’s modernisation project can be seen as the Conservatives adjusting to the silent revolution; a pro-environment message was a useful signalling device to help attract moderate, socially liberal voters from Labour and the Liberal Democrats (Hayton 2021, p. 270; Carter and Clements 2015). Since the 2019 general election, commentary has focused on constituencies in the south of England which have traditionally been strongholds for the Conservatives but may be at risk from Labour or the Liberal Democrats. The environment is seen as a key issue for many voters in such areas (Harvey 2021).

Finally, it is not just electoral considerations which dictate centre-right parties’ approaches to climate change. The evidence summarised above suggests significant concern about climate change exists among Conservative voters, which helps explain why the Conservatives did not abandon their commitment to the net zero target during this period. While exactly comparable\(^2\) polling of Conservative MPs’, members’ and voters’ views on climate change is rare (one example: UK in a Changing Europe 2021, p. 16), there appears to be a greater mix of views about the issue among MPs and, particularly, party members. Such attitudes have influenced Conservative prime ministers to tread relatively carefully on the issue.

**Climate change: a valence or positional issue?**

Our analysis of climate politics during this period of Conservative government shows that it continued to resemble a valence issue to a significant extent, notably the continued agreement over supporting the CCA and delivering ambitious UK emission reduction targets. This elite consensus wobbled at times, as illustrated by the need for a cross-party leaders’ pre-election agreement to depoliticise the issue in 2015. Yet, despite some policy dismantling, support within the Conservative party leadership never completely fractured, with May and Johnson embracing the net zero challenge, which enabled the Conservatives to compete vigorously on the issue during the 2019 general election campaign.

However, partisan divisions have emerged over specific aspects of climate policy. The Conservatives’ effective ban on onshore wind throughout this period—barring

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\(^2\) Based on identical questions posed to the different groups at a similar time.
the Truss government’s stated intention to end it—contrasts with Labour Party policy; for example, Jeremy Corbyn planned to install 6000 new onshore wind turbines by 2030 (BBC 2018). Similarly, in 2016 the Labour Party promised to ban fracking (Vaughan, 2016). At the time, the Conservative government supported exploring the opportunities associated with shale gas, a position it held until announcing the moratorium in 2019, before appearing to reconsider again in early 2022. Truss then briefly moved the party back to a fully supportive policy position (only for Sunak to restore the moratorium in October 2022).

Additionally, although improving the energy efficiency of buildings is not particularly controversial within the Conservative Party, a partisan divide has also opened up with Labour on it. Since 2015, Conservative governments have not prioritised this policy issue, including conspicuously in the Johnson government’s April 2022 Energy Security Strategy. Where schemes have been brought forward, they have been criticised for either being insufficient, such as various iterations of the Energy Company Obligation, or botched, such as the Green Homes Grant (CCC 2019b, p. 28; Ambrose 2021). In contrast, Labour have consistently put forward more ambitious policy offers in this area (albeit in opposition). Corbyn committed to provide £12.8 billion in additional funding for insulation as part of a National Transformation Fund (BBC 2018) while Keir Starmer, in his 2021 party conference speech, pledged to make building energy efficiency improvements a ‘national mission’ (Starmer 2021).

Historical accounts of the Conservative Party have discussed the role that shifts in dominant factions and new leaders have played in driving changes in its approach (Bale 2012, p. 309). This is relevant to the Conservative Party’s climate policies because of the existence of significant internal dissent about the commitment to net zero itself, particularly as this opposition appears to be concentrated among those on the right of the party. Thus, the Conservatives’ commitment to take climate change seriously, and by extension both the British party consensus on the topic and climate change’s status as a valence issue, are vulnerable to changes in the balance of power within the party.

**Conclusion**

Conservative governments between 2015 and 2022 had a mixed record on climate policy, combining genuine progress, notably around the commitment to net zero and a ratcheting up of emission reduction targets, with inadequate policy delivery. The inconsistencies that characterised successive Conservative governments’ approaches to climate change reflected divisions over the issue within the party, which contributed to competing political incentives for its leadership. Certainly, when Johnson became prime minister, few environmentalists would have anticipated regretting his demise. Yet in office, after May had committed the UK to net zero by 2050, Johnson embraced ambitious leadership on climate change even if tangible initiatives were less forthcoming. During Johnson’s premiership, hostility to climate policy among figures on the right, which had been fairly muted during the Brexit process and Covid-19 pandemic, became louder again—although by this point pro-climate
sentiment had also become more organised and visible within the party. These tensions were no doubt in Johnson’s mind when he used one of his final public interventions as prime minister to hint at the need for future party leaders not to ignore the environment (Wright 2022). Moreover, we have argued that these internal party divisions over the commitment to net zero and wider partisan differences over specific elements of the delivery of net zero indicate that climate change cannot be regarded as a classic valence issue in the UK.

In Sunak’s first few days as Truss’s successor, the furore around whether or not he would attend COP27 demonstrated continuing potential for political controversy around this issue (in the event he did go). However, since 2015, there have been hard-nosed political reasons for the Conservatives to uphold the cross-party consensus on climate change, aside from any moral imperatives. Future leaders would thus be wise to consider carefully the costs of collapsing this consensus around net zero and the CCA, and trying to turn climate change into a purely positional issue as some other centre-right parties have done.

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