

October 2020  
Britain's Choice:  
Common Ground and  
Division in 2020s Britain

# Chapter 10

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# Countryside, Environment and Climate



More in  
Common

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# Chapter 10

## Countryside, Environment and Climate

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**86 per cent** are worried about climate change

**84 per cent** agree 'we need to celebrate and respect the beauty of the countryside'

**83 per cent** agree the drop in carbon emissions during the Covid-19 lockdown shows that we can reduce our impact on the environment

Almost **2 in 3** people feel proud when taking action to protect the environment

**72 per cent** agree that working to protect the environment can help build a less divided and selfish society

**84 per cent** agree that ending our throw-away culture is one of the most important ways to protect the environment

**4 in 5** would accept stricter rules to protect Britain's environment

**49 per cent** say that it is hard to know what to do to help the environment

# Introduction

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Across the British Isles, from the stark beauty of the Highlands of Scotland down through rolling hills, mountains, woodlands, and lakes to the signpost for Land's End on England's south-western tip, countryside and nature are deeply embedded in the identity and pride of British people. Preserving this natural heritage is universally seen as important, transcending the fault lines of region,



**I think it's everyone. Everyone has an important part to play. So in regards to regulations being put in place, in regards to what rules you should or shouldn't follow. Everyone has a part and everyone has an important part. There is no one who should or shouldn't be playing that part in trying to help.**

*Louise, Disengaged Traditionalist, 26, North West*

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politics, class, and identity. For many people, Covid-19 has been a defining experience that has reconnected them to their natural environment, as lives slowed down, pollution levels subsided, and people reflected on how human activity influences the natural environment.

This chapter examines how Britain is more united than is often understood in concern about environmental issues and the need for more action. There is real opportunity for the environment and action on climate change to be a unifying force in British society. Equally, there is a risk that environmental protection could become a more divisive issue that is drawn into broader conflicts around identity and culture.

The chapter touches on just a few of our many findings relating to the environment and climate, which are explored in more detail in the *Britain Talks Climate* project, launched in November 2020 by Climate Outreach and the European Climate Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

# 10.1 Common ground

**‘There was such a tangible difference made from there being no cars on the streets. Just the birds, the fauna, the flora. That has never worried me before, but now, the difference is that I think we can make a difference. Whereas before I thought it was theoretical, now I know it’s a reality.’**

*Maya, Loyal National, 57, London*

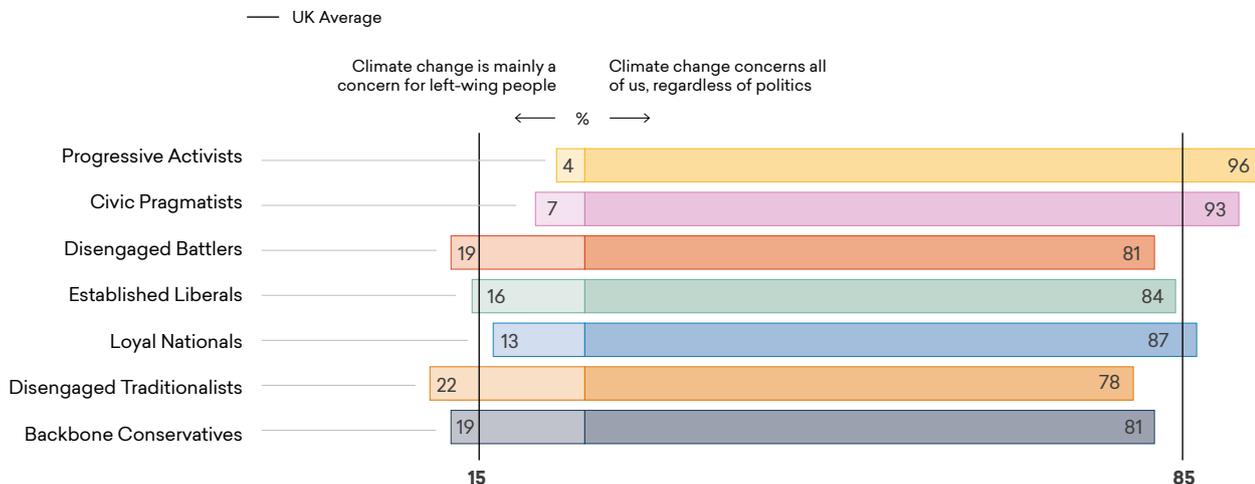
Across Britain, the countryside and nature are the second most cited source of pride. All but one of the segments include the countryside and nature as one of their top three sources of pride (the one exception being the Disengaged Traditionalists, who place the NHS, UK history, and the armed forces slightly ahead of the countryside). This passion for Britain's natural environment and heritage is reflected in many aspects of British culture and national life, including the popularity of membership organisations such as the National Trust, with over five million members, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, with over a million members. Nature and the countryside also play an important role in local and national identities.

Environmental protection is not only a source of shared pride and identity, but it is also a shared priority for the 2020s. As Figure 10.1 shows, Britons are united in their belief that climate change matters for everyone regardless of their background, rather than being an elite concern. The Covid-19 lockdowns also caused a slowing down of the pace of life for many people, and made them think more about the importance of the natural environment.

**Figure 10.1. Climate change concerns everyone**

Britons agree that, regardless of background, climate change is an important issue for everyone

### Climate change concerns all of us



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

The shared experiences of working from home, traveling less, and spending time in their garden or local area have all strengthened people's connection to the natural environment. Most importantly, these experiences have renewed a sense of agency that is fundamental to taking action. The result is perhaps counter-intuitive: at the same time as people are grappling with a pandemic and severe economic disruption, they have also become more concerned about the environment. Figure 10.2 shows that an overwhelming 83 per cent of people agree that the drop in carbon emissions seen during the Covid-19 lockdown shows that we can reduce our impact on the environment if we really want to. There were dramatic reductions in air pollution, the return of birdsong in many places, and even scenes of resurgent wildlife, such as a moment during the lockdown where a group of goats took control of the streets of the town of Llandudno in North Wales, which was widely shared on social media.

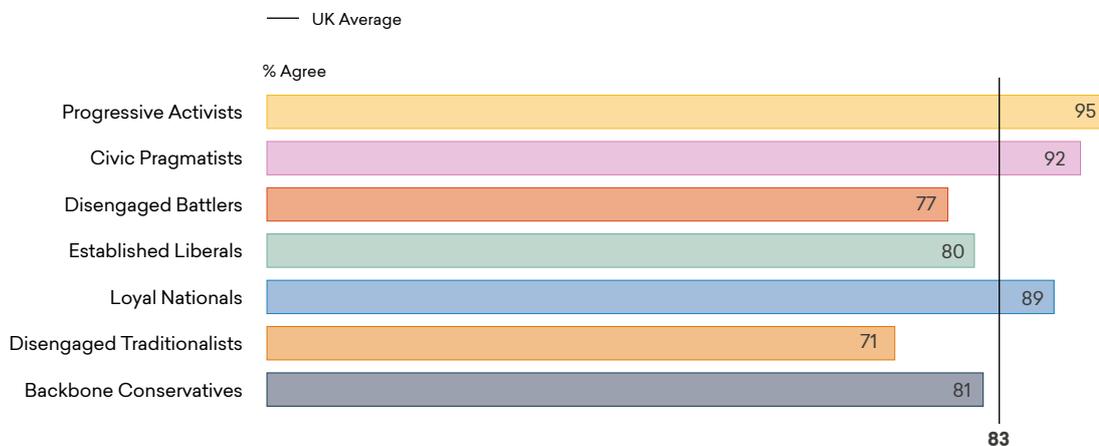
**83%** of people agree that the drop in carbon emissions seen during the Covid-19 lockdown shows that we can reduce our impact on the environment if we really want to

During the pandemic, people have become more aware of both how much human activity impacts our environment, and how a change in human activity can improve the state of the environment. This stronger public confidence in our ability to take action together is important in reducing the feelings of powerlessness that people often have in the face of the threat that climate change poses to the environment.

**Figure 10.2. Climate and Covid-19**

The pandemic has made us more confident that we can reduce our impact on the environment

**The drop in carbon emissions that was seen during the Covid-19 lockdown shows that we can reduce our impact on the environment if we really want to**



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The drop in carbon emissions that was seen during the Covid-19 lockdown shows that we can reduce our impact on the environment if we really want to. June 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

**‘We’ve seen so many more people who were enjoying the countryside who probably weren’t before. And if as a society, just one person can continue to do that who wasn’t doing it before, like yourself, then we’re making a difference, aren’t we? Because it’s not just going to be you. There is going to be other people who are going to do it.’**

*Miles, Loyal National, 38, East of England*

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This sense of the importance of nature and the countryside forms the basis of a strong shared commitment to our natural heritage. It also helps explain why, more than anything else, being environmentally friendly is a quality that people feel we as a society should focus on. For example, some 84 per cent agree that ‘we need to celebrate and respect the beauty of the countryside’, with 59 per cent agreeing strongly.

Concerns about environmental issues are wide-ranging – covering such issues as climate change, environmental pollution, plastic waste, the loss of biodiversity, farming and local food supply, pollutants in the water supply, and the restoration of natural habitats for flora and fauna. While there are differences in emphasis among population segments, these issues are not a flashpoint for disagreement in the way that they are in the United States.

As will be further explored in this chapter, other shared common ground on environmental issues includes:

- The belief that climate change is real
- The desire for government to lead in the fight against climate change
- Confidence that action on climate change is an opportunity to create jobs in Britain
- A desire shared by a clear majority for the UK to provide international leadership in tackling climate change
- The belief that large businesses should make the most changes to address climate change (sizeable minorities worry about responsibility for action being forced onto individuals who are already overburdened with just getting by)
- Widespread agreement that ending our throw-away culture is one of the most important ways to protect the environment
- Trust in climate scientists, who are seen as the most reliable sources of information on the environment. The rejection of climate science is seen only in a minority

## 10.2 Britons' values and the environment

Protecting the environment resonates across society because of its capacity to connect with a diverse range of values and everyday concerns that are important to different segments. The strongest views on the need for more action to protect the environment are held by Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Loyal Nationals. These segments hold different core beliefs that manifest in different values – Progressive Activists are driven by universalist values and human solidarity, Loyal Nationalists by the protection of tradition and symbols of the nation – yet they agree on the need to protect our natural habitat.

Concerns are shared by Disengaged Battlers, Established Liberals, Backbone Conservatives, and Disengaged Traditionalists, although their motivations can differ (for example, Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists are especially concerned about the rural way of life and farmers' livelihoods). This does not mean that all segments embrace environmentalism equally – they vary in the intensity of their concern, and several are alienated by the more disruptive forms of climate activism championed by Extinction Rebellion. But there is common ground on pride in the environment, pride in taking action to protect it, belief in the reality of climate change, wanting the government to do more, and supporting initiatives such as investments in sustainable infrastructure and emerging green industries.

One of the reasons why acting to protect the environment has the potential to bring people together is that, for most people, being more environmentally conscious is already a part of their lives and their identity. Most have already made changes in their lives to adopt more environmentally conscious ways of living, from changing their consumption habits and reducing their use of fossil fuels through to recycling and supporting environmental organisations.

**Protecting the environment is a source of pride for almost two in three people**, as Figure 10.3 shows, with majorities feeling this way in every segment. This holds true for an outright majority of both Remain and Leave voters, of every age group except the over 75s (of whom 47 per cent feel proud), and supporters of every political party except the Brexit Party (at 49 per cent, with disagreement from just 9 per cent of Brexit Party voters).

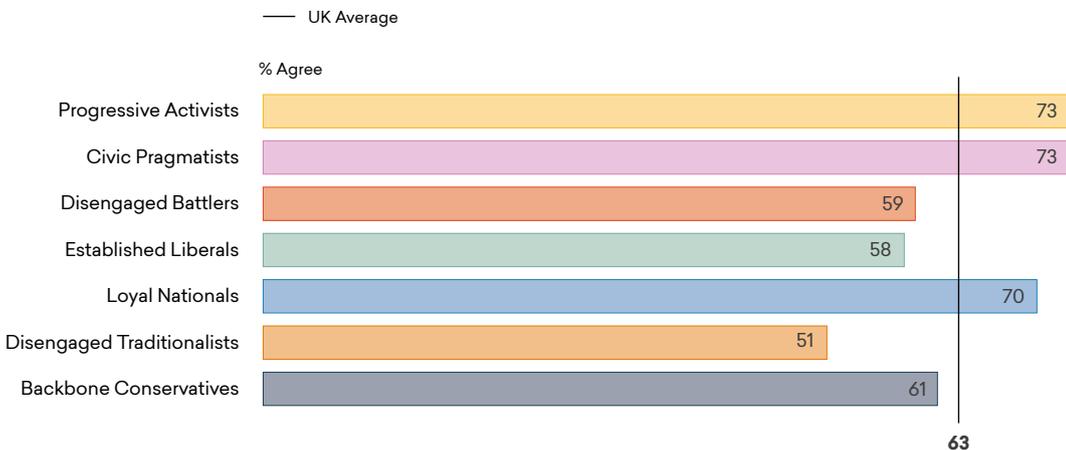
Taking action to protect the environment is a cross-cutting issue that can empower individuals with a sense of agency, potentially improving the overall health of democracy, particularly among the Disengaged groups. This is especially significant because **there are few similar issues of public concern where individuals feel that they personally can make a difference** – what is true of the environment is not, for example, true of issues such as immigration, unemployment, violent crime, housing, or transport policy.

Figure 10.3.

## Pride and the environment

A majority of all segments say they feel proud when they do their bit for the environment

### When I do my bit to protect the environment, I feel proud



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I do my bit to protect the environment, I feel proud.  
February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Alongside this pride in practical action is a concern about climate change:

- 86 per cent of Britons say that they are worried about climate change, while just 3 per cent do not believe that climate change is real.
- However, 20 per cent attribute climate change to the Earth's natural cycle, rather than as the result of human activities.
- A majority of every segment believes that climate change is happening as a result of human activity, although there are sceptics in some segments – for example, only 50 per cent of Disengaged Traditionalists agree that climate change is the result of human activity (in contrast to 94 per cent of Progressive Activists).
- A majority (59 per cent) believe that the UK is already feeling the effects of climate change, a belief strongest among Progressive Activists (83 per cent) but weakest among Disengaged Traditionalists (36 per cent).

The section below looks at the specific values and concerns for each of the segments. These influence the way that they think about protecting the environment and preserving Britain's countryside and nature.

**Progressive Activists** are more motivated about environmental concerns than others, feeling its importance and urgency. Environmental activism is an important part of their personal identity.

- While 77 per cent of the population support a Green New Deal, virtually all Progressive Activists support this idea. Almost all believe that new jobs can be created in the process of reducing carbon emissions.
- Progressive Activists are most likely to say that the government is not doing enough to tackle climate change (96 per cent versus 60 per cent on average).
- Four in five say that they talk about the climate often to others, double the number in the general population.

- Progressive Activists are less concerned than any other segment about protecting current farming practices, with 74 per cent saying it is important to cut carbon emissions quickly, even if it means changing UK farming practices and rural landscapes (compared to 32 per cent on average).

Progressive Activists say that thinking about climate change makes them feel angry, anxious, and scared. The greatest benefits they see from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and helping the poorest around the world. As is further explored in the *Britain Talks Climate* project from Climate Outreach based on the data in this chapter,<sup>2</sup> for Progressive Activists climate change is a lens through which they see many other social and political issues.

While they may be less vocal about their views, **Civic Pragmatists** share many of the concerns of Progressive Activists, and derive a strong sense of pride from practical action to protect the environment.

- They also see potential economic benefits from taking action on climate change (almost all are in favour of a Green New Deal).
- Most Civic Pragmatists think that the government is not doing enough to protect the environment.
- Large numbers are in favour of the UK working alongside other countries to tackle crises, such as Covid-19 and climate change.

The feelings that Civic Pragmatists most associate with climate change are helplessness, anxiety, and sadness. They are worried about climate change and try to follow a low-carbon lifestyle, but lack the confidence to engage more politically on climate change. The greatest benefits they see from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and preserving the beauty of our countryside.

**Loyal Nationals** share concerns about the environment and climate change and also believe that we need urgent, radical action.

- Three in five Loyal Nationals report feeling very or extremely worried about climate change. Across a range of environmental issues, from plastic pollution and deforestation to air pollution and food waste, they show consistently high levels of concern.
- Their strong psychological orientation to loyalty and love of country is expressed in wanting to protect the UK's environment for future generations, and their environmental views are marked by a frustration with elites and concern for fairness in where the burdens of adjustment are borne.
- Loyal Nationals are worried about how climate change will affect them personally. They are the most likely to say they worry it will mean they won't be able to eat as much meat and dairy (33 per cent), drive a petrol or diesel car (40 per cent), or be able to live in the same place (23 per cent).
- Loyal Nationals have the highest concern about British farmers' livelihoods of any group, at 44 per cent compared to an average of 34 per cent.
- Around one in three Loyal Nationals say that, instead of cutting emissions, we should focus on protecting people in the UK from extreme weather (joint highest with the Backbone Conservatives).
- Loyal Nationals are more likely than any segment (at 17 per cent) to say that 'preserving God's creation' is an important reason for action on environmental issues.

There is a surprising amount of common ground between the patriotic Loyal Nationals and the internationalist Progressive Activists on the need to protect the environment. Both are more likely to support additional taxes on frequent flyers, fines for companies that use excessive plastic packaging, and setting food waste targets for supermarkets. Loyal Nationals also share the Progressive Activists' desire for government intervention and measures to ensure that businesses change their practices. Where they differ is that Loyal Nationals tend to think that there is little point in the UK trying to tackle climate change alone if other countries keep on polluting, as they do not want other countries taking advantage of Britain's goodwill.

Loyal Nationals associate climate change with feelings of sadness, helplessness, and anxiety. The greatest benefits they see from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and preserving the beauty of the countryside.

The views of **Established Liberals** on environmental issues are broadly in line with population averages. While Established Liberals support action to combat climate change, they are less likely to see it as an urgent problem than other socially liberal groups.

- Established Liberals are more sceptical of government intervention than others. They are the second most likely to say that the government should only play a bigger role in our lives while the Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing.
- While they split almost evenly on whether action should be radical or gradual, Established Liberals are unlikely to support increased taxation as the price of taking action.

Established Liberals most associate climate change with feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and sadness. The greatest benefits they see from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and preserving the beauty of our countryside. They prefer more of the focus for action on the environment being on a personal level.

**Disengaged Battlers** and **Disengaged Traditionalists** are more concerned about environmental issues than might be assumed – even though they typically have lower concerns than other groups. They are more likely than other segments to say that they do not know how we should respond to climate change. While only 5 per cent of both segments are sceptical that climate change is happening (with a further 12 per cent of Battlers and 14 per cent of Traditionalists being unsure), they are less supportive of the changes that are required to tackle climate change. The Disengaged segments are far more likely than average to say that they are too busy focusing on day-to-day survival to consider climate change.

- In general, Disengaged Battlers are more likely to support environmental measures.
- Disengaged Traditionalists have the least concern about a wide range of environment issues (for example, on climate change 72 per cent are worried and 28 per cent are not). A significant minority within the segment believes that climate change can be attributed to the planet's natural cycles, rather than being the result of human activity.
- While Disengaged Battlers associate climate change with feelings of anxiety, sadness, and helplessness, Disengaged Traditionalists are more likely than any group to have no feelings at all about it (although this is only true for one in four).
- Both segments feel that the greatest benefits from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and preserving the beauty of our countryside.
- Disengaged Battlers feel that green policies can create long-lasting jobs, although they are not confident they will benefit from those jobs.

- Disengaged Traditionalists who have a stronger commitment to environmental action often take pride in Britain's history of industrial innovation and engineering, and mention examples such as wind energy. Real-world examples help the Disengaged groups make connections between environmental protection and the creation of jobs and business opportunities in their communities.
- Disengaged Traditionalists are more likely to say that climate change is mainly a concern for left-wing people, but even then, only 22 per cent hold that view (versus 15 per cent on average). This highlights that, even in the most sceptical group, there is a recognition of the importance of environmental issues.

**Backbone Conservatives** identify being environmentally friendly as a top priority for their ideal version of the UK, although they prioritise different issues to more progressive groups. They are much less likely to trust many of the most outspoken activist voices on environmental issues. Given their strong personal identification with the Conservative Party and support for the government, they are also more likely to support the government's environmental policies than any other segment, and to say they believe that the government is doing the right amount on climate change already.

- While there are more climate sceptics among Backbone Conservatives than any other segment, a clear majority (57 per cent) believes that climate change is real and caused by human action.
- Backbone Conservatives are above average for many personal actions to protect the environment, such as recycling, buying local foods, reducing food waste, and taking steps to reduce their electricity use.
- Being environmentally friendly is in their top three characteristics of an ideal UK.
- Where they differ is that they are more likely to feel that responding to climate change requires slow, gradual change rather than urgent, radical change (by a margin of 47 to 37 per cent).
- A clearly majority of 60 per cent of Backbone Conservatives see job creation opportunities in cutting emissions, even though there are more people concerned that cutting carbon emissions may be a threat to British jobs in this segment than any other. Only one in ten say there are no benefits in taking action on climate change.
- Most Backbone Conservatives say that, if forced to choose, they would prioritise protecting current UK farming practices over taking action to cut carbon emissions.
- The feelings most evoked by climate change for Backbone Conservatives are helplessness, sadness, and anxiety.
- Backbone Conservatives are above average in wanting to change Britain's throw-away culture as a method of protecting the environment.
- Like the Disengaged groups, the greatest benefits they see from action on climate change are protecting future generations, creating a healthier society, and preserving the beauty of our countryside.

The environmental issues on which Backbone Conservatives are most likely to engage are supporting local farmers and suppliers, protecting British farming, and keeping the rural way of life alive in the countryside. Backbone Conservatives are especially supportive of protecting the environment by changing our throw-away culture, being only slightly behind Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists on this measure.



## In their own words



‘People talked about there being a refugee crisis in 2015. That’s nothing in comparison to what is going to happen in the next ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty years as areas get more prone to drought, to flooding.’

*Callum, Progressive Activist, 34, East of England*



‘I think you can see, if you look over the last twenty years, I think you can tell yourself. So I’m not worried it’s something that’s going to affect my lifetime, but I do worry about my children and their children. I do think it’s something we need to take seriously and start little changes now.’

*Peter, Civic Pragmatist, 37, North West*



‘I think it’s a risk to the world but it’s not a huge risk to me personally, in my privileged position in the UK, so the biggest impact will be felt by people in Third World countries. I, maybe incorrectly, don’t believe it’s going to really change my life in the next ten to twenty years or longer and that means I don’t prioritise it as much as other things, which I think are going to have a really direct impact on my life now.’

*Tanya, Established Liberal, 27, London*



‘I think I’m worried, and again I’m looking at all of these animals that are becoming extinct. I was reading something this morning about the amount of plastic that’s at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea and how it’s all accumulating and you think, that’s going to affect marine life, it’s going to affect fish, it’s going to affect people’s diet. So yeah, it’s very worrying. It is very worrying. You wonder what it’s going to be like. I think back to when I was young and how much it has changed, and now in another thirty odd years, how bad will it get?’

*Oliver, Loyal National, 38, Scotland*



‘The reality is, to buy things without plastic on is something that’s really reserved for middle class people. Because if you go to the supermarket, everything’s wrapped in plastic that you can’t recycle. And it’s lovely to have this idea that we’re going out with our cotton eco tote bags and picking up our fresh veg that’s laid out still with the mud on it, but that’s something that really is only applicable to people with the money to buy those kinds of products. For everybody else, especially at the moment when we’re buying a lot of frozen food, everything is wrapped in non-recyclable plastic. And if you can’t afford to change that then you’re forced to damage the environment and keep using plastic. I don’t see how it can ever change unless it’s changed on some higher level.’

*Alex, Disengaged Battler, 42, Wales*



‘It’s always “the coldest one since that” or “the hottest one since that”. You’ve got to be realistic with it. Climate change is happening. You only have to look at history to see how the world has changed as a result of the changing climate throughout the years. Islands have been disappearing for a long, long time and the world is naturally changing. Us recycling a bit more and not using plastic straws, whilst it will do a little bit, it’s not nearly going to do enough to change the world in general. That comes from your major oil companies and governments. So, me deciding to have a steak for dinner doesn’t really make all the difference.’

*Paul, Backbone Conservative, 38, South East*



‘I’ll admit I don’t understand enough about carbon footprint. People saying that they can pay to offset their carbon footprint, that just sounds illogical to me. But I’ve always been a person who is big on recycling. I can’t stand waste. I will sooner slice the end off the bread and use it before I would just throw it away because it’s got a little bit of a bad spot. The idea of wasting anything is just not cool with me.’

*Jodie, Disengaged Traditionalist, 39, South East*

## 10.3 Can protecting the environment bring us together?

**‘It can’t be just one section of society that does something and the rest doesn’t do anything... [Change] has to come from all parts because obviously, it’s like a puzzle. There will be decisions that have to be made by governments but there’s also little efforts that people have to be making and also that lots of companies have to do to fit everything together. Because if it’s only something that is coming from the individuals, we’re only going to get so far. So, everything has to be put together.’**

*Anne, Loyal National, 56, London*

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Both quantitative and qualitative results from this study suggest that British people have far more common ground than differences on environmental protection. This section examines findings around the opportunity for environmental protection to help bring people together, demonstrating the extent to which concern for the environment aligns with different values, shared concerns about the future, and a more immediate sense that now is the right time for change. The section after this (section 10.4) looks at the flip side of the environment as a force for unity: whether environmental issues could be used to cause division within society.

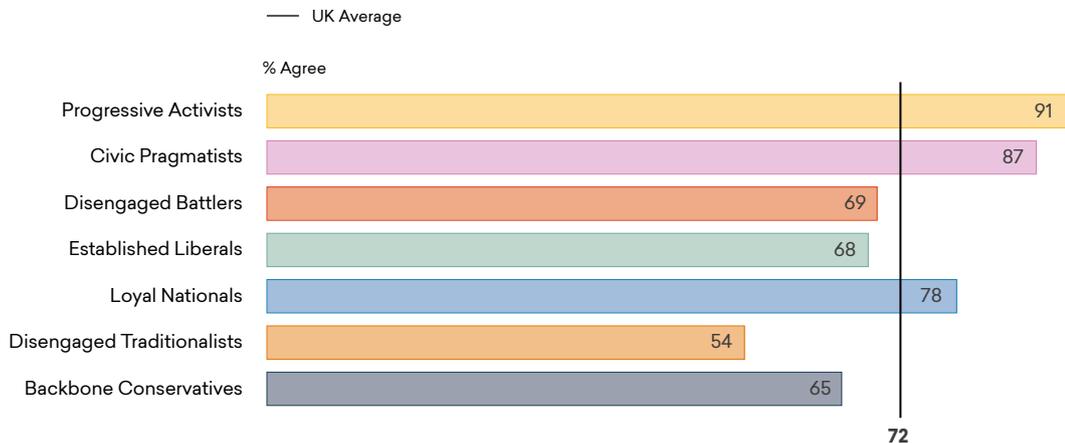
Agreement that protecting the environment is something that can help bring communities together is widely shared across the population. Environmental concerns are connected with deeper values and aspirations that relate to how we live our lives and the kind of society we want to become. As Figure 10.4 shows, **72 per cent agree that working to protect the environment can help build a society based more on sharing rather than selfishness, and on community rather than division.** Two-thirds or more of every segment other than Disengaged Traditionalists agree with this proposition. In our conversations, people made connections between environmental responsibility and a wide range of other concerns, including becoming a less materialistic society, taking responsibility for their children’s future, and making the UK more of an international leader.

Figure 10.4.

## The environment as a unifying force

All segments of society believe that protecting the environment can bring us together

### Working together to protect the environment could build a society that's based on sharing not selfishness, community not division



Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Working together to protect the environment could build a society that's based on sharing not selfishness, community not division. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

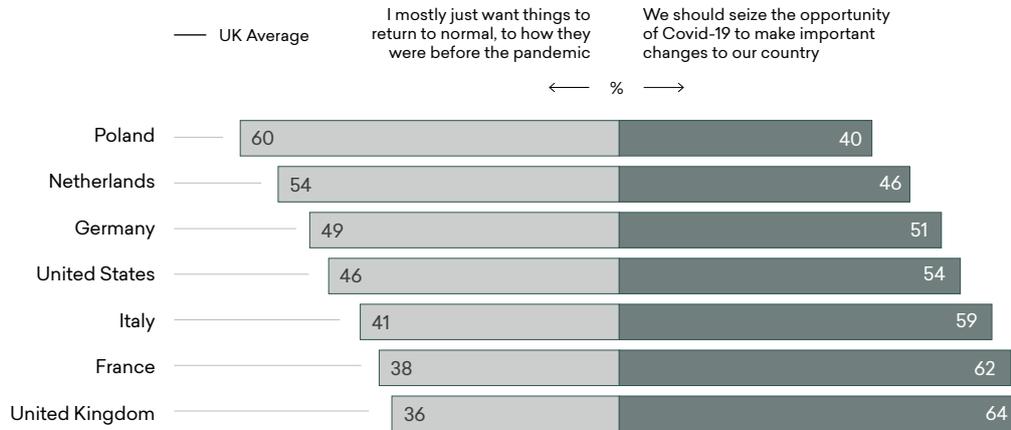
One of the reasons why environmental protection is unusual is that it speaks deeply to both progressive and conservative values. This helps to explain why, as a priority for Britain, it ranks only behind improving the NHS and reducing unemployment. For progressives, it is associated with ecological consciousness, global justice (given the disproportionate impact of climate change on the poor), and economic inequality (given the contribution of corporations and especially the fossil fuel industry to climate change). For conservatives, it is associated with the preservation of natural heritage, the importance of farming communities and the traditional way of life, and a sense of intergenerational responsibility. The qualitative research undertaken for this study demonstrated that this sense of intergenerational responsibility resonates with more sceptical population segments, particularly older people who are aware of the significant changes in the environment over the course of their lifetimes.

Another key reason for the environment's potential to bring people together is that it is also connected to a more immediate desire for change after a very disruptive period caused by Covid-19 and the Brexit divisions. As Figure 10.5 shows, More in Common's study of public attitudes across seven countries released in September 2020 found a stronger mood in favour of 'making important changes to our country' in Britain than any other country surveyed. As Figure 10.2 showed, one of the important changes in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic is the extent to which our relationship with nature is improving.

Figure 10.5.

## Back to normal or time for change?

After difficult and divisive years, Britons are looking for change



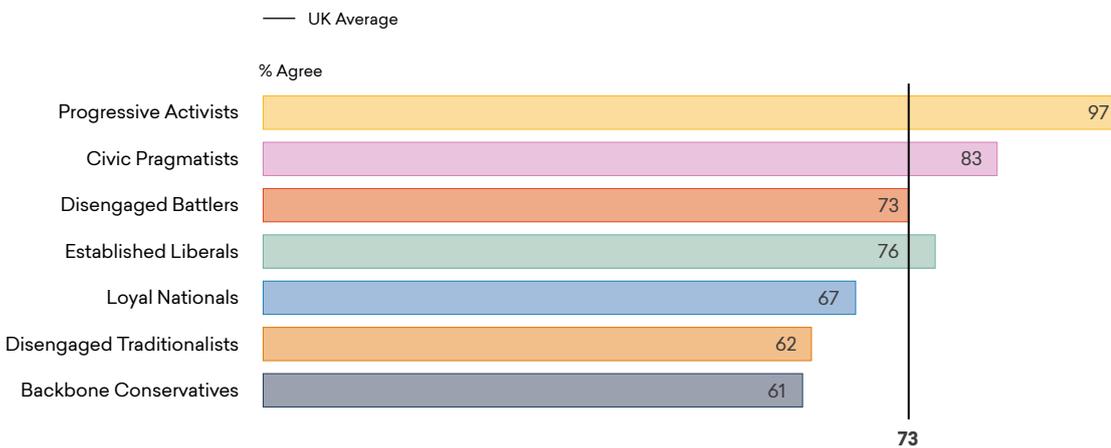
For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Figure 10.6.

## Climate action and job creation

In all segments, people see cutting carbon emissions as having the potential to create jobs

### Cutting carbon emissions is an opportunity to create new jobs in the UK



For full question texts see Appendix 2.1. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

Although the emotions that people associate with climate change are mostly negative, there is strong positive support for taking action on climate and the environment through government policy decisions as well as individual decisions:

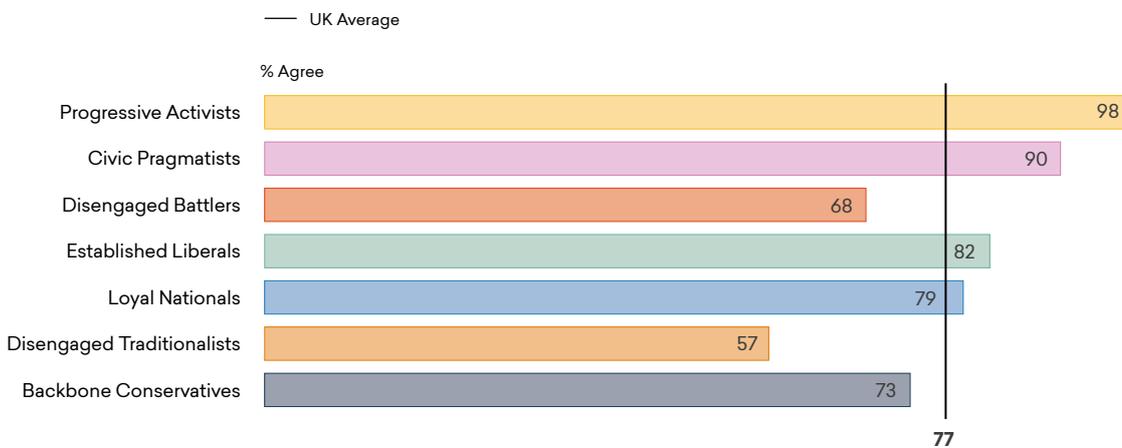
- 73 per cent of Britons think that cutting carbon emissions is an opportunity to create new jobs in the UK rather than a threat to jobs, with high levels of agreement in all segments.
- 62 per cent want the UK to be a global leader on climate change issues.
- Majorities of every segment support a ‘Green New Deal’ (defined as large government investments to make the economy more environmentally friendly). This language does not have the same association with the political left as in the United States, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson adopting language of a New Deal, a Green Deal, and a new green industrial revolution.<sup>3</sup>
- Although the Green New Deal has less support from Disengaged segments, especially Disengaged Traditionalists, a solid majority is still in favour.
- A staggering 93 per cent of Britons agree that government support to businesses should be conditional on those businesses making commitments to reduce their carbon emissions and protect the environment.
- Only 16 per cent of people worry that it will cost too much to tackle climate change and think that we should be giving priority to other things instead.

Figure 10.7.

## Green New Deal

Support for a Green New Deal transcends political divisions

### Developing a “Green New Deal” that makes large-scale government investments to make our economy more environmentally friendly



Qu. There is currently debate about different political measures. Would you support or oppose the following proposal? June 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

**Another way in which action on the environment has appeal across society is that it promises to address different problems and excesses in modern lifestyles.** An issue frequently raised in focus group conversations about the environment is the excessive amount of plastic in packaging and day-to-day purchases, something which worries 91 per cent of people, including 68 per cent who describe themselves as very or extremely worried by it.

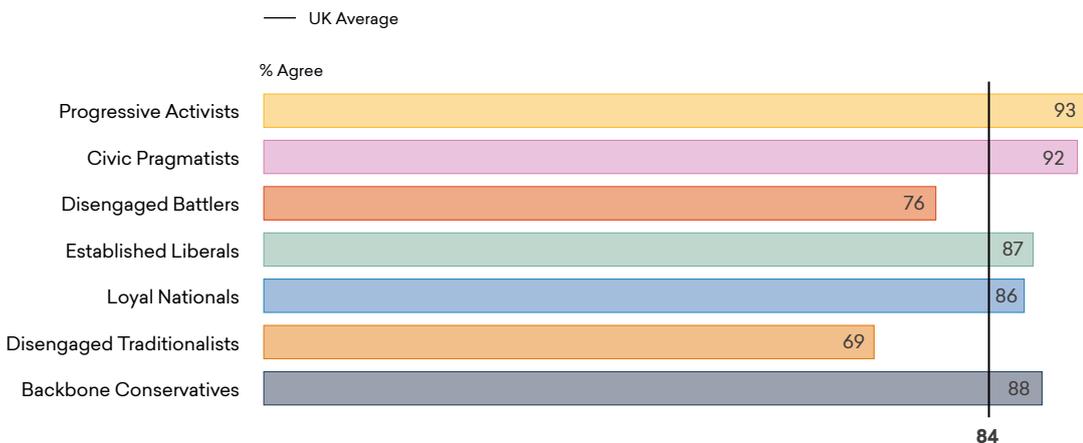
Britons share a high level of awareness of plastic pollution, and especially its effects on oceans, even among the Disengaged groups. They are even more supportive of ending throw-away culture as a means to protect the environment and support measures such as fining brands that use excessive or difficult to recycle plastic packaging. Eighty-five per cent think we should set targets for supermarkets to reduce food waste. Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists are more supportive of these ideas than the average, but there is significant support even among Disengaged Traditionalists (who are also the most consistently sceptical segment regarding climate change).

Figure 10.8.

## Throw-away culture

There is widespread support among segments to end our throw-away culture

### Ending our throw-away culture is one of the most important ways to protect the environment



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Ending our throw-away culture is one of the most important ways to protect the environment. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

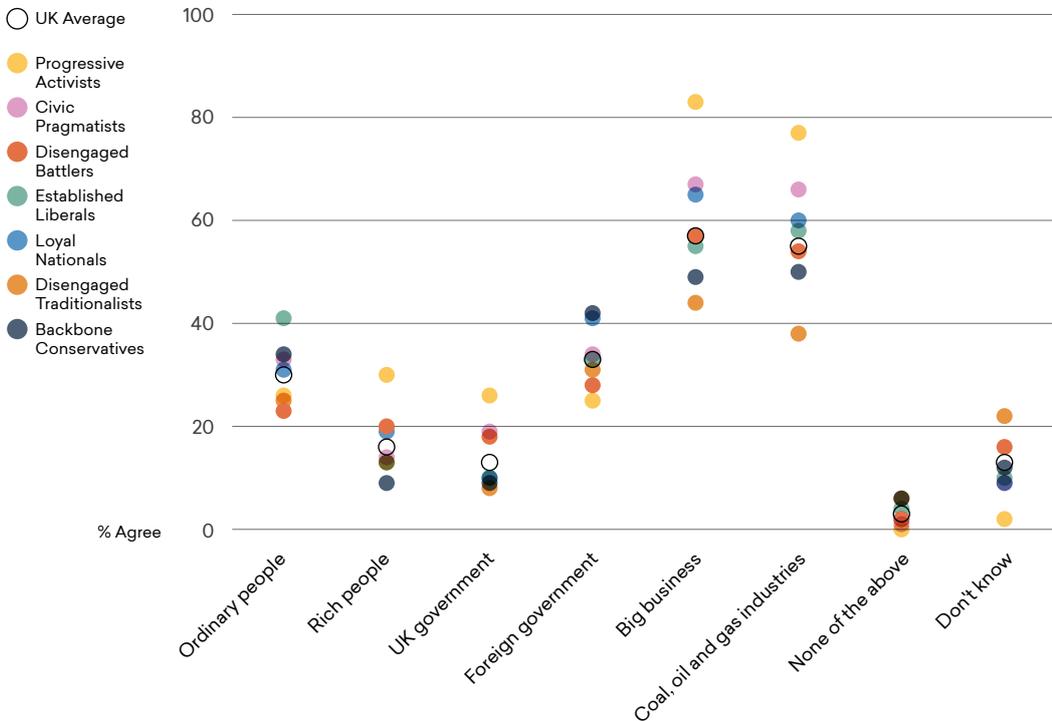
A surprising finding is that three-quarters of Britons agree that the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged them to think more about the environmental consequences of their consumption, such as buying more seasonal products. The three segments that most strongly agree are an unusual combination: Progressive Activists, Loyal Nationals, and Backbone Conservatives, highlighting the way in which the environment resonates in unexpected ways across the segments.

While there are differences of emphasis that reflect differences in their values, Figure 10.9 shows that on responsibility for environmental harm, the segments have a difference in emphasis, but not a fundamental difference in worldview. Britons attribute blame for causing damage to the environment chiefly to big businesses and the fossil fuel industry. Both Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives are outliers in being influenced by specific political narratives: Progressive Activists are far more likely to blame rich people, while Backbone Conservatives are far more likely to blame foreign governments.

Figure 10.9.

## Who is to blame for environmental damage?

Britons blame big business and fossil fuel industries more than ordinary people and the government



Qu. Who do you think is most responsible for causing damage to the environment? Please pick up to three. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

Britons are also united in believing that, to address climate change and protect the environment, leadership must come from the government. Differences of emphasis are reflected here – with stronger views among socially liberal groups that more needs to be done – but there is agreement that the government needs to take charge in tackling climate change.

While there are differences of viewpoint about the pace of change required to protect the environment, public opinion is strongly in favour of more and faster action: asked to choose between the two options, 52 per cent say radical change is needed, versus 32 per cent who opt for slower, more gradual change. Only 6 per cent believe that we shouldn't change anything to respond to climate change. Majorities of the Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, and Disengaged Battlers say that urgent, radical change is required, while pluralities (although not outright majorities) of the four other segments think that slow, gradual change would be better.

**'Radical. I think we've done the gradual thing and it's not made any change, particularly. I think the gradualness that we're doing isn't catching up with the speed that the environment is changing. So, I think we need something radical to actually catch up and get ahead of it as well. Not that I know what that is.'**

*Daniel, Civic Pragmatist, 34, North West*



## In their own words



'Only governments can make those big decisions about climate change. The big decision that the British government could take would be to replace all our fossil-fuel burning stations and replace them with a nuclear programme. And those are things that I can't do. None of these are things that we can do...'

*Richard, Backbone Conservative, 69, East of England*



'I think it would be better if it came from the top down. I think big businesses should change. Me, I really just feel like a small person in a really big planet. So, I don't really feel like I can make that much of a difference although I do know that it takes one person to make a change or whatever...'

*Elizabeth, Loyal National, 39, Scotland*



'I think governments would be a good start. Governments are the people that are running the country. They decide the laws and the way people have to live. So that's I think where the main driver has to come from.'

*Jake, Disengaged Traditionalist, 47, South East*



'You can see with the Coronavirus how they have developed strategies, they need to do the same with climate change. They need to get the panel together and see what they can do. Then it's not just our country. You need all of the countries, you know, you need everybody to do it. It's no good one country doing it and then the other countries not doing it. So you need to be all together, united.'

*Sophie, Loyal National, 32, North East*



'I think definitely every individual is responsible for taking their own action and if individuals don't take responsibility then we'll never get anywhere. But, there is also a responsibility within the government to make sure that the public have the information and the resources that they need to be able to take their individual action, so we've all got a big part to play.'

*Amber, Civic Pragmatist, 22, West Midlands*



‘We’ve always expected politicians and states to act on this and to enforce things from the top down. But actually, what we’re seeing more and more is companies and organisations and collectives just doing it themselves... That seems like it’s got a lot more traction and ability to act more quickly than the government can... it’s everyone’s responsibility to be aware of what they can do. If you happen to be somebody who can control the way your company spends its money or how it travels and to give incentives, for example, like Cycle to Work or subsidising people who come by public transport, that kind of thing, as a company or organisation you can actually have a big impact on your local area.’

*Sally, Progressive Activist, 29, South East*

## 10.4 Risks: Could the environment become a force that divides us?

**'I think [Extinction Rebellion] maybe have a point about some things. But they go about things in the completely wrong way and just annoy the general public. If they could get the general public on side and give them the evidence to try and get things done. I mean if you've got people trying to get to work and there's people stopping your train, you're just hacking off everyone on that train but it's not going to get everyone on your side.'**

*Oliver, Loyal National, 38, Scotland*

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In countries such as the United States, debates about the environment and climate have been drawn into wider conflicts around identity and values. These debates can flare up quickly, inflamed by opinion commentators, social media, and online disinformation. This section examines the risks of these divisive dynamics playing out in the United Kingdom around climate and environmental issues, notwithstanding the common ground among Britons and the potential for action on the environment to unify people from across different segments of the population.

The risk of environmental issues becoming a force for division arises from the fact that many aspects of people's daily lives have environmental consequences – such as the industries on which communities rely for jobs and livelihoods, diesel and petrol cars, air travel, the consumption of meat and dairy, and leisure activities. In some instances, people's sense of identity or community are strongly attached to those activities (for example, historically the identity of many working class communities in Britain was shaped around coal mining). Criticism of those activities, or efforts to encourage people to change behaviour, can be perceived or portrayed as an attack on the identity of people involved in those activities. In turn, this can provoke resentment and social division. The *gilets jaunes* (Yellow Jackets) movement that emerged in France in 2018 is one example of this dynamic, when a government proposal to increase the tax on diesel fuel became the lightning rod for a much larger movement to emerge across the regions of France, galvanising millions of people who resented 'out-of-touch elites' in Paris (who mostly do not drive) making their lives more difficult.

The unifying potential for environmental protection could be undermined if it is drawn into the broader forces of division and 'us-versus-them' polarisation, where people feel forced to choose between two starkly opposed alternatives. Environmental issues could be drawn into existing divisions in society. The possibility for environmental issues to become a future flashpoint between Leaver and Remainer identities is reflected in the finding that while 68 per cent of those who voted to Remain say that they trust climate scientists, only 46 per cent of Leavers agree. Similarly, university graduates are more likely to support the tactics of environmental activists than non-graduates (27 per cent v 18 per cent).

Environmental debates have the potential to become more emotionally charged, and therefore potentially more divisive, because environmental actions often have a moral dimension. Groups may be divided into good or bad according to their actions, and they can pass moral judgments on each other and create a sense of shame (for polluting, failing to recycle, or continuing environmentally harmful activities). This could lead to environmental debates becoming more connected to differences in identity (not just opinions), where groups' sense of victimhood at other groups' perceived privileges are activated.

The fact that environmental issues have such strong resonance with progressive and liberal values can lead to those voices defining environmental policies solely within the confines of their identity. However, because their values and sense of identity are often very different from other segments of society, this can be alienating to those who also have values that connect strongly to environmental protection, but from different standpoints. While research shows that protecting the environment actually has much wider appeal, there are also associated risks:

- Environmental protection is mostly *not* currently seen as a partisan issue in Britain, even if there is greater intensity and higher levels of support among Progressive Activists especially. Asked whether climate change is mainly a concern for left-wing people, relatively few people agree – with the highest proportions among the segments being 22 per cent of Disengaged Traditionalists and 19 per cent of Backbone Conservatives.
- Nevertheless, the intensity of Progressive Activists' belief in environmental priorities, and their very loud voices on social media, makes it possible for them to dominate advocacy around climate and the environment. If that happens, the dynamics of affective polarisation could lead conservatives with strong political identities to oppose environmental protection, merely to oppose progressives who support it. Negative partisanship is often a stronger motivator than positive partisan loyalties. This creates incentives for political actors to oppose policies that are closely tied to their opponents' identities.
- Activist organisations may choose to polarise a debate or an issue as a means of mobilising highly engaged supporters into action, but this can create a dynamic of activists versus the wider community. While 67 per cent of the population agrees with the aims of environmental activists, only 25 per cent of the population believe that their tactics are helping the cause. Some 60 per cent of Progressive Activists support the aims of environmental activists and think they are helping the cause, yet just 7 per cent of Disengaged Traditionalists and 10 per cent of Backbone Conservatives do.
- There are perceptions of double standards from celebrities and environmental campaigners, with 52 per cent of the population agreeing that 'environmental campaigners are mostly hypocrites who fly on holiday while lecturing the rest of us about how to live'. Only 16 per cent of Progressive Activists agree with this premise.

To prevent these risks, environment challenges and policies need to be framed in ways that speak to the values and identities of each of the segments, and to the shared values of all.

Another significant risk to sustaining broad and unifying support for environmental protection is the **perception of unfairness in who bears the costs of change**. There are many dimensions to improving environmental protection, some of which involve costs and changes to day-to-day habits. For those changes to enjoy widespread acceptance, they need to appear fair – that is, they must not impose burdens on particular groups in society in ways that

people feel are unfair or disproportionate. Moral foundations theory highlights the importance for people with stronger conservative values that fairness involves proportionality and no cheating. To avoid perceptions of unfairness, the costs of adjustment should not be disproportionately on people who have little capacity to bear those costs, such as people on lower incomes and those who are forced to travel longer distances for work.

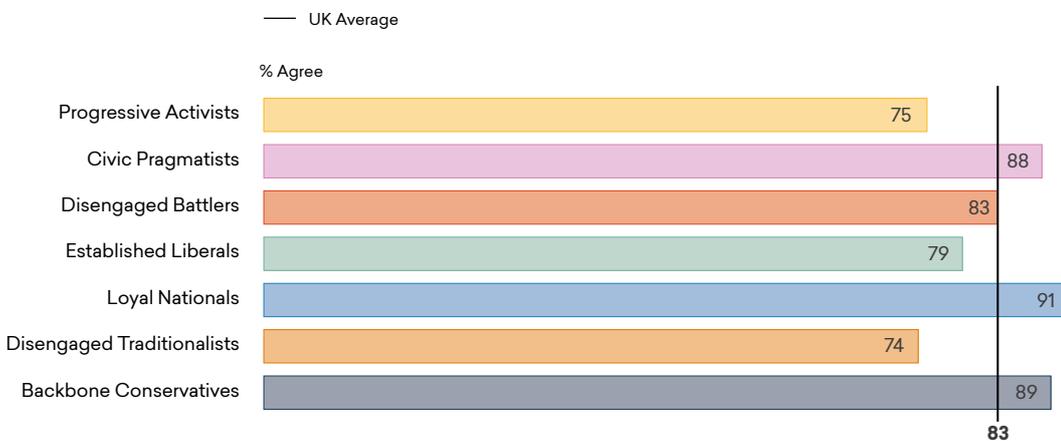
The importance of fairness in environmental measures is reflected in the strong support among Backbone Conservatives and Loyal Nationals shown in Figure 10.10 for stricter environmental rules applying to everyone. Overall, eight in ten Britons say they would accept stricter rules if they applied equally to all. Fairness appears to be a more salient concern than the fact that environmental protection measures may have costs, although it is notable that around two in five Backbone Conservatives and Disengaged Traditionalists express concerns about green policies affecting how individuals travel. This was reflected in focus group conversations, such as with concerns about electric vehicles only being affordable to the haves, while governments impose heavier taxes on the have-nots who can only afford diesel or petrol cars.

Figure 10.10.

## Rules for protecting the environment

Provided that rules apply equally to everyone, the segments agree on stricter regulation to protect the environment

### Stricter rules to protect the environment are only fine if the same rules apply to everyone



Qu. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Stricter rules to protect the environment are only fine if the same rules apply to everyone. February 2020.  
Source: More in Common 2020.

The potential for environmental debates to become divisive is increased by the wider problem of the **growth of disinformation and conspiracy theories**.<sup>4</sup> Information about the environment is being communicated in an environment of declining faith in institutions and established media. This highlights the need to elevate expert voices that resonate with the wider public and that carry scientific authority and credibility. This is especially critical as disinformation efforts grow more intense, and their effects become more ubiquitous on social media. Progressive Activists and Civic Pragmatists have greater trust in a range of sources of information on the climate and report a high level of awareness. Some of the most important sources of information about the environment are not well trusted, particularly among the Disengaged segments, Loyal Nationals, and Backbone Conservatives.

The danger of the environment being drawn into wider societal conflicts is in addition to a more general threat to its capacity to bring people together: the risk that people lose confidence in their own agency and in the UK's **ability to have a genuinely positive impact** on the environment. The scale of the threat of climate change and the need for collective action by nations all across the world can be debilitating, because of the difficulty of seeing the connection between small actions and their impact.

- Preoccupation with financial survival makes it harder for people to engage with longer-term environmental concerns, with almost one in three saying that they are so busy focusing on day-to-day survival that climate change does not cross their minds.
- The complexity of environmental science is a problem – just under half of the population says that it is hard to know what to do to help the environment.
- Pessimism about our society's capacity to change can undermine confidence – 54 per cent worry that we are too set in our ways to stop climate change.
- Four in ten Britons also agree that there is no point in trying to do anything about climate change because big businesses and other countries will keep on polluting.
- A majority of Progressive Activists, Civic Pragmatists, Disengaged Battlers, and Loyal Nationals believe that those in power do nothing to protect the environment because they want to maintain the system as it is now, a belief shared by half of the total population.
- This feeling of powerlessness in the face of a challenge is most pronounced among the two Disengaged segments and Loyal Nationals.

## 10.5 Key takeaways

Most people in the United Kingdom share a strong sense of connection to the countryside and believe we need to better protect the environment. A vision for stronger environmental protection and a greener future resonates strongly with people's sense of identity and values, reflecting its potential to bring communities together. It also accords with people's desire for change after the divisive Brexit years and the very difficult experience of Covid-19, as well as its economic fallout. Environmental protection speaks to widely-held sentiments about the kind of society people want to live in, and to the way that people want to live – being more in harmony with nature and more connected to their local community.

Understanding the way that environmental issues connect to people's core beliefs and how they are expressed in different ways is important if we are to realise the potential for action on the environment that can unify society. Environmental protection can resonate widely with the population because it can speak to differing values systems – whether it is global justice or preserving our heritage – in support of the same policy aims. Its dimensions also range from practical household action and local community initiatives through to Britain's place on the world stage.

Environmental issues have a sense of priority and urgency because of both the 'back-to-nature' experience that many people had during the pandemic and the need to rebuild economies to recover from the Covid-19 recession. The pandemic has renewed Britons' sense of agency in the face of the climate

change challenge. A majority of people feel that taking action on the climate is an opportunity to create new jobs in Britain after the pandemic. A large majority of the public is also in favour of a Green New Deal, with its focus on new infrastructure and a structural transformation of the country's economy.

However, there is also a risk that the environment and climate change could be drawn into conflicts based on culture and identity. Some of the differences between segments on environmental protection reflect broader fault lines in society around fairness, activism, the role of experts, and Britain's acceptance of international rules. Disinformation around climate change is likely to continue increasing, and there is potential for divisive debates about who bears the costs of the changes we need to make in our own lives. Navigating society's existing fault lines and sustaining a unifying commitment to the protection of the environment requires an understanding of the dimensions of identity and core beliefs that can be activated around environmental protection. Such an understanding enables us to anticipate both the opportunities to unite and the risks of division that need to be mitigated against.

The chapter touches on just a few of our many findings relating to the environment and climate, which are explored in more detail in the *Britain Talks Climate* project, launched in November 2020 by Climate Outreach and the European Climate Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 The research questions that we report in this chapter were the result of our partnership with the European Climate Foundation and Climate Outreach to research public attitudes on climate change. The findings are more fully reported in *Britain Talks Climate: A Toolkit for Engaging the British Public on Climate Change*.
- 2 Susie Wang and Adam Corner, *Britain Talks Climate: A Toolkit for Engaging the British Public on Climate Change* <<https://climateoutreach.org/britain-talks-climate>>.
- 3 An example of Prime Minister Johnson's framing of renewable energy policy with reference to British history is his remarks in his 2020 Conservative Party conference speech, in which he remarked: "'I remember how some people used to sneer at wind power, 20 years ago, and say that it wouldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding. They forgot the history of this country. It was offshore wind that puffed the sails of Drake and Raleigh and Nelson, and propelled this country to commercial greatness.'"
- 4 See: John Cook, 'Understanding and Countering Misinformation about Climate Change', in *Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online* (Hershey, PA: IGI-Global, 2019), pp. 281–306.
- 5 The research questions that we report in this chapter were the result of our partnership with the European Climate Foundation and Climate Outreach to research public attitudes on climate change. The findings are more fully reported in *Britain Talks Climate: A Toolkit for Engaging the British Public on Climate Change*.

