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Green Evolution: Lessons from British Climate Policy, 1973-2020

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, the approach that the United Kingdom has taken to climate policy has undergone a dramatic evolution, from a fierce opponent of climate policy at any level to a strong supporter of such policy at both the domestic and international level. That shift—which took place under both Labour and Conservative administrations—was driven primarily by two factors: increased public opinion in favor of climate regulation and a shifting judgment about the value of such policy to the British economy. This evolution holds four main lessons for advocates of sustainable development: 1.) Durable cross-party support for climate change policies is possible, provided that politicians view supporting climate policy to be in their interest; 2.) Public pressure after elections is as important as pressure during elections to ensure that politicians' campaign promises match policies they enact in office; 3.) The business community can have a transformational effect on the policy debate when it recalculates the value of climate policies into its bottom line; and 4.) Ambitious governmental action on climate change is easiest when accomplished in steps, rather than in an overnight, all-or-nothing period.

Author's Note

Hello! My name is Eric Scheuch, and I am a current senior undergraduate at Columbia University in New York, New York (10027), affiliated with the Earth Institute's Sustainable Development program and the Department of Political Science. I have been an admirer of the cross-party British consensus on the need for climate policy since watching the 2015 UK General Election in high school, and was alarmed for a long time about the impact that Brexit might have on that policy, much of which was tied up closely in British participation in European Union institutions. Last

spring, while taking a class on the European Union, I had the chance to write a paper on the impact of Brexit on British climate policy, which forms the core of this paper. I hope that you have as much fun reading this as I did writing it!

Keywords

United Kingdom, environmental policy, climate change, public opinion, environmental politics, Brexit

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last five decades, there has been a steady progressive evolution in Britain's attitude toward climate policy, from complete hostility toward climate policy at all levels to strong participation at the national, international, and, until recently, supranational levels. That evolution has been almost consistently positive, and has taken place under governments of both parties. It has been driven by two main political trends that have transcended any one Prime Ministership: increasing domestic political pressure for governmental action on climate change, and a recalibration of the perceived impact of such regulation on the British economy. These trends persist today, and help to explain why Brexit is unlikely to fundamentally change either the goals or form of British climate policy (Pollitt and Chyong, 2017). Key lessons can be drawn from these trends about the possibility of cross-party consensus on climate policy, the need for constant public pressure, the role of the business community in the climate debate, and the gradual nature of the policy process.

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II. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BRITISH CLIMATE POLICY

Under Margaret Thatcher's (1979-1990) Conservative government, the UK actively opposed climate policy at the national, supranational, and international levels. Such opposition was made easier by a lack of public demand for climate regulation; climate change had just begun to enter into the public consciousness during Thatcher's reign, and had not yet acquired a high level of public urgency (Harris, 2017). Britain came under intense pressure from its fellow EU member states as a result of its opposition, with one of its peers denouncing it as the "dirty man of Europe" (Harris, 2017). Thatcher repeatedly refused to yield to such pressure, however, so long as she viewed climate regulation to be detrimental to the economy and public pressure on the issue remained lacking.

One prominent instance of Thatcherite opposition to climate regulation came in 1989 when France, the Netherlands, and Norway convened the Hague Summit on the Atmosphere. This was one of the earliest international attempts to address climate change as a standalone environmental issue (Harris, 2017). Despite the participation of 17 governments, the UK's refusal to join them forced the European Communities to withdraw as a bloc. In justification of this decision, the UK emphasized that it could "not accept a body with supranational powers that could supersede national sovereignty on environmental issues" (Harris, pg 70).

While maintaining its resistance toward European climate policy, the Thatcher government began to loosen its opposition to broader international climate policy after the Hague Summit (Zito, 1999). This shift was due partly to public pressure; voters had expressed their dislike of Thatcher's opposition to climate regulation in the 1989 European elections by handing the UK Green Party a record 15% of the vote, up from just 0.5% in 1984 (Zito, 1999). Faced with these developments, Thatcher began to shift her approach to climate policy at the international level, while remaining firmly opposed to it at the supranational level. In a speech at the UN in 1990, Thatcher leaned into international climate policy, acknowledging the danger of global warming and calling for the negotiation of an international framework treaty on which future international climate action could be based (D. Fischer, 2013).

The United Kingdom would live up to Thatcher's promise of a UN framework treaty, but it would not be under Thatcher, who resigned just months after her UN speech. Under her successor and protégé, John Major, the UK attended the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The Rio summit resulted in the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which committed signatories to working together to fight climate change and provided a framework which could be used to create future climate treaties. Inspired by the UNFCCC, the European Union searched for policy mechanisms it could employ to work toward the treaty's climate goals. Under the January-June 1993 Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, a major part of the Council's agenda was creating an EU-administered carbon tax (Kluk, 2002). The UK Government made their opposition to the tax clear (Weale, 1999), and, despite strong efforts by the Danes to change their minds (Golub, 1996), the British effectively ended debate on the issue before it began. When German representatives took over the Presidency of the Council in 1994, they introduced a new carbon tax proposal designed to accommodate British concerns (Golub, 1996). The UK once again rejected the tax, forcing Germany to withdraw its proposal.

While the Major government continued Thatcher's opposition to climate action at the supranational level and support of it at the international level, it committed itself to domestic climate action by signing the UNFCCC. In 1993, the Conservative government turned around and introduced a carbon tax of its own under Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke. However, in the face of firm opposition from the Labour party and a rebellion from Conservative backbenchers, the tax failed. Major's actions on climate change temporarily appeased the public pressure that Thatcher had faced; the UK Green Party vote share, which can be used as a proxy factor for public opinion on climate change, went from 15% in the 1989 European elections to just 3% in 1994, the next election after Major's signing of the UNFCCC.

In the 1997 general election, the Labour party campaigned on making Britain more involved with climate action at the European level, stating that "a Labour government will strengthen cooperation in the European Union on environmental issues, including climate change and ozone depletion." Labour also combined its environmental goals with its social and

economic goals, making 1997 the first time a major British party had framed climate progress within the context of sustainable development (Darkin, 2006). The Conservatives, on the other hand, ran largely on a platform of business-as-usual. Labour won, ending 18 years of Conservative leadership and marking a new era in European climate policy.

Part of Labour's success may be attributed to the fact that, despite being temporarily sated by Conservative moves on the environment in the early 1990s, by the end of that decade public pressure for action on climate change had continued to rise. Between 1993, when the Major administration blocked the Danish Carbon Tax, and 2000, when Blair rolled out his major domestic climate action item, the percentage of Britons "very concerned" about air pollution rose from 54% to 63% (Taylor, 2012). Under the 10-year Prime Ministership of Tony Blair, the Labour government would participate in three major pieces of carbon mitigation legislation: the international 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the domestic 2000 Climate Change Programme, and the supranational 2006 European Trading System.

The Blair government played a leadership role in the formation of the 1997 Kyoto protocol just months after the election and the subsequent adoption of international emissions reduction targets, building the policy framework upon which all subsequent international climate agreements have been based (Darkin, 2006). Labour's commitment to strong climate policy at the domestic level continued with the release of the 2000 Climate Change Programme. Kyoto and the Programme together committed the UK to cutting its emissions to an ambitious 23% below 1990 levels by 2010 (House, 2005). Part of the program involved implementing a domestic "climate change levy" in 2001, allowing the government to succeed where the Conservatives had failed in 1993 (House, 2008). Labour's focus on climate action at the domestic and international levels was formed not only out of concern for the environment, but also out of a calculation that climate regulation could result in new business opportunities and economic benefits that outweigh the costs—the opposite calculation from the Conservatives under Thatcher (Darkin, 2006). That calculation was shared by some in the business community; the Climate Change Programme was based in part on recommendations from Lord Marshall, a former President of the Confederation of British Trade

Industries (Darkin, 2006). While the Confederation itself remained opposed to such regulation, Marshall demonstrated that attitudes were changing among some influential members of the business community. This focus on climate action proved to be quite popular in the court of public opinion; in the 2001 election, the Conservatives ran on rolling back Labour's climate regulations, only to lose to Labour again in another landslide (Carter, 2009).

At the same time that Labour was implementing the Climate Change Programme and the Climate Change Levy, the European Commission was considering implementing a bloc-wide emissions trading system (ETS) to help countries meet their obligations under Kyoto (Ellerman and Buchner, 2007). As the new Europe-wide ETS took shape under another Danish Presidency of the Council, Britain participated in planning the proposal from the beginning (Veenman and Liefferink, 2012). This contrasted strongly with its blocking of the carbon tax, when the UK refused to take part in the drafting of the policy by the Commission, and then conspired to block it without further attempts at participation once it had moved onto the Council (Veenman and Liefferink, 2012).

The UK's change in approach could be attributed to the Blair government's view of the EU's impact on the British economy. Whereas Thatcher and Major viewed European carbon policy as a threat to British economic growth, Blair saw a financial opportunity to make London the center of a new carbon trading industry (Meckling, 2011). Thus, the willingness of the UK to participate in the formation of the ETS was due, in part, to a change in the calculation of how beneficial carbon reduction legislation would be to the UK economy. As a result, at least in part because of the UK's leadership, Europe finally got its ETS, which debuted in 2005 (Meckling, 2011). It was then, and is now, the largest carbon pricing system in the world.

In 2007, Tony Blair resigned and gave way to Gordon Brown. Rather than waiting for the EU to take the lead on climate policy and shaping UK policy to match it, as Blair did with the ETS, Brown's administration wrote an aggressive new climate law known as the Climate Change Act of 2008 and pushed the EU to match it. This further evolution in British climate policy was due, once again, to the twin forces of

public opinion and increased recognition of the benefits that climate regulation had for Great Britain.

British public opinion began a strong push for increased climate regulation in 2005. Although Labour had already released its Climate Change Programme and helped author the ETS, there was an increasing demand for yet more action. These demands were driven by three trends: the release of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, which was highly influential among British viewers; a rise in scientific reports outlining just how devastating climate change would be for Britain; and an increase in media coverage of the issue (Carter and Jacobs, 2013). Within a year, the vast majority of the public was demanding increased action on the issue; by 2006, one poll by Ipsos MORI found that a whopping 94 percent of respondents believed that further action should be taken to combat climate change (Ipsos MORI, 2006).

These changes in public opinion led to the rise of an organized "Big Ask" campaign, which demanded that MPs commit to statutory emissions reductions that went beyond what was outlined in the ETS (Carter and Jacobs, 2013). As public opinion shifted, there was an increased recognition by government and opponents alike that the benefits of stronger climate regulation outweighed the costs. By 2007, even the Confederation of British Industry—the same organization that had so vigorously supported Thatcher's opposition to environmental regulation of any type—was calling for carbon reduction targets (Lockwood, 2013).

In large part due to these changes in public opinion, there was a legislative push—from both the Labour Party and from the two major opposition parties, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives—for increased climate regulation that went above and beyond the existing European policy. While support from the Liberal Democrats was unsurprising given the party's long history of championing of environmental causes, the vocal support from the Conservatives was more surprising, and was due largely to efforts of the new Conservative leader, David Cameron (Carter, 2009). Such widespread support for legislation across all sectors helped smooth the way for an ambitious new climate bill, and, in 2008, the Climate Change Act passed with support from a majority of MPs from all three parties. In an indication of how far members of the opposition had evolved on the issue, one of the main figures in rallying Conservative support for the bill was John Gummer, who

had played a key role in stopping the German carbon tax in 1994. One of the essential components of the Act was a commitment to reduce British emissions by 80% by 2050. After the passage of the Act, the UK advocated for the EU to match that commitment, showing its progress from blocking EU climate goals in the 1990s to negotiating low goals in the mid-2000s to leading the creation of new goals in the late 2000s (Bocse, 2020).

The 2010 election brought an end to thirteen years of Labour rule and restored the Conservatives to power, but the cabinet that moved into Whitehall was very different from the last Conservative government to hold power. Under David Cameron, the Conservatives ran on an ambitious climate platform that promised to create "the greenest government in history" and advocated that "European countries need to work together to [...] combat global climate change" (Conservative Party, 2010). The early work of Cameron's coalition government lived up to its promises by further advancing British climate policy, including the extension of carbon reduction targets to 2027, the creation of a "Green Bank," new energy loan programs, and utility reforms (Carter and Jacobs, 2013). Such climate action continued to be popular at the polls, and, in 2015, voters rewarded Cameron's Conservatives with another term and an increased majority.

In 2016, after losing the Brexit referendum he himself authorized, Cameron resigned, and gave way to Theresa May. While Brexit would, ipso facto, lead to a change in Britain's role in European climate policy—it is difficult to lead in the formulation of policy through an institution when you no longer belong to that institution—under May there was strong continuity in Britain's approach to climate policy at both the domestic and international levels. May led British ratification of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2016, and publicly rebuked President Donald Trump when he pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement the following year (Merrick, 2017). On the domestic front, she led an amendment to the Climate Change Act that committed the UK to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050—its most ambitious emissions target yet—making it the first G7 country to commit to this level of emissions (Walker, Mason, and Carrington, 2019). Just as the original Climate Change Act was passed in part in response to media-driven shifts in public opinion, so was the net-zero amendment. In March of 2019, polling firm Ipsos MORI

registered its highest level of concern about the environment since 2007, and several polls saw a further jump in voter concern after the Extinction Rebellion protests in April of that year, which were accompanied by significant media coverage (Ipsos MORI, 2019).

May's successor, Boris Johnson, has been in office barely a year, and with his tenure dominated by Brexit and Coronavirus, he has said little on the subject of climate policy. Nevertheless, he seems primed to continue May's policy of strong climate action at the domestic and international levels. In February, as Britain hosted the COP-26 climate summit, he reaffirmed support for the net-zero goal and called on other countries to follow Britain's lead, indicating that he will maintain Britain's role as an international climate leader (Farand, 2020). At the same conference, he announced that he would be moving up the deadline for Britain to ban the sale of new diesel cars from 2040, where May had set it, to 2035, suggesting support for further domestic action on climate change (Edie, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has not dampened the enthusiasm of the British public for climate action either; a July poll found that 67% of British voters support a coronavirus relief package that makes tackling climate change a priority, including a majority of voters among all three major parties (George, 2020). Supporters of the net-zero goal include the Confederation of British Industry, which, in 2018, said that such a target, properly deployed, would have a "range of benefits across UK business sectors including power and industry" indicating, once again, a vast shift in the business calculus around climate change regulation (Confederation, 2018).

Over the course of Britain's membership in the European Union (1973-2020), the consensus of British elites on climate change underwent a dramatic shift, from opposing climate regulation at all costs in the name of business and sovereignty to a wide coalition supportive of a net-zero by 2050 goal. This evolution was primarily driven by the consistent application of public pressure and a recalculation of the value of climate policy to the British economy.

III. KEY LESSONS

There are several key lessons that the UK's experience holds for its peer nations, including fellow members of the EU, member nations of the

Commonwealth, and the United States. First, it illustrates that durable cross-party support for climate change policies is possible, provided that politicians view supporting climate policy as strategically beneficial; the Conservative Party started backing climate policy only after it became a salient election issue in the minds of the public. In economic terms, politicians are rational, self-interested actors, and if the electorate demands action on climate change, they are likely to follow along. The mixed news for climate advocates is that there is some evidence of climate change increasing in salience as its costs—in terms of natural disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires—become more visible. In the 2020 U.S. Presidential debates, for example, climate change earned a prominent place among the topics discussed in both head-to-head encounters of the two major presidential candidates, after receiving little mention in the debates four years earlier (Harder, 2020). The debates took place during both a record fire season in the American West and a record hurricane season in the American south-east, both of which could have played a role in increasing the issue's importance in voters' minds.

Backing the concept of such a causal link, one study directly linked proximity to 2020 fires to individual support for climate action (Hazlett and Mildenerger, 2020), although the study also found evidence that the increase is more prominent among liberal voters than conservatives, potentially limiting its impact on the wider public. There is similar evidence from Australia, with support for climate change mitigation reaching an all-time high after the devastating 2019 fire season (Slezak, 2020).

If the UK is any guide, however, while increased backing for climate policy in polls can help, it is itself not enough to move politicians; true results are seen when climate action is a winning issue in elections, as it was in the 1997 and 2001 British elections. Recent elections in the United States have been somewhat encouraging on this front; President Joe Biden won industrial states such as Michigan and Pennsylvania despite promising to "phase out" the oil industry, while fossil fuel-backed incumbent senators lost reelection in Colorado and Arizona (Ronayne and Knickmeyer, 2020). A similar situation played out in the 2019 election north of the border in Canada, with 63% of Canadians backing parties whose platforms included support for major action on climate change (Meyer, 2019). In a perfect example of

how such electoral results can translate into policy consequences, the new government backed Canada's first-ever net-zero goal less than a month later, explicitly citing the election results as a justification for implementing the ambitious policy (Meyer, 2019). In the UK, an early sign of the shifting consensus on climate was the change in the climate platforms of both major parties, with both backing climate action starting with the 2005 general election. In 2020, the U.S. Democratic national climate platform was the most aggressive in history, while congressional Republicans released their first-ever climate policy plan that, while modest in scope, was a marked shift from the party's previous policy of denying the existence of climate change altogether (Roberts, 2020). However, Britain's case study suggests that other factors are also important in creating a bipartisan consensus on climate.

One of those factors is the application of continual public pressure between elections, in order to make sure that the policies underpinning campaigns match those enacted in office. Climate mitigation, especially at the scale necessary to meet the 2°C goal established under the Paris Agreement, is expensive and requires lifestyle changes among the population, and therefore can be popular in polls but difficult to implement in practice. One needs only to look to the carbon tax that inspired France's Yellow Vest movement to witness a policy that was popular in polls but unpopular in implementation (Douenne and Fabre, 2020). In the face of such backlash, it is tempting for politicians to scale back the ambitions of their policies to be more popular among the public, but also require smaller reductions in emissions.

As Britain shows, one way to prevent that from happening is for activists to apply continual public pressure, rather than just pressuring politicians during election cycles. The British example of this was the "Big Ask" campaign, which leveraged celebrity endorsements and public lobbying to push the incumbent Labour government to implement ever more ambitious forms of climate policies. The campaign did not happen overnight, but rather took years of organizing and building a wide coalition to successfully trigger change. The campaign is still ongoing; one of the drivers of the current British government's continued action on climate is the ongoing work of Extinction Rebellion, more than a decade after the "Big Ask" campaign first began (Ipsos MORI, 2019).

While organized, continual public pressure on the British government was important on its own, this effort was amplified by the amount of media coverage of the issue. This underscores the link between which of the issues are covered by the media and which make their way into the public consciousness. Historically, since climate change is a somewhat abstract issue with costs that are sometimes hard to see in the moment, there has been a dearth of media coverage of the issue that reached a wide swathe of the public, with the exception of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

In Britain, at least, this has changed somewhat, with coverage of climate change hitting an all-time high in recent years. Spikes in media coverage are often, unsurprisingly, linked to extreme weather, and as these weather events become more frequent, so do such spikes (Hope, 2019). The baseline level of coverage has also risen, however, suggesting that the media sees climate as a salient issue even when its costs are not immediately in the forefront of the public consciousness. A rise in media coverage of climate change can help drive increased public awareness of the issue, since it highlights the costs of climate change in voters' minds even if they are not seeing them firsthand in their own communities. It can also drive further action by politicians, who often use media coverage as a proxy for what voters are thinking about at any particular moment. There are indications that increased media coverage of climate change is another ingredient for climate consensus present in many of the UK's peer nations. In the United States, numerous mainstream media outlets such as The New York Times and The Washington Post have stepped up both their regular and investigative coverage of climate change in recent years. That increase was driven in part by an administration hostile to climate action, but is unlikely to cease in a year of record droughts, hurricanes, and wildfires.

Increased coverage of climate change is not guaranteed, but rather can be subject to the viewpoints of those who control a nation's media outlets. In Australia, for example, major news organizations owned by NewsCorp have continued to give a voice to those who deny that humans play a role in climate change, even as the country burns (Readfearn, 2020). One possible way to account for this is the influence of social media coverage of climate change, which, by the very nature of social media platforms, is a grassroots approach. 2019

was also a banner year for social media conversations about climate change, with over twice as many conversations occurring as those in the previous year. All of this combined presents significant evidence that the ingredients for increased consensus on climate change may be present in the United States and other peer nations.

A third lesson from the United Kingdom is the transformational effect that the business community can have when it recalculates the value of climate policies into its bottom line. From the United Kingdom to the United States, right-wing parties have historically taken policy cues from business groups that are aligned with party views on economic policy. For decades, particularly under the Thatcher and Major administrations, incumbent Conservative governments anchored their opposition to climate policies in the view that such policies would be bad for business. This position aligned with the views of industry trade groups such as the Confederation of British Industries. Around the mid-2000s, however, the position of such groups toward climate legislation began to shift, driven by a view that certain policies, such as carbon trading, represented a potentially profitable opportunity, and that climate change was an increasingly large risk to future profits. While the Conservative shift on climate policy was not solely caused by the evolution of such groups, the increased support for climate action by one of the party's key constituencies was likely a major factor.

This leads to a broader observation that political parties are most likely to back climate action when those they view as their important constituents demand such action. In American politics, one individual example might be former Congressman Carlos Curbelo of Florida. During his service, Curbelo—who represented a congressional district in south Florida, which is among the areas most vulnerable to climate change—regularly bucked his Republican party to back climate legislation, since such legislation was in high demand among his constituents (Harder, 2018). Curbelo's backing made little difference, since one vote only goes so far in a legislative body with 435 members. However, it still provides further evidence that politicians, whether as individuals or as parties, are willing to shift their position to back climate legislation if their constituents demand it.

The fourth, and perhaps most important, lesson that climate advocates can draw from the United Kingdom is that ambitious governmental action on climate change is easiest when accomplished in steps, rather than in an overnight, all-or-nothing period. Bipartisan backing of Britain's net-zero policy didn't happen overnight. Rather, it was the culmination of two decades of progressive public policies that learned from and built upon each other. The success of this incremental approach can be explained with two concepts from political science: the policy cycle and the Overton window.

The policy cycle is a roughly six-step process that describes how public policy is created in an ideal environment. The exact steps of the policy vary between models, but the central tenet remains the same: public policies are most successful when they operate in a cyclical manner, with each building upon the lessons of the last (F. Fischer et al., 2006). The policy cycle can account for the evolutionary nature of numerous successful governmental policies in the U.S., from the Clean Air Act (passed in 1963, amended in 1970, 1977, and 1990) to Medicare (passed in 1966, amended in 1997, 2003, and 2010). The policy cycle is predicated on the fact that creating successful public policy is, by nature, a difficult and expensive endeavor, and such endeavors can be more successful when done in stages. British climate policy can also be described through the policy cycle model, beginning with the 2000 Climate Change Programme and UK participation in the EU ETS, then evolving into the Climate Change Act of 2008, and, finally, Theresa May's goal of net-zero by 2050. Each of these policy structures has learned from the last, and each has enacted more aggressive climate policies than the last. A key to the success of this policy cycle has been a constant willingness among British policymakers, such as those employed by the Committee on Climate Change—a permanent government body dedicated to tracking British progress toward its emissions goals—to reassess progress and to modify policies to ensure they work better going forward.

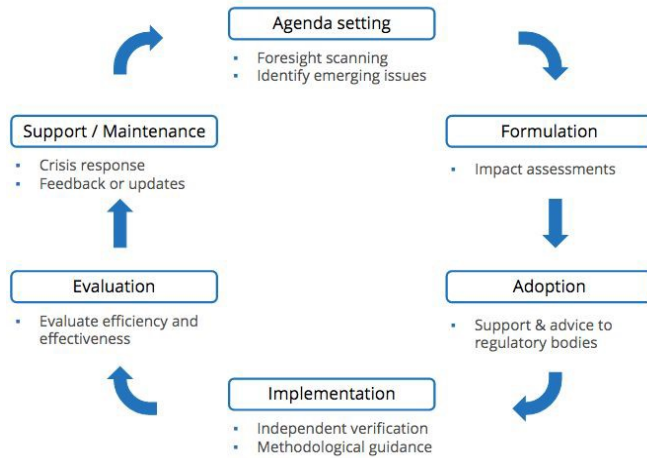


Figure 1: One version of the policy cycle (EU Geosciences Union)

The Overton window is a concept first invented by Joseph P. Overton of the University of Michigan to describe the range of policies acceptable to the public at any given time. Policies that are too radical to be implemented in a given moment due to their unpopularity with the public are said to fall outside of the window. The window is not a static entity, but rather a means of representing the policy views of the public at a given moment (Lehman, 2014). The window matters a great deal to the field of climate policy because policies can vary widely in their ambition and cost, and discerning which policies are acceptable to the majority of the public at a given moment is vital to successfully implementing such policies. Shifts in the Overton window tend to be either gradual or sudden. Britain's engagement with climate policies is an example of a gradual shift. If Labour had campaigned in 1997 on ending sales of gas-powered cars by 2035 and having a carbon neutral economy by 2050, they would have been laughed out of office, as such policies lay far outside the political mainstream. Instead, they campaigned on more modest policies, whose success and public benefits allowed them to gradually shift the window to the left, so that policies, such as the former, that had once been unthinkable were eventually seen as sensible by the bulk of the British public. The trajectory of such a shift is shown in Figure 2.

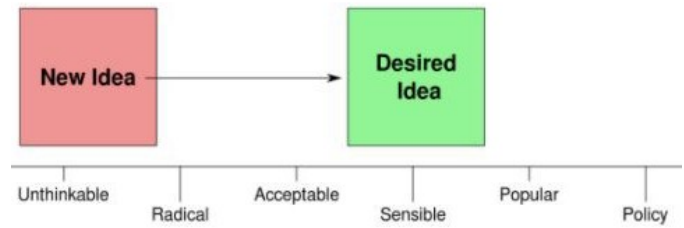


Figure 2: The Overton window (Vox EU)

The Overton window on a given issue can also shift suddenly, usually in response to a given stimulus or event (Lehman, 2014). One example of this from the world of energy policy is the idea of phasing out nuclear power, a stance that became much more popular following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident (Kang, 2019). That case study also illustrates the policy potential of shifts in the window, with the shift after the Fukushima accident leading Germany to phase out all of its nuclear plants.

The British example shows us how, over the course of several years and several governments, the policy cycle and a shifting Overton window can help make once-radical concepts of climate policy become mainstream. The problem is that, if the United States and peer nations are to make the types of emissions cuts necessary to avoid the worst effects of climate change, the world cannot afford to wait for two decades of gradual emissions reduction policies. This is the limitation of the British model; we must make progress on climate policy at a far greater rate than the United Kingdom did if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

In reality, however, we may not need to wait for smaller policies to shift the Overton window and make ambitious climate policies mainstream—climate change may be doing that for us. There is some evidence that adverse environmental conditions caused by climate change, such as air pollution and natural disasters, can lead to greater support for climate policies. An area's exposure to natural disasters has been associated with a more successful adoption of climate mitigation laws (Kalafatis, 2018). Local air pollution has also been shown to increase the likelihood of a successful adoption of climate policies, at least in urban areas (Hess and Gentry, 2019). This suggests that, as the number and severity of extreme climate events increases, the odds of a large shift in the Overton window may also increase.

IV. CONCLUSION

The last four decades have seen the evolution of a cross-party and cross-sectional consensus on the need for Britain to fight climate change. This consensus supports climate action at the domestic and international levels, and has proved durable even amidst Brexit, the largest change in British politics since its joining of the European Communities in 1973. The rise in this consensus has paralleled a steady progressive evolution in climate policy under governments from both major parties, allowing the UK to move from being the “dirty man of Europe” to having the most ambitious climate goals in the G7. An examination of the historical roots of this consensus demonstrates that it has been primarily driven by public pressure and a recalculation of the economic impact of climate regulation.

Britain’s case should give proponents of sustainable development hope that it is possible to build durable, effective, cross-party consensus on climate change. Such consensus is most easily accomplished when politicians consider supporting climate policy to be in their interest, when public pressure is applied both during and after elections, when the business community recalculates the value of climate policies into its bottom line, and when progress is accomplished in steps rather than an overnight period. Britain’s experience does not suggest, however, that doing so is easy—it is quite the opposite, as Britain’s progress on the issue has been driven by decades of hard work by activists and politicians in both parties. Future research on the issue should monitor if the actions of Britain’s leaders continue to live up to their rhetoric, and, specifically, what impacts that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the UK’s carbon reduction goals. The adaptability of the UK model to its peer nations will also be vital, as organizations like Extinction Rebellion ramp up public pressure in countries around the world.

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