

Addressing hardship and climate change: Citizens' perceptions of costs of living, social inequalities and priorities for policy

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Abstract

In the wake of rising energy prices and the cost of living crisis, some have claimed that climate policies are at odds with citizens' more pressing everyday living concerns. Critics challenge these simplifying narratives that shorter term economic and social wellbeing priorities and 'longer term' decarbonization policies are in tension with one another and argue that effective policies must treat them as interconnected. Evidence regarding how citizens think about climate policy mostly focus on policy acceptability, highlighting the role of perceptions of effectiveness and fairness, but there is a quite limited conceptualization of contexts of social inequality, and even more limited engagement with the views of marginalized groups whose buy-in is seen as crucial for effective net zero transitions. This paper reviews the evidence and analyses new data from a small exploratory study with citizens from low income and marginalized backgrounds. In group discussions several participants emphasized the importance of tackling both social hardships and climate priorities, seen by some as interlinked. Further, many described wider societal unfairness relating to experiences of poverty, exploitation, a lack of voice or even recognition and a keen sense of disconnect between politics and their own everyday concerns and lived

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experiences. I argue that climate policy making should engage more fully with contexts of social inequality and that social wellbeing and systematic action on climate change need to be treated by policy makers and politicians as profoundly interlinked challenges.

KEYWORDS

climate change, fairness perceptions, inequalities, policy, voice

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the wake of rising energy prices and the cost of living crisis it has been argued by some that addressing the climate and environmental crises should be less of an immediate priority because of citizens' more pressing everyday living concerns (Euronews, 2023). This framing has been an influential strand within recent UK Conservative Government politics, right wing media and rhetoric surrounding Net Zero goals and environmental policies (Carbon Brief, 2023a). Such simplifying narratives of disconnect between 'social' and 'climate' priorities have been widely discredited. Critics have demonstrated that climate change vulnerabilities and social inequalities more generally are profoundly interconnected and that policies need to recognize this (e.g., Chancel, 2020; Phillips, 2022). Furthermore, survey evidence shows that high levels of climate concern have been sustained through both the pandemic and cost of living crises, indeed UK support for government action on climate has grown over recent years (Verfuert et al., 2023) and high levels of support for climate policies exist across respondents regardless of their economic circumstances (Demski et al., 2022). In short, evidence points to broad consensus about the importance of acting on climate alongside tackling cost of living and social hardships. However, there are gaps in knowledge regarding citizens' varied ideas about directions for climate policy (Fairbrother, 2022) and if and how they see it as relevant, complementary or in tension with tackling cost of living concerns.

A body of research explores citizens' evaluations of climate change mitigation policies and influences on policy preferences (e.g., Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Maestre-Andres et al., 2019) although much of the evidence base relates to lay views about carbon pricing, in turn often linked to hypothetical scenarios (Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023). The evidence shows that the perceived effectiveness and fairness of policies are key to their public acceptability although, notably, there is quite limited consideration of what fairness actually means to citizens (Povitkina et al., 2020), of the bases on which people evaluate climate-relevant policies, and of how they perceive what matters here (Fairbrother, 2022; Povitkina et al., 2020). I will argue that policy decisions need to more fully engage with contexts of social inequality and if and how these influence citizens' perceptions of climate change policies. Relatedly it is necessary to understand the experiences and perceptions of diverse population groupings, especially those who are conventionally on the margins and their voices unheard in climate-relevant decision making (Boss et al., 2023) since it is here that we can expect cost of living concerns to be especially salient.

In this paper, I briefly review evidence on the intersection of inequalities and climate policy, and citizens' views, and then turn to new evidence from a small exploratory study with citizens from low income and marginalized groups in northern England, examining their views of climate policy directions in the context of cost of living concerns. This research took place in the midst of national debate about UK energy and Net Zero policies after the dramatic global energy price increases due to rising demand after Covid lockdowns eased and disruptions to supply following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The research sought to explore how citizens living in less advantaged circumstances discussed social priorities and climate policy, for example whether they saw these to be in tension or aligned to each other, and how. The small study contributes to the extant evidence base as follows. First, it illustrates how participants discussed links between climate policy and tackling social hardships, providing qualitative insight

and complementing extant survey evidence on lay perceptions (e.g., Demski et al., 2022). Second, it illustrates accounts of political disconnect and perceived unfairness, with some participants recounting anger at private profiteering and exploitation and others recounting a generalized political mistrust. Drawing on the analyses I argue that climate policy interventions must embrace and respond to citizens' lived experiences of inequality, constraint, felt injustices and lack of voice in shaping the conditions of their day to day lives (cf. Bal et al., 2023; Middlemiss et al., 2023). The evidence is illustrative of perceived tensions but more often of perceived complementarities between climate policies and tackling cost of living privations, unsurprisingly with an immediacy and urgency accorded to the latter. In addition the analysis highlights the importance of moving beyond concerns about fairness within climate policy (although this remains important) to more fully engage with wider contexts of inequality as integral to enabling inclusive climate policies.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section looks briefly at work on the relationships between climate policies and social inequalities and Section 3 reviews evidence on citizens' priorities vis-à-vis climate policy scenarios. Section 4 considers the gilets jaunes protests in France, exemplifying citizen framings of un/fairness in practice and also considers how some UK politicians have mobilized very particular, unsupported, political claims about un/fairness in climate policy commitments. Section 5 presents the new empirical analysis on lay perceptions of climate policy directions and I conclude in section 6.

2 | CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

The overlapping, interacting, nature of climate change and social inequalities have been well documented (Green & Healy, 2022; Harlan et al., 2015; Islam & Winkel, 2017) as has the need to decarbonize and adapt to climate change without perpetuating inequalities and injustices both across the globe and within countries (e.g., Chancel et al., 2023; Eriksen et al., 2021; Hickel & Slamersak, 2022). It is widely recognized that those who are least responsible for emissions are most vulnerable to their environmental and climate consequences (e.g., Harlan et al., 2015; Newell et al., 2021). So too there is extensive evidence that poorly designed climate policies can exacerbate inequalities and vulnerabilities (Eriksen et al., 2021; Islam & Winkel, 2017; Newell et al., 2021). In consequence climate policies (and so too their absence) should be understood as socially embedded and as having potentially profound social inequalities implications. Many have argued that the social justice implications of climate related interventions need to be at the heart of policy design and implementation (e.g., Green & Healy, 2022; Islam & Winkel, 2017) yet recent social science research points to routine disconnects here (Middlemiss et al., 2023; Ternes et al., 2024).

Markannen and Anger-Kraavi (2019) argue that, despite wide interest in inequalities there is a shortfall of knowledge about the inequalities consequences of climate change mitigation policies, and little by way of a strategic overview of evidence in the area (see also Karlsson et al., 2020). Other research shows that the circumstances and concerns of disadvantaged groups are partially recognized but poorly embedded in policy processes (Middlemiss et al., 2023; Ternes et al., 2024). In their review of UK Net Zero policies, Middlemiss et al. (2023) observe that policy decision making is itself siloed across different sectoral or policy areas, decontextualizing lived experiences which do not neatly disaggregate in this way. Current climate policymaking, they argue, does not sufficiently engage with inequalities contexts and consequences. In their account they seek to 'people' Net Zero policies, considering how complexly linked and relational lives are lived across policy areas and arguing that we need to better understand:

'...how NZ will affect people's lives as a whole, as well as recognising that existing social arrangements, inequalities, and injustices will shape how people will experience these complex, multi-layered policy changes'

(Middlemiss et al., 2023: 2)

Without a sufficient concept of social complexity, Net Zero policies could exacerbate vulnerabilities and create new kinds of marginalization (Middlemiss et al., 2023). Climate change vulnerability and social inequality further undermine health and wellbeing as the cost of living crisis intensifies the hardships of those in poverty (Mulrenan et al., 2023).

These analyses offer important arguments for mainstreaming evidence on social inequalities and vulnerabilities into political directions and joined-up policy framings for low carbon transitions. A wider body of work has examined the role of social policy in societal transitions to Net Zero asking how systems of social protection and welfare might be integral to in transitions to sustainable and inclusive societal arrangements (Gough, 2022; Nenning et al., 2023). However, whilst there is a growing evidence base on what is needed to effect an inclusive low carbon transition there is relatively limited research into lay perceptions of climate policies and of what matters here (Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023). Much of what does exist, as I describe next, provides a quite schematic picture of lay evaluations of policy options with limited evidence on the meanings which people bring to these evaluations.

3 | LAY VIEWS ABOUT WHAT MATTERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF FAIRNESS IN CLIMATE POLICIES

It is widely held that the transition to a low carbon society, and linked policy design and implementation, requires public acceptance and buy-in (Bergquist et al., 2022; Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023; Schaffer, 2023).¹ In turn this invites us to ask: how do citizens perceive (possible) climate policies, what do they prioritize and how might they be engaged in low carbon transitions (Howarth et al., 2020)? Reviews of research into lay support for climate policy highlights the role of influencing factors including individual level factors such as climate concern and political beliefs, contextual factors such as political trust, civic engagement, social norms and media framings and features of the policy itself (e.g., Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Maestre-Andres et al., 2019). I very briefly consider evidence on support for climate policies much of which relates to hypothetical scenarios and policies (Fairbrother, 2022) and shows that, in assessing climate policy scenarios, people especially prioritize policy effectiveness and fairness (Bergquist et al., 2022; Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Kallbekken, 2023). The question of fairness, important within the literature discussed below, overlaps and intersects with justice (on which see Newell et al., 2021) but is not synonymous. For example, expert opinion can be seen as adjudicating just process and outcomes whilst fairness refers to subjective evaluations of process and outcomes (Bal et al., 2023; Goldman & Cropanzano, 2015). Fairness is a central element in citizens' evaluations of climate policy but it is framed in quite generic terms within the literature (Povitkina et al., 2020). Furthermore, the focus on fairness within climate policies does not sufficiently embrace what matters to citizens in the context of wider felt injustices.

Much current evidence on public acceptability of climate policies centres on attitudes to carbon taxation (Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023), on the face of it an important decarbonization policy since, in marketized economies, increasing the costs of emissions should incentivize alternative low carbon ways of doing things. However, in practice carbon taxation has a very mixed record and can be regressive (Chancel, 2020). There are varied possibilities for how carbon taxation is designed and how revenues are put to use, and public evaluations of different options have been the subject of extensive research. Work based on review, cross-national survey analysis and experimental study has highlighted the importance of perceived fairness and effectiveness in citizens' evaluations of climate policies, along with a preference for earmarking of tax revenues both for environmental projects and in favour of lower income or vulnerable groups (e.g., Bergquist et al., 2022; Dechezlepretre et al., 2023; Douenne & Fabre, 2019; Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Maestre-Andres et al., 2019). In their survey in France, Douenne and Fabre (2019) also show broad support for upstream policy options such as regulations around building insulation and fuel emission standards. Fairness preferences are indicative of ways in which social contexts and outcomes of climate policy are important within lay evaluations. However, accounts of public preferences for fairness are quite generalizing, for example, there is limited evidence on the influence of socio-economic diversity in climate policy

fairness perceptions (Maestre-Andres et al., 2019) and on what fairness actually means to citizens (e.g., Povitkina et al., 2020). The literature reviewed offers limited discussion on what is deemed fair, for whom, how different claims to fairness are weighed up or if and how ideas about fairness, and what matters more generally, vary (or not) across different population groupings (cf. Povitkina et al., 2020).

I pause with the question of political trust which is widely identified as an important contextual factor influencing lay views about policy directions, fair process and fair outcomes (Dechezlepretre et al., 2023; Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Fairbrother, 2022). A number of studies have explored the importance of procedural fairness and show that climate policy acceptability and perceived fairness increases where the public have a role in decision making processes (Drews & van den Bergh, 2016; Liu et al., 2020). Entrenched societal inequalities are associated with lower levels of trust in political decision making process and scepticism about whose interests are being served (Chancel, 2020). For example, through survey and focus group research in Britain, Evensen and colleagues explored attitudes towards energy transitions paid for by social and environmental levies on the public and found that their participants were least supportive where they felt that the levies might subsidize energy company profits (Evensen et al., 2018). People significantly overestimated levels of private company profit, a tendency linked to a broader distrust and lack of transparency in a deregulated system: 'Perceptions of a lack of voice were one manifestation of disenchantment with governance and operation of the energy system in general' (Evensen et al., 2018: 457). That is, lay support for energy transitions and views about whose interests were being served, were bound up with contextual influences undermining trust in the motives of decision makers (Evensen et al., 2018) a theme which is also relevant to the analysis in section 5.

Evidence on climate policy acceptability offers some important insights into what matters to people, and into the role of contextual influences on lay perceptions but leaves under-explored questions about if and how wider felt injustices influence views of, and engagement with, climate policies. I now turn to an instructive example of policy in practice, specifically a backlash to climate policies felt to exacerbate social inequalities and vulnerabilities and the ensuing citizen mobilization in support of more inclusive and progressive climate policy.

4 | 'END OF THE WORLD, END OF THE MONTH: IT'S THE SAME STRUGGLE'

The French *gilets jaunes* protests which swept through France in 2018 were characterized by some, including initially President Macron and parts of the media, as reactionary and anti-climate policy and as evidencing the impossibility of garnering public support for low carbon transitions (Driscoll, 2023). The demonstrations took off in November of that year in protest at the increases in carbon taxes which were part of the French Government's climate transition policy (Chancel, 2020). The longer term context was one of a secular decline in living standards with wage stagnation and growing employment precarity amongst working class French people, alongside cuts to social protection, when taxes were raised by a newly elected centre-right government (Chancel, 2020; Driscoll, 2023; Fairlie, 2019). For Chancel (2020: 129) '[t]he French example might usefully serve as a case study of how not to reform taxation in the twenty-first century.' Carbon tax and fuel price rises fuelled anger amongst citizens who perceived that they were being required to carry the costs of transition whilst, at the same time, the government was reducing taxes on the rich and providing exemptions from carbon tax for corporations (Chancel, 2020; Driscoll, 2023). *Gilets jaunes* activists interviewed by Driscoll were infuriated by the ways in which rising costs of transition were, as they saw it, being individualized and directed at those least able to afford it (Driscoll, 2023, also see Fairlie, 2019).

The protesters were often presented in the media as reactionary, acting against climate policies and said to make a 'magma of motley demands' (*Liberation*, cited by Fairlie, 2019: 13) but whilst the protesters were politically very diverse, for Driscoll (2023) this characterization belies a coherence in the dominant political messages which emerged, notably a set of broadly pro-climate demands alongside the demand for a more progressive social settlement. They were protesting against a carbon tax which appeared at best to be raising general revenue and at worst

subsidizing tax cuts to the rich (Driscoll, 2023). President Macron sought to pacify the protestors whose rallies continued beyond the government's climbdown. He said that he understood frustration about the government focusing on 'end of the world' climate change issues whilst French people, struggling to get by, were 'talking about the end of the month' (*France 24*, cited by Driscoll: 144). However, for Driscoll's interviewees as with the movement more generally, this assertion was not only patronizing but a false dichotomy: 'Many in the movement called the climate crisis and their justice concerns the meme combat or "same fight."' (Driscoll, 2023: 154). Indeed this had become a protest slogan following a demand for improved social protection for those in poverty made by the gilets jaunes' assembly of delegates which issued a statement: 'Recognizing the urgent need to address the ecological crisis, we assert fin du monde, fin du mois (end of the world, end of the month) – same logic, same struggle' (Fairlie, 2019: 13). This example underlines the ideological nature of arguments that people who are struggling to get by necessarily see their interests as at odds with the imperative to act on climate change.

Such arguments have been recently echoed in the UK where there has been some political pushback on climate policy commitments held to be at odds with citizens' more pressing everyday living concerns (Euronews, 2023), a strand in recent UK Conservative Government politics and rhetoric. In 2023 then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak criticized UK Net Zero commitments for imposing 'unacceptable costs [on] hard-working British people' (Carbon Brief, 2023b). This claim, that people who are struggling with the costs of living cannot be expected to embrace climate change policies might be characterized as a discourse of climate delay (Lamb et al., 2020) where solutions to 'long term' climate change are said to be at odds with immediate and everyday concerns and needs for support. The UK Government decisions to delay some of its Net Zero commitments drew widespread opprobrium (White, 2023) and experts have demonstrated that social policy goals and climate policy goals overlap and intersect extensively (Chancel, 2020; Green & Healy, 2022; Mulrenan et al., 2023; Walkley, 2022), whether improving housing energy efficiency and insulation to reduce heat loss, emissions and household costs, retraining and skills development for green industry, expanding national renewable energy production to reduce vulnerability to global energy price rises and expanding accessible and efficient public transport infrastructure. Across expert commentators, acting on climate change and the cost of living crisis are widely seen to overlap and support one another (Schaffer, 2023; Walkley, 2022). Evidence further shows that the cost of living crisis and household economic vulnerability have not undermined UK citizens' concerns about climate change and appetite for bolder leadership and government action on climate (Demski et al., 2022; Verfuert et al., 2023; YouGov, 2024). There is, however, a relative dearth of evidence on lay perceptions of what matters here, or on perceived tensions, complementarities or links between cost of living concerns and climate policy directions. This gap, and the especially limited evidence on marginalized voices in this space prompted the exploratory research to which I now turn.

5 | VIEWS FROM LESS ADVANTAGED GROUPS: SOCIAL CONTEXT AND DESIRED POLICY DIRECTIONS

In this section, I explore new data from a small pilot project designed to explore public views of the cost-of-living crisis and directions for addressing climate change.² It was devised as an inter-disciplinary study embracing the socio-logical and political communication disciplinary specialisms of the author and co-researcher. It was undertaken in the summer of 2022 in a context of rapid rises in energy prices and in wider costs of living. Several commentators and politicians were invoking lived experiences of cost, unfairness and energy security in arguing for further domestic fossil fuel extraction and were receiving not insignificant media coverage (Salter, 2022). Our pilot research project sought to explore the views of less advantaged citizens regarding directions for climate policy and their views on what matters in the context of the cost of living crisis. Three group discussions were run with citizens from low income contexts and from disabled and diverse ethnic groupings. We targeted our sampling strategy through recruiting from networks and organizations working with people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, minoritized faith communities and disabled people across a city and smaller former industrial town in Yorkshire. Such

groupings' voices are under-represented in climate policy discussions. We asked prospective participants to identify where they had learned about the research project but they did not do so routinely, and we did not collect data on participants' socio-demographic characteristics. On the basis of what we knew about participants we sought to ensure diverse representation within the interview groups although one included four people known to one another. A brief thumbnail of the 3 groups is provided in Appendix A. Group discussion was scheduled for up to 90 minutes and was facilitated by the author and co-researcher. Participants were each given a £30 shopping voucher to acknowledge their time and ethical approval for the project was gained from the University of Leeds.

The focus groups, each comprising seven or eight research participants, were organized around two sets of discussion prompts. The first of these was a vignette storyline inviting reflections on what the protagonist should do. In the storyline a person was deciding whether to invest some money, left to her in a will, in a local authority project to help the environment and local people by producing local renewable energy and insulating council housing, echoing climate bond schemes in place across a number of local authority areas in England although not in the study areas. The second set of discussion prompts followed two short clips from contrasting political campaign videos on how and when to act on climate. One showed Nigel Farage criticizing UK Net Zero policy as likely to increase household energy costs, diminish UK manufacturing and increase global emissions. The second video showed a Green Party short focusing on the cost effectiveness, environmental and social value of a national programme of home insulation. We chose these videos for their divergent views, the first exemplifying wider political rhetoric around links between domestic energy security and ongoing investments in North Sea oil and gas extraction, asserting that Net Zero goals are incompatible with ordinary people's needs to reduce energy costs. The second, in contrast, showed Net Zero, energy savings and positive social outcomes as consistent with one another, and promoted the value of a national home insulation programme. Our questions and prompts are shown in Appendix B. The discussions were professionally transcribed and the data were analysed through undertaking close readings and coding inductively to identify key analytic themes. The discussions were held online to facilitate access in the context of the practical constraints of a small pilot study, but this meant some trade off in terms of building rapport and also, of course, missed those unprepared to engage online. Discussion was quite free-flowing but not especially cumulative. The data arising is, nevertheless, illustrative of some interesting themes.³ In the analysis I focus primarily on the discussions which followed the video clips. The three groups had differing emphases in their discussions so I indicate (pseudonymised) participants' group membership in the analysis by the first number in the square brackets.

First, I consider participants' views on climate relevant policies and their link to cost of living concerns. Some, mostly in Group 1, were concerned about the costs of climate policies. For example, after watching the Green video promoting UK-wide domestic insulation Sally [1/4] said:

'it is more in line with what I would want personally but how are they going to do it?... insulating every home, blah, blah, blah, it isn't going to happen. You know, how are we going to afford it?'

In this group Anderson [1/7] was in a minority saying 'we need an immediate action' on climate, but others seemed to share Linda's [1/3] lament of 'false promises' to support people. However, in contrast the other two groups both revealed broad consensus on the importance of climate policies alongside addressing cost of living hardships. In some instances these were seen to be directly intertwined. For example, Mitch [2/15] advocated investing in renewables and insulating homes to reduce costs and Pete [3/17] praised the local city waste-to-heat district heating network for its environmental gain and reduction of costs to local domestic users. Cost of living and climate issues were especially closely intertwined in the account of Jane [3/19] who, in her response to the vignette, described saving energy costs as a climate and social 'win':

'I think that investing in environmental things is quite often going to have quite a big social impact... [insulation] cut hundreds of pounds a year off my bill. Like it is a drastic difference. So I think a lot of environmental things are going to help people.'

Following the first video clip, in response to a question about a tension between tackling the cost of living crisis and tackling climate change Jane continued: ‘Yeah I don’t think you ever really have to choose between like two things like that.’ Good insulation was seen as climate positive as well as helping to manage energy bills even though, for Jane, the increase in cost was ‘insane,’ compromising her ability to heat her small flat despite her severe heat related disability. For several participants climate relevant policies and cost of living concerns might be seen as complementary but the urgency of addressing cost of living privations put the linked demands on a different timescale. Emma [2/12] said:

‘...anybody that’s struggling with their energy, that’s living in poverty, they’d love to care about [Green Party priorities]. They don’t, they care about putting food in their kids’ mouths, making sure they’re clothed, all of that is not instant enough for somebody who can’t even afford to turn their oven on to cook a jacket potato...’

However, the different urgency of outcome did not mean a drag on climate action now. In response to a question asking if we can tackle the cost of living crisis at the same time as climate change or whether one excludes the other, Emma later said:

‘Both have to be done together ... Green policy isn’t going to change overnight so that needs to [get] up and running. We need to be reactive to the energy crisis now and do something about it, and proactive in terms of the long-term. We’ve got to do both, but we’ve got to address the current issues, and that’s that people can’t heat [their home] and feed their kids.’

In parallel, for Mike [2/8]:

‘[Nothing] is going to have an immediate effect where we all feel better off suddenly, but I think if, as a nation, we’re working towards systems like renewable energy and ...giving people a job to help to produce things like that, then I think that’s ...got to be a way to go’

In sum, across two of the three groups there was broad consensus on the importance of addressing cost of living hardships and tackling climate change. For some participants these were seen as closely linked (e.g., through generating cheaper renewable energy; home insulation) whilst others simply saw both of them as important but prioritized the urgency of easing cost of living privations. A subset participants, mostly in group 1, expressed concerns about the costs of climate relevant policies, and here such policies seemed less salient within discussion which was dominated by cost of living issues and, as we will see, a sense of political disconnect and loss of agency.

I now turn to some issues relating to the contexts in which people make judgements about appropriate directions for policy. I earlier reviewed literature on appraisals of fairness in the design and implementation of climate policies. However, it is difficult to imagine that questions about calibrating fairness within climate policies really tap into these participants’ sense of what matters. A number of participants were critical of economic inequalities and of the gap between the rich and powerful and ordinary people, and were frustrated and angry at rising costs of living and at what they saw as companies’, and shareholders’, profiting from rising energy costs. Their accounts suggest that the question of fairness within climate policies (so dominant in the literature) is eclipsed by broader questions of societal fairness, particularly relating to inequalities in where power resides. Some participants reflected on energy companies’ profits. For Hannah [3/18]:

‘...they’ve now obviously had that windfall tax [on oil and gas companies] ...which was very delayed and they should have done it way earlier than they did. And... it shows the fact that like, that businesses were able to make huge amounts of profit during times of crisis.’

Jane [3/19] commented on the government's raising of the energy price cap:

'I'm not sure if there was an actual justification or the Government were just giving money to their pals that work in energy companies.'

For Catherine [2/14], responses to increased living costs and climate change need to recognize that political choices have fuelled social inequalities and wider injustices:

'...to me, it's fine to say we'll insulate, it's fine to say we'll use renewables, but the thing... we have to be saying, I think, is the reason that our bills are going up is not just because of world circumstances, it's because shareholders are raking in huge profits. You know, we're all skint, we are struggling to put food on our tables because of the way that our bills have gone up, but there are people who are, you know the directors and the shareholders of these companies, are making profits on us.'

Accounts of inequality were explicitly linked by some participants to a sense of political disconnect and a lack of voice (cf. Evensen et al., 2018), issues which particularly animated Group 1 members' discussion. Here participants spoke of an 'out of touch Westminster' and their sense that ordinary people are not being heard, their everyday needs and circumstances not recognized:

'... Westminster is out of touch with the people [respondents nod]. You know, they're very high earners... they don't see the, the people who are at the lower end of the scale. And, you know, it's, as usual they are bleeding the poor and the rich are getting richer. (Sally [1/4])'

'[T]hey need to really come down to earth and listen to the public who are struggling. ...People are just so angry at the moment about the cost of living. (Celina [1/5])'

Accounts of particular experiences, for example in health and education, fleshed out a linked sense of social needs being mis-recognized by politicians and policy makers, for example focusing on children's academic attainment with no recognition of children's backgrounds and the 'baggage [they are carrying] into schools, ..., they've not been fed, they've not been looked after' (Alia [1/1]).

Participants expressed a need for much stronger dialogue with people to get them to re-engage with politics:

'They've got to find a way of getting back to knowing exactly what Joe Bloggs public wants... when they throw meetings, it's not the general public that will attend these meetings because they're so disillusioned, they're so upset by everything that they think "...why bother then, I'm just gonna not be heard," ...the grass roots have been forgotten... [respondents nod] because we're all nothing without the bottom layer. (Linda [1/3])'

There is of course some risk that focus group discussion evokes expressions of frustration and amplifies them beyond normal everyday discourse as participants bounce their ideas off one another. Their anger was sharpened by the then current 'Partygate' scandal of Conservative government leaders ignoring their own mandated lockdown rules. However, the broader point I make here is that climate interventions need to engage with these contexts of inequality and experiences of voicelessness, critiques of power inequalities and broader problems of political mistrust.

The data discussed above came from a small exploratory pilot study. Online group interviews could only ever provide a very partial lens on what matters for people in respect of directions for climate policies. The discussion was often disparate and the format allowed limited scope for interrogating participants' meanings. A larger study

would benefit from follow-on one to one interviews with participants. The data nevertheless offers some insights into diverse and less advantaged citizens' views on climate policy directions and contextualizes these in relation to wider saliences including cost of living concerns. It further points to the potential value of qualitative method for interrogating what matters to people here. The data complements wider survey evidence on citizens' significant desire for policy on climate alongside the cost of living crisis (Whitmarsh et al., 2023). It also shows how some participants highlighted political decisions and energy company profits as drivers of everyday hardship and others emphasized their feelings of general political disconnect and mistrust. This has relevancies for extant literature on lay views of climate policy where there is a rather narrow embrace of 'the social' wherein policy might be deemed fair, perhaps redistributive of resources or ability to engage. This framing does not work with a sufficient conceptualization of the contexts into which climate policy is to be implemented. Climate policy must necessarily embrace questions of inclusion and trust and the conditions in which diverse and marginalized groups are to engage with policies which affect them.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Commentators widely argue that the climate crisis and social inequalities need to be tackled together or we run the risk that climate policies will fail (e.g., Chancel, 2020; Kallbekken, 2023). There is a risk of backlash where climate policies are perceived to be unfair, illustrated in the example of the gilets jaunes protests. Many therefore say that we will only see a managed transition to a low carbon economy and society with public engagement and buy-in (Green & Healy, 2022). If taken seriously the question of engagement raises profoundly important questions about how to best engage citizens in a new politics and new kinds of practice and system level policies which will effect rapid social change to low carbon societies (e.g., Howarth et al., 2020).

Although there is a growing research base looking at climate policy acceptability much of it focuses on attitudes to carbon taxation (e.g., Maestre-Andres et al., 2019) and researchers have recently highlighted the need for further evidence on citizens' views about wider climate policies and policy direction (Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023). Extant research commonly highlights the importance of public preferences for effectiveness and fairness in (often hypothetical) policy design and implementation. Further, writers have called on policy makers to mainstream the question of how social inequalities might be addressed in climate policy by attending to need or unequal risks, being pro-poor and engaging a wider array of voices (e.g., Markannen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019). I have argued that the climate policy fairness framing, whilst important and interesting, offers a partial lens on the broader question of lay perceptions of directions for climate policy and its intersection with social inequalities and so too a partial lens on the broader dynamics of social exclusion, felt unfairness and voicelessness.

As it stands, we have limited evidence on how citizens themselves think about these issues. This is especially so when it comes to understanding the perspectives of marginalized social groupings. The pilot research group interviews reported here explored these issues with participants from low income backgrounds and of diverse ethnicities and dis/ability. Across two of the three group discussions most participants gave accounts where climate goals and social policies were compatible, for example with reference to tackling household energy costs, improving insulation, expanding renewable energy infrastructure and workforce skills training. Additionally within the group interviews participants shared views on what mattered to them in the context of the cost of living crisis and unprecedented energy prices. They stressed the urgency and immediacy of economic need, getting by day to day and supporting others to do so. Some of them foregrounded extensive experiences of constraint, worsening living standards, frustration, anger at private profit being extracted from the energy crisis and a sense that national government was wholly disconnected from their everyday concerns. This evidence underlines the importance of a wider embrace of inequality dynamics and of marginalized voices across climate relevant politics and policy making. The empirical evidence described in this paper aligns with the wider call for politicians and policy makers to treat social wellbeing and systemic action on climate as complex, multifaceted and profoundly interlinked challenges.

The research reported here adds to the understudied area of how citizens see tensions, complementarities and overlaps between immediate cost of living concerns and climate policy. Further research could add important insights, for example by extending qualitative and mixed methods research across different social and geographic contexts. This would add to knowledge of citizens' views of directions for policy and contextual influences and could additionally contribute to the growing body of work on the value of diverse mechanisms for climate deliberation (e.g., Howarth et al., 2020; Verfuërth et al., 2023). Further, it would be valuable to examine socially diverse perceptions of, and engagement with, policy design and implementation in practice, in contexts where it has immediate salience to people in their everyday lives. Public recalcitrance around climate relevant policy may dissolve only after policy implementation and lived experience of a new set of practices as illustrated in the Stockholm car charging example (Eliasson & Jonsson, 2011). Longitudinal research could track if and how evaluations and norms change through time in light of climate policy interventions (see also Fairbrother, 2022; Kallbekken, 2023). Finally, there is a risk that perceptions and evaluations of policy options might reflect 'what is' (Gijssberts, 2002) and give undue weight to unjust, but naturalized, inequities within current social arrangements. More sufficiently embracing the voices and interests of marginalized groups in research and policy would help to guard against this risk.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research received ethical approval from the University of Leeds, ref: FAHC 21-085.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Kyselá et al. (2019) for a discussion of definitions and varying uses of the terms acceptance, acceptability and support within the literature on public attitudes to climate policies.
- ² The project was supported by the University of Leeds Research and Innovation Services Net Zero Challenge Workshop follow-on funding. I devised and undertook the research with Dr. Lone Sorensen.
- ³ I focus here on three thematic areas but a wider set of themes is described in a brief report of the research: <https://flag.leeds.ac.uk/research/net-zero-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis/>.

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APPENDIX A: Thumbnails of discussion groups

Within Group 1 climate issues had apparently quite limited salience and discussion often centred on cost of living concerns and politicians' disconnect from ordinary citizens' everyday concerns. Within this group four of the participants were recruited from the same organization and were known to one another. Group 2 and 3 participants were more engaged with climate change issues alongside cost of living issues; in both of these groups a consensus emerged in discussion about the importance of both climate policies and addressing social hardships and some saw these as intertwined.

APPENDIX B: Interview prompts

This was our script for prompting discussion following each of the video clips shared with participants.

After watching each video, we'll discuss what you think together. You may well have different views. We're keen to listen to different views and understand what really matters to you. We'll spend about 10 minutes on this and then go on to the next video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sc5MYUBmKQ> (->1.51) and show a second time.

Discussion prompts:

1. Do you think Farage raises issues that are important to people? Does he listen to what citizens want? What would important issues be? [lived experience; cost of living vs. climate change; listening].
2. Do you agree about needing more control as a citizen? About having policy imposed on you? [Political participation (referendum); anti-establishment (out of touch)].
3. Is it the right kind of political participation that he is suggesting (public debate, referendum)? Why? [Political participation; public sovereignty].
4. He says that we can't tackle the cost-of-living crisis and climate change at the same time. Do you agree? [Climate delay; pragmatism vs. idealism; cost of living vs. climate change].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vn9WyJDA420> (->1.28) and show a second time.

Discussion prompts:

1. Do you think the video raises issues that are important to people? Do they listen to what citizens want (and what is the difference to Farage in this respect)? What would important issues be? [lived experience; cost of living vs. climate change; listening].
2. The speaker here says that big business is profiting while ordinary people have no say, and that government is making excuses for big business. Do you agree? [political participation/agency; ideology/neo-liberalism].
3. Do you agree that we can tackle the cost of living crisis and climate change at the same time? [pragmatism vs. idealism; cost of living vs. climate change].