

Political elite climate consensus erosion: Evidence from the UK Parliament (2017–22)

Politics

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Abstract

Climate change has become an increasingly partisan issue. Yet while the focus is often placed on public attitudes and populist anti-climate movements, little research examines how political elites discuss climate change in parliaments – important arenas of formal debate where politicians transmit elite cues that influence voters. We fill this gap by combining computational analysis of 9000 parliamentary contributions with 13 interviews of parliamentarians to study the partisan character of UK parliamentary climate debate between 2017 and 2022. While parliamentary discourse remained predominantly pro-climate, this masks stark partisan and intra-party variation. Notably, divisions within the Conservative governing majority drove greater volatility in support and growing ambivalence towards climate action. The article's analysis both updates and clarifies conceptions of the UK's elite climate politics and advances the literature on the politics of climate change by demonstrating how the erosion of elite climate consensuses can proceed through the politics of 'divided conservatism' within parliament.

Keywords

climate consensus erosion, computational analysis, delay discourse, elite interviews, parliamentary debates, United Kingdom

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Introduction

Once considered in some countries to be a 'valence' (or 'consensus') issue that mainstream politicians competed over in terms of governing competence rather than policy

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position, climate change is increasingly viewed as a partisan issue (Farstad, 2018; see also Carter and Clements, 2015; Gillard, 2016; Hess and Renner, 2019; Patterson, 2023). Today we see a range of movements pushing back against or seeking to delay climate action (see Paterson et al., 2023; Patterson, 2023) and previously established elite climate consensus eroding (Carter and Clements, 2015; Carter and Pearson, 2024; Gillard, 2016). Understanding changing attitudes towards climate change is therefore a hugely important exercise. Yet, while focus in the literature is often placed on examining populist anti-climate movements (e.g. (Lockwood, 2018; Paterson et al., 2023) or changing public attitudes (Caldwell et al., 2025), as a recent systematic review of the literature found, surprisingly there has been much less research on how our elected political representatives themselves engage with and communicate about climate change (Moore et al., 2024: 12). Save for some honourable mentions (Debus and Himmelrath, 2022; Kirk-Browne, 2021; Nisbett et al., 2025; Willis, 2017), there is even less work that examines how politicians discuss climate change in parliaments. This lacuna is important given the critical role parliaments play as arenas of elite partisan politics; parliamentary debate is an essential tool for politicians to communicate with electorates (Goet, 2021) and can transmit powerful and often partisan ‘elite cues’ shown to be significant in shaping individuals’ climate change beliefs (Brulle et al., 2012; Kenny, 2020; Merkley and Stecula, 2018). While highly valuable, the research that does exist on parliaments has also tended to focus on linguistic trends in the character of the UK’s elite climate debate. In this article, our analytical attention is instead placed upon understanding the partisan characteristics of climate change debate within a parliament.

This article examines the nature of climate debate in the UK Parliament between 2017 and 2022. The United Kingdom represents a highly important and revealing case when considering the changing politics of climate change for several reasons. Historically, the country was seen as an international climate leader (Tobin, 2017) and characterised by cross-party consensus on climate issues (Carter and Jacobs, 2014). Yet, this elite consensus is found to have eroded somewhat, including during the period studied (Carter and Clements, 2015; Carter and Pearson, 2024; Gillard, 2016; Lockwood, 2021). To analyse the changing character of the UK’s pro-climate elite consensus in the UK Parliament, we apply a rigorous mixed-methods approach, drawing upon analysis of nearly 9000 parliamentary interventions on climate change in the UK Parliament ($n=8928$) from June 2017 until December 2022. This is supplemented by and triangulated with qualitative data from semi-structured elite interviews with 13 UK parliamentarians of both Houses (MPs and Peers) (see Appendix 1 and Research Design section; see also Nisbett et al., 2025).

Our analysis shows that UK parliamentary climate discourse remained predominantly pro-climate overall in this period, but that this headline finding conceals stark partisan and intra-party variation. The Labour Party contributions were consistently pro-climate, whereas contributions from the governing Conservative Party were only mildly pro-climate and – importantly – much more volatile. Perhaps most surprisingly, despite some major pieces of pro-climate action including Net Zero legislation occurring in this period, Conservative government ministers showed the weakest (and declining) pro-climate profile of contributions of any group examined. Furthermore, the UK’s elite climate consensus was not simply being eroded by a small fringe, but by widening Conservative dissent: the number of unique Conservative MPs making delay/denial interventions rose from 22 in 2017 to 114 in 2022, approaching one third of the parliamentary majority. The emergence of the populist Net Zero Scrutiny Group (NZSG) faction within the party in 2021 coincides with declines in pro-climate contribution scores and increases in delay/denial

speakers. These trends indicate that a divide in mainstream conservative politics (Hess and Renner, 2019) underpinned parliamentary volatility on climate action and amplified partisan contestation over mitigation and Net Zero policy in the period studied.

These findings contribute to the literature in three important ways. First, it brings together analyses of parliamentary climate discourse (e.g. Kirk-Browne, 2021; Willis, 2017) with the literature on the increasingly partisan character of climate debate (e.g. Farstad, 2018) to build out our understanding of the party-political character of elite climate debate in parliament. Second, it does this by demonstrating the significance of ‘divided conservatism’ within the mainstream governing centre-right for the erosion of elite climate consensus (Hess and Renner, 2019), as opposed to the literature’s stronger focus on populist far-right parties. Third, it clarifies debate within the UK-focused scholarship on the character and extent of the erosion of UK’s elite climate consensus by utilising a larger and more up to date dataset that takes us through a highly important period (2017–22) for climate politics. The remainder of the article reviews relevant literature about the growing partisan character of climate debates, the limited existing work on parliaments, and the specifics of UK climate politics. It then sets out the analytical framework and methodology, presents the empirical analysis, and concludes with implications for the study of climate politics under conditions of growing elite contestation.

The politics of climate change

An increasingly partisan character?

When environmental problems initially surfaced as mainstream political issues in the 1970s and 1980s, elite opinion was seen to be ‘not strongly politicized’ in most contexts and studies revealed cross-partisan legislation on the environment (Birch, 2020). This altered significantly in the United States through the 1980s and 1990s, with a clear partisan divide on climate change in particular developing in US politics (Dunlap and McCright, 2008), which has only intensified in the decades since (Dunlap et al., 2016). Beyond the US context, the literature has also indicated a partisan character to climate policy, with left-wing parties seen as ‘more pro-environmental than their right-wing counterparts’ (Neumayer, 2003). Research shows that a greater left-wing presence in parliament is associated with stronger green taxation measures (Ward and Cao, 2012) and left-wing parties in government implement more pro-environmental policies (Schulze, 2021). On the other hand, conservative party ideology is found to be a contributing factor in the dismantling of climate policies when entering government (Birchall, 2014).

Understandably, there is much focus in the literature on populist right-wing movements and far-right parties and their attempts to de-legitimise environmental and climate issues (Dickson and Hobolt, 2024; Gemenis et al., 2012; Lockwood, 2018; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023 cf. Turner and Bailey, 2022). As Hess and Renner (2019) noted, less attention has however been placed on moderate or mainstream conservative parties in this regard, despite their greater comparative representation within parliaments and in government. In a comparative study of six European countries, they found that there were similarly significant divisions over climate action *within* mainstream conservative parties as there was between such parties and the far-right populists (Hess and Renner 2019). This point is reflected in the rise of ‘anti-net zero populist’ (ANZP) movements, which have often been found operating within mainstream conservative parties (see Atkins, 2022; Paterson et al., 2023). Given the established importance of conservative governing

parties to the shape and direction of climate and energy legislation, Hess and Renner (2019) urged researchers to pay greater attention to such divisions within conservative parties ('divided conservatism' in their terms) when seeking to explain the rise of opposition to climate mitigation strategies.

UK climate politics: An eroding elite consensus?

The United Kingdom is a fascinating and valuable case for understanding the changing dynamics of climate politics over the past decade. It was historically seen to have a relatively strong cross-partisan consensus on climate action. Writing in the mid-2000s, Carter (2006) found the extent of the 'party politicisation' of the environment in Britain was 'limited'. Other literature focused on this period found that the United Kingdom was characterised by an elite 'green consensus' that acted to propel it to the forefront of environmental legislation in the 2000s, seen particularly with the introduction of the 2008 Climate Change Act (CCA), the world's first legally binding climate change mitigation target (Carter and Jacobs, 2014; Gillard, 2016; Lockwood, 2021; Russel and Benson, 2014).

It is clear, however, that this consensus is breaking down in the United Kingdom as it is in other contexts (Carter and Clements, 2015; Farstad, 2018; Gillard, 2016). Scholars have begun pointing to at least a partial erosion of the climate consensus among UK political elites in recent years and the emergence of a dual valence-partisan character of climate change politics (see (Carter and Clements 2015; Carter and Clements, 2015; Carter and Pearson, 2024; Gillard, 2016: 204–205), writing on the Conservative Party and Coalition government (2010–15), found that in the post-2008 crisis period, climate change had been 'to some extent (. . .) transformed into a positional issue' in the party, with some Conservative MPs adopting an 'increasingly partisan approach to climate change'. Both Gillard (2016) and Russel and Benson (2014) add further weight to this argument by documenting how the Coalition government's austerity programme, which sought to massively reduce the size of the British state and its spending, challenged the climate agenda by undermining the economic basis for action in government.

Political attention on climate action peaked in the late 2010s, particularly following the 2018 IPCC report, the emergence of global climate protests in 2018, and the UK's hosting of COP 26 in Glasgow in 2021 (Ebrey et al., 2020; Nisbett et al., 2025). However, research demonstrates that the salience of climate change as an issue has diminished somewhat in the face of growing concerns over inflation and the cost-of-living in the post-COVID era (Carter and Pearson, 2024; Stephenson and Allwood 2025). This is reflected in literature examining the period of UK government policy under the Conservative governments from 2015 to 2022. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's initial enthusiasm for Net Zero was undermined by a growing 'cost of living crisis' from 2021, catalysed by post-COVID inflation, alongside Conservative MPs' criticisms of his programme's perceived 'statism' and Johnson's own political missteps (Carter and Pearson, 2024). In this period, we also see the emergence of ANZP populist movements within the governing Conservative Party, such as the NZSG of MPs, which emerged in the summer of 2021, that sought to critically 'scrutinise' and lobby against the government's Net Zero policies (Atkins, 2022; Paterson et al., 2023). Paterson et al. (2023) described this as an example of an intra-party 'populist backlash' movement. A pushback against Net Zero was also more apparent under Johnson's Conservative successors, Liz Truss and then Rishi Sunak, who was seen to U-turn on some of the government's Net Zero targets in

September 2023, including for the phasing out of Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) vehicles by 2030.

Overall, the literature appears to suggest a mixed, albeit changing landscape of climate politics in the United Kingdom. Though Kirk-Browne (2021) suggested a growing climate scepticism evident in the period up until 2018, more recent scholarship strikes a slightly more cautious tone. Carter and Pearson (2024) described the climate continuing ‘to resemble a valence issue to a significant extent’, although they do point to the way in which new partisan characteristics emerged in this period. Westlake and Willis (2025) similarly focused on the way in which climate action has even become more mainstream within British politics over the period since 2018, but do equally note a ‘shifting landscape’ wherein the ‘fragile’ consensus around climate action appears liable to breakdown and climate scepticism to grow if and when climate policies are seen to impact people’s lives more directly (Westlake and Willis, 2025: 15–17).

Parliaments and climate debate

Climate change may be becoming a more partisan issue in the United Kingdom and beyond but, as a recent systematic review of the literature found, the body of scholarship concerned with understanding politicians’ engagement with climate change is remarkably small (Moore et al., 2024: 12). There is research examining the intra-party politics of climate change (McDaniel, 2025), surveys of politicians’ understanding of the issue (Kenny and Geese, 2025; Sundblad et al., 2009), and how this compares with public perceptions (Pearson and Wager, 2025; Rapeli and Koskimaa, 2022). Somewhat surprisingly there is, however, less research on the way in which politicians communicate about climate change within parliaments.

Parliaments are highly important yet under-examined sites in the development of climate politics. The ideological composition of legislatures not only significantly affects the composition of climate policy (e.g. Ward and Cao, 2012) and thus potential policy backsliding, but as institutions they both reflect (via their inherent ‘representative’ function) and shape public opinion. Though just one of several means through which politicians transmit messages to each other and the wider public, parliamentary debate is critical here as it is shown to serve as ‘a pivotal strategic tool to communicate with the electorate’ (Goet, 2021: 789). As research has shown, the messages transmitted by politicians in parliaments can act as ‘elite cues’ (Brulle et al., 2012). These elite cues have been shown to be highly significant, with evidence from the United States showing that Republican politicians’ messaging has contributed to an increasingly climate sceptic voter base (Brulle et al., 2012; Kenny, 2020; Merkley and Stecula, 2018). Studying parliamentary discourse over several years can, therefore, yield a valuable insight into the changing character of elite climate debate, which itself has implications for understanding changes in broader shifts in the nature of the climate debate beyond the parliamentary setting.

Parliaments are also highly important because they are sites of formal political debate and conflict, both between competing parties and, more often than not, between the government and its own ‘backbench’¹ MPs. Legislative debate is key to understanding UK parliamentary politics both because of its role in communicating with the electorate (Goet, 2021: 789) and because of the way the UK House of Commons considers legislation as an ‘Arena parliament’, wherein chamber debate dominates legislative proceedings (Polsby, 1975). Parliamentary debates are also known to reflect MPs’ constituency

representation priorities, indicating core concerns among constituents (Blumenau, 2021; Blumenau and Damiani, 2021). Studying parliamentary debate therefore allows you to capture a diversity of opinion and ideas from across government and other MPs and understand how this changes over time. Such a picture is somewhat lost when only considering legislative outcomes or intra-party dynamics that may be dominated by a small number of influential figures.

While there may be less research on how politicians communicate about climate change in parliaments than we might assume, Willis' research over the past decade (2017; 2018a; 2018b; Westlake and Willis, 2025) is the key exception. Willis has shone light on what politicians think and feel about climate change using interviews and corpus analyses of parliamentary speeches. Her corpus analysis of MPs' discussions in the UK Parliament of the 2008 CCA found that in the late 2010s British politicians sought to 'tame' the climate issue, by focusing on it as a technical or economic issue (Willis, 2017), and that MPs expressed concern not to be labelled a 'climate zealot' (Willis, 2018). Building upon Willis' contributions, Kirk-Browne (2021) performed a large-scale corpus analysis of UK parliamentary debates between 2006 and 2018, focusing on establishing narrative framings in parliamentary debates. Interestingly, this longer period of analysis yields insight into what Kirk-Browne (2021) viewed as evidence of a growth in climate 'scepticism' discourse. However, a more recent account – albeit based on interviews with MPs rather than analysis of parliamentary discourse – sounds caution over the rise of generalised scepticism, and points instead to both a greater willingness to advocate for climate action alongside a growth in the use of 'pragmatism' narratives, used to legitimise incrementalism (Westlake and Willis, 2025).

Research design and methodological approach

This article builds upon the existing literature in important ways. First, it seeks to bring an analysis of parliamentary climate discourse (e.g. Kirk-Browne, 2021; Willis, 2017) into conversation with the literature on the increasingly partisan character of climate debate in the United Kingdom (Carter and Clements, 2015; Gillard, 2016; Paterson et al., 2023) to introduce an explicit party-political aspect to the analysis of how climate change is debated within parliament. The article investigates partisan differences in the discourse used, namely between the governing Conservative Party and the main opposition Labour Party, and between Conservative government ministers and the party's backbenchers, and explores the role of divided conservative politics (Hess and Renner, 2019) in shaping the partisan character of UK climate debate.

Our data also covers a wide range of parliamentary debate. It includes both the main chamber and the Westminster Hall chamber in the House of Commons, as well as debates in the House of Lords. This is important, as whereas debate in the Commons' main chamber is framed around the government agenda, Westminster Hall debates give backbenchers, and opposition, more opportunities to intervene (Norton, 2013), therefore providing a more complete insight into MPs' views. Furthermore, in the House of Lords, Peers are known to play a key role in policy scrutiny and for being less aligned with party leaderships (Russell, 2013), providing a useful comparison to the debates in the House of Commons, which may appear more partisan.

Finally, it serves to further clarify debate within the UK-focused scholarship on the character and extent of the erosion of the UK's elite climate consensus, which has produced differing conceptions of the rise of climate scepticism in parliament

(e.g. Kirk-Browne, 2021; Westlake and Willis, 2025). It does so through its analysis of a comprehensive dataset that covers the period between 2017 and 2022, allowing it to reflect a period of time wherein climate change entered the political mainstream, and we see an explosion of both pro-climate protest and ‘backlash’ against climate policies (Ebrey et al., 2020; Nisbett et al., 2025).

To conduct our analysis, we ask the following two questions:

1. To what extent was there still a pro-climate consensus within the UK Parliament (2017–22)?
2. If an erosion of this elite consensus within the UK Parliament has occurred in this period, how can we describe its partisan character?

A mixed-methods approach is adopted to answer these questions. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 parliamentarians from both the House of Commons and House of Lords, representing the main political parties. These participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on their involvement in climate policy. The interview data not only provides expert insight on how parliamentary discourse on climate change has altered but also helps to fine-tune our computational classification model.

Our main dataset includes 1719 unique UK parliamentary debates, covering 8929 individual spoken contributions between 21 June 2017 and 1 December 2022. This timeframe captures key moments in UK climate politics, including the rise of climate protests in 2018 and 2019, the COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021, and renewed activism after the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected the debates using the TheyWorkForYou and UK Parliament APIs, filtering the data with 146 climate-related keywords (see SI1.1). For each debate contribution, we obtained metadata including the date, debate title, full text, and speaker details such as name, party affiliation, and constituency. In addition to debates, we collected Early Day Motions (EDMs), proposals submitted by MPs to highlight issues of importance to them. These were used solely as additional training data for our model.

To automatically classify the climate debate contributions, we trained a machine learning model. We used RoBERTa (Robustly Optimised BERT Pretraining Approach), a refined version of the BERT model, which was originally developed by Google and later enhanced by Meta. The BERT-based models are pre-trained to understand word relationships using large volumes of text and can be fine-tuned for specific tasks. Fine-tuning involves adding a small classifier on top of the pre-trained model and training it on a smaller, manually labelled dataset. We fine-tuned the RoBERTa model using our manually labelled interview data and EDMs. To improve performance, especially for under-represented narrative types, we used a method called data augmentation. This involved generating synthetic data by translating text into another language and back again (known as back-translation). This helped increase the size and diversity of the training dataset (SI1.2 for technical details). The model was trained using 10 epochs (i.e. 10 full passes through the training data) which is a common balance point between performance and overfitting (Liu et al., 2019). The final model is publicly available via Huggingface (https://huggingface.co/nnisbett/cc_narratives_robertamodel3).

The debates were initially coded into one of three groups: (1) normative arguments in favour of climate action that emphasise the moral duty to respond to the large-scale human suffering and social injustice that climate change causes; (2) economic rationales

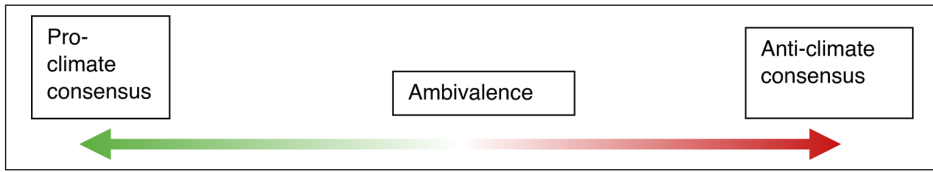


Figure 1. The climate consensus spectrum.

for climate action that emphasise the economic opportunities of Net Zero and the costs associated with climate change; and (3) delay/denial arguments that either deny the existence of climate change or advocate a delay in climate action for any number of reasons, including the economic costs associated with such action or its social impacts, following Lamb et al. (2020; see also Nisbett et al., 2025). In this article, the distinction between normative and economic rationales that underpinned the original coding exercise was felt to be less relevant to our analysis, so we combine both normative (e.g. climate action as a moral imperative) and economic arguments (e.g. Net Zero as an economic necessity or opportunity) into ‘pro-climate’ discourse and compare this to ‘delay/denial’ discourses. We utilise the delay/denial narratives as a signifier of an eroding elite climate consensus in the UK Parliament compared with the consensus position characteristic of British politics in the 2000s and 2010s. To avoid misclassification of delay criticism as delay/denial (Nisbett et al., 2025), we added a second layer of analysis, using Huggingface sentiment analysis pipeline, a bespoke transformers-based sentiment detection model. This ensured that delay criticism (denial/delay label + negative sentiment) was correctly labelled as pro-climate. The two-stage classification approach led to a model accuracy of 0.8 (0.76 for pro-climate and 0.84 for denial/delay, see SI1.3).

This coding exercise allowed us to analyse the composition (pro-climate or delay/denial) of climate discourses using the concepts of ‘consensus’ and ‘ambivalence’ as key markers in a sliding scale. As Figure 1 shows, strong pro-climate consensus sits at one end and represents a scenario wherein all debate contributions within the group selected for analysis are pro-climate, with strong anti-climate consensus at the other end wherein all contributions are delay/denial. ‘Ambivalence’ is situated in the middle, representing a scenario wherein there is an equal split of pro-climate and anti-climate discourses within the sample group analysed.

To assess the relative strength/weakness of pro-climate discourse within a group or time period analysed, we place the climate consensus spectrum into a grading system, set out in Table 1. The grading system ranks the proportion of pro-climate contributions vis-à-vis delay/denial contribution in a given analysis and establishes seven grading boundaries along the spectrum, ranging from pro-climate consensus to anti-climate consensus, with ‘ambivalence’ in the middle.

Climate discourse in the UK Parliament

Still a pro-climate consensus?

The first of our research questions asks, *to what extent was there still a pro-climate consensus within the UK Parliament (2017–22)?* Climate has become a much more prominent issue within the UK parliament over the period studied. Figure 2 shows that across

Table 1. Grading the climate consensus.

Proportion of pro-climate contributions	Description
0%–20% (0.0–2.9)	anti-climate consensus
30% (3.0–3.9)	predominantly anti-climate
40% (4.0–4.9)	mildly anti-climate
50% (5.0–5.9)	ambivalence - mixed climate messaging
60% (6.0–6.9)	mildly pro-climate
70% (7.0–7.9)	predominantly pro-climate
80%–100% (8.0–10.0)	pro-climate consensus

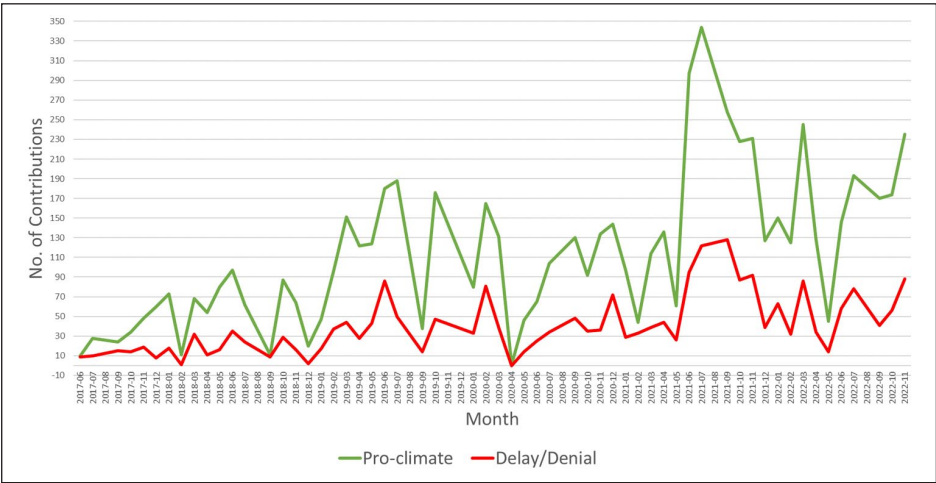


Figure 2. Number of pro- and anti-climate interventions in parliament (all MPs and Peers, 2017–22).

both Houses of the UK parliament, the total number of climate contributions increases over time, from an average of 95 per month in the first half of the period studied to more than double this (199 per month) in the second half. The majority of this change occurs in the UK parliament’s lower house, the House of Commons (HoC), where we see an increase from 85 to 142 contributions by MPs in the two halves of the period studied.

Figure 2 also indicates that pro-climate discourse outweighs delay/denial contributions, but to understand this better, we need to analyse not just the total contributions but the strength (or weakness) of pro-climate consensus in parliament and how this changes over time. To do so, we focus our analysis predominantly on the HoC; the HoC not only provides more substantial data for analysis compared with the upper house, the House of Lords (HoL), but as the site of the governing majority (Conservative at the time) in parliament and the official opposition party (Labour), it represents the most valuable arena for understanding the front-line of climate debate in UK politics. Data from the HoL is, however, also used to provide valuable comparative data to strengthen our analysis of the HoC at various points.

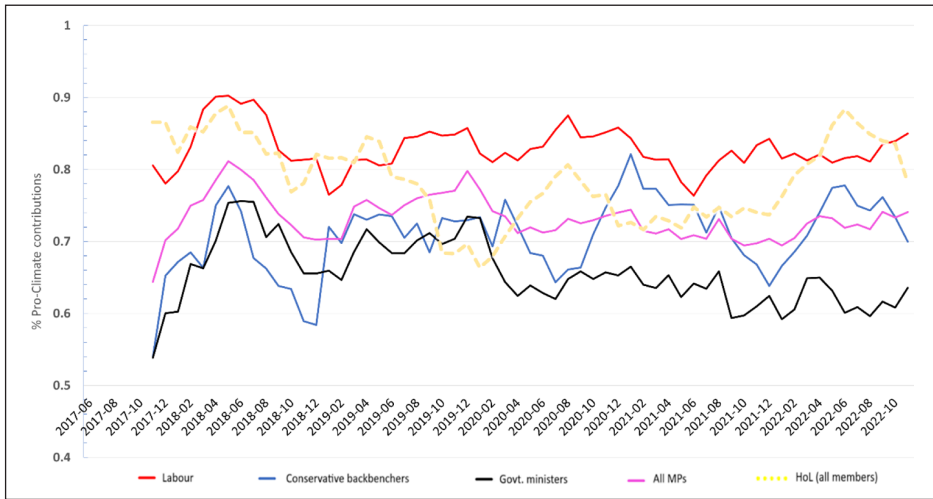


Figure 3. Proportion of pro-climate debate contributions, per political grouping (2017–22). The data in Figure 3 has been smoothed using a 6-month rolling average to avoid overly noisy data.

To explore the character of the climate debate within parliament, we consider the proportion of total interventions by MPs that have been coded as pro-climate vis-à-vis delay/denial and grade the result according to the system set out in Table 1. Figure 3 charts the proportion of pro-climate contributions from different groups in parliament (Labour MPs, backbench Conservative MPs, all MPs in parliament, government ministers, and members of the HoL). What we can see from Figure 3 is that there are quite stark partisan differences between Labour and the Conservatives, reflecting broader findings in the literature which show that centre-left parties are likely to be more pro-climate than centre-right parties (Farstad, 2018). Across the period studied, an average of 73% of all MP contributions on the climate were pro-climate (equating to a mean average of 73 pro-climate interventions per month against 27 delay/denial), giving the HoC as a whole during this period a ‘predominantly pro-climate’ character. For Labour MPs, this average sits at 83% (av. 25 monthly pro-climate contributions versus 5 delay/denial), giving its MPs’ contributions a clear ‘pro-climate consensus’ character.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, are much less united on climate action. Just 67% of Conservative MPs’ total contributions are classed as pro-climate (av. 48 monthly pro-climate contributions versus 23 delay/denial), characterising Conservative contributions as ‘mildly pro-climate’. This finding is reflected in interviews with parliamentarians, a number of whom highlight the growth of scepticism on climate action within the Conservative Party, particularly in recent years (Interview 16, Conservative MP; Interview 13, Labour MP; Interview 3, Crossbench Peer).

Interestingly, we find that across the period, the proportion of government parliamentary pro-climate discourse is much weaker (mean 65%, with av. 28 monthly pro-climate contributions versus 15 delay/denial), than that of all MPs in general (mean 73%, see Figure 3). Indeed, government ministers are the one group of parliamentarians analysed in Figure 3 where we see a *steady decline* in the proportion of pro-climate contributions over time (explored further below). This is a stark finding, particularly as throughout this period different governments promoted their programmes as being strongly pro-climate

and, indeed, passed some important pieces of climate legislation. This includes the amended 2008 CCA which set a Net Zero target for 2050 and Boris Johnson's '10 Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution' (HM Government 2020) following the COVID-19 pandemic. This heightened ambivalence on the part of government may be partly explained by the different role that ministers play; in a pro-climate parliament, ministers may often be required to defend government policy from criticisms put forward by opposition parties that adopt a pro-climate stance. Nonetheless, this finding illustrates the lack of a clear, strong pro-climate discourse being advanced by government consistently throughout the period studied.

As such, while broadly there is a pro-climate consensus in the UK Parliament in the period studied, it is not a *universally* strong one. While Labour (and other opposition parties, such as the Liberal Democrats) have a high proportion of pro-climate contributions, the position of Conservative MPs (who made up the parliamentary majority) and Conservative government ministers are less strongly pro-climate, suggestive of greater division within the Conservative Party over this issue. We investigate this further below.

The partisan character of elite climate debate

We know that parliament begins to debate the climate much more in this period, and that MPs remain broadly 'pro-climate' throughout the period. Yet, parliament-wide analysis does not tell us the whole story. To understand what lays behind this headline, we need to dig deeper into the character of the partisan divide within the HoC and examine the extent of these fluctuations in pro-climate contributions as a way of understanding the ongoing erosion of elite climate consensus within the UK Parliament.

The Conservative Party in this period is certainly not a climate denying party per se; indeed, the pro-climate action Conservative Environment Network's parliamentary caucus boasted more than 130 MPs within its ranks in this period and the Conservative government delivered some important climate legislation and policy. However, there was clearly a lack of consensus across the party on climate. Delay/denial contributions being made by Conservative politicians are not simply confined to a small group of rebellious individuals, either.

The number of unique Conservative MPs making delay/denial contributions grows considerably over the period studied; starting off with 22 unique speakers in 2017, the figure increases each year to 80 in 2019, and then again to 114 in 2022 – a more than fivefold increase across the years studied (see Figure 4). This means that by the end of the period, the number of Conservative MPs making delay/denial contributions is approaching one third of all Conservatives MPs in the HoC. We do also see the number of unique speakers in the Labour Party making delay/denial contributions increases over this time, but the increase is less significant and plateaus in 2019 at a much lower level (even in relative terms).

While the Conservative Party and government continued to hold an ostensibly pro-climate position, this analysis reveals a considerable growth in the spread of discourse contesting climate action among Conservative MPs in parliament. This is not a pattern repeated in any other party. This confirms insights from the existing literature into the nature of intra-party divisions within the Conservative Party that have enabled a more partisan character to climate debate to emerge in recent years (Carter and Jacobs, 2014; Carter and Pearson, 2024; Gillard, 2016). This is important because, as Hess and Renner (2019) noted, divisions within mainstream conservative politics are often important to a

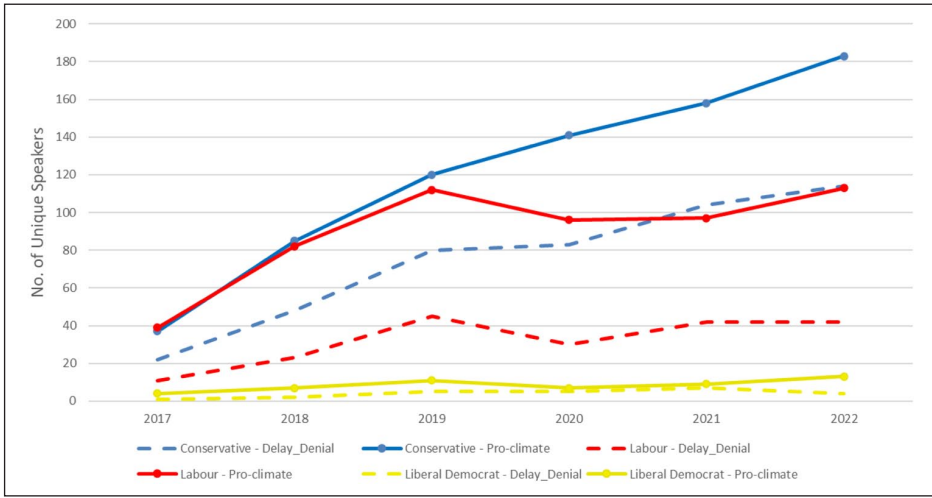


Figure 4. Number of unique speakers by party, pro-climate, and delay/denial debate contributions (HoC, 2017–22).

broader story of growing opposition to climate and energy policies. In the following section, we build upon the idea of ‘divided conservatism’ (Hess and Renner 2019) by exploring in more detail how this growing division within the Conservative Party was translated into parliamentary interventions.

Divided conservatism and the UK’s elite climate consensus

Divisions within the Conservative Party are apparent and are seen to increase over the period analysed. These divisions are significant because they appear to lay behind a volatility of the parliamentary majority on climate action apparent in the UK Parliament between 2017 and 2022. On the one hand, we find evidence of a rallying effect wherein as the climate agenda becomes more discussed within parliament from late 2018, following the rise in global climate protests and leading to MPs endorsing a motion to declare a formal climate and environment emergency in May 2019 (HC debates 1 May 2019, c318) (see Nisbett et al., 2025), Conservative MPs (both backbench and within government) adopt an ever-so slightly more pro-climate stance. The score increases from 6.4 in the pre-protest period to 6.8 afterwards, both reflecting a ‘mildly pro-climate’ stance. In the aggregate, this suggests a growing pro-climate consensus. On the other hand, however, the divided nature of the Conservative majority appears to undermine the strength of this consensus.

Figure 3 shows that Labour MPs remain *consistently* strongly pro-climate throughout. There are some time periods wherein Labour’s pro-climate stance does appear to wane (which we explore further below), but these shifts in Labour’s pro-climate discourse are relatively minor, with a relative standard deviation (RSD) of 9.45. On the other hand, the contributions from Conservative backbench MPs, while remaining mildly pro-climate on average, are much more volatile in character in the period studied, with an RSD of 21.14. This means that backbench Conservative MPs’ contributions are more than twice as variable as Labour’s, and as the Commons as a whole (RSD 10.24) (see Table 2). The high

Table 2. Proportion of pro-climate discourse and relative standard deviations.

	Mean av. % pro-climate (2017–22)	RSD
All MPs	73%	10.24
All MPs except Conservative MPs	82%	10.19
Labour MPs	83%	9.45
Conservative backbench MPs	70%	21.14
Government ministers	65%	17.74
House of Lords (all members)	79%	13.76

RSD = relative standard deviation.

levels of variation in Conservative climate discourse in the HoC can also be contrasted with the HoL (RSD 13.76).² We thus see higher levels of deviation in the climate discourse of members of the Conservative parliamentary majority compared with both other MPs (who are not linked to the electoral consequences of government climate policy through party affiliation) and members of the HoL (an unelected chamber). This finding chimes with accounts that would suggest that MPs (particularly in the UK’s plurality rule or ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system) are liable to be sensitive to imposing costs on voters which might lead to weaker commitment to climate action (Finnegan, 2022: 1207).

The volatility apparent in the statistics on Conservative MPs’ contributions are most apparent at critical moments already discussed in the literature; it is the two major socio-economic events of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis in late 2021, which usher in large swings in the character of Conservative climate contributions in parliament. In the year up to and including January 2020, backbench Conservative discourse scored an average of 7.4, whereas in the 6 months from February 2020 on – during which time the United Kingdom was under ‘lockdown’ – this was reduced to 6.5. Pro-climate contributions then rose among Conservative backbenchers in the second half of 2020 in support of Boris Johnson’s green industrial policies (to a score of over 8 (‘pro-climate consensus’)) but subsequently declined again significantly over the course of 2021 (to c.6.5 (‘mildly pro-climate’)) by the end of the year as the cost-of-living crisis took hold.

An element of this volatility might reasonably be accounted for by the natural difficulties faced by any party in government as new pressures or policy challenges emerge, such as the cost-of-living crisis that emerged in 2021. We might also contend that it is reflective of a broader breakdown in governing authority and is not specific to the climate issue. The character of this volatility, however, suggests a deeper fissure within the party that is, while not necessarily *wholly* related to climate, driven by a growing positional divide within the party on climate action. This is exemplified by the emergence in 2021 of the populist anti-Net Zero faction, the NZSG, which called on the Johnson administration to halt the ambitious Net Zero plan (Carter and Pearson, 2024; Paterson et al., 2024). Though the group’s membership is secretive, it was known to comprise of at least 21 sitting Conservative MPs in the 2019–24 parliament with many more Conservative politicians showing support for the group at various points through signing its open letters (Hermann, 2022). The NZSG members and supporters held influential positions within the Conservative party and government in this period, including figures such as Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, Lord Frost, Esther McVey MP, and Dame Andrea Jenkyns.

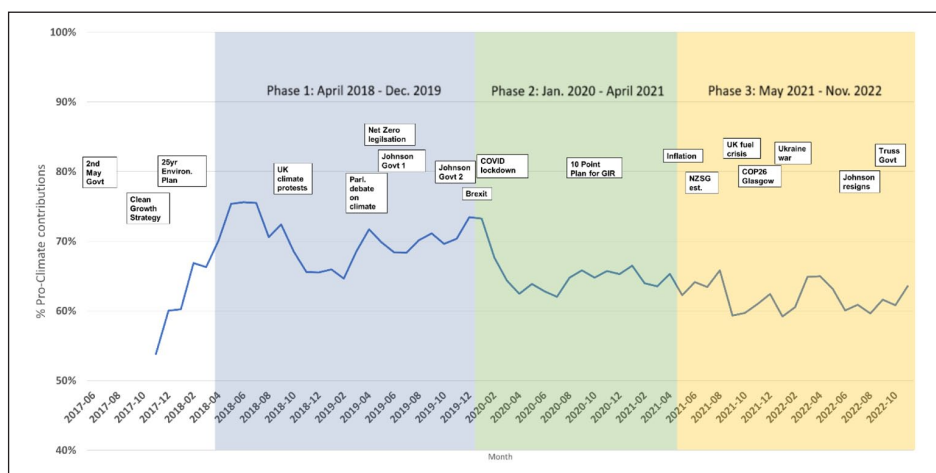


Figure 5. Proportion of pro-climate discourse, UK government ministers (2017–22). The data in Figure 5 has been smoothed using a 6-month rolling average to avoid overly noisy data.

Analysis suggests the group exerted a broader influence within the party and government too. Across the entire pre-NZSG period up to the beginning of summer recess in July 2021, backbench Conservative contributions score an average of 7.5. In the 14-month period studied after the establishment of the NZSG, this average drops down to 7.0. In the 12 months leading up to the NZSG being established, there were 54 unique Conservative backbench speakers making delay/denial contributions, whereas this increases to 79 unique backbenchers (a 46% increase) in the 12 months following their establishment. For the Conservative government itself (see Figure 5 below), in these same time periods, the score of ministers' contributions drops from 6.8 to 6.3. As with the backbenchers, we also see this become more widespread within government. In the 12 months pre-NZSG's establishment, 23 unique government ministers made delay/denial contributions, with this figure increasing to 31 (a 35% increase) in the 12 months after the NZSG is established. While we cannot make a direct causal claim here on the NZSG's influence vis-à-vis the broader cost-of-living and inflation issues, these findings correlate directly both with accounts in the existing literature (Carter and Pearson, 2024; Paterson et al., 2024) and to statements given by our interviewees. These interviewees noted that when material circumstances changed from late 2021, the Johnson government's policy programme, and in particular its Net Zero stance, was put under pressure from the right wing of the Conservative party (Interview 16, Conservative MP; Interview 17, Crossbench peer; Interview 13, Labour MP).

Conclusion

This article has examined how climate change was debated in the UK Parliament between 2017 and 2022, combining computational analysis of nearly 9000 contributions with elite interviews to map parliamentary discourse over a period marked by rising salience and mounting contestation. It shows that while parliamentary debate remained predominantly pro-climate, this headline obscures sharp partisan and intra-party variation. The UK's elite climate consensus was put under strain by a divided conservative politics within the

governing majority that was characterised by volatility and the growth of delay/denial contributions within the party and government. The emergence of the NZSG in 2021 coincided with declines in pro-climate scores among both backbenchers and ministers and a broader diffusion of delay/denial contributions. While caution is warranted in inferring causality, the temporal alignment of these trends with our interview evidence suggests that the politics of a divided conservative party, catalysed by cost-of-living pressures, amplified delay/denial discourse in the UK Parliament. Interestingly, of all groups examined, government ministers displayed the weakest pro-climate discourse and the steadiest decline in the proportion of pro-climate contributions over time, despite stewarding notable legislative milestones in the period studied (e.g. the 2019 Net Zero Act). This finding points towards the fragility of executive climate discourse in cases where the support it receives from its parliamentary majority is ultimately weak and divided.

The study advances scholarship conceptually by demonstrating how the erosion of climate consensus within established climate leaders can proceed through the politics of ‘divided conservatism’: widening intra-party heterogeneity within right-of-centre parties that shifts climate debate towards more contested terrain over time. This complements existing accounts that draw attention to the importance of divisions within mainstream conservative parties – not simply far-right, populist ones – that can serve to institutionalise ambivalence in agenda-setting arenas (Hess and Renner, 2019). Empirically, the article deploys a comprehensive, updated analysis of parliamentary speech, extending UK-focused scholarship on the evolution of the country’s elite climate consensus.

It is important to recognise that since the period of data collection that underpins this article (2017–22), there have been further significant developments in the politics of climate change in the United Kingdom. The Conservative Party has since adopted an explicitly anti-Net Zero stance, while the pro-climate faction within the party has diminished and been sidelined since the 2024 General Election under the leadership of Kemi Badenoch. Simultaneously, Nigel Farage’s Reform UK has become a major player in British politics and similarly stands on an anti-Net Zero platform. This suggests that the politics of ‘divided conservatism’ we see in the period studied may have given way to a more conventional partisan divide on climate politics in the United Kingdom. These developments correlate with what we would expect to see as the breakdown of elite climate consensus continues. Although this article has been unable to capture such developments empirically, it has provided a valuable snapshot of a pivotal time in UK climate politics that allows us to better understand the processes through which elite climate consensus erosion occurs.

These contributions have important implications for the study of climate politics more broadly. First, we know that elite cues transmitted in parliaments matter (Brulle et al., 2012). The patterning of Conservative volatility and the progressively weaker climate discourse from government ministers seen in this case suggests that signals from governing majorities can soften, stall, or reframe climate commitments even when formal targets remain in place. This is important because sustained executive ambivalence risks amplifying partisan climate divisions among the wider public. Understanding elite climate debates within different parliamentary settings is therefore a highly important task that should be further explored by the literature. Second, we have seen how the sequencing of socio-economic shocks (COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis) seemingly interacted with intra-party dynamics to reshape parliamentary discourse. These findings invite scholars to decentre simple left–right party comparisons and instead scrutinise the internal dynamics of governing (particularly conservative) parties and how these intra-party

dynamics within a parliamentary setting can open the door to increasing climate ambivalence, the erosion of previously established elite consensuses, and growing partisan division on climate action.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In the UK context, ‘backbencher’ is a term used to describe an MP who occupies no governmental office and is not a frontbench spokesperson in the Opposition party.
2. Although the relative standard deviation score for the HoL is slightly higher than we expected, this score comes from a higher mean average of pro-climate discourse across the Lords (79%), compared with the Commons (73%). We can see this in Figure 3, which shows contributions from the HoL fluctuating but consistently at a much higher proportion of pro-climate discourse.

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Appendix I

List of interviews

1. Member of House of Lords (A), Crossbench, 07.09.2022
2. Member of House of Lords (B), Crossbench, 18.08.2022
3. Representative of UK Cabinet Office, 28.08.2022

4. Member of House of Commons (A), Scottish National Party, 27.07.2022
5. Member of House of Commons (B), Labour Party, 12.07.2022
6. Member of House of Commons (C), Conservative Party, 27.06.2022
7. Member of House of Lords (C), Liberal Democrats, 10.06.2022
8. Member of House of Commons (D), Labour Party, 10.06.2022
9. Member of House of Lords (D), Green Party, 13.05.2022
10. Member of House of Commons (E), Conservative Party, 10.05.2022
11. Member of House of Lords (E), Crossbench, 13.04.2022
12. Member of House of Commons (F), Labour Party, 21.04.2022
13. Member of House of Commons (G), Labour Party, 11.04.2022