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Legally robust, politically fragile? The discursive institutional dilution of conservative climate discourse in UK Net Zero politics (2010–2024)

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Abstract

The Conservative Party governed the UK during 2010–2024; a period which included several flagship climate actions as well as rollbacks under austerity. To date, however, limited attention has been paid to how discourses and institutions co-evolve, and how narrative strategies shape the meaning and durability of legal commitments. This article examines the evolution of UK climate governance from 2010 to 2024 by introducing a new conceptual process of Discursive Institutional Dilution (DID). DID conceptualises institutional change as a cumulative process operating through shifts in political meaning rather than formal rule alteration. The analysis identifies overlapping discursive configurations characterised by tensions between leadership, affordability, sovereignty, and pragmatism. From these patterns, four mechanisms of DID are derived inductively: fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, and antagonistic reframing. The analysis situates these shifts within the crises of Brexit, COVID-19, and the Ukraine war, and examines the temporary ‘thickening’ of discourse during the Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) movements. The findings show that climate institutions endure not through law alone but through meaning. Sustaining Net Zero therefore requires discursive renewal – embedding fairness, prosperity, and intergenerational justice at the core of policy narrative to resist populist reframing and ideological decay.

Keywords Climate governance · Discursive Institutionalism · Green Conservatism · UK politics · Net Zero · Populism



Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) is widely regarded as a pioneer in climate governance, having established one of the most comprehensive statutory frameworks for long-term decarbonisation among advanced economies (Gillard 2017). The Climate Change Act 2008 introduced legally binding carbon budgets and an independent oversight body in the Climate Change Committee, institutionalising emissions reduction as a core function of the state (Lockwood 2021). This architecture was further consolidated with the adoption of a legally binding Net Zero target in 2019, positioning the UK as the first major economy to enshrine such a commitment in law (Carter and Pearson 2024). From an institutional perspective, the UK therefore exemplifies a model of durable climate governance, in which long-term commitments are insulated from short-term political volatility through legal design and delegated authority (Lockwood 2013, 2021).

Yet, the trajectory of climate politics in the UK since 2010 presents a more complex picture. While the legal architecture of climate governance has remained largely intact, the political narratives through which these commitments were justified, communicated, and contested shifted markedly across successive Conservative governments between 2010 and 2024. Early efforts to frame climate action as a vehicle for economic modernisation and global leadership gave way, over time, to discourses emphasising affordability, energy security, and national sovereignty. In later years, elements of political rhetoric have gone further still, recasting climate policy as burdensome, excessive, or misaligned with the interests of “ordinary” citizens (Paterson et al. 2024; Marquardt and Lederer 2022). These shifts do not necessarily imply the abandonment of climate commitments. Rather, they point to a more subtle transformation in the discursive environment within which those commitments are embedded.

This article, therefore, examines an empirical puzzle: how can institutional commitments to decarbonisation remain legally durable while the political narratives that sustain their legitimacy evolve, fragment, or in some cases weaken? To clarify terms, the article defines *legal robustness* as the persistence of statutory targets, carbon budgets, and institutional oversight mechanisms that structure climate governance, even where implementation pathways or political support fluctuate (Lockwood 2013). The aim is therefore explanatory rather than diagnostic: to account for the coexistence of institutional durability and discursive transformation within a single governance system.

Conceptually, this article advances Discursive Institutionalism (DI) (Hacker 2004; Schmidt 2008, 2010; Peters 2019), by introducing *Discursive Institutional Dilution* (DID) as a novel and analytically distinct mode of institutional change, distinguishing it from existing forms of *drift*, *layering*, *conversion*, and *symbolic compliance* (Hacker 2004). DID conceptualises institutional change as a cumulative process operating through shifts in political meaning rather than formal rule alteration. It identifies four mechanisms – fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, and antagonistic reframing – through which the narratives that sustain institutional legitimacy may become less coherent, less salient, or more contested over time.

Empirically, the article examines the evolution of Conservative climate discourse between 2010 and 2024, drawing on a corpus of 127 political texts including party



manifestos, prime ministerial speeches, departmental strategies, and parliamentary debates. This period is analytically significant because it spans multiple governing contexts – including austerity, the Brexit referendum, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global energy crisis – each of which reshaped the political conditions under which climate policy was articulated and justified (Gamble 2021; Asiamah 2022; Beiser-McGrath 2022; Bailey 2023). Rather than treating discourse as a reflection of policy change, the analysis treats it as constitutive of the institutional environment itself, shaping how climate commitments are understood, prioritised, and contested.

The article makes two contributions. Empirically, it provides the first systematic longitudinal analysis of Conservative climate discourse across 14 years in government, demonstrating how political narratives surrounding climate policy have shifted in response to changing economic, geopolitical, and electoral pressures. Theoretically, it advances DID as a novel mechanism within Discursive Institutionalism, offering a framework for understanding how institutions may remain legally intact while their discursive legitimacy is reconfigured. In doing so, it extends existing accounts of institutional change – which have tended to focus on formal rule transformation – by showing how changes in meaning can reshape institutional trajectories even in the absence of legislative reform (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hacker et al. 2015).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on UK climate governance, Conservative environmental politics, and the role of populism and crisis in shaping climate discourse. The subsequent section develops the analytical framework, explaining how Discursive Institutionalism informs the concept of Discursive Institutional Dilution. The methods section outlines the research design and coding strategy. The results section then identifies shifting discursive configurations within Conservative climate politics, before the discussion situates these findings within wider debates on institutional change and environmental governance. The conclusion reflects on the implications of discursive transformation for the future of climate policy in the UK.

Literature review: institutional durability, conservative politics, and anti-Net Zero populism

The trajectory of UK climate governance has generated a substantial body of scholarship concerned with the relationship between institutional design, political discourse, and policy durability (Lockwood 2013, 2021; Carter and Clements 2015; Carter and Pearson 2024). Much of this literature converges on a central paradox that the UK has developed one of the most legally robust climate governance frameworks among advanced economies, yet political support for climate action has proven uneven, contested, and increasingly susceptible to reframing. To situate the contribution of this article, this section brings together three strands of scholarship that are often treated separately: (1) research on the institutional durability of UK climate governance, (2) studies of Conservative environmental politics, and (3) work on populism, crisis politics, and the discursive contestation of climate policy. While each offers important insights, their integration reveals a gap concerning how discursive change interacts with institutional resilience over time.



Institutional durability

A first strand of literature emphasises the institutional strength and durability of UK climate governance. The Climate Change Act 2008 is widely regarded as a landmark in global environmental politics, not only because it established legally binding emissions targets, but because it embedded these targets within a system of carbon budgeting and independent oversight through the Climate Change Committee (Gillard 2017; Lockwood 2013; 2021). This institutional design has been interpreted as an attempt to insulate climate policy from short-term electoral pressures by delegating authority to technocratic bodies and locking in long-term commitments through legislation (Fankhauser et al. 2018). From this perspective, the UK stands out as a case in which cross-party consensus, elite coordination, and legal entrenchment combined to produce unusually durable climate institutions (Carter and Jacobs 2014; Lockwood 2021; see also Jordan and Moore 2020).

The existing literature provides institutional explanations for why UK climate governance arrangements have persisted despite political turnover and economic pressures. However, its focus on institutional architecture can understate the extent to which such durability depends on a continuing environment of political justification. Institutions are not self-sustaining; they rely on narratives that explain their purpose, justify their costs, and connect them to broader visions of economic and national development (Schmidt 2008; Peters 2019). As such, legal durability does not automatically translate into political vitality. Long-term climate commitments must be continually legitimised through discourse, particularly in democratic systems where policy priorities are subject to electoral contestation. It is at this juncture that a second strand of literature becomes crucial: work on the evolution of Conservative environmental politics.

Conservative politics

Early analyses of Conservative climate politics focused on the modernising project associated with David Cameron, in which environmentalism was framed as compatible with economic competitiveness, technological innovation, and responsible governance. Carter and Clements (2015) show how the slogan “Vote blue, go green” functioned as a strategic attempt to reposition the Conservative Party by aligning environmental policy with a broader narrative of modernisation. During this period, climate action was frequently presented as a source of economic opportunity and global leadership, rather than as a constraint on growth. However, this literature also demonstrates that such environmental modernisation was inherently unstable. Tensions quickly emerged between green growth narratives and competing priorities centred on fiscal austerity, deregulation, and cost-of-living concerns (Lockwood 2013; Carter and Jacobs 2014). Cameron’s reported call to “get rid of all the green crap” (The Guardian 2013a) became emblematic of these tensions, highlighting the fragility of environmental commitments within a broader political project defined by economic retrenchment.

Subsequent scholarship has traced how Conservative climate discourse evolved beyond this initial phase. Carter and Pearson (2024) argue that the post-2015 period



involved a significant recalibration, in which climate policy became increasingly subordinated to the languages of affordability, competitiveness, and national interest. In this account, Theresa May's decision to legislate for Net Zero in 2019 was historically significant in legal terms but politically ambiguous in narrative terms, functioning in part as a legacy measure rather than as evidence of renewed discursive commitment. Similarly, analyses of Boris Johnson's "green industrial revolution" highlight the performative role of leadership discourse in elevating climate ambition rhetorically, even as policy implementation remained uneven and often subordinated to broader economic priorities (Bailey and Hofferberth 2022; Jackson 2024a, b). Across this literature, a recurring theme is that Conservative climate politics has been characterised not by consistent opposition or support, but by oscillation between endorsement, instrumentalisation, and contestation. While this body of work foregrounds the importance of political discourse, it often treats rhetoric as a reflection of party strategy or ideological change rather than as a constitutive element of institutional durability itself. In other words, it shows that discourse changes, but does not fully explain how those changes affect the legitimacy and resilience of climate institutions. This limitation becomes more apparent when considering a third strand of literature, which examines the politicisation of climate governance through populism, nationalism, and crisis dynamics.

Anti-Net Zero populism

Comparative research increasingly demonstrates that climate policy has become a key site of populist mobilisation, particularly where environmental commitments can be framed as economically burdensome or imposed by distant elites (Forchtner 2019; Marquardt and Lederer 2022). In the UK context, Paterson et al. (2024) identify the emergence of Anti-Net Zero Populism as a distinct rhetorical formation within Conservative politics. This discourse does not necessarily reject climate science outright; rather, it reframes climate policy as excessive, unfair, or disconnected from the lived realities of "ordinary people." Such narratives often draw on broader themes of sovereignty, fairness, and economic protection, linking climate policy to wider debates about national autonomy and state intervention (Gamble 2021).

These developments cannot be understood in isolation from the broader political transformations associated with Brexit and its aftermath. The discourse of "taking back control" has reshaped British political debate across multiple policy domains, privileging autonomy, flexibility, and national discretion over international coordination (Asiamah 2025a). Within this context, climate policy becomes more easily framed as a potential constraint on national sovereignty or economic competitiveness. The politicisation of Net Zero is therefore part of a wider reconfiguration of political discourse in which environmental commitments are increasingly contested through the language of control, cost, and national interest.

Alongside populism, a growing body of literature has examined how crises reshape climate governance. Scholars have shown that periods of economic or geopolitical disruption – such as the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the energy shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine – tend to shift political attention toward short-term imperatives, often at the expense of long-term environmen-



tal goals (Burns et al. 2020; Beiser-McGrath 2022; Bailey 2023). In the UK, these crises have reinforced discursive shifts toward affordability, security, and resilience, providing new justifications for slowing or recalibrating climate ambition. However, crises do not simply constrain policy capacity; they also reorder the hierarchy of politically legitimate arguments, making certain narratives more salient while marginalising others.

Drawing together three scholarly literatures

Taken together, these three strands of literature provide important but incomplete insights into the dynamics of UK climate governance. Research on institutional design explains why climate commitments have proven legally durable. Scholarship on Conservative politics demonstrates that climate discourse has shifted significantly over time. Work on populism and crisis governance shows how climate policy can be reframed through competing narratives of cost, sovereignty, and fairness. What remains underdeveloped, however, is a framework for understanding how these discursive shifts interact with institutional durability itself. Existing studies often imply such a relationship but rarely theorise it explicitly.

Analytical framework: Discursive Institutionalism and DID

This article addresses the existing gap regarding how discursive shifts interact with institutional durability by treating discourse not merely as context or rhetoric, but as a mechanism through which institutional legitimacy is reproduced, contested, and potentially weakened over time. In doing so, it builds on Discursive Institutionalism while extending it through the concept of Discursive Institutional Dilution (DID). Whereas existing theories of gradual institutional change – such as drift, layering, and conversion – focus primarily on changes in formal rules or policy instruments (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hacker et al. 2015), DID highlights how institutions may be reshaped through changes in meaning even when their formal structure remains intact. By integrating insights from institutional theory, political discourse analysis, and climate governance, the article offers a new perspective on how long-term policy commitments are sustained – or contested – within evolving political environments.

Explaining how climate governance institutions can remain legally durable while their political legitimacy evolves requires an approach that captures both institutional stability and ideational change. Traditional institutionalist theories have been effective in explaining policy persistence through a focus on rules, organisational structures, and path dependence, but have often treated ideas and discourse as secondary (Hall and Taylor 1996; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). In climate governance – where long-term commitments must be continually justified within shifting political environments – this risks overlooking the constitutive role of discourse in sustaining institutional authority.

To address this limitation, this article draws on Discursive Institutionalism, which places ideas, language, and political argument at the centre of institutional analysis (Schmidt 2008, 2010; Peters 2019). From a DI perspective, institutions are not sim-



ply rule systems but dynamic structures of meaning that must be continually interpreted and reproduced. Institutional durability therefore depends not only on legal design or organisational capacity, but on the ongoing production of narratives that render institutions legitimate and politically viable.

A key distinction within DI is between *communicative* and *coordinative* discourse. Communicative discourse refers to public-facing narratives through which political actors justify policy to citizens, invoking themes such as leadership, affordability, or responsibility. Coordinative discourse refers to the internal processes through which policy ideas are constructed and negotiated among governing elites (Schmidt 2010; Peters 2019). These two forms of discourse may diverge: governments can publicly affirm ambitious commitments while internally prioritising competing objectives such as fiscal restraint or political expediency. Such divergence is particularly salient in climate governance, where long-term decarbonisation goals must be reconciled with short-term economic and electoral pressures.

While DI has been widely applied in environmental politics to examine competing discursive frames – such as ecological modernisation, economic pragmatism, and environmental justice (Fitch-Roy et al. 2020; Dryzek 2022; Jackson 2024a) – it has been less explicit in theorising how discursive change affects institutional resilience over time. This limitation becomes apparent when compared to dominant accounts of gradual institutional change, most notably Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) framework of drift, layering, conversion, and displacement. These mechanisms provide powerful tools for analysing incremental transformation but remain oriented toward changes in formal rules, institutional effects, or policy instruments.

What these frameworks capture less effectively is the possibility that institutions may be transformed through shifts in meaning rather than changes in rules. In policy domains such as climate governance, formal commitments can remain intact even as the narratives that justify them are reframed, deprioritised, or contested. Existing approaches tend to treat such dynamics as secondary or derivative, rather than as mechanisms of institutional change in their own right.

To address this gap, the article introduces Discursive Institutional Dilution. DID conceptualises institutional change as a cumulative process operating through shifts in political meaning rather than formal rule alteration. It refers to a condition in which institutions remain legally intact while the discursive frameworks that sustain their legitimacy become less coherent, less salient, or more contested over time. Dilution does not imply institutional ineffectiveness or irrelevance; rather, it captures a transformation in how institutions are justified and understood within political discourse.

DID specifies four interrelated mechanisms through which discursive reproduction may weaken: *fragmentation*, *rhetorical neglect*, *orphaning*, and *antagonistic reframing*. Fragmentation describes the coexistence of competing justificatory narratives – such as green leadership alongside cost containment – that destabilise institutional meaning. Rhetorical neglect refers to declining discursive salience, where institutions persist but no longer occupy a central place in governing narratives. Orphaning occurs when ambitious commitments, such as long-term targets, lack sustained narrative embedding connecting them to everyday political concerns. Antagonistic reframing captures situations in which institutions are recoded as burdensome, unfair,



or imposed by unaccountable elites, altering their moral and political justification without dismantling them.

These four mechanisms operate cumulatively rather than sequentially. Multiple discursive logics may coexist at any given moment, reflecting the contested nature of climate governance in democratic systems. DID does not impose a deterministic trajectory but provides a framework for tracing how shifts in discourse reshape the conditions under which institutions are legitimised and contested.

DID is particularly relevant in policy domains characterised by long-term commitments combined with short-term political incentives. Climate governance exemplifies this condition: decarbonisation targets span decades, while political attention is shaped by electoral cycles, fiscal constraints, and recurrent crises (Hale 2024). Under such conditions, maintaining coherent narratives of legitimacy becomes increasingly difficult.

In this sense, DID complements rather than replaces existing theories of institutional change. It extends the analytical toolkit by foregrounding the role of meaning in shaping institutional trajectories, demonstrating that institutions may be transformed not only through changes in rules or structures, but through shifts in the narratives that render them politically viable (see Table 1). The following sections apply this framework to UK climate governance between 2010 and 2024, tracing how Conservative Party discourse reconfigured the discursive foundations of climate institutions even as their legal architecture remained intact.

Research design and methodology

This article employs a qualitative research design grounded in discourse analysis to examine how political narratives surrounding climate governance evolved in the UK between 2010 and 2024. Rather than cataloguing policy outputs, the analysis focuses on how climate commitments were interpreted, justified, and contested within elite political discourse. Consistent with Discursive Institutionalism, discourse is treated not as a reflection of institutional change, but as a constitutive element of the institutional environment itself, shaping how governance arrangements are legitimised and sustained over time (Schmidt 2008, 2010; Peters 2019).

The research design distinguishes between communicative and coordinative discourse in order to capture both public-facing legitimation and internal policy construction. Communicative discourse is examined through outward-oriented texts such as prime ministerial speeches, party manifestos, and official press releases, where political actors articulate climate policy to wider publics. Coordinative discourse is traced through policy documents, departmental strategies, legislation, and parliamentary debates, where policy ideas are negotiated and translated into governing practice. Combining these domains allows the analysis to trace shifts not only in rhetorical emphasis but in the underlying policy logics through which climate governance was articulated – particularly important in a context where formal institutional commitments remained stable while narratives evolved.

The empirical analysis draws on a corpus of 127 official texts produced under Conservative governments between 2010 and 2024, including speeches, manifestos,



Table 1 How DID complements DI and extends gradual institutional change theory

Discursive Institutionalism (DI)	Gradual Institutional Change Mechanisms (Mahoney and Thelen 2010)	Discursive Institutional Dilution (DID)
Focuses on how ideas and discourse shape institutional operation (communicative vs. coordinative discourse).	Drift: institutions unchanged while external conditions shift. Layering: adding new rules to existing ones. Conversion: reinterpretation of rules for new purposes. Displacement: replacement of institutions.	Adds <i>meaning-based change</i> , showing how institutions shift even when rules and structures do not change.
Treats institutions as dynamic systems of meaning that require discursive reproduction.	Mechanisms emphasise rule-based or structural change but underplay shifts in justification or narrative.	Shows how institutions remain legally intact, but their legitimising narratives weaken, diverge, or fragment .
Explains how discourse sustains institutional legitimacy.	Accounts for incremental institutional transformation but rarely analyse <i>discursive erosion</i> .	Identifies four discursive mechanisms - fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, antagonistic reframing – that reshape institutional legitimacy.
Highlights divergence between public-facing (communicative) and internal (coordinative) discourse.	Focuses on external shocks or reinterpretation of rules; less attuned to public narratives or political communication.	Explains how mismatches in communicative/coordinative discourse can cumulatively dilute institutional authority.
Emphasises meaning-making but does not specify how meaning weakens over time.	Describes <i>how rules</i> evolve but not <i>how narratives</i> evolve.	Provides a framework for analysing how discursive change reshapes institutional legitimacy over time.

departmental publications, legislation, and Hansard debates (see online Appendix A). Documents were selected through purposive sampling to capture both routine governance and moments of heightened discursive salience. In addition to systematically collected materials, the corpus includes widely recognised landmark interventions, such as Cameron's early statements on green leadership, May's Net Zero announcement, Johnson's COP26 rhetoric, and Sunak's 2023 Net Zero speech. This approach enables a longitudinal analysis spanning multiple prime ministers and major political disruptions, including austerity, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the energy crisis, which together reshaped the political conditions under which climate policy was justified (Gamble 2021; Asiamah 2025a, b; Beiser-McGrath 2022; Bailey 2023).

The analysis employs qualitative content analysis using an abductive coding strategy that combines theoretically informed categories with patterns emerging from the



data (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Coding focused on three dimensions: the type of discourse (communicative or coordinative), key normative registers (such as leadership, justice, affordability, pragmatism, and sovereignty), and the four mechanisms of DID – fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, and antagonistic reframing.

The identification of the four mechanisms followed an abductive logic in which recurring discursive patterns were iteratively compared across texts and time periods. Initial open coding generated a broader set of discursive tendencies, which were subsequently refined through constant comparison and theoretical engagement with the DI and gradual institutional change literature. The final four mechanisms were retained because they met three criteria: (1) recurrence across multiple time periods and document types, (2) distinctiveness in their effect on institutional legitimation, and (3) consistency with observed divergences between communicative and coordinative discourse.

Coding was conducted primarily by the lead author, with collaborative review of a subset of texts to ensure consistency. While the analysis is qualitative in orientation, it is supplemented by indicative frequency counts tracking shifts in discursive emphasis across time and document types (online Appendices C and D). These measures are used to support, rather than substitute for, contextual and interpretive analysis.

A central analytical distinction is maintained between discourse and policy outcomes. Policy developments are referenced not as evidence of institutional change per se, but as sites where justificatory practices become visible. The analysis therefore prioritises patterns of meaning, narrative coherence, and legitimating logic over claims about policy effectiveness or causal impact. This distinction is essential for maintaining consistency with the concept of DID, which focuses on the conditions under which institutions are politically sustained or contested rather than on their material performance.

The approach faces inevitable limitations. Reliance on publicly available sources means that communicative discourse is more visible than informal internal deliberation, and the focus on elite political communication limits engagement with sub-national or civil society narratives. Discourse analysis also involves interpretive judgement. These challenges are mitigated through transparent coding, triangulation with secondary sources, and the integration of qualitative interpretation with systematic indicators of discursive salience. Despite these constraints, the research design provides a robust foundation for analysing how climate institutions can remain legally durable while their discursive foundations are progressively reconfigured.

Results: discursive configurations and the reproduction of climate governance meaning (2010–2024)

The analysis of Conservative Party manifestos, prime ministerial speeches, departmental strategies, and parliamentary debates reveals a pattern of discursive change that is best understood not as a linear sequence of phases, but as a set of shifting and overlapping *discursive configurations*. These configurations represent changing centres of gravity within Conservative climate politics, reflecting the relative promi-



nence of different justificatory logics – such as leadership, affordability, sovereignty, and protection – across time.

Importantly, these configurations are neither mutually exclusive nor temporally discrete. Elements of multiple discursive logics frequently coexist within the same period, often reflecting internal party tensions, shifting governing priorities, and responses to external crises. The analytical value of distinguishing configurations therefore lies not in imposing a deterministic trajectory, but in tracing how particular narratives gain or lose salience and how these shifts reshape the discursive environment within which climate governance is legitimised.

Across the period 2010–2024, three dominant configurations can be identified: *Green Conservatism*, *Sceptical Neoliberalism*, and *Hardline Populism*. These labels capture broad patterns in the data rather than rigid categories. Each configuration is associated with distinctive discursive emphases, but all remain internally heterogeneous and partially overlapping. The analysis below draws on both qualitative textual evidence and indicative frequency patterns (Fig. 1; see also online Appendices C and D) to demonstrate how these configurations emerged and interacted over time.

Green Conservatism (2010–2015)

The period from 2010 to 2015 is best understood not as a coherent or stable phase, in part due to the Conservatives' parallel coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. Instead, the period reflects a dominant discursive configuration in which a modernising, pro-climate narrative achieved high salience while coexisting with, and gradually giving way to, competing logics centred on cost and fiscal restraint. Following the election of David Cameron in 2010, Conservative climate discourse was initially structured around a communicative framework that positioned decarbonisation as integral to economic renewal, technological innovation, and global leader-

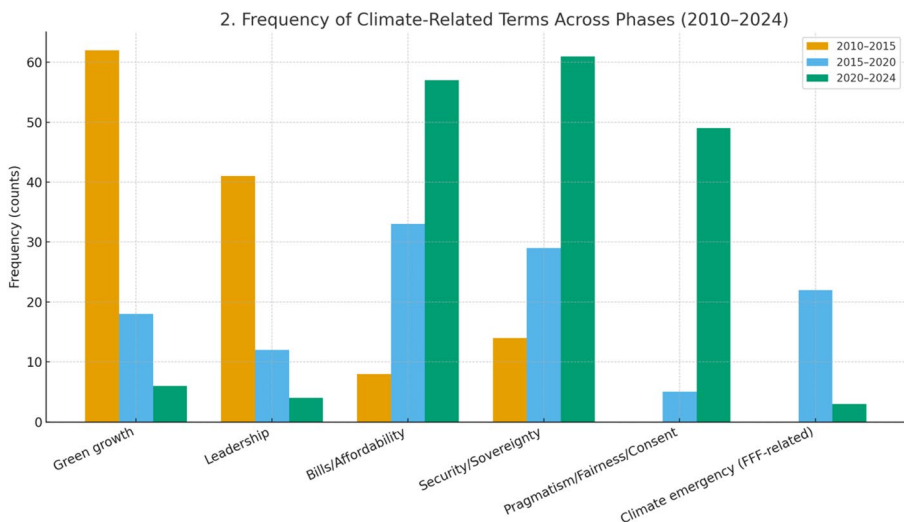


Fig. 1 Frequency of climate-related terms across configurations (2010–2024)



ship. Across the corpus, this configuration is marked by a dense clustering of terms such as “greenest government,” “green economy,” “low-carbon,” “jobs,” “innovation,” and “leadership,” particularly pronounced between 2010 and 2013 (see Fig. 1; online Appendix D).

The 2010 Conservative Party manifesto exemplifies this configuration. Its dedicated section, “*Build a Greener Economy*,” presents climate action not as a constraint on growth but as a driver of competitiveness and industrial transformation (Conservative Party 2010). It contains the highest frequency of environmental (40) and climate-specific (15) references across the period, consistently linking emissions reduction to economic opportunity and global leadership. Phrases such as “build a green economy” and “lead the world in low-carbon energy” situate climate policy within a broader narrative of modernisation aligned with market competition and international positioning.

This framing was reinforced through prime ministerial rhetoric. In his first major speech at the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), Cameron declared: “*I want us to be the greenest government ever – a very simple ambition and one that I’m absolutely committed to achieving*” (UK Government 2010). Similar formulations recur in the early years of government, often coupling environmental ambition with economic pragmatism. In 2013, for example, Cameron articulated a tripartite justification for climate policy – “*cut carbon, cut costs, drive innovation*” – invoking environmental responsibility, consumer benefit, and industrial strategy simultaneously (Business Green 2013; The Guardian 2013b). Parliamentary debate echoed these themes, with references to the “greenest government ever” appearing in discussions of the Queen’s Speech (Hansard 2010a, b), indicating diffusion across institutional sites.

Institutionally, this communicative narrative was supported by policy initiatives that embodied a market-compatible model of decarbonisation. The establishment of the Green Investment Bank in 2012, and its expansion in 2013, was framed as a “ground-breaking” mechanism to mobilise private capital into low-carbon infrastructure (UK Government 2012, 2013). As an institutional innovation, the Bank symbolised the alignment of environmental ambition with financial and industrial policy, reinforcing the claim that climate action could proceed through market facilitation rather than state-led constraint.

Yet, this configuration of Green Conservatism was neither uncontested nor internally stable. Alongside the high-salience modernisation narrative, competing discursive logics emerged around cost, affordability, and fiscal discipline. Tensions became visible as early as debates over the Fourth Carbon Budget in 2011, when concerns about the economic implications of ambitious targets surfaced within government (Ares 2011; Jackson 2024b). Over time, these concerns became more pronounced within coordinative discourse, particularly in Treasury-led language emphasising competitiveness and household affordability. Budget statements by Chancellor George Osborne increasingly framed climate policy through the need to limit consumer costs, signalling a shift in internal justificatory logic.

By 2013, these tensions were also evident in communicative discourse. The growing prominence of language centred on “levies,” “bills,” and cost pressures marked a subtle but important recalibration (Carter and Pearson 2022). Media-reported brief-



ings attributed to Downing Street – including Cameron’s alleged remark to “*get rid of all the green crap*” – circulated alongside continued claims to environmental leadership, illustrating the coexistence of competing discursive registers within the same political moment (The Guardian 2013a). While the government distanced itself from this phrasing, its resonance contributed to a gradual rebalancing of narrative emphasis away from Green Conservatism. Rather than displacing the modernisation frame outright, affordability concerns were layered onto it, producing a more fragmented discursive environment.

This divergence between communicative and coordinative discourse became most visible in the later years of the period. Public-facing rhetoric continued to invoke leadership and innovation, but internal policy justifications increasingly prioritised cost-effectiveness and consumer protection. A clear illustration is the June 2015 statement by Energy Secretary Amber Rudd announcing the removal of subsidies for onshore wind. The policy was justified explicitly in terms of affordability: renewable subsidies were framed as costs borne by consumers through energy bills, and decarbonisation was recast as a process that must proceed “*as cost-effectively and securely as possible*” (Hansard 2015a, b; UK Government 2015a, b). Contemporary commentary similarly presented the decision as part of a broader effort to “*keep down household bills*” (Carbon Brief 2015).

Within the analytical framework of DID developed here, this period illustrates the mechanism of discursive fragmentation. A high-salience narrative of green leadership and economic modernisation coexisted with, and was increasingly constrained by, a competing discourse centred on affordability, fiscal restraint, and competitiveness. These logics did not emerge sequentially, but overlapped and interacted, rendering the justification for climate policy more conditional and internally contested. Such conditionality and contestation do not imply a straightforward weakening of climate governance. Rather, it marks a shift in the terms through which climate action was defended, narrowing the range of politically acceptable arguments and foreshadowing later forms of discursive institutional dilution. The Green Conservatism configuration is therefore best understood as a period of discursive expansion followed by internal differentiation, rather than a stable or unified phase of environmental commitment.

Sceptical Neoliberalism (2015–2020)

The period from 2015 to 2020 marks a reconfiguration of Conservative climate discourse in which the earlier language of environmental modernisation was not abandoned but progressively subordinated to a justificatory logic centred on affordability, competitiveness, and energy security. Rather than a shift in formal commitment, this period reflects a change in discursive hierarchy; climate ambition remained affirmed, but its legitimacy became increasingly conditional on cost control and economic pragmatism.

This reorientation is visible in the Party’s 2015 majority mandate. Manifesto analysis reveals a clear decline in the salience of climate action, with climate references falling from fifteen in 2010 to nine in 2015, and environmental references dropping from forty to twenty-two (Conservative Party 2010, 2015; online Appendix



D). Where the earlier manifesto framed decarbonisation as a strategic asset, the 2015 document increasingly embedded climate commitments within a narrower emphasis on “affordable energy” and “secure supply.” Climate policy was not rejected, but discursively constrained.

Ministerial rhetoric reinforced this shift. In her June 2015 Commons statement announcing the early closure of the Renewables Obligation for onshore wind, Energy Secretary Amber Rudd framed renewable subsidies as costs “*paid for by people through their energy bills,*” emphasising that decarbonisation must proceed “*as cost-effectively and securely as possible*” (Hansard 2015a, b; UK Government 2015a; 2015b). Such statements consolidated a justificatory logic in which climate ambition was legitimate insofar as it minimised consumer costs and protected competitiveness.

Policy developments during this period reflected the same internal framing. The cancellation of the £1 billion carbon capture and storage competition in late 2015 – despite evidence of higher long-term system costs – illustrates the prioritisation of short-term fiscal discipline over long-term decarbonisation strategy (Environmental Audit Committee 2016; National Audit Office 2017). Similarly, the integration of DECC into the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) repositioned climate governance within a broader economised framework, embedding decarbonisation within goals of productivity and industrial growth (UK Parliament 2016a, b).

The 2017 *Clean Growth Strategy* crystallised this discursive realignment. Its core formulation – “*cut emissions while keeping costs down for consumers, creating good jobs and growing the economy*” – captures the dominant grammar of sceptical neo-liberalism (HM Government 2017; Hansard 2017). Climate action is affirmed, but justified primarily through efficiency and value-for-money rather than leadership or moral responsibility. This economisation was reinforced in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, which reduced climate references further while foregrounding energy security and domestic supply (Conservative and Party 2017a, b).

Brexit intensified these dynamics by introducing sovereignty as a central justificatory register. Parliamentary discourse increasingly framed decarbonisation within narratives of “taking back control” and reducing reliance on foreign energy imports (Hansard 2017; Gamble 2021). Climate policy was thereby rearticulated as an instrument of national self-reliance rather than a component of international leadership or collective responsibility.

The emergence of Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion in early 2019 briefly disrupted this narrowed discourse. Youth strikes and civil disobedience reintroduced themes of intergenerational justice and moral urgency into Westminster debate, culminating in Parliament’s declaration of a climate and environment emergency (Hansard 2019a, b). Theresa May’s decision to legislate for Net Zero that year captured this moment, translating civic mobilisation into legal symbolism (CCC 2019). Government communications emphasised Britain’s first-mover status and generational duty, framing Net Zero as “*the defining decision of this generation*” (BEIS 2019).

However, this discursive ‘thickening’ proved short-lived. Emergency language and justice-based framing were rapidly absorbed into a technocratic vocabulary of targets, delivery, and competitiveness. By late 2019, ministerial rhetoric had largely



reverted to the familiar coordinates of affordability, pragmatism, and security of supply (Hansard 2019c; Silverwood and Jackson 2025). Boris Johnson's *Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution* revived aspirational language ahead of COP26, but functioned primarily as episodic boosterism rather than sustained narrative renewal (UK Government 2020).

Within the DID framework, this configuration illustrates the combined mechanisms of rhetorical neglect and orphaning. Climate commitments – most notably the Net Zero target – were legally consolidated but insufficiently embedded within a durable moral or societal narrative. As a result, climate governance remained formally robust yet discursively thinned, increasingly justified through economised and conditional frames rather than expansive claims of leadership or responsibility.

Hardline Populism (2020–2024)

From 2020 onwards, earlier discursive constraints were consolidated and normalised within a more explicitly protection-oriented and antagonistic framing of climate governance. This period is shaped by overlapping crises – COVID-19, the post-Brexit adjustment, the energy shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis – that reordered the hierarchy of politically legitimate arguments. Climate policy was no longer marginal, but its justification became increasingly filtered through the imperatives of household protection, national security, and political “realism.”

Across the data corpus, this configuration is marked by declining references to “green growth” and leadership, alongside rising salience of terms such as “bills,” “energy security,” “fairness,” and “pragmatism” (online Appendices C-D). Decarbonisation continued to be affirmed, but primarily as a means of delivering protection against volatility rather than as a transformative or moral project.

The *British Energy Security Strategy* (April 2022) exemplifies this shift towards security. Published in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the strategy foregrounds energy independence and domestic supply, promising to “accelerate home-grown power” and “wean Britain off expensive fossil fuels” (BEIS 2022). In his foreword, Boris Johnson framed the UK as having “drifted into dependence” on foreign energy, recoding decarbonisation as an instrument of national restoration rather than global stewardship. Climate action thus became discursively subordinate to sovereignty and security.

This protection-first logic was further normalised during the short Truss premiership. Measures such as the suspension of green levies under the Energy Price Guarantee were justified as immediate relief for “hard-working families,” while signals supporting expanded domestic hydrocarbon extraction reframed environmental regulation as a constraint on affordability (UK Government 2022; Hansard 2022a). Although brief, this episode accelerated the legitimisation of climate rollback rhetoric within mainstream governing discourse.

Under Rishi Sunak, this orientation was stabilised rather than reversed. In his September 2023 speech on Net Zero, Sunak committed to maintaining climate targets while advocating a “*more pragmatic, proportionate, and realistic approach*” that reduced burdens on households (UK Government 2023a; 2023b). This language



encapsulates a defining feature of the period: continued formal commitment combined with a narrowing of justificatory terms. Climate ambition was acceptable, but only insofar as it aligned with immediacy, affordability, and political feasibility.

Policy documents reinforced this discursive alignment. *Powering Up Britain* explicitly linked decarbonisation to security and resilience while supporting continued domestic oil and gas production (UK Government 2023c). The approval of the Rosebank oil field was justified in similar terms, framed as strengthening energy security even as it sat uneasily with longer-term emissions trajectories (UK Government 2023d). Institutional changes, including the creation of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, symbolically elevated climate policy while discursively subordinating it, with “energy security” consistently preceding “Net Zero” in official justification (UK Government 2023e; Ofgem 2023).

Via the DID framework, this period is characterised by the consolidation of antagonistic reframing. Climate governance was increasingly interpreted through a populist-protectionist lens in which regulatory costs, levies, and timelines were recoded as potential burdens imposed on households. This did not entail abandonment of climate institutions, but their reinterpretation within a more restrictive and conditional discursive logic. Leadership, stewardship, and intergenerational justice did not disappear, but were consistently subordinated to claims of pragmatism and protection.

Analysis and discussion: Discursive Institutional Dilution and climate governance in the UK

This article has set out to explain the paradox of resilient UK climate institutions that remain legally intact yet discursively hollowed. Through our DID framework, we have shown how Conservative governments between 2010 and 2024 maintained the legal architecture of climate governance while progressively eroding its normative and communicative foundations. The Climate Change Act 2008 and the Net Zero Amendment 2019 remain world-leading statutory instruments, yet the moral language that once animated them – leadership, fairness, and intergenerational responsibility – has been displaced by vocabularies of pragmatism, affordability, and security. As discussed earlier (in the introduction), one stage of this process is orphaning, where a legal commitment (such as the 2019 Net Zero target) is adopted without the accompanying moral or political narrative required to sustain its legitimacy. DID therefore extends Discursive Institutionalism by specifying how discursive erosion can weaken institutions even when their formal rules remain unchanged. In what follows, we reflect on what this trajectory reveals about institutional resilience, identify the mechanisms driving dilution, situate them within the wider political ecology of crises and civic mobilisation, and consider their implications for the future of British climate governance.

To explain this transformation, the article identifies four interrelated mechanisms – fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, and antagonistic reframing – through which discursive change reshapes institutional legitimacy without requiring formal institutional alteration. These mechanisms are not sequential stages but interacting processes whose relative prominence varies across political contexts (see Fig. 2).



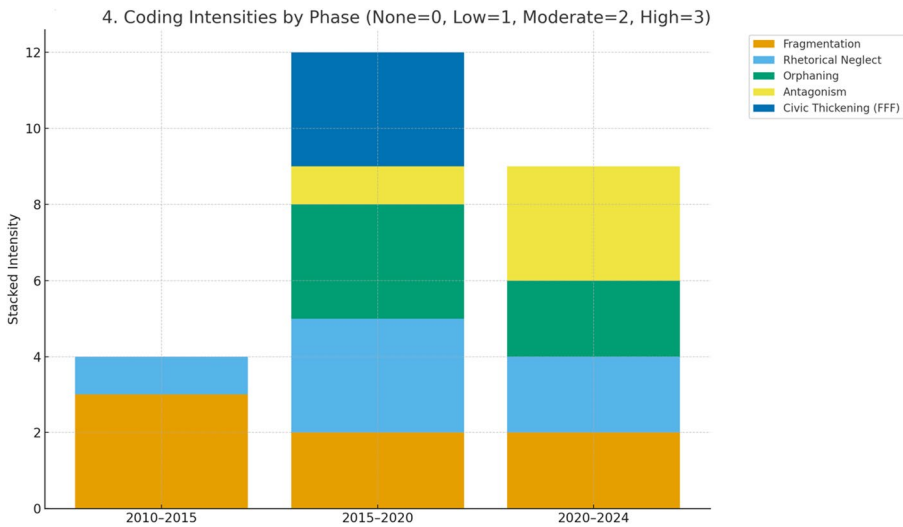


Fig. 2 Coding intensity across the configuration

Their analytical value lies in specifying how shifts in discursive configuration alter the conditions under which institutions are interpreted, justified, and sustained.

Four mechanisms of Discursive Institutional Dilution

Fragmentation is the mechanism most evident in the early configuration of Green Conservatism, where climate governance was embedded within a modernising narrative that aligned environmental ambition with economic competitiveness and global leadership. At the level of communicative discourse, this produced a relatively expansive justificatory frame – exemplified by the ambition to create the “greenest government ever.” However, this framing coexisted with an increasingly constraining coordinative logic shaped by austerity, Treasury discipline, and cost containment. The significance of fragmentation, therefore, lies not in inconsistency per se, but in the coexistence of competing justificatory logics that destabilise the coherence of institutional meaning. By revealing a divergence between communicative and coordinative discourse, fragmentation signals an early form of discursive vulnerability. In this sense, DID extends Discursive Institutionalism by showing how such divergence can function as a mechanism of gradual institutional weakening rather than merely a feature of political disagreement.

Rhetorical neglect becomes more analytically salient in the post-2015 period, as climate governance shifts from a central to a subordinated position within political discourse. This process is not one of overt rejection, but of discursive displacement, in which climate policy is rearticulated through alternative frames – particularly industrial strategy, productivity, and affordability. The institutional reorganisation of climate governance, most notably the absorption of DECC into BEIS, provides a material anchor for this shift, but its significance is primarily discursive: climate policy loses its distinct narrative identity and becomes embedded within a broader



economised logic. Rhetorical neglect therefore operates through a reduction in discursive maintenance. Institutions that were previously sustained through active moral and political justification are instead reproduced through technocratic or managerial language. This finding supports the broader insight, implicit in Lockwood (2021) and Carter and Pearson (2024), that institutional durability depends not only on formal rules but on continued narrative reproduction. Without such reproduction, institutions remain operational but become less politically salient and more vulnerable to reinterpretation.

Orphaning provides a more precise account of how institutional commitments can be advanced without acquiring durable discursive support. The 2019 Net Zero legislation illustrates this mechanism clearly. While the policy itself represents a significant legal consolidation of climate ambition, its discursive embedding was both temporally concentrated and substantively narrow. The mobilisation cycle associated with FFF and Extinction Rebellion briefly expanded the discursive field, foregrounding themes of emergency, intergenerational justice, and moral responsibility. However, this expansion was not sustained within government discourse. Instead, these themes were rapidly translated into a technocratic vocabulary centred on targets, delivery pathways, and international leadership. The result is not an absence of discourse, but a shift in its structure: the moral and societal narratives that could anchor the policy in everyday political meaning were not institutionalised. Orphaning therefore captures a specific form of discursive misalignment, in which institutional ambition exceeds the narrative infrastructure required to sustain its legitimacy. Unlike drift or conversion, which operate through changes in institutional effects or purposes, orphaning operates through a failure of discursive embedding, leaving institutions formally robust but politically under-supported.

Antagonistic reframing represents a further escalation in the reconfiguration of discursive legitimacy. From 2020 onwards, climate governance is increasingly interpreted through a populist-protectionist lens in which policy instruments – such as levies, regulatory obligations, and decarbonisation timelines – are recoded as sources of economic burden or constraints on national autonomy. This mechanism does not simply reduce the salience of climate discourse, but actively reorganises its evaluative framework. Under the leadership of Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, the dominant justificatory language shifts toward “pragmatism,” “proportionality,” and “realism,” signalling a recalibration of legitimacy from moral obligation to economic and political constraint management. Importantly, pragmatism does not necessarily produce discursive dilution. Its effects depend on whether it operates alongside, or in place of, broader narratives of leadership, justice, and long-term responsibility. In this configuration, climate policy is no longer framed as a collective project of transformation, but as a domain requiring limitation, adjustment, or protection against excess. Antagonistic reframing therefore represents not the abandonment of climate governance, but its reinterpretation within a more restrictive and conditional discursive logic.

Taken together, the central theoretical contribution of DID is that these four mechanisms demonstrate that institutional change can occur through the restructuring of meaning rather than through formal amendment or repeal. Whereas existing frameworks of gradual institutional change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hacker et al. 2015) emphasise shifts in rules, instruments, or institutional effects, DID highlights how



transformations in discursive configuration can narrow, destabilise, or reconstitute the legitimacy of institutions that remain legally intact. The UK case illustrates that climate institutions were not inherently hollow; rather, they were initially embedded within relatively expansive justificatory narratives that were progressively fragmented, deprioritised, insufficiently institutionalised, and ultimately reinterpreted under changing political conditions. In this sense, DID captures a distinct pathway of institutional transformation in which durability and vulnerability coexist, mediated through the evolving structure of political meaning.

Crisis politics, civic mobilisation, and the reordering of climate legitimacy

The trajectory identified in this article is best understood through the interaction between crisis politics and episodic civic mobilisation. Rather than acting as external shocks, crises function as discursive reordering moments, recalibrating what counts as legitimate political argument. DID operates most clearly in these moments, where justificatory logics are filtered through pressures for immediacy, protection, and political defensibility.

Brexit was particularly consequential for the discursive foundations of climate governance. While it did not dismantle the Climate Change Act or Net Zero, it reconstituted the discursive basis of legitimacy by foregrounding sovereignty and autonomy (Gamble 2021; Asiamah 2025a, b). Climate governance became easier to frame not as a collective moral project embedded in international cooperation, but as a potential constraint on national discretion. In DID terms, Brexit expanded the opportunity structure for protection-oriented and antagonistic framing without requiring institutional change.

The COVID-19 pandemic further compressed the discursive field. As attention shifted toward economic stabilisation and centralised decision-making, the language of climate governance narrowed toward delivery, resilience, and managerial competence (Beiser-McGrath 2022). While “building back better” suggested renewal, its framing remained technocratic and growth-oriented rather than justice-centred (Bailey and Hofferberth 2022). Crisis conditions did not eliminate climate discourse but reconfigured it, privileging forms of justification compatible with short-term political imperatives (Stephenson and Allwood 2025).

The Ukraine war and energy crisis consolidated this reordering. Climate governance was increasingly legitimised through energy security and resilience, enabling the justification of expanded domestic hydrocarbon production. Institutional signals, such as the renaming of BEIS to DESNZ, reflect this shift: formally elevating climate while discursively subordinating it to security. The prioritisation of “Energy Security” over “Net Zero” indicates a reordered hierarchy of meaning.

Civic mobilisation briefly disrupted this trajectory. Movements such as FFF and Extinction Rebellion reintroduced moral urgency, intergenerational justice, and emergency language into elite discourse. The 2019 climate emergency declaration and Net Zero framing reflected this moment of expansion. However, this discursive thickening was not sustained. Movement language was rapidly absorbed and translated into technocratic registers of targets and delivery, illustrating a central feature of



DID: institutions can absorb discursive challenge without renewing their legitimating narrative.

Factionalism, populism, and the uneven operation of DID

DID does not operate uniformly across political actors or governing moments. As the analysis has shown, episodes such as Theresa May's decision to legislate for Net Zero and Boris Johnson's leadership framing around COP26 demonstrate that pro-climate narratives continued to surface throughout the Conservative period. DID should therefore not be interpreted as a linear process of erosion, nor as the product of a uniform anti-climate orientation. Rather, it emerges through asymmetric discursive competition, in which some narratives persist episodically but fail to stabilise their dominance over time.

Within the Conservative Party, distinct discursive coalitions coexisted: *green modernisers* seeking to align decarbonisation with innovation and leadership; *fiscal pragmatists* prioritising affordability, competitiveness, and budgetary restraint; and *populist critics* framing climate policy as excessive, elitist, or disconnected from everyday concerns. Crucially, these strands were not equally influential. DID arises not from coordinated intent to weaken climate institutions, but from the repeated success and routinisation of particular justificatory frames, especially those centred on cost, protection, and sovereignty. Over time, these frames came to structure the default terms of political debate, shaping what kinds of arguments were perceived as credible, defensible, or electorally viable.

The DID perspective extends existing accounts of anti-Net Zero populism (Patterson et al. 2024). While populist analyses help explain how climate policy is rhetorically constructed as an imposition by distant elites, DID shifts attention to the *institutional consequences* of such framing. Antagonistic and protection-oriented narratives do more than contest specific policies; through repeated success, they narrow the discursive bandwidth within which climate governance can be justified at all. Even where formal commitments remain intact, the range of acceptable public justifications contracts, rendering climate institutions more exposed to reinterpretation, delay, or conditionality.

Importantly, this uneven operation of DID highlights the role of discursive power in institutional resilience. Institutional durability depends not only on statutory continuity, but on which actors can define legitimate arguments and normalise evaluative standards over time. Pro-climate narratives that appear episodically – during moments of leadership change, international summits, or crisis-induced mobilisation – prove insufficient if they are not embedded within day-to-day governing discourse. DID thus captures how institutional vulnerability can accumulate even in the absence of formal rollback, as dominant frames repeatedly privilege short-term protection over long-term transformation.

In this sense, discursive institutional dilution should be understood as a contingent, politically mediated process shaped by factional balance, crisis dynamics, and electoral incentives. Its unevenness is not a weakness of the framework but a core feature. DID explains how institutions become fragile not because all actors withdraw support, but because some discursive repertoires consistently outcompete



others, gradually reshaping the institutional environment within which climate governance must operate.

The broader significance of DID

The UK case suggests that institutional resilience should not be assessed solely through legal endurance. Institutions may remain intact while becoming politically vulnerable due to shifts in the discursive contexts that sustains them. DID captures this intermediate condition between stability and rollback. It shows that institutional trajectories are shaped not only by changes in rules or policy outputs, but by transformations in the structure of meaning through which institutions are justified. In doing so, it extends existing frameworks of gradual institutional change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Hacker et al. 2015) by identifying a pathway of transformation operating through discursive reconfiguration.

More broadly, the findings challenge binary interpretations of climate governance as either resilient or declining. The UK case demonstrates that legal durability and discursive vulnerability can coexist, producing a condition of conditional stability, in which institutions persist but are increasingly exposed to contestation. Ultimately, DID shifts analytical attention from whether institutions endure to how they endure, and under what discursive conditions their legitimacy is sustained or eroded.

Conclusion

This article set out to explain how UK climate institutions could remain legally durable while their discursive foundations were progressively reconfigured. It argued that this apparent paradox is best understood through Discursive Institutional Dilution (DID), a mechanism-based account of how institutional legitimacy is reshaped through shifts in political meaning rather than formal rule change. Across the period 2010–2024, Conservative climate discourse did not simply weaken or reverse; it was restructured through fragmentation, rhetorical neglect, orphaning, and antagonistic reframing. These processes altered how climate policy was justified, narrowing the discursive space within which it could be defended, even as its legal architecture remained intact.

The analysis contributes to institutional theory by identifying a distinct pathway of gradual change operating through discursive reconfiguration. While existing frameworks emphasise changes in rules, instruments, or institutional effects, DID shows that institutions may become politically vulnerable without formal amendment, as the narratives sustaining them are contested, deprioritised, or recoded. In this sense, institutional resilience is not only a function of legal design, but of discursive ecology – the evolving set of ideas, values, and justificatory logics.

Empirically, the UK case illustrates a condition of conditional stability: climate institutions endure, but under increasingly constrained and contested terms of justification. This has important implications for future governance. Legal continuity alone is unlikely to secure long-term durability if discursive legitimacy remains narrow, technocratic, or vulnerable to populist reframing (Bailey 2023; Paterson et al.



2024). Sustaining climate governance will require not only policy delivery, but the reconstruction of narratives that connect decarbonisation to broader societal goals, including fairness, prosperity, and collective purpose.

The findings also open several avenues for future research. First, comparative work could examine whether DID operates similarly in other political systems, particularly where strong climate commitments coexist with populist or crisis-driven politics (Flachsland and Levi 2021; Bergman et al. 2025). Second, greater attention is needed to the interaction between communicative and coordinative discourse, including how internal policy debates shape public narratives (McDaniel 2025). Third, future studies could explore the conditions under which discursive dilution may be reversed, identifying pathways for discursive renewal and re-legitimation (Jackson and Paterson 2025; August et al. 2026). Together, these directions would deepen understanding of how climate institutions endure, adapt, or become vulnerable in an increasingly contested political environment.

Ultimately, the findings underscore a broader insight that climate governance arrangements are not sustained by law alone. They depend on the continual production of meaning within political discourse. Institutions may endure in statute, but their authority rests on narratives that must be repeatedly articulated, defended, and renewed. Where this process falters, the result is not necessarily institutional collapse, but a more subtle and consequential transformation – one in which climate governance arrangements remain legally robust, yet politically more fragile.

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Author contributions George Asiamah led the conceptualisation of the study, conducted the data collection and coding, and drafted the manuscript. James Jackson, Paul Tobin, and Charlotte Burns contributed to the refinement of the theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and substantive redrafting of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the article.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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