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The Changing Electoral Politics of Pursuing Climate Action in the UK

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Abstract

Action on climate policy in the UK has been at a crossroads since 2021. The UK's previously world-leading performance in emissions reduction was derived largely from eliminating coal from electricity supply and relied on a broad political consensus regarding the issue's importance. The next stage of emissions reduction is more contentious, however, and at the same time, the underlying consensus across political parties has collapsed. Actors pushing for accelerated climate action need to consider that such action is now fiercely contested. The UK's local elections in 2026 provide the latest signals regarding how political-electoral pressures may shape climate action. We argue that there are powerful reasons for governments not to give in to pressures to backtrack on climate action, especially where such action might also generate electoral payoffs.

Keywords: climate policy, electoral volatility, social justice, Green Party, Reform UK, Labour Party

Introduction

CLIMATE CHANGE IS often, and increasingly, framed as a 'progressive' issue. However, from the 1990s through to 2021, UK policy towards the climate crisis—the most challenging and complex crisis on the global policy agenda—was enabled and driven by a relatively stable political environment with support across the political spectrum. The UK's first-past-the-post electoral system produced a two-party system at Westminster, and climate policy was shaped by the competition between Labour and the Conservatives as a relatively low-profile electoral issue. Party competition was over who could best implement climate policy, not whether climate policy was a priority for action.[1] Yet, the UK's 2026 elections, and the electoral fragmentation and volatility they reflect, are the latest stage in what is now a profound challenge to climate policy.

The institutional and electoral stability that has shaped UK climate policy no longer exists, and anyone seeking to push for enhanced climate action needs to understand this dramatically new political context.[2] The 2024 general election (GE) produced what we might call a 'wafer-thin landslide' for Labour, which won 63 per cent of seats with just 33 per cent of the vote. The party doubled its seat share on a 1.6 percentage point increase in the vote, while Reform UK (hereafter Reform) and the Green Party (GP) received 14 per cent and 7 per cent of the vote respectively.[3] Since then, the two-party system has all but collapsed, as evidenced by local election results in 2025 and 2026 and by polling data which routinely report five parties gaining over 10 per cent of popular support.

Climate policy is not central to these electoral dynamics in terms of the *motivations* of voters, but the implications of volatility for climate action are dramatic. Few are voting for

[1]N. Carter, 'The politics of climate change in the UK', *WIREs Climate Change*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2014, pp. 423–33.

[2]G. Asiamah, et al., 'Legally robust, politically fragile? The discursive institutional dilution of conservative climate discourse in UK Net Zero politics (2010–2024)', *British Politics*, vol. 21, no. 13, 2026.

[3]M. Miori, and J. Green, 'The most disproportionate UK election: how the Labour Party doubled its seat share with a 1.6-point increase in vote share in 2024', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 96, no. 1, 2025, pp. 37–64.

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Reform because of its opposition to climate action: a majority of Reform voters do not oppose climate action.[4] Conversely, the evidence of the *increase* in support for the GP is mostly that it is driven by disaffection with Labour over questions of economic inequality and government support for Israel over Gaza. But climate policy remains central to GP support overall, while attacking net zero is integral to Reform's strategy.[5] The rise of Reform, and the switch in approach to climate policy by the Conservatives after the 2024 election, have given voice to a backlash against climate policy. And while the GP was largely silent on climate policy in February 2026's Gorton and Denton by-election, it can be expected to seek to accelerate climate action when elected. For example, the new Mayor of Hackney, Zoë Garbett, has stated, 'Everything I do has climate at its centre', while GP leader Zack Polanski's interventions from around June 2026 onwards include many that centre climate action, for example over oil and gas or the summer 2026 wildfires.[6]

In this article, we elaborate on the implications of the 2026 elections for the pursuit of climate policy and action in the UK. We start by detailing the background of UK climate policy in the two-party system, the rise of a backlash against climate policy and the collapse of a cross-party consensus over climate change. We then discuss the main aspects of the 2026 elections needed to understand the new conditions shaping UK climate policy. Finally, we detail the policy implications and political dilemmas those new conditions raise. Broadly, we argue that the dilemmas are not best tackled by backtracking on climate action. Rather, we argue for a strategy that focusses more clearly on pursuing climate action combined with social justice—a strategy that aligns with the needs and motivations of the GP and of many Reform voters alike.

Background

The UK has long been a world leader in climate policy, reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by over 50 per cent since 1990. Politically, this was based on a broad, stable consensus between Labour and the Conservatives over the value of climate action, and indeed party competition was key to stimulating the origins of the Climate Change Act 2008, and further development of climate policy by both parties when in government.[7]

An elite-led backlash against climate action started in 2021, when a group of Conservative MPs created the Net Zero Scrutiny Group (NZSG). Allied with key actors outside Parliament—The Global Warming Policy Foundation, Reform's leader Nigel Farage and commentators in the conservative press—the NZSG orchestrated a campaign against 'net zero' during the period 2021-2023.[8] This campaign deployed classic populist arguments against net zero, framing it as an elite project destroying ordinary people's lives. It focussed on specific policy targets, including the fracking moratorium, subsidies for heat pumps and low traffic neighbourhoods. While Prime Minister Rishi Sunak flirted with these arguments during 2023 in the Uxbridge by-election, they were taken up wholesale by Kemi Badenoch as the new Conservative leader after the 2024 GE.

Beyond Labour's 'wafer-thin landslide', the 2024 GE was notable also for the electoral breakthroughs by Reform and the GP. They gained seats, but perhaps more significant for thinking about electoral competition, came second in 138 constituencies. Reform came second in a mix of 98 'red wall' and rural seats. The GP came second in 40 seats, all in urban English Labour-held constituencies. The election was

[4]A. Deo, *Fed Up and Rolling the Dice: Inside Reform UK's Voter Coalition*, Hope not Hate, 2025; A. Johnstone, 'Local election poll—majority of Reform voters back climate targets', Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit, 2 May 2025.

[5]D. Difford, 'How is the Green Party's appeal changing?', YouGov, 2 April 2026; E. de Quay and P. Sethi, *The Reform UK Party's Approach to Climate Change and Net Zero in Local Councils*, London School of Economics, 2026.

[6]M. Taylor, '"Everything I do has climate at its centre": Hackney's first Green mayor gets to work', *The Guardian*, 27 May 2026.

[7]N. Carter and M. Pearson, 'From green crap to net zero: Conservative climate policy 2015–2022', *British Politics*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2024, pp. 154–74, p. 156; Carter, 'The politics of climate change'.

[8]M. Paterson, S. Wilshire and P. Tobin, 'The rise of anti-net zero populism in the UK: comparing rhetorical strategies for climate policy dismantling', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, vol. 26, nos. 3–4, 2024, pp. 332–50.

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also characterised by massive volatility. The number of 'effective electoral parties'—parties able to compete across the country electorally, also a measure of electoral volatility—was 4.5, the highest ever.[9]

The GE pulled climate policy in two directions. After the election, Sunak's replacement, Kemi Badenoch, joined Reform in saying the Conservatives would scrap net zero. Conversely, the GP's successes warned that a Labour government risked being punished were it to weaken climate action. This sense of the agenda being pulled in two directions has consolidated since then. By autumn 2025, Reform was routinely topping opinion polls, sometimes by over 10 percentage points. From winter 2025, it was joined by a rapid rise of the GP. In 2025, Reform won ten of the twenty-three county councils that held elections. Its gains were both in rural (Lincolnshire, Northumberland) and ex-mining areas (Durham, Derbyshire). Late 2025 was also Reform's peak in the polls to date, before its steady decline during 2026.

In the county councils it has come to run, Reform has attacked climate policy directly. As of March 2026, seven of the ten councils that Reform won in 2025 have abandoned existing climate targets, and three have removed the council's earlier climate emergency declarations.[10] Some, such as Derbyshire, have eliminated climate change committees within the council. A substantial number of individual Reform councillors have expressed climate change denial arguments in council debates.

The 2026 elections: key dynamics

The 2026 elections confirmed that England currently has a five-party system. In Scotland and Wales, this is complicated further by the strength of nationalist parties who now run the devolved authority government in both countries. Reform was the major winner, although it won fewer seats than some projected and its overall vote share declined noticeably compared to 2025. There were also significant gains for the GP, although again less than some predicted.

This fragmentation of British politics and collapse of party alignment has geographic patterns. The GP's gains were concentrated in the large urban centres where it came second in the 2024 GE—Sheffield, Manchester, London, Newcastle, Leeds, Norwich—and its first constituency seats in Scotland were similarly in large cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Reform's gains tended to be in smaller towns within broader city regions (for example, South Shields, Ashton-under-Lyne, Wakefield). Significantly, in many of these places, Labour lost seats to Reform by losing votes to the GP: overall, it lost four times as many voters to the GP as to Reform.[11] This reality demonstrates the threat of the politics around Gaza, the cost of living and climate change to the Labour government's massive 2024 majority.

In most constituencies where the GP or Reform had come second in 2024, both parties consolidated their support. Table 1 shows that both parties won over 60 per cent of the ward seats in around half these constituencies. The basis for organising to win these seats at the next GE seems clear: overall, if the results in these councils were replicated across all 138 constituencies, the GP/Reform would be in strong positions to challenge for 73 seats in the next GE (19 for the GP, 54 for Reform). Some notably strong results in this regard in 2026 include the GP winning every single ward in Manchester Rusholme and Sheffield Central, while Reform won all the wards in Normanton and Hemsworth (Wakefield), Makerfield (Wigan), Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend, Stalybridge and Hyde (Tameside, Greater Manchester), Wigan, Thurrock and Castle Point (both in Essex) and Hartlepool.

In most of these seats, electoral competition at the local level will be between Labour and the challenger party. But in some seats, Labour's vote share collapsed. In four seats, every ward was won in 2026 by *either* Reform or the GP: this was the case in Gorton and Denton (where the GP won 4, Reform won 4), Huddersfield (GP 12, Reform 6),

[9]C. Prosser, 'Fragmentation revisited: the UK general election of 2024', *West European Politics*, vol. 48, no. 6, 2025, pp. 1501–513, pp. 1507–508.

[10]de Quay and Sethi, *The Reform UK Party's Approach to Climate Change*.

[11]P. English, 'Labour's voter coalition broke more to left than right at 2026 local elections', YouGov, 21 May 2026.

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Table 1: 2026 local election performance in constituencies where the Green Party and Reform UK came second in the 2024 general election

	Green Party	Reform UK
Number of constituencies where the party came 2nd in 2024 GE	40	98
Number of those constituencies with local elections in 2026	27	56
Number (percentage) of those constituencies where the party gained over 60% of the seats in 2026 local elections	13 (48%)	31 (55%)

Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (GP 10, Reform 9) and South Shields (GP 10, Reform 22). Conversely, there are constituencies (primarily in London) where the challengers came second in 2024, but Labour has been able to fight them off: in, for example, the constituencies of Barking, Dagenham and Rainham, Islington South and Finsbury and Vauxhall and Camberwell Green.

A tale of three by-elections

In 2026, three important parliamentary by-elections underscored the fragmentation and complexity of British party politics: Gorton and Denton in February, Makerfield in June and Holborn and St Pancras in October. We leave the August Clacton by-election aside as it says little about overall political fragmentation or climate policy, given that none of the other larger parties stood candidates. There were also parliamentary by-elections in Scotland's Aberdeen South and in Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (both on 18 June 2026): the Conservatives and SNP won the seats, respectively. The Manchester mayoral by-election in July mirrored the dynamics of the Makerfield parliamentary by-election, with Labour winning again, albeit with a larger vote share for the GP.

In February, the Gorton and Denton by-election confirmed the collapse of party alignment: Labour's vote share fell from 50 per cent in the 2024 GE to 25 per cent in the by-election, despite similar voter turnout. Conversely, the GP vote increased from 13 per cent to 40 per cent, overtaking Reform, which had been in second place in 2024. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats received 3.7 per cent of the vote *between them*. At the heart of the Gorton and Denton campaign were competing claims by both Labour and the GP over which of them could beat Reform in the constituency. In this context, websites designed to enable voters to engage in tactical voting, depending on which party they most wanted to *keep out*, grew in pertinence. By the end of the campaign, all three of the main such sites said the GP was the tactical choice to keep out Reform. This practice signals the considerable potential fragility of Reform in the face of tactical voting: it may top polls, but it is also the most disliked party.[12] Gorton and Denton also signalled the importance of the capacity to mobilise locally: while only possible in by-elections because of the need to draw on widespread support beyond a constituency, the capacity of the GP to mobilise large numbers of people from across Manchester and beyond was likely critical to its success.

A notable point in the Gorton and Denton campaign was the GP strategy of not emphasising climate change in its messaging. Of sixty-eight leaflets delivered by the GP, Labour or Reform during the campaign (the entirety of such leaflets delivered to two colleagues in the constituency), climate change was only directly mentioned three times (in 4.4 per cent of all leaflets). Of these three mentions, none was by the GP: Labour mentioned climate change once to attack the GP for allegedly not supporting solar panels, while two Reform leaflets mentioned its plan to scrap net zero. Climate was also not central to debates held publicly, at least those recorded (Manchester Evening News, YouTube, 12 February 2026). Rather, the GP campaign emphasised the cost-of-living crisis, rising inequality and the need to keep out the far right. As noted above, however, since this by-election, GP campaigning has emphasised climate change considerably more.

The second 2026 by-election of note was in Makerfield, which has only ever been represented by Labour MPs since the constituency's

[12]M. Mitchell, 'Poll: Reform UK is most disliked party in Britain', *UnHerd*, 4 March 2026.

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creation in 1983, but Reform had won all the council seats in the constituency in the May 2026 local elections. But the high-profile nature of the June by-election there, because the Labour candidate would presumptively become Prime Minister afterwards, meant that it would be closer than those local election results might suggest. Again, climate policy was hardly discussed in the election campaign. Replicating patterns from Gorton and Denton, tactical voting was central in Makerfield, as were the websites that emerged to enable it. In both seats, these websites enabled those parties judged unlikely to have a chance to beat Reform to be squeezed: Labour in Gorton and Denton and the GP in Makerfield, whose vote collapsed there to 0.7 per cent despite running at around national average polling prior to the election being called.

In contrast to the contests in Makerfield and in Gorton and Denton, the Holborn and St Pancras by-election held on 8 October was a simple Labour–GP fight, given additional profile by the GP decision to stand leader Zack Polanski as the candidate. In the 2024 GE, the GP came third, but there was a well-known left-wing independent, Andrew Feinstein, who stood against Labour and came second. He decided not to stand in 2026 and endorsed the GP. In the meantime, the GP made inroads into the constituency, winning 7 council seats (of a potential 30) in the constituency in the 2026 local elections, all gains from Labour, and coming second in all the others bar two wards where it didn't stand, given an electoral pact with the Camden People's Alliance. Shortly after this, however, Labour got a steady 'Burnham bounce' in opinion polls, after Andy Burnham became Prime Minister and shifted some policy positions in clear ways to try to recapture voters lost to the GP. Labour held on in Holborn and St Pancras, albeit with a declining vote share and Polanski receiving 33 per cent of the vote, more than the combined GP/Feinstein vote in the 2024 GE. Overall, the result underscores the pattern seen in Gorton and Denton and the local elections, that in many parts of large cities, the GP is now Labour's principal opponent.

Climate policy in the new political environment

These elections in 2026 have accelerated the destruction of the previous political consensus on UK climate policy. Since 2024, both Labour and the Conservatives have seen their strategy as trying to prevent the loss of votes to Reform. The clear pattern from the local elections, in which Labour lost more *votes* to the GP but more *seats* to Reform, signals the risks of this strategy, but does not provide Labour with any obvious solution.

Nevertheless, while in 2024 the political logic appeared to favour weakening climate policy, by 2026 that was no longer obvious. While Reform will continue to push for scrapping net zero and undermining climate action, its position does not enjoy wider salience with the British population, and could in some cases undermine its success. Reform has come under criticism from its own voters in Lincolnshire over attempts to undermine support for climate adaptation, given the acute flood risks there. Reform's deputy leader, Richard Tice, is MP for Boston and Skegness, the constituency that received the second-largest sum for climate adaptation in 2024, owing to its need for flood defences.[13] And the wildfires of the summer of 2026 provided impetus for criticisms of Reform's opposition to climate action, especially in areas where Reform is now in office, such as Suffolk and Derbyshire.

The implications of the above analysis for climate policy are that if its proponents want to fight off the challenge of those opposing it, they need to take much more seriously questions of social justice within its design and promotion. While there are strong normative and practical policy reasons for this shift, there are also interrelated *political* benefits.[14]

First, the backlash against climate policy has mobilised ideas of social justice extensively. Anti-net zero populists have argued that net zero in general, and specific policies like support for heat pumps or the petrol and diesel ban, are attacks on the living conditions of 'ordinary' people and only benefit the well-off.[15]

Second, the critique that existing climate policy is regressive has a substantial basis in

[13]J. Gabbatiss, 'Analysis: constituency of Reform's climate-sceptic Richard Tice gets £55m flood funding,' *Carbon Brief*, 27 February 2026.
[14]C. Snell and L. Middlemiss, *Just Climate Futures: Integrating Social Inclusion into the Net Zero Transition*, Bristol University Press, 2025.
[15]Paterson, et al., 'The rise of anti-net zero populism in the UK'.

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reality. Many of the policies focussed on decarbonising housing and transport have been designed in a way that favours the well-off, since they are typically pursued through household subsidies which nevertheless require householders to be able to pay upfront sometimes substantial costs for EV purchases, solar panels, heat pumps or household insulation, while 40 per cent of adults have less than £1,000 in savings.[16] These investments do bring down overall energy bills but principally for those on higher incomes.[17]

Third, the rise of the GP has been premised on a left-populist reaction against the inequalities of the neoliberal era and especially Labour's failure to tackle them. GP campaigners are mobilising around many of the same *economic* resentments that have also stimulated the rise of Reform, but they connect those resentments to climate policy in the opposite way, arguing that the cost-of-living crisis is *caused* by our fossil fuel dependence, and because of 'fossilflation' rather than because of 'net zero madness'.[18] There are, of course, complex questions about the exact costs of the energy transition, for example regarding the costs of upgrading grid infrastructure, but the rhetorical strategy of the GP in this area has clearly been important to its ability to take votes off Labour. Hence, if Labour is to mitigate its local election vote losses towards the GP in the next GE, then following the call by former leader Tony Blair to abandon net zero would be electorally misguided.[19]

Fourth, many of the resentments that have produced the rise of populism are areas where socially just climate action could contribute. Housing, transport and urban regeneration are critical to the next stage of climate policy: transport now produces 31 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK, while buildings produce 22 per cent. But these are also underlying areas of increasing inequalities and mobilisation by populist forces (of left and right) and are thus important politically as well as for climate policy.

The Warm Homes Plan and the community energy elements of Great British Energy are perhaps the most obvious areas where climate policy could generate political advantages. These need to be approached with an eye to the distributive consequences as well as the perceived fairness of implementation. Transport policy is another area ripe for electoral salience, with a clear rationale for moving from a principal focus on EVs, whereby the main benefits go to wealthier households, and towards cheaper public transport and active travel through cycle lanes. Burnham's focus on devolution and on the dynamics of particular places, arising out of his experience as Mayor of Greater Manchester, could become an instrument for a strategic, joined-up set of initiatives to target climate action that benefits lower-income households, as prioritised by local and regional governments that are frequently more tuned in to the needs of their constituents.

There are signs that Burnham is aware of this need to use climate-related policies to achieve goals of poverty mitigation, such as via the £2 bus fare cap and some of the housing announcements made since he came to office. Several of his appointments—notably Miatta Fahnbulleh to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero—signal an understanding of the connections between social justice and climate action. But Burnham has also vacillated on key issues in climate action, notably over North Sea oil and gas licences. His first major statement on climate change came over two months after taking office, and he seemed to be dragged into making it.[20]

Conclusions

The radical structural changes in the character of British electoral politics, exemplified by the 2026 elections, raise a profound challenge for the pursuit of UK climate policy. There is a real danger of backsliding from

[16]L. O'Brien, 'UK savings statistics 2025', money.co.uk, 17 October 2025.
[17]A. Owen, et al., 'Who applies for energy grants?', *Energy Research & Social Science*, vol. 101, July 2023, 103123.
[18]J. Jackson, 'The climate-changing context of inflation: fossilflation, climateflation, and the environmental politics of green central banks', *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2024, pp. 1–9.
[19]J. Elgot. 'Tony Blair tells Starmer and rivals: abandon net zero and move closer to Trump,' *The Guardian*, 26 May 26 2026.
[20]A. Burnham, 'British people understand the climate crisis threat. Today I'm empowering them to tackle it', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2026.

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the leading position that the UK has historically taken in the global response to climate change. But there are also opportunities for those pushing for more ambitious climate action created by the new agenda. While the GP's surge is an obvious pathway for accelerating action, this surge also generates electoral dangers for Labour in downplaying climate action. Alongside this direct pressure for stronger climate action, there is an indirect route to electoral benefits from climate action. The critical areas for climate policy—especially housing and transport—are also where direct material benefits (warmer homes, lower heating bills, improved transport infrastructure) can be generated by climate action in areas where Labour is vulnerable to Reform. To respond to both pressures, refocussing climate policy on benefits for low-income households is critical. Shifting the focus of climate action to make social justice and rebuilding trust the core of policy design is key to this, enabling the government to target climate action at voters disaffected by government, to build back trust. There are no guarantees, clearly, and that shift in approach creates its own tensions, but we argue it is the most plausible pathway to keeping the UK's climate policy on track.

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