

# A Crisis in Common

How Eco-Anxiety  
is Shared Across  
our Country





# About *Us*

**Global Future** is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges facing our times. We aim to guide leaders - from businesses to politics, arts and civil society - to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

To contact the Global Future think tank, please email Rowenna Davis on:

**[Rowenna.Davis@globalfuturepartners.com](mailto:Rowenna.Davis@globalfuturepartners.com)**  
**[www.ourglobalfuture.com](http://www.ourglobalfuture.com)**

The Think Tank is supported by Global Future Partners, which is a consulting firm advising organisations on Purpose Driven Culture Change, Leadership and Talent.

If you would like to contact the Consultancy, please email Gurnek Bains on:

**[Gurnek.Bains@globalfuturepartners.com](mailto:Gurnek.Bains@globalfuturepartners.com)**  
**[www.globalfuturepartners.com](http://www.globalfuturepartners.com)**

The report was written by Rowenna Davis with Sadie Levi, Justin Robinson and Pavlos Vasilopoulos.

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[www.isabeldoraisamy.com](http://www.isabeldoraisamy.com)







**Rowenna Davis** is a director for Global Future, a writer, a teacher and an environmental activist. She grew up in London where she got a lot of her politics from her multi-cultural state school in Cricklewood. She became a campaigning journalist, reporting on social inequalities and the environment. She moved into politics, standing for Labour as a Parliamentary Candidate before serving as a teacher in a secondary school like the one that first inspired her.



**Sadie Levi** is a Global Future Intern in her fourth year of studying Geography at the University of Edinburgh.



**Justin Robinson** is a postgraduate research student studying Politics at the University of York. His current research focuses on the role of emotions in environmental attitudes and behaviours.



**Pavlos Vasilopoulos** is Lecturer in Politics at the University of York and an Associate Researcher at the Centre of Political Research at Sciences Po Paris. His research interests are in the areas of social and political psychology, electoral behaviour, and comparative politics. Specifically, his work focuses on the association of voters' psychological traits with their political choices and the impact of fear and anger on political attitudes and voting. He has published a number of articles in peer-reviewed journals and his work has also been featured in several media outlets. He teaches introduction to comparative politics, political psychology, and quantitative methods.

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# Foreword



**Kylie Bains**

*Co-Founder of Global Future Think Tank and Partner at Global Future leadership consultancy*



**Neil Carter**

*Professor of Politics at the University of York specialising in British and environmental politics*

Coronavirus proved that we are capable of making unprecedented, fast and radical changes to our ways of life. The global challenge of the pandemic thrust humanity into action, albeit for many of us this meant a paradoxical standstill during lockdown. The irony that such extensive periods of isolation led to a stronger sense of global unity has not been lost - and must be built upon.

The way in which humanity continues to respond to COVID-19 raises crucial lessons for how we must react to the Climate Crisis, the other global existential threat we now face. There may be much to celebrate in our response to the pandemic, but our attempts at unification have not been perfect or without challenge. Deep and structural inequalities continue to hamper our efforts to protect each other from the virus as they do with climate change.

This report, despite revealing widespread environmental anxiety, offers hope. People across the UK are united in their belief in global warming and their commitment to action. Just as we saw in the pandemic - when the public

was more in favour of lockdown than the government - people seem to be leading the politicians on the climate.

At a time when we are allegedly conquered by division - whether it be identity politics or social unease - this report reveals a surprising and hopeful unity. Contrary to stereotypes, eco-anxiety is revealed to be equally strong across a range of demographic groups. Politicians of all parties can no longer afford to dismiss climate change as an issue only important to young or more affluent voters in the south.

Although the UK made history by being the first country to declare an ecological emergency in May 2019, it is action, not simply words, that are needed now. As the polling and case studies in this report demonstrate, individuals across the country are making collective sacrifices for the environment, just as they did during the pandemic. This suggests that political leaders who recognise and build on the British people's hopes and fears about the planet won't just deliver a more sustainable future, they will be rewarded by our democracy.



# Executive *Summary*

**Eco-anxiety is just as likely to affect older and working-class people as those who are young or middle class.**

Stereotypes about climate change being a metropolitan issue reserved for the young appear unfounded.

**Fear about climate change is high amongst all classes** with 42% of middle and upper-class people reporting high levels of concern compared to 39% amongst working class groups.

Although southern voters are slightly more likely to worry about climate change, **38% of people in the north and midlands, including in so-called 'Red Wall' areas, report high levels of eco-anxiety.**

**Most people (56%) believe that climate change will have a bigger impact on humanity than Coronavirus.** This majority holds across all classes, genders and older age groups.

**These findings contest commonly held views that the environment is only an issue for the southern middle class.** Instead, climate change appears to be becoming more similar to issues like unemployment or crime which are recognised as priorities by the majority.

**Psychology suggests that political leaders make decisions with preconceived ideas about the electorate.** Whilst many politicians see the country as divided and that 'Red Wall' voters may reject action on climate change, our research suggests these views may be out of touch.



**This disconnect between politicians and the people was also evident during Coronavirus.** It was thought voters would not stand for lockdowns, but they did. Politicians may need to 'catch up' with voters on climate change just as they did with the pandemic.

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Although fear about climate change is fairly evenly distributed throughout different social groups and the country, **young people and women are significantly more likely to feel anger about the climate threat.**

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**People of all backgrounds are also taking environmental action.** Voters of different classes, genders and ages are changing their lives for the common good of the planet. As our case studies demonstrate, just as we made collective sacrifices for Covid, people of all backgrounds are acting for the planet. A significant 'green pound' also seems to be in effect.

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**However, people are sceptical about the impact their personal lifestyle changes can make.** They are more likely to blame industrialised nations, corporations and consumer culture for climate change than individuals.

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**People lack faith in our political leaders to act on this critical global challenge.** A significant number of people (31%) believe that the fast-approaching global environment summit in Glasgow, COP26, will have little or no impact.

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**Whoever hopes to win the next election will need to win the 'Red Wall'.** This will mean responding to concerns these voters actually hold rather than perceptions of them. From our research, this must include a meaningful response to climate change.

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*The main report starts here. The following polling research was conducted by YouGov on 6th -7th October 2021. It used a weighted sample of 2130 respondents from across Great Britain. All surveys were conducted online. Likert scales of 0 to 10 were used to rate emotions. For the purpose of this report they have been grouped into categories. The 'Red Wall' groups respondents from the north and the midlands. Rounding decisions may impact totals.*

# Section 01. Climate Change is bigger than Coronavirus

A significant majority of people (56%) believe that climate change will have a bigger impact on humanity than Coronavirus. Interestingly, this majority holds across a variety of demographic groups. Working class and older people, men and those living in the north are also more likely to

report that climate change will be more important than the pandemic. As the case studies at the end of this report demonstrate, climate change is considered a top global priority for people of all backgrounds and regions across Great Britain.

*Figure 01: The percentage of people who believe that climate change will have a greater impact on humanity than COVID-19, by demographic*



*N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.*



*“British people accepted huge changes in their lives during the pandemic; they may do the same for climate change.”*

Previous reports have shown that the belief in climate change has not been evenly spread amongst different demographic groups. Whilst our poll did find a slight variation in those believing in climate change, the overwhelming majority of us (89%) believe that climate change exists and that human activity is playing a role in this. Middle class groups were slightly more likely to believe in man-made climate change (91%) compared to 86% of working-class groups, but this still appears very close. Interestingly, there was no clear relationship between age, region or gender and a belief in climate change. Older people, those in the ‘Red Wall’ and men were as likely to accept man-made climate change.

The fact that such a high cross section of society not only accepts climate change, but believes its impact will be bigger than Coronavirus, is hugely significant. People across the country were willing to make huge sacrifices when asked to lockdown, curtailing their freedoms and respecting huge government action. If people believe in climate

change and expect it to have an even bigger impact, they may be prepared to accept a similar scale of changes in their own lives once again.

Many politicians, pundits and journalists act on very different assumptions of the electorate. Climate change has traditionally been viewed as a divisive issue that young, metropolitan liberals care about to the frustration of older, more working-class voters in the north. Our findings challenge these stereotypes and suggest that, just as the British people were more likely to accept huge changes in their lives in response to the pandemic, they may do the same for the environment. Politicians’ biases or preconceived opinions of the electorate may be at best dated and at worst out of touch. If they fail to catch up with voters’ current hopes and fears about the planet, they risk losing their support.



# Section 02. Eco-Anxiety is High for All of Us

When asked about the level of fear they felt about climate change on a scale of 0-10, some 78% of people reported some degree of anxiety. Some 41% of people reported being very much or extremely fearful. As the graph below demonstrates, these findings held across age and class, with older and working-class people almost just as likely to report these levels of

anxiety as young, middle-class people. Where 42% of middle-class respondents said they experienced significant fear about the climate, some 39% of working-class voters did.

Table 01: Distribution of eco-anxiety across age and class

CLIMATE CHANGE FEAR	AGE		SOCIAL GRADE	
	18-55	OVER 55	ABC1	C2DE
A little	9%	10%	9%	10%
Moderate	27%	31%	29%	26%
Very much	26%	24%	27%	23%
Extremely	16%	14%	15%	15%
Total	78%	79%	81%	75%

*N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures have been rounded.*



Although fear about climate change does cut across class boundaries and ages, it is important to note some small regional disparities. 43% of those living in London/East/South of England reported high levels of fear regarding climate change, in comparison to 38% of those living in the English ‘Red Wall’ region. Whilst this 5% difference is significant, it remains relatively small, particularly given prevalent expectations and previous studies of ‘Red Wall’ voters. Politically, the fact that over a third of ‘Red Wall’ voters still experience high levels of eco-anxiety seems significantly high.

Interestingly, the biggest difference in levels of eco-anxiety was not between rich and poor, young or old or North or South, but between men and women. Women remain significantly more anxious about climate change than men with 45% of women across the total sample reporting high levels of eco-anxiety compared to 36% of men. This may explain why women are also more likely to change their behaviour to help fight climate change, particularly in regards to spending decisions, which we explore in Section Four.

Table 02: Distribution of high levels of eco-anxiety across gender

CLIMATE CHANGE FEAR	GENDER	
	MEN	WOMEN
Very much	24%	27%
Extremely	12%	19%
Total	36%	45%

N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample. Figures have been rounded.

“78% of people reported some degree of climate anxiety.”

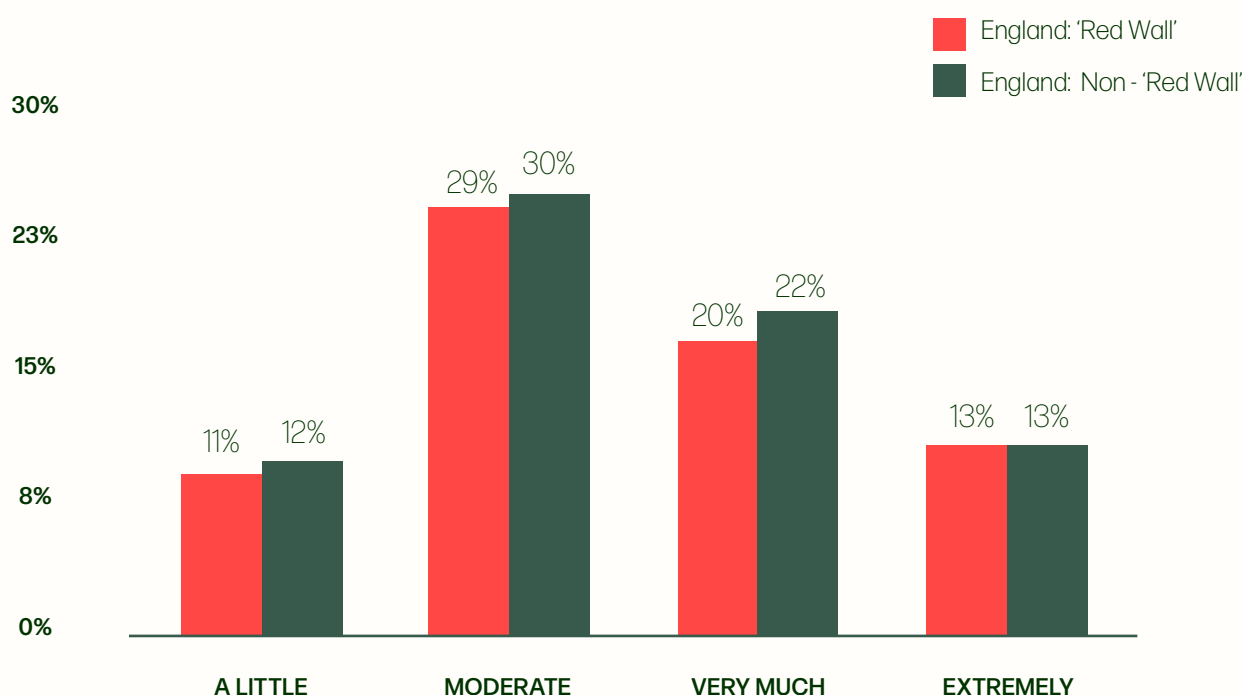


## Section 03. Eco-Anger is Highest for Young People

Eco-anger is prevalent across the population, but it is not as high or broadly felt as fear. Overall, some 75% of people across the UK experienced some level of anger about climate change on a scale of 0 to 10. This falls to one in three when you look at who experiences high levels of anger.

Once again, an individual's level of eco-anger does not seem to depend on whether they are rich or poor or whether they live in the North or South of England. As demonstrated by Figure 2 below, there is little difference in levels of anger felt by those in living in the 'Red Wall' of England and those in the South.

Figure 02: Eco-anger by region

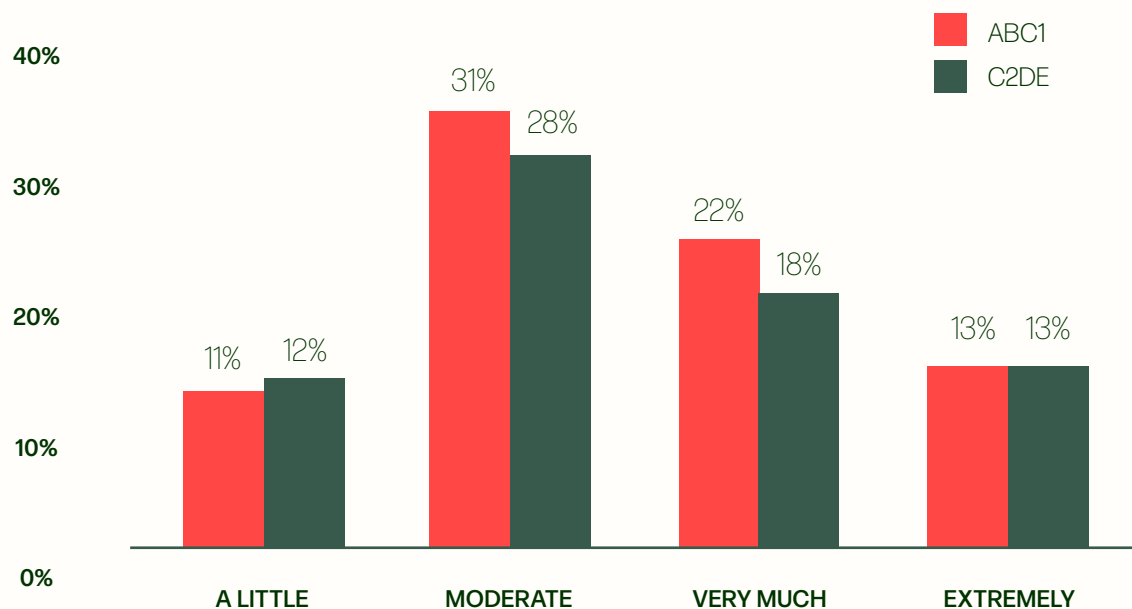


*N= 1791. All percentages shown represent percentages of those sampled in England.*



Levels of climate change anger are also similar across class differences. For example, 35% of middle-class voters expressed a high degree of anger over climate change compared to 31% of those with a working-class background.

*Figure 03: Differences in levels of eco-anger across social class*



*N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.*

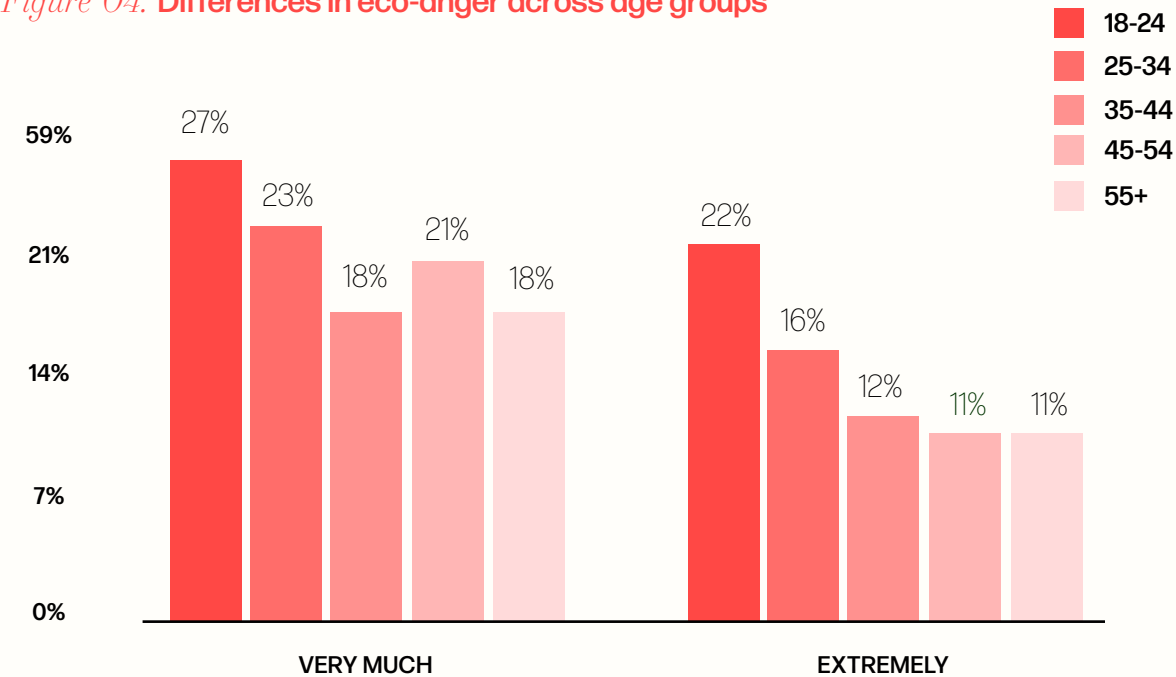
Although eco-anger was felt across the population, it tends to be deeper and more common across younger age groups. In fact, this research reveals a direct relationship between anger and youth, with anger levels declining with age, as can be seen in Figure 4. 49% of 18-24s recorded their climate-related anger levels in the highest categories. As age increases, anger declines: comparatively, 39% of 25-34s, 30% of 35-44s, 32% of 45-54s and 29% of 55+'s fell into these higher categories of anger.

*“75% of people feel some anger about climate change.”*



Levels of climate change anger are also similar across class differences. For example, 35% of middle-class voters expressed a high degree of anger over climate change compared to 31% of those with a working-class background.

Figure 04: Differences in eco-anger across age groups



N= 2130. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

Given that the younger generation is more likely to have grown up with climate change on the curriculum and at a time when it is also more prevalent in the news, this pattern makes sense. The fact that younger people have also spent less time contributing to the climate change problem and are set to inherit more of the consequences could also be a reasonable explanation to why anger increases with youth. If the younger generation continue to hold on to these beliefs, climate change is set to become even more of a powerful driver of both results in the polls and spending decisions in the economy,

trends that we will continue to explore in section four.

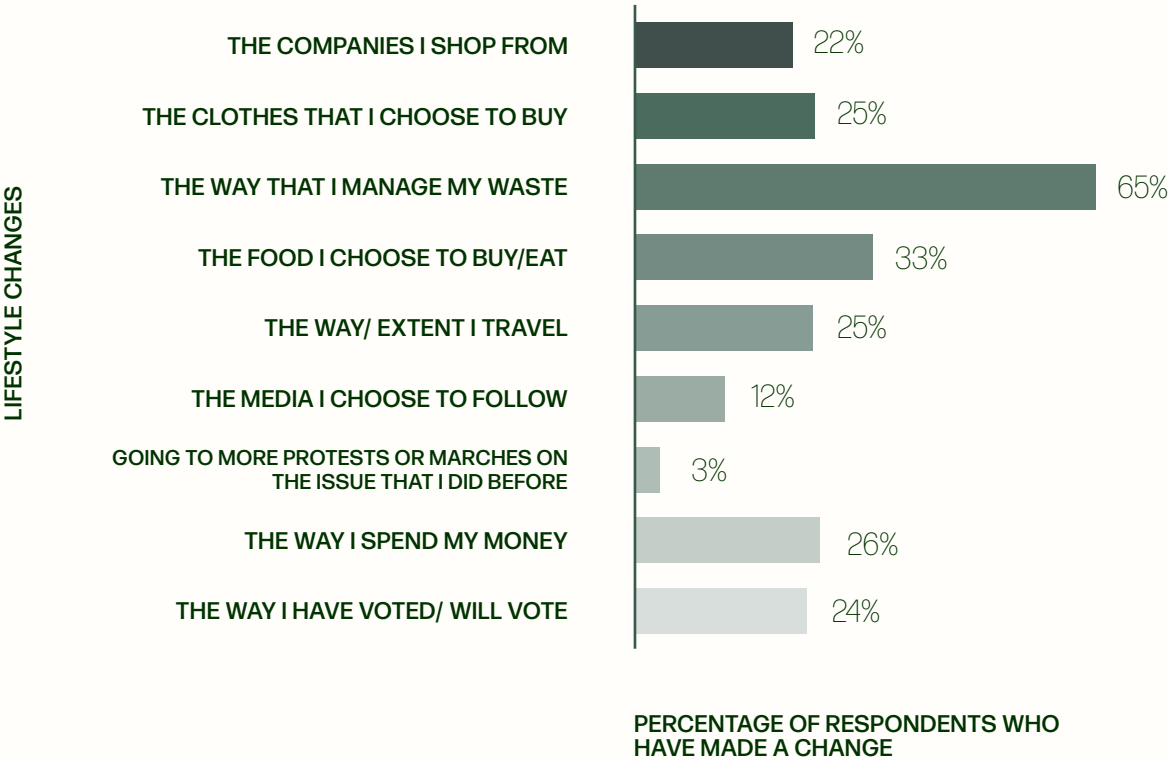
Finally, it is worth noting that gender also has a link with eco-anger (as it did with eco-anxiety in Section 2). This research revealed that amongst the total sample, 36% of female respondents reported high levels of anger compared to 31% of male respondents. It is however important not to overstate these differences, as high levels of anger about climate change are reported by over one in three men and one in three women alike.

# Section 04. Individuals Take Action but Doubt Impact

Many of us report changing our behaviour in response to concerns about climate change. In particular, over one in four (26%) of us state that it changes the way we spend money. These

lifestyle changes will have a huge impact on the economic landscape of the country, rewarding companies and leaders who speak to these desires and punishing those who do not.

Figure 05: Lifestyle changes to combat climate change amongst all respondents



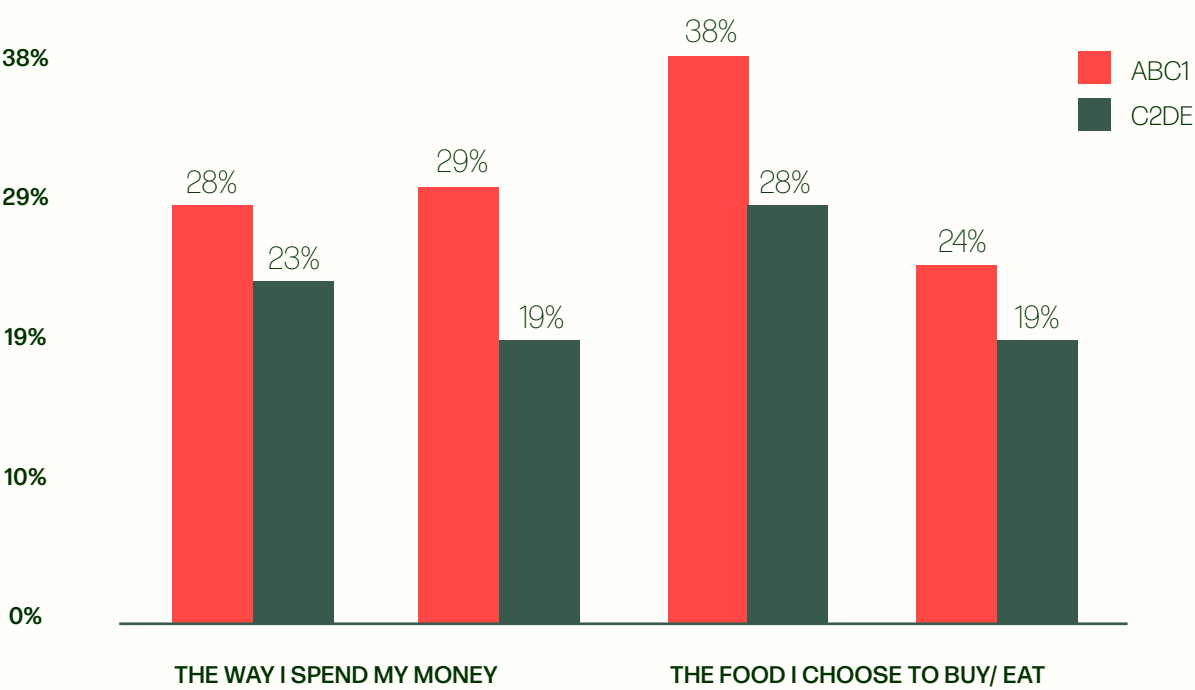
N= 2130. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.



Although changes in behaviour were noted across all demographic groups, working-class groups were consistently less likely to change their spending decisions. Overall, 28% of middle-class respondents claimed to have changed the way they spend their money to combat climate change, compared to only 23% of C2DEs. The same pattern occurred when looking at more specific spending changes. For example, 29% of middle-class people said that they had changed the way they travel compared to 19% of working-class people. Similarly, 38% of more affluent respondents said they had changed their food consumption patterns in response to climate change, compared to just 28% of less affluent respondents.

*“If the younger generation hold on to these beliefs, climate change will become an even more powerful issue.”*

Figure 06: Social class differences regarding the adoption of lifestyle changes to combat climate change



N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample.

*“Less affluent people are less likely to change their spending decisions.”*

This pattern is interesting given that both social groups, as discussed earlier, express equal levels of climate concern. One explanation could be that working-class voters lack the material means to change their spending decisions to act in a more climate conscious manner. It would be difficult, for example, to cut down on flights when you afford so few any way, or to buy organic, wholefood produce when processed, carbon-intensive food products are cheaper.

Finally, it is worth noting that gender plays a significant and consistent role in changing behaviour. Some 40% of female respondents claim to have altered the way they buy and eat food in order to help combat climate change, compared to 27% of male respondents – a striking difference. Similarly, almost 34% of female respondents claim to have altered their clothes purchasing habits in order to help combat climate change, compared to 16% of male respondents. In the face of these figures, it is understandable that the ‘green pound’ has often been described as ‘pink’.

These behavioural patterns make sense in the context of higher levels of anger and fear expressed by women compared to men as covered in Sections 2 and 3.

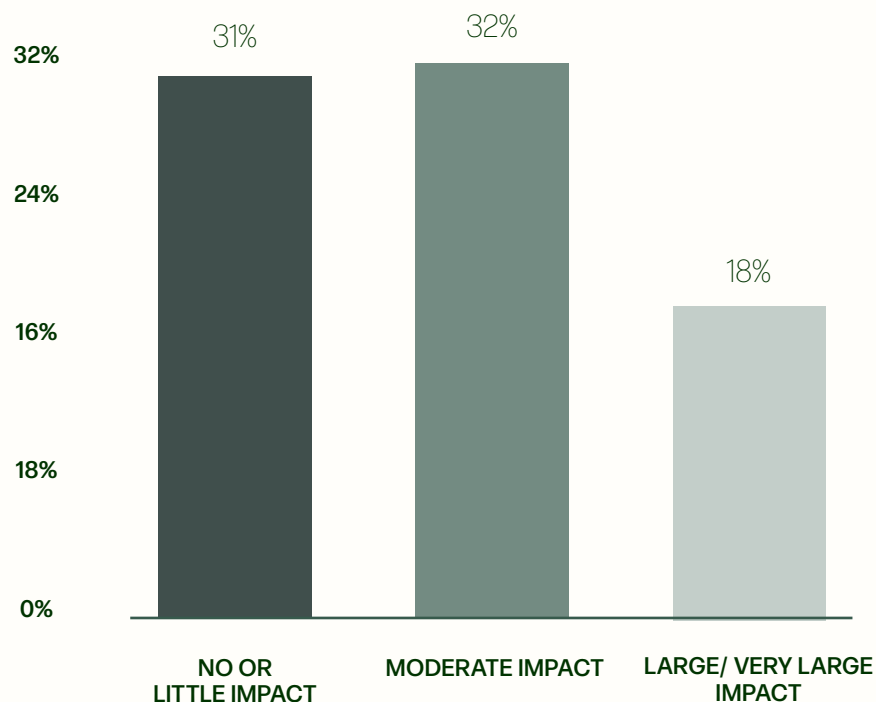


## Section 05. Cynicism About the Future

One explanation behind such high and broadly felt eco-anxiety may be the absence of faith in leaders to take action. When asked whether the upcoming climate conference, COP26, due to be held in Glasgow this November, would make

any difference, some 31% claimed it would have very little or no impact. This compares to 18% of people who are optimistic it would have some or high positive impact.

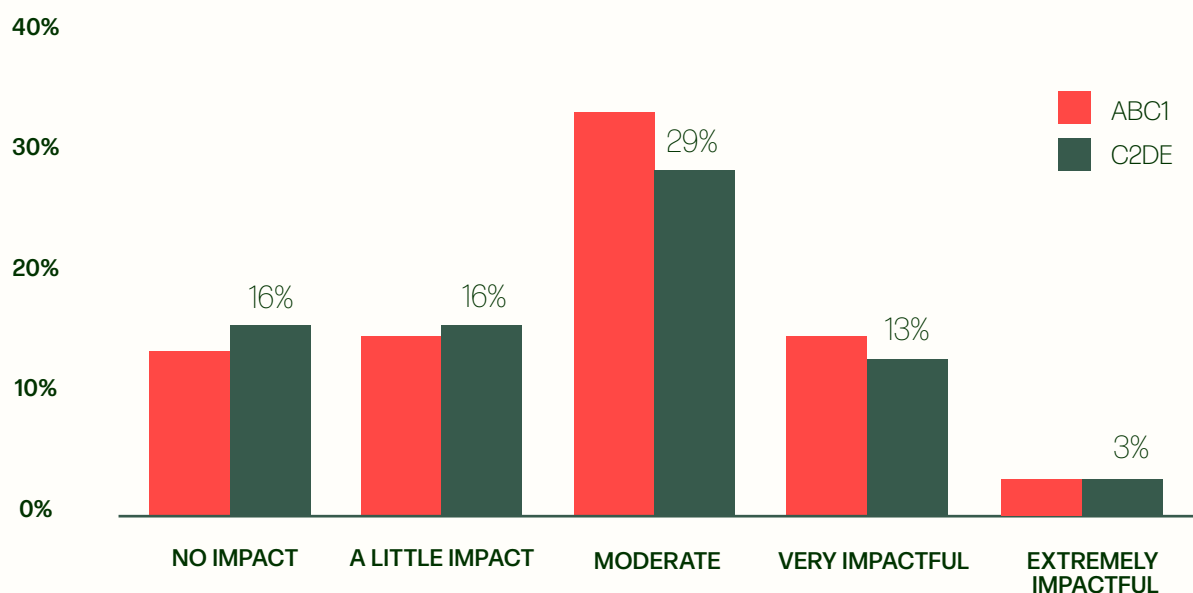
*Figure 07:* Respondent opinions on the impact of COP26 on combating climate change



*N= 2125. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample about COP26*

Interestingly, as can be seen in Figure 8, working class voters were slightly less likely to be optimistic about the impact of COP26 than more affluent voters.

*Figure 08: Differences in expected impact of COP26 by social grade*

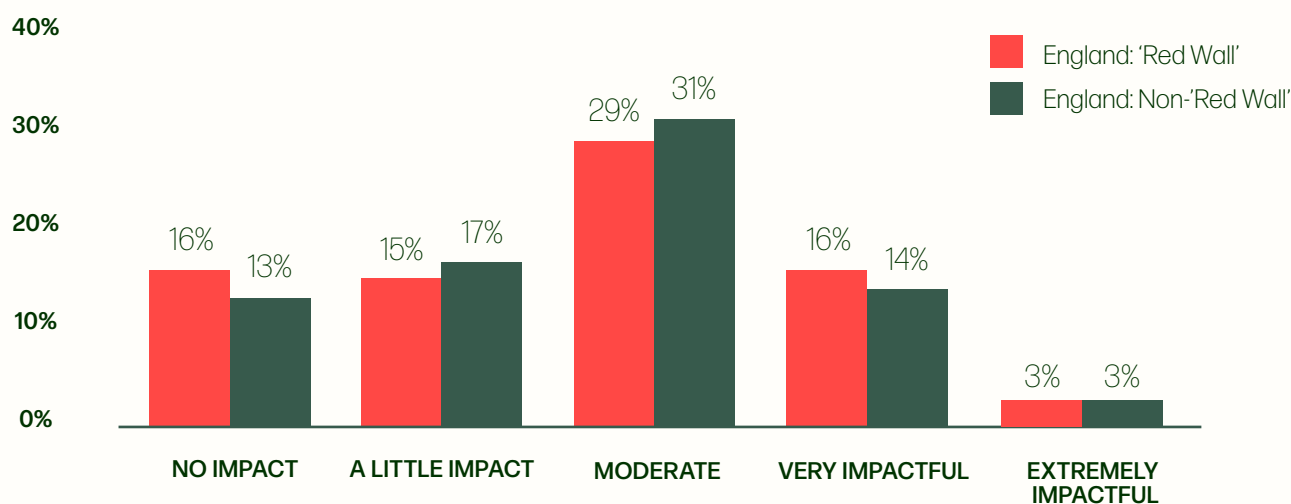


How impactful do you think COP26 will be in terms of making changes to combat climate change?

*N= 2150. All percentages shown represent percentages of the total sample asked about COP26.*

When thinking regionally, comparison between the 'Red Wall' region of England and the rest of the country once again reveal similar attitudes regarding the anticipated impact of COP26.

*Figure 09: Differences in expected impact of COP26 by region*



How impactful do you think COP26 will be in terms of making changes to combat climate change?

*N= 1791. All percentages shown represent percentages of those sampled in England.*

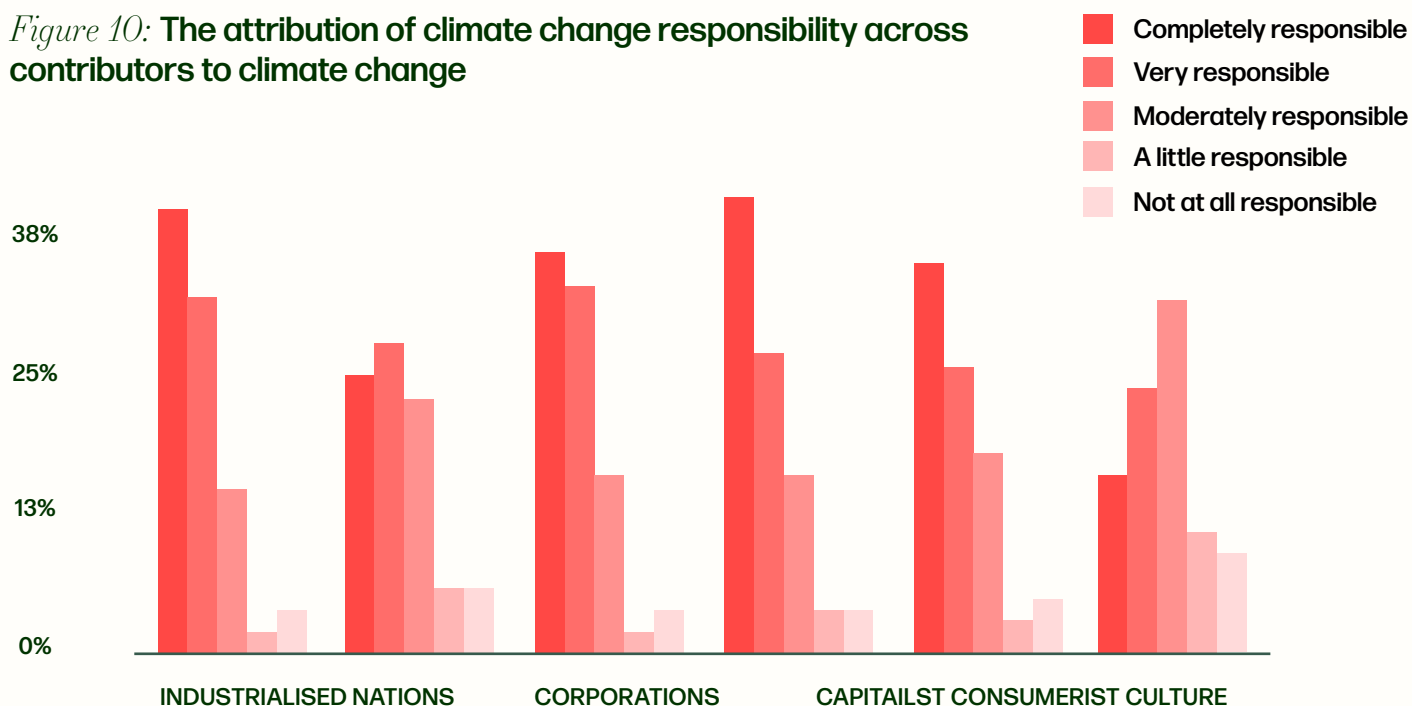


Although individuals are making personal lifestyle changes to fight climate change, they do not believe that the solutions to this global problem are fully in their control. When asked to rank the impact of individual actions such as consuming less meat, changing travel habits or boycotting particular retailers, people were often sceptical of the difference their personal contribution made to this global problem.

People are more likely to believe that actors beyond their control are responsible for climate

change. As Figure 10 below demonstrates, people are most likely to blame industrialised nations, fossil fuel companies and corporations than they are individuals. As depicted below, over 40% of people think that fossil fuel companies are completely or extremely responsible for climate change, compared to just 16% who attribute such blame to individuals. Interestingly, 35% of respondents thought that 'consumer culture' was highly responsible for the climate crisis.

**Figure 10: The attribution of climate change responsibility across contributors to climate change**



Sample size varied for each climate actor is as follows: industrialised nations (N= 2106), high net worth individuals (N=2105), corporations (N=2105), fossil fuel companies (N=2102), capitalist consumer culture (N=2105), individuals (N=2109)

These figures point to a crisis of control. There is clearly deep and widespread fear about climate change, but people don't believe their individual actions have sufficient impact to avert the crisis. They blame global actors like nations and corporations for the problem, but they don't

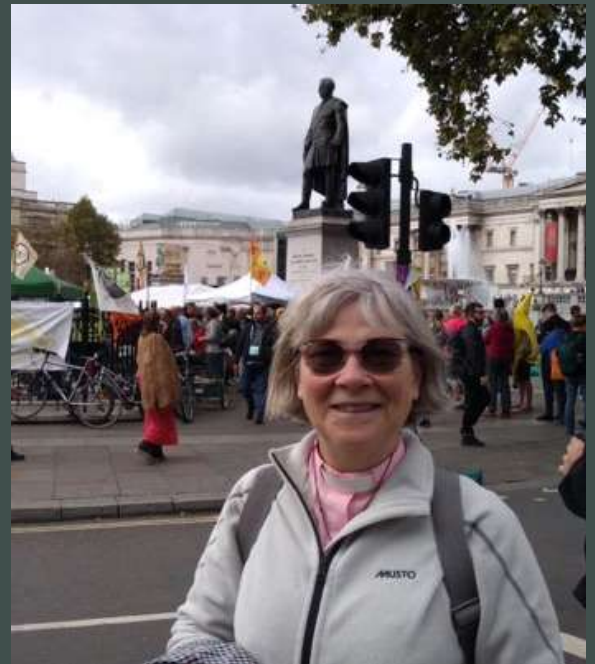
have faith that their political leaders will take the necessary action to avert disaster. This lack of faith and agency is likely to exacerbate anxiety about the climate. Global summits like COP26 provide an opportunity to break this vicious cycle or to exacerbate it.

# Section 06.

## Case Studies

### Nicola Hunt

Local XR Activist,  
North Devon



*“Coming to terms with climate change is sort of like a grieving process, because we know life isn’t going to be the same.”*

The overwhelming thing I feel is love and sorrow, for life and the environment. As a Christian, I believe we are all stewards of the earth, and therefore anything we do shouldn’t endanger life going forward, not just for human, but all forms of life. Coming to terms with climate change is sort of like a grieving process, because we know life isn’t going to be the same. Sometimes I just feel like banging my head against the wall in anger or breaking down crying. I do however find solace in the local Extinction Rebellion sharing circle I belong to, where each week we meet on Zoom to talk about our fears, concerns and frustrations. I think we all need to take responsibility, but mostly, I’m disappointed in politicians and journalists for not doing enough and not

speaking honestly about the crisis. We all have to make changes in our lives, but alone that’s not going to be enough; companies have a lot to answer for and ultimately, we need to get governments to pull their fingers out. I’ve made some lifestyle changes; I rarely drive, I use green energy in my home, I buy local and I’m vegetarian five days a week. I also take part in activism, lobbying councils, taking part in protests locally and in London. In the end, I think all we can do is get ourselves and our own communities active. Activism gives me hope, because I know that if leaders are all talk and no action, there will be more demonstrations; people won’t give up.



## Valerie Brown

Radical Activist,  
London



*“When you’re part of a global movement to save the planet, you’re going to feel a hell of a lot better, because you’re empowered. Hope lies in actions.”*

I’ve had horrific breakdowns, cried and had many sleepless nights feeling overwhelmed. It feels like a sort of grief, because I know that my grandchildren are in grave danger, but this grieving isn’t just about them, it is for all of humanity, all forms of life. I also feel immensely guilty, because my generation with all our hippie ideas of a utopian world, once we grew up, we just fed into the consumerist culture which is systematically destroying our planet. I’m also aware, as an African person, that this capitalist culture is part of the same system which saw the enslavement and subjugation of black people. Now, we’re all enslaved and locked into a system that is leading us to death. It’s strange, because the information is out there, but it’s like we have all become numb to it, desensitised by entertaining apocalyptic movies and easily distracted by social media.

Saying all this, taking part in activism, seeing other protesters grieving together, people willing to be arrested to hold leaders to account, it gives me hope. I joined Extinction Rebellion and later Burning Pink and through this I have met the bravest, most extraordinary people. Some of my radical activism has put a strain on relationships with my family and friends, and this makes me waiver, but I keep going because my eyes are open, and I can’t close them now. When you’re part of a global movement to save the planet, you’re going to feel a hell of a lot better, because you’re empowered. Hope lies in actions. There is no point waiting for salvation, we have to save ourselves by getting involved, because we’ve already waited too long and we’re running out of time.

## Jon Swales

Climate activist and Team Vicar at  
St George's Church,  
Leeds



*“Putting my kids to bed I would have tears in my eyes thinking about their future.”*

*I became involved in the climate movement three years ago when I joined my daughter on a youth climate strike, it pushed me to do some further research, looking beyond the mainstream news. I became immediately overwhelmed, realising that unless things change, we face a future of mass starvation, migration, societal collapse, violence and war. I entered this stage of grief, lament and disorientation. Putting my kids to bed I would have tears in my eyes thinking about their future. I feel deeply angry, because democracy and unrestrained capitalism have failed us. Politicians have been aware of the crisis for decades, but they've failed to act because of their own financial and political motivations. Whilst leaders focus on far-off emissions targets, they obscure the fact that its already affecting the world's most vulnerable. In this*

*sense I worry that COP26 will bring another round of overly-optimistic empty promises. Personally, lifestyle changes have helped me regain a sense of agency. I love meat, but now I try to only eat it if its due for landfill, I don't fly anymore, even though my brother lives in Thailand and that means I may never see him again. I've also become involved in activism, working with Christian Climate Action and Extinction Rebellion to try and change the system. And that's good for the soul, activism keeps me from that anxiety which paralyses. In the activist community there is a tangible sense of love and shared humanity. Ultimately, when faced with suffering and threat ordinary people can act in extraordinary ways, there's lots of places to find hope.*



## Lysander Bickham

Founder of Leo's Box,  
London, 17 years old



*“Lots of corporations have been part of the problem, but I think the issue comes from a more specific corporate and consumer culture.”*

*I try to be optimistic because otherwise my anxiety becomes overwhelming and I'm not able to do anything. It is this spirit which inspired me to set up Leo's box, an affordable eco-friendly subscription service for cosmetic and household goods. I'm really proud to be the youngest B Corp CEO in the world because I'm a firm believer that businesses can be a force for good. Lots of corporations have been part of the problem, but I think the issue comes more from a specific corporate and consumer culture. My work is passion-led, it reminds me that there's human joy everywhere if you just look for it. My anger mostly comes from the lack of accessible communication on the issue of climate change. The information is scary because it's brutally honest, but we have to understand the various threats the*

*crisis poses. Whilst it's important to talk about how far we are falling behind sustainability targets, I think it's vital to have hope, because we are still closer to achieving our goals. I feel like most of my peers are incredibly alert, and my friends and I help educate and support one another in our activism. It frustrates me when people express scepticism, but as long as they are willing to listen, I remain hopeful. Ultimately, we can't afford to alienate people who we need to get onside. I think when individuals act collectively, we can deliver huge results. If we look back to the Covid crisis, we can see how effective it is when people act together. If the government and the general public are together behind the same cause, we can deliver exceptional change.*

## Tony Herrman

Climate activist,  
Leeds



*“I think about my grandchildren and the world I’ll be leaving them. I feel fearful about their future.”*

I’ve become increasingly frustrated with people in power, with governments and organisations. When leaders discuss 2050 as a distant date to set emissions targets, I think about my grandchildren and the world I’ll be leaving them. I feel fearful about their future. I think, ‘What can we do now?’ I’ve increasingly focused my work on tackling the climate emergency, for over a decade working with Carbon Conversations to help individuals overcome the psychological barriers they face to taking action. Carbon Conversations focuses on people; the vast majority who are aware of the climate crisis but aren’t sure how best to take action. Information and awareness are important, but this alone can cause anxiety or despair – the worst motivators for change as they push people to rationalise not taking action because ‘there’s no point’ or ‘it’s too difficult’. We create a safe space for people in a small group to reflect on their values and find

support from one another. These groups, led by trained facilitators, started in the midlands and are quickly expanding in the North as well as being established internationally. On average we see people reduce their carbon footprint by half and vitally taking action in the wider climate movement. More recently, I’ve started work with Climate Action Leeds, mobilising communities by developing locally-run climate action hubs. This is one part of the whole programme, engaging people and organisations across the city aimed at achieving a zero carbon, nature friendly, socially just Leeds by the 2030s. Personally, I’ve stopped flying, changed my diet, and reduced driving. Individual behaviour changes are important, but not enough. We need massive climate movement that politicians and companies cannot ignore, because ultimately, they need our political and financial votes.

## Conrad Langridge

Sustainability marketer  
and climate activist,  
Bristol

*“...ultimately, we need to change the mindset of consumerism; we need a societal behavioural shift.”*



For me, climate change manifests in a low-level constant anxiety. I feel an internal guilt, that me and people like me are inflicting damage on people's lives across the world, our consumption is outsourcing destruction. We've already seen droughts, fires, floods and food shortages which is horrendous, and I worry this will only get worse causing mass migrations and global conflicts. This concern has motivated me to focus my work on the climate crisis, offering marketing support for brands, charities and NGOs in the sustainability sector. I also founded a volunteer run environmental news platform, Curious. Earth and have found great personal benefit from aligning my work with my values. I try to practice what I preach- I've changed my diet, I don't buy new clothes or technology, I've given up flying and changed who I bank with and vote for. In order for this to have a scaled impact we need environmentally friendly choices to

become the cheapest, easiest and the most exciting options. Technology is making it easier for individuals and companies to understand their carbon footprints but ultimately, we need to change the mindset of consumerism; we need a societal behavioural shift. Individual action is powerful, and when people collectively vote with their wallets change can happen. I have faith that awareness is spreading, whilst I exist in a bit of a green bubble, when I went back to the conservative rural town I grew up in, I heard people talking about climate change. The spreading climate consciousness is what really gives me hope. We saw in the Covid crisis incredible global collaboration. Because it affected everybody, we all did our bit. That's the kind of response we need now, because the climate crisis is going to impact us all.



## *Conclusion*

Climate change is not just a concern for younger, more affluent southern voters. Instead, fear about global warming seems to be equally high amongst working class groups and older voters. It is also pervasive in the 'Red Wall' regions of the north and midlands as well as amongst male voters. Political leaders who assume that this issue remains the preserve of a particular elite in society risk being out of touch with the voters they need to win a majority.

Younger people are, however, significantly more likely to feel angry about the unfolding climate crisis. If this anger holds, the environment will only grow as an electoral priority over time.

Voters are highly conscious that they can't solve these problems by individual actions alone, but lack faith in political leaders to take the action needed to challenge the powerful industrialised nations and corporations that they blame for the problem.

Global environment summits like COP26 therefore represent an opportunity and a threat. Take the action that's needed on climate change, and people across the country – regardless of background or geography – should find a sense of relief. But fail to step up to the environmental challenge and political leaders risk losing their own electoral coalitions along with the future of the planet.





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