

UK climate protests potentially increased the number of people willing to take climate action.

Note: This is our more accessible report, with a more technical one, with additional analysis, being released in a few weeks. Subscribe to [our newsletter](#) if you want to read that one!

Summary

[Social Change Lab](#) commissioned YouGov to conduct three nationally representative surveys of approximately 2,000 people in the United Kingdom, focusing on peoples' views on climate change, their willingness to engage in environmental activism, and their views on the climate activist group *Just Stop Oil*. The surveys were conducted before any significant protest activity occurred (on March 29th), during the Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion protests (on the 9th of April), and after most (but not all) of the protest activity had occurred (on the 19th of April). It should be noted that other environmental protests also occurred in April, so any change in views should be understood as the impact of the combination of both activity from Just Stop Oil *and* activity from Extinction Rebellion.

Key Results:

- **The number of people saying that they were willing to take part in some form of climate activism increased from 8.7% to 11.3% of the UK population** from Before (March 29th) to After (April 19th), equivalent to approximately 1.7 million adults in the UK.
- Respondents were also asked questions about their concern about the climate crisis, their awareness of the impact of fossil fuels on climate change, their support for the goals of Just Stop Oil, their discontent with government environmental policy, and their support for more fossil fuel extraction. There were no statistically significant changes in any of these variables.
- **Despite disruptive protests, there was no loss of support for climate policies**, providing some evidence against the notion that disruptive protests can invoke a negative public reaction.
- Most people claimed to be aware of Just Stop Oil and aware that the protests were taking place, with 63% of respondents saying that they were aware of the Just Stop Oil protests after most of the protests had occurred. Most respondents did not support the actions of Just Stop Oil, with only 18% of respondents saying that they supported the protests.
- **Together these results suggest that the high-profile disruptive action did not change minds about environmental issues, but did inspire some already concerned people to want to join in.**
- However, due to existing [high levels](#) of climate concern in the UK, **it's possible that advocating for issues with existing high salience or broadly trying to increase climate concern is now less effective (albeit still successful) than previous years.** One might infer that it's now more promising to either focus on building salience for more neglected issues, or on focusing on climate advocacy in countries with much lower baseline support for climate change.

Introduction

Whether protest can have an impact on public opinion is an important question for figuring out the impact of protest more broadly, as the impact of protests on legislators and its ability to influence policy is likely to be at least partially mediated by the impact of protest on public opinion (Agnone, 2007). A meta-analysis by Burstein (2003) examines the relationship between public opinion and policy change. He finds that in 75% of cases of policy change, public opinion plays a significant role. With this in mind, it seems especially important to study the impact of protests on public opinion, given the impact of public opinion and policy and legislator behaviour.

Whilst there has been some analysis of the impact of protest on public perceptions for a certain issue in experimental conditions (Bugden 2020, Feinberg et al. 2020), there has been little research examining the impact of large-scale protests using observational techniques, such as public opinion polling ([Kenward & Brick, forthcoming](#)). This seems particularly important as the exposure to protest in experimental conditions is quite distinct to what is observed in real life. Experiments generally involve a single exposure to a neutral news item about protest, whereas reality may involve people being exposed to partisan media sources, word of mouth, and other sources of information. There has rightly been a criticism of experimental designs on the basis of the difference between experiments and reality. Observational work around ongoing protests provides a way for us to examine and more accurately evaluate the impact of protest on public opinion.

This was our goal for this research, using representative polling to better understand how public opinion around climate change and fossil fuels was changing as a result of protest and nonviolent direct action by groups such as Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion UK. For further information on the actions of Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, one can read [this article on Just Stop Oil](#) or [these highlights](#) from Extinction Rebellion. Generally, they involved illegal actions such as sustained and [high-profile oil infrastructure blockades](#) (e.g. refineries and oil depots), [glueing to government buildings](#), and blocking buildings of [carbon-intensive industries](#).

Methodology

Each of the three surveys had approximately 2000 respondents - the polling conducted before the protests had 2057 respondents, the polling during the protests had 2030 respondents, and the polling that took place after most of the protests had occurred had 2160 respondents. Further detail in our methodology can be seen in the [Appendix](#).

Responses were weighted by demographic information in order to ensure that the survey was nationally representative.¹ All of the data can be found [here](#).

¹A small note is that although there was no crossover between the sample for the first survey and the second survey, there were approximately 130 people who participated in the third survey who also participated in either the first or the second survey. This is discussed further in the [Appendix](#).

Likelihood of Engaging in Activism

Respondents were asked “How likely or unlikely are you **personally** to do each of the following within the next 12 months?” and were able to rate themselves as being anywhere from ‘Very unlikely’ (1) to ‘Very likely’ (7). The types of activism they were asked about were:

- 1) Talking with others (e.g. spouse, partner, parent(s), children, friends) about environmental issues
- 2) Writing letters, emails or phone your member MP (member of parliament) about climate change
- 3) Volunteering for an environmental cause
- 4) Donating to an environmental cause
- 5) Going to a legal protest (e.g. a march)
- 6) Participating in peaceful and disruptive civil disobedience (e.g. sit-ins or blocking roads) against corporate or government activities that make climate change worse

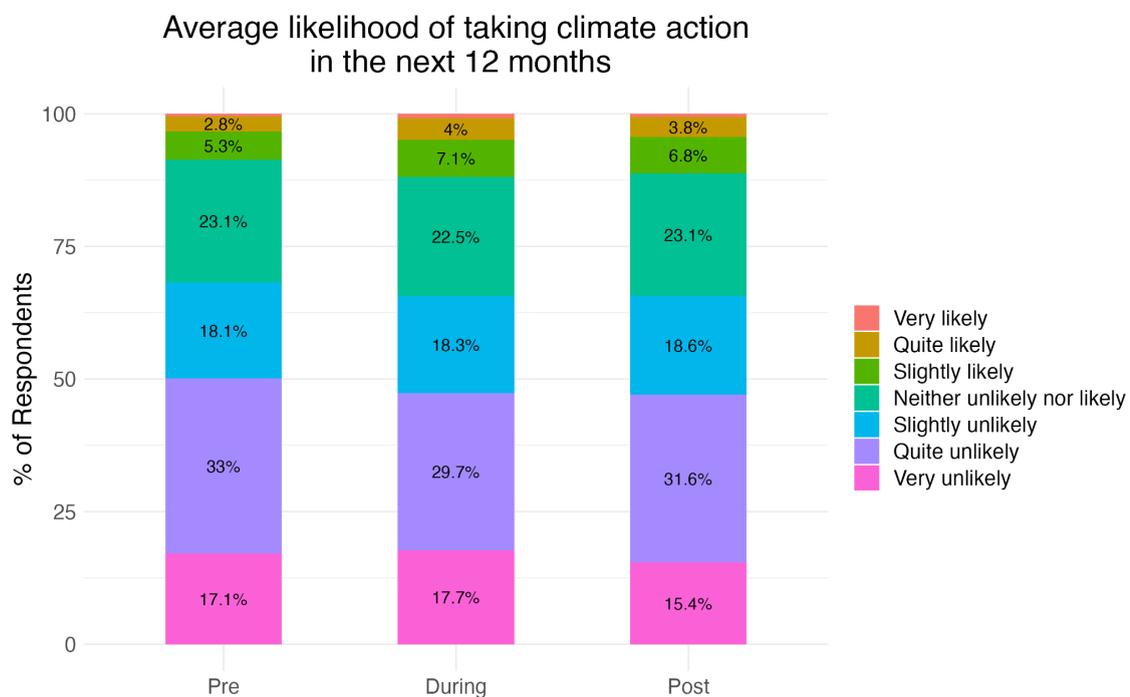


Figure 1: Average Likelihood of taking climate action in the next 12 months, grouped by the period in which the respondent was surveyed.

For this aggregated metric, there was a statistically significant increase in the percentage of respondents saying they were willing to engage in the various forms of activism specified. Prior to the protests, the weighted mean response on this metric was 2.77, whereas after the protests this figure had increased to 2.87.² The percentage of respondents who said it was either ‘Slightly likely’, ‘Quite likely’, or ‘Very Likely’ increased from 8.7% to 11.3%.

² (p = 0.016, Cohen’s d = 0.07)

All but three of the individual types of activism had a statistically significant difference in means - the three that were not statistically significant were the likelihood of volunteering for an environmental cause, the likelihood of donating to an environmental cause, and the likelihood of participating in civil disobedience. Because the aggregated metric may not tell the whole story though, it is worth looking at the specific types of activism specified in the question, which can be found in the [Appendix](#). These results suggest that news coverage of protests can lead to people becoming more willing to partake in future protests or environmental activism.

Concern about Climate Change

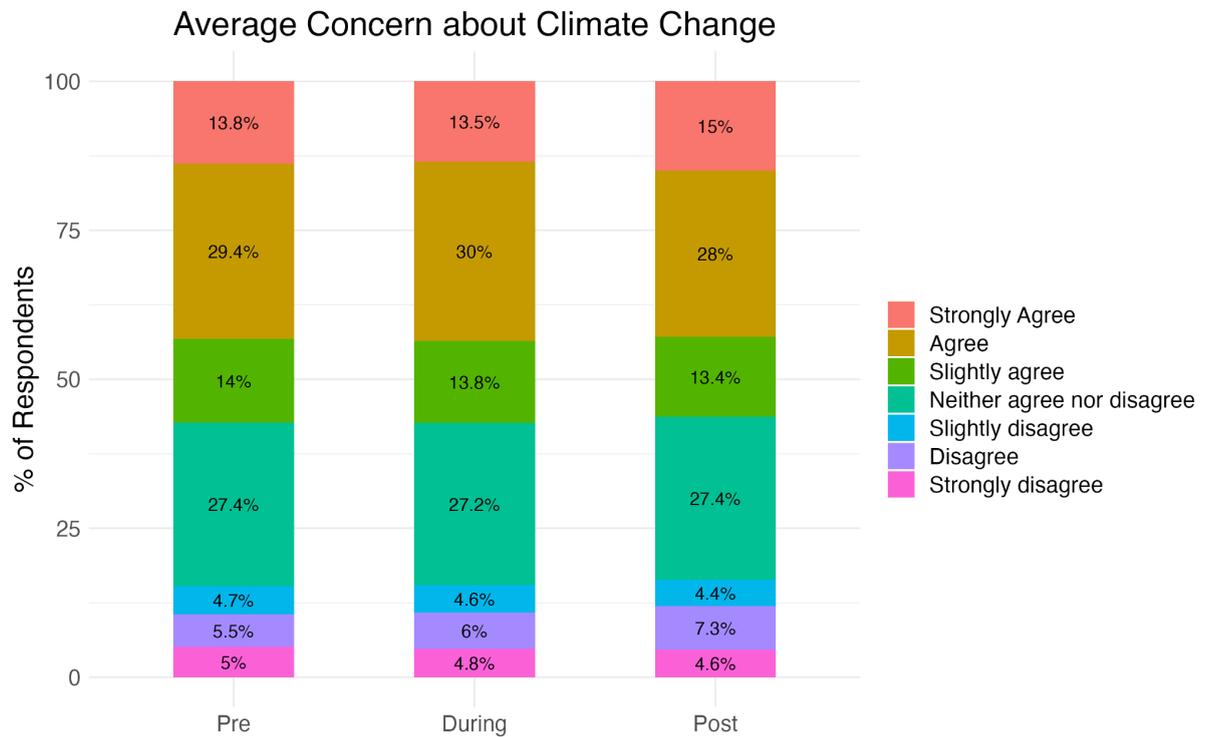


Figure 2: Average Concern About Climate Change, grouped by the period in which the respondent was surveyed.

For the second aggregated metric, which looked at one question about whether respondents believed that ‘climate change is one of the greatest threats to humanity’ and another that asked whether respondents felt ‘frightened at the prospect of climate change and the impact it might have’, there was no statistically significant difference in means. This indicates that the protests probably failed to make any impact on peoples’ views about climate change.

Support for Just Stop Oil's Goals

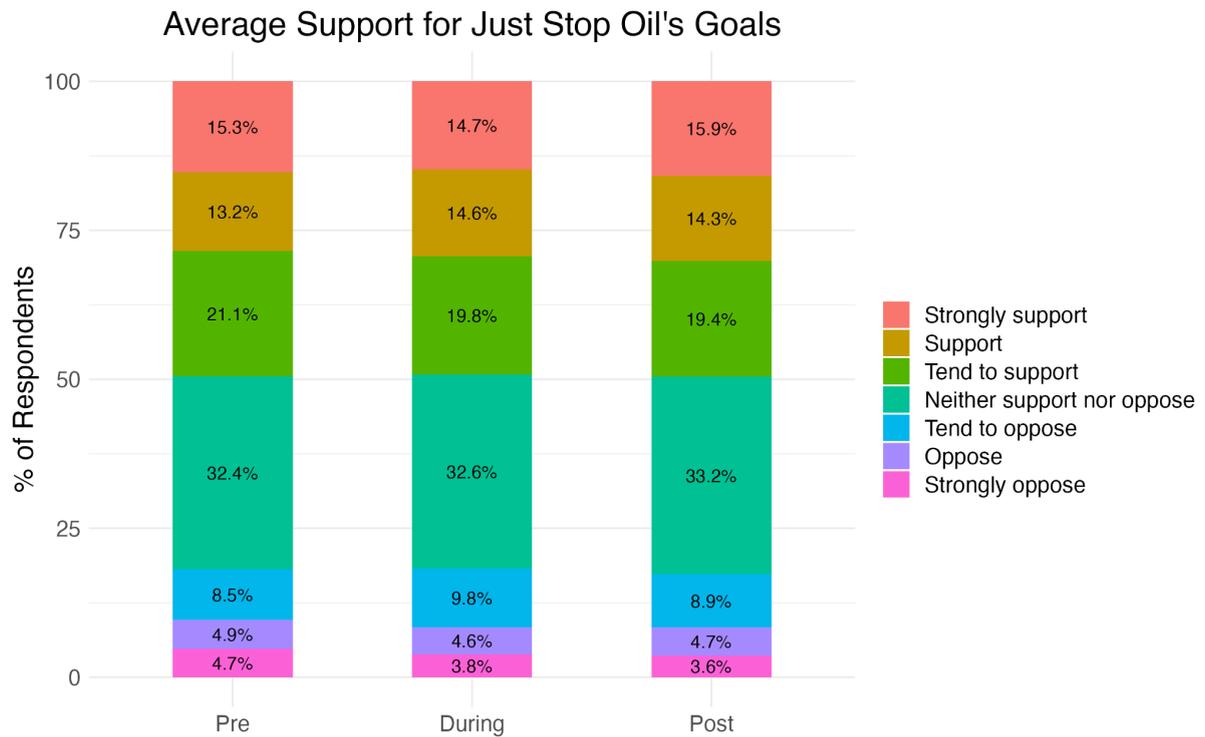


Figure 3: Average Support for Just Stop Oil's goals, grouped by the period in which the respondent was surveyed.

A third aggregated metric looked at the number of people saying that they supported the goals of Just Stop Oil (note that the questions did not specifically allude to the fact that these were the goals of Just Stop Oil, as **we believe it's more important to understand public support for the issue rather than the organisation**). These questions asked people whether they supported or opposed three measures that the government could take: stopping the exploration of oil and other new fossil fuels, no longer granting new licences to oil and gas production, and making companies who extract fossil fuels spend their profits on transitioning to a new low-carbon economy. There was no statistically significant change in the mean response to the questions from before the protests to after the protests - the mean increased from 4.61 to 4.67, within our margin of error.

Awareness of the Impact of Fossil Fuels

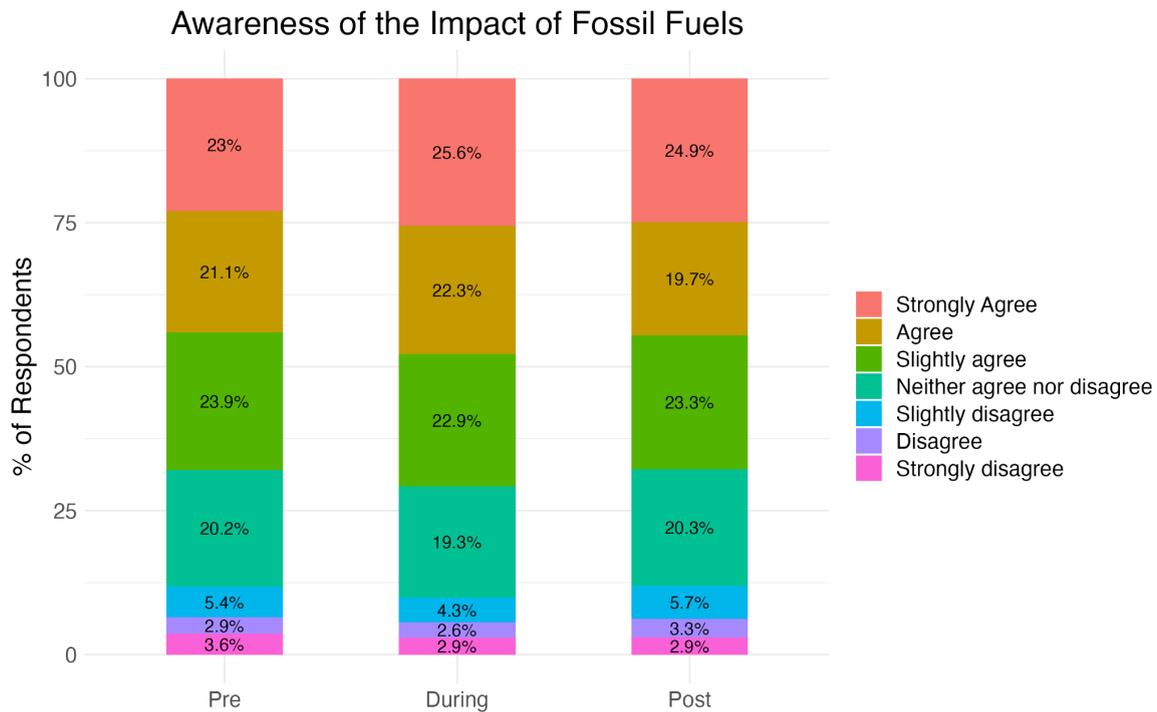


Figure 4: Awareness of the impact of fossil fuels on climate change, grouped by the period in which the respondent was surveyed.

The surveys also looked at the number of people saying that they were aware of the impact of fossil fuels. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that ‘Fossil fuels are major contributors to climate change and environmental damage’. There was no statistically significant change in the mean response to the questions from before the protests to after the protests. However, we did find a statistically significant change from Before to During, which then fell below our margin for error when comparing Before to After.³

³ It’s possible that this is due to the release of the IPCC report before our “During” survey, and discussed further in our [limitations section](#).

Average Opposition to Just Stop Oil

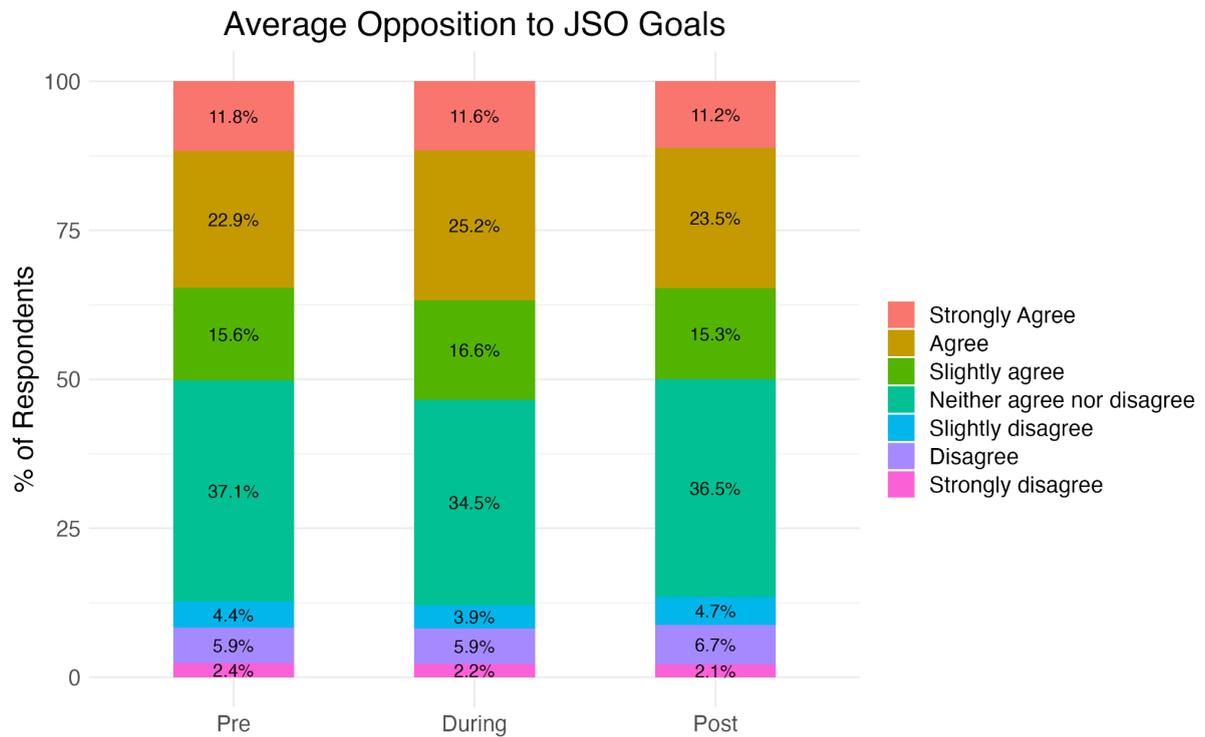


Figure 5: Average Opposition to the goals of Just Stop Oil, grouped by the period in which the respondent was surveyed.

Respondents were asked questions that were intended to provide insight into whether the opposition to Just Stop Oil goals increased. One concern about disruptive protests is that they may be liable to increase opposition to the aims of the protesters - for instance, polling after Insulate Britain protests showed that many people in the UK believed that their traffic obstruction was likely to lead to more people opposing the aims of the protesters⁴, and so our surveys asked questions intended to gauge whether this is true in the case of Just Stop Oil’s protest activity. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with two statements. The first statement was “Given the current high fuel prices, it’s not appropriate for the UK to reduce extraction of oil and gas”, and the second statement was “Because of the war in Ukraine, we need to maintain our country’s own production of oil and gas”, and responded on a 1 to 7 scale (1 being ‘Strongly Disagree’ and 7 being ‘Strongly Agree’). There was no statistically significant change in the number of people who were opposed to Just Stop Oil’s goals from before the protests to after the protests ($p = 0.7$).

⁴ Three weeks into motorway climate change protests, public opposition has only grown | YouGov. (2021). YouGov. Retrieved 7 April 2022, from <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/10/08/three-weeks-motorway-climate-change-protests-publi>

How many people support Just Stop Oil?

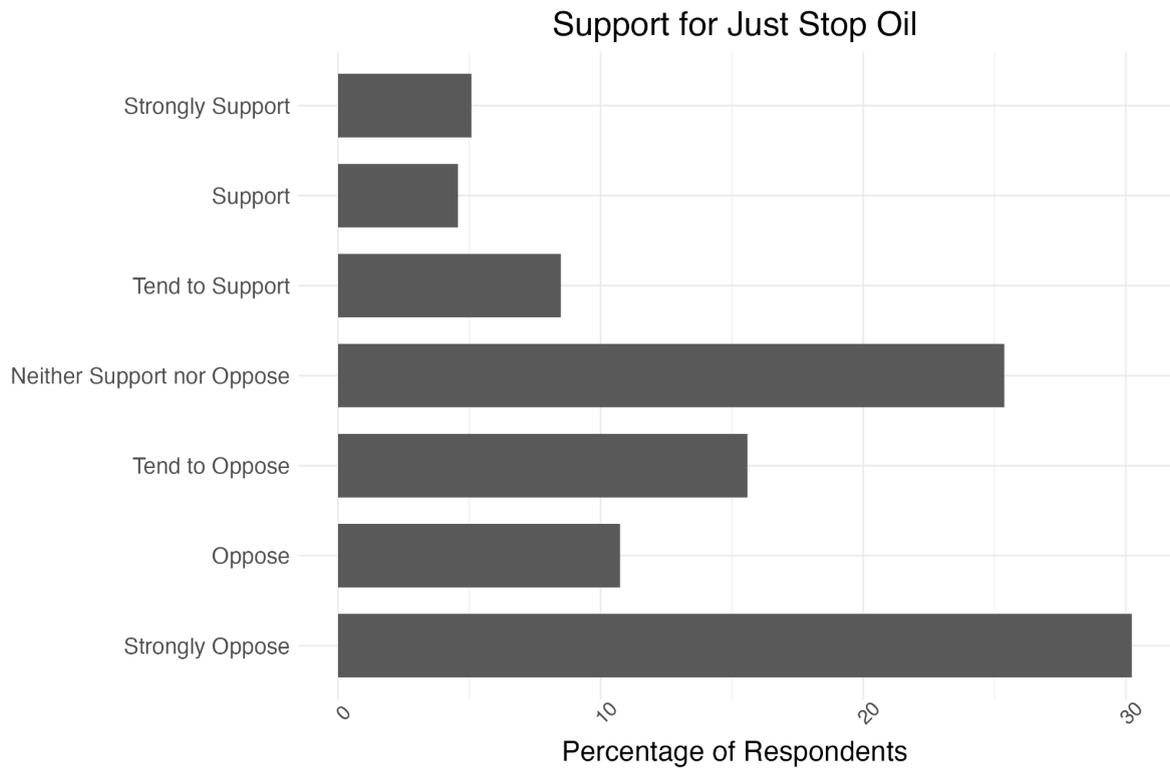


Figure 7: Support for Just Stop Oil in the survey that was conducted on the 19th of April, after most of the protests had occurred.

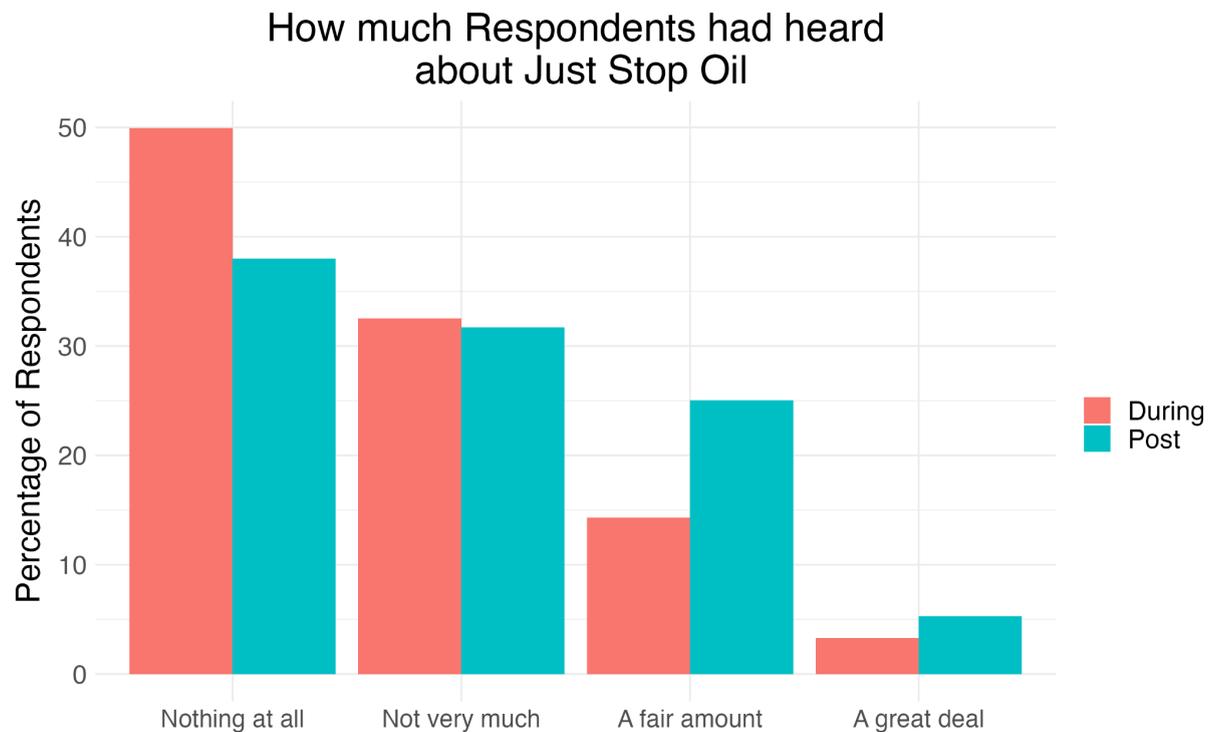


Figure 8: How much respondents had heard about Just Stop Oil in both the second survey and the final survey.

Evidence from these surveys suggests that most people do not support the *actions* of Just Stop Oil, even if they support the *aims* of the protesters. 56% of respondents in the survey that took place after the protests had occurred said that they opposed the Just Stop Oil protests, whereas only 18.1% of respondents said that they supported the protests. The likelihood of supporting the protests was contingent on which party the respondent had voted for - only 4.8% of people who voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election said that they supported the protesters, whereas 33.7% of Labour voters supported them.

Who is likely to take climate action?

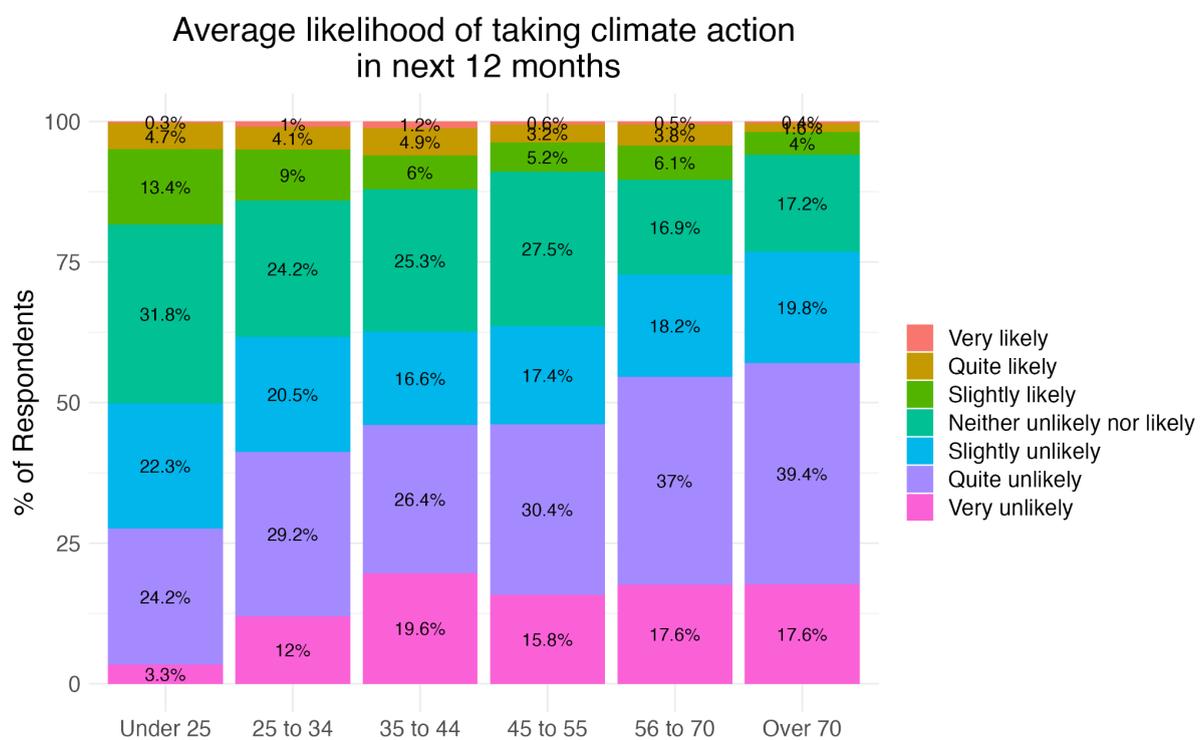


Figure 7: Aggregated metric on likelihood of taking climate action, grouped by age group.

Unsurprisingly, younger people were disproportionately likely to say that they were willing to engage in some form of environmental activism in the next 12 months (See Figure 1). In the April 19th Survey, the mean response on the 7-point scale was 3.54 for Under 25s, whereas for Over 70s it was 2.61.

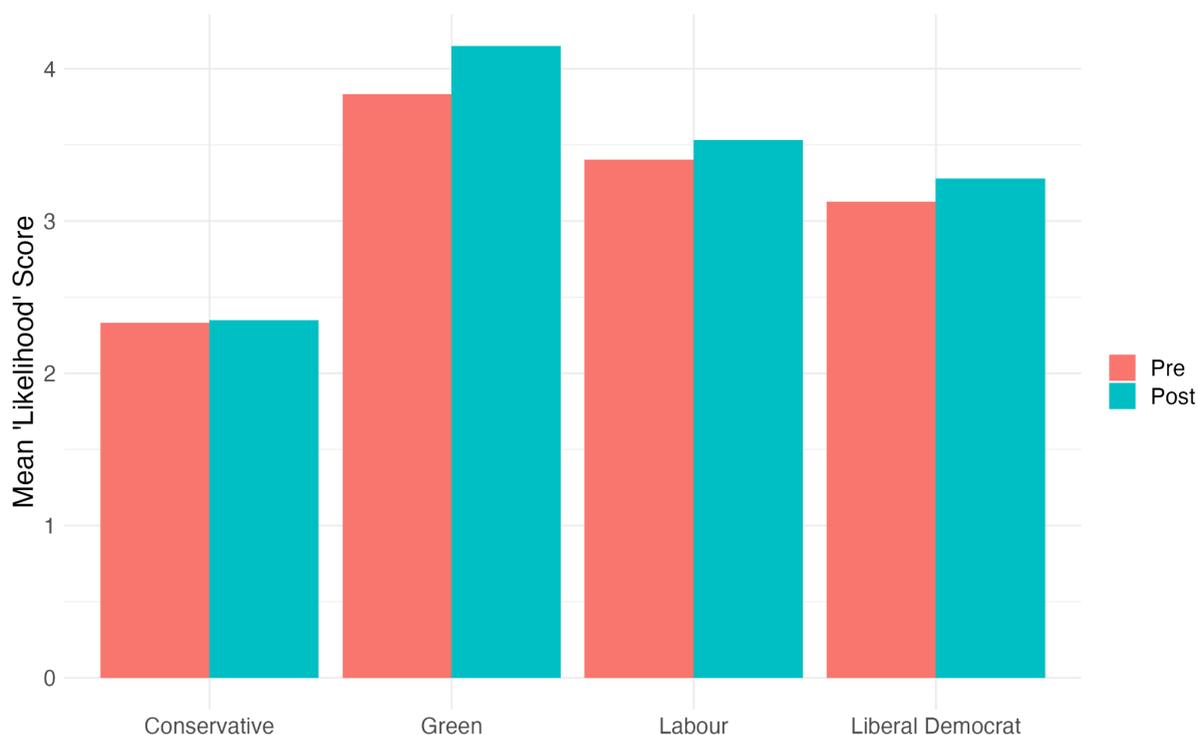


Figure 9: Changes in mean 'Likelihood' Score by Party from the survey before the protests to the survey that took place after most of the protests had occurred.

People who voted for different parties in the most recent UK General Election expressed differing views on how likely they were to engage in action related to climate change in the next twelve months, as can be seen in Figure 9.

Discussion

Our findings seem to corroborate similar public opinion polling to gather observational data on the impact of climate protest on public opinion by [Kenward & Brick \(forthcoming\)](#). Climate campaigns that use disruptive protest and garner large amounts of media attention seem to have a detectably significant impact on UK public opinion for climate change. It's important to note that our findings have smaller effect sizes relative to Kenward & Brick (forthcoming), who also found statistically significant changes in constructs that we did not – such as concern for climate change and support for disruptive methods used by XR. Other [polling](#) also indicates changes in public opinion due to XR being much larger in 2019 relative to what we see now, where there might be one main explanation for this - a “ceiling effect”.

Ceiling Effect

It's plausible that UK public opinion on climate issues is already so high for certain variables, marginal increases are quite hard to elicit, which we'll refer to as a “ceiling effect”. This is discussed briefly in [Kenward & Brick \(forthcoming\)](#), where “concern for climate change” had a mean response of 5.3 out of 7 initially, meaning there is little scope for this to increase. On the other hand, our variable “willingness to attend a legal climate protest” started with a

mean of 2.04 out of 7, meaning there was more scope for the mean to increase. As the salience of climate issues has increased dramatically since 2018, it's plausible that there are now diminishing returns on climate campaigns where the main outcome is high levels of media coverage, as most people interested in climate issues in the UK have likely already been exposed to relevant news and information. To illustrate this, in our 'Before' polling we found that the mean score of "concern for climate change" was 4.8 out of 7 and the public awareness of the impacts of fossil fuels on climate change was 5.1 out of 7, implying high existing knowledge of the issues that Just Stop Oil was trying to draw attention to. A caveat is that we believe this is potentially only relevant to the UK and select few countries, which as it has some of the highest percentages of [public concern for climate change](#) globally. One implication of this is to prioritise (potentially disruptive) climate protest and campaigning in either countries with relatively low levels of concern for climate change, or focusing on specific issues that have less public salience.

No detected backfire due to disruption

The data presented also suggest that it is unlikely that there was a strong backfire effect of the protests. There was no evidence that protests reduced support for climate policies or the goals of Just Stop Oil. Despite the fact that most people were opposed to the protests themselves (only 18.1% of respondents said that they supported the protests), there was no significant negative change in the number of people saying that they supported the goals of Just Stop Oil, or any fall on any of the other metrics that people were surveyed on. This seems relevant as some experimental findings (Feinberg et al. 2019, Polanco et al., 2022) show a loss in support for an issue when protests are perceived to be "extreme". Further research seems important to test how the public responds to different levels of disruption.

The activist's dilemma: Preference for non-disruptive vs disruptive protest

It should be noted that there were three forms of environmental activism that people did not report that they were significantly more likely to do after the protests occurred: volunteering for or donating to an environmental cause, and the likelihood of participating in civil disobedience. The fact that people said that they were not more likely to participate in civil disobedience (even if they were more likely to participate in peaceful protests) suggests that people may not have been willing to do the sorts of things that Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion were shown as doing in the media. Rather, they were willing to participate in less disruptive activism, which is in line with what is termed the [positive radical flank effect](#), where more radical actors can increase mobilisation or support for more moderate actors.

The survey responses suggest that a significant portion of the British public became aware of Just Stop Oil, with only 38% of respondents saying that they had heard nothing at all about the climate protests by Just Stop Oil, although it is worth noting that only 5.3% said that they knew 'a great deal' about the climate protests that were taking place.

Limitations

This research should not be seen as *definitive* evidence for the claim that protests in general cause people to become more willing to engage in activism, or that there is no backfire effect

from disruptive, non-violent protests. Although it is true that our surveys did show a statistically significant increase in the number of people saying they were willing to engage in activism and no statistically significant increase in the number of people claiming to be opposed to the aims of Just Stop Oil, there are several reasons that we cannot claim with certainty that this was a causal effect that will generalise to other protests that occur (although it probably should cause the reader to update in that direction).

Value-Action Gap

Despite our polling finding that people are more willing to take part in some forms of climate action relative to before the climate protests and associated media coverage, it's not clear that this will actually happen. There is widespread understanding within the field of environmental psychology that the actions of people can be different to their beliefs, commonly referred to as the Value-Action Gap (Flynn et al. 2007). In our case, we only measure the *willingness* of people to take part in climate activism, not whether they actually increase the amount of activism they take part in. Hence, it's possible that despite people having increased willingness to engage with climate activism, very little changes ([Castiglione et al. 2022](#)) nothing changes. In future work, one could build upon this by using additional questions, possibly after a long follow-up period, asking about the number of times they have actually taken part in some of the actions we suggested in the past 6-12 months.

Climate-related External Events

There were other climate-related events that took place during the survey period that may have influenced respondents' views, namely the [report](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group Three on the mitigation of climate change released on the 4th of April and the [British Energy Security Strategy](#) that was released on the 6th of April, both before our second and third surveys. Hence, one could plausibly claim that these were the key reasons that willingness to engage in climate activism increased over our time-period.

If it was the case that the IPCC report and British Energy Security Strategy were the main drivers of shifting public opinion, we would have expected to see a larger increase in our measured variables between the Before (March 29th) to During (April 9th) surveys, shortly after the release of both reports, relative to changes in opinion when comparing our During (April 9th) to After (April 19th) survey.

Of our three climate activism variables that increased from our Before to After period, only the variable "willingness to engage with your local MP" experienced a statistically significant shift from the Before (March 29th) to During (April 9th) period. The other two variables, "willingness to talk to friends and family about climate change" and "willingness to attend a legal climate protest" showed only statistically significant increases from the During (April 9th) to After (April 19th) period or the overall period respectively.

From these findings, one could infer that whilst climate protests and related media coverage were the main contributing factors to increases in two of our three statistically significant variables, the impact of the IPCC report and British Energy Security Strategy is not easy to disentangle for the shift in "willingness to engage with MPs". As there were both large climate protests by Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, with associated media coverage,

in the period from March 29th to April 9th, in addition to the external events mentioned, causality is harder to attribute for this particular variable.

As no major climate-related events that we know of occurred between the 9th of April and the 19th of April, besides Just Stop Oil protests and related media coverage, we suggest that the increase in overall willingness to take part in climate activism, willingness to talk to friends and family and attend a legal climate protest is largely attributable to these protests and related coverage.

Additional limitations can be seen in our [Appendix](#).

Conclusions

The protests by Just Stop Oil, as well as those by Extinction Rebellion, appear to have resulted in an increase in the number of people willing to engage in environmental activism, and to have had no negative (or other) effect on peoples' views about climate change or the goals of Just Stop Oil. That being said, this should only be taken as prima facie evidence that the protests by Just Stop Oil had an effect on the number of people saying that they were likely to take part in environmental activism, as it is difficult to ensure that we are seeing direct causal effects when we are looking at a before-and-after study in the real world. It is worth mentioning that the effect size was small (Cohen's $d < 0.2$), which is perhaps to be expected given the extent to which coverage of the protests was overshadowed by developments in Ukraine, yet still amounts to an additional 1.7 million people in the UK who were willing to take part in some form of climate activism.

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