

Attitudes to climate change in Northern Ireland

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Crisis? What crisis?

The evidence of environmental breakdown in Northern Ireland today is overwhelming. Northern Ireland (NI) is now one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with 12 per cent of species here threatened with extinction (Gilbert et al. 2023). It is also the worst in the United Kingdom (UK) for the proportion of nitrogen-sensitive habitats experiencing damaging levels of ammonia; these levels continue to rise, resulting in a steady decline in biodiversity (ibid.). The creeping death of Lough Neagh – the largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland – made visible by the spread of blue-green algae caused public outcry in 2024. Unfortunately, rather than being exceptional, its perilous state is quite the norm. A report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (2024) on water quality found that, in 2021, only 14 per cent of Northern Ireland's lakes could be classified as having good ecological status. This was down from nearly a quarter in 2015, which makes a mockery of the target of 100 per cent good ecological status by 2027 set by The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017.

Another ambitious environmental target was set by the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) in 2022, namely to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. This is another challenge that looks increasingly unrealistic despite the dangers of such emissions having been known for decades. Since 1990, the UK as a whole managed a 50.2 per cent reduction in emissions by 2022; during the same period, the reduction in emissions in Northern Ireland was a mere 26.4 per cent (DAERA, 2024). Indeed, in 2022, Northern Ireland contributed 5.3 per cent of all UK greenhouse gas emissions despite constituting less than 3 per cent of its population. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a report by Cavendish Consulting (2024) found that only 11 per cent of those polled in Northern Ireland believed the NI Executive would reach its net zero target on time.

Against the background of such present threats and disappearing targets, the data on public opinion on the topic that have been gathered to date appear to indicate deepening complacency. The Deloitte 'State of the State' report (2025) found Northern Ireland's population, in comparison to those of the other regions and nations of the UK, to be the least

worried about protecting the natural environment and to have the least trust in their government to take environmentally responsible actions. Even as the scandal of Lough Neagh was in the headlines, climate change and protecting the natural environment dropped further in public priorities, as 'immigration and border security' rose (for a discussion of NILT data on that topic, see Hayward and Devine, 2025). Nevertheless, there is a 'pressing need... to engage the public in the climate agenda and why it matters' (Deloitte, 2025: 9).

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey has not included questions on the environment since 2000. Back then, a quarter of respondents agreed that 'many of the claims about environmental threats are exaggerated' although 85 per cent of respondents considered the rise in the world's temperature caused by the 'greenhouse effect' to be dangerous. A quarter of a century later, in light of the new environmental evidence, NILT returned to this topic to assess contemporary social attitudes in Northern Ireland on the topic of climate change, which is so fundamental to a sense of public urgency and responsibility regarding the protection of nature.

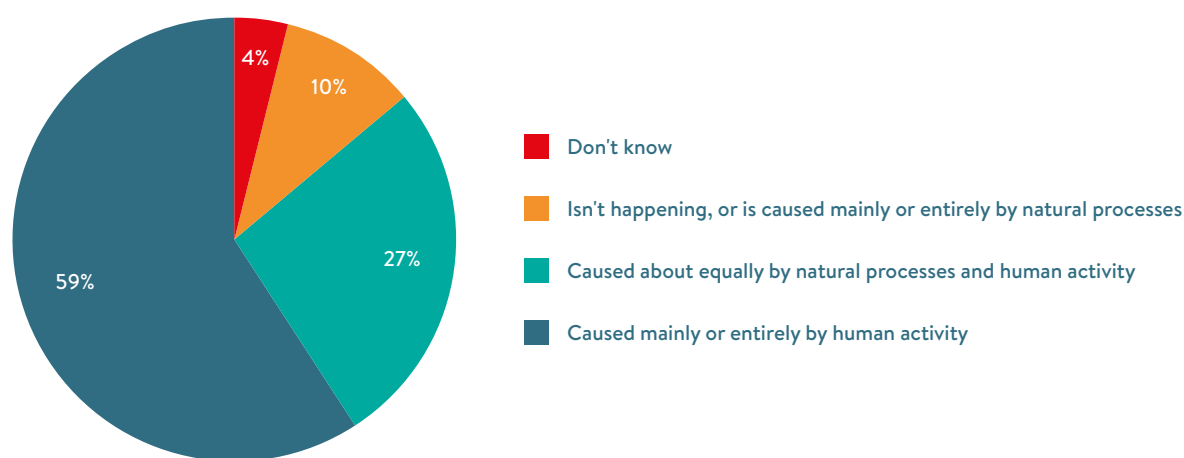
The source of the problem

If people do not agree that climate change is caused by human activity, then they are unlikely to believe that tackling it requires behavioural, social and economic adjustments. The European Social Survey (ESS) has included a set of questions on climate change since 2016. One question addresses the matter of whether climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity or both.

The survey conducted in 2023/24 found that 90 per cent of respondents in the UK and 88 per cent in Ireland thought that climate change is at least partly caused by human activity; the average of European countries polled was 91 per cent (ESS, 2024). The 2024 NILT survey asked the same question and found that 86 per cent of respondents in Northern Ireland believe climate change to be caused at

least equally by human activity (Figure 1) – a figure lower than all other countries in the European Social Survey other than Slovakia (79%) and Lithuania (83%). Indeed, it is also lower than the positions of all countries surveyed in the European Social Survey almost a decade ago, in 2016/17, other than Israel (85%), Russia (84%) and Lithuania (83%) (ESS, 2018).

Figure 1: Do you think climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity or both? (%)

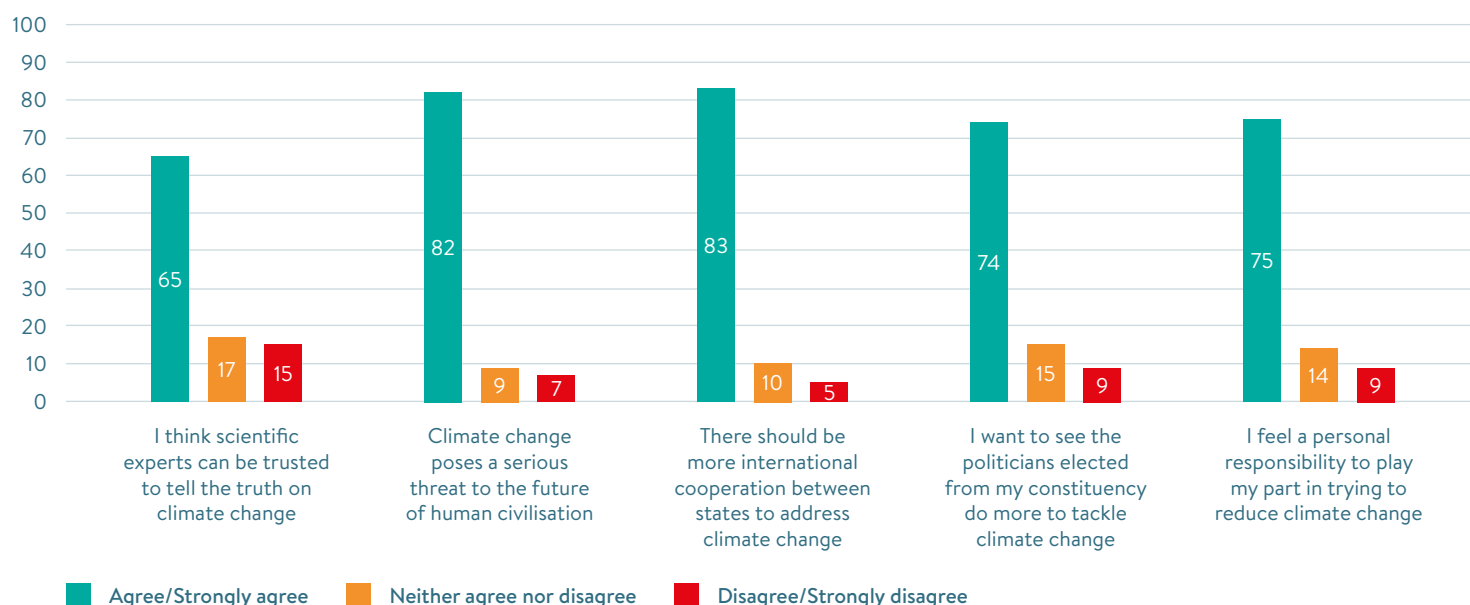


Further questions on the topic in the 2024 NILT survey present a picture of the degree to which the public in Northern Ireland consider climate change to be both a real and urgent danger and one that needs a response. While a clear

majority (8 in 10) think it poses a serious threat to the future of human civilisation (see Figure 2), fewer want to see local/national political or personal action to address it (some 3/4). Even fewer (2/3) trust scientific experts to tell the truth

on climate change. This lack of trust in the sources of relevant information and expertise is likely to have a dampening effect on the public sense of the danger caused by climate change and the need to act on it.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards climate change (%)



Climate change disbelief

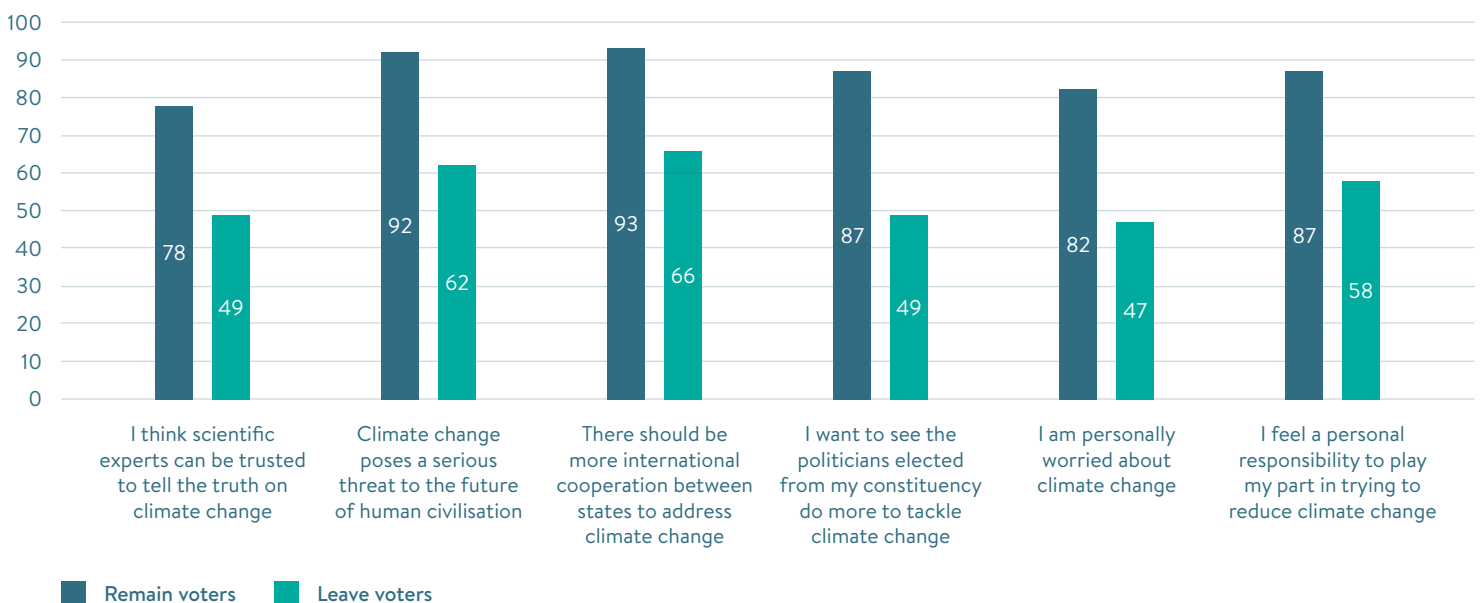
Looking at the data in more detail, some factors appear significant when it comes to the causes of climate change. This question is a good indicator of climate change disbelief, including both climate change denial (rejecting outright the notion that it is caused by human activity) and climate change uncertainty (being unsure about the contribution of human activity). Only 45 per cent of unionists think that climate change is caused mainly or entirely by human activity, compared to 68 per cent of nationalists and 67 per cent of those identifying as neither unionist nor nationalist. Looking a little more closely at this data, it is clear that there is a further difference between supporters of different unionist parties. Supporters of the DUP are more sceptical than those of the other parties in the Executive, including the UUP. Twenty four per cent of DUP supporters say that climate change is either not

happening or is caused entirely by natural processes (compared to 12% of UUP supporters, and 10% of NILT respondents overall). Indeed, there are striking differences between the strands of unionism evident in the answers to each of the questions on climate change in this NILT survey, with DUP supporters' views significantly more sceptical than those of UUP supporters.

Perhaps relatedly, the stance that respondents take on Brexit is also a significant factor in answers to these questions on climate change. Those who identify as Leave voters in the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership are much more likely to be sceptical about climate change than Remain voters. Twenty two per cent of Leave voters consider climate change to either be naturally occurring or not happening at all, compared to just six

per cent of Remain voters. Indeed, stark differences between Remainers and Leavers are evident across the whole set of questions asked in the 2024 NILT survey on climate change (see Figure 3). Climate change was not a topic pertinent to the debate about the UK's membership of the European Union. These results, instead, indicate a certain wariness among Leave-voters towards scientific expertise, international cooperation and dominant narratives. This tallies with findings others have found in relation to climate change disbelief being 'part of a broader, cross-national ideology' characterised by opposing 'the mainstream', including on such matters as immigration, pluralism and globalisation (Lübke, 2022).

Figure 3: Attitudes towards climate change, by Brexit vote. (% Agree/Strongly agree)



Tackling climate change

In 2000, 76 per cent of NILT respondents agreed that there should be international agreements to address environmental problems that countries should be made to follow. In answer to a similar question, Figure 2 shows that 83 per cent of respondents to the 2024 NILT survey agreed there should be more international cooperation between states to address climate change – hardly a dramatic increase. However, there was even less support for local political action. Seventy four per cent of respondents would like to see politicians elected from their constituency ‘do more to tackle climate change’. Of relevance is the fact that only 60 per cent of unionist respondents want to see elected politicians act on this issue, compared to 83 per cent of nationalists and 80 per cent of those identifying as neither unionist nor nationalist.

Notably, the figure on those wanting political action on climate change is the same for those from both rural and urban areas in Northern Ireland (74%). However, where there is an apparent rural/urban divide is on the fundamental question of whether climate change poses a serious threat to the future of human civilisation; 84 per cent of respondents from urban areas agree/strongly, compared to 79 per cent of those from rural areas. Gender is

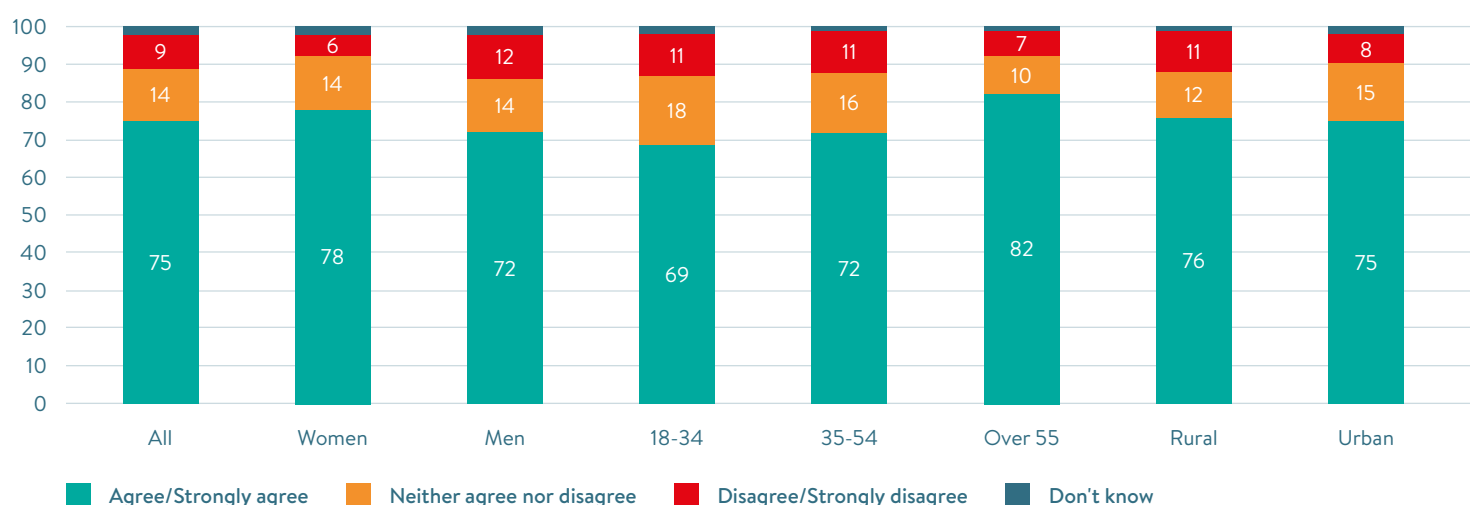
also an important factor on that topic, with women (85%) more likely than men (80%) to think that climate change poses a serious threat. Young people under 35 years are the age group most likely to perceive climate change as being such a serious threat (85%), compared to 81 per cent of those a generation behind them (aged 35-54 years).

Climate anxiety

The 2023 European Social Survey repeated the questions on climate change that had been asked in 2016 and 2021. It found that there had been an increase in the intervening years in the proportion of those very or extremely worried about climate change, from 30 per cent to 39 per cent (ESS, 2024). The question asked in NILT 2024 was slightly different, asking the degree to which a respondent agreed or disagreed that they are personally worried about climate change. This revealed that 69 per cent of NI respondents agreed that they were worried to some extent about climate change. The comparable figure for the UK in the European Social Survey of 2023/24 was 84 per cent and 80 per cent for Ireland. The figure from Northern Ireland is lower than any other European country asked in ESS 2023/24, the closest being Lithuania, with 72 per cent at least ‘somewhat worried’.

Related to the question on personal worry is that of personal responsibility. In 2000, 41 per cent of NILT respondents believed that it was ‘just too difficult for someone like me to do much about the environment’. There appears to have been a sizeable shift over the course of the 25 years in attitudes in this realm, with three quarters (75%) respondents in 2024 saying that they have a personal responsibility to play their part in trying to reduce climate change. There is a striking difference here in terms of generations, with younger people being less likely to feel that sense of responsibility: 69 per cent of under 35s compared to 82 per cent of those over 55 (see Figure 4). There is also a significant difference in terms of gender on this topic, with women more likely to feel responsibility (78%) than men (72%). When the results from Northern Ireland are compared to those across Europe, we see that the region is in line with the European average (78% assessing their sense of responsibility as 5-10 on a scale of 0-10) (ESS, 2024). However it is lower than the UK average (84%) and the Ireland average (83%). Notably, the ESS also found men and younger people less likely to hold a sense of personal responsibility in tackling climate change (Isikli, 2023).

Figure 4: Feeling of personal responsibility to play a part in trying to reduce climate change? (%)



Conclusion

The majority in Northern Ireland believe that climate change is primarily caused by human activity and that it poses a serious threat to civilisation. Most are worried about it and see themselves as having personal responsibility to tackle it, as well as wanting to see action from states internationally and from their elected politicians on the topic. However, this majority consensus is weaker than in almost all other European countries, and

very much so compared to the rest of the UK and Ireland. This appears to be linked to the fact that there is a strong wing of climate change disbelief in Northern Ireland, and a particularly firm element of scepticism towards scientific expertise. Given that trust in information and institutions is all-important when it comes to accepting the changes that need to be made to address climate change, this socio-political problem

needs to be considered as a crucial part of the environmental challenge. This was also a finding from a recent ARK policy roundtable on achieving a Just Transition in Northern Ireland (Hanson and Gray, 2024). Until this happens, the likelihood is that environmental crises in the region will spread and deepen just as surely as noble environmental targets are missed.

Key Points:

- Six out of 10 NILT respondents (59%) see human activity as being the primary cause of climate change
- A clear majority of respondents (8 out of 10) believe that climate change poses a serious threat to the future of human civilisation and want to see states cooperate internationally to address it.
- Unionists are more likely to be sceptical about the human causes of climate change than nationalists and others.
- Leave voters in the Brexit referendum are far more likely than Remain voters to be sceptical about climate change and far less likely to feel concerned about it or to wish to see action to address it.
- DUP supporters' views on climate change are significantly different to those of other Executive parties in Northern Ireland, including the UUP, being far more sceptical of climate change and less concerned to see action to tackle it.
- Gender is a factor in some attitudes towards climate change, with men being personally less worried, less keen to see political action, and less likely to feel a sense of personal responsibility to address it than women.
- Attitudes on climate change between rural and urban dwellers are similar, although the former are less likely to trust scientific experts on the topic.
- Younger people (18-34 years) are less likely to feel a sense of personal responsibility to address it.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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