



## The political climate: political parties and attitudes to climate change in Northern Ireland

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Climate change remains one of the defining issues of the 21st century; the economic, social and political future of the whole world will be determined by current decisions and actions in response to it – or lack thereof. However, the relatively broad political consensus on recognising and responding to the challenge that it represents has started to fracture in recent years, driven in part by the growth of right-wing populism (Burleigh, 2021; Forchtner, 2020).

Recent work by ARK has focused on the challenges and opportunities of achieving a just transition in Northern Ireland (NI) (Hanson and Gray, 2024), with respondents at the policy roundtable on which the resulting Policy Brief was based, noting the importance of maintaining broad political support for equitable action on climate change. Similarly, drawing on data from 1,199 adults in the 2024 NI Life and Times (NILT) survey, Hayward and Hanson (2025) noted that belief in and attitudes to climate change were notably more sceptical in NI than in the UK, Ireland or most of Europe. Furthermore, they pointed out that there were greater levels of climate scepticism within and between unionist party supporters, compared to supporters of the Alliance party, SDLP and Sinn Féin. Here, and drawing on the 2024 NILT data, we discuss and compare attitudes to climate change among supporters of the five main NI political parties in greater detail.

A previous ARK Feature compared differences between the five main NI political parties and their supporters on the issue of abortion (Gray et al., 2018). In this Feature, we consider the stances of these parties' supporters in relation to the parties' policy positions on climate change from the 2024 Westminster election manifestos. Overall, when we compare political party positions on climate change to their supporters' views on the same issue, what does this tell us about the political climate in NI?

### Attitudes to climate change and political party support

Belief in climate change being caused by human activity is associated with political party support (Table 1). Alliance Party supporters had the highest level of belief in the human contribution of climate change (96%), followed by the SDLP (93%), Sinn Féin (89%), the UUP (83%) and the DUP (71%). These compare to an NI average figure of 86 percent. DUP supporters had notably lower levels of belief in climate change than supporters of the other parties, with the gap between the UUP and the DUP similar to the gap between the UUP and Alliance Party. Nevertheless, a large majority of DUP supporters still believed that climate change was at least equally caused by human activity.

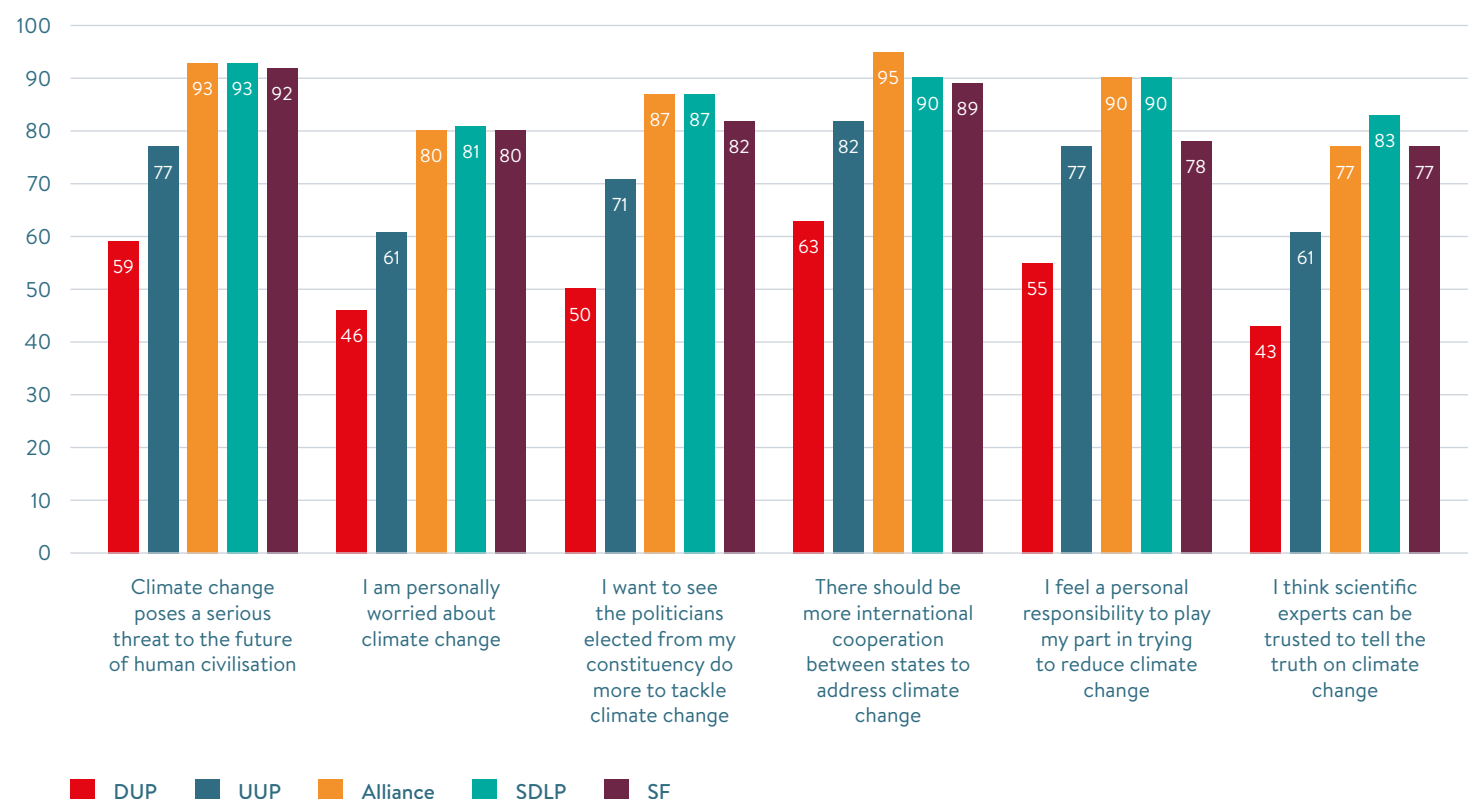
**Table 1: Belief that human activity causes climate change entirely, mainly, or equally to natural causes, by political party support (%)**

|  | DUP       | UUP       | Alliance  | SDLP      | Sinn Féin |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Caused mainly or entirely by human activity                  | 36        | 43        | 74        | 68        | 65        |
| Caused about equally by natural processes and human activity | 35        | 40        | 22        | 25        | 24        |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>71</b> | <b>83</b> | <b>96</b> | <b>93</b> | <b>89</b> |

Six question gauging attitudes towards various responses to climate change were asked in the 2024 NILT survey. In four of these, at least 50 per cent of supporters of the five main political parties agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed response. Yet there were also stark differences between the parties' supporters. More international cooperation on climate change had the most agreement, with an NI average of 83 per cent. There was also considerable consensus on the threat posed by climate change to human civilisation, with an NI average of 82 per cent agreeing that it was a serious threat.

Overall support across NI dropped into the 70 per cent category regarding another two responses, namely on personal responsibility for trying to reduce climate change (75%) and a desire for local politicians to do more to tackle climate change (74%). The lowest levels of support, with an overall NI average in the 60 per cent category, were in relation to a sense of personal worry about climate change (69%) and trust in scientific expertise on the topic (65%).

**Figure 1: Strongly agree/agree with climate change responses, by political party support (%)**



Across each of these six questions a pattern emerged in relation to support for political parties that was very similar to the pattern for belief in climate change itself (Figure 1). Supporters of the Alliance party and the SDLP were consistently the most supportive, followed by Sinn Féin supporters. Gaps of up to 19 percentage points then emerged between the lowest figures from these three parties and the UUP, with a further gap of 15-22 percentage points between supporters of the UUP and the DUP. Despite these, at least half of DUP supporters agreed or strongly agreed with action on four of the six questions, including local politicians doing more to address climate change. For the UUP, at least 61 per cent of their supporters agreed or strongly agreed with each response to climate change.

## Positions on climate change and political party

This pattern of belief in and responses to climate change was largely echoed by the manifestos of the five main political parties from the 2024 Westminster elections. As Table 2 shows, climate change was mentioned most often in the Alliance party manifesto, followed by the SDLP manifesto. However, while the UUP manifesto mentioned climate change 10 times, and the DUP manifesto referenced it three times, the Sinn Féin manifesto only mentioned it once. The frequency of climate change mentions in the Alliance and SDLP manifestos mirrors the importance of the issue to their supporters in the 2024 NILT data.

**Table 2: Political party climate change references and policy position summaries from 2024 Westminster election manifestos**

| Party     | Number of climate change references | Summary of climate change policy position   | Quote source                 |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| DUP       | 3                                   | "The DUP supports the United Kingdom's long-term net zero ambitions and will advocate for policy and initiatives that are environmentally responsible and support decarbonisation... The DUP will press for a truly fair transition which is inclusive of all communities, households and industries..."  | DUP Manifesto – Page 36      |
| UUP       | 10                                  | "The Ulster Unionist Party has a strong commitment to addressing the climate emergency in Northern Ireland... and will continue to strive for an 82% or better reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050 as part of our comprehensive climate mitigation strategy rather than the 100% target currently enshrined in legislation."                  | UUP Manifesto – Page 19      |
| Alliance  | 42                                  | "Alliance MPs will work in close collaboration with our Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to demand the UK Government paves the most ambitious and just path possible to Net Zero."   | Alliance Manifesto – Page 24 |
| Sinn Féin | 1                                   | "We want to... meet climate change targets through a fair and just transition to net zero."   | Sinn Féin Manifesto – Page 5 |
| SDLP      | 20                                  | "Dealing with the threat of unchecked global temperature increases, climate breakdown...is an urgent necessity... The SDLP will continue to hold government at Stormont and Westminster responsible for the delivery of a Just Transition, including ensuring that it is a central tenet of all climate action plans by Executive Departments." | SDLP Manifesto – Pages 32-3  |

There is more nuance, but similar patterns, in relation to the climate change policy positions of the five main political parties (Table 2). Once again, the fulsome support for action on climate change expressed by the Alliance and SDLP manifestos is mirrored in the high levels of support among their likely voters. The support from the Sinn Féin manifesto was less explicit but still unequivocal. This also tallies with the slightly lower levels of belief in and response to climate change from Sinn Féin supporters in the NILT data, compared to Alliance and SDLP supporters. Both the UUP and DUP manifestos devoted more space and mentions to climate change than Sinn Féin, but both of them queried the scale and speed of cuts to NI's Greenhouse Gas emissions. Again, this pattern is also broadly matched by the views of their supporters, as discussed above, with the UUP more supportive of action than the DUP.

## Conclusions

There is broad belief in and support for action on climate change across supporters of all the main political parties in NI. However, as noted by Hayward and Hanson (2025), this average figure is lower than elsewhere in the UK, Ireland and much of Europe. When beliefs and attitudes are compared between supporters of these parties, a clear pattern emerges: higher levels of concern among Alliance and SDLP supporters, followed, respectively, by supporters of Sinn Féin, the UUP and the DUP. Gaps between the UUP and DUP were often wider than between the UUP and nationalist/non-aligned parties, reflecting divisions within unionism on how to recognise and respond to climate change. Nevertheless, at least half of the supporters of each of the five parties agreed or strongly agreed with action on climate change across four of the six responses posed.

Similarly, the climate change policy positions of the five main political parties (as stated in their 2024 Westminster election manifestos) broadly echoed the views of their supporters in the 2024 NILT survey. Here, the SDLP and Alliance parties offered the most support for action on climate change. Sinn Féin proffered unequivocal support for climate action while at the same time proposing fewer measures. Both the UUP and the DUP challenged the extent and pace of the climate-focused response, while still broadly supporting action on climate change. Thus, the positions of the five main political parties, at least in June 2024, would appear to be broadly synchronous with those of their supporters in the same year.

The connection between party positions on climate change and those of their supporters has enormous implications – especially if parties choose to change their stances in response to political competition. Since the 2024 UK general election, a right-wing populist party, Reform UK, has been the one making the political weather in the UK – including on the topic of climate change. This is likely to be accelerating the ongoing fraying of the political consensus on recognising and responding to climate change (BBC, 2025), including in Northern Ireland. The political climate here may be about to change: will the attitudes of the majority hold firm, or will political winds batter down the fragile consensus?

## References

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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](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)