

What do we know about UK citizens' views of how trade policy could support climate change policy?

A summary of existing research

January 2024

Introduction

Since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, there has been a substantial volume of primary research carried out looking at UK citizens' view of Brexit and their attitudes towards the UK's future trade policy. But there has not been a focused research on the UK population's view on the relationship between trade policy and the environment.

This background briefing summarises a review of the available literature that touches on UK public attitudes to the relationship between trade and the environment and climate change in particular.



Photo: NASA Goddard

Scope of the brief

This briefing paper summarises known research that captures UK citizens' views on the relationship between trade policy and the environment. It covers surveys, opinion polls and forms of deliberative democracy between 2017 and 2023, from:

- UK in a Changing Europe
- Department of Business and Trade
- Which?
- More in Common
- UCL citizen's assembly on Brexit
- What UK Thinks: EU
- National Trade Conversations
- Citizens' Juries on UK Trade Policy
- Climate Assembly UK

What does the literature say?

UK in a Changing Europe research

The UK in a Changing Europe project produces a variety of social research projects on Brexit and its implications, including the “What UK Thinks: EU” website, run by The National Centre of Social Research (NatCen) which hosts a wide range of polling results. There has been no specific research on Brexit and its implications for the environment as part of this project, though there are some individual polling questions that reference the environment in terms of standards.

For example, a poll in June 2023 asked people if they supported or opposed the UK maintaining at least the same level of regulatory protections as the EU (for example, in food safety, the environment, and workers’ rights), which the majority of respondents supported, and an older poll from 2020 which found that the majority of respondents favoured stricter standards on the environment after Britain has negotiated a trade deal with the EU.

From these limited questions, it is clear that UK citizens support the UK in maintaining and ideally strengthening environmental standards in its nascent trade policy.

Department of Business and Trade “Public attitudes to trade tracker”

Since 2019, the Department of Business and Trade (DBT) has run a biannual public poll called the “Public attitudes to trade tracker”. The majority of questions asked over the seven polls have stayed the same, with some small additions and removals each time. Environmental issues in the context of trade are only briefly mentioned in the research, and is limited to asking participants how important the issue is in regard to negotiating priorities with specific FTA partners.

Though limited, the results demonstrate that environmental consideration is something UK citizens do think UK trade policy should respect. For example, in wave 4, conducted in Spring 2021, a quarter (25%) of respondents selected ‘environmentally considerate’ as one of their 3 priorities for the UK’s future trading partners. In



Photo: Dirk Dallas

wave 5, conducted between October 2021 and January 2022, some one-off questions on the WTO were included. When asked what issues respondents thought the WTO should prioritise when setting new rules for international trade, ‘protecting the environment’ was one of the top two endorsed responses, with the other being to ensure all countries follow international trade rules.

Which? opinion polls

Consumer group Which? has run several opinion polls on UK trade policy, many of which are focused on specific consumer issues like food standards, but also pertaining to the environment. The results of these demonstrate that UK citizens think it is important for trade policy to support environmental objectives, rather than ignore them.

In a Which? poll carried out in June 2021, 80% of survey respondents agreed that the UK Government should promote trading in ways that reduce global carbon emissions, while 81% agreed that the UK Government’s trade policy should promote high environmental standards and that the Government should not sign deals that remove existing environmental protections. However, while survey respondents felt action on the environment was important, many also felt sceptical that the Government would act on this issue. Only 5% of respondents were ‘very confident’ that the UK

UK Government will prioritise environmental protections as part of trade deals, with nearly a quarter (23%) saying they were ‘not at all confident’.

More in Common research on public attitudes

In early 2023, More in Common carried out research funded by the European Climate Foundation to explore opportunities for influencing public attitudes towards greener trade in the UK. This research consisted of an opinion poll and 8 focus groups, 4 in “red wall” areas and 4 in “blue wall” areas. When the focus groups were asked what they thought the most important priority was for UK trade policy, the majority thought this should be “growing the British economy”.

However, when survey respondents asked to consider trade-offs like ‘the UK should make as many trade deals as possible, even with the most polluting and emitting countries’ vs ‘the UK should stand up for cutting pollution, even if that means making fewer trade deals’, a large majority of poll respondents selected the climate friendly option as opposed to the purely economic driven decision.

What did other deliberative research find?

We identified several other UK deliberative democracy exercises (such as citizen’s assemblies) that touch on questions to trade and environment. The following pulls out the highlights.

UCL citizen’s assembly on Brexit

One of the earliest pieces of more detailed, deliberative research on attitudes to trade was the 2017 citizen’s assembly by University College London (UCL) on Brexit, which asked participants to identify some key guidelines for UK trade policy as well as asking what they wanted to see in the UK’s future relationship with the EU. How trade policy interacts with the natural environment and the fight against climate change was not covered in these discussions.

Future of Britain after the EU Referendum

The next piece of large-scale deliberative research was a project convened by What UK Thinks: EU called The “Future of Britain after the EU Referendum”. This focused on three key policy areas that the UK would have the opportunity to shape independently after it left the EU: immigration, food policy and consumer regulation. Discussions on trade were again

Five prior deliberative democracy exercises show that UK citizens are interested in the linkage between trade policy and environmental concerns



Photo: Alan Cleaver



Citizens' Assembly
on Trade and Climate

limited to standards, and the potential for the UK to diverge from inherited EU laws in the food and consumer regulation sectors. The research found that participants were keen to retain existing standards and regulations when they were given specific examples to discuss. Participants' enthusiasm for retaining EU regulation was particularly keen when it had been implemented for environmental reasons, such as the banning of certain lightbulbs in order to reduce emissions.

National Trade Conversation 2020

In 2020, the consumer group Which? carried out the “National Trade Conversation”, a series of public dialogues, asking UK consumers around the four nations of the UK what their priorities were as consumers for UK trade policy. This deliberative research identified four key priorities, one of which was to ‘protect the environment’. This was despite environmental issues and considerations not being part of the formal evidence sessions or talking points, but emerged organically as the discussions progressed, reflecting its importance.

Specifically, participants wanted:

- Trade deals to help them minimise the environmental impacts of what they buy

- Negotiating priorities to incorporating environmental protection as they were concerned by the carbon footprint of international trade

- The UK's trade deals to align with our environmental and sustainability targets.

National Trade Conversation 2021

In 2021, a subgroup of National Trade Conversation research participants were reconvened a year after the event to see if their priorities had changed since the first piece of research. The strength of feeling around protecting the environment had increased significantly, with the priority going from a ‘nice-to-have’ to one of moral responsibility.

During this research, participants were shown extracts from the environmental provisions in the UK-Japan CEPA and the agreement in principle between the UK and Australia. The majority felt both were not ambitious enough and a missed opportunity to collaborate on more innovative approaches.

Citizens' Juries on UK Trade Policy

The most recent deliberative research on public attitudes to trade was conducted in early 2023 by NatCen on behalf of the Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy (CITP). This research was primarily designed to prompt participants to make a decision in a range of very specific trade-offs, that roughly reflected realistic trade-offs in trade policy. Aligning with other research, when asked about what the most important objective for UK trade policy should be, participants agreed that this should be economic growth. However, this perspective changed when they were presented with the specific trade-offs. The research presented trade-offs in four policy areas: human rights, differential impacts on UK regions, data privacy and food & the environment.

The food and environment trade-off was concerned with standards: “are the risks of importing food into the UK which potentially contain pesticides banned here, worth the benefits such as lower prices and greater choice?” When debating this issue, the majority of respondents were unwilling to compromise on standards, despite the potential benefit of reduced food prices. This research further demonstrates that when faced with direct trade-offs, UK citizens prioritise social issues such as workers' rights, human rights, and combating climate change over more trade and potential economic gain.

2020 Climate Assembly UK

Another relevant deliberative research project was the 2020 Climate Assembly UK – a citizen's assembly dedicated to discussing how the UK should achieve Net Zero emissions by 2050. Whilst it didn't cover trade policy specifically, this research is relevant as it discussed the trade-offs of climate change action in great detail, which will be a useful resource when preparing the policies to be discussed in our research.

The deliberations also had two stages - the first to agree a set of principles that underpinned the broad policy approach, followed by discussions of specific trade-offs. One of the principles identified was fairness, something also identified by both the National Trade Conversation and the CITP research. In the discussion of trade-offs, the discussions were framed in terms of a series of relatable circumstances: “The way we live our lives, what we buy, how we travel and what we eat.” Breaking down trade policy into a set of similar topic areas could provide a useful route into more complex discussions.

Conclusions

This body of work provides a good foundation for our research. It's important that our project does not replicate existing insight, and focus our work on exploring new areas of the trade and environment policy intersection. In summary, previous research has shown us that:

- 1** | When asked in isolation, UK citizens will pick economic growth as the most important objective for UK trade policy.
- 2** | But when presented with specific trade-offs, people prioritise protecting the environment over stimulating economic growth through increasing trade.
- 3** | People want 'fairness' to be a key tenet of how the UK approaches trade, and this extends to how trade impacts on the environment.
- 4** | In general, the UK public is very concerned about climate change and sees tackling this as much more important than maximising international trade opportunities.
- 5** | A relatable and tangible example of how the trading system and FTAs interact with the environment is through the possible reduction (or increase) of food standards.



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The UK Citizens's Assembly on Trade and Climate is a joint initiative of [Queen Mary University of London](#) and [Trade Justice Movement](#) to facilitate an informed deliberation among ~70 citizens, rigorously selected to be representative of the rich diversity of the UK, on the question: How should the UK government respond to the climate crisis through trade policy?"

Find out more



<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/trade-climate-assembly/>



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