Environmental *Change* Institute

Behaviour change or system change?

Where should individuals and communities put their efforts to tackle climate change?

Dr Sam Hampton

University of Oxford and University of Bath

Talk Outline

What can individuals and communities do to accelerate action on climate?

Part 1 - Problem framings

Part 2 - Public opinion

Part 3 - what can be done?

Part 1

What is the Problem?

Who is responsible?

Individuals!

The system!

Who is responsible?

CNN ✓
@CNN

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Scared by that new report on climate change? Here's what you can do to help:

• Eat less meat (about 30%)

• Swap your car or plane ride for a bus or train

• Use a smart thermostat in your home, and upgrade to more efficient appliances

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> **CNN** ✓ @CNN
> Scared by that new report on climate change? Here's what you can do to help:
>
> • Eat less meat (about 30%)...

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34 3.7K 6.7K

Who is responsible?

bp
@bp_plc

The first step to reducing your emissions is to know where you stand. Find out your #carbonfootprint with our new calculator & share your pledge today!

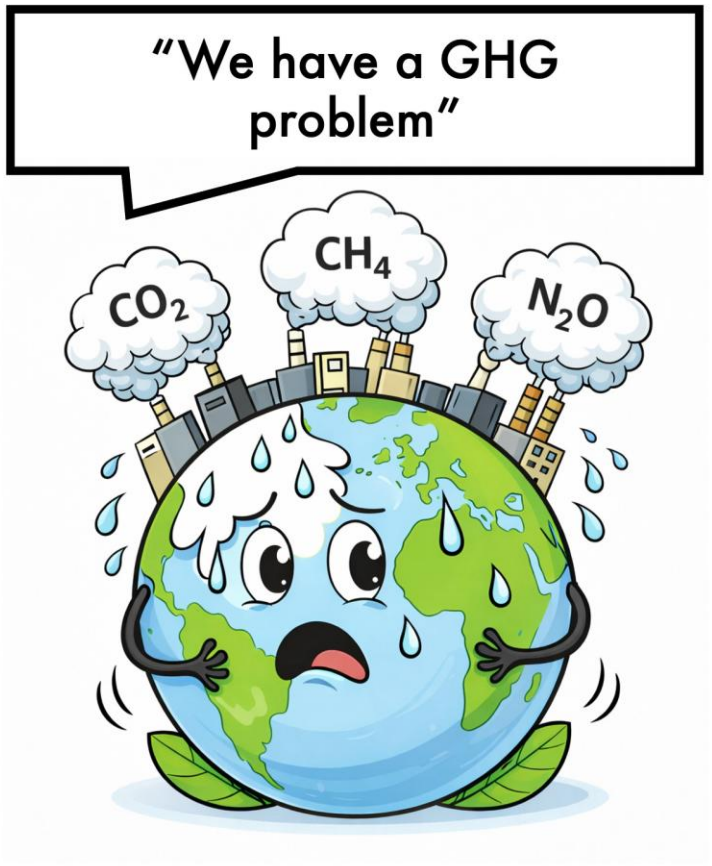
Andrew Henderson
@andrwfhenderson

i pledge not to spill 4.9 million barrels of oil into the gulf of mexico

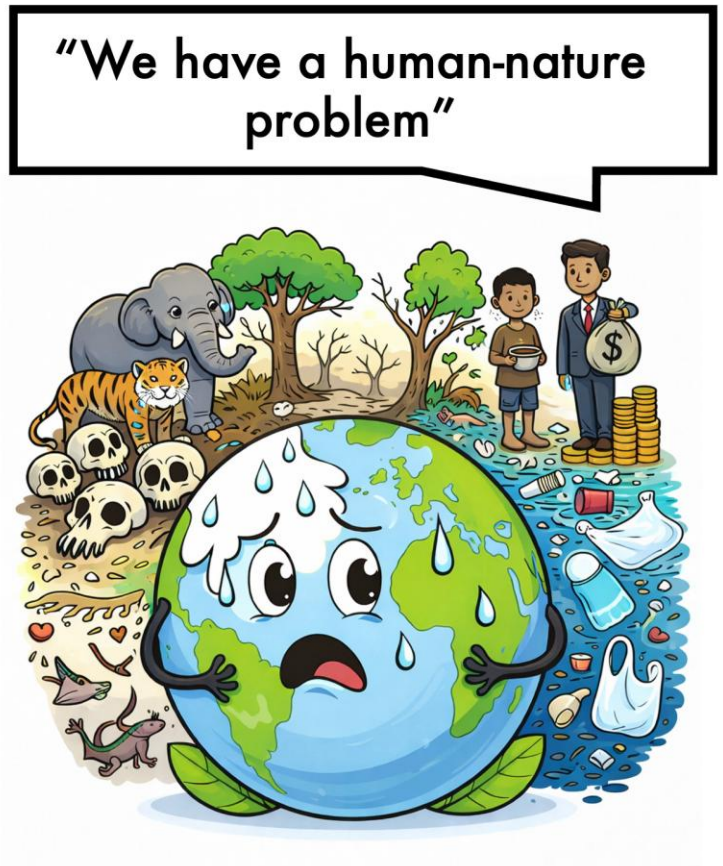
Zack Polanski

Leader of the Green Party

Another divisive set of problem frames

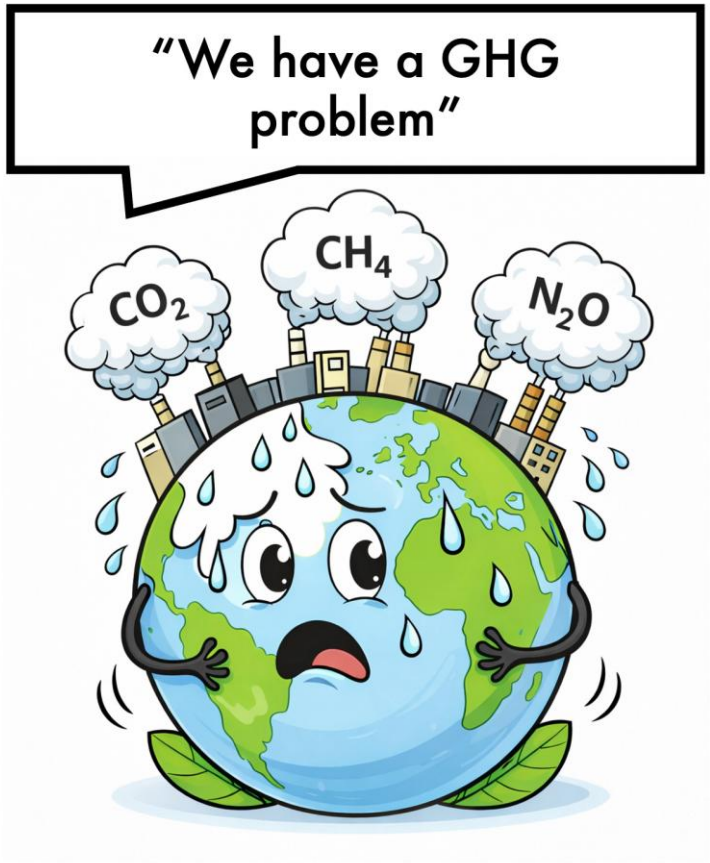


"If we try to solve all our problems at once, we'll end up doing a lot of talking and get little done."



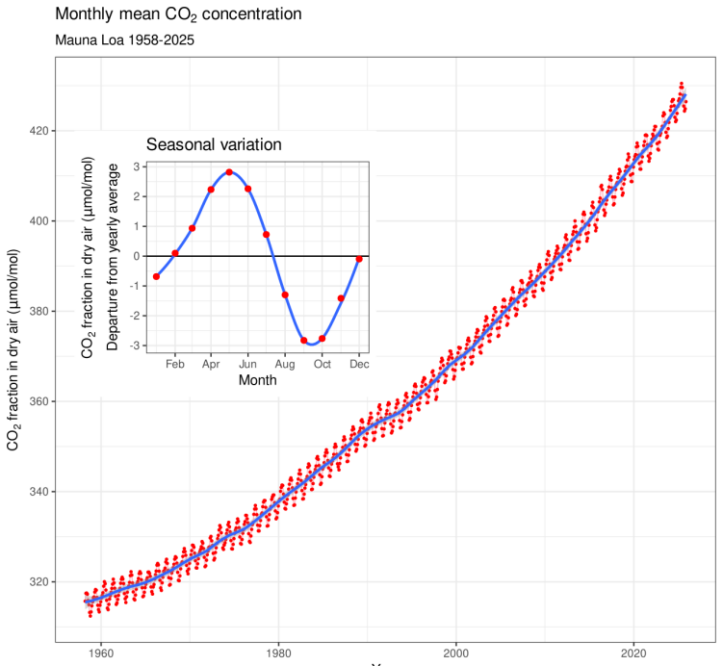
"If we just focus on CO2, we'll not address any of the root causes of environmental destruction"

Problem framings draw on different evidence

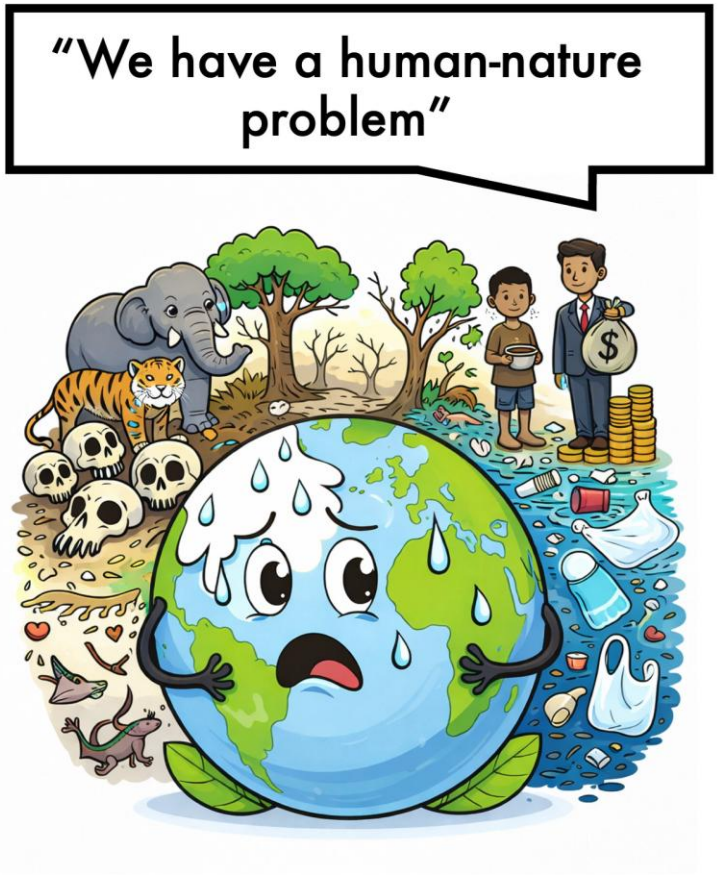


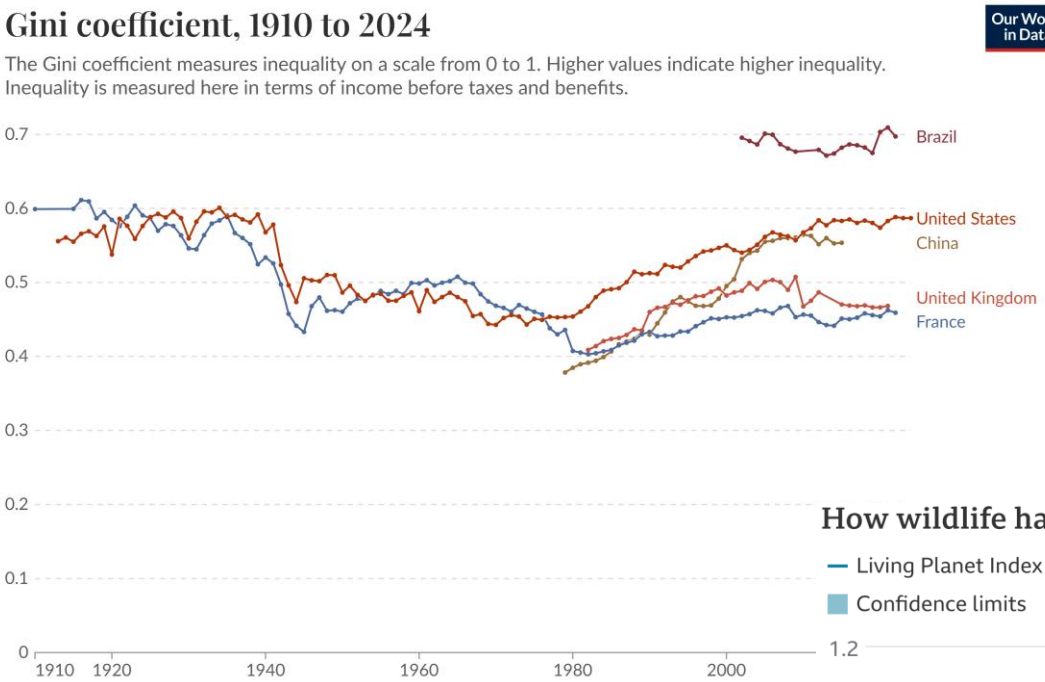
"If we try to solve all our problems at once, we'll end up doing a lot of talking and get little done."

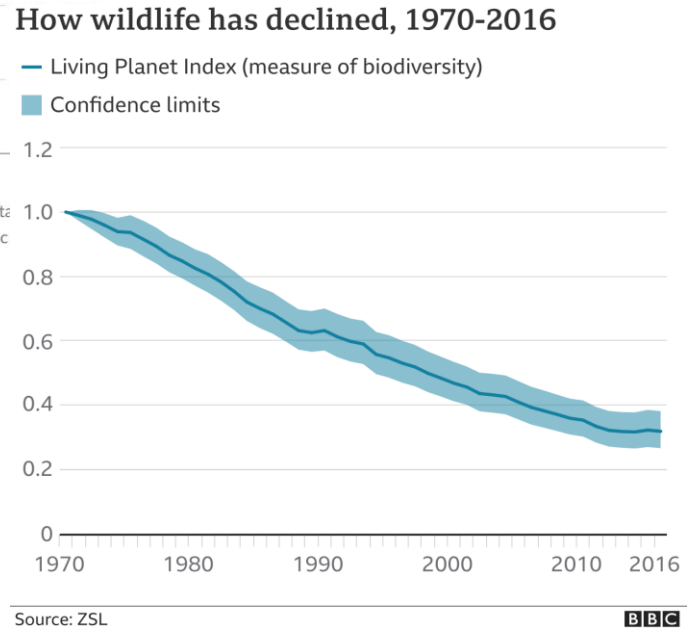
The Keeling Curve



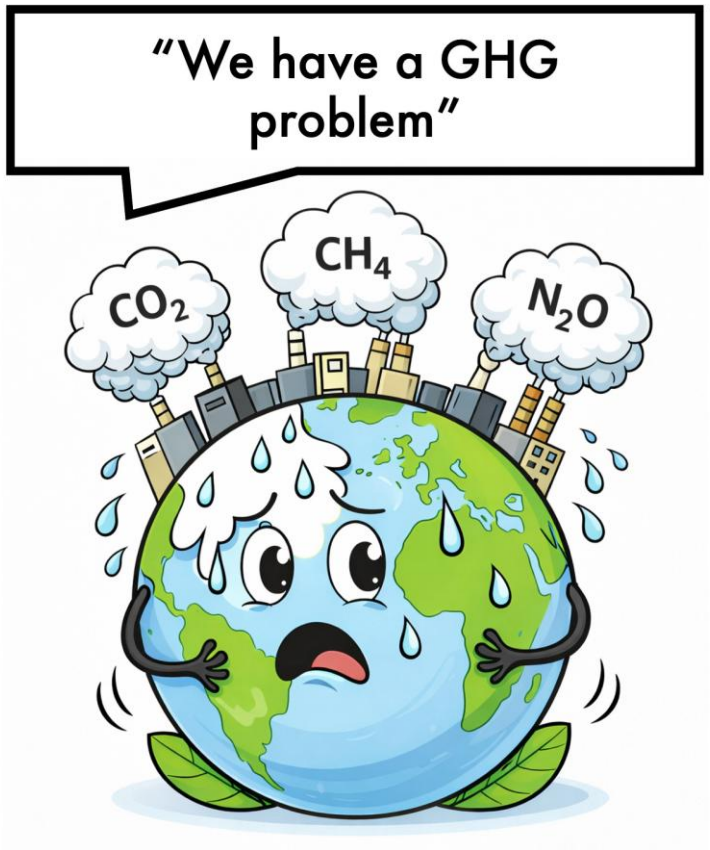
Problem framings draw on different evidence

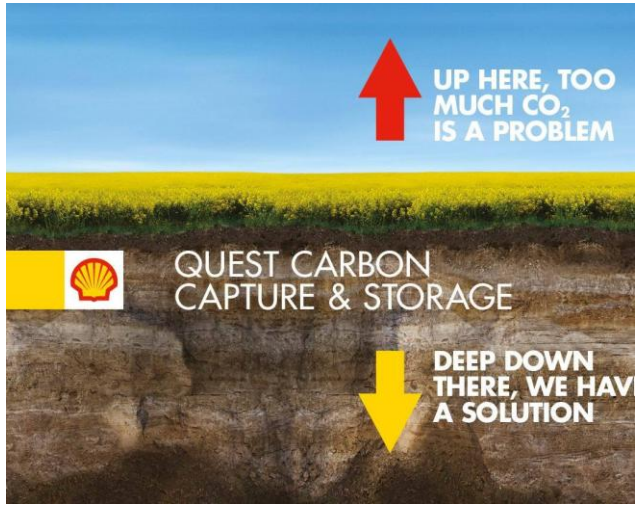






… lead to different solutions,



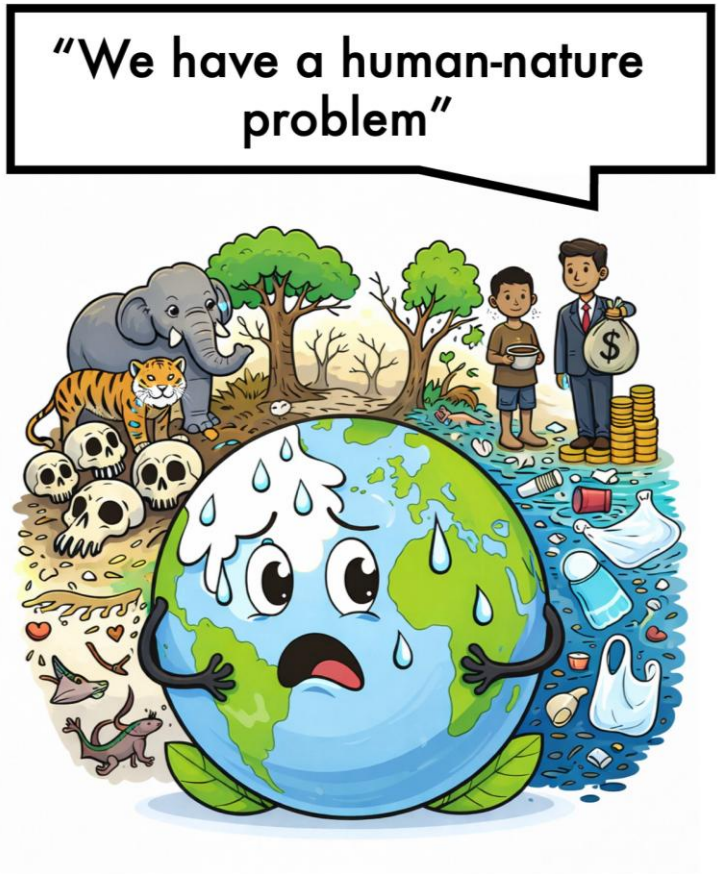


Fossil fuel producers must be forced to 'take back' carbon, say scientists

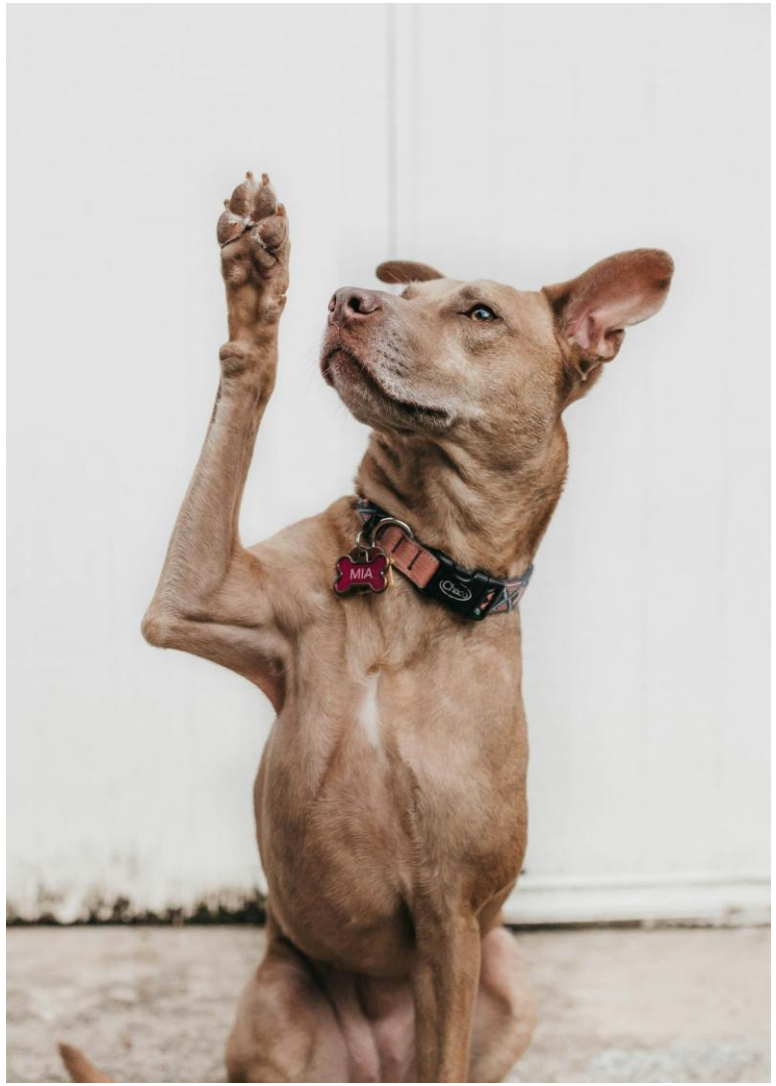
Group says forcing polluters to store carbon dioxide underground is needed to help world reach net zero

An oil rig in Invergordon, Scotland. Photograph: Jane Barlow/PA

… lead to different solutions,



… and have very different implications for what individuals might do



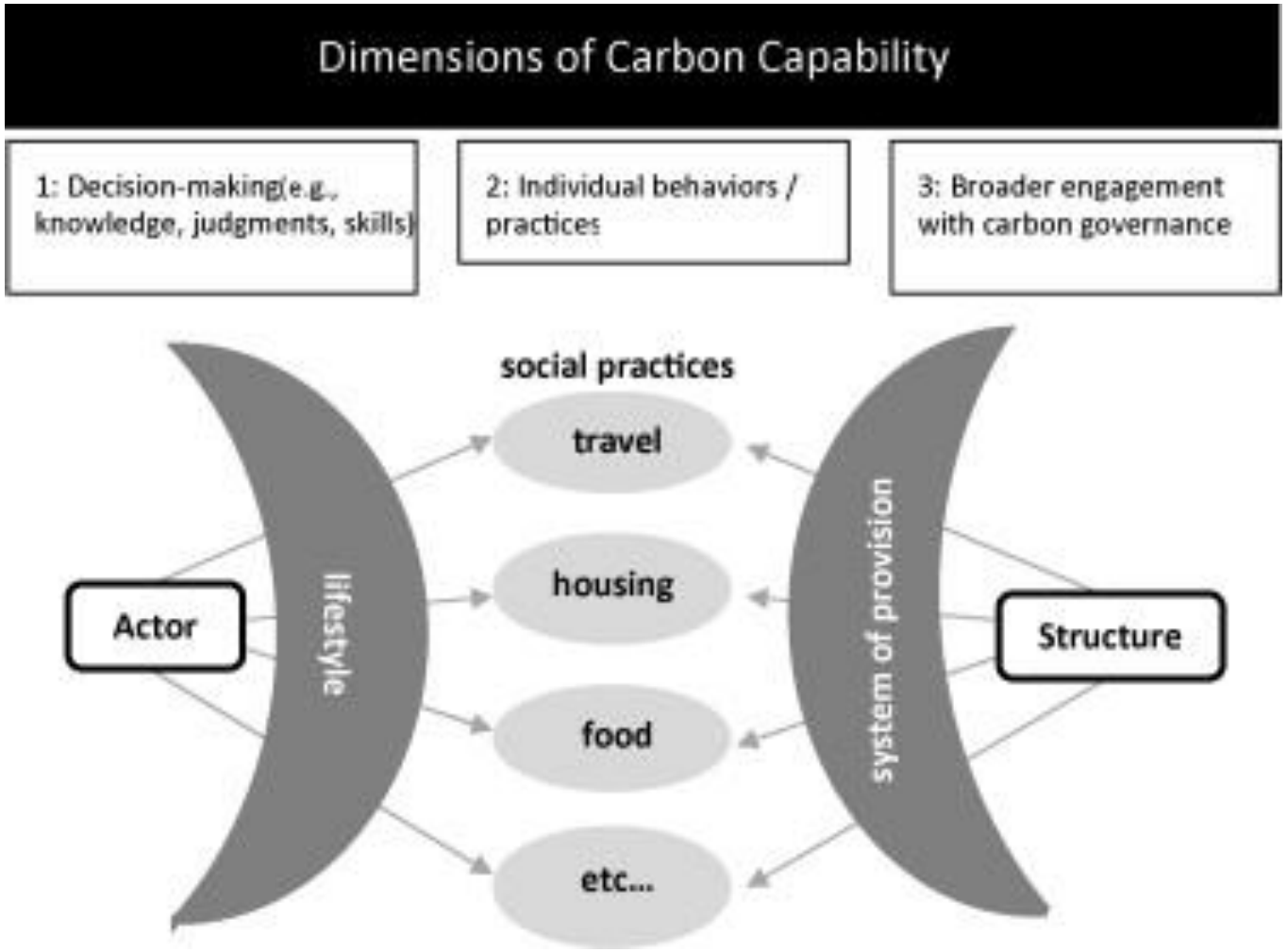
Which problem framing resonates best with you?

Carbon Capability

"An individual's ability, motivation, and knowledge to make informed decisions and take effective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, both through personal behaviour change and collective action"

Overcoming unhelpful dichotomies:

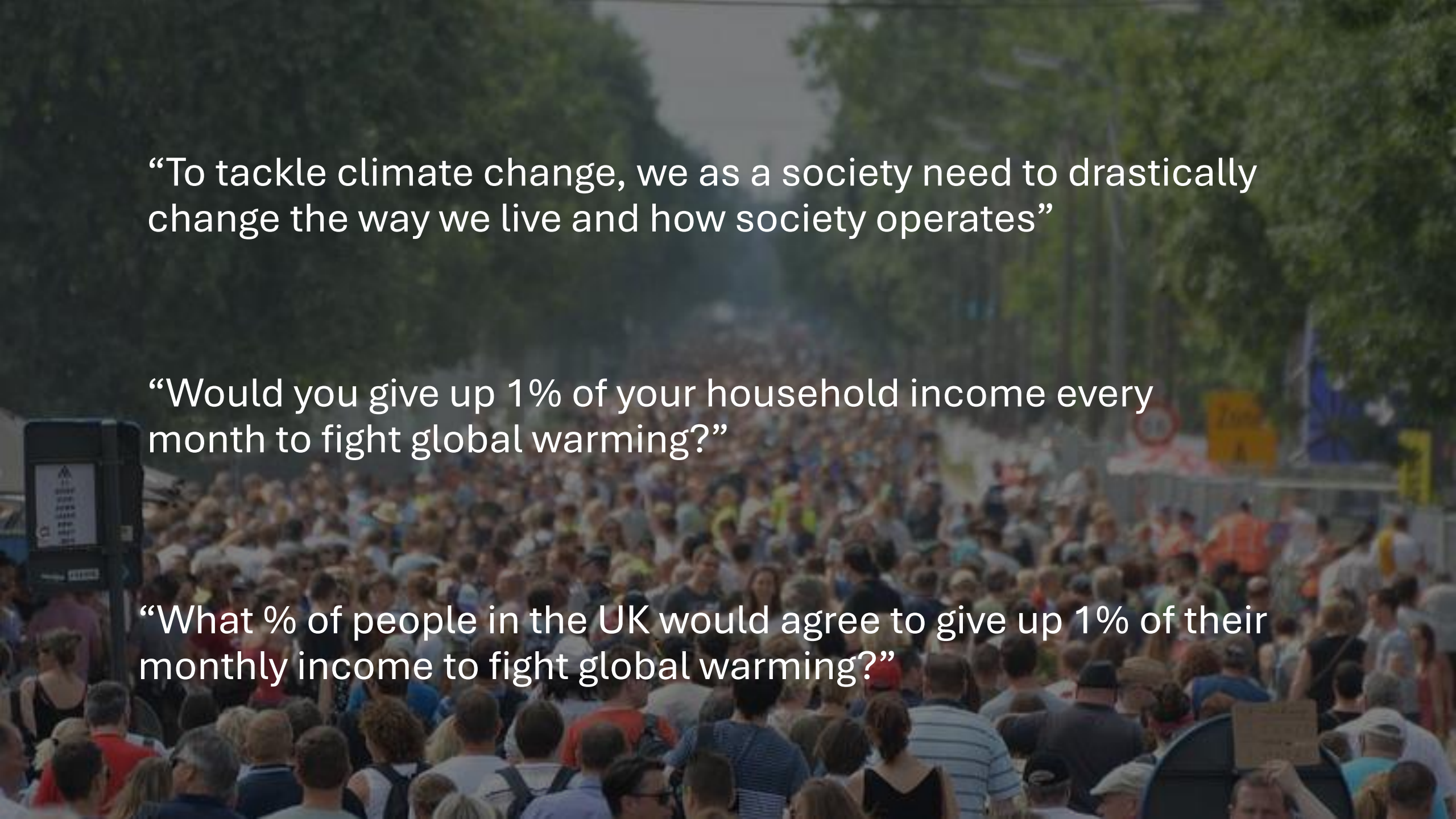
- Individual AND system change
- Technology AND behaviour change
- Left AND right wing



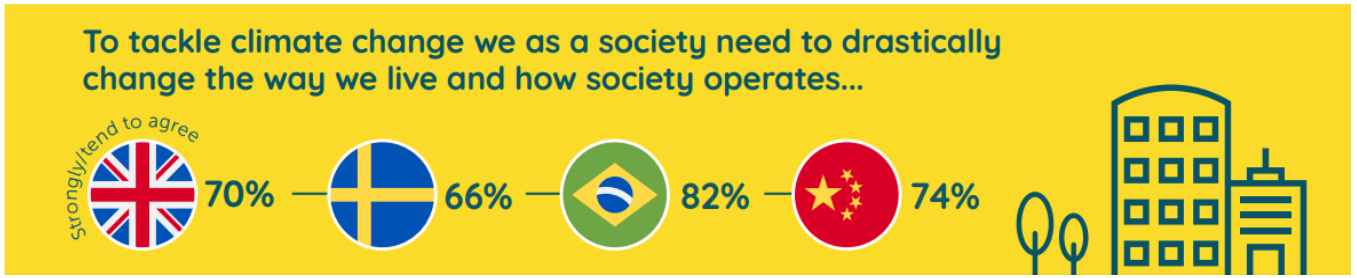
Whitmarsh, L., Seyfang, G., O'Neill, S., 2011. Public engagement with carbon and climate change: To what extent is the public 'carbon capable'? Global Environmental Change 21, 56–65.

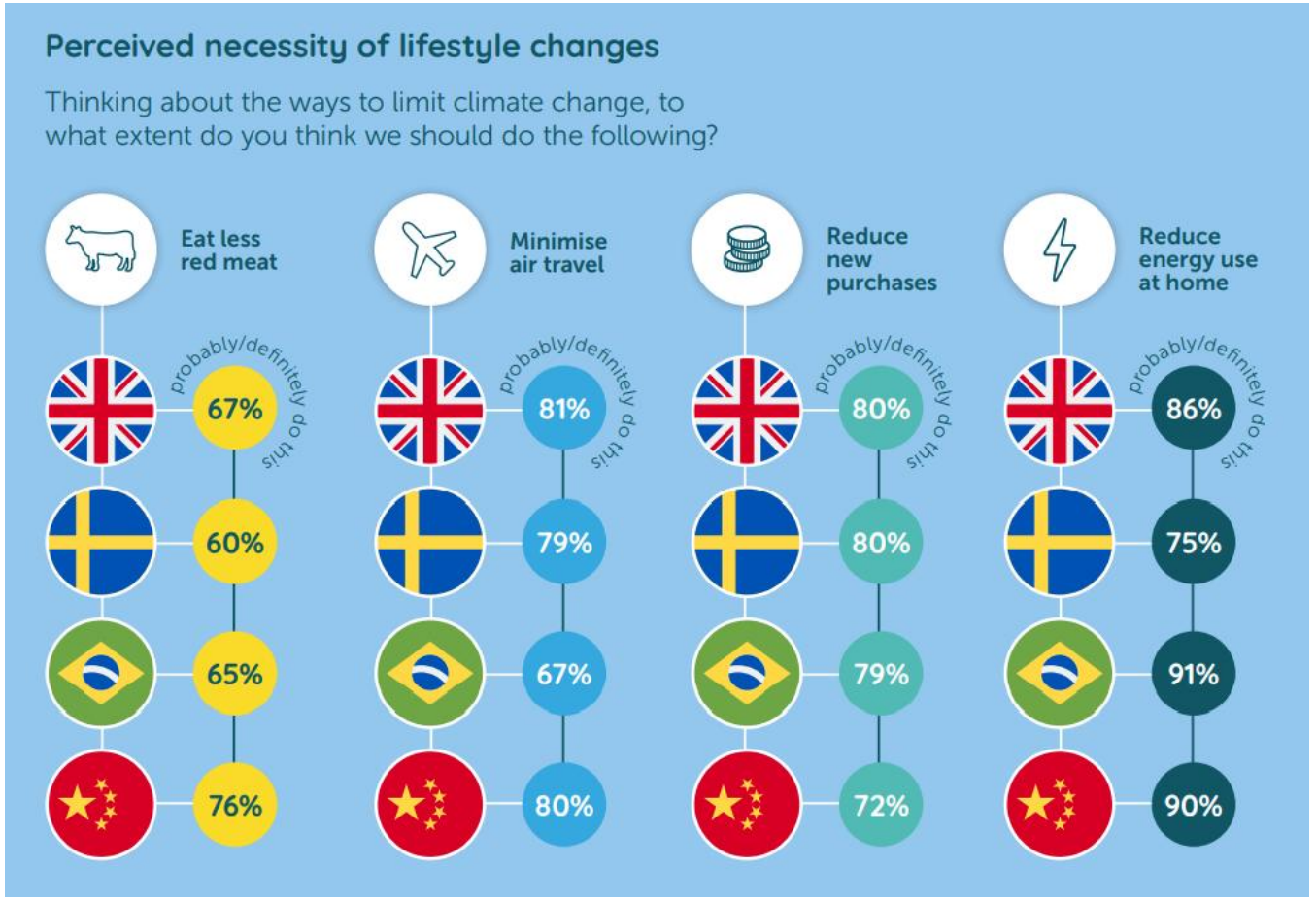
Part 2

Public Support for Change


“To tackle climate change, we as a society need to drastically change the way we live and how society operates”
“Would you give up 1% of your household income every month to fight global warming?”
“What % of people in the UK would agree to give up 1% of their monthly income to fight global warming?”

Behaviour and lifestyle change is widely supported



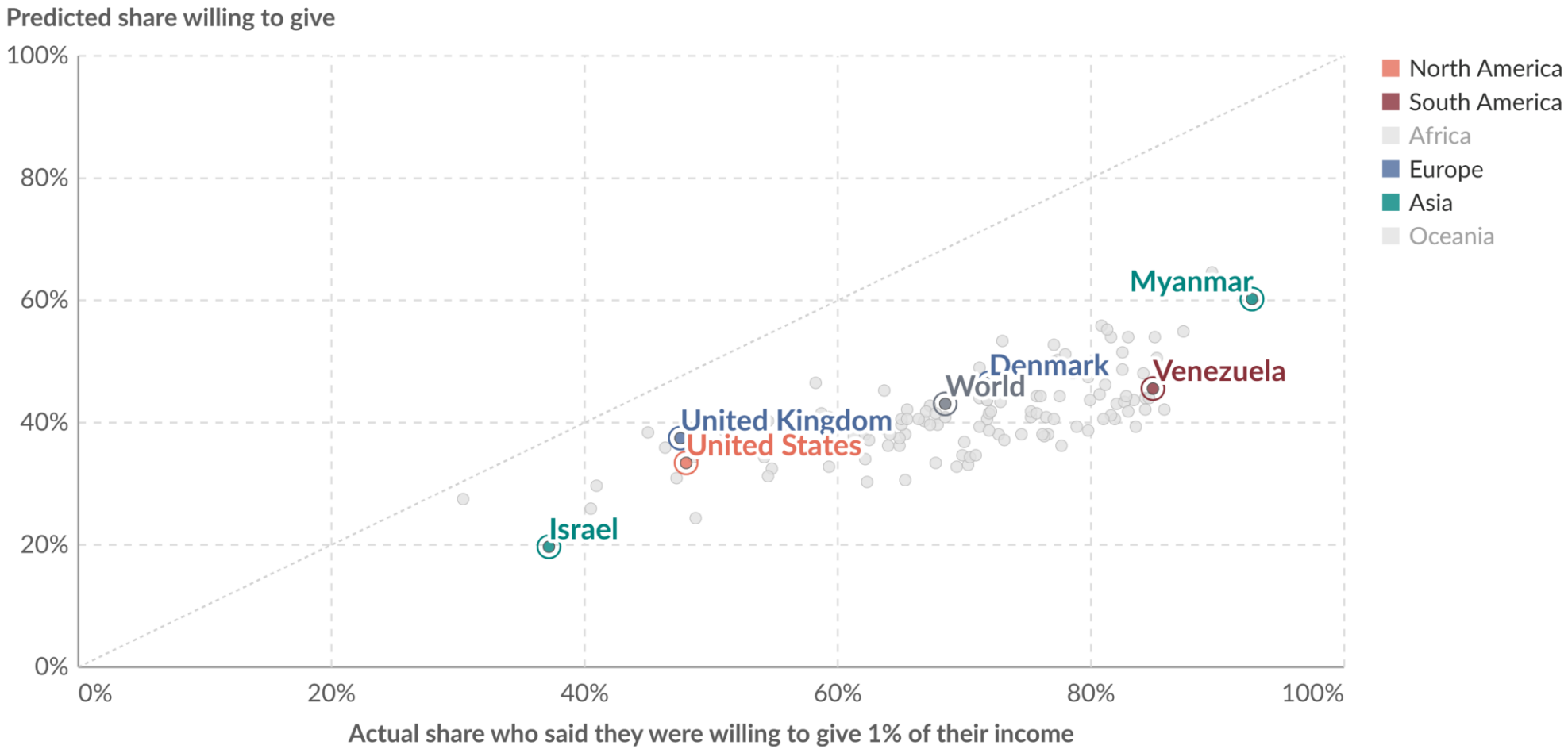


Steentjes, K., Demski, C. & Poortinga, W. (2021). Public perceptions of climate change and policy action in the UK, China, Sweden and Brazil. CAST Briefing Paper 10.

People underestimate others' willingness to take climate action

Our World in Data

Participants were asked if they would contribute 1% of their income to tackle climate change. The share that answered "yes" is shown on the horizontal axis. The share of the population in their country that people *think* would be willing is shown on the vertical axis.

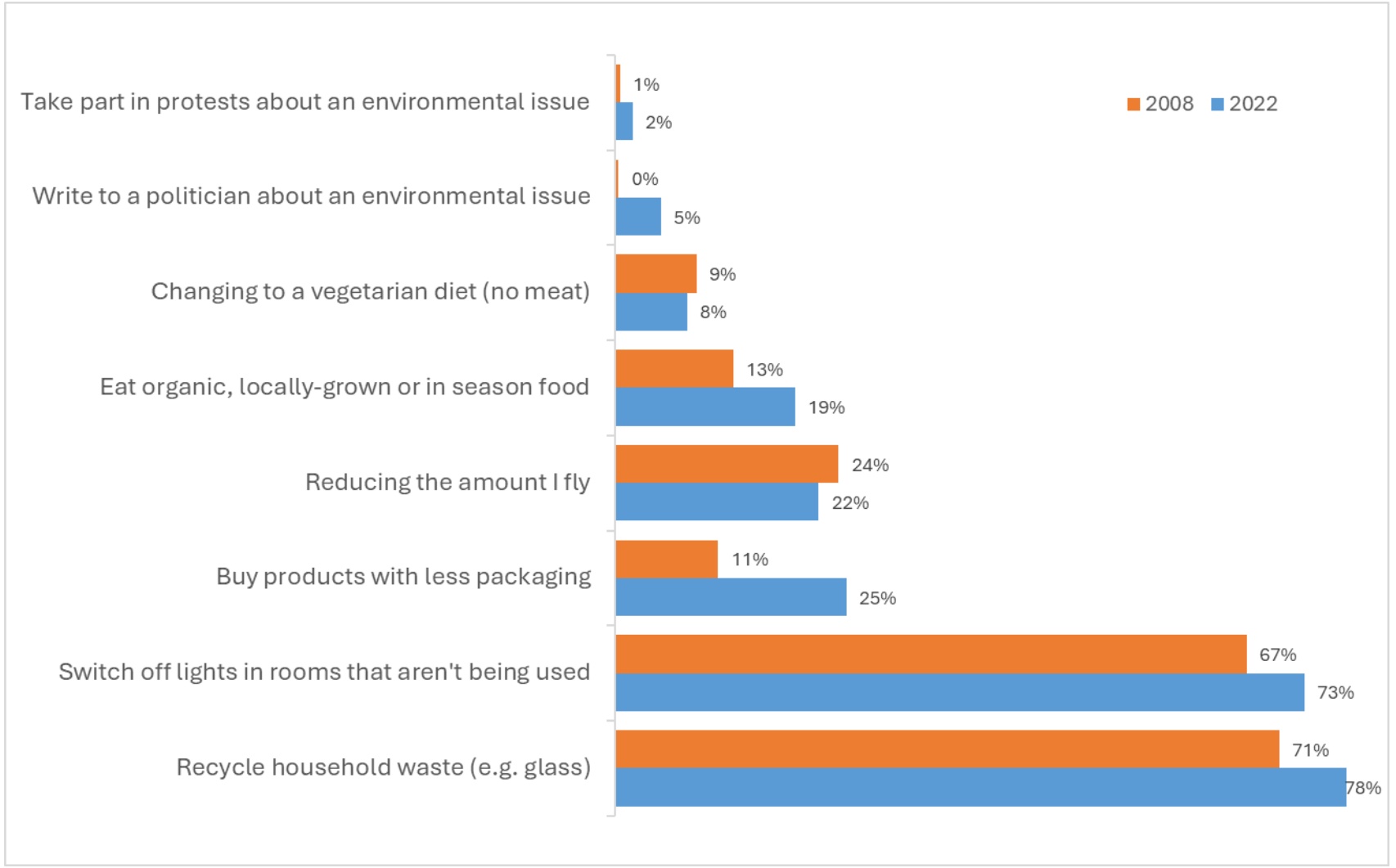


Data source: Andre et al. (2024). Globally representative evidence on the actual and perceived support for climate action.

Note: Based on representative surveys of almost 130,000 people across 125 countries.

But behaviour and lifestyle change remains modest

Low-impact consumer actions (still) dominate; little political action



Carbon capability indicators 2008 and 2022.

Bars indicate proportion of UK residents answering 'Always' or 'Already did this'.

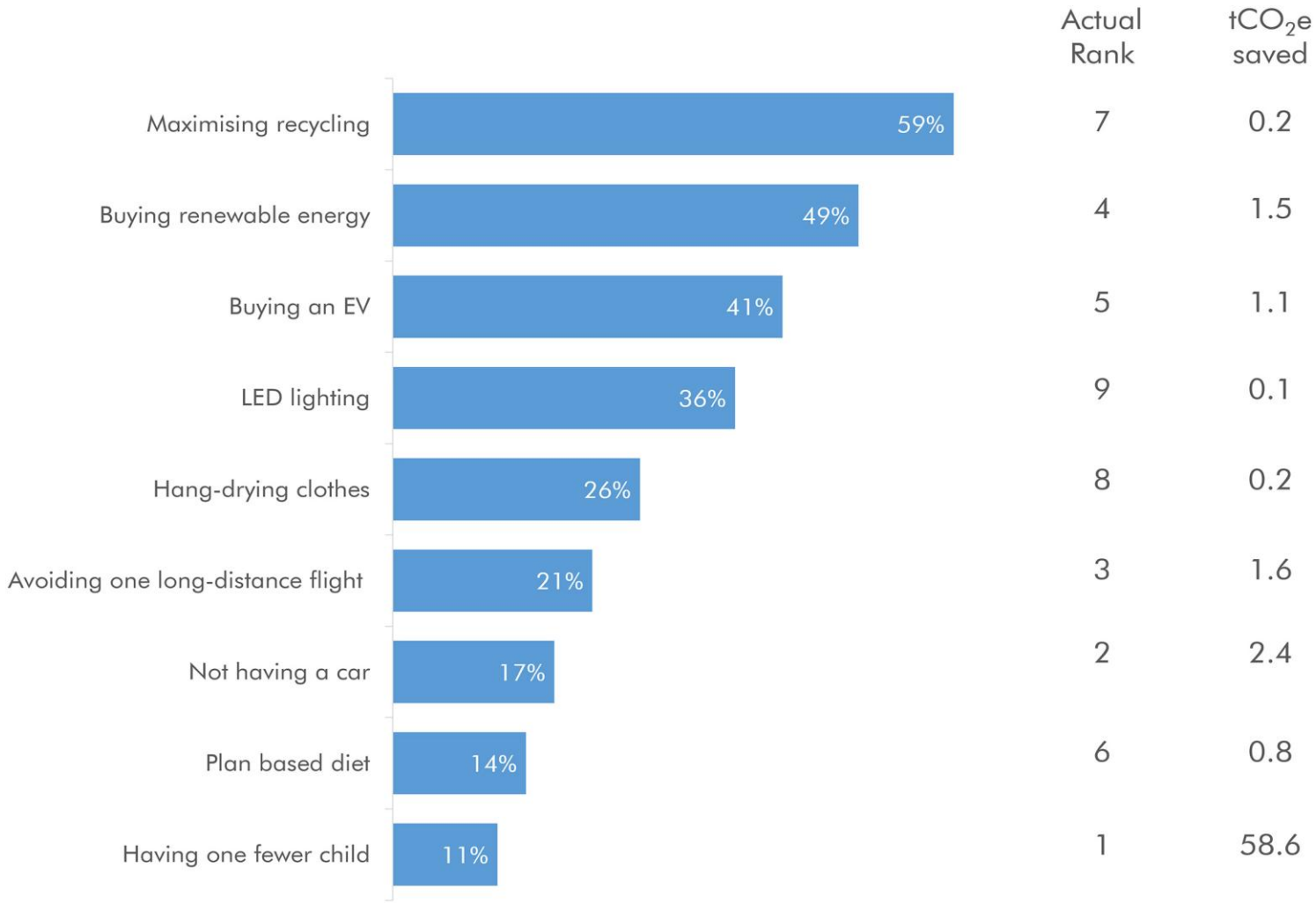
Hampton & Whitmarsh, 2024

Why do low-impact actions dominate?

Partly due to **misperceptions of environmental impact** (e.g. over-estimating significance of recycling)…

… and **pluralistic ignorance** (under-estimating wider public support for climate action))

…but primarily **structural barriers**



''From this list of options, which three do you think would most reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of an individual living in one of the world's richer countries?'' (Ipsos, 2021, n = 21,011)

Hampton & Whitmarsh, 2023

Four sources of influence on climate action

Individual influences

Individual factors include values, habits, skills, and perceived control shaping personal climate choices.

Social influences

Social factors encompass cultural norms, family practices, identities, and peer expectations influencing behavior.

Physical influences

Physical factors include infrastructure and environments like transport systems and urban design affecting choices.

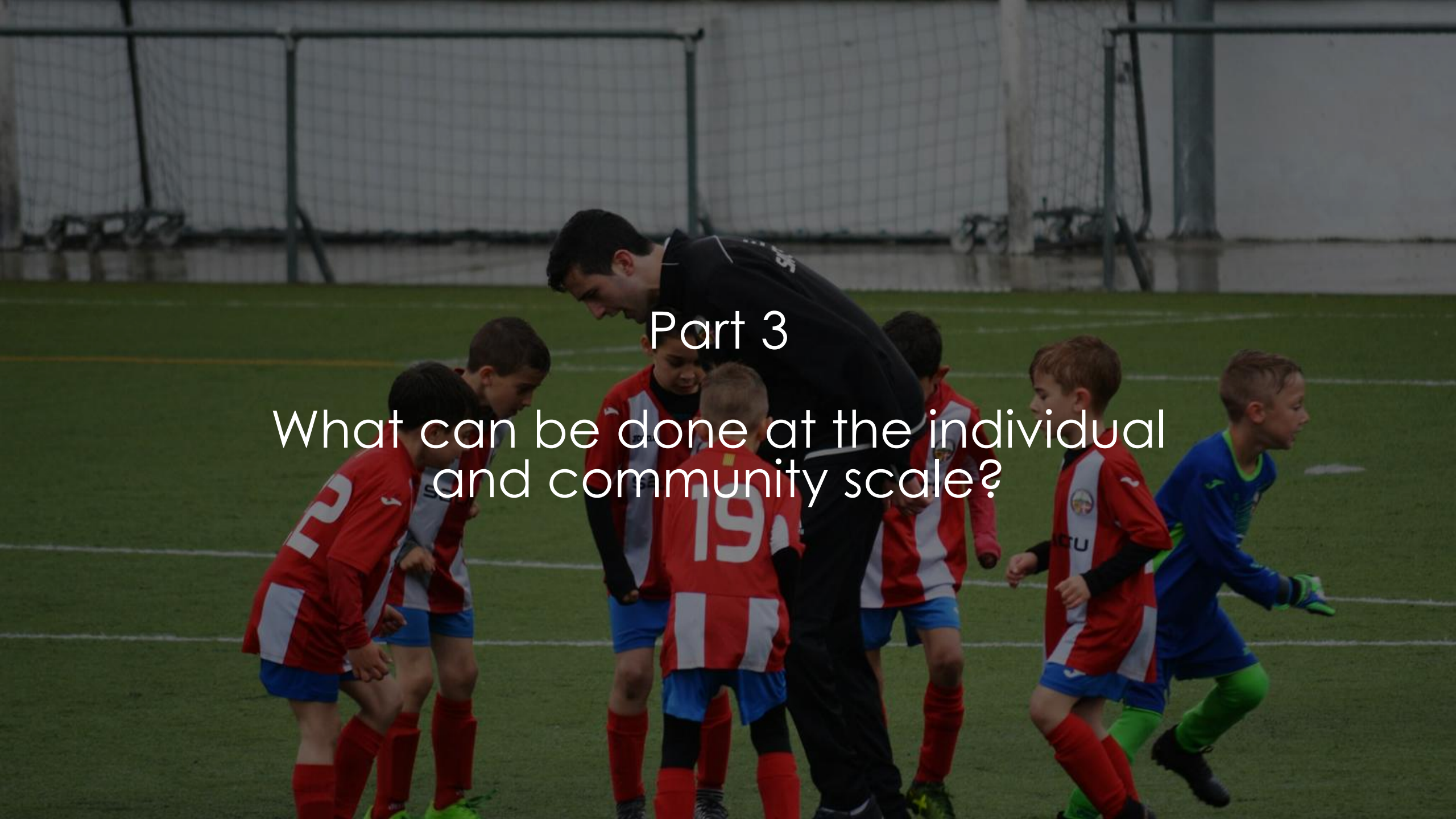
Political influences

Political factors cover policies, regulations, pricing, and governance shaping behavioral constraints and incentives.

Influences on climate choice capabilities		Examples of choice enablers	Common constraints on individual agency
Individual	Psychological	Pro-environmental values; personality traits; digital skills	Resistance to change, perceived lack of agency
	Demographic	Education; member of socially advantaged groups (younger, ethnic majority, male, heterosexual)	Disability; member of disadvantaged groups (ethnic minority, female, sexuality)
Social	Cultural	Low-carbon norms; social pressure to decarbonise; positive role models; aspirational environmentalism	High-consumption norms; consumption-linked identity; negative images of environmentalism
	Social capital	Prevalence of community organisations; strength of social networks	Community deprivation; loneliness
Physical	Material	Income and wealth; asset ownership; availability of green products	Renting housing; poor infrastructure; poverty; limited consumer choices
	Spatial	Access to infrastructure (active transport, electrical grid); renewable potential (sunny/windy)	Isolation; limited infrastructure; planning constraints (heritage buildings); extreme weather
Political	Governance & Democracy	Locally devolved powers; multiple channels for engagement; citizens assemblies; right to protest; freedom of press, transparency; subsidies available	Excessively bureaucratic, technocratic, or autocratic systems; lack of transparency and accountability

Hampton & Whitmarsh, 2023

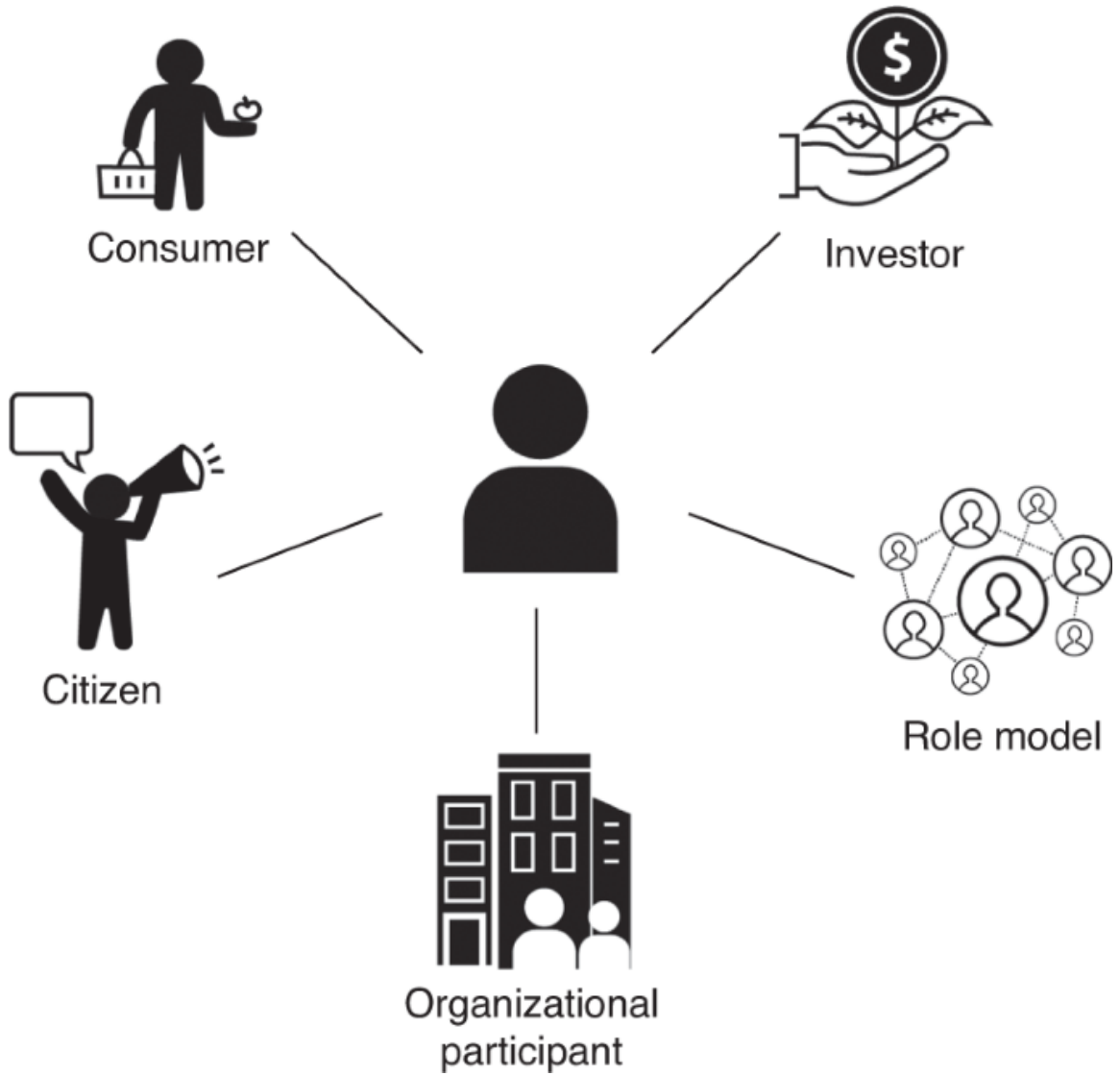
How can we build on public support to generate meaningful climate action?



Part 3

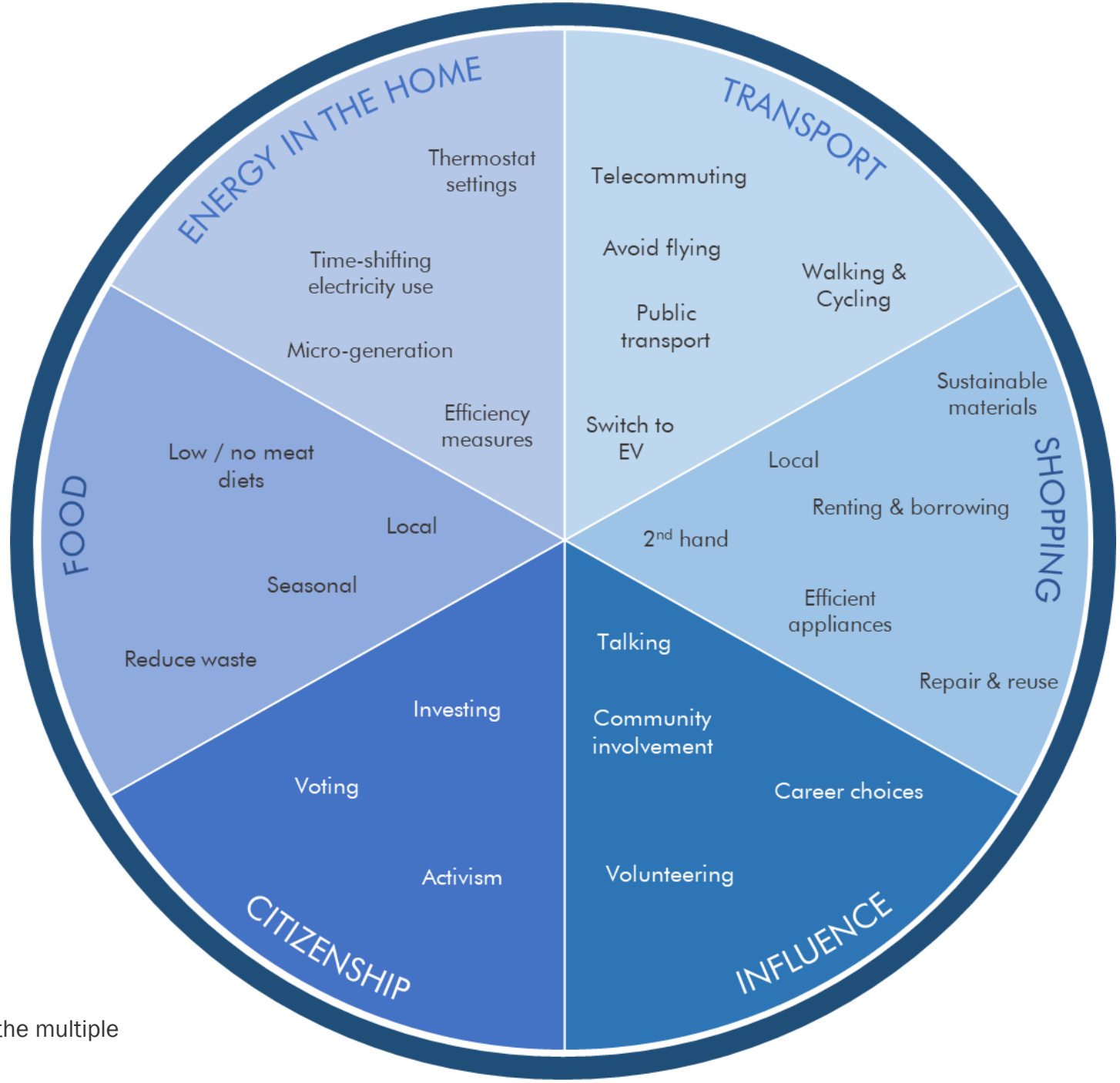
What can be done at the individual and community scale?

Capitalise on the multiple roles that individuals can play



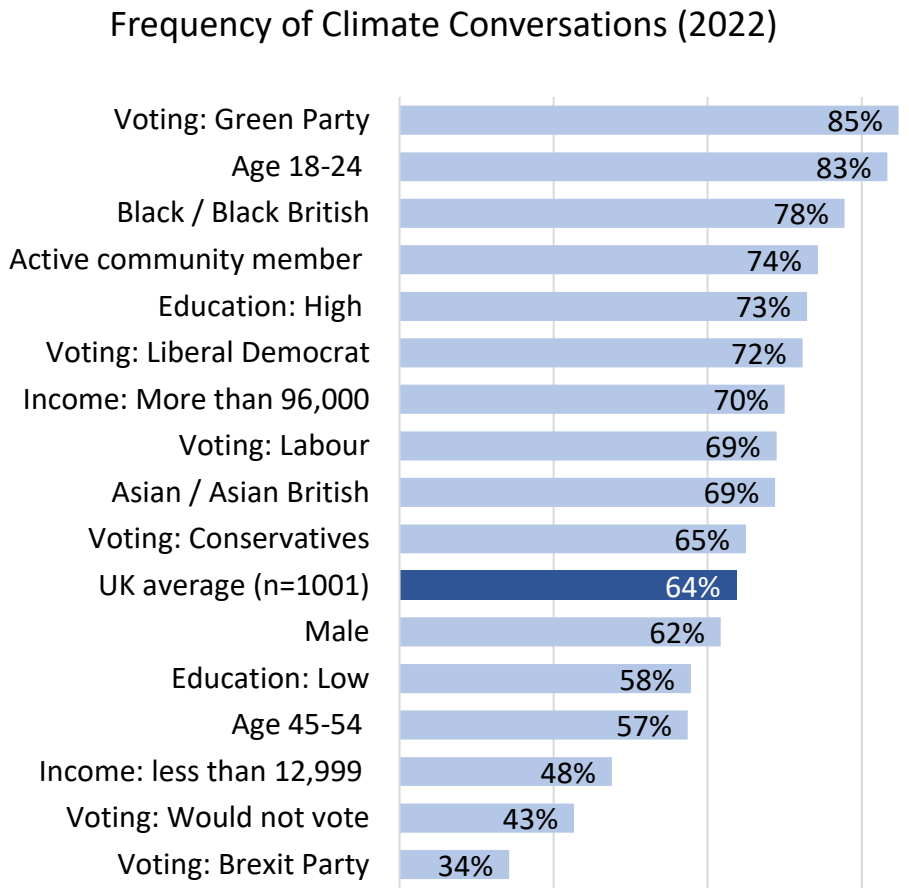
Nielsen et al. 2021. The role of high-socioeconomic-status people in locking in or rapidly reducing energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions. Nature Energy 6, 1011–1016.

A simple framework for green choices

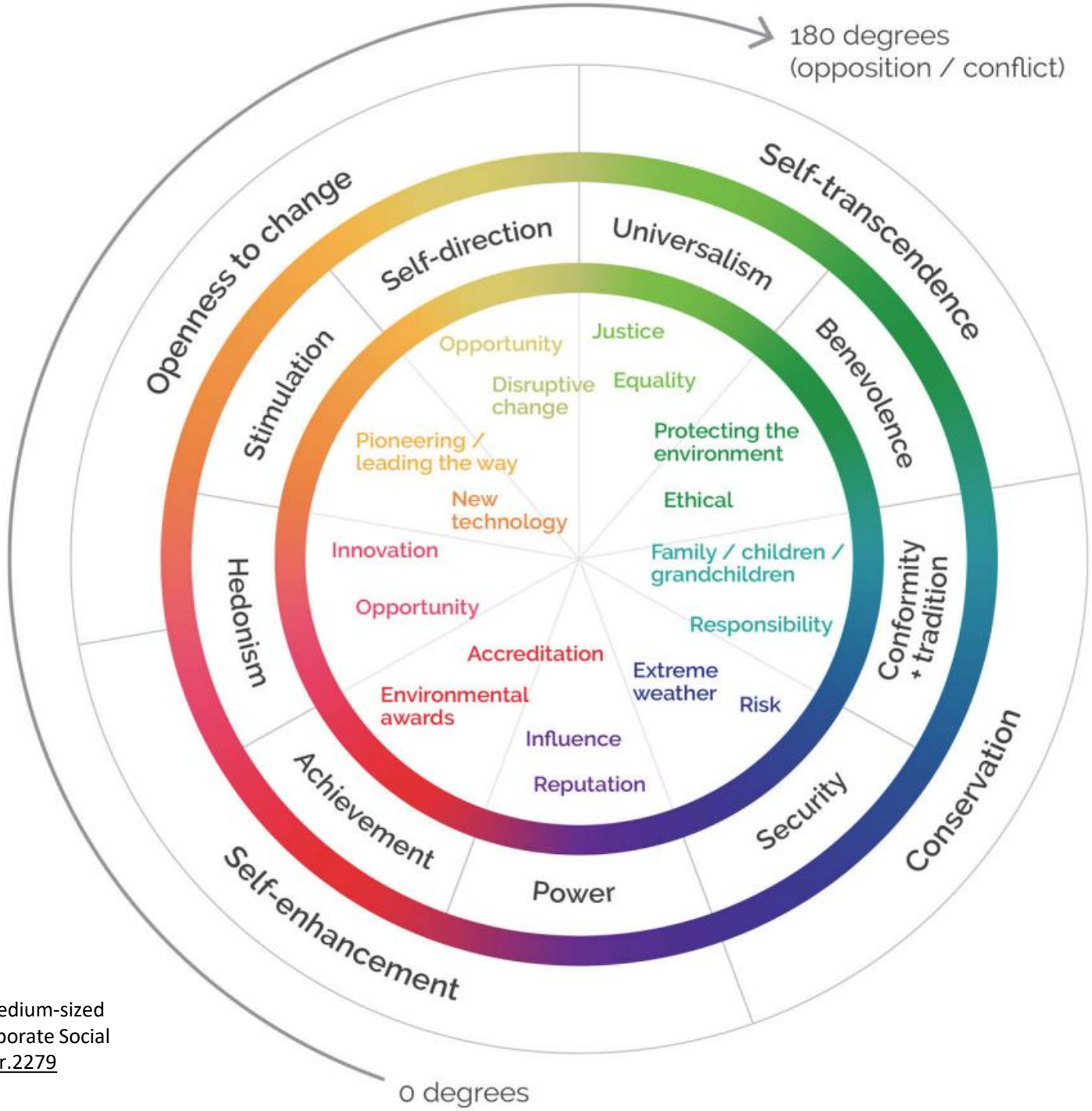


Hampton, S., Whitmarsh, L., 2023. Choices for climate action: A review of the multiple roles individuals play. One Earth 6, 1157–1172.

Collective action begins with talking



Climate action can appeal to all



Hampton, S., Blundel, R., Wahga, A., Fawcett, T., Shaw, C., 2022. Transforming small and medium-sized enterprises to address the climate emergency: The case for values-based engagement. Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management 29, 1424–1439. https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.2279

Climate conversations: the role of ‘everyday influencers’

“Hairdressers are massively underrepresented from an influence perspective. We can convince you to basically do anything that we ask you to.”

Latter, B., Hampton, S., Baden, D., Hodgson, S., 2026. Public engagement and climate change: exploring the role of hairdressers as everyday influencers. Humanit Soc Sci Commun. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-06781-4

Everyday influencers

Leadership from the top

“Why should I change if those with money, power and influence aren’t?”

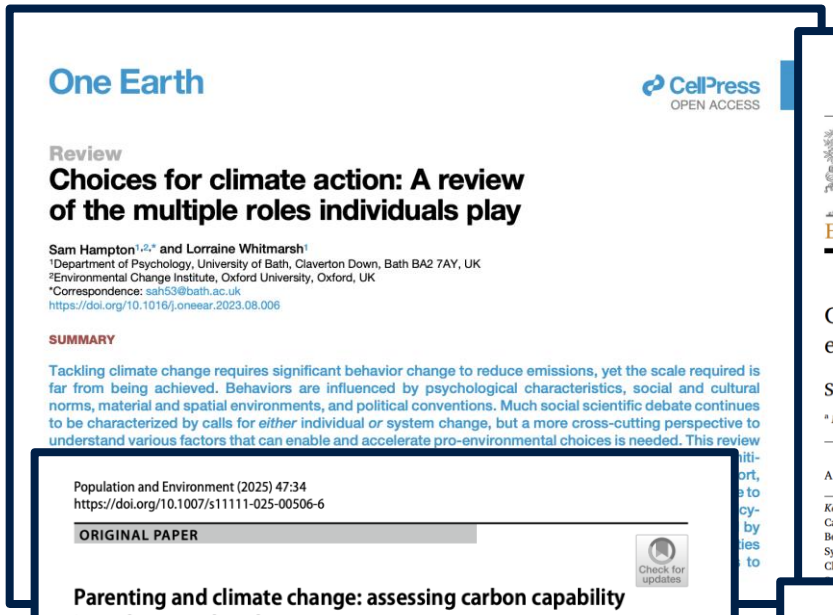
Conclusion

The role for individual climate action continues to be hotly contested

Systemic change needs public support

Community scale activity is crucial for:

- Overcoming climate silence
- Exerting pressure upwards
- Demonstrating sustainable lifestyles
- Mobilising and motivating individuals



One Earth

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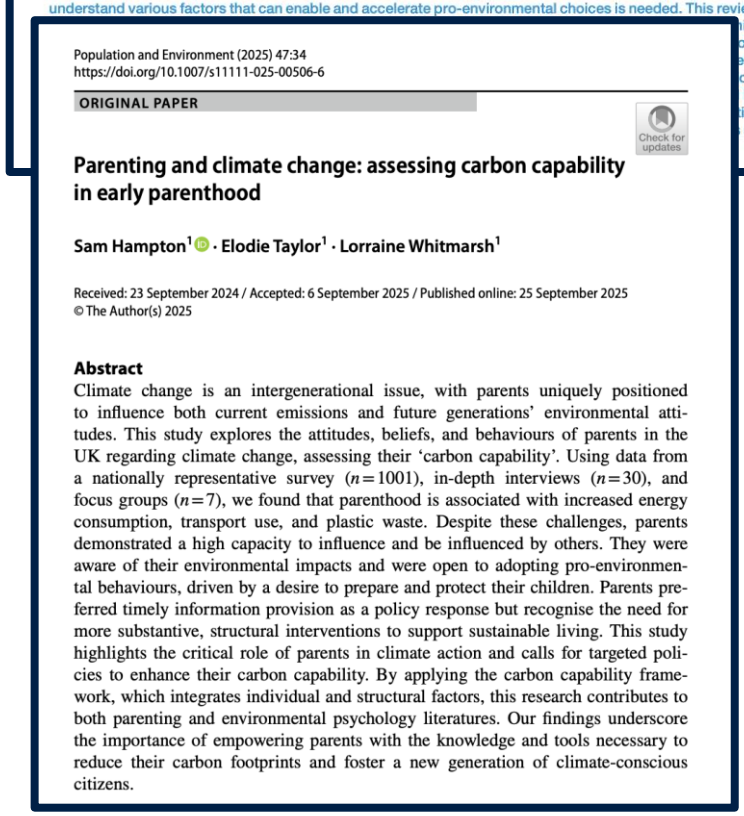
Review

Choices for climate action: A review of the multiple roles individuals play

Sam Hampton[1,2,*] and Lorraine Whitmarsh[1]
[1]Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, UK
[2]Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University, Oxford, UK
*Correspondence: sah53@bath.ac.uk
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2023.08.006

SUMMARY

Tackling climate change requires significant behavior change to reduce emissions, yet the scale required is far from being achieved. Behaviors are influenced by psychological characteristics, social and cultural norms, material and spatial environments, and political conventions. Much social scientific debate continues to be characterized by calls for *either* individual *or* system change, but a more cross-cutting perspective to understand various factors that can enable and accelerate pro-environmental choices is needed. This review



Population and Environment (2025) 47:34
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11111-025-00506-6

ORIGINAL PAPER

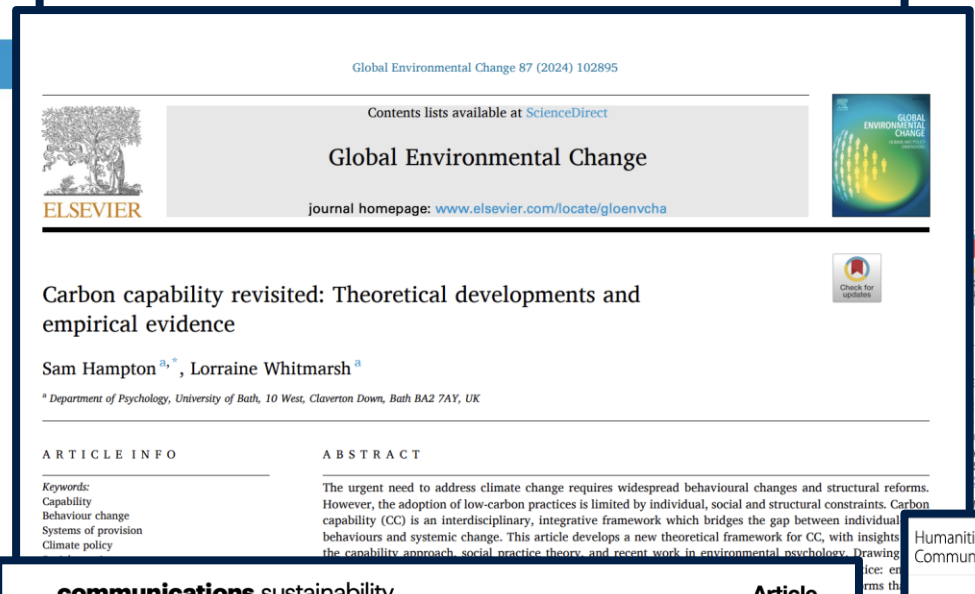
Check for updates

Parenting and climate change: assessing carbon capability in early parenthood

Sam Hampton[1] · Elodie Taylor[1] · Lorraine Whitmarsh[1]

Received: 23 September 2024 / Accepted: 6 September 2025 / Published online: 25 September 2025

Abstract
Climate change is an intergenerational issue, with parents uniquely positioned to influence both current emissions and future generations' environmental attitudes. This study explores the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of parents in the UK regarding climate change, assessing their 'carbon capability'. Using data from a nationally representative survey ($n=1001$), in-depth interviews ($n=30$), and focus groups ($n=7$), we found that parenthood is associated with increased energy consumption, transport use, and plastic waste. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated a high capacity to influence and be influenced by others. They were aware of their environmental impacts and were open to adopting pro-environmental behaviours, driven by a desire to prepare and protect their children. Parents preferred timely information provision as a policy response but recognise the need for more substantive, structural interventions to support sustainable living. This study highlights the critical role of parents in climate action and calls for targeted policies to enhance their carbon capability. By applying the carbon capability framework, which integrates individual and structural factors, this research contributes to both parenting and environmental psychology literatures. Our findings underscore the importance of empowering parents with the knowledge and tools necessary to reduce their carbon footprints and foster a new generation of climate-conscious citizens.



Global Environmental Change 87 (2024) 102895

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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Global Environmental Change

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/gloenvcha

Check for updates

Carbon capability revisited: Theoretical developments and empirical evidence

Sam Hampton [a,*], Lorraine Whitmarsh [a]

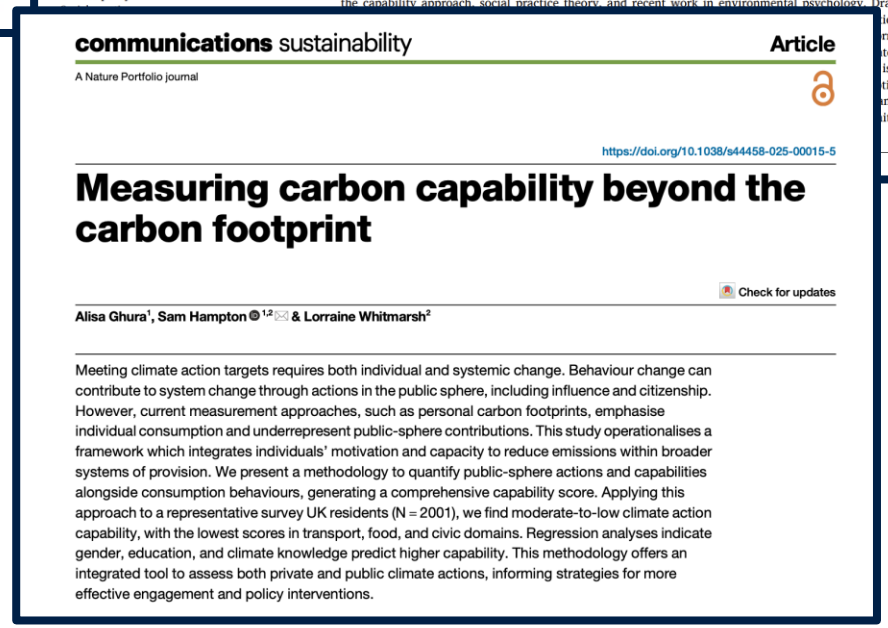
[a] Department of Psychology, University of Bath, 10 West, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Capability
Behaviour change
Systems of provision
Climate policy

ABSTRACT

The urgent need to address climate change requires widespread behavioural changes and structural reforms. However, the adoption of low-carbon practices is limited by individual, social and structural constraints. Carbon capability (CC) is an interdisciplinary, integrative framework which bridges the gap between individual behaviours and systemic change. This article develops a new theoretical framework for CC, with insights the capability approach, social practice theory, and recent work in environmental psychology. Drawing



communications sustainability

A Nature Portfolio journal

Article

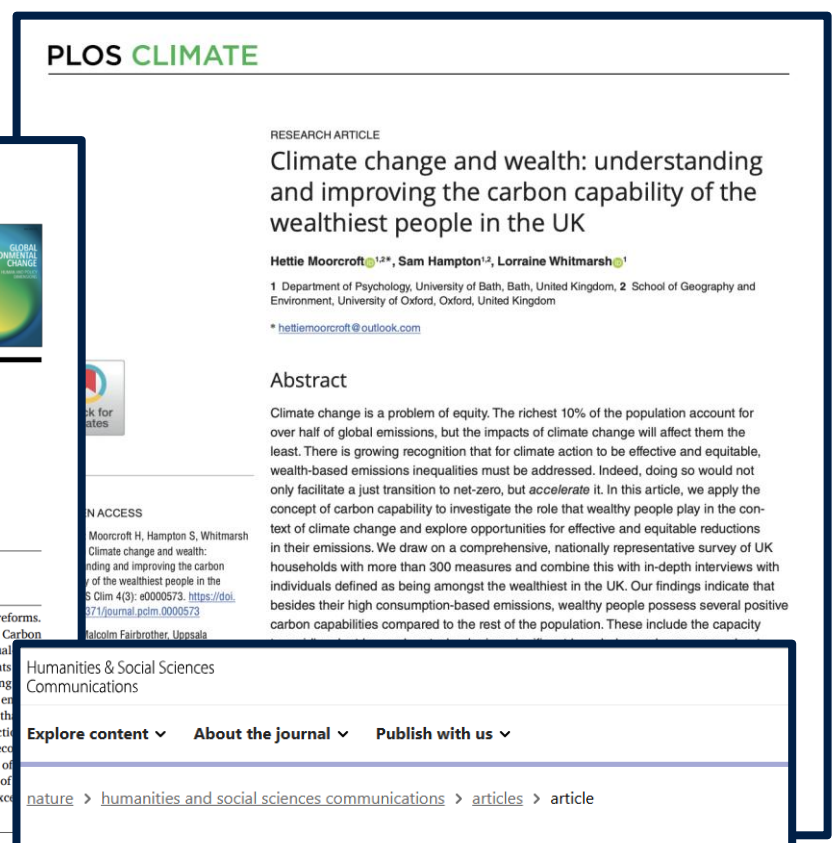
https://doi.org/10.1038/s44458-025-00015-5

Measuring carbon capability beyond the carbon footprint

Check for updates

Alisa Ghura[1], Sam Hampton[1,2] & Lorraine Whitmarsh[2]

Meeting climate action targets requires both individual and systemic change. Behaviour change can contribute to system change through actions in the public sphere, including influence and citizenship. However, current measurement approaches, such as personal carbon footprints, emphasise individual consumption and underrepresent public-sphere contributions. This study operationalises a framework which integrates individuals' motivation and capacity to reduce emissions within broader systems of provision. We present a methodology to quantify public-sphere actions and capabilities alongside consumption behaviours, generating a comprehensive capability score. Applying this approach to a representative survey UK residents (N = 2001), we find moderate-to-low climate action capability, with the lowest scores in transport, food, and civic domains. Regression analyses indicate gender, education, and climate knowledge predict higher capability. This methodology offers an integrated tool to assess both private and public climate actions, informing strategies for more effective engagement and policy interventions.



PLOS CLIMATE

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Climate change and wealth: understanding and improving the carbon capability of the wealthiest people in the UK

Hettie Moorcroft[1,2*], Sam Hampton[1,2], Lorraine Whitmarsh[1]

1 Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom, 2 School of Geography and Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

* hettiemoorcroft@outlook.com

Abstract

Climate change is a problem of equity. The richest 10% of the population account for over half of global emissions, but the impacts of climate change will affect them the least. There is growing recognition that for climate action to be effective and equitable, wealth-based emissions inequalities must be addressed. Indeed, doing so would not only facilitate a just transition to net-zero, but *accelerate* it. In this article, we apply the concept of carbon capability to investigate the role that wealthy people play in the context of climate change and explore opportunities for effective and equitable reductions in their emissions. We draw on a comprehensive, nationally representative survey of UK households with more than 300 measures and combine this with in-depth interviews with individuals defined as being amongst the wealthiest in the UK. Our findings indicate that besides their high consumption-based emissions, wealthy people possess several positive carbon capabilities compared to the rest of the population. These include the capacity

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Article | Open access | Published: 26 February 2026

Public engagement and climate change: exploring the role of hairdressers as everyday influencers

Briony Latter, Sam Hampton, Denise Baden & Stephanie Hodgson

Humanities and Social Sciences Communications **13**, Article number: 415 (2026) | Cite this article

Abstract

Public engagement has a key role in the social transformations needed to address climate change, one form of which is climate conversations. This research focuses on a widespread and conversational space - hair salons. It engaged with sustainable salons across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland to explore these conversations in two studies. Thirty salon owners/directors were interviewed about hairdressers' engagement with clients about climate change and sustainability (GoZero), and an intervention was conducted with 25 salons using

Environmental *Change* Institute

Thank you

samuel.hampton@ouce.ox.ac.uk

https://www.linkedin.com/in/sam-hampton-low-carbon/