

# How green are the manifestos? GE2017 and climate change

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*Sam Fankhauser and Sini Matikainen review what the manifestos of the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats contain on the environment. They argue that all three parties are committed to taking action, but there is a risk that climate change will be forgotten by a new government preoccupied with other issues.*



Climate change and the environment do not feature prominently in this election. Just as the campaign got under way, a [High Court ruling](#) forced the government to publish its draft plans on air quality which they had hoped to delay until after the election, but since then, party leaders and candidates have been largely silent on the environment. The Conservative, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats' manifestos all broadly agree on the need to take action. However, they disagree, sometimes in significant ways, on how they would go about it.



Unsurprisingly, the consequences of Brexit are one of the main areas of contention. Labour and the Lib Dems have pledged to safeguard all environmental regulations established under EU law. Under the Conservatives, EU environmental regulations could be amended or repealed by parliament, although the party commits to an energy policy that meets global commitments on climate change. Labour and the Lib Dems also emphasise links to the European energy market to secure energy supply. The Tories promote shale gas as a way of safeguarding energy security. The other parties oppose fracking (Lib Dem) or would ban it outright (Labour).

With an eye on Britain's competitiveness after Brexit, all three parties stress the importance of new export markets which offer trade opportunities for the UK. Labour and the Liberal Democrats explicitly highlight low-carbon sectors. Focusing on these sectors makes strategic sense, since trade in low-carbon goods and services is growing rapidly and could be worth between [£1 trillion and £1.0–£1.8 trillion a year by 2030](#).

The UK is well-placed to tap into these vast new export markets, but developing a comparative advantage in emerging technologies requires investment in innovation. All three manifestos support an increase in research and development (R&D) spending. The Lib Dems offer a wide-ranging list of low-carbon technologies they would support as part of their R&D commitment. The Conservatives strategically focus on battery technology, while Labour does not mention specific low-carbon technologies. None of the three parties pledge a specific amount of investment in low-carbon technology, though they may consider it under the infrastructure packages they have all put forward.

Energy costs have emerged as another point of contention. All three manifestos discuss the importance of keeping electricity costs low, with Labour targeting an annual price cap and the Conservatives proposing what they call a safeguard tariff cap. The desire to keep energy prices down is not consistently reflected in other proposals. Energy prices, like all prices, have to reflect the cost of production. Once the costs to the environment are included, this means moving towards low-carbon technologies. As part of a 60 per cent renewables target, Labour and the Lib Dems support a technology mix that includes [relatively expensive](#) solutions like tidal power. The Conservatives continue to oppose more onshore wind, even though it is the [cheapest form](#) of renewable energy at the moment and competitive with fossil fuel-based electricity that covers its environmental costs.



Energy conservation is one of the most effective ways to reduce bills (as well as greenhouse gas emissions), and encouragingly it features in all three manifestos. Energy efficiency improvements have already saved the typical UK household around [£290 per year since 2008](#). Labour and the Lib Dems each pledge to insulate 4 million homes, and the Lib Dems and the Conservatives want to upgrade more homes to EPC Band C.

These measures are unlikely to exploit the full energy savings potential that is available. One potential gap is low-carbon homes. All parties commit to house building programmes, but only the Lib Dems want to restore the zero-carbon standard for new homes. The Conservatives plan to review the energy efficiency requirements on new homes and Labour would consult on a zero carbon standard.

The three parties make promises in two areas where past governments have been caught out: air pollution and flood defence. Unsurprisingly, following recent media attention, there are explicit plans on air quality. Labour and the Lib Dems both propose a new Clean Air Act. The Conservatives acknowledge the importance of clean air, and (like the Lib Dems) make low-emission vehicles a key part of their transport strategy. These are important pledges. An integrated policy on renewable energy, energy efficiency and low-carbon transport can address multiple objectives, from air quality to climate change.

After a dry winter, flooding has temporarily disappeared from the headlines, but the need for more flood defences is noted by all three parties. Flooding is perhaps the most prominent climate risk Britain faces, but it is not the only one. The UK's [Climate Change Risk Assessment](#) also highlights risks related to heat waves, water shortages, the natural environment and new pests and diseases. In addition to more flood investment, the next government must strengthen the national adaptation programme and communicate more clearly to businesses and households the risks that climate change will pose to them.

The next government will have to make some important decisions on climate change. The government has a statutory obligation, under the Climate Change Act, to detail as soon as practical its plans for meeting the [4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> carbon budget](#), which cover the years 2023-2032. Shortly before the end of the next parliament, it will have to legislate the [6<sup>th</sup> carbon budget](#) for the period 2033–37.

All three manifestos acknowledge these obligations. The Conservative manifesto implicitly so, with passing references to the Climate Change Act and its 2050 target. Labour explicitly promises to get 'back on track' on the carbon budgets. The Lib Dems go one step further, pledging a new 80% reduction target for 2040 and 'net zero' emissions by 2050, compared to the current 80% target for 2050. The Paris Agreement also gets name-checked in each manifesto, and all three parties are in agreement that the UK should be a leader in global action against climate change.

All this makes the manifestos of the three main parties not a bad read for climate change campaigners. The key

challenge in the next parliament will be to remind all parties of their election commitments and make sure climate change does not take a back seat in a parliament preoccupied with other issues.

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## About the Authors

**Sam Fankhauser** is Co-Director of LSE's Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, and Deputy Director of the ESRC-funded Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy (CCCEP).



**Sini Matikainen** is a Policy Officer at the LSE Grantham Research Institute and CCCEP.



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