

Selective Assimilation and the United Kingdom's Net Zero Transition: Explaining the Consensus Gap

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Abstract

Consensus in the United Kingdom's net zero discourse across government, expert, and public domain was examined. Computational content and thematic analysis was used to trace the filtration of policy priorities. Out of eight topics meeting the silence criteria: six were absolute silences in the government policy, while two were structural silences. A further coding stage thematically analysed 159 excerpts and showed state policy does not simply reject net zero priorities. Instead, it narrows them through cost, regulation, market, technology, and security framing, or leaves them underdeveloped through silence, ambiguity, and delay. These patterns fit into two higher-order constructs which together support a broader mechanism of Selective Assimilation. The findings suggest a consensus gap produced not by direct disagreement over the goal of net zero, but by selective filtering of which concerns enter the official policy frame. The result is a narrower version of consensus than the wider documentary record supports.

1. Introduction

Human activities mainly through greenhouse gas emissions have driven global warming, with mean global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above the 1850–1900 baseline during 2011–2020 (IPCC, 2023). To limit global average temperature increases, nations including the United Kingdom, have embedded commitments to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century into their legislative frameworks (Parliament, 2008). Net zero planning serves as the central mechanism for coordinating the extensive, systemic transformations required across multiple production and consumption sectors, including energy, transport, and the built environment, to check global rising temperatures (Allen et al., 2022). However, executing these transitions is not merely a technical or economic challenge; it is fundamentally a political and social one (Arun Kumar, Sowmya, Sambrani, & Shekhar, 2024; Meadowcroft & Rosenbloom, 2023). The scale of the net zero transition entails significant distributional consequences, actively altering infrastructure, employment landscapes, and everyday consumer behaviours. Consequently, the successful implementation of long-term climate policy is highly dependent on democratic legitimacy, policy feasibility, and sustained public support (Rettig, Gärtner, & Schoen, 2023). While aggregate public concern regarding climate change generally remains high, public support for specific mitigation measures often fluctuates when individuals are confronted with tangible behavioural changes, competing trade-offs, or direct financial costs (Fesenfeld & Rinscheid, 2021). When climate policies are perceived as coercive or procedurally unfair, or when their associated costs disproportionately impact specific groups, they can provoke substantial public opposition (Carattini, Carvalho, & Fankhauser, 2018). Given these dynamics, aligning ambitious climate policy with complex social and political realities constitutes a critical governance challenge. If the public perceives net zero policies as economically burdensome or socially inequitable, governments risk political backlash and the potential dismantling of established climate initiatives. Recent developments, such as the emergence of anti-net zero populism in the UK, illustrate how immediate concerns over the cost of living and the uneven distribution of transition costs can be effectively mobilised by political actors to contest existing climate policy architectures (Paterson, Wilshire, & Tobin, 2024a). Therefore, understanding how top-down

policy ambitions intersect with broader societal expectations, perceived fairness, and socio-economic constraints is essential for securing the durability and democratic mandate required to sustain the net zero transition.

To navigate the systemic transformations required for decarbonisation, independent advisory bodies such as the UK's Climate Change Committee, provide critical scientific and techno-economic modelling to guide statutory targets(Change, 2019). However, these expert-driven discourse must be translated into actionable legislation by governments operating within the constraints of short-term electoral cycles, while simultaneously requiring broad behavioural compliance and support from the public. A growing body of literature recognises that these distinct actors do not consistently converge on the same priorities, acceptable trade-offs, or timelines for action(Drews & Van den Bergh, 2016; Ming Lee, Markowitz, Howe, Ko, & Leiserowitz, 2015). While expert energy models frequently optimise for aggregate, long-term cost-effectiveness, public evaluations of climate policy are heavily mediated by immediate concerns over perceived fairness, the equitable distribution of costs, and the preservation of individual choice(Poortinga et al., 2023; Pye et al., 2021). Furthermore, a temporal mismatch often exists: whereas scientific consensus emphasises the objective urgency of mitigation, politicians and citizens frequently exhibit temporal discounting, naturally prioritising near-term economic security and visible benefits over distant, abstract climate stabilisation(Fesenfeld & Rinscheid, 2021). Consequently, technically optimal expert discourse often misalign with the socio-political realities and immediate welfare concerns of voters and local stakeholders. This divergence among expert models, political mandates, and public preferences generates substantial risks for the implementation, democratic legitimacy, and long-term durability of the net zero transition(Sridhar et al., 2022). When top-down climate targets fail to reconcile with everyday economic constraints, they become highly susceptible to "policy dismantling"; the active diminution or removal of existing climate policies(Paterson et al., 2024a). If the financial burdens of the transition are perceived as unfairly distributed, they provide a discursive opportunity for populist counter-movements to actively exploit these grievances and delegitimise the broader climate policy architecture. Historical examples, such as the abandonment of the UK's Zero Carbon Homes strategy, illustrate how shifting political priorities and negative policy feedbacks can lead to the rapid repudiation of established targets(Edmondson, Rogge, & Kern, 2020). Thus, the failure to align these divergent inputs threatens the foundational social consensus required to sustain decades-long decarbonisation efforts.

The divergence between official climate strategies and the actual expectations of experts and the public can be understood as a consensus gap. While aggregate concern for climate change generally remains high(Rettig et al., 2023), the consensus gap manifests as the tangible distance between a government's stated policy narratives and broader societal or technical expectations. These gaps are not exclusively the result of direct disagreement or active public contestation over specific policy instruments. Rather, they may originate from absence, omission, and selective emphasis(Elstub, Carrick, Farrell, & Mockler, 2021). Because policy emerges from complex network interactions where certain actors wield disproportionate power to amplify or marginalise specific concerns, official narratives tend to selectively highlight politically safe, techno-economic solutions while deliberately sidestepping contentious socio-

economic trade-offs(Bouman, Steg, & Dietz, 2024). Consequently, what is left unsaid in official climate policies such as the precise distribution of transition costs or the necessity of demand-side behavioural changes, can be just as consequential as what is explicitly stated. By selectively assimilating palatable inputs and omitting difficult socio-political realities, governments may project an artificial consensus that masks deep underlying fragilities. Recognising these blind spots is critical, as ignoring the complex trade-offs of the net zero transition leaves long-term decarbonisation efforts highly vulnerable to pluralistic ignorance, public backlash, and eventual policy dismantling. Extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to individual components of climate governance, studies have examined public support for climate action and policy acceptability(Rettig et al., 2023), assessed the role of independent expert advisory bodies, and evaluated the ambition of official policy commitments(Sridhar et al., 2022). However, these domains are typically investigated in isolation. Less attention has been paid to systematic comparisons of the relationships between expert advice, public expectations, and government policy discourse. As a result, there is limited comparative empirical work on how certain climate transition issues are incorporated, reframed, downplayed, or omitted in official policy while others remain more prominent(Pralle, 2013). This study addresses this gap by comparing these three discourses to explain how the consensus gap is constructed and sustained in the context of the UK's net zero transition.

2. Methods

A comparative documentary design was adopted to examine how the UK net zero transition is framed across government, expert, and public discourse. The analysis drew on three documentary sources: the government delivery plan, an independent expert review, and a citizens' assembly report. These texts were selected because they represent distinct institutional and deliberative positions within the net zero debate and therefore allow systematic comparison. A conceptual framework was developed iteratively through engagement with the public policy literature and an initial close reading of a representative subset of the corpus. This process identified the main comparison categories and established the analytical sequence that guided the remainder of the study. At a broad level, the framework organised the analysis as a staged progression from issue-level comparison in the corpus, to coded themes, to higher-order constructs, to a final explanatory model, and then to the overarching mechanism used to structure the later computational and qualitative stages. In doing so, it positioned the three documents as related but distinct discourses through which net zero priorities are articulated, translated, and filtered. This provided the basis for identifying topics that were unevenly distributed across the corpus and for tracing how those topics were subsequently handled in the text.

2.1. Corpus Preparation and Pre-processing

The analytical corpus was constructed from the full text of three documentary sources representing the principal perspectives in the UK net zero transition: the UK Government's Carbon Budget and Growth Delivery Plan(Zero, 2025), Mission Zero: an independent review of Net Zero(Skidmore, 2023), and The path to net zero: Climate Assembly UK report(K, 2020). These sources represent, respectively, the official

policy position, an expert review, and a public deliberative account of climate priorities. Together, they provide a triangulated documentary basis for comparison across the government, expert, and public discourse. Initial text extraction was carried out to convert the source PDFs into machine-readable format prior to analysis. The extracted material was checked for common PDF-related artefacts, including broken words, repeated headers and footers, and other formatting noise that can affect text matching. This quality-control step was applied to ensure that the source documents were suitable for downstream analysis. No page-range exclusions were applied in the final corpus. The extracted text was then pre-processed using a custom Python pipeline. Cleaning steps included de-hyphenation of words split across line breaks, normalisation of whitespace, and correction of common character-encoding artefacts introduced during PDF extraction. The cleaned text was processed using spaCy(Vasiliev, 2020) to produce lemmatised tokens and sentence boundaries. This reduced inflectional variation and generated a consistent machine-readable representation of the corpus for subsequent comparison. Each processed document retained provenance metadata so that matched excerpts could later be linked back to their source document and documentary voice. The resulting corpus contained cleaned text, lemmatised terms, sentence-level segmentation, and document length metrics for each of the three source documents. These processed text objects formed the foundation for the later topic comparison and excerpt-level analysis.

2.2. Structural Silence Analysis

After preprocessing, the corpus was analysed using quantitative gap analysis to identify topics that appeared more frequently in the expert and public texts than in the government text. This stage served as the screening step for the study, isolating topic-level differences across the three documentary sources for later analysis. The comparison used a fixed set of issue topics specified in advance for targeted analysis across the corpus. Topic matching was performed on the lemmatised text. Each topic string was processed through the same text-preparation pipeline as the source documents, and the resulting base-form phrase was used as the search term. This approach reduced variation caused by pluralisation, tense, and other inflectional differences, and allowed equivalent topic forms to be compared across the three documents. Topic counts were generated separately for the government, expert, and public documents, with each count reflecting the number of matches in the lemmatised token stream for the relevant source. To account for differences in document length, raw counts were normalised into relative frequencies per 10,000 words. Gap scores were then calculated by subtracting the government frequency from the expert frequency and from the public frequency. These scores indicated the extent to which a topic was more visible in the expert or public text than in the government text. Topics with positive gap scores and low government frequencies were classified as candidate structural silences. Topics with zero government mentions but at least one mention in either the expert or public documents were classified as absolute silences. The analysis produced a structural silence matrix that summarised counts, frequencies, gap scores, and silence flags for each topic. Topics were retained for the next stage if they met the predefined silence criteria, namely a gap score greater than 0.5 per 10,000 words in either the expert-versus-government or public-versus-government comparison,

together with a government frequency below 1.0 per 10,000 words, or if they met the absolute silence condition. The resulting filtered topics formed the basis for the excerpt-level analysis that followed.

2.3. Coding, Mapping and Validation

The excerpt set retained from the structural silence analysis was coded using a two-pass heuristic procedure. The excerpt corpus consisted of sentence-level matches from the structural silence analysis, each paired with its immediate textual context and source metadata. Each excerpt therefore comprised the matched sentence, the surrounding context, the topic label, the source document reference, the sentence index, and the documentary voice. A structured coding frame was used to preserve the code assignments and the audit trail for each row. The first coding pass applied a predefined keyword dictionary linking specific terms and phrases to the rhetorical codes, while the second pass used a separate set of contextual markers to identify implicit exclusion strategies among unresolved excerpts. The coded excerpts were then grouped into candidate themes using a predefined mapping from rhetorical code to theme. The codes targeted explicit forms of constraint and justification, including `COST_PROHIBITIVE`, `TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL`, `MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE`, `DEFLECTION_TO_MARKET`, and `SECURITY_FRAMING`. When a match was found, the relevant rhetorical code was assigned. When no match was identified, the excerpt was flagged for manual review. The second pass was applied to excerpts flagged in the first pass. This step used a second set of contextual markers to identify more indirect forms of exclusion, including `DEFLECTION_TO EFFICIENCY`, `SCOPE_EXCLUSION`, `CONDITIONAL_ACCEPTANCE`, and `NON_COMMITTAL`. Excerpts that matched one or more of these markers were assigned the corresponding code. Excerpts that remained unresolved after the second pass were retained for review. The coded excerpts were then grouped into candidate themes using a predefined mapping from rhetorical code to theme. These themes were subsequently mapped to the higher-order construct level using a second deductive mapping step. Excerpts that triggered conflicting code logic or did not map cleanly were assigned a review label and recorded separately. The final output of this stage was a thematic log and a justification matrix that preserved the excerpt-level evidence chain from source text to rhetorical code, theme, and construct. A final validation step checked the coded outputs for unresolved items and confirmed the distribution of themes and constructs across the final corpus. Any manual decisions were recorded in the reflexive notes field to preserve the audit trail and support reproducibility.

3. Results

The quantitative screening stage identified eight topics that met the study's silence criteria across the three documentary sources. These topics were fairness, diet, wellbeing, sufficiency, justice, frequent flyer levy, meat, and public engagement. Topic frequencies were normalised per 10,000 words to allow comparison across the government, expert, and public documents. Gap scores were then calculated as the difference between the government frequency and the expert frequency, and between the government frequency and the public frequency (Fig. 1). Six of the eight topics were classified as absolute silences. These were fairness, diet, wellbeing, sufficiency, justice, and frequent flyer levy. In

each case, the government document recorded zero mentions, while at least one of the other two documents contained the topic. Fairness appeared 2 times in the expert document and 33 times in the public document. Diet appeared 2 times in the expert document and 18 times in the public document. Wellbeing appeared once in the expert document and 10 times in the public document. Sufficiency appeared once in the expert document and twice in the public document. Justice appeared once in the expert document and twice in the public document. Frequent flyer levy did not appear in the government or expert documents, but appeared once in the public document.

Two topics were classified as structural silences rather than absolute silences. Meat appeared 3 times in the government document, 1 time in the expert document, and 58 times in the public document. Public engagement appeared once in the government document, 21 times in the expert document, and twice in the public document. These two topics therefore met the silence criteria because they showed a marked imbalance across the three source documents, even though they were not absent from the government document altogether. Overall, the government corpus recorded zero occurrences for topics concerning fairness, diet, wellbeing, sufficiency, justice, and the frequent flyer levy. Conversely, the topics of meat and public engagement appeared across all three documents at varying frequencies. The final structural silence matrix retained these eight topics for the subsequent phase of analysis, providing the excerpt-level context for the qualitative coding stage.

The 159 excerpts retained from the structural silence analysis were carried forward into an excerpt-level coding stage. These excerpts were drawn from the three documentary sources, with the majority coming from the Public discourse (120 excerpts), followed by the Expert discourse (34 excerpts) and the Government discourse (5 excerpts). Each excerpt retained its topic label, documentary voice, source document reference, sentence index, matched sentence content, and full source text context, allowing the coding to remain linked to the original document location. The first coding layer assigned rhetorical codes to the excerpts using the predefined code set. The largest category was `UNCATEGORISED_SILENCE`, which applied to 65 excerpts. Among the explicit rhetorical codes, `COST_PROHIBITIVE` appeared 24 times and `MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE` appeared 22 times. The implicit exclusion marker `IMPLICIT: DEFLECTION_TO_EFFICIENCY` appeared 17 times. Smaller code counts were recorded for composite or mixed-label excerpts, including `COST_PROHIBITIVE; MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE` (8), `COST_PROHIBITIVE; TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL; MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE` (6), `TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL; MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE` (5), `COST_PROHIBITIVE; TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL` (3), and `SECURITY_FRAMING` (3). Single-occurrence codes included `IMPLICIT: NON_COMMITTAL` (1), `COST_PROHIBITIVE; DEFLECTION_TO_MARKET` (1), `TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL` (1), `MINIMAL_COMPLIANCE; DEFLECTION_TO_MARKET` (1), `DEFLECTION_TO_MARKET` (1), and `TECH_OPTIMISM_DEFERRAL; DEFLECTION_TO_MARKET` (1). The distribution of excerpts demonstrates that the coding stage generated a mixed set of explicit, implicit, and unresolved labels, rather than collapsing the material into a single rhetorical category. The coded log preserved 159 distinct excerpts, linking each directly to its source document and sentence location. Furthermore, the coding frame incorporated a reflexive note field to capture manual analytical comments

and review decisions alongside the automated labels. This process established the foundational evidence base, preserving the raw rhetorical codes for subsequent consolidation into candidate themes.

3.1. Theme Consolidation and Construct Mapping

The excerpt-level codes were consolidated into candidate themes through the predefined code-to-theme mapping used in the computational coding stage. At this level, the most frequent theme label was Unresolved Silence, which was assigned to 65 excerpts. Among the explicit thematic labels, Fiscal Prudence appeared 24 times, Light-Touch Regulation appeared 22 times, and Efficiency Over Transformation appeared 17 times. Lower-frequency labels included National Security (3), Rhetorical Ambiguity (1), Technological Hope (1), and Market Primacy (1). These labels were not mutually exclusive, and several excerpts carried composite theme labels where more than one thematic category applied to the same passage. The composite theme labels showed that some excerpts were assigned combinations of the base themes rather than a single label. The most frequent composite label was Fiscal Prudence; Light-Touch Regulation (8 excerpts). This was followed by Fiscal Prudence; Light-Touch Regulation; Technological Hope (6 excerpts), Light-Touch Regulation; Technological Hope (5 excerpts), and Fiscal Prudence; Technological Hope (3 excerpts). Less frequent composite labels included Fiscal Prudence; Market Primacy, Light-Touch Regulation; Market Primacy, and Market Primacy; Technological Hope (1 excerpt each). These combinations were retained in the thematic log so that the coded excerpts preserved the full set of assigned labels rather than forcing a single thematic category. The theme consolidation stage therefore produced a structured thematic log that linked each excerpt to one or more candidate themes. In parallel, a justification matrix was generated to preserve the topic-level summary of the coded material before higher-order construct mapping. This matrix retained the eight final topics and their distribution across the thematic families, providing a compact summary of how the coded excerpts were organised prior to the final mapping stage.

The final stage of the analysis mapped the coded themes into the two higher-order constructs used in the study's explanatory framework. Across the 159 coded excerpts, 83 were assigned to Silent Veto and 76 were assigned to Wall of Feasibility. The construct distribution was therefore close, with the two constructs capturing broadly comparable shares of the final evidence base (Table 1). The construct-level pattern was not confined to a single documentary source. Within the Silent Veto category, 67 excerpts came from the Public source document, 13 from the Expert source document, and 3 from the Government source document. Within Wall of Feasibility, 53 excerpts came from the Public source document, 21 from the Expert source document, and 2 from the Government source document. This distribution shows that both constructs were present across the three documentary sources, although the Public and Expert source documents accounted for most of the coded material, while the Government source document contributed only a small number of excerpts. At topic level, the same two-construct pattern was visible across the eight final topics. Meat contributed the largest total number of coded excerpts, with 29 assigned to Silent Veto and 25 to Wall of Feasibility. Fairness contributed 13 Silent Veto excerpts and 18 Wall of Feasibility excerpts. Wellbeing contributed 18 Silent Veto excerpts and 8 Wall of Feasibility excerpts. Diet contributed 12 Silent Veto excerpts and 11 Wall of Feasibility

excerpts. Public engagement contributed 9 Silent Veto excerpts and 10 Wall of Feasibility excerpts. Sufficiency contributed 1 excerpt to Silent Veto and 2 to Wall of Feasibility. Justice contributed 2 excerpts to Wall of Feasibility and none to Silent Veto. Frequent flyer levy contributed 1 excerpt to Silent Veto and none to Wall of Feasibility. The final thematic output therefore preserved a complete mapping from topic to rhetorical code, theme, and higher-order construct. The evidence chain remained intact across the excerpt-level coding, theme consolidation, and construct assignment stages. The final reporting stage confirmed that no items remained flagged for further review hence, no unresolved items requiring validation. This left a final coded corpus of 159 excerpts organised into two construct-level groupings and eight topic-level silence categories.

Table 1
Macro-distribution of validated themes and theoretical constructs

Semantic Theme	Mapped Theoretical Construct	Filtration Strategy	Instance Count
Unresolved Silence	The Silent Veto	Implicit Omission	65
Efficiency Over Transformation	The Silent Veto	Implicit Deflection	17
Rhetorical Ambiguity	The Silent Veto	Implicit Deflection	1
Construct Subtotal			83
Fiscal Prudence	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	24
Light-Touch Regulation	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	22
Fiscal Prudence; Light-Touch Regulation	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	8
Fiscal Prudence; Light-Touch Reg.; Tech Hope	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	6
Light-Touch Regulation; Technological Hope	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	5
National Security	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	3
Fiscal Prudence; Technological Hope	The Wall of Feasibility	Active Constraint	3
Construct Subtotal			76
Total Mapped Instances			159

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine whether a consensus gap exists in the UK net zero transition and, if so, how it is produced across government, expert, and public documentary discourse. The results show that the gap is not simply a matter of open disagreement over net zero as a policy goal. Rather, it is produced through patterned differences in what is emphasised, narrowed, or left unaddressed across the three discourses. At the topic level, the analysis identified eight final silences. Six of these were absolute silences, meaning that the government text contained no mention of the topic, while the other two were structural silences, meaning that the topics were present in the government text but at a much lower level than in the expert or public documents. Taken together, these findings indicate that the government discourse retained the language of net zero while comparatively under-representing a set of issues that were more visible in the expert and public discourse. The topics involved are not peripheral details. They include fairness, diet, wellbeing, sufficiency, justice, frequent flyer levy, meat, and public engagement. Several of these topics are directly connected to the distributive and behavioural dimensions of the transition, including who bears the costs, how everyday practices change, and what kinds of social support or participation are required for long-term delivery. Their uneven presence across the three source documents suggests that the consensus gap is not only about policy instruments, but also about which dimensions of the transition are treated as salient in official discourse. In particular, the government discourse was comparatively sparse on topics that the expert and public documents treated as important to the transition.

The excerpt-level analysis reinforces this pattern. The final coded corpus contained 159 excerpts drawn from the three source documents, with most excerpts coming from the Public discourse, followed by the Expert discourse, and only a small number from the Government discourse. The coded material was distributed across two higher-order constructs, 'Silent Veto' and 'Wall of Feasibility', indicating that the same broad filtering pattern appeared in more than one rhetorical form. Some excerpts were left unresolved or only weakly engaged, while others were acknowledged but constrained through cost, regulation, market, security, or technological framing. This means that the government discourse did not simply reject external input. Instead, it selectively absorbed some elements and filtered out others. Therefore, the UK net zero consensus gap is produced through selective attention rather than outright denial. Topics that appeared more strongly in the expert and public documents were either omitted or constrained in the government source document, while the language of net zero itself remained intact. This points to a patterned filtering process in which some concerns are incorporated into the policy frame while others remain absent or only weakly engaged.

4.1. Policy Filtration Model

The results suggest that the consensus gap is not produced by a single form of exclusion. It is organised through two distinct but related mechanisms. One works by acknowledging a topic while narrowing the terms in which it can be discussed, the other works by leaving a topic underdeveloped, displaced, or unresolved. Taken together, these mechanisms show how official discourse can retain the language of transition while limiting the range of issues that remain politically actionable (Fig. 2). The Wall of Feasibility captures the first pattern. In the coded excerpts, this construct was associated with cost,

regulation, market reliance, technological delay, and security framing. These were not random rhetorical choices. They consistently appeared where more expansive demands were brought into the government discourse and then translated into terms that reduced their scope. Fiscal Prudence framed action through affordability, taxpayer burden, and value for money. Light-Touch Regulation reframed change as voluntary guidance, consultation, or gradual adjustment rather than binding intervention. Technological Hope shifted attention toward future innovation, pilots, or technical maturity, which displaced pressure for immediate structural change. Market Primacy relocated responsibility to private actors, consumer choice, or competition. National Security recast the transition through resilience, independence, or supply-chain robustness. In each case, the topic remained visible, but its implications were narrowed. This matters because the mechanism does not simply reject external input. It absorbs that input into a policy language already organised around feasibility, manageability, and incremental delivery. The result is a discourse that can acknowledge the existence of social or distributive concerns without allowing them to expand the policy frame. In the context of the UK net zero transition, that means issues such as fairness, diet, sufficiency, and public engagement can be recognised in principle while still being constrained in practice. The policy conversation remains open in form, but closed in scope.

The Silent Veto operates differently. It captures material that remains substantively underdeveloped, deferred, or only weakly engaged. The coded excerpts associated with this construct included unresolved silence, efficiency over transformation, bureaucratic boundaries, conditional delay, and rhetorical ambiguity. These were the points at which the texts did not fully argue against a claim, but also did not meaningfully take it up. Some topics were simply absent from the government text, while others were acknowledged only through indirect references to review, consultation, scope, or future action. The practical effect was to postpone engagement without needing to state rejection. This mechanism is important because it shows that absence is not always a simple blank. Sometimes it takes the form of partial reference without commitment. A topic can be named and still remain functionally excluded if the surrounding language shifts attention to efficiency, administration, or further consideration. That pattern was especially visible in the topics that were coded as unresolved silence or efficiency over transformation. These excerpts did not establish a direct counter-argument. Instead, they left the issue in a weakened or suspended state. The distinction between the two mechanisms helps explain the structure of the final evidence base. Some excerpts were retained but constrained. Others were left underdeveloped or unresolved. Both processes contributed to the overall narrowing of the policy frame, but they did so in different ways. The Wall of Feasibility works through containment. The Silent Veto works through deferral and omission. The former gives policy discourse a way to recognise an issue without expanding its implications. The latter gives it a way to avoid substantive engagement without overtly opposing the issue. This pattern is consistent with the wider literature on climate governance, which shows that policy ambition often depends on how climate claims are framed, translated, and prioritised rather than on whether they are formally accepted or rejected. It is also consistent with work on policy acceptability and climate legitimacy, which has repeatedly shown that fairness, perceived burden, and everyday implications shape whether climate action is seen as workable. The filtering

therefore operates before open conflict or visible backlash, it is built into the way the discourse is structured.

4.1. Selective Assimilation

The two filtering mechanisms described above point to a wider pattern: the government discourse does not simply accept or reject external climate claims. It incorporates some elements, narrows others, and leaves some without substantive engagement. Selective Assimilation captures that pattern. It describes a policy process in which the broad legitimacy of net zero is retained, while the more demanding social and structural implications of the transition are filtered out or recast in narrower terms. The government discourse did not remain silent on every topic raised in the expert and public documents. Some issues were acknowledged and carried into the policy frame, but often in forms that reduced their scope. Other issues were absent altogether or appeared only at low intensity. This mix of presence, constraint, and omission is what makes the gap more than simple disagreement. It is not a case of one discourse openly opposing another. Rather, it is a case of partial incorporation, where some claims are made compatible with existing policy logics while others are left outside the frame of action. Selective Assimilation is useful because it explains both sides of that pattern at once. It shows why the government discourse can retain the language of transition without adopting the full substance of the expert and public discourse. It absorbs claims that can be translated into existing priorities such as affordability, gradualism, market delivery, or technical optimisation. It filters out claims that require stronger redistribution, demand reduction, behavioural change, or broader public engagement. In that sense, the model is not only about absence. It is also about controlled inclusion. This helps explain why the consensus gap should not be understood as a simple deficit of information. The expert and public documents do not merely supply missing facts that the government text fails to notice. Once certain concerns enter the policy frame, they are often reworked into forms that are easier to absorb. That process can preserve the appearance of responsiveness while limiting the range of change that is treated as feasible. The result is a version of consensus that is partial and selective rather than shared in full.

The concept also fits the distribution of the coded evidence. The final thematic log contained excerpts from all three documentary sources, but most came from the Public and Expert discourse, with relatively few from the Government discourse. That pattern is consistent with a policy process in which external claims are present in the wider debate but are not carried through with equal force in official discourse. The government discourse engages with the transition, but it does so on terms that preserve existing policy boundaries. Selective Assimilation names that process of incorporation without full uptake. This explanation is stronger than a binary account of support versus resistance because it captures the way policy discourse can remain open in form while narrow in substance. It also accounts for why the same issues recur across the evidence base in altered form. Some are framed as costs, some as technical futures, some as questions of scope or administration, and some remain unresolved. The common feature is not direct refusal, it is selective processing of what can be included, what can be delayed, and what can be left out.

The findings sit within a literature that treats net zero as a political and social project as well as a technical one. Fankhauser *et al.* (Fankhauser *et al.*, 2022) argue that net zero only becomes workable when it is governed through credible institutions, social legitimacy, and attention to distributive consequences, rather than treated as a narrow emissions-accounting exercise. Dudley *et al.* (Dudley, Jordan, & Lorenzoni, 2022) similarly show that expert advice from the UK Climate Change Committee has become more pointed over time, but that recommendation uptake is still selective rather than automatic. Read against this literature, the present study suggests that the UK consensus gap is not simply a problem of weak ambition, it is also a problem of how climate claims are translated once they enter official policy discourse. Topics that were prominent in the expert and public discourse were often muted, narrowed, or left absent in the government discourse, which suggests that policy translation is part of the problem, not only policy design. The study also speaks directly to the literature on policy acceptability. Bergquist *et al.*'s meta-analysis shows that fairness and perceived effectiveness are among the strongest determinants of public support for climate taxes and laws (Bergquist, Nilsson, Harring, & Jagers, 2022). Maestre-Andrés *et al.* (Maestre-Andrés, Drews, & Van Den Bergh, 2019) reach a similar conclusion in their review of carbon pricing, arguing that perceived fairness is central to policy acceptability. In the UK context, Poortinga *et al.* (Poortinga *et al.*, 2023) report that net zero policies are widely supported, but that support is most closely tied to climate worry and perceived fairness, while effects from reframing are small and support falls when policies are presented through cost and lifestyle implications. More recently, Bergquist (Bergquist, 2025) finds that perceived unfairness is a stronger barrier to environmental tax support than either cost or ineffectiveness. These studies align with the present findings in showing that fairness and distributive implications matter. They also suggest, however, that the problem is not reducible to cost alone. A policy can be costly and still command support if it is seen as fair, while a policy can be low-cost and still meet resistance if it is perceived as unjust.

At the same time, the literature does not support a simple story of public obstruction. Bernauer and Gampfer (Bernauer & Gampfer, 2015) find that support for unilateral climate policy is robust. Sparkman *et al.* (Sparkman, Geiger, & Weber, 2022) show that people systematically underestimate how much support climate policy already has. Bouman *et al.* (Bouman *et al.*, 2024) go further, arguing that majorities across countries, demographics, and most political ideologies want more governmental climate action, not less. Bechtel *et al.* (Bechtel, Scheve, & van Lieshout, 2022) also show that multilateral framing can increase support for costly climate action, in part because it strengthens perceptions of fairness and effectiveness. Taken together, these studies challenge any assumption that government caution is a straightforward reflection of mass opposition. They point instead to misperception, framing, and political filtering. The present study is consistent with that interpretation: the issue is not only whether the public supports climate action, but how that support is translated, narrowed, or disregarded in official discourse. The study also extends literature on agenda-setting, policy dismantling, and climate backlash. Pralle (Pralle, 2013) argues that climate change must remain visible on the political agenda if policy is to advance. O'Neill and Gibbs (O'Neill & Gibbs, 2020) show how the UK zero-carbon housing agenda was mainstreamed and then dismantled, illustrating how sustainability transitions can be blocked or

reversed. Paterson *et al.* (Paterson, Wilshire, & Tobin, 2024b) demonstrate that anti-net zero populism now targets the architecture of climate policy directly through rhetorical strategies of dismantling. The present study adds a different but related mechanism. It shows that filtering can occur before overt dismantling: topics can be retained in the broad language of net zero while being constrained through feasibility framing or left functionally silent. The contribution is therefore not to replace the policy dismantling literature, but to show a more understated form of policy filtering that precedes it.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the UK net zero consensus gap across government, expert, and public documentary sources. Its central finding is that the gap is produced not by straightforward disagreement over the goal of net zero, but by selective filtering of what is allowed into the official policy frame. The government discourse retains the language of transition, but it does so while narrowing, deferring, or omitting several issues that appear more prominently in the expert and public texts. The most pronounced absences concern fairness, diet, wellbeing, sufficiency, justice, frequent flyer levy, meat, and public engagement. The coded excerpts show that these topics are not simply missing by chance. They are either constrained through cost, regulation, market, technology, or security framing, or left underdeveloped through silence, ambiguity, and delay. The study's contribution is to show how this filtering works. The distinction between active constraint and passive exclusion helps explain why the same policy domain can appear responsive while still remaining limited in scope. The broader account of selective assimilation captures the result: official discourse absorbs some climate priorities while muting others, producing a narrower version of consensus than the wider documentary record supports. This matters for climate governance because legitimacy and delivery depend not only on target-setting, but on whether policy can carry fairness, distribution, lifestyle change, and public participation into the official frame.

For policy makers, the main implication is that delivery strategies which emphasise affordability, efficiency, or gradualism may preserve a sense of policy stability while leaving fairness, diet, sufficiency, public engagement, and other distributive concerns underdeveloped. That matters because the expert and public documents do not present these issues as peripheral. They appear as recurring parts of the transition itself. If official discourse continues to absorb only those claims that fit existing policy logics, the result may be a narrower form of net zero governance that is easier to announce than to sustain. The study therefore supports the view that legitimacy in climate policy depends not only on target-setting and implementation capacity, but on whether the policy frame can accommodate the social consequences of change. A second implication concerns political translation. The results show that external priorities are not simply ignored. They are filtered into forms that are easier to manage, justify, or delay. That pattern suggests that the challenge for climate governance is not only to increase ambition, but to widen the terms on which ambition is discussed. Fairness, burden-sharing, lifestyle change, and public participation are not secondary add-ons to delivery. They shape whether policy is seen as credible and governable. The study therefore points to the need for climate communication and policy design

that can carry these issues into official planning without converting them into weak procedural references or future possibilities.

The study has clear limits, it is based on three documentary sources and therefore captures a specific policy debate rather than the full net zero process. It does not directly observe private negotiation, ministerial deliberation, lobbying, or implementation on the ground. It also analyses a particular policy moment, so the pattern identified here should not be assumed to hold unchanged across other sectors, other countries, or later UK policy cycles. The coding strategy was deliberately structured and reproducible, but it still reflects a defined corpus, a fixed topic set, and a pre-specified analytical framework. Different source documents or topic selections could produce a different distribution of silences and rhetorical mechanisms. A further limitation is that the analysis remains documentary, it identifies how priorities are framed in texts, not how they are received, contested, or operationalised by audiences and institutions outside the documents. Future work could test whether the same pattern appears in other policy domains, later UK net zero documents, or other national settings, and whether interviews or process tracing reveal how these filtering practices operate inside decision-making.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Codex to write the code for the study. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed the code as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Figures

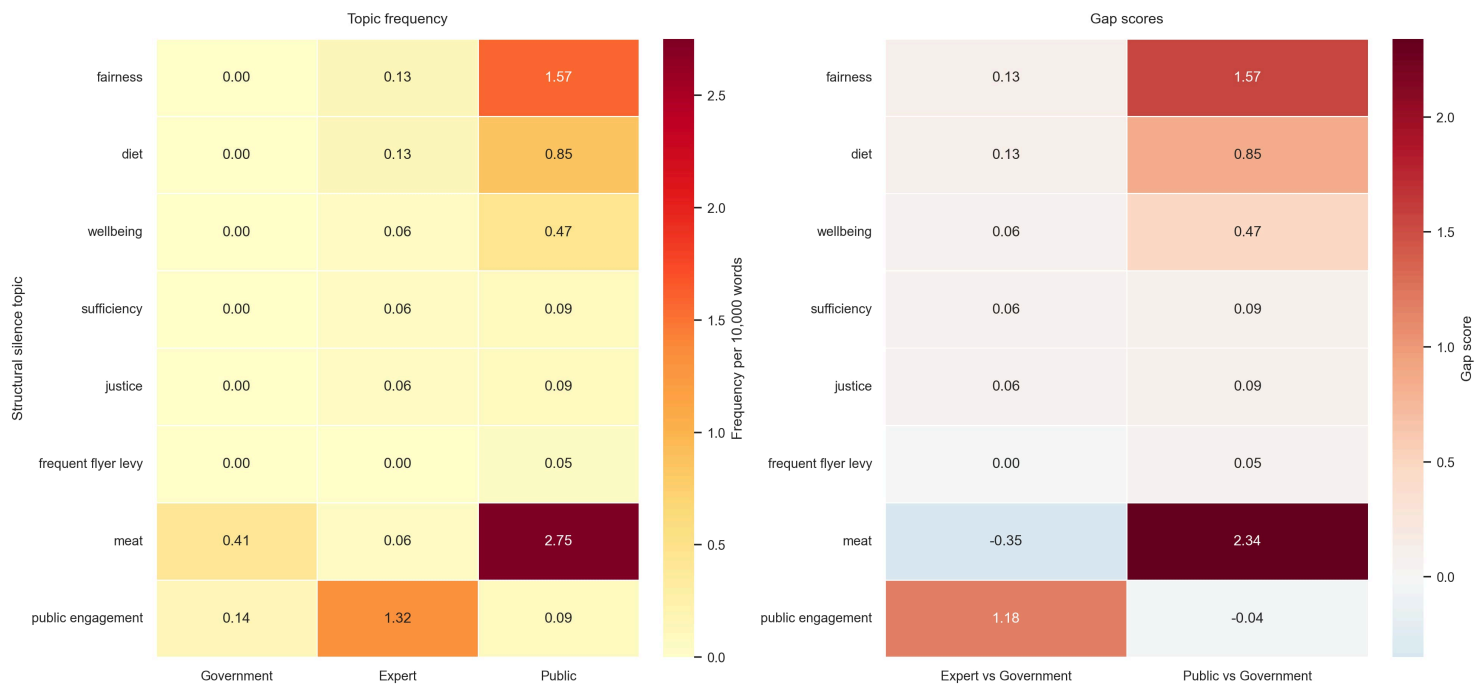


Figure 1

Heatmap of topic frequency and gap scores across government, expert, and public sources

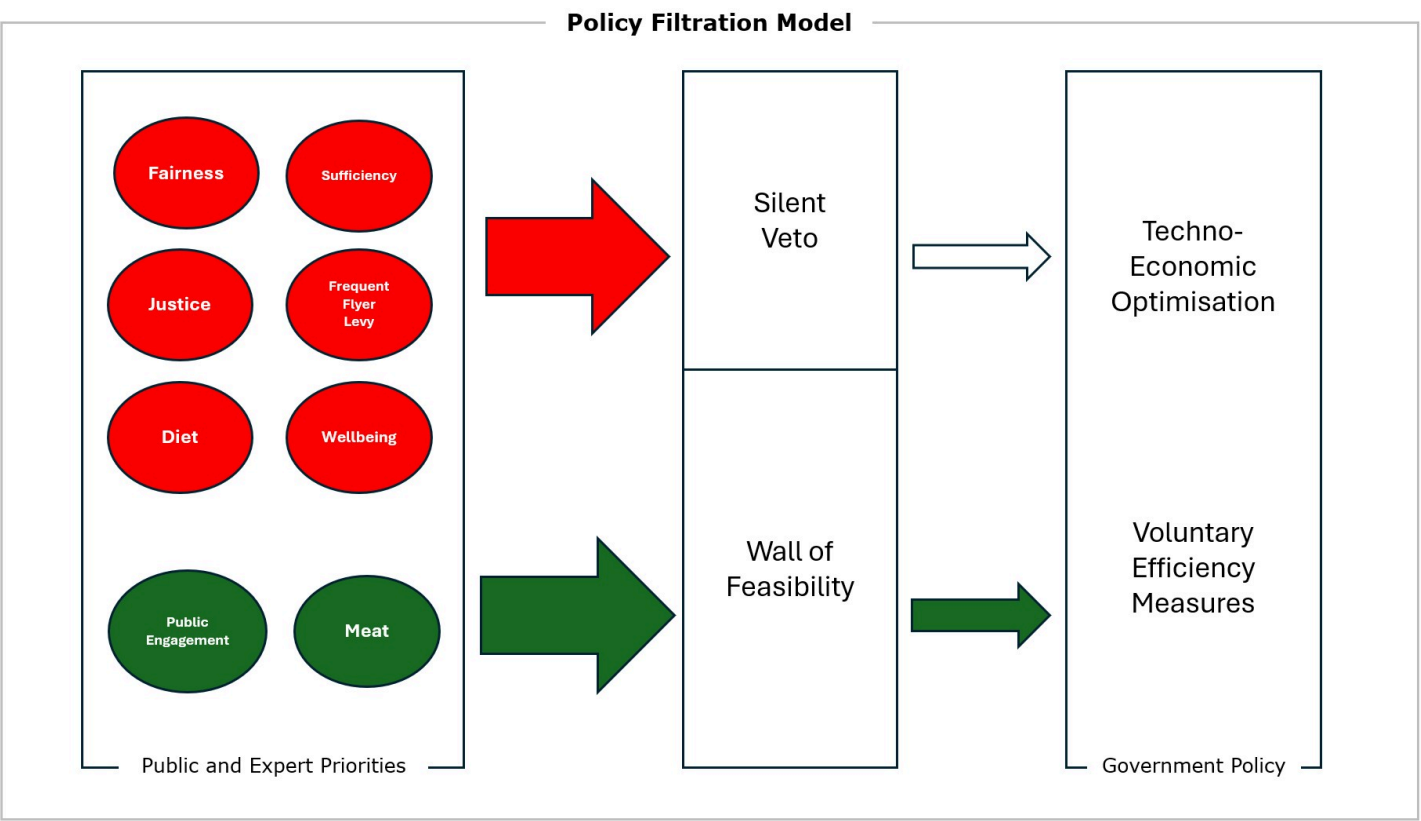


Figure 2

