

Zero Ideas[®]

Unleashing multi-partisan support for climate action



Simon Glynn

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Acceptance of climate change as a Left-leaning political agenda is limiting support for climate action. New research across the G20 and beyond shows a large, untapped base of support on the political Right. We don't see it because we don't speak to it, so the support stays latent.

If we learn to connect with this group, we can turn this vicious circle into a virtuous one, extend the support for climate policies from a minority to a majority, and achieve the cross-party consensus that can sustain climate commitments over multiple election cycles.

A global investigation

In 2023 Potential Energy, a non-profit marketing firm creating public demand for climate solutions, carried out one of the broadest and most comprehensive global message testing studies conducted on climate change, working in partnership with the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, the Meliore Foundation, and Zero Ideas. The messaging findings are presented in a research report, *Later is Too Late: A comprehensive analysis of the messaging that accelerates climate action in the G20 and beyond*,¹ and in an interactive, Web-based, *Global Data Explorer*.²

At the core of this study was a survey of nearly 58,000 people across 23 countries. Zero Ideas has now used the data from this survey, in collaboration with Potential Energy, to generate a segmentation of the 'market' for climate policies and messages, in order to better understand the motivations and interests of different addressable groups. This segmentation reveals two complementary target groups with strong latent support for climate action. One is familiar and well understood, but the other is less so.

Finding a neglected group

We segmented the global public (as represented by the online public across our 23 countries), based solely on their moral values and beliefs. Our model yielded four distinct groups of people, with different prevalence and characteristics around the world. Two of these are relatively unresponsive to government action on climate change, in one case because they are actively resistant and in the other because they are disengaged. But two stand out as supportive, each in a different way.

The first of these two target groups presents a familiar picture of archetypical climate supporters: politically Left-leaning, trusting in their national government, and believing in an egalitarian role for government in meeting basic needs for food, housing, healthcare and education, with society run for the sake of people at large. We call them Social Staters. They make up more than one third of the (online) population in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Italy, Kenya, Norway, South Africa, and Türkiye.³ As a broad generalization, the prevailing global narratives on climate change, e.g. from the United Nations and from the climate movement, fit well with this group.

The other group that is particularly supportive of government action on climate is quite different. They are politically somewhat Right-leaning and sceptical about their government's role in their everyday lives, generally believing we would be better off with less government involvement. Like the Social Staters, they have strong egalitarian morals, but they look for equality more in shared opportunity than in government intervention in the outcome. They are optimistic, confident about the future, and believe that the world will be a better place for their children than it was for them. Particularly prevalent in the Global South, they tend to see sustainability in the context of sustainable development. Relative to the other three segments they skew younger, more urban, actively religious, and socially integrated, through their families and communities. We call them Engaged Families (Figure 1). They make up more than one third of the (online) population in China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye.

Their political orientation by party is shown for selected countries in Figure 2.

Figure 1
Strong support for climate action exists on the Right as well as the Left

Strong support for immediate government action on climate

N = 53,753. 'Strong support' is the proportion of the group answering 5 on a 5-point scale of agreement with the statement, 'I support immediate action by the government to address climate change.' 'Political leaning' is the net proportion of the group identifying themselves either left of centre (1-3) or right of centre (5-7) on a 7-point spectrum from 1='extreme left' to 7='extreme right'. Excludes China and Saudi Arabia.

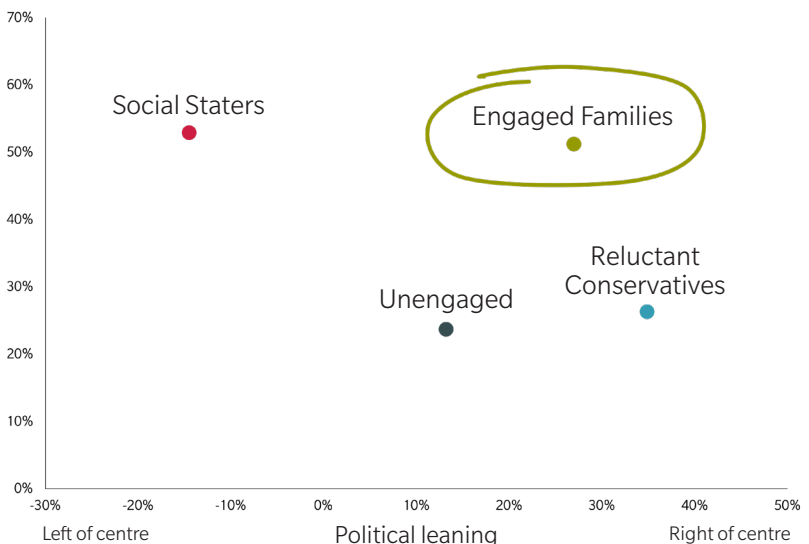
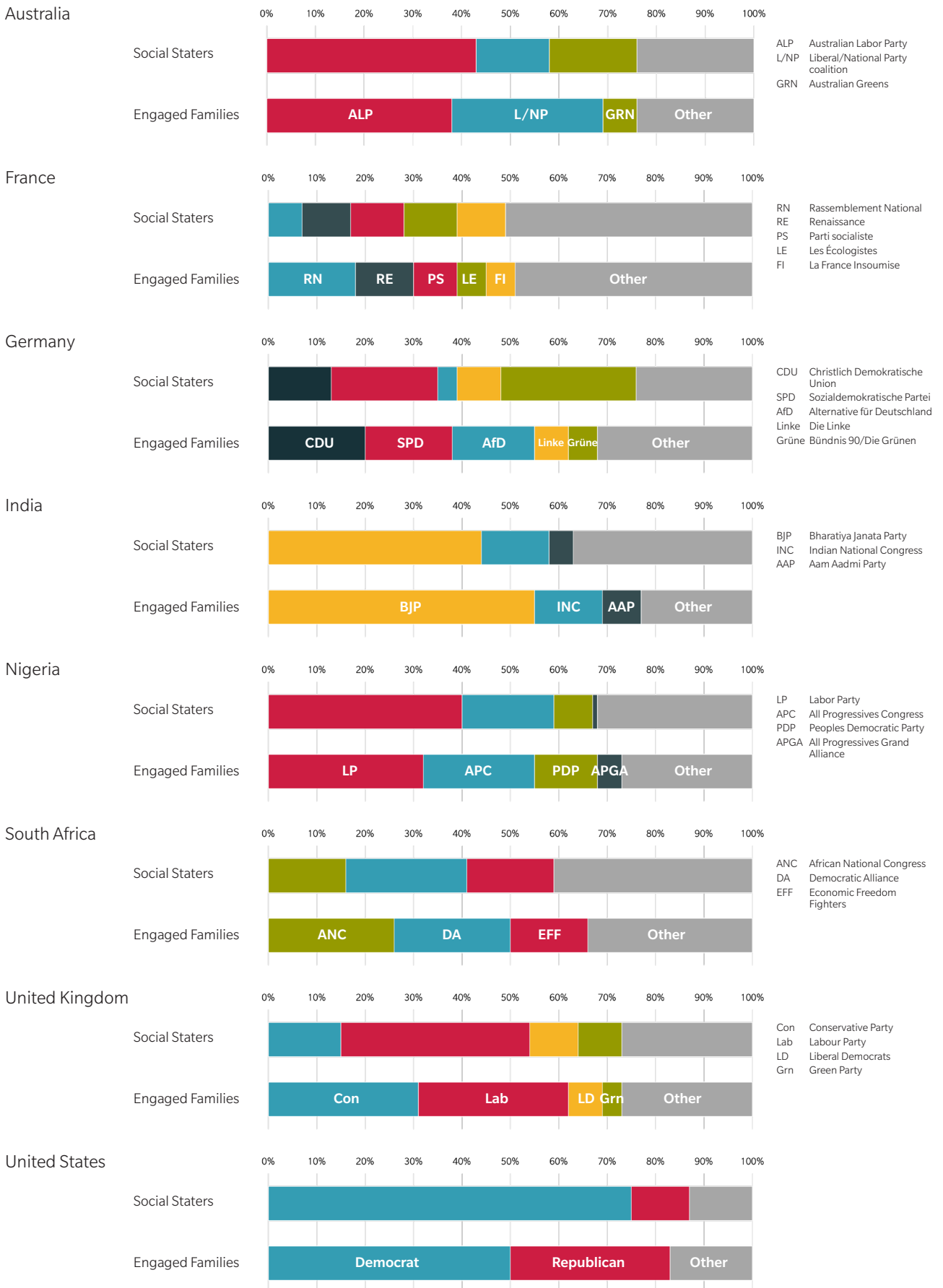


Figure 2
Engaged Families tend to support a mix of mainstream parties from centre-left to right



Other includes smaller named parties, independent, and prefer not to say

Engaged Families are looking for growth and prosperity, and see sustainability as the way to achieve that, not to substitute for it. Compared with the Social Staters, they see a bigger role for business rather than government, and for countries to compete rather than cooperate. They are twice as likely as Social Staters to agree that we should solve climate change ‘to protect ourselves and put our national interests first,’ and to want to find ways to control nature, rather than work in harmony with it. They are not the archetype that people typically have in mind when thinking about climate supporters. Unsurprisingly, then, the prevailing global narratives on climate change do not fit so well with this second group.

Broadening the foundation for climate action

Simple arithmetic shows the importance of appealing to both of these groups of people. Social Staters alone are not the majority in any of the countries we researched. Social Staters and Engaged Families between them make up the majority in 15 of the 23 countries. Connecting with Engaged Families is therefore critical to winning support for climate policies, and won’t happen naturally with narratives tuned to Social Staters.

There are two particular benefits to connecting with Engaged Families, beyond boosting the overall numbers:

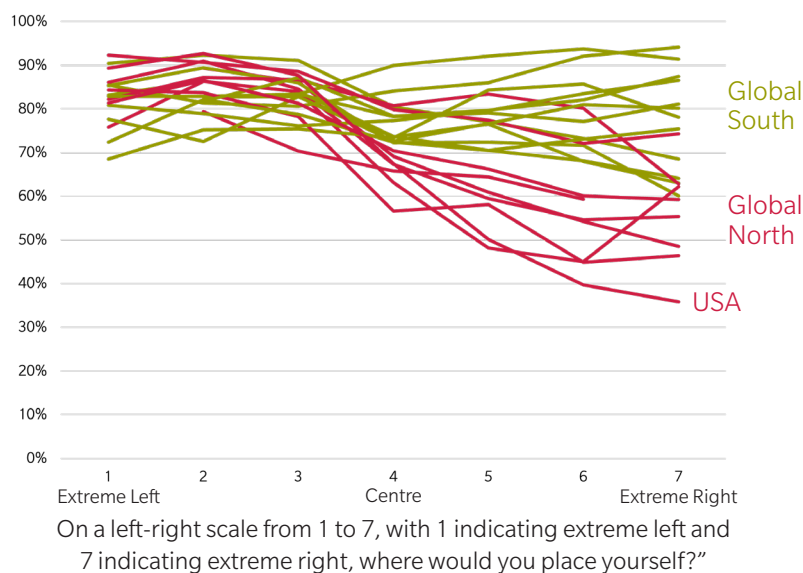
Depoliticizing climate action. The deep, structural transformations needed in our energy systems, agriculture, transport and industry require investors’ confidence that government commit-

ment will be sustained over multiple election cycles. Cross-party support is critical to achieving a stable, long-term policy environment. That cross-party support becomes possible if we engage both the Social Staters and the Engaged Families. Climate change is not inherently an issue of the Left. We found in the same research that the political polarization of views on climate varies a lot by country. The extreme polarization in the US is an outlier; other countries in the Global North tend to be more mildly polarized, and several countries—including all those we tested in the Global South—have fairly even support across the political spectrum (Figure 3). Connecting with Engaged Families activates the latent support on the Right, and shifts the political battles on climate to practical questions of how, rather than ideological questions of why.

Appealing to the growing emitters. The Social Staters—the archetypal Left-leaning base supportive of climate action—are particularly prevalent in Latin America and some countries in the Global North, and are under-represented in the big Asian countries which have high and rising emissions (on a total basis, if not necessarily per capita). Engaged Families, by contrast, account for the majority of people in some of these Asian countries (among the online population tested). As the world’s carbon emissions rebalance, with emissions generally decreasing in North America and Europe and rising rapidly in Asia, it becomes increasingly important to connect with people in these countries.

Figure 3
Political polarization of support for climate action is limited to the Global North, with the US as an outlier

% agreeing that ‘I support immediate action by the government to address climate change.’



N minimum 2,000 per country. Attribution of countries to Global South and Global North follows UNCTAD. Excludes China and Saudi Arabia. Source: Adapted from Marshall, J., Lu, J., Glynn, S., Leiserowitz, A., Brookes, T. (2023). *Later is too late: A comprehensive analysis of the messaging that accelerates climate action in the G20 and beyond.* Potential Energy Coalition.

Consensus on policy direction

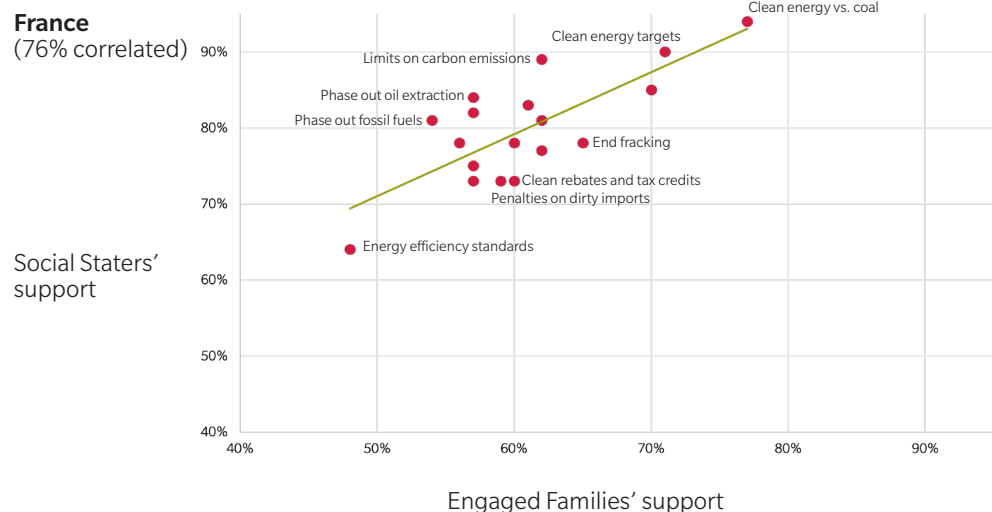
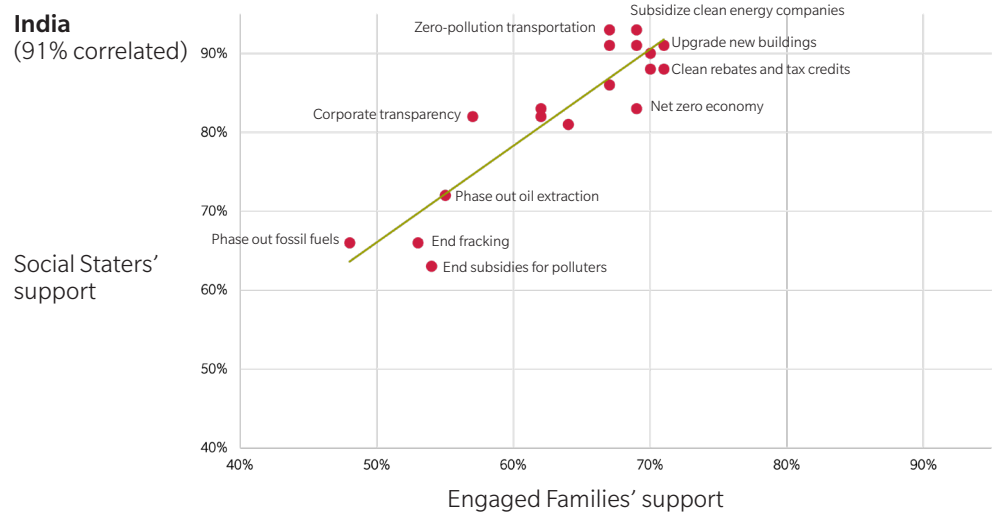
The good news is that the specific policies that Engaged Families do and don't support are largely similar to the picture for Social Staters. We don't need two separate and conflicting policy agendas, because the policies that attract one group generally won't alienate the other. The important difference is in how to communicate with each group, in terms of both messages and messengers. And that can be a 'both... and', rather than an 'either... or'.

In our research we tested people's response to 18 different policies for climate action, each pitched head-to-head against an opposing policy that favours the status quo (see Appendix 1). When we compare the support that Engaged Families give to this range of policies in each country against the support that Social Staters give, the two are

on average 81% correlated. Among Global South countries, the correlation is even higher, averaging 86%. Among Global North countries it is not as extreme, but still high, averaging 77%. Figure 4 shows the correlation charts for India and France as examples.

For comparison, this in-country correlation between these two segments is higher than the correlation we see between countries. On average, across all country pairs among the 23 countries we researched, support for the range of policies from two different countries is only 62% correlated. (Again we see greater consistency in the Global South, with south-south country pairs 79% correlated on average, north-north pairs 56%, and north-south pairs 58%.) Country differences should therefore drive policymaking more than segment differences.

Figure 4
Support for a range of climate policies from Engaged Families and Social Staters is highly correlated



N = 4,120 for India and 2,021 for France. Each red dot represents a climate policy frame tested head-to-head against an opposing frame. Full text for each of these policies is shown in Appendix 1.

A failure to connect

So the policies themselves don't seem to be the issue—at least within the range of policies we tested. But there is an issue in how we are failing to connect with Engaged Families, which means that we are not activating their latent support.

Engaged Families are almost as concerned about climate change as the Social Staters are: 83% of Engaged Families are 'alarmed' or 'concerned' about climate change, using the definitions from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication,⁴ compared with 89% of Social Staters. Their stated support for government action on climate change is also almost as high as the Social Staters'. On average across countries, the proportion agreeing (strongly or somewhat) with the statement, 'I support immediate action by the government to address climate change,' is 80% in both cases (compared with 71% for the overall population). And the proportion *strongly* agreeing with that statement is also similar for both: 51% for Engaged Families and 53% for Social Staters. And yet the level of support for actual policies, pitched head-to-head against the opposition, is much less strong among Engaged Families. Engaged Families show an average of 65% support (across countries and policies), compared with 79% support among Social Staters: a difference of 15 percentage points. The difference is strongest in the Global North, where Engaged Families' support is at 61%, 18 percentage points below Social Staters at 79%. It is milder but still substantial in the Global South, where Engaged Families' support is at 69%, 10 percentage points below Social Staters at 80%. The principal figures above are summarized in Table 1 for easier comparison.

So how do we connect with Engaged Families, and turn their real concern and their desire for action into broad, cross-party support for actual climate policies? We need to respond to their values and aspirations, which much of today's climate narrative and messaging fails to do. That means that we need first to understand what those values and aspirations are.

Rethinking responsibility

The segmentation on which this paper is based was built entirely from questions about people's moral foundations. We asked respondents to what extent they agreed with a variety of statements expressing moral beliefs and values. Some of these statements are derived from the moral foundations proposed by Jonathan Haidt

Table 1
Engaged Families lag in policy support despite their desire for action

	Engaged Families	Social Staters	Difference
'Alarmed' about climate change	57%	60%	3%pts
'Concerned' about climate change	26%	29%	3%pts
Support government action on climate	80%	80%	0%pts
Strong support for government action	51%	53%	2%pts
Average support for specific policies	65%	79%	15%pts

in his book *The righteous mind*,⁵ and the associated *Moral Foundations Questionnaire*;⁶ for example, 'Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.' We also included other moral statements about how society should be organized. (See Appendix 2 for the methodology, showing the path from these statements to our four segments.)

Our two segments that are highly supportive of climate action, the Engaged Families and Social Staters, differ in how they answer two subgroups of these statements: one related to the role of government in society, and one related to optimism and positivity about the future.

Social Staters stand out for believing in a strong, active role for government in society. They tend to *disagree* that 'if the government spent less time trying to fix everyone's problems, we'd all be a lot better off,' that 'our government tries to do too many things for too many people—we should just let people take care of themselves,' and that 'the government interferes too much in our everyday lives.' Engaged Families, by contrast, tend to *agree* with these statements about governments being too involved.

Social Staters also tend to be critical about both the future and the past, while Engaged Families tend to be more positive, optimistic and loyal. Engaged Families tend to *agree*, and Social Staters to *disagree*, that 'the world will be a better place for our children than it was for me,' that 'change is always good and a sign of progress, even if it's not what I was hoping for,' that 'I am proud of my country's history,' and that 'people should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.'

It is these moral statements that define our segments (together with other moral statements which our two segments of interest answer similarly). The extent to which people agree with these statements determines which segment we allocate them to. We can then observe other characteristics that people in the same segment tend to share, which don't define the segment, but can help to describe and understand it. This is what we mean when we say, for example, that Social Staters tend to lean politically Left and Engaged Families lean Right. The groupings are not defined that way, but they tend to be that way, given their moral beliefs. Similarly, we did not define them in terms of their support for climate action. We observe that people in these two segments, defined by their moral beliefs, tend to have a stronger commitment to climate action than the other two segments of the population—and that this same commitment translates into support for real policies more effectively among Social Staters than among Engaged Families.

Once we know more about who the members of these groups are as people, we can begin to see why they think and act as they do. Social Staters, who support government intervention and are already somewhat downbeat about the future, are relatively open to a government-led story that requires constraint. Engaged Families, who are sceptical about government and optimistic about a better future, are looking for a more

empowering story about opportunity and abundance. Climate action—in many cases the same climate action—can deliver both, but the stories need to be different.

It is nearly five years since Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac argued, from their experience in negotiating the Paris Agreement, that competing for dwindling planetary resources is a futile zero-sum game, and that collaborating to create sustainable abundance, e.g. through clean energy, is the game we need to be playing instead.⁷ Our research report, *Later is too late*, built on this idea with its recognition that limitation is a losing frame, and that the shared motivation that people have is about protecting what we love for the next generation.

This is not naive optimism; it is grounded in loss and longing, not denial and fantasy. It offers agency, seeing responsibility as a moral choice ('I am a responsible person') rather than an imposed burden ('I have been given responsibility through the position I have been put in').

If we position government-led climate action not as an act of rationing or sacrifice, but as a responsible and positive choice to build a future of sustainable abundance and prosperity, we can connect with Engaged Families as well as with Social Staters, and so can begin to build majority, cross-party support for the policies we need.

Simon Glynn is founder of Zero Ideas.

Appendix 1

Full text of climate policy frames and opposing frames tested

Respondents rated 18 pairs of policy statements as a trade-off between two politically contrasted alternatives. Respondents were asked a binary question that simulates a political battle: ‘The following are pairs of statements you might hear from two competing political leaders. In each case, which leader are you most likely to support?’ For each pair of policy statements (i.e., the

policy territory), respondents were (a) presented with one anti-climate statement and (b) randomly presented with one of three pro-climate statements. The pro-climate statement with the highest percentage of agreement for each policy territory was selected for the analysis in this paper, and is the one shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Head-to-head policy statements

Policy territory <i>(not shown to respondents)</i>	Support statement	Opposition statement
<i>Clean energy vs coal</i>	Using clean energy alternatives to coal lowers energy costs and creates a greener energy sector. It brings affordable, reliable, and sustainable electricity to everyone's daily lives.	Coal is a stable, cost-effective energy source. We need it to power more homes, not less. Any transition will need to be gradual and wait until other technologies are ready.
<i>Subsidize clean energy companies</i>	We should invest in safer, healthier communities with reduced smog and cleaner air by encouraging clean technologies.	The government/We shouldn't waste taxpayer money on making risky bets on unproven technology. They should let the market decide.
<i>Limits on carbon emissions</i>	We share a global responsibility to limit the amount of carbon pollution emitted in order to protect the communities that are most at risk.	Regulating corporate activities will ultimately lead to inefficient economies and higher prices for consumers.
<i>Clean energy targets</i>	Cleaner energy means cleaner air, water, and environment. We should require our energy providers to rapidly shift to using only non-polluting clean energy for our communities.	Clean energy is expensive and unreliable. In time, it may work, but what we need now is steady, dependable power for our homes and industries.
<i>Upgrade new buildings</i>	As better technologies come onto the market, we should require their use in all new buildings and construction. These smart upgrades ultimately save us in energy and money.	It isn't right for the government to tell us how to cook our food or how to heat our homes. It's inevitable that these changes will increase prices for everyday citizens.
<i>Food and agriculture</i>	Our farmers are the most vulnerable to extreme weather. We must financially support them in new, more sustainable ways of growing food during a changing climate.	Farmers and farmworkers know best, and we shouldn't force them to use agricultural practices that will be expensive and raise costs for everyone else.
<i>Clean rebates and tax credits</i>	Clean technologies should be accessible for everyone, not just the rich and wealthy. We should ensure that the communities most impacted by pollution and climate change can access and benefit from clean products with some financial support.	In a time of economic uncertainty, it is not right to increase taxes and costs on everyday citizens to peddle 'clean' products.
<i>Energy efficiency standards</i>	Setting new energy standards that increase efficiency and reduce pollution will force companies to be more innovative and competitive, leading to better products for consumers.	Raising energy standards for buildings and cars will only lead to higher prices for consumers. The average citizen can't afford it, especially in today's economy.
<i>Corporate transparency</i>	People deserve the truth about the environmental and social impacts of companies. Businesses must be held to higher standards and required to produce their products cleanly and ethically.	The government/We should focus on keeping energy prices low for citizens and maintaining stability of the energy system, not interfering in how companies operate.
<i>Zero-pollution transportation</i>	Switching to zero-pollution cars, trucks, and other kinds of transportation is in the best interest of our communities. It means less toxic air pollution and healthier kids.	To take away our ability to drive our own cars is to take away our freedom. We should decide for ourselves what mode best fits our needs. Relying on public transit alone is unrealistic.
<i>Regulate methane</i>	Polluters are getting away with leaking methane gas, a powerful carbon pollutant, into the air. We must hold them accountable by strictly regulating these pollutants.	Methane leakages rarely happen and are not a big enough problem that needs more government bureaucracy. Natural gas is a cheap, clean and cost effective power source.
<i>Net zero economy</i>	Clean, zero-pollution economies are just better. They're better for our health, our kids, our way of life and the planet. We can start to build a pollution-free society today.	We are already transitioning our economy to lower emissions and should continue to do so gradually. We need to wait until other technologies are ready.
<i>Taxes on polluters</i>	To ensure a fair and just energy system, we need to charge polluters for the cost of the damage their pollution causes.	Any tax implemented on companies is ultimately passed on to the consumer, leading to higher prices, and still wouldn't reduce climate change or extreme weather.
<i>Penalties on dirty imports</i>	Pollution-intensive products produced in other countries with dirty energy should be the most expensive, not the cheapest. The government/We should ban or put a cost on dirty imported products.	Any tax implemented on companies is ultimately passed on to the consumer, leading to higher prices, and still wouldn't reduce climate change or extreme weather.
<i>End fracking</i>	We cannot permit oil and gas companies to keep fracking, a process that releases methane, a powerful pollutant that traps more heat, cooks our planet, and worsens wildfires, droughts, and floods.	We should use all cost-effective forms of energy, and fracking ensures we have access to cheap and abundant energy.
<i>Phase out oil extraction</i>	Oil extraction has significant environmental impacts, including air and water pollution. We must phase out oil extraction to reduce pollution and avoid risking our health.	Access to oil resources is critical to keep our cars and trucks on the road, powering our economy, and protecting our way of life. We need to ensure a stable, secure supply of oil for our country.
<i>End subsidies for polluters</i>	The government/We should stop providing handouts to companies that pollute the environment, causing climate change.	Fossil fuel subsidies keep energy prices affordable and support economic growth. We must balance environmental concerns with societal needs.
<i>Phase out fossil fuels</i>	We can no longer let dirty, extractive industries use our natural resources for their own profit. Their products are making extreme weather worse and must be phased out.	We can reduce emissions while continuing to use fossil fuels, which are critical to keeping prices low and maintaining our quality of life.

Appendix 2

Segmentation methodology

The four moral segments featured in this paper were developed using the following segmentation method.

We asked respondents, as part of a larger online survey, to what extent they agreed with 17 statements that express various moral values and beliefs. We then performed an Exploratory Factor Analysis of their answers. The factor analysis groups together in one ‘factor’ statements that are correlated, meaning that people tend to see each of them in much the same way (if they agree with one, they are likely to agree with another in the same set). Table 3 shows how much each statement (in the rows of the table) is correlated with each factor (in the columns). The name we have given each factor, at the head of each column, is our interpretation of the moral statements that most correlate with that factor (those

shown in bold and colour in the table), emphasising what they have in common.

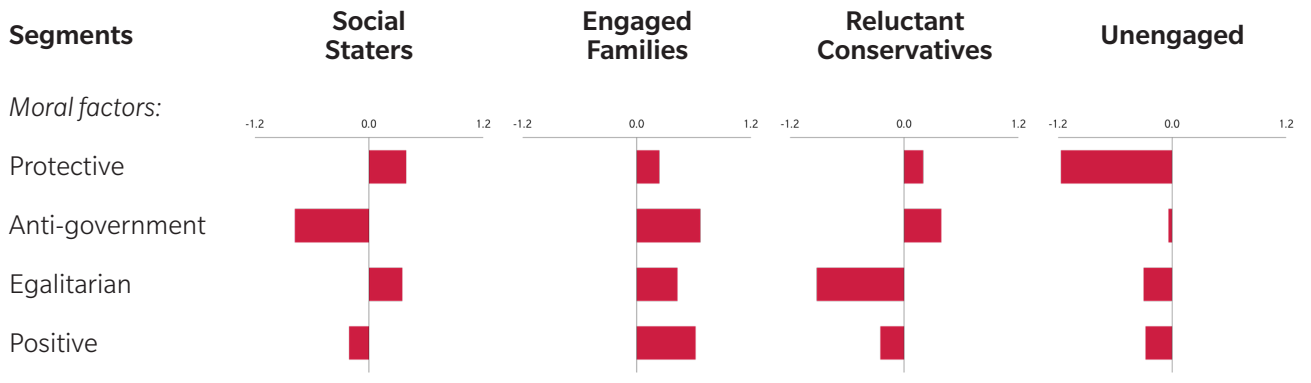
We then used k-means clustering to group respondents based on their similarity across these four moral factors. We identified four distinct segments which usefully distinguish different responses regarding climate action. The decision to specify four segments (clusters) in the k-means algorithm was made through an analysis of silhouette scores and within-cluster sum of squares.

Finally, we profiled each of these segments based on a range of other questions in the survey. Based on these profiles, we named the four segments to reflect our understanding of what makes each distinctive: Social Staters, Engaged Families, Reluctant Conservatives, and the Disengaged (Figure 5).

Table 3
Four factors derived from respondents’ agreement with 17 moral statements

Statements in survey	Factors			
	Protective	Anti-govt	Egalitarian	Positive
Justice is the most important requirement for a society.	0.53	0.03	0.17	0.22
One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenceless animal.	0.49	-0.02	0.17	-0.02
People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.	0.48	0.12	0.12	0.10
Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.	0.47	0.19	0.02	0.21
Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.	0.46	0.01	0.30	0.15
If the government spent less time trying to fix everyone's problems, we'd all be a lot better off.	-0.01	0.69	-0.04	0.03
Our government tries to do too many things for too many people. We should just let people take care of themselves.	-0.08	0.67	-0.11	0.07
In my ideal society, all basic needs (food, housing, healthcare, education) would be guaranteed by the government for everyone.	0.15	-0.01	0.62	0.09
The world would be a more peaceful place if its wealth were divided more equally among nations.	0.15	0.04	0.59	0.06
I support government programs to get rid of poverty.	0.23	-0.07	0.47	0.25
The world will be a better place for our children than it was for me.	0.01	0.26	0.15	0.54
Change is always good and a sign of progress, even if it's not what I was hoping for.	0.23	0.19	0.21	0.42
Science and technology drive progress for society and improve lives.	0.34	-0.04	0.17	0.41
I am proud of my country's history.	0.21	0.27	0.02	0.38
I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.	0.30	0.36	0.10	0.11
People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.	0.14	0.39	0.08	0.21
Men and women each have different roles to play in society.	0.18	0.38	0.02	0.22

Figure 5
Four segments (clusters) derived from how respondents score on the four moral factors



Zero Ideas is challenging leadership thinking on climate action. We conduct original research and publish articles and research reports to drive an ambitious leadership mindset based on radical realism.

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Endnotes

- 1 John Marshall, Jessica Lu, Simon Glynn, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Tom Brookes (2023), *Later is Too Late*, Potential Energy.
<https://potentialenergycoalition.org/guides-and-reports/global-report/>
- 2 <https://potentialenergycoalition.org/global-data-tool/>
- 3 Because our research is based on an online survey, these numbers may not be representative of the full, national population, especially in countries with limited Internet penetration.
- 4 <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/about/projects/global-warmings-six-americas/>
- 5 Jonathan Haidt (2012), *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*
- 6 <https://moralfoundations.org/questionnaires/>
- 7 Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac (2020), *The future we choose: Surviving the climate crisis*, p60