

How AI will reshape the political opportunity for climate



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Political issues such as climate change, which lack the salience to stand on their own, piggyback on the issues that are most salient to citizens. Today, that is overwhelmingly the immediate pressure of the cost of living. But this is not always the case.

Systemic, societal issues have become salient before. And the signs are that AI is set to reshape the political landscape, raising the salience of systemic concerns that are at the core of the climate issue but are not getting attention today.

This could turn out to be good news for climate action, opening up political territory that climate needs but has not been able to reach. Or it could be bad news, with AI dominating that territory as fast as it opens it.

Either way, it is the public reaction to AI, rather than climate change, that is likely to shape our perspectives and define what's possible. Tracking and building on what AI makes salient may unlock the most promising opportunities for climate.

Summary

Climate change is systemic: both the risks we face and the responses required operate at the scale of economies, institutions and societies. But despite decades of trying, we have not made those systemic issues sufficiently or consistently politically salient.

Instead, climate policy has adopted the practical approach of piggybacking on whatever is most politically salient. Today, in many rich countries, that is overwhelmingly the immediate pressure of the cost of living. Piggybacking on the cost of living can unlock substantial climate action, as clean technologies offer lower prices and greater security. But it confines the political case for climate to those immediate material benefits, leaving the deeper questions of governance, collective purpose and long-term responsibility untouched. What it makes possible is useful but is not enough to stop the devastation of climate change. That is the hole we are in.

But politics is not always so immediate. ‘It’s the economy, stupid’ is usually right, but there have been moments when systemic questions—how

society is led, who it works for, what it values and what kind of future it is trying to create—have come to the fore. This has usually happened in response to a widely felt sense of loss, failure or brokenness.

Today there are signs that artificial intelligence may create such a moment. AI threatens losses across people’s livelihoods, relationships and communities; our collective agency and institutional capacity; and ultimately human dignity, purpose and value. Those losses could raise the political salience of systemic concerns that are central to climate change but are struggling to get attention today.

AI has what climate has lacked: it is experienced by people directly in their lives, while simultaneously raising systemic questions about power, governance and purpose. Its speed, scale and immediacy may therefore provide the paths that climate has been missing from personal experience to societal concern.

The figure below summarizes our argument.

How AI-generated losses may create new political opportunities for climate

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership <i>AI issues:</i> Concentration of compute, data, and models; innovation outpacing regulation  <i>Loss of:</i> National agency, economic equality, connection between GDP and welfare  <i>Potentially salient:</i> Leadership role of government, shaping vs. optimizing, re-embedding the economy in society  <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Recognizing the end of an era of optimization and the need for more mission-based leadership; rejection of the powerlessness of ‘realism’ stances that defend the status quo	What it means to be human <i>AI issues:</i> Machine cognition, robotic dexterity  <i>Loss of:</i> Human agency and value; dignity, displaced by utility; existential stability and ‘progress’  <i>Potentially salient:</i> What we want to optimize—Purpose, meaning, the position of humanity in the world  <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Readiness to challenge societal goals and metrics, and reassess the big drivers of human endeavour—markets, finance, productivity—as means rather than ends
	Economic security and opportunity <i>AI issues:</i> Job displacement and intensification/speed  <i>Loss of:</i> Income (jobs, levels of pay, value of skills) complementing outgoings (cost of living)  <i>Potentially salient:</i> Household viability; future career ladders  <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Sense of dependence on an operating environment that can’t be taken for granted. Primarily a bridge to the salience of adjacent territories.	Attachment to people, place, community <i>AI issues:</i> Substitute relationships; global uniformity of models; data-centre buildout  <i>Loss of:</i> Human connection; local activity, character and contribution; tangibility  <i>Potentially salient:</i> Craving for the real, tangible, local, natural  <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Valuing nature and outcomes beyond the financial; sensitivity to loss and the need to protect what matters to us
My life (immediate)		

Looking at what has become politically salient in the past, we group concerns along two dimensions: how people experience the effects—immediately in their own lives or systemically across society—and how they judge those effects—by what works functionally or by what matters in terms of values and meaning.

In each quadrant of the resulting ‘salience map’, we trace a potential causal path:

1. The AI developments emerging in that territory;
2. The losses that people may experience or anticipate as a result;
3. The broader concerns the sense of loss may make politically salient;
4. The opportunities for climate action to piggy-back on that new salience.

This is not a forecast of the future. Not every social or cultural concern becomes politically salient. It is a way to look beyond the immediacy

of the cost of living, to monitor how the political landscape is changing, and to look out for opportunities for future salience as they emerge.

Where AI does create new salience, it could be good news for climate action, opening up political territory that climate needs but has not been able to reach. Or it could be bad news, with AI dominating that territory as fast as it opens it.

The practical task is to monitor which AI issues are moving from private concerns to cultural and elite discourse and from there into electoral politics; explore policies that build on the opportunities in each territory; and watch where AI closes political opportunities as carefully as where it opens them.

However it evolves, it is the public reaction to AI, rather than climate change, that is likely to shape our perspectives and define what’s possible. Tracking and building on what AI makes salient may unlock the most promising and previously elusive opportunities for climate.

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1. Political opportunity is shaped by what is salient

‘It’s the economy, stupid’

There are many things we care about that don’t shape how we vote in elections. Climate change is one of them. Research consistently shows a vast majority who worry about climate change and want action to fix it—typically 70-90%, depending on the study and the question. But research also consistently shows that climate change is low on the list of issues that steer our votes (Figure 1).¹ We do care about it, but it is not politically salient.

To win public and therefore parliamentary support, big policy initiatives depend on what is politically salient. If the issue in question has low salience, it can try to piggyback on something with a higher salience.

Often, including today in the U.S. and UK as shown in Figure 1, what is most salient is people’s immediate household finances—the cost of living. As famously articulated by Bill Clinton’s campaign strategist in the 1992 U.S. presidential election, ‘It’s the economy, stupid.’

As former UK prime minister Rishi Sunak said of current UK prime minister Andy Burnham,

‘Burnham has declared that he will lead a “cost of living government”. It is easy to see why: the cost of living is the number one issue for voters.’²

It has become normal for climate policy to be positioned as cost-of-living policy, offering lower and more predictable energy costs through reduced dependence on the world prices and supply of fossil fuels. The most prominent example is America’s Inflation Reduction Act, delivering massive subsidies and investments for clean energy through a promise about prices and jobs, piggybacking on the salience of the cost of living.

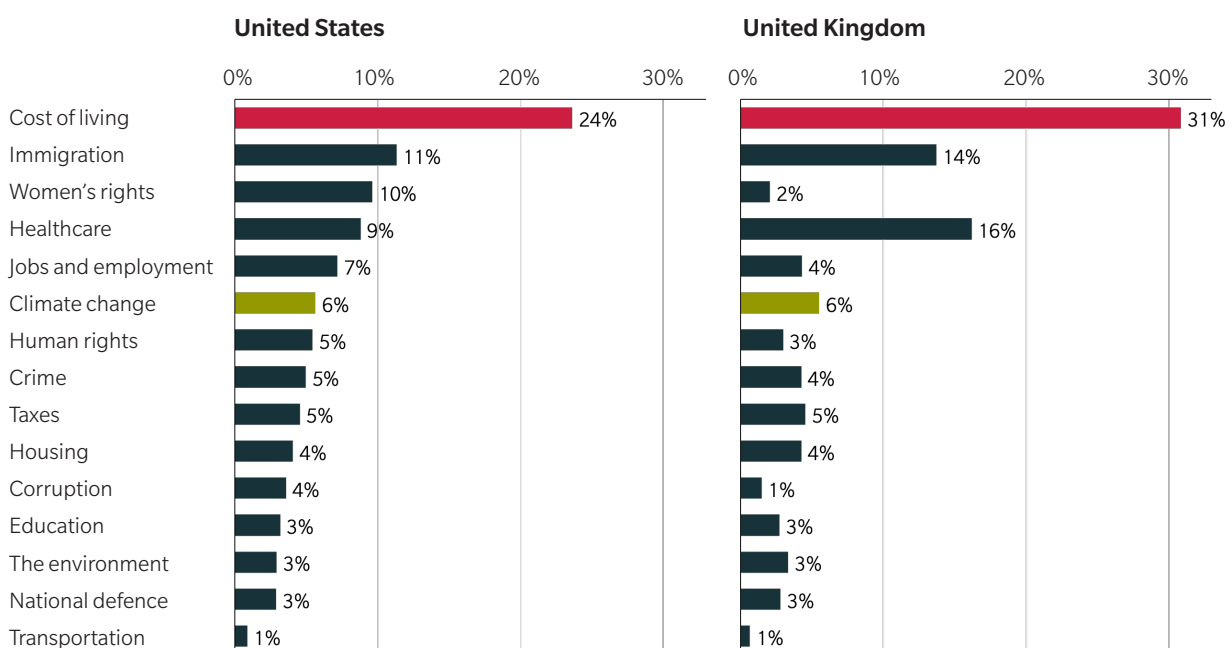
Salience is not always to do with the economy

The chart in Figure 1 is strongly skewed to the cost of living. Indeed, among 21 countries surveyed in 2023, the cost of living was the most, or one of the most, salient issues in 15 of them. In the remaining six (all in the Global South) the most salient issues were typically jobs and corruption.³

But even in the Global North salience can go beyond the cost of living. In Germany, immigration is up there with the cost of living; in Poland, it’s healthcare and defence (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Voting issues in the U.S. and UK

Ranking of voting issues

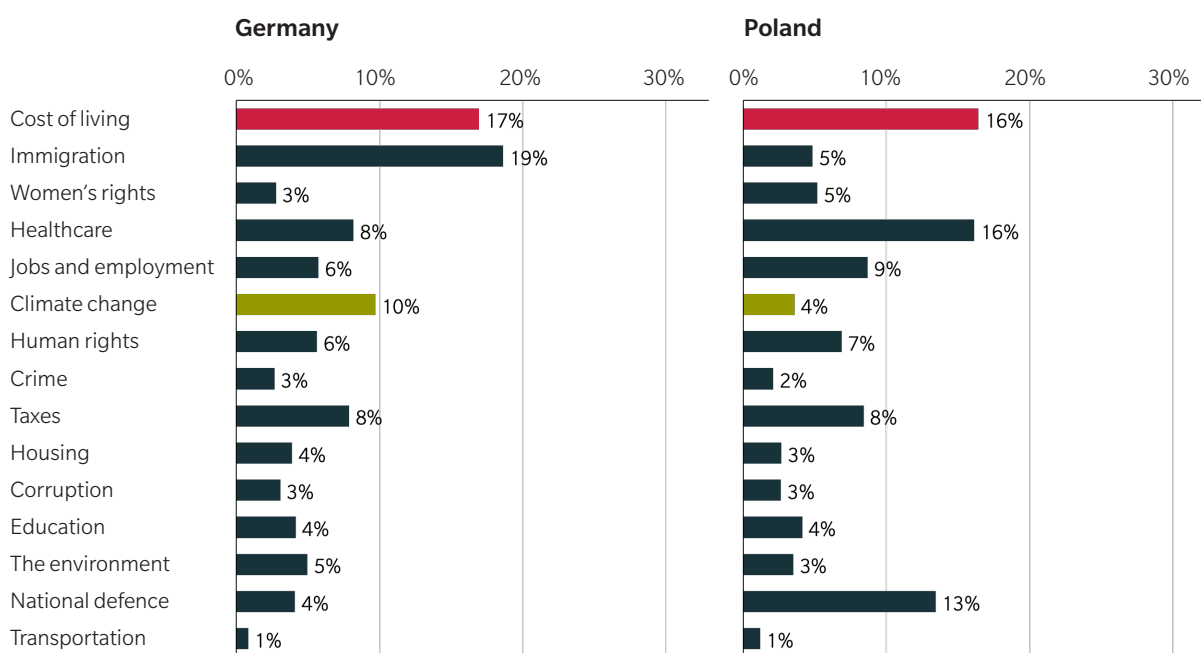


If there was a national election today, of the issues below, which would be most important to your vote? Select one.

Source: Zero Ideas/Savanta 2025

Figure 2. Voting issues in Germany and Poland

Ranking of voting issues



If there was a national election today, of the issues below, which would be most important to your vote? Select one.

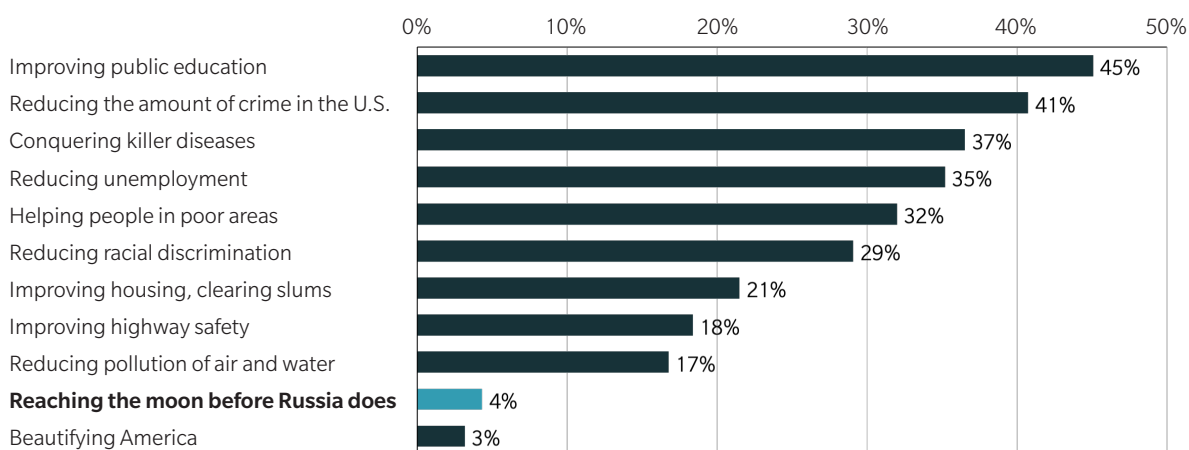
Source: Zero Ideas/Savanta 2025

In 1960s America, the Apollo space program faced the same challenge as climate change today. Getting to the moon before Russia did was one of the least salient issues for the American public, almost at the bottom of people's priorities for the government (Figure 3).⁴ To win support for the space program, President Kennedy

needed to piggyback on a salient issue, just as climate policy does today. But that issue was not the economy. Americans had lost confidence in their country—a pattern visible in the collection of issues that are prominent in Figure 3—and the promise that mattered was to bring the country together and restore its self-belief.

Figure 3. The public's priorities for the Government in 1960s America

Ranking of issues the U.S. Government should focus on in 1965



Which three of these national problems would you like to see the government devote most of its attention to in the next year or two?

Source: Gallup 1965

The salience for Apollo was in rebuilding America's capabilities and its confidence in itself, and what it could do if it came together as a country: 'We choose to go to the moon in this decade,' said Kennedy in 1962, '...because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win....'⁵

Russia was too far away to be salient, and the moon even more so. But the Apollo program was not about Russia or the moon. It was about America, and what America could do.

The salient and motivating issue in this case was not to do with the economy. In fact, throughout the 1960s, less than half of Americans said that Apollo was worth the cost. But two thirds approved of it nonetheless.⁶

A 'salience map' to track potentially salient issues

To understand how different issues become salient in different ways, times, and places, we explored two dimensions of how people experience an issue:

- *Where is it experienced?* Does it have an immediate impact on my life, or does it appear as a systemic issue for society? This dimension is about the scope and focus of the issue's effects.
- *How is it judged?* Is it a question of what works (functionally, instrumentally), or what matters (in terms of values and meaning)? This dimension is about the basis on which those effects are evaluated.

These two dimensions define four broad territories for what can become salient (Figure 4):

1. *Economic security and opportunity*
(My life/What works).

This foundational territory is the familiar, default territory for salience. It includes the cost of living, as well as broader issues that influence the financial viability of the household, on the revenue side (jobs and careers) as well as the cost side (prices and affordability).

2. *Attachment to people, place, community*
(My life/What matters).

This territory stays local and immediate, but is concerned with belonging and meaning. It in-

Figure 4. Schematic 'salience map'

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership Distribution of wealth and power Managing the transition to what's next Regime competence and effectiveness	What it means to be human Identity and individuality Human dignity and purpose; pursuit of the common good Societal agency Responsibility and stewardship
My life (immediate)	Economic security and opportunity Cost of living Household financial viability Jobs and future career ladders	Attachment to people, place, community Community agency and belief in its future Family roles and relationships Sense of personal contribution Connection with nature and the physical world

cludes the connections I feel to friends and family, to where I live and the community (or communities) I am a part of, and to nature and the physical world.

3. Need for effective leadership (Our society/What works)

This territory is concerned with what is stopping the system from working for people. It includes the distribution of wealth and power, how we manage the transition to whatever is next, and questions about the competence and effectiveness of the system of governance.

4. What it means to be human (Our society/What matters)

The top-right territory is concerned with the big questions of who we are and what we are here for: our identity and individuality; human dignity and purpose; the pursuit of the common good; and the agency and responsibility of society at large.

The resulting 'salience map' sets out the different spaces that *can* be salient, with no claim at this point about what is or isn't.

Our primary interest here for climate policy is in political salience (relevance for how people vote). Issues can be salient culturally, or within elite discourse, without being politically salient. These other forms of salience are interesting as an indicator of how issues are evolving, but do not always have the power of political salience among the general public in enabling the support of policies.

In the remainder of this paper we use the salience map to explore:

- How political salience has worked in the past (Chapter 2);
- How artificial intelligence will reshape political salience for the future (Chapter 3);
- How that reshaped salience changes the political opportunity for climate (Chapter 4).

This exercise does not depend on an ability to predict the future. AI is unusually capable of generating several different kinds of political salience at once. Even without knowing which will play out in reality, or which will dominate, we can identify the resulting political openings and prepare for them.

2. How political salience has worked in the past

Every territory has been salient in big societal shifts

Some of the big, historic societal shifts have involved political salience from all across our salience map. It is newly-salient territories that have helped to make those shifts possible. Here we pick out four examples, chosen to illustrate different paths across the map (Figure 5):

The New Deal in 1930s America:

From My life to Our society, focusing on What works
People clearly experienced the Great Depression primarily in the bottom left of the map, as an acute issue of economic security and (lack of) opportunity. But by 1933 the scale of the problem—unemployment at 25%, a third of farmers having lost their land—made the issue systemic. As the U.S. Social Security Administration tells its own history, ‘The severe Depression of the 1930s made Federal action a necessity, as neither the States and the local communities nor private charities had the financial resources to cope.’⁷ The tariff intervention that had intended to protect workers had backfired, as retaliatory tariffs

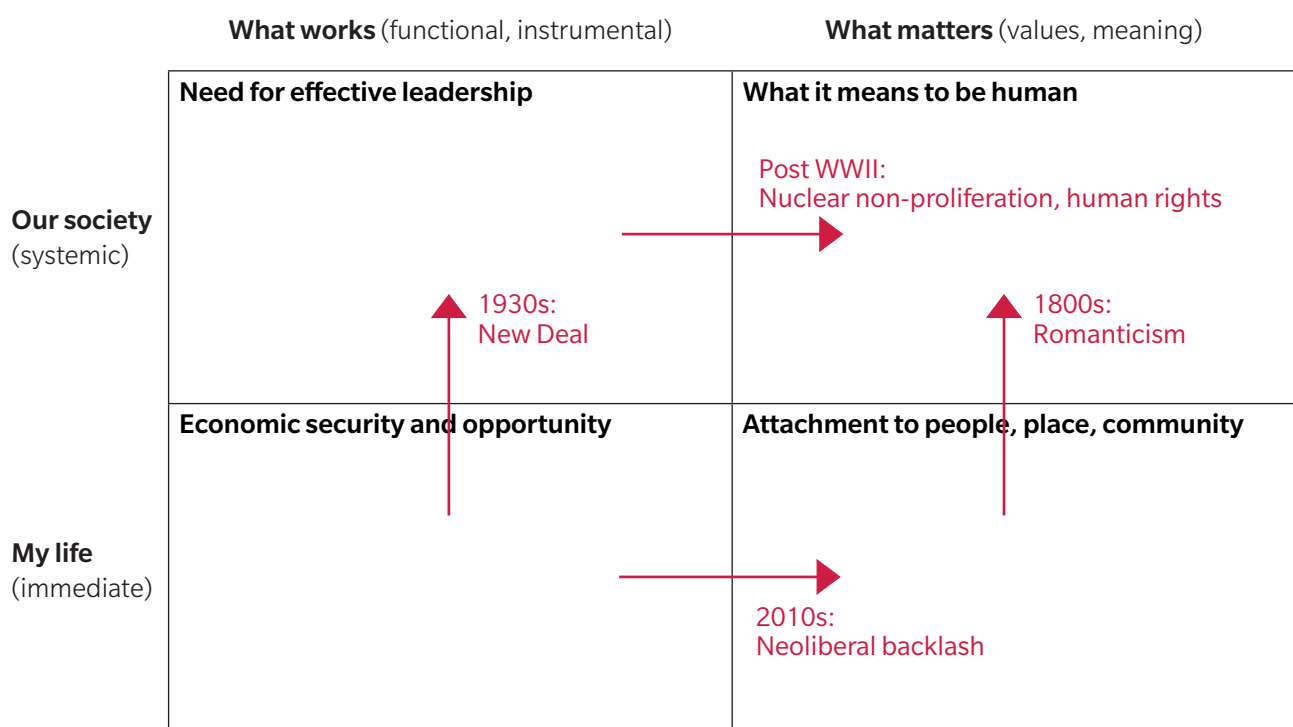
hit American exports. More than a third of America’s banks had gone out of business. Political salience expanded from people’s individual circumstances to a systemic concern about whether the whole system worked, and for whom.

Backlash against neoliberalism in the G7 in the 2010s:

From What works to What matters, in My life

Since the 1980s workers in rich countries have experienced global competition, offshored jobs, and stagnating wages.⁸ Their economic security has been politically salient since then. Decline in community engagement has been even longer-running, and part of cultural and elite discourse. But until the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, economic growth and abundant consumer credit helped contain the political consequences. After the crisis the underlying issues increasingly became politically salient in terms of people’s attachment to people, place, and community, reflected in the rise of nationalist-populist parties and movements in the U.S., UK, Germany, France, and elsewhere.

Figure 5. Range of salience involved in historic societal shifts



Nuclear non-proliferation and human rights after the Second World War:

From What works to What matters, in Our society
By the end of the Second World War, fascism, mechanized genocide, total war and atomic weapons demonstrated that modern states, institutions, and science could exercise immense capability while serving inhuman ends. Questions about the value of human life and the ends that collective power should serve became politically salient, at least among elites. The answers included the inherent dignity and rights of every person, and humanity's shared interest in survival—principles expressed through the UN Charter, the Nuremberg principles, the Genocide Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in due course, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Romanticism in early-1800s Europe:

From My life to Our society, focusing on What matters

Across Europe, industrialization, urbanization, revolution and war disrupted people's inherited relationships with place, community, tradition and nature. Romanticism turned people's experiences of attachment and loss into larger questions about human nature and flourishing. Against the prevailing ideas of people as primarily rational beings and of nature as a mechanism

or resource, it elevated imagination, emotion, individuality, the sublime and an organic relationship with the living world as essential to what human beings need and what makes life meaningful. In this example the focus is on cultural salience, with a less direct translation to public political support at that time.

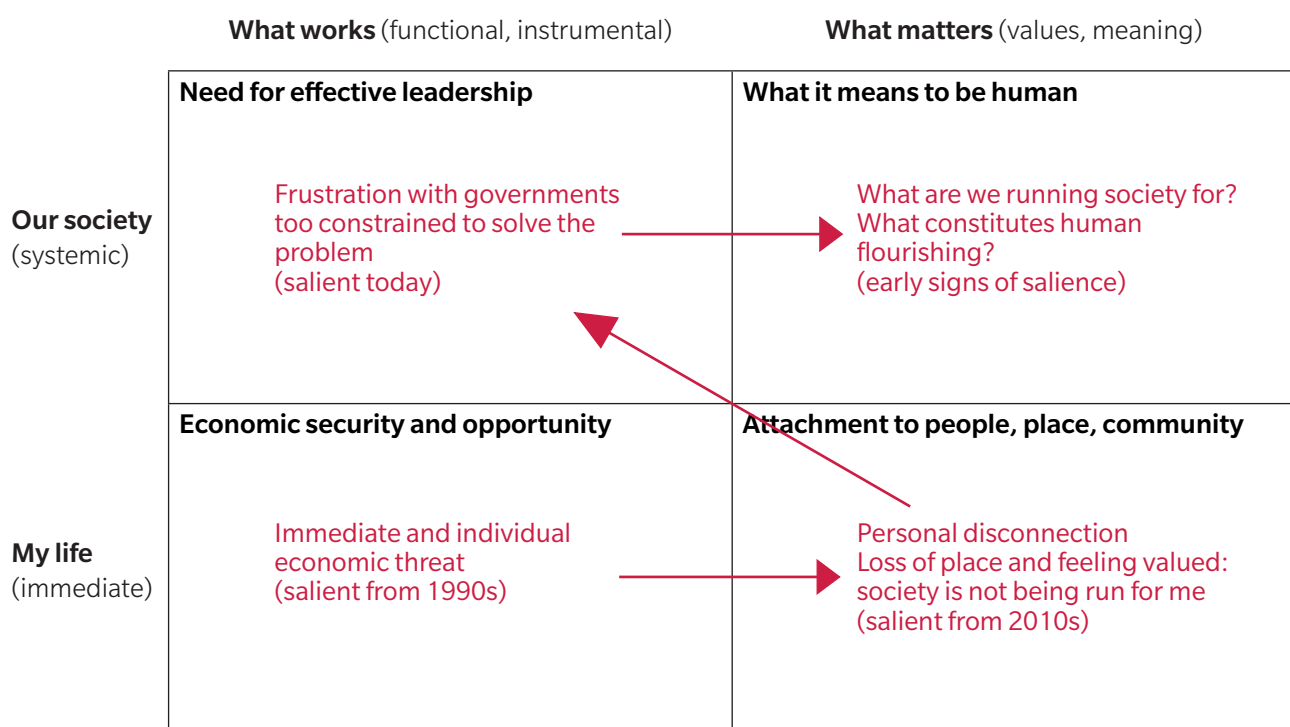
Neoliberalism has covered the salience map

While the examples above illustrate the range of salience in different times and places, neoliberalism itself illustrates how one political theme can evolve in salience over time. Most importantly, neoliberalism has moved gradually towards the salience of the systemic (Figure 6).

We already described the shift from what works to what matters, in people's immediate lives. The sense of personal disconnection, though, has evolved beyond an immediate, personal issue, into a sense that society is not being run for me or people like me.

This is more than a frustration with individual leaders, governments, or policies. G7 governments find themselves unable to respond effectively, because they can't reconcile the expectations of their people with what is needed to keep their economies competitive in the global markets they helped to create. The social contracts

Figure 6. The evolving salience of neoliberalism



they had made with their people during the Cold War, justified by the ideological competition from Communism and protected by borders, have proved unaffordable in an era of globalism. The tough love that the G7 meted out to emerging markets 20 years ago, demanding that those countries submit to global financial markets in pursuit of prosperity at the expense of social security, has come back to hit their own economies and people. The result is a ‘democratic “solvency gap”’.⁹

As it becomes clear that this structural challenge can’t be solved by a change of government (or in the UK case, a quick succession of seven prime ministers), the question of who and what we are running society for becomes salient. This is not (yet) at the level of what it means to be human, but there are signs that we are no longer only in the territory of what works, but increasingly of the bigger questions of what matters.

Every territory has shaped important national elections

We have argued that these different territories have become more or less salient in different times and places, but does that salience translate into what counts at elections?

To answer that, we looked at the range of national elections that have taken place since the Second World War in the U.S., UK, Germany, and France, to see what was salient in terms of the four territories on the map.

Economic security and opportunity is the default territory for most elections, but Figure 7 shows examples of elections in each country where each of the other three territories played a role. The assessment of individual elections is a judgment call; the broader point is that each territory has shaped important national elections in recent decades.

Attachment to people, place, community—specifically identity, loss of a sense of place and belonging, and the implications for immigration—was famously salient in the U.S. election of President Trump in 2016. In the UK it drove the Brexit referendum the same year, and the ensuing election in 2019. The felt local impact of refugees was salient in Germany in 2017, and community cohesion in response to immigration was salient in France in 2002, when Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen made the Presidential run-off.

Need for effective leadership shaped the UK election in 1979, introducing Margaret Thatcher’s

Figure 7. Salience territories of national elections in the U.S., UK, Germany, and France

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership UK 1979, 97 Government effectiveness U.S. 1976 Trust in government Germany 1990 Ability to drive reunification France 1958 State competence	What it means to be human UK 1983 Patriotism and the nation U.S. 1960 America’s role 1964, 68 Civil rights Germany 1972 National identity and role France 2017 Nature of the nation state
My life (immediate)	Economic security and opportunity Default territory for most elections: • Cost of living • Jobs • Prosperity • Financial security	Attachment to people, place, community UK 2019 Local impact of and reaction to Brexit U.S. 2016 Identity, loss of place Germany 2017 Local impact of and reaction to refugees France 2002 Community cohesion

Conservative government after years of industrial disruption, unstable governments and a bail-out by the IMF had raised questions about the UK's governability. (Government effectiveness was also salient in the election that ousted the Conservatives 18 years later.) Trust in government was central to the U.S. election in 1976, post-Watergate. Confidence in the capability of government shaped Germany's election in 1990, where the question was who could make a success of the reunification that had just been formalized. Further back, state competence was on the ballot in France in 1958, with governability issues that went even deeper than the UK in 1979.

What it means to be human, often with assertive overtones about patriotism and the nation rather than humanity at large, shaped the UK election in 1983 after the Falklands Conflict, the U.S. in 1960 after the Soviet Union beat America into space, Germany in 1972 when it re-assessed its role in the world acknowledging the reality of the Cold War, and France in 2017 debating openness vs. nationalism. In these cases, the territory was expressed through questions of collective identity and purpose—who 'we' are and what kind of society or nation we understand ourselves to be. In more universalist terms this territory shaped the U.S. elections in 1964 and 1968, at the time of the civil rights movement.

Salience usually follows from brokenness or loss

An important observation from these elections is not just that salience happens across the map, but that it usually (though not always) follows from brokenness or loss (Figure 8).

Attachment to people, place, community typically becomes salient after the accumulation of a personal sense of loss, occasionally acutely (Germany in 2017) but more often chronically, building up over time and eroding social cohesion.

Need for effective leadership typically becomes salient when confidence in an institution is lost, whether because of demonstrable failure, misbehaviour, or a step change in the challenge.

What it means to be human typically becomes salient when confidence in ourselves is lost, and also when a belief in ourselves can compensate for losses elsewhere.

A personal sense of loss; falling confidence in institutions; a step change in the challenge; losing confidence in ourselves: these all feel like what we are beginning to experience with AI. Now we have established the salience playbook, it's time to see how it may play out in the age of AI.

Figure 8. Triggers for salience in national elections

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership UK 1979 Winter of Discontent, strikes, inflation, tax, union power, sense of ungovernability UK 1997 Desire for renewal to restore confidence in government and end sleaze U.S. 1976 Collapse of trust following Watergate Germany 1990 Can leadership deliver reunification? France 1958 Unstable governments, Algerian War	What it means to be human UK 1983 Falklands invasion challenging UK sovereignty U.S. 1960 Sputnik challenging U.S. competence and leadership U.S. 1964 Implications of the newly passed Civil Rights Act U.S. 1968 Riots, assassinations, protests since Civil Rights Act Germany 1972 Recognizing ongoing reality of divided Germany France 2017 Populism and collapse of old party system
My life (immediate)	Economic security and opportunity Most elections Ongoing economic challenges of relative loss of economic status by G7 economies, amplified since the start of neoliberalism by open, global competition particularly hitting low- and median-wage workers in rich countries	Attachment to people, place, community UK 2019 Fallout from Brexit vote and subsequent politics U.S. 2016 Political recognition of a loss built up over time Germany 2017 1 million+ asylum seekers from Middle East France 2002 Falling social cohesion linked to immigration and fear of cultural change

3. How AI will reshape political salience for the future

AI triggers losses all over the map

The observation that salience usually follows from brokenness or loss is significant, because AI is positioned to drive various forms of loss in every territory on the salience map (Figure 9).

Not all these losses will come to pass, and not all those that do will become politically salient. We can't predict what *will* be salient, but we can see that the *potential* for political salience across the map will be high. Here we include examples of social and cultural salience, recognizing that not all of these will become an electoral priority, but they change the language, expectations and institutional pressures through which political opportunities emerge. Over time, we can watch for the progression of issues from private concerns to cultural and elite discourse and from there into electoral politics.

In *Economic security and opportunity*, AI threatens both job displacement and the intensification and acceleration of jobs that remain. People increasingly stand to lose their income (if not through job loss, then through a reduction in the

market value of their skills), extending the concern about economic security from the cost side of the equation to the revenue side. Concerns about household viability and future career ladders are potentially salient.

So far, actual salience has been limited by the indirect nature of the shift, threatening career opportunities more than existing jobs. Where the impact is that gateway jobs to professional careers never get posted,¹⁰ there is no layoff event, no one to blame, nothing tangible to protest. Political salience may also be moderated by the lack of collective bargaining in the most affected sectors. At least in the U.S., and at least for digital AI, 'the sectors with highest AI displacement risk (finance, professional services, retail) have the lowest union density, while the best-organized sectors (public administration, education) face comparatively lower AI exposure.'¹¹ For physical AI (AI embodied in robots), political salience is likely to be stronger, extending the history of direct job losses through automation, often with concentrated impact in unionized environments.¹²

Figure 9. Potential salience-driving losses that may result from AI

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership <i>AI issues:</i> Concentration of compute, data, and models; innovation outpacing regulation <i>Loss of:</i> National agency, economic equality, connection between GDP and welfare <i>Potentially salient:</i> Leadership role of government, shaping vs. optimizing, re-embedding the economy in society	What it means to be human <i>AI issues:</i> Machine cognition, robotic dexterity <i>Loss of:</i> Human agency and value; dignity, displaced by utility; existential stability and 'progress' <i>Potentially salient:</i> What we want to optimize—Purpose, meaning, the position of humanity in the world
	Economic security and opportunity <i>AI issues:</i> Job displacement and intensification/speed <i>Loss of:</i> Income (jobs, levels of pay, value of skills) complementing outgoings (cost of living) <i>Potentially salient:</i> Household viability; future career ladders	Attachment to people, place, community <i>AI issues:</i> Substitute relationships; global uniformity of models; data-centre buildout <i>Loss of:</i> Human connection; local activity, character and contribution; tangibility <i>Potentially salient:</i> Craving for the real, tangible, local, natural
My life (immediate)		

Where direct job losses do start happening at scale, who bears the financial cost will likely be a salient political issue. The worker, without protection? The state, creating a potentially unaffordable social burden? The employer, reducing the economic benefit of AI and reducing competitiveness? In China today, courts have taken a more protective line than any of those options, arguing that just because a job can be substituted by AI does not meet the criteria for redundancy.¹³ That stance may be easier to sustain in a growing economy than a flat one.

In *Attachment to people, place, community*, AI threatens various types of loss. The most salient today is the neighbourhood impact of building out data centres. Data centres were already a live issue in Virginia's 2025 election for governor, though still in the context of the cost of living and whether they pay their 'fair share' for electricity and the upgrade of the grid that is needed to serve them.¹⁴ Beyond their electricity demand, the physical presence of these centres can make them a target for people's resistance to AI: planning consent is a rare opportunity where local democracy can beat global might. They may therefore have a tactical salience out of proportion to any actual loss to a community.

More significant over time may be the loss of local culture and character: just as global retail brands homogenized (and even displaced) our high streets, so AI, trained on an agglomeration of different cultures, may homogenize (and even displace) the way we communicate and think.¹⁵ We may also lose human connection as we turn to AI, rather than our fellow humans, for advice, understanding, sympathy, and emotional relationships more broadly: already romantic relationships with chatbots are both substituting potential human relationships and compromising actual human relationships.¹⁶ Responding to such losses, cravings for the real, tangible, local, and natural are potentially salient—both culturally and politically. California and New York have already passed laws to try to mitigate the harm from companion chatbots.¹⁷

In *Need for effective leadership*, AI is likely to stretch our established systems and institutions of governance, by creating unprecedented concentrations of compute, data, models, and therefore power, at a pace of innovation that regula-

tion cannot keep up with. We stand to lose our agency as nations, our level of economic equality, and the connection between the output of our economy and the welfare of our people. Reforming the leadership role of government, from optimizing what we have in a stable environment to shaping a dynamic future, and re-embedding the economy in society, may become salient concerns.

Today the international tensions are already salient for political elites, even if not electorally. The U.S. Cloud Act, from the first Trump administration, is amplifying the salience of data centre sovereignty, giving U.S. authorities access to data in centres operated by U.S. tech companies even in other countries; Airbus has started to migrate critical systems away from AWS in response.¹⁸ Domestically, there have been no major clashes yet, but the stage is set: in an NBC poll in the U.S., only one in four people had a positive view of AI, and one in three thought that neither political party would do a good job dealing with AI; that's twice as many as for any other issue NBC asked about.¹⁹

In *What it means to be human*, advances in machine cognition and robotic dexterity may reach the point where AI outperforms us in most roles. In that situation we stand to lose not just our jobs, but our agency and value as humans; our dignity, replaced by utility, in a replay of the more inhumane labour markets of the early industrial revolution; and the sense of where we are, and where we are going, in the path of civilizational progress. The salient question then becomes what we want to optimize, if not simply productivity: a search for purpose and meaning to resolve the position of humanity in the world.

This is the fundamental challenge that has already been brought into the discourse by Pope Leo XIV in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 'on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence'.²⁰

Physical AI may amplify the political salience of these issues, because robots—and especially humanoid robots—make the issue of human substitution hard to ignore. Digital AI acts invisibly, ethereally. Robots will be in our faces, their presence making the absence of human labour visible.

AI stands to move quickly and directly to systemic salience

In a world engaging with AI, salience can quickly spread far beyond its default territory of economic security and opportunity. We saw in Chapter 2 that neoliberalism spread throughout the salience map, moving gradually towards the salience of the systemic. Based on the above, AI stands to make a similar move to systemic salience, but quickly and directly (Figure 10).

The functional, immediate concerns about job losses, career prospects and the future value of skills are already culturally salient. They are not yet established as electoral priorities, but they have several characteristics—personal exposure, potential loss and identifiable concentrations of power—that could make them so.

From there, what is remarkable about AI is that salience appears already to be spreading in all directions at once.

On the functional (left) side of the map, the gap between how fast AI capabilities are growing and the sluggish capabilities of our institutions (both corporate and government) to respond is both

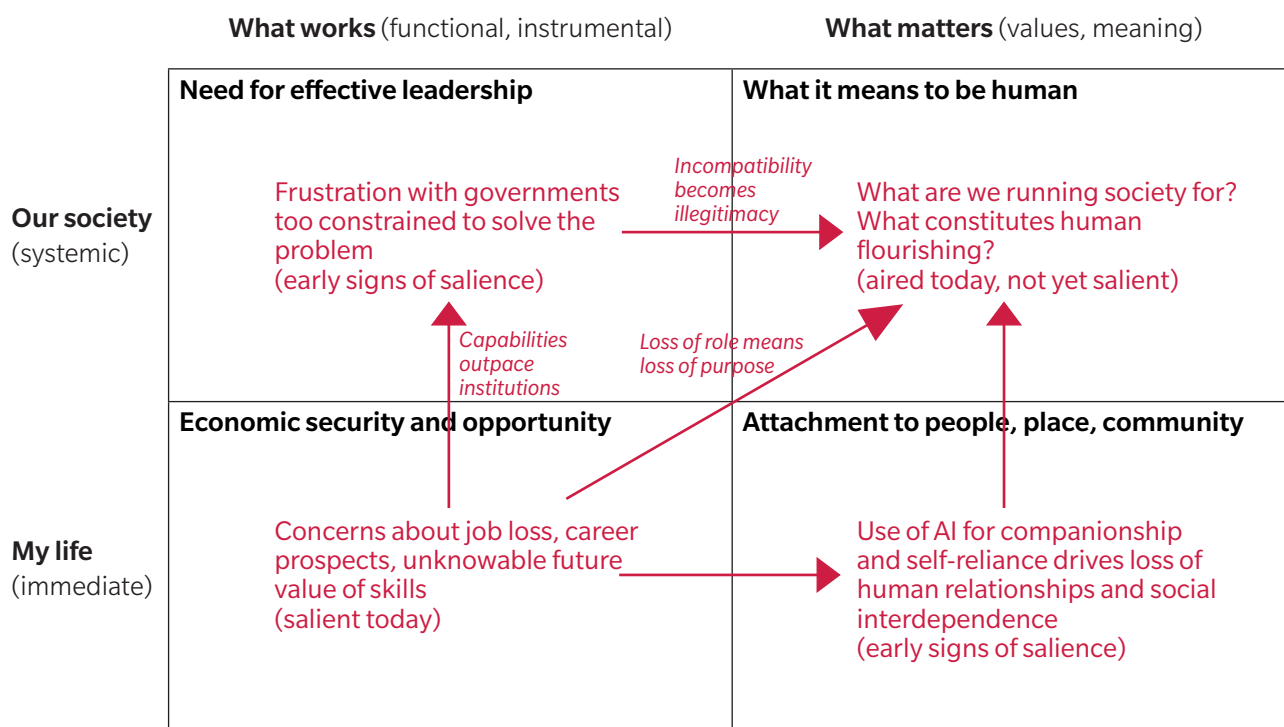
vast and visible. There are increasingly noticeable signs that governments, business, and even the AI frontier labs themselves, are not in control. Leaders' fear of missing out has been overriding people's other important fears, as well as more purposeful ambitions.

At some point this institutional incapability may translate into illegitimacy, as people shift to the fundamental questions that most of our institutions aren't asking, let alone answering, about what matters: What are we running society for? What constitutes human flourishing?

Meanwhile a more immediate, personal-scale loss of human relationships and interdependence, as people turn to AI for companionship and self-reliance, provides a parallel path to the same territory of what it means to be human.

Again, not all of these issues will translate into political salience. But the multiplicity of paths, and the short, direct routes to the upper (systemic) part of the map, suggest that AI may quickly shift people's focus from the immediate to the systemic to a degree that challenges our assumptions about what people find salient.

Figure 10. AI's paths to systemic salience



3. How new salience changes the political opportunity for climate

In rich countries, climate struggles with salience in any territory

Climate change is a systemic issue. Why hasn't it already stimulated a salience spreading rapidly up the map like AI is beginning to do?

The core of the answer is that for most people in rich countries, climate change is experienced abstractly, while the interventions to address it would be experienced concretely. The most serious effects of climate change remain a probabilistic future risk, mostly affecting future generations and often people in other countries; whereas avoiding those effects would impose costs and constraints on me and my family, here and now.

One indicator that people experience climate change abstractly: within the U.S., people's level of worry about climate change is strongly predicted by their values and beliefs, and hardly predicted at all by models of the risk of extreme weather events where they live.

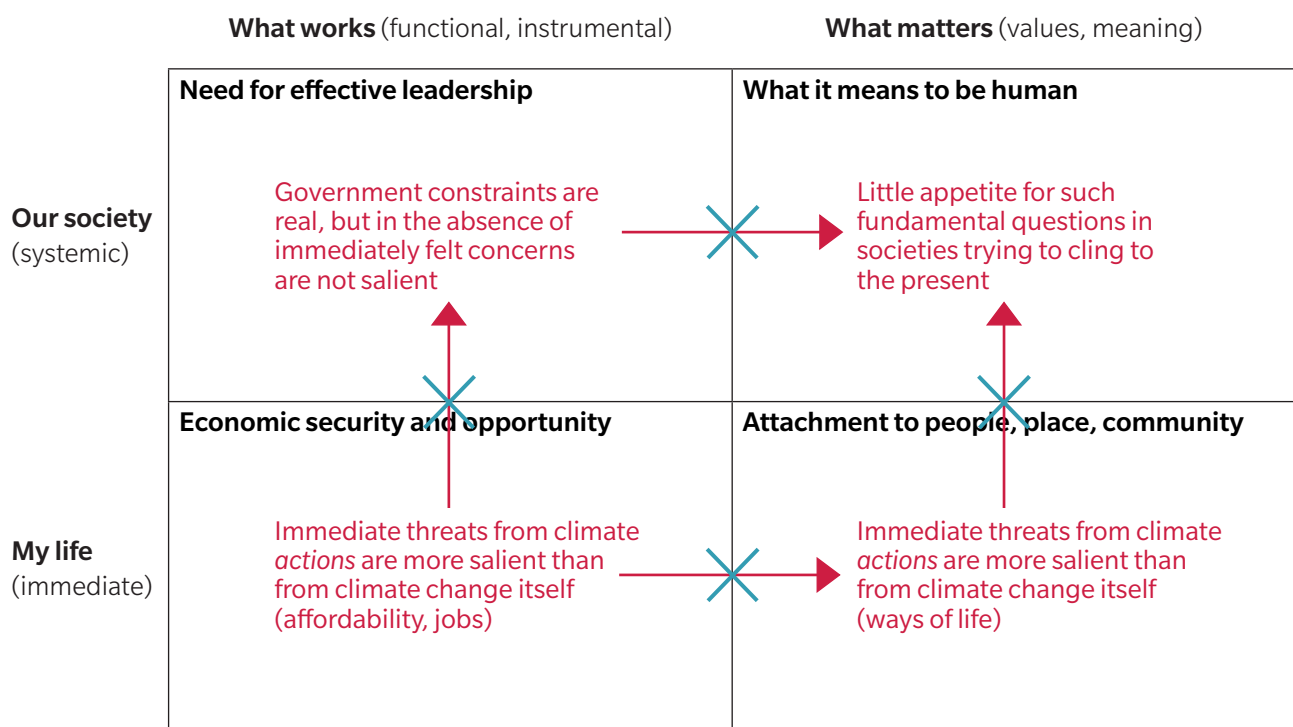
The climate movement's emphasis on individual behaviour change adds to the sense of constraint,

even though realistic pathways to net zero are dominated by policy action and the substitution of one technology for another, with minimal individual sacrifice.²¹

The result is that, both in the functional concerns about costs and jobs, and in the value-based concerns about ways of life, the immediate threats from climate actions are more salient than the threats from climate change itself. And as Figure 11 shows, without more of an immediate sense of loss in the immediate (lower) half of the salience map, there is a weak foundation for growing salience in the systemic (upper) half.

Governments have proved incapable of taking the climate action needed, held back by pressures on global competitiveness, popular rejection of climate policies that feel costly or constraining, and political pressure from the industries most at risk from the transition: most prominently the fossil fuel companies, but also automotive companies, steelmakers and other incumbents. In the absence of immediately felt concerns, voters are often on the same side as the corporate lobbyists in defending the status quo.

Figure 11. Climate change's struggle for salience



So, while climate change raises existential questions about humanity's role and impact on the planet and our relationship with nature, there is little appetite for such fundamental questions in societies that are unengaged in the future and trying to cling on to the present.²²

What AI makes salient will reshape what's possible on climate

What's significant about AI in this context is not that it is also a systemic issue, but that it provides the paths from the immediate to the systemic that climate change has failed to achieve.

People's experience of AI is far from abstract. We are already reaching the point where most people in developed countries use generative AI directly, whether at work, home, or both. And those that don't use it themselves experience it almost as directly in search results or customer service. It's already a factor in individual career choices, even if the impacts are unknown. And as we saw in Chapter 3, there are multiple, direct paths from these immediate experiences to the salience of systemic, societal concerns.

Figure 9 (on page 13) showed, for each territory on the salience map, how specific issues related to AI create concerns about various types of loss, which make broader societal concerns potentially salient. In Figure 12 we take that causal chain

one stage further, and show how those new areas of salience (if and when they occur) open up new opportunities for tackling climate change:

In *Economic security and opportunity*, we showed how AI could broaden salience from the cost side of the household economic equation (affordability and the cost of living) to the revenue side (household viability and future career ladders). The climate opportunity is to generalize this increased sense of jeopardy into an awareness of how much people depend on an operating environment that cannot be taken for granted. That awareness sets the context for engaging with both AI and climate change, creating political demand for resilience, transition to a more secure future, and a collective agenda, on the political right as much as on the left.

In *Attachment to people, place, community*, we showed how AI, through the substitution of human relationships and the homogenization of language and thinking, can drive a loss of human connection and community character, potentially driving a craving for the real, tangible, local, and natural. The climate opportunity is to build on people's appreciation of nature and outcomes beyond the financial, and their desire to protect what matters to us. These are strong motivators for climate action,²³ potentially made salient by AI.

Figure 12. New climate opportunities opened up by what AI may make salient

	What works (functional, instrumental)	What matters (values, meaning)
Our society (systemic)	Need for effective leadership <i>New salience:</i> Leadership role of government, shaping vs. optimizing, re-embedding the economy in society <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Recognizing the end of an era of optimization and the need for more mission-based leadership; rejection of the powerlessness of 'realism' stances that defend the status quo	What it means to be human <i>New salience:</i> What we want to optimize—Purpose, meaning, the position of humanity in the world <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Readiness to challenge societal goals and metrics, and reassess the big drivers of human endeavour—markets, finance, productivity—as means rather than ends
	Economic security and opportunity <i>New salience:</i> Household viability; future career ladders <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Sense of dependence on an operating environment that can't be taken for granted. Primarily a bridge to the salience of adjacent territories.	Attachment to people, place, community <i>New salience:</i> Household viability; future career ladders <i>New climate opportunity:</i> Valuing nature and outcomes beyond the financial; sensitivity to loss and the need to protect what matters to us
My life (immediate)		

In *Need for effective leadership*, we showed how people are beginning to feel the incapability of leaders and institutions to tackle AI, to a degree that they don't feel regarding climate change, even though the reality is similar in both cases. Sensitivity to these shortcomings in AI may make salient the leadership role of government in society, the shift needed from optimizing the present to shaping the future, and the need to re-embed the economy in society. The climate opportunity is to piggyback on this awakening, recognizing the end of a stable era of optimization and the need for more mission-based leadership in a more dynamic world, boosting state capacity and industrial strategy.

In *What it means to be human*, we showed how advances in machine cognition and robotic dexterity may drive the loss not just of our jobs, but of our agency and value as humans, our dignity, and the sense of where we are in the path of civilizational progress; the potential salience is then about purpose beyond productivity. The climate opportunity from this is to challenge and realign society's goals and metrics, embracing stewardship, intergenerational responsibility, and measures of progress beyond output, and treating markets and productivity as means rather than ends.

More important than the specifics in each territory is the idea that AI stands to open up the salience of the systemic territories where climate change needs to play, but currently can't reach.

Quite what opportunity that will create is not yet clear. Salience is not guaranteed: concerns can fester for a long time without becoming politically salient. The opportunities we have described above are possibilities, not predictions. And AI may open up these new territories only to dominate them once it has opened them, making them salient but depriving climate change of any airtime within them. Looking across our four territories, there is a risk that AI-generated salience could:

1. Crowd climate out during employment or financial crises;
2. Strengthen opposition to local infrastructure and development;
3. Produce techno-nationalism or fossil-fuelled energy-security politics;
4. Intensify a human-first politics that places less value on nature or future generations.

Our confidence in AI making systemic issues salient, however, is reinforced by the multiple paths through the salience map. Individual paths may not materialize. The loss of place and community that was so salient in the neoliberalism pathway may or may not play the same role here, for example, but the route to systemic salience (the upper half of the map) does not depend on it.

Building on what AI opens up

What's clear is that AI, more than climate, will define the agenda. AI has a potent mix of immediacy, pervasiveness and speed that will traverse the salience map in a way that climate cannot, setting the agenda for what we find salient.

Hopefully, and with help, that will boost the prospects for climate action, focusing citizens on the future and on the systemic issues of governance and purpose that can shift what is possible on climate change.

Conversely, if AI continues to be understood as threat more than possibility, there is a risk that it may restrict the prospects for climate action, by stoking the fear we already have of the future and reinforcing our urge to cling to the present.

Either way, it is the public reaction to AI, rather than climate change, that is likely to shape our perspectives and define what's possible. Wherever it takes us, tracking and building on what AI makes salient may unlock the most promising opportunities for climate policy and climate action. It therefore makes sense to:

Monitor which AI concerns are moving from private concerns to cultural and elite discourse and from there into electoral politics. Not all concerns will complete that journey, and those that do may do so at different speeds. But despite those uncertainties, it is possible and useful to observe what is on its way before it arrives.

Prepare policy propositions suited to each of the four territories, rather than assume that the cost of living is the only 'host' to piggyback on. In particular, anticipate the increasing salience of systemic perspectives (the top half of the salience map), which is the most important operating space for climate action, and which has not previously been accessible.

Keep a balanced perspective by tracking where AI closes political opportunities as carefully as where it opens them.

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About Zero Ideas

Zero Ideas is a research charity established to challenge leadership thinking on climate action. We conduct primary and secondary research and publish articles and research reports to inform leaders on climate issues and to drive a more ambitious leadership mindset regarding climate action.

Our research focuses on how to win public support for climate-related policies, and on redirecting institutional effort for greater impact.

Zero Ideas is a Charitable Incorporated Organization in England & Wales.

Registered Charity Number 1199593.

zeroideas.org.

Endnotes

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