

Polling Policy Preferences

Public Opinion Analytics Lab (POAL)

Miriam Sorace

02/03/2026

Executive Summary

Headline policy attitudes derived from single-item survey questions provide an incomplete and often misleading picture of public preferences.

- Single-item measures obscure underlying bases of support/opposition, trade-offs and potential ambivalence that shape responses to policy items.
- Headline findings can diverge sharply from those derived from multidimensional analyses - as evidenced in this brief.

Robust policy preference polling requires survey designs that reflect the multidimensionality of policy issues.

- Multi-item scales and deliberative polls offer partial improvements, but they are either too coarse or too resource-intensive for most policy-specific evaluations.
- Mapping the full policy space and implementing conjoint analysis designs provides a tractable, scalable and analytically rigorous solution.

1 Introduction

Single item policy questions dominate the political insight industry as well as governments' policy evaluation processes. This hyper-reliance on individual pledge assessments is likely to yield an over-simplified – if not entirely flawed – view of the public's policy preferences. For example, stating that the public backs reducing net immigration to zero is uninformative, since people fold in different policies – such as asylum cuts, visa restrictions or deportations – when endorsing that headline position. Additionally, important trade-offs such as labour shortages may not be cognitively accessible, yet would plausibly change the headline response if they were.

The plots below illustrate the dangers of polling headline policy pledges in isolation. YouGov's recent single-item analysis of climate policy shows comparatively high levels of public support for taxing carbon-emitting companies and for strict regulatory phase-outs of non-energy-efficient homes and non-renewable energy (see Fig. 1). When these policies (energy tax-increase, energy phase-outs, building phase-outs) are tested against all feasible alternatives and across all targeted

sectors simultaneously, however, they are comparatively low support options instead (marginal means below the 50% threshold - from Sorace et al.'s conjoint analysis, Fig. 2).

Support for climate change measures in Britain

Taking into account the costs involved and possible disruption, to what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose the Government bringing in each of the following policies to tackle climate change? %

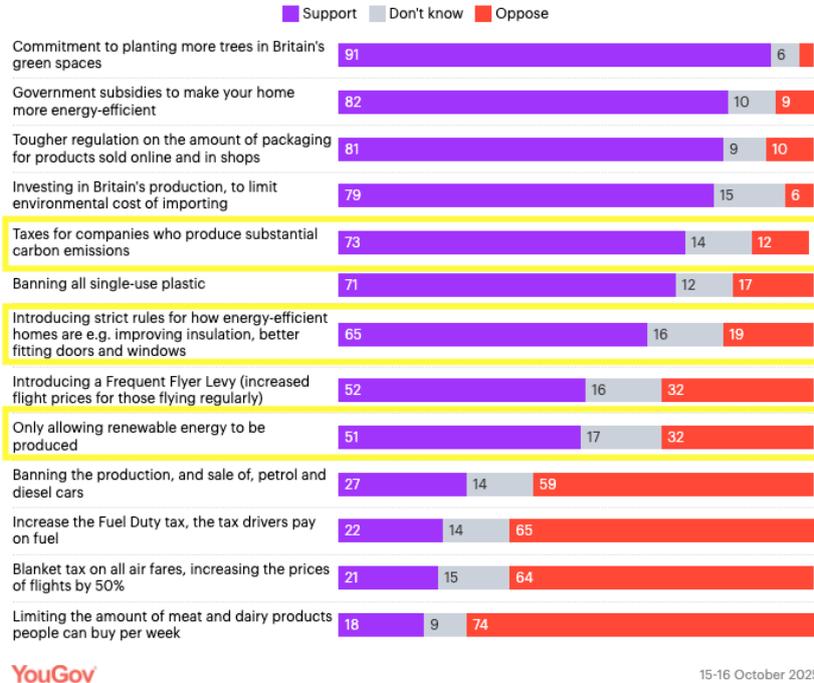


Figure 1: YouGov Single Item Headline Policy Analysis – Autumn 2025

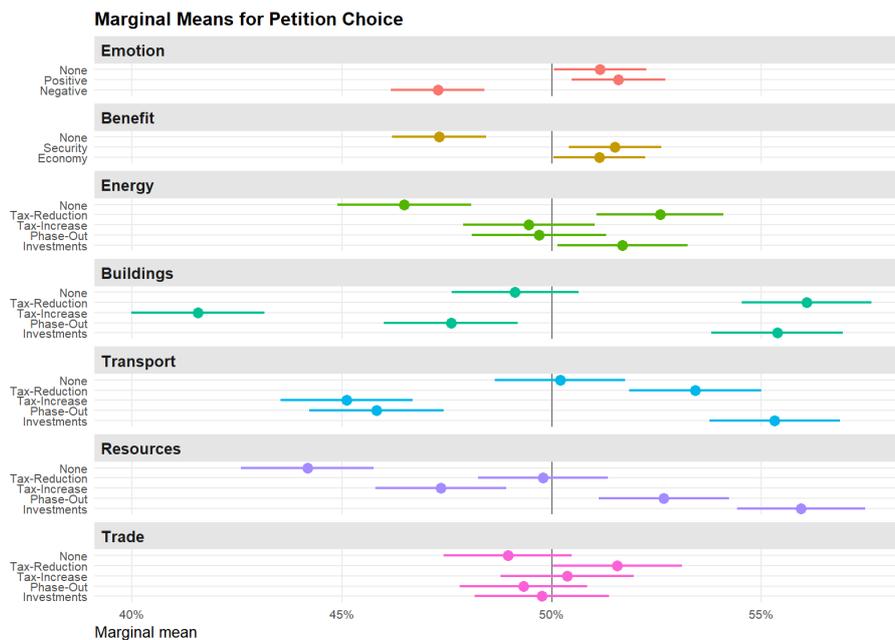


Figure 2: Sorace et al. Conjoint Policy Analysis – Spring 2025

Measuring policy attitudes via single items is inappropriate because attitudes are ‘multi-component’ [Eagly and Chaiken, 1993]: They are summary evaluations in which multiple pieces of information are integrated into an overall attitude. Examining what underlies a headline policy attitude is crucial in order to assess the true levels of support or opposition to a policy. Single-item attitudes are notoriously unstable over time and depend heavily on immediately available information at the moment of response. In addition, they fail to measure the strength or confidence of the policy attitude [Ansolabehere et al., 2008, Zaller, 1992].

2 Potential Solutions

What should public opinion analysts do instead? Several workflows have been proposed. The first – and simplest – is *scaling*: i.e. fielding multiple related policy items to then combine the (independent) answers into a scale [Ansolabehere et al., 2008]. A second, more resource-intensive option is to conduct *deliberative polls*, in which recruited respondents meet for a weekend, receive expert input, discuss the policy among themselves, and then complete the survey [Luskin et al., 2002]. This ensures that all relevant information is brought to bear on the headline response and that respondents draw on a more uniform set of considerations when forming their attitudes. Both solutions help produce more valid and reliable estimates of support for the *general* policy area, but they are less well-suited to narrower issues (which offer too few items to construct a scale) or to specific policy pledges (which do not warrant a full deliberative set-up).

Carefully mapping the range of potential policy pledges associated with an issue – such as carbon emissions or immigration regulation – and their inter-relationships (with guidance from the relevant policy literature) in order to design a multidimensional survey instrument is the better approach. *Conjoint analysis* is the natural multidimensional tool for this purpose. It presents respondents with two options which randomly vary in their features, and respondents typically complete 4–6 rounds of such pairwise choices. The data can then reveal the part-worths of each policy pledge as well as the salience of each policy dimension. Conjoint designs can also capture interactions between different policy pledges or outcomes, realistically mirroring the trade-offs faced by policymakers. Finally, they reduce social desirability bias and limit differential item functioning, since the relevant attitude dimensions are made explicit rather than left to subjective interpretation and retrieval processes [Bansak et al., 2021]. For tips on practical implementation, see the [POAL method brief on conjoint analysis](#).

Recommended Practice

1. **Avoid single-item measures for policy attitudes** – i.e. ‘headline policy pledge’ type analyses
2. **Map the full policy space** prior to questionnaire design, identifying all plausible pledges, trade-offs and interactions within the issue area
3. **Adopt conjoint analysis** as the default method for estimating marginal support for specific pledges, assessing attribute salience, and uncovering trade-offs that single-item and simple scaling approaches systematically miss.

References

Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James M Snyder Jr. The strength of issues: Using multiple measures to gauge preference stability, ideological constraint, and issue voting. *American Political Science Review*, 102(2):215–232, 2008.

Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, Daniel J. Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto. Conjoint survey experiments. In James N. Druckman and Donald P. Green, editors, *Advances in Experimental Political Science*, pages —. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Alice H Eagly and Shelly Chaiken. *The psychology of attitudes*. Harcourt brace Jovanovich college publishers, 1993.

Robert C Luskin, James S Fishkin, and Roger Jowell. Considered opinions: Deliberative polling in britain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(3):455–487, 2002.

John Zaller. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge university press, 1992.