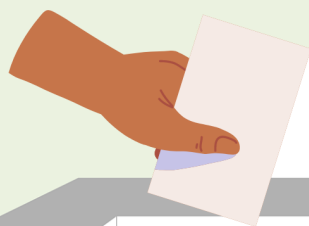


**2024 POLITICAL MANIFESTO POVERTY AUDIT
AUDIT REPORT**

UK GENERAL ELECTION 2024
HAVE YOU READ THE MANIFESTOS?



**29 ACADEMICS FROM
23 UNIVERSITIES**
HAVE DONE THE WORK
FOR YOU

Acknowledgements

A number of people have been involved in the production of this audit. First, we would like to thank our auditors: Sylvie Lomer, Malcolm Sawyer, Michael Orton, Richard Machin, Carolyn Snell, Hannah Morgan, Chris Grover, Becky Tunstall, Charmian Werren, Juan Baeza, Martin Heneghan, Catherine Needham, Emily Burn and Chloe Alexander. All auditors worked around other work commitments and holidays to get the manifestos reviewed and audits returned for inclusion. We would also like to thank our team of anonymous reviewers, who provided independent scrutiny of the audits. Thanks also go to the team at Policy Press, in particular Laura Vickers-Rendall and Jess Miles, who have provided a new level of support for the audit this year. Thanks also go to all the contributors to the blog series: Katie Schmuecker, Gerardo Arriaga, Stewart Lansley, Jane Millar, Kitty Stewart, Steve Iafrazi, Joanna Mack,

Peter Matthews, Eleanor Formby, Dave Beck, Georgia van Toorn, Joanna Redden, Lina Dencik, Jess Brand and Danny Dorling. Finally, we would like to thank Polly Robbins and June Kuhn from Outlandish, Helen Lang and Tamara Schon for their work on developing communications and social media linked to the audit.

Disclaimer

This audit of political manifestos has been produced rapidly due to the impending election, which is scheduled to take place on 4 July 2024. Given the limited time available from when the political manifestos were published, this audit may contain errors or omissions. We ask for your understanding and patience, recognising that this analysis was conducted under significant time constraints to provide timely information to the public.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Foreword	4
Executive Summary	6
Scorecard	8
Crime and Justice	9
Disability	11
Education	13
Fiscal Policy	15
Health	17
Housing	19
Levelling Up	21
Social Care	24
Social Security	26
Sustainability and the Environment	29
Author Biographies	32

Foreword

Thank you for reading this audit of the political party manifestos in advance of the 2024 election. This is the third time Academics Stand Against Poverty UK (ASAP UK) have carried out a rapid review of the party manifestos to produce the audit as a source of information for those in the country concerned about poverty and trying to decide which party will offer the best policy platform for addressing poverty in the UK.

We also recommend that readers visit our Audit Website, where you will be able to utilise an interactive graphic which explores the scoring that underpins the analysis of the party manifestos by our auditors to explore the full score of the audit alongside the ability to filter by particular topics of interest: <http://ukpovertyaudit.org/>

This year we also worked in partnership with Policy Press to not only produce the audit but develop a blog series in the run up to the election. This series covers a range of topics that are not covered in the audit and we recommend readers also visit this blog series: <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/category/academics-stand-against-poverty/>

Developing the audit

There has been considerable change in the UK since the last review in 2017. The snap election in 2019 and its focus on Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis and inflation have all contributed to ongoing challenges across households in the UK struggling to make ends meet. Consequently, the reason for the original audit back in 2015 remains as valid today as it did then: ‘We believe that there

is both an unmet need and a demand for quality independent assessment of the pledges coming from political parties. We hope that you – as an individual concerned by poverty – will find our results help you think through your choices.’

The audit does not seek to provide support for any particular party, it does not advocate any party policy over the others. Rather it draws together a range of independent academics to offer their expert analysis of the outlined policies and assess these within the framework we established back in 2015 around the notion of flourishing.

We understand flourishing as a process in which people are able to meet a set of self-determined and dynamic needs, which will vary throughout their lives and change across space, time and according to different social contexts. This recognises implicit universal needs shared by all humans: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom.

The challenge, however, as with the 2017 audit, rests upon which manifestos we can focus on in the time available for our reviewers to conduct their assessments, for these to be independently peer reviewed and made ready for publication. For this review we have been able to move beyond the three main parties, importantly considering the shifting poll position of the Conservatives and Reform at the time of writing and the pressure of the Greens on certain Labour seats and campaigns for left-leaning voters to support Green candidates. Unfortunately this means that the SNP have not been included in the review as

their manifesto was not produced in time for inclusion in this audit. Additionally, much of the analysis was carried out based on the draft proposals by Reform whose manifesto was launched as we were finalising the audits included in this document. We have sought to cross-check the reviews against the published contract offered by Reform to maintain validity of the analysis.

There have also been tough decisions to make around which topics are included in the review. The snap nature of the election, and how it happened to fall within the academic year, has resulted in some changes in topics covered in this audit compared to 2015 and 2017. We have sought to retain as many of the recurring themes from previous audits as possible. Considering the significance of levelling up in recent policy debates we have included this as a topic for

consideration as well as an additional focus on social care to sit alongside our previous, long-standing focus on health in the broader context. Unfortunately, we were not able to include key topics of immigration and international development in this audit and we recommend that those interested in debates around poverty do give consideration to these topics alongside those set out in the following audit.

ASAP UK hopes that this audit provides a useful source of information for those looking to cast their vote in the election to further efforts to address poverty in the UK.

Lee Gregory
Chair of Trustees
Academics Stand Against Poverty UK
On behalf of the Trustees

Executive Summary

Entering the 2024 election the UK has been through a period of turbulence which has created significant challenges for addressing poverty for the incoming government. Analysis by the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) illustrates:

More than 1 in 5 people in the UK (22%) were in poverty in 2021/22 – 14.4 million people.

This included:

8.1 million (or around 2 in 10) working-age adults

4.2 million (or nearly 3 in 10) children
2.1 million (or around 1 in 6) pensioners.

This has led the foundation to suggest that it has been 20 years since the last prolonged period of falling poverty rates in the UK. The election, one would hope, is a time at which poverty can be revisited by political parties and a clear strategy for addressing poverty be put forward. Yet, the term poverty barely features in some of the manifestos. A quick word search of the documents generates the following results:

Manifesto	Poverty	Inequality	Low income	Cost-of-living crisis
Conservative	1	0	1	0
Labour	14	1	1	5
Liberal Democrats	12	0	1	4
Greens	7	2	1	2
Reform	0	0	0	0
Plaid Cymru	12	2	1	2

How the term poverty is featured also varies. Child poverty, fuel poverty, water poverty, deep poverty, rural poverty, asylum seekers, disability and international development are all policy topics associated with the term. For many parties, however, the term is infrequently used and some of the alternative terminology barely features.

This audit provides a brief but considered account of how each party seeks to address poverty and rates various policy approaches on a 5-point scale which we have used for the two previous audits. From the scoring of the manifestos it is possible to draw out the following summary.

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Green	Reform	Plaid Cymru
Overall score	1.3	2.1	2.9	3.4	0.9	2.4

The distribution of scores largely mirrors the 2015 audit. Whilst the Greens have come out in front and Plaid Cymru (not in the 2015 audit) have just been pipped to the post by the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives have come in towards the back of the pack with Reform scoring lowest.

Labour:

- Labour came out with a total score of 2.1. This reflects some rather mixed scoring.
- Labour has scored well in relation to disability, sustainability and environment and on par with other parties for education and crime and justice.
- But Labour has scored lower on social security and fiscal policy (although most parties have scored poorly on these domains).

Conservatives:

- The Conservative score is also low, being rated as a 2 or 1 overall for all policy domains.
- The low score suggests that auditors had little confidence that the suggested policy platform would effectively address poverty.

Liberal Democrats:

- The Liberal Democrats have scored fairly well in comparison to other parties. But have not quite achieved a mid point score of 3.
- They were rated well in a number of policy areas: disability, for example, was their only 5 score.
- Across other policy domains their scores range from 1 to 3.

Green Party:

- They performed the best across most indicators. They were the only party to score more than one 5 rating within the domains of disability, health, sustainability and environment, and housing.
- But this has been counterbalanced by low scores on other policy domains.

Reform:

- Scores for Reform need to be treated with some care as assessments were based on the earlier draft of their contract and then cross-checked against the final published version.
- Consistently low scores likely reflect the lack of detail in much of the policy platform and they were consistently rated 1 across the various domains.

Plaid Cymru:

- Although across some of the specific criteria the Welsh focus, as expected, from Plaid Cymru can lead to some low scoring, the overall score for Plaid Cymru reflects their policy platform sitting consistently in the middle of ratings.
- They scored well (a 4) on disability and sustainability and the environment which has held up their scoring.
- For education and health they have scored a 3 and have scored lower than 3 for all other policy domains. Resulting in a mixed bag of results.

It is worth noting that in previous audits we highlighted that a score below 3 indicated a low level of confidence that the policy platforms would effectively address poverty and promote flourishing of citizens in the UK.

Although the Greens do score just above 3 the low scores across the board indicate a lack of ambition to address poverty in the current context by all the political parties reviewed in the audit.

Please consider the impact of parties' policies on poverty when you vote on 4 July. This audit should be a starting point for scrutinising the manifestos and their focus on poverty across a number of policy areas. With an estimated 14.4 million people in poverty in the UK, we can't ignore it.

Scorecard

To provide a quick illustration of the Scorecard, the infographic below shows the final scoring of each party against the effectiveness of their policies to enable British society to flourish. A scoring of 1 indicates very low confidence by the authors in the package of measures, and a scoring of 5

indicates a very high level of confidence. These scores were peer-reviewed. This image reflects the overall rating from our reviewers. Each review has been independently reviewed. Online you can find an interactive infographic depicting the overall scores that also gives you the ability to filter by topic to see the variation across the policy areas by party: <http://ukpovertyaudit.org/>

Overall Scoring.

The analysis reflects the combined averages of overall ratings for audited policy areas.

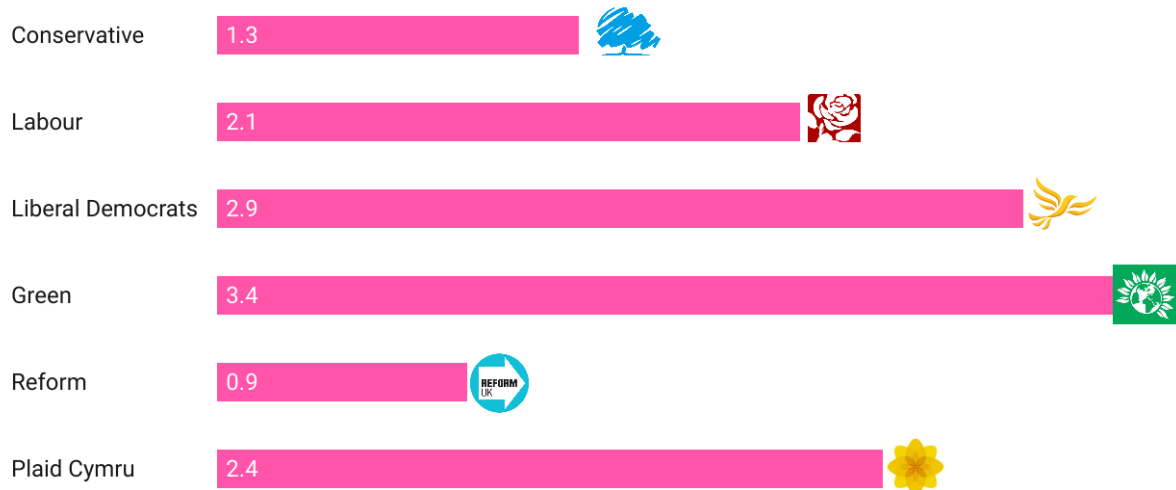


Chart: Lee Gregory • Created with Datawrapper



Crime and Justice

Charmian Werren, UEA Law School

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
2	3	3	4	1	2

'It is only really the Green Party who set out to provide a more theoretically coherent vision of reform.'

While there may be wide disagreement on the best direction for criminal justice, one thing that almost everyone agrees on is that the criminal justice system is facing some major challenges. The majority of the six manifestos acknowledge immediate and serious problems in need of attention, such as prison overcrowding, a stretched police service and delays in the courts.

Their approaches to solving these problems differ, but not entirely. The Conservatives root themselves firmly in a 'Law and Order' framework, pledging 'safer streets and ... justice for victims of crime', an approach mirrored by Reform's intent to 'restore Law and Order on Britain's streets and make sure that criminals face justice'. While the Liberal Democrats and Greens put forward a range of policies focused not just on protecting victims but also focusing on a rehabilitative 'public health' approach to tackle underlying causes of crime, they likewise implicitly frame criminal justice policy as needing to protect communities 'plagued' by crime and 'horribly high' violence, in the words of the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives, Reform and Labour all intend to

create more police officers and more prison spaces, as well as pledging new laws and sentences which are likely to mean more people entering the criminal justice system. The Liberal Democrats and Green Party take a different approach, with policies on decriminalising drug offences and diverting people away from custody.

Labour meanwhile sit in the middle, proposing to both 'Take Back Our Streets' and 'put victims first', but in the small print there are also signs of intent to challenge some of the underlying causes of offending. For example, one of Labour's six 'key steps for change' is to 'crack down on antisocial behaviour', intending to tackle the 'antisocial behaviour [that] blights our towns and city centres' with new Respect Orders and banning offenders from city centres. On the other hand, they also intend to create youth community hubs and identify the children of those in prison to provide support to prevent future crime. These policies have, however, sparked intense debate, and it remains to be seen whether policies that ostensibly aim to provide support can be effective, while their main aim remains the prevention of

offending rather than seeing support as worthwhile in its own right.

Perhaps the clearest example of the dichotomy in approaches are the pledges on regulating protest. The Conservatives reserve a significant section of their chapter on criminal justice for outlining plans to extend the powers of the police to curtail disruptive protests, including banning face coverings, climbing on war memorials and powers to prevent disorderly protests. Reform's draft manifesto explicitly states that they intend to ban claimed two-tier policing. In contrast, the Greens, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru all pledge to protect the right to peaceful protest rather than to restrict it, with proposals to repeal restrictions on protests made under the previous Conservative government. This difference in attitude is also clear in how the manifestos frame these pledges: the Conservative manifesto describes protest as 'a cover for extremist disruption and criminality', while the pledges to protect protest are not even considered criminal justice issues in both the Green and Liberal Democrat manifestos, falling instead in chapters on democracy, equality and human rights. The difference between seeing protest as a problem to be regulated for our protection, as opposed to a fundamental opportunity for participation for all, is indicative of the wider approach of the parties to the purpose of criminal justice. Strikingly, however, Labour are the only party who make no mention of

protest, except to say that they have 'been transformed from a party of protest to one that always puts the interests of the country first'.

As this shows, there is a sharp division between approaches from those parties offering a 'Law and Order' approach to criminal justice based on harsh treatment for offenders, and those attempting to look beyond current paradigms to envisage a new set of aims for a system generally agreed to be in crisis. It is only really the Green Party who set out to provide a more theoretically coherent vision of reform. Policies that show consideration of both victims and those drawn into the criminal justice system, and which derive from a clear evidence base, are more likely to have the long-term impacts of targeting underlying inequalities and building opportunities for all, compared to policies that adopt a 'tough on crime' stance without supporting evidence and which show little understanding of how the categories of 'victims' and 'criminals' often overlap, preferring instead to create images of good people hiding in their houses from the criminals who now rule the streets. Labour in particular use these tough policies as a way of attacking what they frame as Conservative failures; but it remains to be seen whether their more reformist policies on prevention emerge from beneath their headline policies of cracking down on crime and antisocial behaviour and 'putting victims first'.



Disability

Hannah Morgan, Leeds University and Chris Grover, Lancaster University

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
2	4	5	5	1	4

‘The Lib Dems and Greens have the most comprehensive package of commitments grounded in the language of rights, independent living and dignity.’

All of the manifestos acknowledge disabled people, and their concerns and aspirations are addressed to varying degrees across policy areas. Investment in addressing health inequalities, educational disadvantage and forms of poverty more generally will benefit disabled people. Our focus is on those policies and commitments that name disabled people as their intended recipients or targets.

Education

There are increasing numbers of children assessed as having the highest levels of need and receiving an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and inadequate funding and resources to meet this need. The Conservatives, Greens, Lib Dems and Labour all make pledges to improve provision for children with special educational needs, while the Greens and Plaid promise consistency of education and support for all children.

Employment

The Greens, Lib Dems and Labour seek to reduce the disability pay gap and commit to more support to help disabled people into (waged) work, while the Conservatives focus on people with ‘moderate mental health problems or mobility issues’. Labour and the Lib Dems pledge to address problems with Access to Work.

Health and social care

The Lib Dems and Greens promise free personal care, with Labour and Plaid creating national care services, and Labour and the Lib Dems committing to ‘home first’ care. The Lib Dems, Labour and Reform will all set up some form of commission on the long-term funding of social care. Labour and the Greens pledge parity for mental and physical health. All parties make some commitment to addressing workforce issues and to improving support for mental health, albeit with different priorities and level of detail.

Social security

Reform pledges a benefit system that helps ‘genuinely’ disabled people, while the Conservatives intend to tackle ‘the unsustainable rise in benefit claims’ by working age disabled people. The Lib Dems will make the benefit system ‘work better’ for disabled people and give them a ‘stronger voice’ in shaping benefit policy. The Conservatives, Greens, Lib Dems and Reform will all reform the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and the Conservatives, Lib Dems, Labour and Plaid address differing concerns with the work capability assessment. The Greens (5% increase on disability benefits and 10% increase on carer’s allowance), Plaid (Universal Credit increases and removal of the benefit cap and two-child limit) and Lib Dems (carer’s allowance) pledge increases and changes to various benefits.

Equity, rights and justice

The Lib Dems and Plaid are committed to adopting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) into UK law, while Labour will champion the rights of disabled people and ensure ‘their views and voices will be at the heart’ of all it does, and Plaid and the Lib Dems make specific commitments to disabled people’s involvement. The Greens focus on their commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention and Court on Human Rights (which Reform pledges to leave).

Manifesto accessibility

Plaid had the highest proportion of accessible formats at launch (pdf, BSL, large print and easy read) and added audio within two days. Labour launched with pdf, hard copy, braille and large print with easy read, easy read colours, BSL, audio and screen reader versions ‘coming soon’. The Lib Dems launched with pdf, hard copy, braille and easy read versions, with clear print, plain text, audio and BSL coming soon. The Conservative manifesto is only available as a standard pdf or print copy. Reform’s draft ‘contract’ only appeared at launch in pdf.

Summary

The Lib Dems and Greens have the most comprehensive package of commitments grounded in the language of rights, independent living and dignity. They commit to bringing the UN CRPD into UK law. Labour also frame disability as an equality issue. Plaid, the Lib Dems and Labour all pledge to better include disabled people and their organisations.

The commitment to free personal care by Lib Dems, Greens and Plaid would make a significant contribution to the flourishing of disabled people, as would the positive reform of benefits like PIP.

The Conservatives’ ambition to make the UK ‘the most accessible place in the world for people with disabilities to live, work and thrive’ sits uncomfortably with the centring of reducing disabled people’s access to benefits and the tone of the Conservatives and Reform on benefit reform and equality and diversity. Reform makes scant mention of disabled people or of policies that would enable their flourishing. Their commitment to replace the Equality Act and ‘scrap’ all Diversity, Equality and Inclusion roles creates a worrying context for the flourishing of disabled people.

All of the manifestos make specific disability pledges, many of which are focused on particular groups, for example, veterans (Reform), neurodiversity (Lib Dems, Plaid), BSL users (Lib Dems), accessibility of public spaces (Lib Dems) and railway travel (Lib Dems, Conservatives).

Overall, those parties who frame disability in terms of rights and independent living have a strong focus on disabled people and on enacting policies that will best enable them to flourish. This also requires a redistribution of resources that goes beyond tropes related to ‘deservingness’ and waged work.



Education

Sylvie Lomer, Manchester Institute of Education

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
2	3	3	4	1	3

‘Only the Green Party and Plaid Cymru centre “fairness” as a primary concern for education.’

None of the parties articulate concerns about different social groups who experience social inequality in relation to education, other than in broad terms like ‘disadvantaged pupils’. Only the Green Party and Plaid Cymru centre ‘fairness’ as a primary concern for education.

None of the manifestos include any awareness of inequalities based on region, family composition or ethnicity in relation to education. The only specific dimensions of inequality mentioned are socio-economic, care-leavers, and occasional mention of Special Educational Needs provision.

These manifestos centre, understandably, on the headline issues of child poverty, the physical integrity of schools in relation to the RAAC scandal, the teaching staff crisis, early years provision and the student loan system. These are certainly the most urgent issues affecting education in the UK. But it does not give confidence that these parties understand how to support an education system that supports people into flourishing lives in a range of different capacities, in the context of the climate crisis.

How the parties deal with Ofsted reform is a case in point. The tragic case of Ruth Perry’s suicide in the wake of a particularly poor but not unrepresentative school inspection has highlighted the punitive role Ofsted plays in the school system. Yet the Conservative manifesto promises only to ‘back Ofsted’s judgements’, and the Labour Party promises to ‘enhance the inspection regime with a new report card system’. Only the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party seek to respectively ‘reform’ and ‘abolish’ Ofsted.

Costings are mostly speculative, even those backed by some form of data and Treasury statistics. For example, the Conservative manifesto claims it will fund its 100,000 new apprenticeship places by ‘closing down university courses with the worst outcomes for their students’. It doesn’t specify how many courses this refers to, how many students would be affected and what the cost saving would therefore be. However, the Labour and Conservative manifestos are the most thoroughly costed and evidenced.

Comparing parties on specific issues highlights radical differences in how each party understands the challenges affecting education and therefore the solutions they propose. Broadly speaking, the Conservatives intend to maintain the academy trust, free school and private school as different types of school outside the control of local authority, while the Greens and Liberal Democrats would increase the funding and powers available to local authorities. Notably, of course, Labour (as well as the Greens, and Plaid Cymru) would apply VAT to private school fees to fund some of their investments. So whatever the challenge, it seems that the Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Plaid Cymru and the Labour Party intend to cooperate with the relevant sector and local authorities, while the Conservatives intend to launch specific initiatives and erode local authority control (Reform UK doesn't mention local authorities at all). The capacity to deliver education for a flourishing life is a profoundly local endeavour, and undermining local authority powers over educational provision seems unlikely to work towards equity.

In regards to higher education, policies are either alarmingly vague or vaguely alarming. The Conservatives plan to close down 'underperforming' university courses and use this to fund 100,000 new

apprenticeships. For a government to 'close down' courses represents a substantial intervention into institutional autonomy, even if it is done at arm's length through the Office for Students. Reform want to cut funding to 'universities that undermine free speech', but don't specify what would constitute such 'undermining' or what funding stream would be cut or by how much, which is deeply alarming. However, they also intend to cancel interest on student loans but extend capital repayment from 30 to 45 years, two very specific proposals which could effectively cancel each other out. The Liberal Democrats and Labour are equally vague, promising respectively to 'review higher education finance' and deliver 'a secure future for HE', but at least promise to work with universities and the rest of the sector. Finally, the Green Party promises to scrap tuition fees, cancel graduate debt and restore the Education Maintenance Allowance, which sounds promising for equity of access but doesn't come with a plan to establish alternative funding streams for universities. The funding system certainly needs reform to work towards equity and contribute to people's abilities to lead flourishing lives, but it needs comprehensive reform in consultation with the sector, not the imposition of a couple of arbitrary interventions.



Fiscal Policy

Malcolm Sawyer, University of Leeds

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
1	2	3	4	1	3

‘The exception is the Green Party who “will not allow our country to be held back by fiscal rules that don’t serve us all”.’

Fiscal rules and constraints

The background to the general proposals on taxation and public expenditure is the time path for the next five years as envisaged by the present government. In brief summary, a fiscal rule that government debt relative to GDP should decline in the final years. Public expenditure on ‘protected’ areas (including education, health and defence) would rise at modest rates generally below what is required to meet increased demand. In the other non-protected policy areas there will be a fall to £18 billion (circa 0.7% of GDP). The proposals in the manifestos are generally set in terms of differences relative to that ‘baseline’.

There is an adherence by Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties to a fiscal rule which envisages the current budget in balance, with borrowing for public investment subject to the national debt to GDP ratio declining by the end of the Parliament. The general framework appears to be unquestioned and nor is there any significant element of a different scale of budget deficits (whether up or down). The exception is the Green Party who ‘will not

allow our country to be held back by fiscal rules that don’t serve us all – we’re prepared to tax wealth and carbon emissions and prepared to borrow to invest in a fairer future. We do however acknowledge that public expenditure can only be expanded as far as the economy has the capacity to absorb it without triggering dangerous levels of inflation. This would be our overriding fiscal rule.’

There is a general approach to match proposed increases in public spending with proposed increases in taxation from specified changes: often at the overall level, though in the case of the Labour Party on an item by item basis. This approach has some attractions in bringing together something of the scale of changes which each party is proposing. The limitations of this approach should, however, be recognised. Proposals such as ‘close tax gap’, and so on are inherently difficult to put a figure on (and in the manifestos which mention that little has been done to show how the figures used are arrived at). The tax proposals make little allowance for behavioural change consequent on the tax changes. The expenditure costings focus on the gross cost, without any allowance for tax revenues

arising from the recipients of the public expenditure (for example, income tax and national insurance paid by those thereby employed). There is no discussion of the impacts, positive or negative, of the proposed increase in public spending.

Taxation

The tax initiatives which are proposed are generally on an ad hoc basis in a search for a funding stream to match against expenditure plans. There is little attempt to secure a more equitable tax regime.

Tax proposals which relate to wealth are largely off the table. The notable exception is the Green Party who propose a wealth tax of 1% over £10 million and 2% over £1 billion. The Liberal Democrats, Green Party and Plaid Cymru propose raising tax on capital gains to income tax rates.

Additional taxes on business are either virtually non-existent (Conservative, Labour) or targeted on specific sectors and on windfall or excessive profits. Banks (in the case of the Liberal Democrats) and oil and energy companies (in the case of the Green Party and others). Such taxes often rely on high interest rates (banks) and high oil prices (energy and oil companies) which may be an unreliable income stream.

In respect of taxes designed to make the tax system more environmentally friendly: the Liberal Democrats propose additional tax on private jet flights, reform of aviation taxes and sewage tax on water company profits. The Green Party proposes a carbon tax, intending to raise up to £90 billion by 2030. In contrast, Reform seek savings of £30 billion by scrapping 'net zero', and also removing VAT on energy and lower fuel duty.

There is generally little change proposed for tax on income: the Conservatives and Labour propose

'triple lock' of no increase in income tax, national insurance or VAT. There is a sleight of hand here as the tax allowance frozen in nominal terms leads to rising income tax payments as wages and prices rise. The Conservatives have proposed cuts in national insurance rates. The Green Party would abolish the ceiling on earnings for national insurance payments. Reform would raise the income tax threshold to £20,000 and higher rate starting point to £70,000.

The main direct effect on children in poverty would come from removing the two-child cap on benefits. The Conservative Party rules that out though adjusts child benefit for high earners, benefitting those on incomes over £60,000. The Labour Party also rules out removing the two-child cap. The Liberal Democrats, Green Party and Plaid Cymru would remove the two-child cap.

Public investment

The level of spending on public investment is likely to be constrained by the operation of the 'fiscal rule' rather than by the need for public investment, particularly in addressing climate change, or by the availability of resources. There is relatively little change in public investment proposed by the Conservative or Labour Party. Others recognise the need for higher investment. The Liberal Democrats offer an average over five years of £19.7 billion per annum of investment and the Green Party suggest raising investment to £90 billion by 2030 (focused on green transformation and social housing). Plaid Cymru have a range of ideas for energy transition. Overall it is worth noting that spending and tax are on course to diverge significantly, even if growth is reasonably strong, so that there is a need to find overall increases in the tax share of GDP, to bring the UK into line with comparable European countries and ensure that the government has sufficient resources to undertake needed activities.



Health

Juan Baeza, King's College London

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
2	2	3	5	1	3

'In terms of health care policy, government must take a broad view that includes health promotion, illness prevention and public health services.'

A good level of health is essential for people to flourish, to achieve this citizens require the necessary resources and opportunities to access healthy housing, food, environment and a well-functioning health and social care system. Due to continuing poor hospital performance, difficulties in getting GP appointments, continually missed targets, and the longest NHS waiting times in its history, health in general and the NHS in particular continues to be a major issue for the public. Sufficient financial resources are needed so that the health and social care system can guarantee individuals a comprehensive range of high quality services within a reasonable time frame. Thanks to social and medical progress we are an increasingly aged population that require growing support from an adequately funded social care system in particular. At present health and social care services are too limited and of variable performance, and experts agree that spending in these areas needs to be substantially increased to sustain a good quality health and social care system to improve and maintain the population's health status.

Although all the parties' manifestos have policies that focus on the poor performance of the NHS only the Green Party propose to significantly increase NHS spending to the level that independent experts state is necessary. The other manifestos have pledges to reduce NHS waiting times and 'fix' the social care system but the commitment to the necessary funding in these areas is missing. For example, on NHS spending the Conservatives are offering 0.9% and Labour 1.1% extra, which is well below what experts state is necessary. The Liberal Democrats focus on improving access to GP services by recruiting 8,000 more GPs, although the funding for this pledge is unclear. Although the Conservative manifesto vaguely commits to a long-term NHS workforce plan the only explicit spending commitments in their manifesto are to modernise 250 GP surgeries and develop 50 more Community Diagnostic Centres. The Labour Party's only specific costed aim for the NHS is to provide 40,000 more NHS appointments to begin to tackle the long waiting lists.

All the manifestos make variable pledges to tackle the poor dental health of the population with increasing access to dental health services, but only the Green Party is able to pledge the necessary funding for this. Mental health is another area that gets some policy attention from the manifestos, particularly for young people. All the manifestos pledge to provide mental health professionals in all schools. The manifestos also give variable policy attention to the plight of social care. Only the Liberal Democrats and the Greens are explicitly committed to providing free personal care as is the case in Scotland. The Labour and Conservative parties discuss social care but have no explicit costed policies in this area, for example the Labour Party states that it will create a National Care Service but there are no details on how this would be done.

To achieve a flourishing society government must coordinate various policy areas such as education, housing, employment and the environment. In terms of health care policy, government must take a broad view that includes health promotion, illness prevention and public health services. It is encouraging to see some of the manifestos having a multisectoral approach to health, for example, the Liberal Democrats include policies on food, with a National Food Strategy to make nutritious food affordable and making more green spaces available for people's mental and physical well-being.

Similarly, the Green Party provides a plan for a cross-government approach to public health, by requiring food labelling, promoting active travel and pledging local government investment in sport. The Conservative manifesto aims to legislate to combat smoking, vaping and high fat, sugar and salt in foods. Although the Labour manifesto has several good aims that would contribute to a flourishing life, there is a lack of a clear and costed plan for achieving these aims and no provisions for funding them. This quote is typical of the Labour manifesto: '[A]t the core of our mission will be a bold new ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history.' Without pledges for funding these ambitions, Labour's aims remain only vague ambitions. Except for the Reform Party all the manifestos to a lesser and greater extent discuss the need to tackle health inequalities amongst regions, age groups and genders.

As already stated, a flourishing and healthy population is only possible if government is committed to ensuring that citizens have the necessary material resources. Many experts agree that abolishing the two-child benefit cap in particular and increasing benefits to the most vulnerable in society in general is urgently needed. The Liberal Democrats, Greens and Plaid all pledge to specifically abolish the two-child benefit cap, the bedroom tax and tackle benefit poverty in general.



Housing

Becky Tunstall, University of York

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
2	3	3	5	1	3

‘[N]one of the three main parties propose policies that will substantially alter current worsening problems or reduce housing’s CO₂ production sufficient to meet net zero goals.’

Despite the salience of housing problems and the climate crisis, none of the three main parties propose policies that will substantially alter current worsening problems or reduce housing’s CO₂ production sufficient to meet net zero goals, and the housing budget will probably be reduced further.

Labour and the Conservatives emphasise new building and support for first time buyers (FTBers). New building is an indirect route to improving affordability and helping the worst off, and FTBers are generally not the youngest or worst-off people.

All parties but Reform pledge to ensure substantial housebuilding (and some conversion and reuse). The Conservatives promise 1.6m new homes over five years or 320,000/yr in England, but do not specify tenure. Labour promises 1.5m, and the ‘biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation’, without giving numbers. Plaid Cymru promise a ‘significant expansion’ of social housing. The Lib Dems mention some affordable housing. The Greens offer 150,000 social rented homes a year, with

unspecified numbers in other tenures. As context, over 2019–24 about 200,000 homes were built per year, the vast majority for owner occupation. Labour and the Conservatives assume that more building will improve affordability and access to home ownership. In contrast, the Greens propose demand and cost management, aiming for no real growth in housing prices, alongside private rent control. With Plaid the emphasis is on the efficient use of existing homes, bringing empties back into use, and restricting and taxing second homes and short-term lets.

All parties want to change the planning system. The Conservatives, Labour and Reform want faster decisions. Labour will reverse Conservative changes to restore mandatory local targets for house building, and will allow some development on ‘grey’ green belt. The Lib Dems also want more powers for planners, and they and Labour promise more funding. The Lib Dems will allow councils to buy land at current use value, rather than the value including planning permission, enabling more affordable development at the expense of landowners. Labour will also

amend compulsory purchase to reduce payments to landowners. In contrast, the Greens will reverse the 2012 presumption in favour of ('sustainable') development, emphasising biodiversity and public benefit.

The Conservatives will reduce costs for FTBers with a 'permanent' reduction in stamp duty, extending Truss's 2022–25 holiday, alongside a continued Mortgage Guarantee Scheme, with government guarantees to enable people to buy with just 5% deposit (about £12,000 on average in England). Labour will not make the tax cut but will also continue mortgage guarantees, and offer FTBers 'first dibs' (but no help with cost) on new homes. The Right to Buy, one route to affordable home ownership but a drain on social housing, has ended in Scotland and Wales. In England, only the Conservatives plan to keep it unchanged. Labour will review the (Conservative) enhanced discounts and increase protections on new social housing, while the Lib Dems will let councils decide. The Greens will end both the Right to Buy and mortgage guarantees.

In England, all parties except Reform will pass something like the failed Renters Reform Bill 2024, and end 'no fault' evictions for private renters. Labour will also ensure all homes meet 'minimum' standards and give private tenants the same powers as social renters to challenge landlords. The Lib Dems plan compulsory local registration. The Greens want local boards to negotiate disputes. Going further, the Greens and Plaid plan some form of rent control, limiting when and how much rent can increase, and Labour will allow tenants to challenge big rent increases. Reform, in contrast, offers support to private landlords.

In 2019, the Conservatives promised to end rough sleeping by 2024. A special COVID-19 pandemic effort almost achieved this, but then numbers rose again. The Conservatives promise to 'continue' work, and Labour and Plaid match this; Plaid will use Housing First. The Greens more boldly promise to end rough sleeping, and the Lib Dems all forms of homelessness.

The Conservatives say little about benefits to make housing affordable. Labour promises to improve fairness and efficiency, not generosity. Both are likely to try to reduce expenditure. In contrast, the Greens will increase Universal Credit by £40 a week, raise disability benefits, end the 2012 two-child benefit cap and the 'bedroom tax', which will be costly but have a very big impact on poverty. The nations' governments cannot change benefit rules. Plaid will lobby for anti-poverty changes, and is the only party to mention Local Housing Allowance for low-income private renters.

Light taxation of housing represents support for existing owners and landlords, and taxation of housing wealth could provide an alternative source of government income. The Conservatives will end stamp duty for some FTBers. Reform will abolish inheritance tax for estates under £2 million, and cut the rate for larger amounts. Labour plan to increase stamp duty, but only for foreign buyers. The Lib Dems will enable higher stamp duty and council tax on second homes. The Greens will raise capital gains tax and introduce a wealth tax on assets of £10 million or more.

Reform comes close to climate denial. All other parties promise at least some retrofitting. The Conservatives will spend £6 billion to improve one million homes (4% of the total in England) over three years, but have postponed targets for removing gas boilers, and promise no new green tariffs. After trimming its plans, Labour will spend £1.1 billion a year, and a very similar £5.5 billion over five years. The Lib Dems promise to end fuel poverty, with free retrofits for people on lower incomes, and will restore the duty on private landlords to provide homes at EPC C that was dropped by the Conservatives. The Greens, however, offer £29 billion on insulation to EPC B, and £9 billion for low-carbon heating for homes and other buildings over five years. The Conservatives and Labour make general promises about the quality of promised new homes. All Greens' new homes will be to Passivhaus standards, and Lib Dems' will be zero carbon.



Levelling Up

Martin Heneghan, University of Nottingham

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
3	4	4	2	1	See note below

‘[T]he overarching strategy of the Labour Party has the potential to turbocharge levelling up as a ten-year infrastructure strategy that will be aligned with a ten-year industrial strategy.’

This audit will analyse both parameters in turn that were set out above as a baseline for levelling up the United Kingdom. Given that levelling up is a UK-wide policy initiative, the audit focuses on the political parties that contest elections across Great Britain.

Enhanced resources from central government for infrastructure investment

The Conservative Party’s record on delivering infrastructure projects whilst in office has not been strong. It recently cancelled the final leg of HS2 between Birmingham and Manchester – the most high-profile investment in connectivity between the UK’s major cities. Their manifesto promises to reinvest the savings from this cancellation with ‘every penny saved in the North or Midlands to be spent there’. There are pledges to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail connecting Liverpool to Hull, with further rail investment in the Midlands, South West and Wales. They pledge to invest £4.7 billion for smaller cities, towns and rural areas in the North

and Midlands to spend on their transport priorities. In addition, they pledge to invest £8.3 billion to fill potholes and resurface roads. A more concerted focus on roads will potentially harm the UK’s ability to meet its decarbonisation targets. A further £8.55 billion is pledged for city regions to spend on their local priorities.

Whilst in office, capital investment by the Conservatives has often been neglected for immediate priorities, including tax cuts. The manifesto offers further tax cuts, promising to cut national insurance contributions by a further 2% for employees and to abolish them completely for the self-employed. Investment pledges must be seen in the context of these short-term priorities.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto offers similar policies to the Conservatives on transport but is vague on costing and specifics. There is a pledge to ‘significantly extend the electrification of the rail network and deliver Northern Powerhouse rail’. Further pledges are on the passenger side with a

promise to freeze fares. They pledge to review the cancellation of HS2 to see if it can be delivered. On electric vehicles there is a pledge to extend charging points and mandate all new small cars and vans sold from 2030 will be zero-emission. There are pledges to work with local government to deliver tram networks. Although this would significantly enhance the effective size of local economies, the policy within the manifestos remains vague on specifics.

On the whole, the Liberal Democrats offer some scope to invest in much-needed infrastructure across the UK, but the vagueness of their proposals would make it difficult to hold them to account.

The Labour Party has a bolder transport policy, which is to bring the railways back into public ownership by not renewing franchises once they are up for renewal. They also pledge to give city mayors more control over rail planning in their localities. However, unlike the Conservative Party, the Labour manifesto is vague on specific rail projects. That said, the overarching strategy of the Labour Party has the potential to turbocharge levelling up as a ten-year infrastructure strategy that will be aligned with a ten-year industrial strategy. Short-term policy making has hindered regional policy in the UK for decades.

Like the Labour Party, the Green Party promises to bring railways back into public ownership in the same way. Similarly, the party is vague on specifics and costings. There is a pledge to increase electrification and reopen viable lines. Where Labour frames its transport policies around economic and environmental security, unsurprisingly the Green Party is preoccupied by environmental concerns.

Reform UK's policy on infrastructure promises to '[f]ocus on our coastal regions, Wales, the North, and the Midlands to improve existing rail and road links'. However, its transport policies are framed by an anti-net zero stance rather than a prospect for economic development. It promises to 'stop the war on drivers' by banning ULEZ clean air zones. It also promises to

scrap the rest of HS2 and create a new infrastructure commission that ends net zero targets.

Enhancing enablers through devolution

The Conservative manifesto continues its approach to levelling up communities through pots of central government funding. There is a commitment to 105 towns of a £20 million endowment fund, continuation of the shared prosperity fund for three more years, and a pledge to launch a seaside heritage fund. However, this does not match the funding available in 2019, particularly as the Conservative Party's national service policy will be funded from the shared prosperity fund.

There is a commitment to offer 'level 4' devolution powers to all local areas with a devolution deal. However, this does not equip local and combined authorities with the much-needed revenue-raising powers essential to build local capacity and place-based economic policy making.

The Labour Party does not pledge specific pots of money to local authorities from the central government. It is vague on its plans for devolution but does go further than the Conservative Party by promising to widen devolution. Local areas will be able to gain new powers over transport, adult education and skills, housing and planning, and employment support. It promises multi-year settlements to local councils, which will provide more certainty to local governments. However, there is no pledge to give local authorities more revenue-raising powers and so the assumption is that they will remain dependent on central government funding.

The Green Party is vague on local governance arrangements. There is a commitment to give local authorities the resources and power they need with £5 billion a year in extra funding, but no specifics on the power that would be transferred to local authorities. They are invited to play a key role in decarbonising the economy, but again this is not framed within rebalancing the unequal spatial economy.

Like Labour, the Liberal Democrats will offer multi-year settlements to local governments. There is also a vague commitment to grant local authorities more power where it ‘matters to them most’. Councils will be permitted to increase council tax by up to 500% on second homes. Whilst this is the firmest commitment to increase revenues for local government, it is quite a targeted policy at localities with tourist economies whose flourishing can be blighted by vacant second homes.

The Reform UK manifesto does not mention devolution, metro mayors, combined authorities or local councils once.

To note: we have not included this area within the overall manifesto scoring as we omitted Plaid Cymru from this topic and so inclusion in the scoring would skew the output.



Social Care

Catherine Needham, Emily Burn and Chloe Alexander, University of Birmingham

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
1	2	3	2	1	2

‘Of all the manifestos, the Liberal Democrats offered the most thorough and convincing focus on social care reform.’

Of all the manifestos, the Liberal Democrats offered the most thorough and convincing focus on social care reform. Prior to the launch, the party released a video in which the leader Ed Davey talked about caring for his disabled son. It was a powerful human story in a policy sector which for years has suffered from vague promises, or has focused narrowly on the narrative of older people selling their homes to pay for care.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto included proposals to improve access to care, and a promise of free personal care. They committed to more support to unpaid carers, with education-based support for young carers, and reform of carer’s allowance. They proposed a Royal College of Care Workers and committed to ethical international recruitment.

The Conservatives had little to say about social care in the manifesto beyond the commitment to implement the cap on private care costs. This cap was passed into law in 2022, scheduled for implementation in 2023 and then delayed – so this promise amounts to little more than a follow through on their own unfinished business. It’s also not clear how they would pay for it

since the Health and Care levy which was originally going to pay for it was scrapped in 2022. The manifesto offered more cuts to National Insurance rather than increases to pay for this.

The Labour manifesto puts forward a plan for a National Care Service and commits to reform of social care. The needs of different groups are considered through proposals for improving SEND services in education and improving local availability of mental health support. There is also a reference to plans to address workforce problems in social care, alongside those affecting healthcare. However, the plans do not engage directly with unpaid carers or show an understanding of the connections between these different areas for those with care needs and those supporting them. There is limited consideration of how people in economic poverty, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people are experiencing the service gaps, exclusionary approaches and lack of early interventions affecting the social care system.

The Greens’ manifesto outlines several measures to improve the situation of unpaid carers and create

a new social care settlement. They propose free personal care for older people and disabled people. They commit to a large investment in care services. Carers should expect an increase in carer's allowance and, when in work, pay gap protection. Social care services will be improved by a new career structure for paid care workers.

Plaid Cymru promises additional funding for both adults and children's services. The manifesto includes the aim to explore direct provision of services (reversing decades of outsourcing to the market). Plaid Cymru commits to the development of a National Care Service and also expresses support for the idea of care being free at the point of use. The manifesto acknowledges the importance of the voluntary and community sector to the social care system and intends to support the sustainability and planning of the sector by introducing multi-year funding settlements.

Reform recognises that changes need to be made to the social care system and intends to establish a Royal Commission to inform a national plan. While the complexity of the social care system and the need for increased funding are acknowledged, there are few ideas about the changes needed to lead to better outcomes.

In summary, the majority of manifestos acknowledge the challenges facing the social care system and the

need for reform. However, plausible commitments to increase funding are thin on the ground, and without a long-term funding settlement it will be impossible to improve social care outcomes.

The definition of what is a good social care outcome will change from person to person depending on their circumstances. For people drawing on care and support to flourish we need a well-functioning social care system which can ensure fair and timely access to good quality and person-centred support. We need better pay and conditions for paid care workers and much more support for unpaid carers. The legacy of austerity and rising demand has contributed to a vast underfunding in the sector. The funding settlement to local authorities is key, however there are few strong commitments to increase funding to local authorities to support the commissioning of care services. A number of parties commit to multi-year funding settlements which may help the social care sector have more certainty to plan service provision. Nevertheless, there is scant detail as to whether local authorities can expect increased funding to discharge their duties. Promises to increase the living wage will likely have a positive effect on much of the care workforce. However, this will place additional pressure on care providers and local authorities will need to account for this when commissioning services.



Social Security

Michael Orton, Warwick University and Richard Machin, Nottingham Trent University

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	PLAID CYMRU
1	1	2	2	2

'It is disappointing to see that none of the party manifestos set out ambitious or transformative changes to social security.'

Reviewing general election manifestos is inevitably a forward-looking exercise. However, it has been necessary for this review to consider the fundamental changes to the social security system implemented over the last 14 years. Whichever party is elected to govern on 4 July will inherit a reduced and diminished system. Benefit changes implemented in this period have created severe issues relating to adequacy – to give just one example, 55% of recipients of Universal Credit are unable to afford enough food (Trussell Trust, 2024).

We view adequacy as the most pressing problem in this policy area. However the legacy of 14 years of cuts has led to a lack of vision about what the social security system is for and what it has the potential to achieve. It is disappointing to see that none of the party manifestos set out ambitious or transformative changes to social security.

Analysis published during this election campaign by the Resolution Foundation (2024) demonstrates the severity of the cuts to adequacy in the social security system. Benefit changes implemented since 2010

include an overall benefit cap, the two-child limit (denying means-tested support within Universal Credit to third or subsequent children), cuts to housing support and a four-year benefit freeze. In the latest parliament, temporary COVID-19 and cost-of-living support was welcome but not enough to offset the cumulative post 2010-impact of £2,800 annual losses for the poorest one-fifth of households (in marked contrast to pensioner households which have gained £900 per year on average). For further detail on benefit changes in this period see the work of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics (Hills, 2015; Cooper and Hills, 2021).

The Resolution Foundation assert that 'rising destitution, record homelessness and child poverty are just the sharpest evidence that the current safety net is inadequate'. The administration of the social security system has also caused difficulties for many claimants with the introduction of digitalised claims, punitive sanctions and long waits for payments.

The Conservative manifesto continues the problematisation of benefits, signalling that social

security should not be a ‘lifestyle choice’ and there is an ‘unsustainable rise in benefit claims for people of working age with a disability or health condition’. It states that £12 billion can be saved by measures including reforming disability benefits, accelerating the rollout of Universal Credit and a tougher sanctions regime. For disabled claimants (particularly those with mental health problems) the manifesto pledges to improve Personal Independence Payment assessments, alongside a tightening of the process for those claiming incapacity for work benefits and an overhaul of the fit note system. These are in effect more cuts. The manifesto offers some benefit increases but for particular groups: for pensioners through the retention of the triple lock and retaining other pensioner benefits; and, for those on higher incomes with children, by changing income eligibility criteria for Child Benefit.

The Labour manifesto is notable for its lack of consideration of social security. The manifesto states Labour will develop a strategy to reduce child poverty and that it wants to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels. But no pledges are made on increasing benefit rates – other than retaining the pensions triple lock – nor reversing any of the benefit reductions introduced over the last 14 years. Instead, the focus is on work as ‘the foundation of our approach to tackling poverty and inequality’. Employment is also the core concern in relation to disability with a pledge to ‘support more disabled people and those with health conditions into work’. There is a commitment to review Universal Credit ‘so it makes work pay and tackles poverty’ which could mean large-scale transformation but as no further detail is given that is wholly hypothetical and in practice there is no concrete basis provided for enabling flourishing lives.

Compared with the Conservatives and Labour, the Green Party, Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru manifestos are tonally more positive regarding social security. The Liberal Democrats pledge to ‘repair the broken benefits safety net’ and end deep poverty within a decade. The Green Party acknowledge that

‘all of us might need extra support or a safety net at different points in our lives’ and Plaid Cymru say reducing child poverty should be a major goal for government.

In terms of content all three of these parties commit to the triple lock/maintaining pension levels but they also commit to increasing other benefit rates. The Green Party proposes raising Universal Credit by £40 a week, carer’s allowance by 10% and disability benefits by 5%. The Liberal Democrats pledge to increase carer’s allowance and Statutory Sick Pay plus introduce an enhanced rate of Child Benefit for one-year-olds. Plaid Cymru’s position is to increase Child Benefit by £20 a week along with other measures. The three parties also propose abolishing some of the punitive elements of Universal Credit (notably the two-child limit, bedroom tax, and ending/reducing the five-week wait for initial payment). In addition, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru commit to an essentials guarantee within Universal Credit but therein lies the caveat with these three manifestos – each would be a significant improvement on the current system but even an essential guarantee falls far short of the basis for ensuring a flourishing life for all.

The ‘contract’ published by Reform refers to a ‘benefits system which is broken’ and emphasises that a reformed system will ensure that ‘those who can work do work’. It lacks specific detail, referring only to an increase in the starting point of income tax to £20,000, increased back-to-work support focusing particularly on 16–34-year-olds, and the withdrawal of benefits for people seeking work after four months or two job offers. For claimants with a disability, it pledges exemption from regular assessments for those with severe or long-term disability and independent face-to-face medicals for Personal Independence Payment and Work Capability Assessments.

Reform claim that these benefit changes would produce £15 billion savings per year. The IFS assess that ‘this would represent a big cut to the size of the state’ but that the costings are problematic and the

spending reductions would realise significantly less than stated. This ‘contract’ does not present a viable vision for social security and would expediate the diminishment of the welfare state.

In summary, the Conservative manifesto promises continuation of what we have seen since 2010. The Labour manifesto acknowledges poverty but provides no plan for achieving a fit for purpose social security system. Labour and the Conservatives share a work focus, lack of consideration of punitive elements and

absence of measures on adequacy. The Green, Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru manifestos are more promising on adequacy but even they do not include the potential for social security as a transformative source of dignity and independence (especially for women and disabled people) nor measures to ensure British society can flourish. Social security is not just about a minimum safety net and the direction of travel in the last 14 years has lost sight of this. Sadly this is reflected in all the manifestos reviewed and broader political discussions.

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Sustainability and the Environment

Carolyn Snell, University of York

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT	GREEN	REFORM	PLAID CYMRU
1	3	4	4	1	4

‘Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and Greens discuss environmental issues in the most nuanced, comprehensive manner.’

Introduction

Across the six available manifestos the discussion of environmental issues varies substantially in terms of reach and ambition, with some showing significantly more potential to enable people to flourish and to create positive social outcomes than others. Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and Greens discuss environmental issues in the most nuanced, comprehensive manner, all drawing on variations of the term ‘emergency’ and ‘crisis’ to describe both the threat of climate change and threats to the natural environment (Labour does so in a more limited way), and drawing on international narratives around the ‘just transition’ to net zero.

Given the wide-ranging nature of environmental issues it is not possible to cover them all here, instead, climate change and the net zero transition, and water pollution are used as examples.

Example 1: Climate change and the net zero transition

With the exception of Reform, which commits to scrapping net zero policies within the first 100 days of office, the other five manifestos recognise the threat posed by climate change and commit to the net zero agenda. Within this context, the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats reference the need for energy security especially in light of the war in Ukraine, and all manifestos describe the need for greater energy production at home.

How net zero objectives might be achieved is handled very differently across the manifestos that support it, with the Conservatives continuing to support the production and use of fossil fuels alongside the development of clean energy: for example, continuing North Sea oil and gas production, and opening new gas power stations, alongside investment in nuclear power and measures to increase renewable energy such as trebling offshore wind capacity. These latter measures are presented as a necessary and pragmatic

trade-off – choosing (in their terms) to keep citizens safe and warm over clean energy.

On the other hand, Labour’s tone is far more positive, highlighting the opportunities associated with net zero, and is embodied in the ambition to become a ‘clean energy superpower’. Labour’s target is to ensure ‘clean energy’ by 2030, this includes proposals to double on-shore wind, triple solar power, quadruple offshore wind; invest in carbon capture and storage, hydrogen and marine energy. Similar to the Conservative manifesto, nuclear power will play a part, however, discussion around fossil fuel is much more muted – with ‘strategic reserves’ of gas stations being retained, alongside a ‘phased and responsible’ transition in the North Sea.

The Green, Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat stance is more ambitious in tone compared to the two main parties, with action reflecting the state of emergency/crisis described within their manifestos. Taking a few examples, the Liberal Democrats plan to invest in renewables so that 90% of UK electricity is renewables-generated by 2030 and plan to reinstate the requirement that all new cars and vans will be zero emission by 2030 (a policy delayed by the Conservatives). The Greens have a target of achieving net zero by 2040 (compared to the existing 2050 target), to issue no new oil and gas licences, and for wind power to provide 70% of electricity by 2030. Plaid Cymru opposes new nuclear power and new licences for oil and gas drilling, and intends to expand the National Welsh Energy Company and community owned energy generation across Wales.

Reform, on the other hand, recognises the challenges posed by climate change, but suggests that adapting to it rather than attempting to prevent it is the best course of action (this goes against international policy narratives and prevailing scientific advice). Reform promises to scrap renewable subsidies, fast-track new nuclear reactors, fast-track licences of North Sea gas and oil, and grant shale gas (fracking) licences on test sites for two years.

All manifestos recognise the potential threats associated with the transition to net zero. Whilst Reform’s approach is to scrap the agenda altogether, the tone of the Conservative manifesto highlights the importance of protecting *existing* jobs. On the other hand, the other four, to differing extents, highlight the positive opportunities for the creation of green jobs, for example, Labour will incentivise companies to create green jobs with a ‘British Jobs Bonus’. The Liberal Democrats, Greens and Plaid Cymru are the only parties to discuss in explicit terms the ‘just transition’ to net zero, mirroring international policy narratives in this space about the need to provide skills, training and education to enable people to participate in a changing labour market.

As part of their discussion about the net zero transition, all five parties that have committed to it cover home energy efficiency, linking this to debates around energy security and in some cases fuel poverty. The Conservative manifesto promises a fund of £6 billion over the next three years to support energy efficiency and ‘make homes warmer’ and Labour intends to invest ‘an extra £6.6 billion’ on improving domestic energy efficiency. Again, the other three parties go further, with the Liberal Democrats proposing a ten-year ‘emergency retrofit’, focusing on those on low incomes; the Greens spending £29 billion over five years to insulate homes to EPC B; and Plaid Cymru proposes a long-term plan for public investment in retrofit, especially amongst low income households.

Whilst Reform doesn’t mention energy efficiency it does propose abolishing environmental levies and VAT on energy bills, and lowering fuel duty by 20 pence.

Example 2: Water pollution

All manifestos recognise the problems associated with water pollution and the discharge of sewerage into rivers and the sea. Solutions vary in ambition. The Conservatives support cancelling executive bonuses for breaches caused by water companies. Labour goes further, promising to cancel bonuses, but also to put

companies into ‘special measures’, and to pursue criminal charges where appropriate. The Greens, on the other hand, support renationalisation (of water companies, but also the large energy companies), the Liberal Democrats pledge to make water companies ‘public interest companies’ and Plaid Cymru proposes greater Welsh control over water to address the issue.

Reform state that they will stop the release of sewerage into rivers and seas, but do not expand on how, and unlike the other five manifestos do not explicitly blame water companies.

Overall assessment

Reform’s manifesto does not align with existing scientific knowledge or dominant international narratives on environmental issues, largely dismissing their causes and consequences. The implementation of these policies is likely to worsen existing social and environmental outcomes.

Overall the Conservative manifesto lacks ambition, and suggests that trade-offs must be made between social and environmental policies. If implemented

it is likely to perpetuate and entrench existing environmental inequalities rather than enabling people to flourish.

Compared to the Conservatives, Labour’s manifesto covers a wider range of environmental concerns and if implemented successfully could help people to flourish (for example, providing access to nature, protection from climate impacts, more energy efficient housing). Despite this, discussions around clean air were muted, which is disappointing in terms of public health, especially within cities. However, proposals are vague in places, and again, given the extent of the crisis, there is a question over whether the manifesto is sufficiently ambitious.

The Green, Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat stance is more ambitious. They promise rapid action in recognition of the climate and nature crisis. These manifestos recognise the interrelationship between people and the environment, and that environmental policies can be combined with social policies, rather than in conflict with each other. Arguably these policies have greater ability to support good social outcomes, although how realistic some of the policies are would benefit from further scrutiny.

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