

2026 Election Policy Insights: Energy

Challenges and Impacts in the Scottish Election and Beyond

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Policy Insights by Molly Coyle and Dr Hannah Salamon

Setting the stage

Transitioning to an energy system that is powered by renewables is a goal of many countries across the world in order to mitigate the catastrophic effects of climate change. Scotland was the first country to make decarbonisation by 2045 a statutory obligation, and developing a clean energy system is key to meeting this goal. Scotland's emissions have successfully [come down by over 50%](#) compared to the 1990 average so far due to scaled-up wind and solar electricity generation, coal phase-out, and decreases in gas generation, however, government aims for [an 80% decrease in emissions by 2040](#). Meeting this goal will require action across other sectors, including scaling up electric vehicle usage and decarbonising heat in buildings. Meeting the current Scottish government's aim to [produce at least half of the UK's total energy](#) by 2030 will require further development of renewable energy generation capacity across Scotland yet will also help deliver on emissions targets.

Energy is a policy area that is reserved to the UK government, limiting Scotland's decision-making power. However, many policy levers devolved to the Scottish government remain key in shaping the delivery of both Scotland and the UK's energy futures. The Scottish government provides funding in energy innovation, training to develop the green energy workforce, and planning guidance for the development of physical energy infrastructure.

The evidence is clear that emissions reductions are required to avoid catastrophic effects of climate change. The Climate Change Committee reports that “Scotland has newly legislated emissions targets consistent with achieving Net Zero by 2045. [The targets are achievable](#), provided the Scottish Government urgently utilises policy powers within its gift”. Although energy is reserved, the CCC reports that “Most of the required emissions reductions will come from sectors with policy powers devolved to the Scottish Government” including via electric vehicle roll-out, decarbonisation of buildings, and woodland/peatland restoration. The incoming Scottish parliament and government must therefore re-commit to achieving targets in these areas in order to bolster the UK’s energy independence and contribute to climate change mitigation.

Who says what?

Leading up to the 2026 Scottish Government Elections, in [April 2026 energy sat as the fourth top issue for voters](#) in deciding which party to vote for alongside issues of the cost-of-living crisis and the NHS. This was up 8% from March 2026, showing the salience of energy as a policy issue in Scotland.

Across the party landscape, two broad positions have emerged. On one side, the SNP, Scottish Labour, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish Greens continued to frame Net Zero as a central organising priority, emphasising the expansion of renewable energy, investment in grid infrastructure, and the economic opportunities of a low-carbon transition. On the other, the Scottish Conservatives and Reform UK Scotland argued for abandoning or significantly scaling back Net Zero targets. They characterised the SNP-led approach as “ideological” and responsible for higher costs, with both parties calling for deregulation and a loosening of environmental requirements to reduce bills and increase energy security.

While the SNP has stood against new oil and gas projects since 2023, they have backtracked on this commitment, [with MSPs citing increased energy insecurity due to conflict in the Middle East and the benefits of job creation in the Northeast](#). Therefore, the SNP, along with Scottish Conservatives and Reform, announced backing for approval of the Rosebank and Jackdaw projects. However, in the weeks following the Scottish election, a bid to permit licences to explore new oil and gas fields was rejected by MPs in the House of Commons. The Commons voted 108 to 323, with the SNP

voting in line with Labour against the amendment proposed by the Conservatives to the King's Speech. The decision on Jackdaw and Rosebank has faced delays and will now be decided in late autumn after both recess and the Holborn and St Pancras by election, in which Labour faces a challenge by the Green party.

As such, energy regulation has also become a focal point in constitutional debates. Both the SNP and the Scottish Greens argue that Scotland's ability to meet its climate goals is constrained by the current division of powers, and they call for the devolution of energy policy, including regulatory authority, to Holyrood. The basis for these calls was a response to the cost-of-living crisis, with the [SNP Manifesto](#) claiming that a transfer of energy powers would be used "to end the practice of gas setting the price for an energy system dominated by renewable energy to lower bills." This positions energy not only as an economic and environmental issue, but also as a key site of contestation over Scotland's constitutional future. This debate is also seen within public opinion, with Ipsos Polling (April 2026) indicating that a majority of Scots favour devolving energy policy to Holyrood, with over half (51%) supporting full devolution of responsibility. Around a quarter believe there should be an equal share of responsibility between Holyrood and Westminster, while 14% believe energy should remain reserved to the UK Government. These findings underline that the constitutional dimension of energy policy is not only a party-political dividing line but also a live issue among voters, reinforcing why questions of regulatory control and decision-making authority became central to the 2026 campaign.

The debate over a Just Transition has also widened during the last two terms of the SNP Government, particularly following the establishment of the [Just Transition Commission](#) and the expansion of the term across policy areas. This has become another point of divergence between the two broad political groupings. For the Scottish Conservatives and Reform UK Scotland, arguments for a return to oil and gas are closely tied to concerns about workers, with both parties presenting the energy transition as a threat to jobs and local economies. This reflects a continuation of the longstanding ["jobs versus environment" framing](#), in which decarbonisation is positioned as carrying unavoidable costs for workers and communities.

By contrast, the SNP, Scottish Labour, the Scottish Greens and the Scottish Liberal Democrats all position the Just Transition as a mechanism for supporting workers

through energy transitions. Across these manifestos (to varying degrees) the transition was framed less as a risk and more as a question of fairness, ensuring workers and communities are supported. Here, a Just Transition is presented as a means to ensure that people in these areas have security, investment, and clear pathways into future industries, rather than being left to absorb the costs of change alone. The wider cost-of-living context sharpens this divide. Energy policy, and whether Net Zero measures are understood as easing or adding to household pressures, becomes a key site of political contestation. In this environment, the Just Transition operates not only as a policy framework but as a narrative device through which parties differentiate their approach and speak to voters whose day-to-day experiences of rising costs shape how they interpret the energy debate.

What the future holds

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East will remain an external pressure the next Scottish Government must contend with, particularly through its effects on global energy markets, supply chains and geopolitical stability. To combat this, the next UK Government may need to strengthen its approach to energy security, diversify supply, and accelerate domestic renewable capacity to reduce exposure to international volatility. As put forward by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, by looking to the Climate Change Plan (November 2025), if the Government follows actions to reduce the role of oil and gas, this will in turn [reduce the impacts of international markets in Scotland](#). For instance, solar power saved Europe more than €100m per day since March 2026, and if gas prices remain high, this could reach as much as [€67.6bn](#).

1. Supply

Energy supply was a key discussion within the political party manifestos ahead of the election. While there was an overarching divide over a return to oil and gas, and a general support of a move towards renewables, there was much inter-party variance between the two sides. Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrats support further nuclear development in Scotland. While nuclear can play a role in [achieving net-zero carbon emissions](#), expanding nuclear may be less effective at addressing the cost of living, as [new nuclear plants can take up to seventeen years to become operable](#).

2. Cost-of-living

Considering energy's role in relation to the cost-of-living crisis, the next Government will have to contend with rising energy costs and living costs alongside other policy commitments. Alongside this, fuel poverty rates are increasing in Scotland, with approximately [28.7% of households in fuel poverty, 14% of which are in extreme fuel poverty](#). The [cost-of-living crisis and rising energy prices have significantly contributed](#) to this, with 38% of Scottish households living in fuel poverty since 2019.

As such, energy is deeply intertwined with other policy areas including poverty targets, housing, transport and so on. The next Government will need to consider how they will support those facing this crisis, while also meeting targets and needs across other policy areas. Various direct measures have been developed in the UK or internationally. For example, introducing grant schemes to improve homes' energy efficiency or offering subsidies or direct payments to assist lower income households can help reduce fuel poverty.

3. Constitutional debates

As discussed above, energy is [largely considered a reserved power](#), there are aspects of energy which already sit with Holyrood, [including planning matters](#), such as electricity infrastructure, or offshore gas developments. Both the SNP and Scottish Greens are calling for energy to be fully devolved to Holyrood, and as shown above, this is supported by the Scottish public.

Therefore, the next Government will need to contend with a complex political landscape, in which a sharp divide between independence and pro-union support could cause policy rifts across reserved and devolved issues. The influence of Reform could impact both energy policy decisions as well as attempts for further devolution of energy powers.

4. Looking ahead

Considering the need to reduce emissions as outlined by the Climate Change Committee, the changing political landscape, public opinion and global instability, the next Scottish Government is coming in at a complex and crucial time for energy policy.

With knowledge of the success of renewables thus far, and the limitations currently faced in their place in [energy supply](#), the next Government will need to decide how they respond to the need for greater energy security in Scotland. Further research must understand the role of different energy supply options, not just in meeting emissions targets, but also in wider policy impacts such as fuel poverty and the cost-of-living crisis.

This consideration must also factor in the impact on local communities who will face the brunt of change whether physical infrastructure development, or in changes to jobs and industry.

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Policy Insights

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