

# An Expansion Too Far? The Contested Space of Environmental Policy Discourses

Andrew S. Mitchell<sup>1†</sup>

1 Institute for Sustainable Futures, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, LE2 9BH

† Corresponding author, Email: [andrew.mitchell@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.mitchell@dmu.ac.uk)

## Abstract:

Evidence linking urban traffic emissions to human illness and death and as a source of climate change is incontrovertible. In August 2023, the London ultra-low emissions zone (ULEZ) was expanded to include all 32 boroughs, a move that sparked a strong reaction especially from the right-wing media in the UK. The policy rapidly became politicised and cleaved along ideological lines. This paper uses sampled news articles from two politically opposing news media to examine the processes by which policy can become politicised. Using semantic tagging, four themes are analysed to highlight the dynamics by which politicisation is accomplished in the media. This dynamic appears to involve prescribing binary victim and persecutor roles, using emotionally-laden phrasing, invoking unfair violations of law and order by anonymous state machinery, and references to physical and emotional abuses on the victim group which is described as innocent and decent. While the implementation of ULEZ was not itself impeded, meaningful enforcement of existing climate change policies have been, and this is often due to the way in which the matter has become politicised. By highlighting some of these dynamics, it is hoped that these practices might be more easily deconstructed and resisted in the future.

**Keywords:** ULEZ; low emissions zones; news media; politicisation; ideological framing

## Main highlights:

- Traffic emissions are scientifically linked to human disease and death, and drive climate change.
- Policy interventions are necessary to mitigate these effects, although some attract controversy
- Controversy often cleaves along ideological lines becoming politicised, like the London ULEZ scheme

## International Conference 2025: Towards Resilient and Sustainable Cities and Communities

- Ideology pitches individuals against society, emphasising violations of personal rights and freedom
- The dynamics of ideological politicisation are examined here in the context of the ULEZ scheme
- Deconstructing strategies of politicisation may help mitigate adversarial effects on public policy

### **Acknowledgement (if any)**

No funding or support was received for this work.