

The European elections-- what's at stake?



Last year was the warmest year ever, both on the land and in the ocean. The average global land temperature was more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. It also was the first year that the average global ocean surface temperatures exceeded 1°C. The ocean is heating up. This has dramatic consequence both on land, like the hunger bringing drought in Southern Africa, and at sea. The American National Weather Service is predicting an intensive Atlantic hurricane season, (June 1 to November 30), partly due to the warm Atlantic Ocean.

Last year we got a taste of the 1.5°C world. According to the Copernicus Climate Change Service, the global average temperature was 14.98°C, while CO₂ emissions continue unabated.

Climate change spurs early blooms in Bulgaria's rose industry. It brings warmer and more humid springs. Today, farmers are harvesting rose petals for their renowned oil a month earlier than the historical norm. In Belgium it is raining for some eight months. Farmers are complaining instead of striking to obtain commitments that seriously hamper the implementation of the Green Deal. Currently, there is a huge backlog of planting certain crops. They fear lower yields, and are asking for more flexibility and support from the government. Yet, about one third of the EU budget, some €55 billion per year, is already dedicated to supporting farmers and rural areas through the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, which mainly serves the large industrialised farmers.

The European Green Deal

The European Green Deal, EGD, is an impressive Flagship initiative of the European Commission, EC. It is developed by the current EC president Ursula von der Leyen and the former EC Executive Vice-President, Frans Timmermans. The EGD is an ambitious growth strategy for the European Union, EU, to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, and to provide economic impetus towards a climate neutral society. In fact, it is a sustainability transition at the European level.

If we move together, we will also move faster, in everyone's interest. Ursula von der Leyen at COP 25 on December 2, 2019

The EGD was announced by Ursula von der Leyen at COP 25 in Madrid on December 2, 2019. "Our goal is to be the first climate neutral continent by 2050. If we want to achieve that goal, we have to act now, we have to implement our policies now. Because we know that this transition needs a generational change." The EGD, in which no one should be left behind, opens new opportunities in all sectors, from transport to taxation, from food to farming, from industry to infrastructure. The EGD is a complete remake of the EU to face today's triple and interlinked, planetary crisis: climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

The EGD is EU's answer to a series of climate marches sweeping across Europe and the world, in spring 2019. Schoolchildren took to the streets and were reviled by most of the traditional political

parties. However, these schoolchildren were rightly concerned about their future in a rapidly warming world.



The Green Deal today

To understand what is at stake now, we have to know where our Green Deal's sustainability transition process has landed, so far. It is important that one realizes that this transition process spans 30 years, in which 2030, 2040 and 2050 are key moments. After ensuring the end goal, being zero emission in 2050, the focus was on the first step: progress within the first ten years. It goes without saying that the 2030 targets are framed within the final zero emission goal, and based upon up-to-date scientific information.

Our Green Deal is a complex and innovative package towards a sustainable and just European society by 2050.

These targets have been agreed upon and legislation is developed and approved. As a consequence, the EU will reduce its emissions by at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels, by 2030. This is the first step to climate neutrality. Within the adopted *Fit for 55* package, the EU legislation is brought in line with the 2030 targets through more than a dozen laws. This means a tightened emissions trading system, a CO₂-tax at EU borders, and the phasing out of internal combustion engines by 2035.

Industrialised farming, has been promoted within the CAP, for more than 60 years to ensure Europe's food security. A message that was flung at us during the farmers' demonstrations. A price tag of a €55bn-a-year subsidy system warrants this as well as a vision based on the economy of scale: bigger farms, bigger holdings, common standards. Yet, the number of farms in the EU has fallen by more than a third since 2005.

Any attempt to go beyond climate and energy within the Green Deal package was blocked by conservative Christian Democrats.

The farming sector accounts for 11% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions. In the *Farm to Fork Strategy*, steps are taken to reach sustainability within the industrial farming. Important aspects are: halving pesticides by 2030, cutting fertiliser use by 20%, devoting more land to non-agricultural use (leaving it fallow or planting non-productive trees) and doubling organic production to 25% of all EU farmland. This is needed to reach the agreed EGD objective for 2050.

One can conclude that, although our Green Deal was successful on climate and energy, each attempt to take further steps in areas such as agriculture, nature restoration, circular economy, combatting pollution (pesticides, plastic) was blocked by the conservative Christian Democrats, to which Ursula von der Leyen belongs. Currently they are the largest group within the European Parliament. Due to both the intensive farmers protest and the powerful agricultural industry lobby, important initiatives like reducing the use of pesticides got stuck in both the European Parliament and Member States. The

same happened to the Nature Restoration Act, which is urgently needed to improve nature within Europe. Yet, it is blocked in the European Council.

What's at stake globally?

More than half the world's population are voting this year in elections that could be pivotal for democracy. Will the democratic system pass this litmus test? According to Nicholas Reece of the University of Melbourne in Australia, democracy currently is at risk on many fronts. Important national elections are in the US, India, Indonesia, UK, Pakistan, Russia, which is a bogus one, Taiwan and South Africa as well as in the European Union. Due to the success of anti-Islam extremist Geert Wilders in Dutch elections last November, a surge to the right is predicted in the European Parliament. Most of them are against the EU and its EGD.

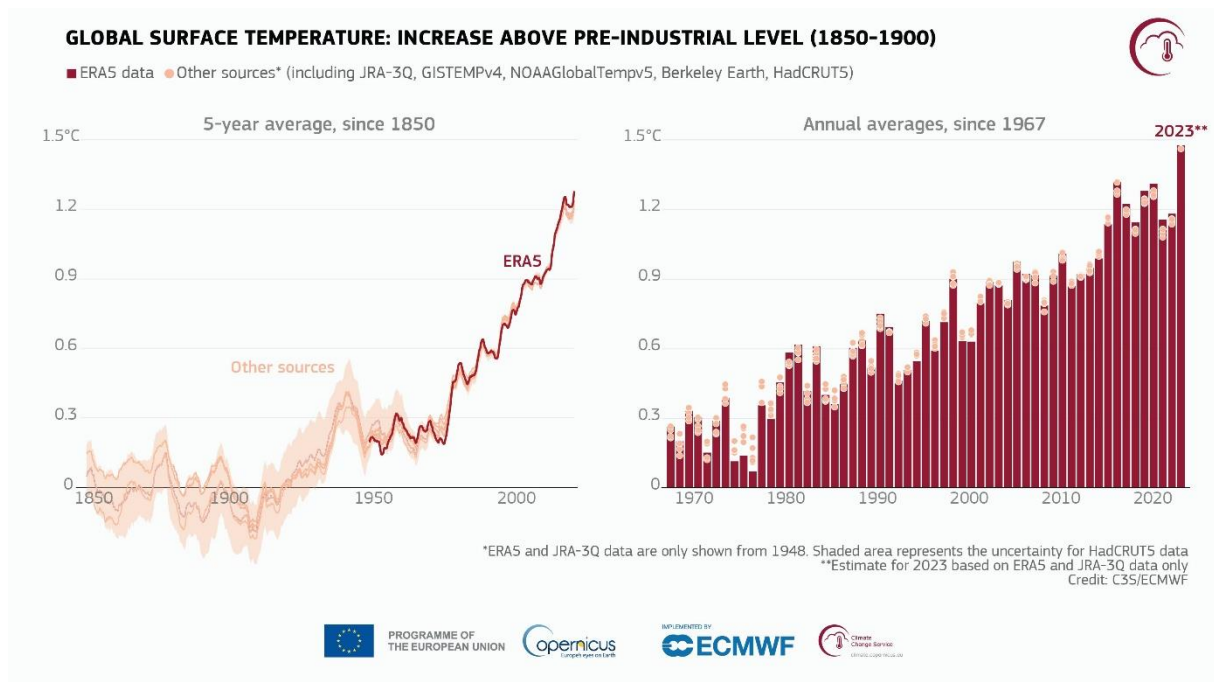
If Trump wins the election in November this could add 4bn tons to US emissions by 2030, creating a global climate change damage of some €900 billion. Carbon Brief, March 6, 2024.

The US elections will be crucial for the rapidly worsening climate crisis. The records and plans concerning the climate crisis of Biden and Trump is strikingly different. Trump, a criminal recognized by the American judiciary, is calling climate change a "hoax", and withdrew from the Paris Agreement. According to climate activist and author Bill McKibben in The New Yorker of May 15, Trump "offered to reverse dozens of President Biden's climate rules and regulations in return for a billion dollars in campaign money", during a dinner with oil-and-gas executives at Mar-a-Lago. Trump's 'thirty pieces of silver', is peanuts for Big Oil. According to Carbon Brief of March 6, a victory of Trump could lead to an additional 4 billion tons of US emissions by 2030, compared to Joe Biden's plans. This will cause global climate damages of some €900 billion.

In May, a study was published in Nature indicating that the average incomes will fall by 19% within the next 26 years, compared to what they would have been if there was no climate crisis. In the same study it is calculated that the costs of damage will be six times higher than the costs of limiting global warming to 2°C. In 2050 the global annual costs of extreme weather will be some €35,000 billion per year, due to the huge amount of greenhouse gases we have discharged into the atmosphere. That is a hefty toll to pay for the lack of political vision or guts as well as conservative policies.

1.5°C, just a number? Or a challenge?

Everybody is aware of the two crucial numbers of the 2015 Paris Agreement: 1.5°C and 2°C. Both are considered as crucial thresholds in the climate system, to which our leaders should pledge to limit the detrimental effects of our climate change as much as possible. On the other hand, temperature change is not uniform across the globe. As a consequence, some areas are passing these thresholds earlier than others. Last April the average European temperature was 1.49°C above the 1991-2020 average, making the month the second warmest April on record for the continent. Yet, temperatures were even warmer in eastern Europe, while Fennoscandia and Iceland were colder. We are flirting with the 1.5°C threshold for more than a year now.



Global surface air temperature increases relative to the average for 1850-1900, the designated pre-industrial reference period, shown as 5-year averages since 1850 (left) and as annual averages since 1967 (right). © Copernicus/ECMWF.

Since several years this flirting brings us record heat waves at land and within the ocean, drought, fires, storms, and flooding like the 2022 Pakistan floods or the current May 18 current flooding in parts of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. For many years the signals that the climate is changing due to our activities, are loud and clear.

But political decision making is slowly, too slowly, despite the fact that the years up to 2030 are crucial, possibly tipping point, years. Scientists expect there could be ice-free summers in the Arctic, increased sea levels, and loss of almost all coral reefs, the base of the marine food chain, if we reach a the 2°C threshold. Yet, political decision making remains too slow, despite the fact that the last 10 years comprise the 10 warmest ever recorded. The years up to 2030 are setting the scene for the generations to come.

What's at stake at the European level?

The European Union, the US, and China are global rivals. Yet, climate change affects every nation. It cannot be solved without China's or the US's involvement as these countries respectively contribute 27% and 13.5% of global emissions, while the EU contributes 7.3%. China and the US are in full swing by huge investments in their innovative industry for the sustainability transition, and the linked new markets.

At the same time the EU is, maybe because of the upcoming elections and the expected tug to the right by populist radical parties, hesitating and losing momentum. Moreover, little attention is given to climate, nature, industrial and agricultural aspects of the Green Deal, during the various election campaigns. Yet, the Spring Eurobarometer of the European Parliament indicates that more than eight in ten Europeans (81%) believe voting is even more important because of the current geopolitical situation. The top issues to be addressed in the coming crucial five years are: poverty reduction (33%), health (32%), support for the economy and jobs creation (both 31%) and climate at 27%.

If you want a just future for your grandchildren's children in a sustainable world, you should vote for them during the upcoming European elections. You have a unique opportunity!

The world won't end if it warms by more than 1.5°C or even more than 2°C: it will just be even more dangerous than it is now, with wars in the Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan etc. yet, As agreed in Paris, whoever wins the European and national elections will be charged with writing their nations' 10-year strategies for curbing the global CO₂ pollution. Those plans are due in 2025. They are one of our last and best chances to turn the tide. That makes the European elections so important and challenging.

The main 'problem' during the European elections might be the hijacking of votes by populist (extreme) right-wing parties that play on gut feelings of citizens with issues, such as migration and security, courtesy of Putin and Orbán. But the real challenge for Europe is its position in the world with the EU as a reliable partner and an innovative and just sustainability transition for its citizens through the implementation of the European Green Deal. Everybody wanting a just and safe future for the next generations, should vote while thinking of the future of their grandchildren's children by doing this.

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