Improving communication on climate policies: A young person’s view

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Abstract
This article discusses why climate change is a major concern for European citizens and how centre–right political parties must address and re-evaluate this topic. Along with developing a new approach to effectively communicating issues regarding climate change, it gives an overview of the communication challenges, the growing awareness of climate change and the importance of meeting citizens’ expectations, as well as the risks and consequences of not acting. This article suggests tangible solutions for how political agents can communicate effectively with their audiences.

Keywords
Environment, Climate change, Youth, Political communication, European Parliament, EPP

Introduction
The environment is, rightly, at the top of today’s political agenda. Climate change and the impact of the widespread use of plastics are rising to the forefront of people’s concerns throughout Europe and fuelling a civic engagement that is, in many ways, without precedent. In fact, if we look at the most recent Eurobarometer results, climate change and the environment generally are the fastest growing concerns amongst European citizens across the Union. Despite the major impact and lasting effects of the 2007–8 global financial crisis, today both climate change and the environment surpass unemployment as the top concerns for European citizens. Climate change is now second only to immigration in terms of citizens’ concerns, and above unemployment, public finances or terrorism.

Everyone communicates about the environment daily, whether this be by sharing a post on social media, taking a reusable bottle of water to the office or school, talking with...
friends over coffee about the recent Amazon fires that have galvanised the world into action, signing a petition against state aid for fossil fuels or voting based on a party’s agenda on climate change.

We use a variety of communication forms to express and develop our thoughts and concerns about the environment. We are also shaped by those we interact with—our peers, family, politicians, teachers, journalists, influencers, entertainers and more. Through these daily interactions, our understanding of the environmental problems facing Europe (and the world), and how we perceive the actions of others in this space, are moulded not only by the nature of the information we receive, but also by the ways in which the different messages are communicated to us.

Climate change and the environment are complex and inherently multifaceted matters. The interplay between the norms that govern dialogue between scientists and experts in this field are often in direct conflict with the tenets of effective communication. Simple, concise and impactful messages are difficult to get across. Extracting the key message from scientific and technical research can be hard to do. This article claims that in order to have a more effective dialogue with young people on these subjects, we have to bear in mind that communication is not only what we express (information, emotions, etc.), but also how (the style, the media, when, where, etc.) and with what underlying significance—political or, in a broader sense, cultural. We must also be aware of the intended recipient of our communication: sometimes we misunderstand or are misunderstood; sometimes we reject the message or the messenger; sometimes we agree only after an open dialogue and exchange of views with others. Information is important, but effective and persuasive communication goes far beyond that.

The European People’s Party: meeting citizens’ concerns

Our political family needs to improve our communication on the environment. We do not need to raise awareness of a problem that is already at the forefront of people’s minds, including our electorate. We need to be ambitious and bold. Instead of simply repeating complex statistics and scientific statements, we need simple and impactful messaging. The political action we take on climate change, plastic consumption, forest fires and other significant environmental issues defines not only who we are as a party today, but also who we want to be. It defines the path that the European People’s Party (EPP) is choosing to take. People need to trust that their political parties are doing what it takes to protect the environment. We must go further: we have a duty to respect the people, the places and the species with which we share our world.

In fact, crisis is a vital motivator for communication about the environment. Different people have different values, and different social and political backgrounds. However, it is our duty to build a working framework; to focus the world’s attention on the challenges facing us as a global community; and to be able to provide meaningful, cross-border and cross-party solutions.
The Amazon and other important forests are burning; the North and South Poles are melting at a worrying speed due to global warming; and our oceans, lakes and rivers are being choked with plastic (with over 8 million tons of rubbish per year entering our oceans). European citizens are acutely aware of these issues and expect changes to be made. Awareness is spreading rapidly. As we engage in conversations within our personal networks, in the media or online, we contribute to the spread of information on these topics and transform the public’s perceptions of the environment and our relationship with it. These social circles are our potential sphere of influence.

Discussions about environmental concerns often occur outside of government meeting rooms and political dialogue. In Ancient Greece, the public meeting spaces and forums where citizens gathered to exchange ideas and discuss community problems were called agoras. Nowadays we have different agoras. We communicate both online and offline, whether with someone across the globe and time zones apart or our neighbour across the street. Everyone matters. The ordinary European citizen plays a crucial part in the fight to protect our environment. The residents that demand change in their local town, the employees who lobby for glass bottles instead of plastic in their companies and the school-children who organise protests to raise awareness are all a crucial and integral part of this fight. However, this is not enough. Big changes, such as emissions regulation, forest protection and energy transition are the responsibility of politicians. Our citizens have given us a clear mandate. It is not a coincidence that in the present European Parliament (2019–24), the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee is the largest.

We live in a globalised world. Just as people, goods and services cross borders, so too does the impact of climate change. Our solutions must cross borders as well. Climate change is forcing politics to overcome economic and national interests. Politicians must instead focus on a socially and economically transformative agenda.

Citizens want us to address the challenges of climate change and the environment. However, there is a big question: what cost is everyone willing (and able) to pay to offset the environmental impact of the developments in our industrial, energy and infrastructure policy? Europe has set a goal of carbon neutrality for 30 years’ time, and the choices made between now and 2024 will shape our ability to meet this goal.

How do we manage to simultaneously improve our economic growth while ensuring respect for the environment? The simple answer is that ‘buying green’ must also represent a good deal for the ordinary citizen. We can no longer insist on a message or an agenda that dictates that, to respect the environment, European citizens must shoulder the financial burden. Technological development has a central role to play in this vision. The environmental impact of industrial production and policy must be incorporated into the value chain. We can no longer forget the importance of sustainability—in industrial policy, but also in the framework of transport and trade policies. Sustainability must become ‘the new normal’ in the decision-making process. Sustainable finance is a new buzzword that is defined as taking environmental and social factors into consideration when making investment decisions.
As mentioned previously, both an ambitious legislative framework and meaningful economic regulation (that accepts adequately priced negative externalities) are needed. This is, however, a transversal subject and one that touches on regulations and legislation of vastly different natures. We need to promote a regulatory shift towards sustainable investments in order to create ‘a new normal’ and ensure deals that are both green and good.

We must push for transformation in the energy sector across Europe in order to fulfil our obligations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change’s 2015 Paris Agreement. This should include introducing new rules for the European electricity market, improving our industrial policies, encouraging the closure of coal power plants, and facilitating developments and investment in green technologies. We must push forward with the implementation of the Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission 2015), which is the key to ensuring high standards of living throughout Europe while working towards the regeneration of the planet.

Issues caused by climate change, such as floods in specific, peripheral locations, are now occurring more frequently and intensely. This has already disrupted and will continue to disrupt the entire global supply chain, which in turn will affect consumers across the globe. The political shifts that may occur are uncertain and risky, and in socially and politically sensitive regions the stakes are very high. Despite this, our current climate-change adaptation plans often fail to recognise or account for these threats.

The speed at which change occurs today increases the risk of the obsolescence of knowledge and institutions: to be relevant, it is no longer enough to keep abreast of these changes; we must foresee them and, ideally, be part of the necessary solutions (and preemptive actions).

**What consequences are we talking about?**

In October 2018 the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its Special Report on the impacts of global warming. Temperatures are rising to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Based on scientific evidence, the report demonstrates that due to human-induced global warming the global average temperature has already reached 1°C above pre-industrial levels and is increasing at approximately 0.2°C per decade. Without increasing international climate action, the Earth’s average temperature could reach 2°C as early as 2060.

This will make large-scale climate effects irreversible. This means sea levels could rise by seven metres, affecting coastal areas and leading to the disappearance of several islands in Europe and the rest of the world. Around 99% of coral reefs are projected to disappear globally at a temperature increase of 2°C. The polar regions will also see major losses.

These changes will have severe consequences in several ways, in areas including political stability, food production, the economy and health. The European Commission
reported an estimated record €283 billion in economic damage last year across the globe caused by climate change. Such consequences could affect about two-thirds of the European population by 2100, compared with just 5% today. The damage caused by river flooding could multiply more than twenty-fold, and the southern European countries face a significant and very real danger of desertification (European Commission 2018). Currently, more than 50% of the territory of some Mediterranean countries faces the risk of future desertification. This could result in conflicts caused by a lack of food and water, which could undermine security and prosperity in the broadest sense. This could cause further knock-on conflicts and migratory pressures.

Failing to minimise our impact on the planet and failing to take action on climate change will make the lives of the next generations much worse. The central message of the IPCC’s Special Report is that we can (and must) do better: it is possible to limit average global warming to 1.5°C and avoid even worse damage to our communities and ecosystems if we act now. In matters of climate change, everyone is a stakeholder, and everyone is a decision-maker with the power to make a difference. This is our call to action.

Climate change might seem like a complex topic but communicating about it does not have to be complicated. To maximise results with the broader public and engage with government, business leaders and other stakeholders, below are 10 ideas for effective and impactful communication.

10 ideas to improve political communication about the environment

1. **Expectations.** People expect politicians and scientists to have immediate and definite solutions, when the reality is far more complex. The use of analogies based on everyday life can help people to see that nothing is as clear-cut as we would like it to be, particularly in our discussions on the environment. A lot of people may also say that climate change is a ‘new’ and modern topic. That is not true: climate change has long been under discussion within the scientific community.

2. **Start with what you know, not with what you do not know.** Do not start by talking about the unknowns of the subject. It is important to highlight what we do know. On many fundamental questions, the science is effectively settled. The role we have played in the world’s temperature rise is indisputably clear. Climate change has a long history and there is established science behind our discussions. There is now a large range of sustainable development practices that are zero-carbon or nearly zero-carbon that can help people to manage the changing climate and improve their well-being.

3. **Be clear about what is settled.** Communication must be clear and simple. The message about the environment must be consistent and reflect scientific findings. This is important because communication can ensure that the groups or individuals within our spheres of influence understand and accept that climate change is
an urgent problem. This demands a coherent and strong political, social and global reaction.

4. **Be clear about the risks and consequences.** When someone wants to minimise a problem, they often try to disparage the topic and the conveyor of the message. This intentionally creates confusion within the community. It is vital to be clear about the causes, consequences, policies and solutions regarding climate change—not only for humans, but for other species and our environment.

5. **Understand your audience.** Climate change and environmental concerns tend to be less relevant among people within our segment of the political spectrum. We must adapt ourselves and seek ways of addressing the problem in a different manner, whilst respecting our electorate’s belief system and tailoring our language to better reflect and convey our values. We must also try to foster dialogue, not arguments. We must avoid making people feel powerless. The messenger is just as important as the message when it comes to climate change. Fake news is widely disseminated and this makes it even more important for people to hear accurate information from people they trust.

6. **Tell a story that people can relate to.** It is more impactful, and people will understand your message better, if you communicate with images and anecdotes rather than numbers and statistics. Look for new ways of conveying the same message, of translating a complex idea into another simpler, more easily memorised concept. Engagement brings with it motivation, and a clear structure can ensure ideas are delivered clearly and simply, but are still grounded in scientific fact.

7. **Use uncertainty in your favour.** A positive framing amidst the current uncertainty and conflicting messaging may trigger people to take steps (however small) if they understand that the problem can indeed be mitigated if we act now. Engage the audience by outlining the future they want to see. People frequently ask, ‘how will climate change affect me?’, regardless of whether their sphere of influence is a household, a company, a community organisation or part of a major government initiative. Although the answer could be: ‘climate change is a crisis today’, the last thing you want to do, as a communicator, is to make people feel angry or powerless. Instead, try: ‘we must act fast, but we can do it together!"

8. **Show, rather than tell.** We must show that it is possible to succeed. The greatest test is to ensure the adoption of sustainable solutions at scale. This can be done by highlighting successful examples, by bringing political and business leaders together to illustrate how, or by explaining effective sustainable technologies in public. By so doing we can grab people’s imaginations and create meaningful effects more quickly.

9. **Use multidirectional approaches.** This is especially true when engaging politicians and the public on climate change. In the first place, the content of communications must be solid and combine different types of information: for instance, combining reliable data and science on climate trends, impacts and results with general knowledge and anecdotes from the public sphere. Then, to communicate your message more effectively, utilise different approaches to content. Different communication tools may be more appropriate for different audiences, but do not make assumptions about which communication tools best
suit your audience. Instead, be open to different possibilities and try new methods of communicating.

10. Persevere. Last, but not least, be modest and honest. Think about the audience, its background and which speaker or tone will help your message resonate best. The public debate on climate change needs to include varied, authentic experiences and be stimulated by new and impactful contributions. Anyone can be a vital messenger in spreading the word to others.

Conclusion

Our political family cannot cede the environmental and climate change agenda to green and socialist parties. As mentioned above, climate change has become a major topic for European citizens. Therefore, we in the EPP must act on this subject, not in a populist way, but in a consistent and meaningful way. In order to ensure that citizens understand our views, we must also be better communicators. We must be clear about the message; we must adapt it to the receiver and we must keep in mind the social environment in which we are communicating. The way forward is to improve and enhance connections with organisations and individuals that deal directly with this subject, and deliver political solutions that citizens can understand and that will improve their lives.

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