

A New Green Wave of Hope

Article by Thomas Coombes

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Five years after the “Green wave” reached the EU Parliament, fear and division seem to dominate political narratives ahead of this June’s EU elections. Instead of accepting the Right’s talking points, progressives should stick to their core values, embracing hope as the key to electoral success in troubled times.

When Green parties performed surprisingly well in elections in Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany in 2018, they called it a “Green Wave of Hope”. The sense was that Green parties had succeeded by sticking to their values, for example by giving voice to the many Europeans who wanted welcoming migration policies.

While that Green wave stayed strong in the European elections of 2019, the dominant narratives came from right-wing populists talking about security and migration. Five years later, extreme right-wing parties are in government in many EU countries, their narratives dominate the political agenda in others and climate policy is facing a backlash.

If they wish to set the agenda for the EU elections this June, Green parties cannot simply react to events and opponents, replicating right-wing narratives of fear and blame. A new Green wave needs new voices, values, and visions.

Hope-based workshops with hundreds of progressive activists across Europe – including participants of the Writing the Green Stories summer camp held by the Federation of Young European Greens (FYEG) in July 2023 – have shown that most of them want more narratives based on empathy, our responsibility to care for each other, and shared humanity. They just lack the means of bringing those narratives to life.

Hope in dark times

In this time of uncertainty, fear as a personal emotion is a normal, instinctive reaction. However, the salience of fear as a political emotion risks making voters even more receptive to a divisive, scapegoating worldview.

There is always a temptation in both progressive activism and Green politics to use fear-based messaging to raise awareness of threats. Yet as brain science teaches, fear is biologically designed to face immediate physical danger, but is less suited to responding to systematic, existential threats.

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Fear-based messages activate the wrong part of the brain for Green politics, which requires deep changes in behaviour and attitudes. Fear triggers a biological response in our body (for example, by

releasing stress hormones like cortisol and increasing our heart rate) that primes us for immediate physical danger. This shuts down the parts of our brain associated with reflective thinking and empathy, priming us to prioritise self-interest over the kind of compassionate, long-termist, common-interest thinking conducive to good climate change policy, for example.

Green parties should cultivate the political emotions that make support for, and action towards their goals more likely. Fear-based emotions like outrage and disgust are like fossil fuels: they provide bursts of energy but their polluting byproducts stay in our political ecosystem long after we use them. Because humans are equipped with mirror neurons that replicate the feelings we see in others, outrage from one movement will arouse more anger among others.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum believes that fear is toxic for a democratic society, where people need to work together in trust. Authoritarians want people to feel afraid and divided, the better to rule with uncontested power. Hope, Nussbaum writes, *swells outward*, while fear makes us *shrink back* from each other. It is precisely times of uncertainty that demand political movements cultivate resilience and solidarity, so that people reach out to each other, rather than shrink back.

Hope offers alternatives

Hope rests on the idea that tomorrow can be better than today, if people act to make change happen. In contrast to optimism and positivity, which in the midst of crisis could come across as false or toxic, hope involves a very strategic focus on getting through dark times and achieving much-needed social progress.

Hope is also unique among “positive” emotions because we activate it precisely to navigate difficult moments in our lives. It is a source of resilience, which also allows us to remain calm, reflective, and determined in order to better respond to the challenges we face.

Without a clear call to action, urgent messages about crises can create despondency, despair, and compassion fatigue. People need to see that change is possible. That’s why messages like “Yes, We Can” (Obama) or “Wir Schaffen Das” (Merkel) are a vital source of political agency. If people believe there is a way they can “get this done”, they are far more likely to roll up their sleeves and get behind bold policies welcoming newcomers or transforming their cities.

When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other US Democrats put forward the Green New Deal, she released “Message from the future”, which looks back at the imagined roll-out of the policies, showing what society would look like and the role of everyday people in making it happen. The video ends with the message “We can be whatever we have the courage to see” – another lesson for politics from brain science that is commonplace in sport science.

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This was an alternative, hopeful vision of the future as bold as Solarpunk, the movement that imagines a future where humanity lives in harmony with nature, as a counter to dystopian Cyberpunk. Green politics

needs to be more like Solarpunk, because human beings have predictive brains: they need to visualise something before we can achieve it. But European politics right now offers little reason for hope.

A bolder Solarpunk politics would offer visions of a better future worth voting and campaigning for. In February 2023 the Green party showed Berlin citizens how their transport policy would change their neighbourhoods: more trees, more cycle lanes and pedestrian areas – but above all more community. This is a simple exercise that Green parties could carry out at European level: what would our societies look like with more freedom of movement, a perfect response to climate change, and more equality and racial justice?

In the US, the Green New Deal was an example of shifting the Overton Window of what is considered common sense politics. The central idea to the Overton Window is that radical ideas can become mainstream if people talk about them enough. The Green New Deal thrilled supporters and enraged opponents so that both kept talking about it, making the idea so salient that it inspired the EU's own Green Deal.

The implication for this year's EU elections is clear: Green parties need to talk about the ideas they want on the political agenda. Rather than trying to win credibility by adopting, and focusing on, mainstream positions on issues like migration or foreign affairs, they should keep core green and progressive values top of mind.

Hope is radical

The key to a new green wave is boldly promoting progressive values that apply to any issue, from migration to climate justice, from support for Ukraine to the fight against Islamophobia and antisemitism. Faced with a radical far-right agenda that elevates the most controversial, divisive fear-based issues, only a radical green agenda will compete for attention. Any politician who wants to break through must offer a vision of the change they want to see.

Trying to change the narrative means changing what is political common sense, rather than changing the message to suit today's headlines. The leading progressive communicator Anat Shenker-Osorio urges politicians to have the courage of their convictions and embrace their values: "Good messaging is not to say what is popular, but to make popular what needs to be said".

The point of political messaging is about making people more likely to stand up for your values, not just making a strong case for a set of policies. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff says that progressives think with a "nurturing parent" worldview built on empathy, care and hope. The Common Cause Foundation believes that Green parties share a common set of intrinsic or compassionate values with social justice movements, so that when the values underpinning a cause like equal marriage are strengthened, allied movements also benefit.

This means Green parties should make the case for their agenda by appealing to innate human values such as social justice, connection to nature, and care for others, avoiding the temptation to only make rational utilitarian arguments that appeal to extrinsic values (like security and wealth) based on the economic or security impacts of climate change. For example, call for humane migration policies because of care for other human beings – rather than economic arguments such as the need for migrants to bolster Europe's workforce.

Narratives built on intrinsic values can convince Europeans that this election should be about empathy, our responsibility to care for each other, and shared humanity. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the

importance of working together, of institutions that support international cooperation, and of policies built on care, mutual respect, and shared humanity.

The challenge for Green parties is to be as comfortable and effective at using values-based messaging as populists are at using social media to spread fear and extrinsic self-interest values. Focus groups carried out ahead of the 2019 European elections found that simple concepts like empathy, care, and community resonate strongly with Europeans when talking about the future of their societies. In hope-based communications workshops, activists from different issues and countries instinctively articulate these same intrinsic values, but they rarely use them in their day-to-day messaging. Yet if you do not constantly repeat a message, it has no chance of achieving political common sense.

Green parties need to have faith that the majority of Europeans share their values, and the courage to stick to a new political vocabulary that reflects them. Words like care, empathy, and love feel unwieldy and incongruous in the political space, but if used correctly, they have the power to change our political brains. Time and again politicians like Barack Obama, New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Turkey's Ekrem İmamoğlu, Slovakia's Zuzana Čaputová, and most recently the Czech Republic's Petr Pavel have shown that voters reward those who see the good in them. Or, as Lakoff writes in *The Little Blue Book*, "Voters care primarily about moral perspective and only secondarily about specific policy details."

This involves a simple but challenging task of articulating the underlying moral values that underpin the practical things we want green politics to achieve. Like social change activists around the world, young Greens carrying out these exercises at the FYEG summer camp last year arrived at the same set of intrinsic value beliefs such as "caring is enough" and "openness is the EU's greatest success", and brought them to life through images of community, togetherness, and harmony with nature. These are ideas that FYEG is now trying to bring to its campaign work around issues like migration and peace and security, also reinforcing hope by emphasising that the future is something that we control and can shape.

Hope is action

To give people political hope requires offering them a means to take constructive action. Hope is a muscle that must be exercised through action that brings values to life and makes people feel control over their destiny.

To reach more people, Green political activism should seek to channel the human hunger for connection and belonging. This means realising the potential of activities which might not feel like traditional political action.

There is a wealth of research showing that spending time in nature helps manage stress; it might also be good for managing political fear. Activities like forest bathing put the human brain in exactly the space where it is resistant to stress and receptive to empathy and reflective thinking, for example by triggering the release of oxytocin, a chemical associated with love and compassion.

They can also activate so many of the intrinsic values that reinforce each other. For example, connection to nature can reinforce our support for social justice. The success of the UK birdwatching collective for people of colour Flock Together shows that to have lasting effect, good politics has to reach into daily life and make people feel agency and belonging. These are kinds of stories activists in hope-based workshops identify when they imagine people acting on their values and vision: for example, diverse people coming together in green spaces or community centres.

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Political organising around nature is a way for Green parties to leverage the values that give our lives meaning as powerfully as, for example, Christian Democrats built on religion, social democrats on trade unions, or, more recently, right-wing populist parties like *Fidesz* or *Alternative für Deutschland* built strong grass-roots presence in places where there was little other community infrastructure. On the progressive side, Swiss group Operation Libero have shown the role belonging and community can play in changing political narratives.

The crucial lesson that populists on the Right know but which many on the Left have forgotten is that community forms values, not the other way around. Anything that builds community is political, and what counts as political is defined by the most closely knit and best-organised communities.

In the long-run, hope is stronger than fear

Faced with the rise of hateful and cruel politics, many activists find themselves asking how hope can compete with fear, outrage, and division. But this overlooks the powerful intrinsic values that underpin the progressive cause. The desire for connection with nature, for example, is wired into every human being. It is just waiting to be activated.

It is up to Green parties to politically leverage the innate joy and passion for the natural world that many people also demonstrate in the online world (think of the emotional pull of animal videos, for example), just as the far right makes political capital from dark elements of the web such as conspiracy theories.

Green party communication could experiment with new and innovative ways to politically activate powerful emotions such as admiration, gratitude, awe, joy, and even love. Recent research suggests that activating awe (for example through the beauty of art) can make people more likely to welcome newcomers into their community.

Crucially, it is action like holding a dinner for newcomers or birdwatching for local communities that brings new narratives to life in a way that messaging and talking points alone can never achieve.

Small actions can thus become politically powerful when they come to symbolise and reinforce values and ideas. This strategic imperative is also a deeply empowering message for political organisers, because it means everyone has some power to shape narratives with the stories they choose to focus on, and the stories they create with their actions.

The only way to compete with the deep emotional pull of authoritarian populism is to offer an alternative that draws on equally deep but more constructive emotions like hope and deeply human values such as connection to nature, compassion, and kindness. As one young activist said at that hope-based workshop held for FYEG last summer, stories of interdependence and connection matter because “they are the things that make us human”.



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