

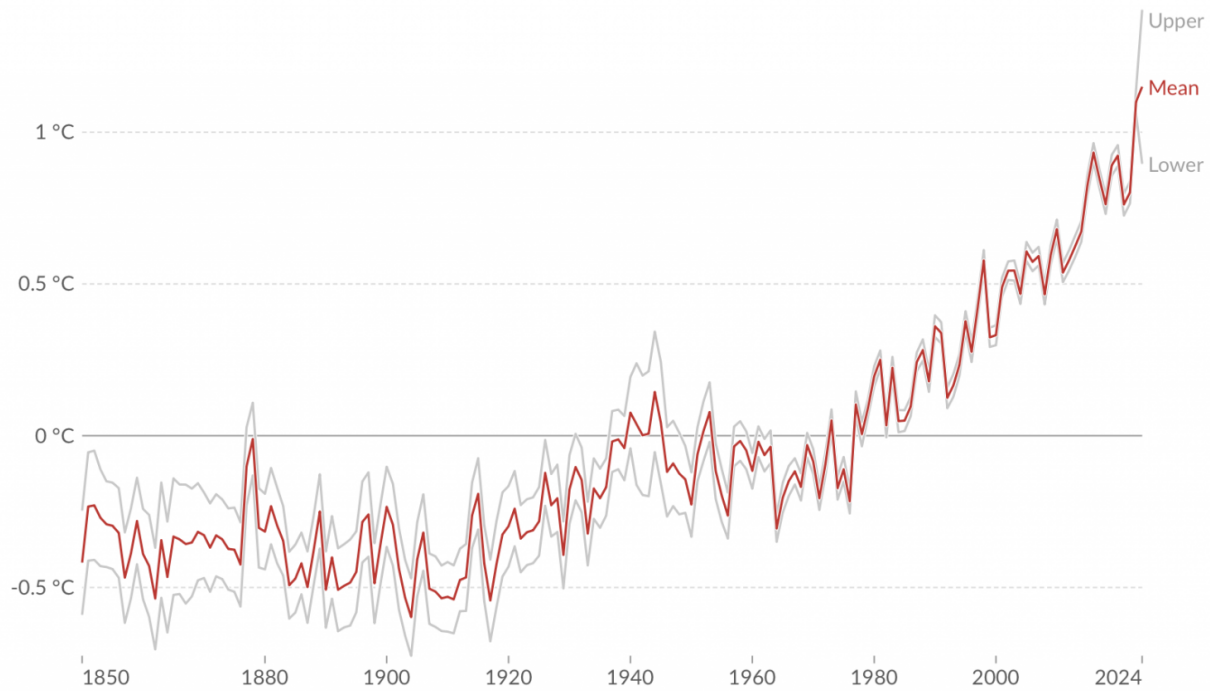
Political leadership on climate and the 1.5°C limit: A normative framework

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Average temperature anomaly, Global



Global average land-sea temperature anomaly relative to the 1961-1990 average temperature.



Data source: Met Office Hadley Centre (2023)

OurWorldInData.org/co2-and-greenhouse-gas-emissions | CC BY

Note: The gray lines represent the upper and lower bounds of the 95% confidence intervals.

Richard Beardsworth, Professor of International Relations and Head of School at POLIS, University of Leeds, walks us through political leadership on climate and the 1.5°C limit and discusses if this limit remains a meaningful normative framework for climate action

In 2015, 196 governments came together at the UN-held international climate meeting COP21 to sign the [Paris Agreement](#). In this non-binding international treaty, almost all governments of the world pledged to “hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C,” aware that the risk of irreparable damage to life rapidly increased at the 2°C threshold.

The subsequent 2018 [IPCC Special Report on Global Warming](#) made clear that limiting warming to 1.5°C would massively reduce the impact on the most vulnerable countries and that every increase of temperature above 1.5°C mattered in terms of impact on human ecosystems as a whole.

How should political leadership respond to the Copernicus report?

Following the UK Met Office's announcements in December, the EU Copernicus Climate Change Service recently reported that 2023 was the hottest year on record, with temperatures close to the 1.5°C limit for the year as a whole. Climate scientists now predict that the overall temperature "trendline" (the average global temperature as such) will cross 1.5°C within the next decade.

There has been little public reaction on the part of governments to the Copernicus report. How should political leadership respond? Synthesising material from academia, think tanks and independent organisations, the rest of this article offers a normative framework for political leadership on climate at this critical moment in history.

The 1.5°C limit: A reminder

Given temperature rises like 1.5°C and their end-dates are a function of the remaining carbon budget. This budget is the net amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) humans can still emit while keeping global warming below a given temperature limit within a given probability.

With GHG emissions still rising (57 GtCO₂e for 2022 as a whole), climate scientists predict that at more than 50% probability, the carbon budget (circa 250 Gt CO₂) will be exhausted within a decade. Government discussions around geoengineering solutions like solar radiation management (SRM) and accelerating carbon dioxide removal (CDR) have intensified, given these timelines. However, SRM is not manageable globally, and CDR cannot be leveraged in time or at scale.

Governments need, therefore, to focus on what can be done now. As the world-leading climate scientist Michael Mann recently suggested, the targets of 1.5°C and net zero by 2050 remain scientifically and technically possible; it is not too late. And, even if it becomes too late, every future temperature increase still depends on what is done now. The moral and pragmatic cases for present action and ambition consistent with the 1.5°C limit remain, therefore, outstanding.

Climate: Government priorities

Notwithstanding calls to adaptation and resilience given the increasing climate realities worldwide, the priority must remain climate mitigation at home – at least for less vulnerable countries with more capacity. In a series of reports running up to COP28 last December, the emissions gap has been situated at 22-25 GtCO₂e per year. Existing pledges are at 4-5 GtCO₂e per year.

At COP28, the Energy Transitions Commission suggested an additional 5-12 Gt CO₂e per year beyond existing NDCs. Present action and ambition require ratcheting up NDCs in 2025 to lock in progress for the remaining half of the decade (43-50% reduction by 2030).

At present, however, governments plan to produce twice the amount of fossil fuels than is consistent with the 1.5°C limit. As Carbon Analytics state, there is therefore “a large and expanding gap” between governments’ excavation and production plans and Paris-Agreement- consistent pathways.

To plug this gap, governments must prioritise a demand and supply approach to the ongoing energy transition to a low-carbon economy: phasing out fossil fuels while scaling up renewable energy. To do one without the other (the licensing approach of the present UK Government) not only falls foul of the Paris Agreement; it keeps us on a minimum 2.7°C trajectory, with unpredictably dangerous impact on world populations. This is not in any government’s national interest, let alone political duty.

The political conundrum

The problem is neither science nor technology; it is politics. Current farmers’ protests across Europe confirm that in the context of long-standing and widening inequalities, *climate action leads to strong resistance to climate action*. The ongoing energy transition entails huge economic and social transformations. If these transformations are not managed by government, the energy transition will exacerbate the inequalities on which extremist politics feeds.

The absolute need to prioritise climate mitigation will forge a social and political backlash unless it is accompanied by a ‘just transition’: that is, a political mindset and set of policies that permit individuals and communities to re-organise their work and lives securely and fairly within this change.

At the same time, therefore, as prioritising climate mitigation, governments must deliver social policy that prevents poverty and dislocation. If governments ignore the socio-human context in which climate mitigation takes place, they (willingly or unwillingly) weaponise climate change for extremist politics.

The international finance required to help developing countries towards their own energy transitions is estimated by the International Energy Agency at \$14 trillion by 2030.

Governments will only provide a small proportion of this sum, but they can steer private investment into just sustainable development. Without this investment, developing countries will continue to produce fossil fuels, and the global climate mitigation target will not be achieved.

The priorities of government are clear if the average global temperature limit of 1.5°C *is to remain meaningful*: mitigate at home now, but in doing so secure a just transition at home; help mitigate internationally now, but in doing so help secure a just transition internationally.

Trade-offs between domestic and international social policies will be increasingly difficult unless governments act now. Is political leadership on climate up to these intersecting, often mutually conflicting challenges? We have five to ten years in which to find out.

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