

Experimental Results on the Behavior of Water Droplets on Polymeric Surfaces Under the Influence of Electric Fields: the Case of an Inclined Test Arrangement for PVC, Rubber and Silicone Rubber

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influence of various parameters on the behavior of water droplets on polymeric surfaces under electric fields. An inclined plane test was carried out to understand the droplet behavior in strong electric field. Parameters such as, water droplet conductivity, droplet volume, polymeric surface roughness and droplet positioning with respect to the electrodes were studied. The flashover voltage is affected by all aforementioned parameters. The droplet positioning is in some cases more vital than the droplet volume.

Introduction

Water droplets on a polymeric surface may cause corona under the influence of an electric field and can cause deterioration to insulation surface even in conditions of low pollution level. Water droplets on a polymeric surface increase locally the applied electric field. Local field intensifications lead to partial discharges (PD) and/or localized arcs, which may render possible the dry bands on the polymeric sur-

face. Local arcing will eventually bridge the dry bands and a complete flashover will finally ensue. This mechanism is valid to a greater or lesser extent for both outdoor and indoor insulation, although each of the aforementioned categories have their own particular characteristics, namely that indoor insulation is stressed more and is subjected to a different type of environmental influences than outdoor insulation [1], [2]. A combination

of water droplets and dust-like impurities on the surface of a polymeric surface may lead to a conducting contamination layer, which may cause a reduction of the flashover voltage. The design of high voltage insulators, they can be for indoor or outdoor use, one should take into account not only the pollution level, the insulator material and the appropriate voltage level, but also the influence of water droplets on the flashover voltage. Previous work, carried out in this laboratory, tackled the behavior of water droplets for a wide range of water conductivities ($1.7 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm} - 10000 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$) [3], [4]. In both publications, it was shown that, among the factors influencing the behavior of the water droplets, were the water conductivity, polymer surface roughness, droplet volume and droplet positioning with respect to the electrodes.

In the present work, a study of the aforementioned parameters on the water droplet behavior under the influence of a uniform electric field in the range of $1.7 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm} - 2000 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ was carried out. All tests were performed with an inclined test arrangement, in order to simulate the behavior of water droplets on the surface

of a real insulator. The angle used with respect to the horizontal was 10° . Such an angle was chosen because of its immediate relevance to industrial insulators.

Force balance at the droplet/polymer surface interface

A modeling of a wet contaminated surface was given in other publications and only a brief outline is provided here [5]. Condensation of droplets on the surface of a high voltage insulator can come about from droplet germs. In Fig. 1, the forces exercised on the droplet are shown in case where no electrical field is applied. Such forces are the surface tension of the liquid (τ_L), the surface tension of the solid (τ_S) and the interfacial tension between liquid and solid (δ_{sl}). When an electric field is applied, the droplet deforms because of an additional force. The tangential electric field on the surface of the insulator creates a force on the surface of the droplet which causes its deformation. The deformation of the droplet affects the field distribution. Local field intensifications may result, which will cause micro-discharges between the droplets. This is the beginning of the chemical deterioration of the insulator surface.

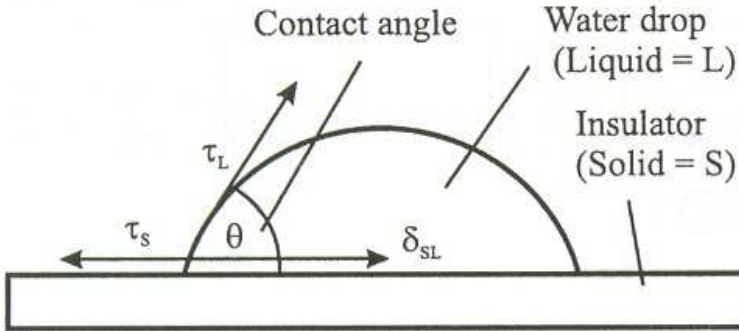


Fig.1: Force balance at the interface solid/liquid at a water droplet on an insulating Surface (after [5])

Hydrophobicity may locally be lost. The voltage difference across the droplet will be diminished and micro-discharges will follow. Solvable nitrates, which are the result of the electrochemical deterioration, cause a higher conductivity of the water droplets. Dry zones may follow. It is important to bear in mind that not only the influence of the applied electric field on the shape of the droplet is of great significance, but also the influence of the disintegrated droplet on the electric field distribution [5], [6].

Hydrophobic polymeric surfaces are characterized by a low surface conductivity which in turn gives a low discharge activity and a higher flashover voltage. This holds also for polluted environments. Reduced hy-

drophobicity implies a higher risk for flashover of the insulator. Hydrophilic materials, on the other hand, are very sensitive to polluted environments, and are characterized by a significant activity of local discharges [7]. It is well known the classification of the Swedish Transmission Research Institute (STRI) regarding the hydrophobic and hydrophilic surfaces. STRI classifies the various surfaces according to their hydrophobicity from class 1 (most hydrophobic, with only discrete droplets on the surface with contact angle larger than 80°) to class 7 (most hydrophilic, with continuous water films forming on the surface). However, the truth is that no matter if the insulator has some sort of humidity and it is only slightly polluted or

it is heavily polluted, in both cases surface discharges play a most important role, and such discharges may start from water droplets.

Experimental arrangement and preparation of the samples

The aim of this paper is to study the behavior of water droplets under the influence of an electric field. The voltage supplied was from a 20 kV transformer (in practice the transformer may deliver voltages up to 1.2 times of its nominal voltage without loss of the accuracy of the measurement. Consequently, the applied voltages were accurate up to 24 kV). The electrodes used were of copper. A top view as well as

a cross section of an electrode is shown in Fig. 2. The electrodes were half cylindrical in shape. Attention was paid to the smoothness of the electrode surfaces, so that no unnecessary field enhancements could be noticed.

The water droplets were positioned on the polymeric material surface with the aid of a special arrangement consisting of a metallic frame and three rules, one of which had two laser indicators. The water droplets were put on the surface with a syringe. Detailed information on the way the droplets were positioned on the polymeric surface is given in [3]. The photograph of the inclined plane test is shown in Fig. 3.

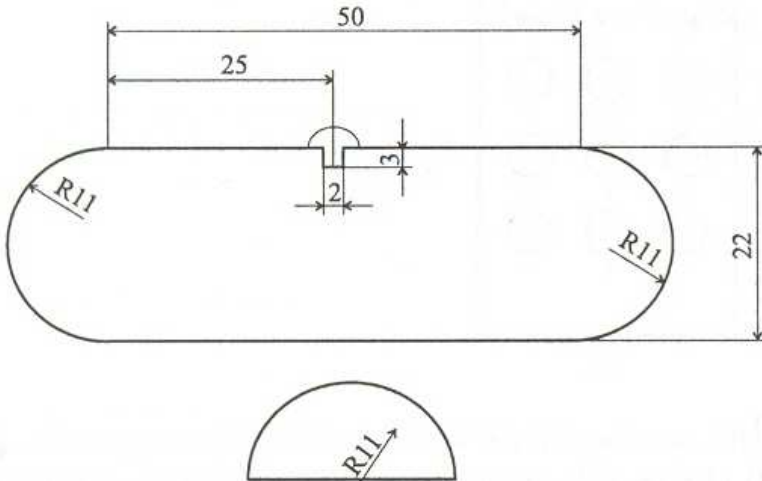


Fig.2: Top view (above) and cross section (bottom) of the electrodes used (all dimensions in mm)

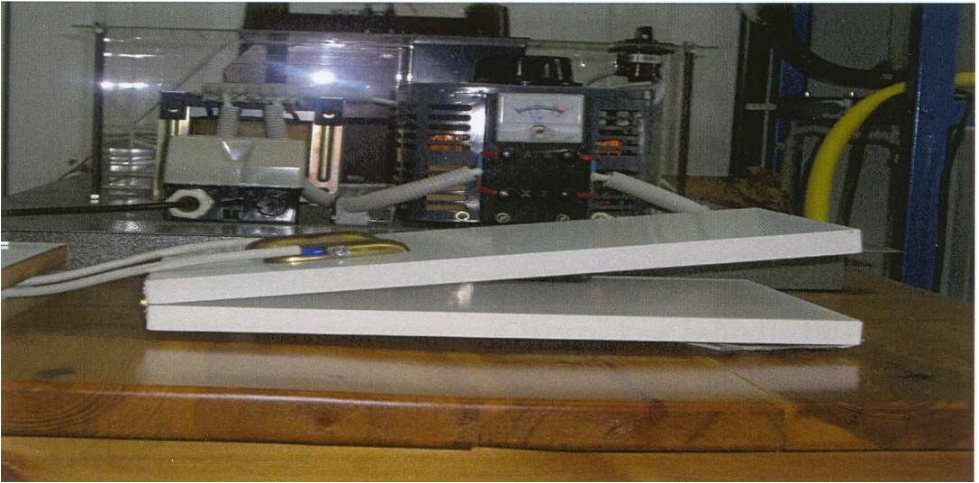


Fig.3: The inclined Plane test setup (side view)

The polymeric materials used were PVC, rubber and silicone rubber. Surface roughness and resistivity of the material were measured. Surface roughness were measured using perthometer (Type Perthometer M4P). They gave a roughness of $0.25 \mu\text{m}$ for PVC, $0.79 \mu\text{m}$ for silicone rubber and $1.10 \mu\text{m}$ for rubber. Resistivity of the material were performed with a Megger (BM25 type) and they gave a resistivity of $206 \text{ G}\Omega$ for PVC, a resistivity of $3100 \text{ G}\Omega$ silicone rubber and a resistivity of $2660 \text{ G}\Omega$ for rubber. The above values of surface roughness and surface resistivity were not isolated values, but each of them was the mean of three measurements [8], [9].

In the present work, by

mixing known quantity of NaCl in distilled water forming solutions with conductivity in the range $1.7 \mu\text{S/cm}$ to $2000 \mu\text{S/cm}$, were used as droplet. The range of conductivity were chosen based on the conductivity of natural rain and its values lie in the range $50 - 150 \mu\text{S/cm}$, whereas the tests with porcelain and glass insulators are performed with conductivities of $2500 \mu\text{S/cm}$ [10].

Experimental procedure

The materials used were PVC, silicone rubber and rubber. Various droplet arrangements were studied. These arrangements are given in Fig. 4. Each droplet had a volume of 0.2 ml . The electrodes were positioned at a distance of 4 cm from each other.

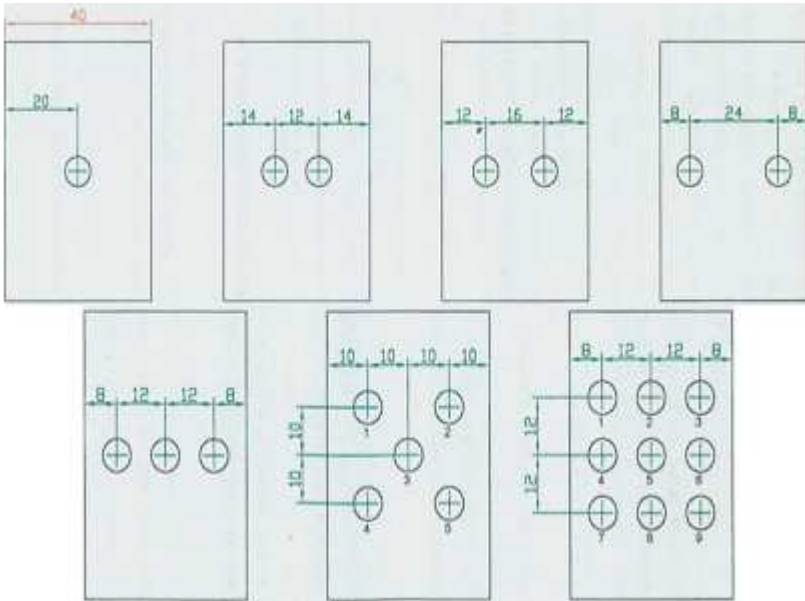


Fig.4: Top view showing the droplet arrangements. Starting from top left, the arrangements were named as
 (1) arrangement with 1 droplet,
 (2a) arrangement with 2 droplets, 14-12-14,
 (2b) arrangement with 2 droplets,12-16-12,
 (2c) arrangement with 2 droplets, 8-24-8,
 (3) arrangement with 3 droplets,
 (5) arrangement with 5 droplets and
 (9) arrangement with 9 droplets
 All dimensions given are in mm and they symbolize the distances of the droplets from the respective electrodes and the distances between them

The parameters investigated were the water conductivity, the roughness of the insulating surface, the positioning of the droplets and their volume. The insulating surfaces were used as they were received from the manufacturer without any further treatment. After putting the

droplets on the polymeric surface, the voltage was slowly raised until flashover occurred. After that and after cleaning the surface and putting new droplets on it, the voltage was raised again up to the previous flashover value minus 1.2 kV, so that no new flashover would occur.

At this voltage the arrangement would stay for 1 min. If no flashover occurred, the voltage was raised by 0.4 kV and the procedure was repeated until flashover occurred. The reason we left every time the voltage on for 1 min, was in order to give necessary time interval for the droplet(s) to deform and for the partial discharge to initiate.

It should be noted that it is observed a tendency for the droplets to slide, especially for PVC because of its smooth surface. The droplet slide was minimal in the case of rubber, which was the roughest of the three materials used. An elongation of the droplets was observed, as the applied voltage was larger. A more evident oscillation of the droplet was observed with silicone rubber. The reason for that was because the aforementioned material is more hydrophobic than the other two. Consequently, the droplet, for a defined droplet volume, has a smaller contact area with silicone rubber, and for this reason it oscillates more [8]. In some cases, such as with PVC with a droplet conductivity of 1.7 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ and with the arrangement (1) of Fig. 4, ejection of minute charged droplets was observed just before flashover [11].

Experimental results

At first, experiments were performed without any droplets between the electrodes. This was done in order to have reference values of the flashover voltage and also to understand influence of number of droplets between the electrodes that would result in a reduction of the flashover voltage. The flashover voltages without any droplets measured were 23 kV (± 0.5) for PVC, 25 kV (± 0.5) for silicone rubber and 24 kV (± 0.5) for rubber. The flash-over voltages of the three materials used were very similar.

In Figs. 5 - 11 the variation of flashover voltage with respect to the droplet conductivity for different droplet arrangements is shown.

It is evident that silicone rubber presents a higher flashover voltage than the other two materials. It should be noted, however, that in the case of droplet arrangements (5) and (9) where rubber seems to be as good as silicone rubber. A possible explanation might be that in such a case, the droplets cover a significant part of the polymeric surface and hence they play an even more important role than the polymer itself. This in combination with the fact that

the rubber has a rougher surface compared to the other two materials, has as a result the lesser oscillation in the case of rubber.

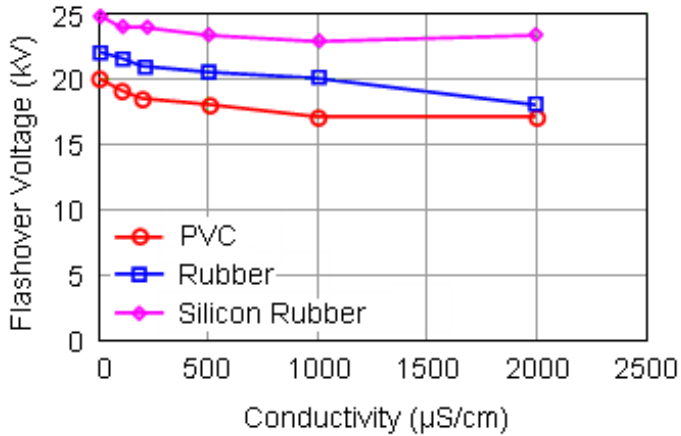


Fig.5: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (1)

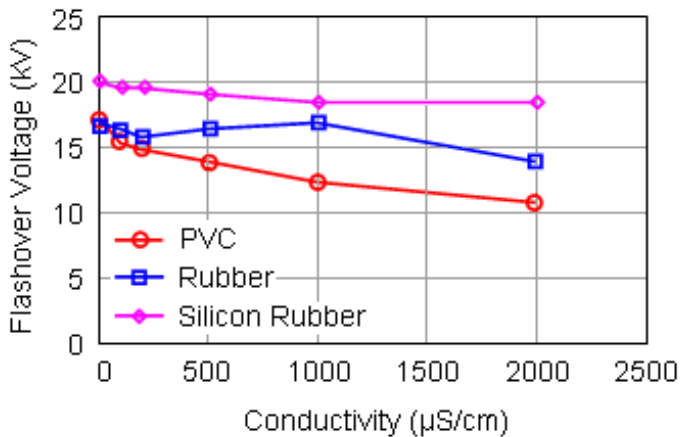


Fig.6: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (2a)

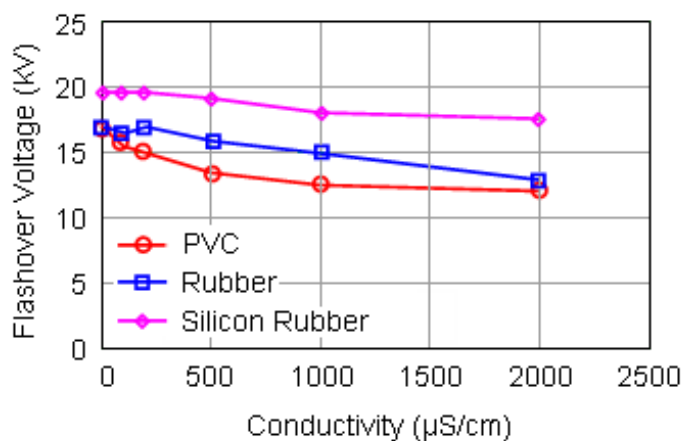


Fig.7: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (2b)

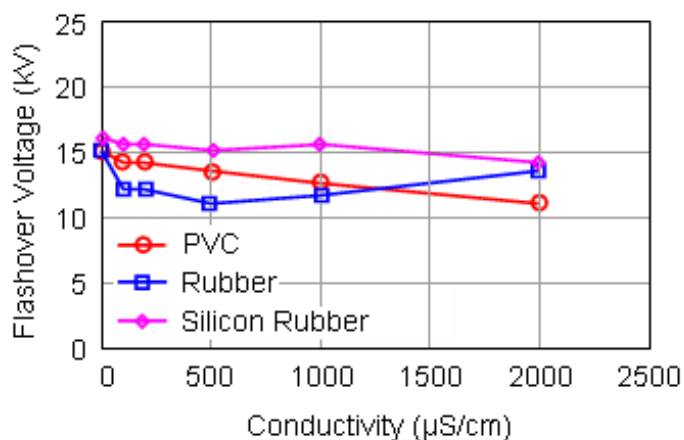


Fig.8: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (2c)

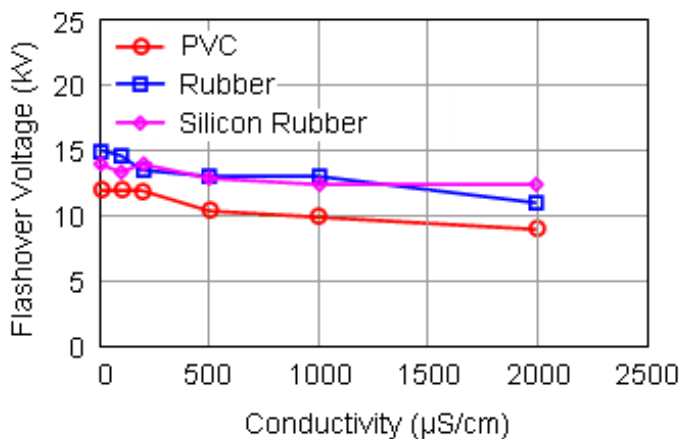


Fig.9: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (3)

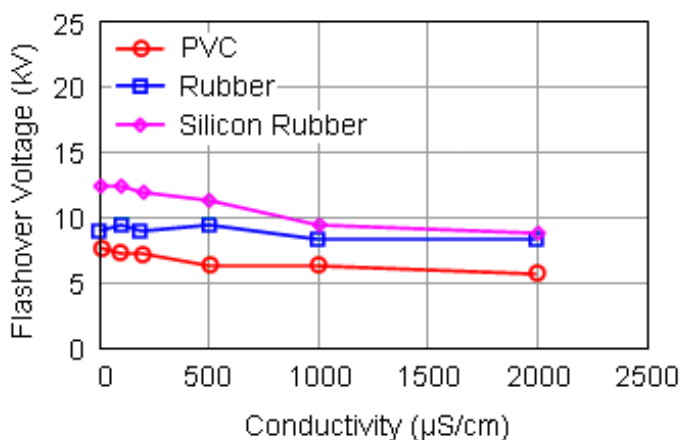


Fig.10: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (5)

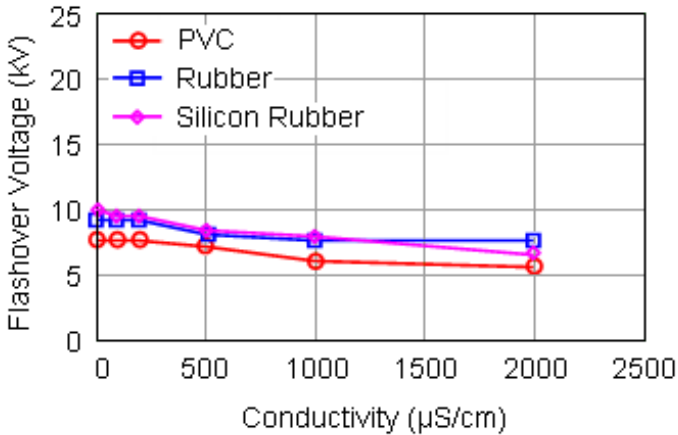


Fig.11: Flashover voltage for droplet arrangement (9)

The better performance of silicone rubber is due to its hydrophobicity [5], [12]. The larger contact angle the droplets have minimum contact with the insulation material as in the case of silicone rubber. Figs. 12 - 14 show the influence of droplet volume on the flashover voltage. It is clear that the number of droplets affects the flashover voltage, i.e. the larger the number, the lesser the flashover voltage. An exception to that we have with the arrangement of 3 and 5 droplets. It is evident that larger flashover voltages were observed with 5 droplets than with 3 drop-

lets. A possible explanation of that is that in the case of 3 droplets, the distance between electrode and droplet is smaller than in the case of 5 droplets. Consequently, one might say that there are occasions where the positioning of the droplets with respect to the electrodes which plays a more vital role than the whole droplet volume. A further validation of the above consists of the comparison of the flashover voltages in the cases of 3 and 9 droplets. It is observed that the flashover voltages for both these arrangements are not that different although the droplet volume triples.

An interesting case consists also of the droplets arrangements 2a, 2b and 2c. Higher values for flashover voltage were observed for arrangement 2a, then for arrangement 2b and the lower flashover voltage was observed for droplet arrangement 2c. This fact reinforces the above observations, namely that the positioning of the droplets play a crucial role, i.e. the closer the droplets to the electrodes, the lower the flashover voltage. It is to be noted that similar observations were made also in [3], [4], where not an inclined arrangement was used but a horizontal one. What is presented in this paper is an approach of the behavior of water droplets on polymeric surfaces with an inclined electrode arrangement. The results were reproducible but not that many tests were carried out which would allow a statistical study of the collected data. The main interest of this paper concentrates on the study of the behavior of the droplets. In the present context, no emphasis was given to the quantification of the studied parameters.

A comment should be made on the results with the conductivity of $1.7 \mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$: in such a case, with such a low conductivity, the water path behaves like a load, i.e. like a resistance connecting the two electrodes. It is for this reason that we observed a lowering of the voltage at the output of the power source. The flow of current through water of low conductivity (i.e. of large resistance) means practically an increase of water temperature because of the power loss in the resistance of the water path. From the relation $P = I^2R$, we can conclude that as the resistance is larger, as in our case the water path of very low conductivity, the power loss at this resistance is larger. Consequently, the temperature developed in such a resistance is enough for the boiling of the water. A quantity of water evaporates and the water path becomes narrower. Dry zones are formed, micro-discharges ensue and finally the flashover follows. Such a phenomenon was observed in the inclined arrangement experiments, as they were observed before with non-inclined test arrangements [8].

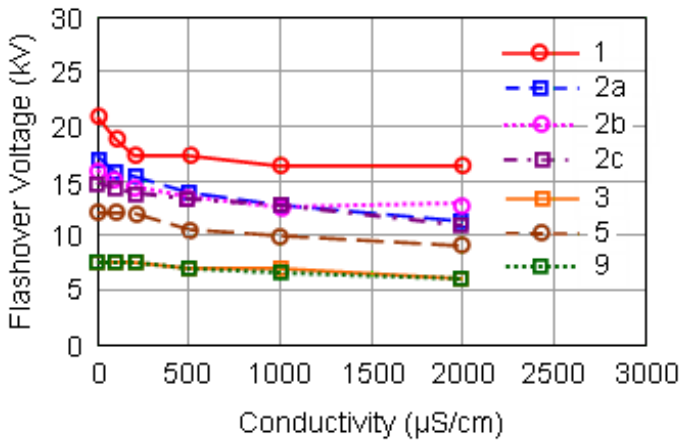


Fig.12: Flashover voltage for various conductivities, positioning and volume of the droplets. PVC used

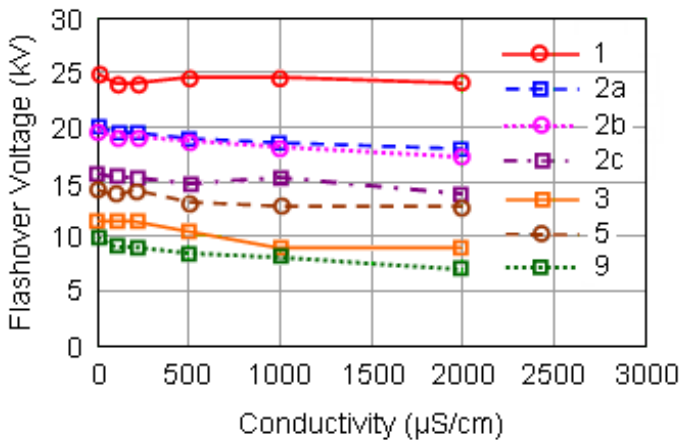


Fig.13: Flashover voltage for various conductivities, positioning and volume of the droplets. Silicone rubber used

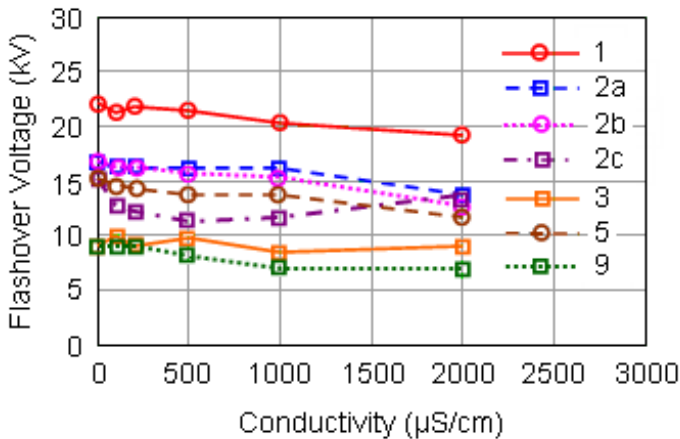


Fig.14: Flashover voltage for various conductivities, positioning and volume of the droplets. Rubber used

Discussion and thoughts for further research

In the present paper, some parameters influencing the droplet behavior on polymeric surfaces were investigated, such as water conductivity, droplet volume, polymeric surface roughness and droplet positioning. An increase of conductivity causes a decrease of flashover voltage. This is a statement valid irrespective of the polymer used. The surface roughness affects in a positive way the flashover voltage, when the number of droplets is large. The surface roughness functions as a hindrance to the movement of the droplets, and consequently renders their oscillation more difficult.

An increase of droplet volume causes a decrease of flashover voltage. This is in agreement with experimental observations published before with either ac or dc electric fields [13]. The position of the droplets with respect to the electrodes is of vital importance. With the droplets nearer the electrodes, the flashover voltage decreases. This is a phenomenon observed, albeit in different circumstances and conditions, also with enclosed cavities in solid dielectrics, where discharges become much more intense when one of the enclosing walls is an electrode [14].

The above show clearly that the polymeric material

plays a predominant role in determining the flashover voltage and the behavior of water droplets. Hydrophobic materials, such as silicone rubber, perform better than PVC or rubber. With this in mind, one should also note that most polymeric materials for outdoor applications present some sort of hydrophobicity. However, the advantage of silicone rubber consists in the fact that it does not only have this property, it can also regenerate it [15].

The formation of water paths, between the droplets as well as between the droplets and the electrodes, generally follow the direction of the applied electric field. The general activity in the form of discharges and droplet movement with rougher surfaces, sets in at higher voltages. In the case of just one droplet, with the application of the field, a deformation starts turning later to instability. Such behavior was observed with the inclined arrangement as well as with previous horizontal arrangements [3], [4]. Also in the case of the inclined arrangement, the role of the 'triple points' (i.e. the points where air, polymeric surface and droplet meet each other) is vital. The forces exercised on the droplets,

because of the applied electric field, are quite strong, and therefore, the 'triple points' move towards the electrodes. Experimental data published recently, validate what is reported here [16]. Such movement of 'triple points' causes the spread of the droplets. The spread of droplets is perhaps the most characteristic phenomenon observed with the inclined electrode arrangement. It is not, however, the only one observed. Droplet oscillation, formation of water paths, collapsing of two droplets into a larger one, ejection of small charged droplets from a larger one, were also noted during the experiments. In this respect, the present work offers similar conclusions with those in [3], [4], [8], [9], [16], [17]. The importance of the triple points should be emphasized. In other works, it has been reported that partial discharge (PD) activity is sometimes marginal, not easily detectable by a conventional electrical PD system but by a photomultiplier. Smaller water droplets offer higher flashover voltages. This can also be explained by considering - in the case of smaller droplets - that the intermolecular forces are in equilibrium with the surface tension and, consequently, the electrical forces required to

disturb the equilibrium are higher. On the other hand, for larger droplets, the inner forces may be lower and, if the surface tension stays the same, the equilibrium can more easily be disturbed. In such a case, the PD activity will start earlier and at lower voltages, and therefore, the flashover voltage will be lower [18]. The fact that the contact angle increases with the decrease of water droplet volume, is something that cannot be underestimated [18]. Generally speaking, although the observations of [18] refer to silicone rubber samples only, the relevant conclusions are not different from the ones presented in this paper.

It is to be noted that the inclined electrode arrangement, used here, should not be compared by any means with the well known arrangement of the inclined plane test [19]. In the latter, a film of electrolyte is arranged to trickle down the back surface of a sheet and the samples are rated in terms of the voltage which causes a track to form in one hour [20]. In other words, the inclined plane test is a means of evaluating resistance to tracking and erosion of insulating materials for outdoor use, whereas the inclined electrode arrangement used in

this work is a setup to study some parameters affecting the droplet movement on polymeric materials. The inclined plane test is an accelerating test [19]. The angle which was used in our experiments, i.e. the angle of 10° , was taken from real insulators. The purpose was to see the droplet behavior under an electric field in, as much as possible, real conditions. The present work confirms some general tendencies noted in [3], [4].

It would be interesting to try experiments, in which the contact angle will be accurately measured for both smaller and larger water droplets w.r.t. time. The purpose would be to see whether the contact angle diminishes with the passing of time and which diminution is more dramatic, that of the contact angle of smaller droplets or that of the contact angle of the larger droplets. Recent research indicated that the contact angle of droplets decreases with time, without, however, precisising whether the rate of decrease is larger for smaller or for larger droplets [21]. Moreover, as noted before, an interesting point can be to study different modes of droplet deformation in terms of the four parameters investigated in this pa-

per [18], [22].

One last point should be raised: the research mentioned above was carried out with conventional polymers. It is remarkable that, most of the aforementioned points, i.e. the importance of the positioning of the droplets, the significance of the droplet volume and/or of the droplet number as well as the importance of the water conductivity, are points which are also important for non-conventional polymers, i.e. for nanocomposite polymers. Work done recently in this laboratory emphasizes that parameters such as those investigated here, are also significant for nanocomposite polymers. In fact, the nature of phenomena such as surface discharges or flashovers, must have a common underlying denominator for both conventional polymers and nanocomposite polymers. Future research must also be directed in order to find the common grounds for surface discharge phenomena in both conventional and nanocomposite polymers [23], [24].

Conclusion

Water droplet conductivity, polymer surface roughness, droplet volume and the positioning of droplets with respect to the electrodes constitute important param-

eters affecting the behavior of droplets under the influence of an electric field with an inclined plane electrode arrangement. Increased conductivity, smoother polymer surfaces and increased droplet volume cause a reduction of the flashover voltage. The droplet positioning with respect to the electrodes plays a vital role in reducing the flashover voltage and, on occasions, is more important than the droplet volume.

Appendix - Elementary modeling

As mentioned above, the behavior of a droplet was modeled in [25], where the electric field E_N developed at one edge of the droplet is given by

$$E_N = U h / [a(h - a)] \quad (1)$$

where, U is the applied voltage, a is the droplet radius and h is the distance of the center of the droplet from one of the electrodes. The electric field E_M on the opposite edge of the droplet is given by

$$E_M = U h(L - h) / [a(L - h - a)] \quad (2)$$

where, L is the distance between the electrodes and the other symbols as in Eq. (1). As a droplet is positioned in the middle of the electrodes, the ratio E_N/E_M is expected to

be unity, and this was what was exactly obtained with the above equations. Considering Eq. (1), as $h \rightarrow a$, E_n tends to infinity. This is what we observed in the context of this work, namely that the closer a droplet is in one of the electrodes, the larger the electric field is getting, and consequently the more deleterious the consequences are. The above simple modeling is due to [25]. It was elaborated in [26], albeit with a non-inclined test arrangement. It must be mentioned that phenomena of very similar nature were observed also with the inclined test arrangement.

Remark

Main aspects of this paper were published in M.G. Danikas, P. Ramnalis and R. Sarathi, "A study of the behavior of water droplets on polymeric surfaces under the influence of electric fields in an inclined test arrangement", J. Electr. Eng., vol. 60, no. 2, 2009, pp. 94-99. The present version, however, contains additional comments on some aspects of the investigated polymeric materials as well as on a possible relation of the observed phenomena in nanocomposite polymers.

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