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## A Prologue for Europe?

### How Dutch farmers' protests evolved into political mobilisation

The early signs of the now omnipresent polarisation between farmers' interests and environmental goals began to appear in the Netherlands in 2019. That year saw both the launch of the European Green Deal as the EU's overarching growth strategy and the establishment of a political party representing farmers' interests in the Netherlands, the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB). Five years later, the Green Deal has lost its appeal and the BBB is likely to enter government, although electorally the party seems past its peak. Farmers are now protesting across Europe and many oppose, in particular, EU environmental policies they consider overly bureaucratic and damaging to their business. The European Christian democrats (EPP) have clearly repositioned themselves as representatives of agricultural interests. They are keen to keep the rural vote, which is also sensitive to other more conservative and right-wing issues. In the Netherlands, this became clear in the most recent general elections where populist parties managed to attract a large part of the (rural) vote and where Geert Wilders' anti-migration Freedom Party (PVV) became the biggest with about 25%. In this policy brief, we will zoom in on the events that shaped the rise of the BBB and led to the current political situation in the Netherlands. On that basis, this policy brief looks at how the Dutch case could be a prologue for the forthcoming European Parliament elections.

In October 2019, Dutch farmers drove their tractors to the political capital, The Hague, causing the most severe morning rush hour in Dutch history.<sup>1</sup> Their grievances about new environmental policies led to the establishment of a new political party, the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB)<sup>2</sup> at the end of 2019. This policy brief illustrates how a large, well-established interest group successfully organised itself politically against the fear of change in times of

economic uncertainty, no longer feeling at home in the existing/traditional political centre-right parties.

The BBB was elected with one seat in the Dutch parliament in 2021, and in March 2023 they became the biggest party in the Dutch senate, after winning the elections in all 12 Dutch provinces.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the European Union (EU) kept a close eye on these developments. Farmer protests are a long-known phenomenon

1 NU.nl, "[ANWB: Drukste ochtendspits ooit, 1.136 kilometer file door boerenprotest](#)," NU.nl, 1 October 2019.

2 See Table 1 for an overview of political parties mentioned in this Policy Brief.

3 See Tables 2 and 3 for timeline events in the Netherlands and the EU discussed in this Policy Brief.

but, in this case, they were linked to European environmental rules. Opposition to the (judicial and political) effects of complying with these rules in the Netherlands was a significant driver for the protests.

The autumn of 2019 is particularly salient because it also saw the birth of the European Green Deal, presented by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commission Vice-President Frans Timmermans. They argued that more stringent environmental policies would help to make the EU more competitive. Since 2019, particularly in the field of energy transition, much has been achieved, aided by the energy crisis due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, intensifying nature protection and reducing the use of pesticides to improve the EU's biodiversity has proved more difficult.

Protests in the Netherlands have eased a little compared to 2019, especially since the BBB victory in the 2023 provincial elections, which is linked to seats in the Dutch senate (upper house) too. However, the grievances continued to play a role later in 2023 when the general elections for the Dutch parliament (lower house) took place. While the BBB lost some ground compared to the outcome of the provincial election, it succeeded in attracting part of the rural vote. As a result, the BBB currently plays a central role in the formation of a new coalition government, in part due to its strong position in the senate.

Now that farmers' protests have erupted across several EU countries in early 2024, and with European Parliament (EP) elections looming on the horizon, it is due time to reflect on the Dutch case. This paper aims to illustrate how farmers' protests and the Dutch elections could be a prologue for the EP elections and for other EU member states. Our analysis is based on a review of the election campaign as covered by NOS, RTL and the big Dutch newspapers (NRC, Volkskrant, AD, Telegraaf and Trouw). We also based our analysis on coverage by the agriculture news website *Nieuwe Oogst*.<sup>4</sup>

4 Financed by the main Dutch farmers association LTO.

## An agricultural superpower on a small piece of land

The Netherlands is one of the largest exporters of agri-food products in the world.<sup>5</sup> Agriculture as a whole<sup>6</sup> accounts for about 7.5% of the country's national income and employment.<sup>7</sup> The agricultural sector is characterised by a high degree of intensive production with high levels of pollution. For example, the Netherlands has the highest livestock density in the EU, with over 100 million farm animals.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, agriculture greenhouse gas emissions have not declined since the 1990s, whereas those of the Dutch economy as a whole dropped by 30%.<sup>9</sup> In the past decade, the sustainability problems have been largely ignored or postponed and new investments have been allowed to build and enlarge stables, and there has been an expansion of milk quotas. In the Netherlands, the highly intensive and industrialised agricultural sector (notably meat and dairy production) is responsible for the largest proportion of nitrogen emissions, which are severely damaging to the quality of nature in a densely populated country.<sup>10</sup>

As in other parts of Europe, the number of farmers continues to decline in the Netherlands. Since the 1980s, 65% of agricultural businesses have ceased to exist.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, agricultural land use has only decreased by 11% in the

5 Laura Reiley, "[Cutting-edge tech made this tiny country a major exporter of food](#)," The Washington Post, 21 November 2023.

6 Including both direct and indirect activities.

7 Petra Berkhout (red.), H. van der Meulen and P. Ramaekers, "[Staat van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel. Editie 2023](#)," Wageningen Economic Research, November 2023, 20.

8 CBS, "[Hoeveel landbouwdieren telt ons land?](#)," CBS.nl, December 2021.

9 Wetenschappelijke Klimaatraad, "[Met iedereen de transities in](#)," December 2023, 20.

10 CBS, "[Stikstofemissies naar lucht](#)," CBS.nl, Accessed 11 March 2024; CBS, "[Stikstof in het oppervlaktewater](#)," CBS.nl. Accessed 11 March 2024.

11 CBS-Landbouwtelling, "[Aantal land- en tuinbouw-bedrijven - Totaal](#)," Staat van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel. Accessed 11 January 2024.

same period.<sup>12</sup> This implies a serious scale-up of agricultural businesses, which has been accompanied by significant increases in agriculture-related added value and productivity in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> However, small-scale farmers have had a harder time carrying on and fewer farmers have a successor ready and willing to take over.<sup>14</sup> Despite the income of farmers seeing an overall increase, inequalities among farmers' incomes has risen too.

Farmers' interests in the Netherlands are backed by a considerable agri-industry buying food products and supplying fodder, fertilisers, stables, glasshouses, agricultural machines, seeds and so on. Big companies like Campina Melkunie, ForFarmers, Vion and VanDrie Group will lose out if the agricultural sector is reduced, and they play a significant role in the farmers' protests.<sup>15</sup> Agricultural interests are moreover well promoted through LTO, the Dutch part of European farmers organisation COPA-COGECA, even though they are not considered radical enough by a group of farmers that established the so-called Farmers Defence Force (FDF). In politics, traditionally the Christian democrats (CDA, EPP) represented farmers' interests. As much as 60% of the Dutch farmer population were believed to vote for CDA in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Polls in the run-up to the November 2023 general elections eventually showed similar numbers, but support now leans towards the BBB.<sup>17</sup>

## Autumn 2019 – spring 2023: growing public support eventually results in a political landslide

Increased support for the BBB has followed on from massive farmers' protests in the Netherlands over the past years. Tractors blocked highways because of anger with new policy measures to reduce nitrogen emissions. The government is legally obliged to reduce nitrogen levels after a 2019 verdict of its Council of State (comparable to a Supreme Court in other countries), which effectuated a ban on all new activities leading to nitrogen emissions, including the building of new houses, infrastructure and stables. To address this issue, the government, which notably included the CDA, announced measures to reduce agriculture nitrogen emissions. These were inevitable to tackle the issue effectively. The policy measures, to be implemented in part by the provinces, included scaling down animal farming activities, notably those undertaken near nature areas designated as 'Natura 2000' by the Dutch government under EU policy.

Following the Council of State ruling<sup>18</sup> and a subsequent report by a government advisory committee on the nitrogen crisis,<sup>19</sup> member of parliament Tjeerd de Groot (of then-government coalition party D66, Renew) proposed legislation to halve livestock numbers in the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> This was the direct trigger for the eruption of a series of protests in the Netherlands. One epicentre of these protests was the Malieveld, a terrain for protests in the centre of The Hague, where thousands of farmers gathered with their tractors to demonstrate against the government approach to the nitrogen crisis. Apart from tractors driving into cities, (support for) the farmers' protests also became highly visible to

12 Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, "[Land- en tuinbouw: ruimtelijke spreiding, grondgebruik en aantal bedrijven, 1980-2022](#)," 25 October 2023.

13 Agrimatie.nl, "[Toegevoegde waarde agrocomplex](#)" Staat van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel. Accessed 15 February 2024.

14 CBS-Landbouwtelling, "[Opvolgingspercentage land- en tuinbouw](#)," Staat van Landbouw, Natuur en Voedsel. Accessed 11 January 2024.

15 Harm Ede Botje, "[Miljardenconcerns hebben flinke vinger in de pap bij boerenprotesten](#)," NU.nl, 8 July 2022.

16 Trouw, "[Onderzoek: boeren keren CDA rug toe](#)," Trouw, 19 April 1994.

17 Tys Hallema, "[Verkiezingspeiling Nieuwe Oogst: 70 procent boeren stemt BBB](#)," Nieuwe Oogst, 8 September 2023.

18 Raad van State, "[PAS mag niet als toestemmingsbasis voor activiteiten worden gebruikt](#)," Raad van State, 29 May 2019.

19 Adviescollege Stikstofproblematiek, "[Niet alles kan – Eerste advies Adviescollege Stikstofproblematiek](#)" Rijksoverheid, 25 September 2019.

20 Peter Winterman, "[D66 wil veestapel halveren: drastische afname stikstofuitstoot](#)," AD, 9 September 2019.

the general public, with Dutch flags being turned upside-down across the country.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of the farmers' protests, agrarian journalist Caroline van der Plas co-founded the BBB as a political party together with two marketeers from the agri-food communications bureau ReMarkAble.<sup>22</sup> The agri-industry that supported the protests were clients of the bureau.<sup>23</sup> The rapid success and rise of the BBB was linked to opposition to EU policies (such as Natura 2000 and various Green Deal policies) and then-climate Commissioner Timmermans as an emblematic figure for these policies. The movement clearly distanced itself from the formal centres of power and claimed to speak up for ordinary citizens and farmers.

In the March 2021 general elections, BBB entered parliament with one seat. Van der Plas, who arrived in The Hague by tractor on her first day in office as a member of parliament, has represented the BBB in parliament since then. Although one seat in a 150-seat parliament did not give Van der Plas a big say on policies, she ensured that the farmers' voice was directly heard during relevant debates, amidst growing sympathy for the farmer population in the Netherlands.

In the meantime, Mark Rutte's new government started with new approaches to combat the nitrogen crisis, for which a separate minister was appointed. Protests at the time became intimidating to certain politicians involved. In particular, the more radical FDF opposed the announced nitrogen policies, such as buying out farmers located close to Natura 2000 areas.

By March 2023, two years later, this had set the stage for the provincial elections that indirectly determine the set-up of the Dutch senate.

With the Christian democrats in bad shape after internal struggles, these elections, in which environment policies played an important role, resulted in a surprise landslide victory for the BBB, which became the biggest party in all 12 provinces and obtained 16 out of 75 senate seats.<sup>24</sup>

The elections demonstrated that the BBB had attracted more voters than just farmers, whose votes would have led to only one or two seats. A Kantar study saw the following four main drivers for voters to vote for BBB:

1. BBB as a protest vote
2. BBB as a viable alternative to CDA
3. BBB as a vote to help rural areas
4. BBB as a viable alternative to PVV and SP (Socialist Party).<sup>25</sup>

Following the landslide victory, most of the reversed flags were rotated 180 degrees towards the normal red-white-blue position.<sup>26</sup>

## Fall of the fourth Rutte government: continued uncertainty and looming new elections

The results of the March 2023 provincial elections in the Netherlands reached Brussels too. At the headquarters of the European People's Party (EPP), political family leader Manfred Weber announced that the EPP – the European Christian democrats – is the European farmers' party defending their core interests.<sup>27</sup> Naturally, the EPP had noticed the decline of 'their' CDA at the

21 Ben Coates, "[Why Dutch Farmers Turned Their Flag Upside Down](#)," The New York Times, 3 April 2023; French and Belgian farmers started in late 2023 turning city signs upside down, as turning vertical flags upside down does not work very well.

22 Together with marketeers Wim Groot Koerkamp and Henk Vermeer; NPO Radio 1, "[Het marketingbureau achter de succesvolle BBB](#)," NOS Met het Oog op Morgen, 17 March 2023.

23 Peter Olsthoorn and Bram Wissink, "[Hoe een PR-bureau de BoerBurgerBeweging in de Tweede Kamer bracht](#)," Adformatie.nl, 11 May 2021.

24 Kiesraad, "[Uitslagen Provinciale Statenverkiezingen 2023](#)," Kiesraad.nl, 27 March 2023.

25 Bart Koenen and Joep Keuzenkamp, "[The rise of the BBB: What can explain the sudden rise of the BoerBurgerBeweging in the Netherlands and what should the climate movement learn from it?](#)," Parlons Climat - Kantar Public, June 2023.

26 NOS, "[Vlaggen weer omgedraaid: 'Maar strijd nog niet gewonnen'](#)," NOS.nl, 16 March 2023.

27 Louise Guillot and Bartosz Brzeziński, "[EPP pitches itself as farmers' party ahead of 2024 European election](#)," POLITICO, 4 May 2023.

expense of the BBB. At the time, it was unclear whether the BBB would position themselves as EPP, ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists)<sup>28</sup> or even Renew at European level.<sup>29</sup> Similar results in other capitals had potentially far-reaching consequences for the European Christian democrats, who feared losing the rural vote they depend heavily on.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the installation of provincial governing bodies (often including the BBB) and new senators further complicated the nitrogen crisis. In a move to show remorse over CDA's support for policies to reduce farming, then-party leader and Foreign Affairs Minister in Rutte's fourth coalition government, Wopke Hoekstra, announced that CDA wanted to bring a halt to the rapid introduction of the government's new nitrogen policy. Within the coalition, an agreement could not be reached with D66, sitting on the opposite side of the nitrogen debate. In an attempt to not bring his government to a collapse, Rutte came up with a so-called built-in pause for CDA to reflect on its demands.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously, stakeholder representatives and the government undertook negotiations on a comprehensive 'agriculture agreement'. CDA stated that it wanted to await the results of these negotiations and the instalment of the often BBB-led governing bodies in the provinces. However, when in June LTO left the negotiations over a 'lack of perspective and income security' for farmers,<sup>31</sup> pressure mounted on the CDA to either come up with new policy proposals or potentially leave the government.

In a balancing act trying to maintain some perspective on the political alignment between D66 and CDA, the coalition kept muddling

through. It was dealing with migration, however, that proved even more divisive within the coalition and led to the fall of the fourth Rutte government in early July, leading to new elections with migration high on the campaign agenda.

This took the wind out of BBB's sails. Van der Plas had aimed to focus a campaign on farmers' interests, climate and environment-related topics. On top of this came uncertainty about the leadership, with Van der Plas not willing to become prime minister. Slowly the BBB started to drop in the polls and was first overtaken by the VVD (Renew) and the newly merged GroenLinks-PvdA combination (Greens/EFA-S&D).<sup>32</sup> When Climate Commissioner Frans Timmermans announced a return to Dutch politics to lead the GroenLinks-PvdA party list in the summer of 2023 it looked like climate and other environmental issues would be brought back on to the agenda and place BBB in a good position for the election campaign.<sup>33</sup>

However, not long thereafter, momentum was taken away from the BBB again when CDA dissident Pieter Omtzigt<sup>34</sup> announced he would stand in the elections with his newly founded New Social Contract (NSC). His popularity among a very similar voter base as the BBB was another crunch to BBB's momentum. Cynical observers point out that the Netherlands now hosts three political parties grounded in Christian democratic ideology – the CDA, BBB and NSC – and it seems that all of them will join the EPP after the 2024 EP elections.<sup>35</sup>

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28 Chris Aalberts, "[BBB rijdt met haar rechts radicale noabers de Europese modder in](#)," 13 December 2022.

29 Eventually, they announced their ambition to join the EPP after the EP elections.

30 NOS, "[Kabinet bouwt pauze stikstof in om CDA in coalitie te houden](#)," NOS.nl, 31 March 2023.

31 LTO Nederland, "[LTO stopt met landbouwakkoord](#)," LTO.nl, 20 June 2023.

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32 POLITICO, "[Poll of Polls Netherlands](#)," POLITICO, Accessed 24 April 2024.

33 In a surprise move, or, rather, 'fleeing the scene', Wopke Hoekstra, who had been slowing down the cabinet's nitrogen policies, surprised nearly everyone as he replaced Timmermans in Brussels, see: Louise van Schaik and Camille van Hees, "[Is Brussels less green with commissioner Hoekstra?!](#)", Clingendael Institute, 29 September 2023.

34 Long-time member of parliament, risen through the ranks of the CDA, but left the party after internal struggles.

35 In addition to the Christian Union (a smaller and more progressive Christian party), which is also part of the EPP, these parties currently hold 35 out of 150 seats in the Dutch parliament.

As the campaign took off, at least the first three of four aforementioned central reasons for people to vote for BBB in the provincial elections<sup>36</sup> had now been taken up by the NSC. In sum, the rise of the NSC and the fall of the government over a topic other than agriculture made it hard for BBB to continue the ‘winning flow’ they inherited from the provincial elections.

### Farmer sentiments wane in the election campaign followed by PVV’s landslide victory over migration as the central topic

Consequently, the farmers’ concerns lost importance in the election campaign. The main topics included the cost of living, migration and good governance. Tensions between agricultural interests and environmental objectives still received some attention, but the dichotomy did not take centre stage. In addition to NSC’s participation and BBB now sitting in provincial governing bodies,<sup>37</sup> a reason for the absence of agriculture as a major theme was the different tone used by, for example, D66<sup>38</sup> and the fact that Timmermans let go of the 2030 deadline for reducing nitrogen emissions his party had previously been very vocal about.<sup>39</sup> Other factors include the loss of momentum (farmers cannot head to The Hague every day) and the broad refraining from addressing farmers’ issues in parties’ discourses (following fears this would boost BBB’s ownership of the topic).<sup>40</sup> The absence of the agriculture issue exposed the

vulnerability of focusing heavily on a single issue as propagated by the BBB.<sup>41</sup>

Instead of agriculture, migration became the main issue in the elections, eventually resulting in a significant rise in the polls for Geert Wilders’ PVV. He achieved the biggest ‘ownership’ of this topic. For a number of voters who initially leaned towards BBB, Wilders became an attractive alternative, even more so due to Wilders portraying himself as a great supporter of farmers’ interests and given his long-standing reputation as Eurosceptic. It became clear that for farmers the party they had long trusted their votes to (CDA) was no longer an option.

The rise of the PVV resulted in a major surprise win of 37 out of 150 seats in parliament. BBB won seven seats, much behind the four biggest parties but still a significant increase from the one seat previously held. Moreover, due to BBB’s massive victory in the provincial elections, the fact that it is part of the governing bodies of almost all provinces, and they have seats in the senate, the party has thus far played a central role in negotiations on formation of a new government. From the very start, BBB appeared most eager to govern by proposing a candidate for a possible agriculture ministerial post the day after the elections.<sup>42</sup> Among the parties<sup>43</sup> currently negotiating a new government, BBB has appeared as the party most eager to cooperate with Wilders’ PVV.<sup>44</sup>

Although the PVV has claimed to be a party for the farmers, *Nieuwe Oogst* described the PVV as ‘fickle’ (*wispelturig*) for the agricultural sector.<sup>45</sup> On the one hand, Wilders’ rhetoric about the farmers included phrases like “[farmers] are the

36 As studied by Kantar: Bart Koenen and Joep Keuzenkamp, [“The rise of the BBB: What can explain the sudden rise of the BoerBurgerBeweging in the Netherlands and what should the climate movement learn from it?”](#) Parlons Climat - Kantar Public, June 2023.

37 And therefore sometimes being forced to water down its (nitrogen) policies, see: NOS, [“BBB doet in provincies water bij de wijn, tot ongenoegen van de achterban,”](#) NOS.nl, 16 November 2023.

38 Philip de Witt Wijnen, [“D66 slaat in het nieuwe partijprogramma verrassend milde toon aan jegens de boeren,”](#) NRC, 22 September 2023.

39 RTL, [“Timmermans laat 2030 als jaartal om stikstof terug te dringen vallen,”](#) RTL Nieuws, 5 November 2023.

40 Auke van Eijdsden, [“De campagne gaat nauwelijks over stikstof. Hoe kan dat?”](#), Trouw, 16 November 2023.

41 Auke van Eijdsden, [“Dezelfde formule, maar het succes lijkt op: waarom het BBB niet nóg een keer lijkt te lukken,”](#) Trouw, 21 November 2023.

42 Peter Smit, [“BBB polst Aalt Dijkhuizen voor ministerspost op LNV,”](#) Nieuwe Oogst, 23 November 2023.

43 PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB.

44 Karl Mathiesen and Bartosz Brzeziński, [“Dutch farmers back Wilders as centrist nightmares come true,”](#) POLITICO, 28 February 2024.

45 René Bouwmeester and Peter Smit, [“PVV is voor de landbouwsector een wispelturige partij,”](#) Nieuwe Oogst, 23 November 2023.

heroes of the Netherlands<sup>46</sup> and “[w]e have the best farmers of Europe.”<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, however, the anti-migration policies of the PVV are very threatening, especially for the Dutch horticultural sector that relies heavily on migrant workers – mainly from Europe – for most of its production.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, long-time PVV member of parliament Dion Graus is famous for his animal welfare policies.

At the time of writing this paper, it is uncertain how the formation talks will evolve. However, it will be interesting to see how a young party that rose through nationwide farmers’ protests will hold up – especially at times when protests re-erupt across Europe. This has led to some smaller re-eruptions in the Netherlands, too. Arguably, this time around, Dutch farmers’ protests are calmer and smaller than elsewhere because of the ongoing coalition talks. Farmers hope their votes will result in different policies more aligned with what they consider to be their interests. However, it remains to be seen whether (more radical) farmers can be satisfied with potential future coalition compromises.<sup>49</sup>

## The Dutch case as prologue for Europe?

When momentum is there, farmers’ protests and interests have the potential to lead to a significant electoral peak. However, as soon as the momentum evaporates it risks being surpassed by other topics. It remains, therefore, to be seen how much of a momentum farmers

can retain in the run-up to the EP elections. While only decided after the installation of new MEPs,<sup>50</sup> the BBB will likely join the EPP.<sup>51</sup> Developments in The Hague will be followed with scrutiny, however. If a coalition government with the PVV sees the light of day, it is uncertain how the EPP will react to a BBB (or NSC) application.<sup>52</sup>

So far, recent farmers’ protests in other EU member states have not led to new political parties akin to the BBB. This might be linked to the EPP’s stride to present itself as the party of farmers’ interest.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in countries like France and Denmark, farmers’ interests are well embedded within various parties in parliament. Meanwhile, the German Christian democrats (CDU) are doing all they can to avoid a Dutch CDA scenario. Nevertheless, the rise of the BBB was fast and no one would have expected in 2019 that the BBB would become the biggest party at the provincial elections three and a half years later. As such, there remains a risk that aggrieved farmers and rural voters will turn to more radical and Eurosceptic parties.

Besides the (electoral) challenges of farmers’ protests in various European countries, the Dutch example illustrates other challenges too. The nitrogen crisis in the Netherlands sheds light on how European environmental legislation agreed upon decades ago lacks legitimacy among some groups in society, while the main problem has been that parliament and government underestimated the legal consequences of the Natura 2000 policy. At the same time, the quality of the environment is a real concern for the Netherlands and successive

46 Loes Reijmer, “[Boeren, de nieuwe knuffeldieren van populisten](#),” *Volkskrant*, 4 October 2019.

47 Johan Wissink, “[Geert Wilders: boeren zijn geen rotte vis](#),” *Nieuwe Oogst*, 1 October 2019.

48 Nieuwsuur, “[Zorgen bij bedrijven over plannen arbeidsmigratie: ‘Het draagt bij aan welvaart’](#),” *NOS.nl*, 27 November 2023.

49 In February 2024, it became clear that the BBB continues to walk a fine line between governability image and farmers’ protests and interests. In February 2024, Farmers Defence Force frontman Van den Oever made threatening comments about Agricultural Minister Piet Adema and an NSC member of parliament. Subsequently, BBB leader Van der Plas was heavily criticised for not directly distancing herself from his words when confronted with them. See: Eppo König, “[Farmers Defence Force verdeelt formerende partijen](#),” *NRC*, 5 February 2024.

50 Sven op 1, “[Jeroen Lenaers \(CDA-Europarlementariër\): ‘Pas na verkiezingen duidelijkheid of BBB en NSC welkom zijn bij EVP-fractie’](#),” *WNL (NPO Radio 1)*, 26 February 2024.

51 Max Griera, “[Dutch farmers’ party to join EPP group after EU elections](#),” *Euractiv*, 15 December 2023.

52 See for example the problems VVD experienced within Renew due to its participation in the coalition talks: Max Griera and Théo Bourgerie-Gonse, “[Azman’s bid for EU liberals’ Renew presidency at risk over far-right scare](#),” *Euractiv*, 23 January 2024.

53 The differences in electoral thresholds between EU member states plays a role too. In the Netherlands (threshold to obtain a parliament seat: 0.67%) the bar is significantly lower than in other countries with higher electoral thresholds, which makes it harder for new parties to enter parliament.

governments could have done more to halt the continuing growth of intensive farming.

### **The need to strike a balance between environmental objectives and agricultural concerns**

Farmers' protests in the Netherlands and the political success of the BBB illustrate how a major established interest can organise itself against change. They also show that farmers are mobilised and their concerns receive sympathy from large numbers of the electorate. Besides the lack of appealing alternative narratives from traditional centre-right parties, the rise of the BBB is also a sign of public support for a broad sense of conservatism and cultural protectionism of the countryside against change induced by European environmental norms. This is a sentiment strengthened by the fact that people in the countryside believe the government pays less attention to them than to inhabitants of the urban Randstad area.<sup>54</sup>

Strict(er) environment and climate targets for agricultural production are needed to protect nature but are difficult to achieve when farmers and the agri-industry oppose them. Agricultural and food policies need to balance sustainability objectives with other objectives such as food security in Europe, global competitiveness and reasonable administrative burdens and incomes for farmers.

So far, parties traditionally representing farmers' interests have not succeeded in providing a convincing story about how to integrate these objectives and ensure a positive future for farmers. In the face of the EP elections, these parties now aim to win agricultural support in the short term by postponing and reversing (agri-)environmental measures. While the farmers' protests seem to have been very effective in halting and reversing policies in the lead-up to the EP elections, it is likely that these

policies will return at some point. It is widely observed that the agriculture sector could – at least in the long run – contribute more to reaching other environmental objectives, and that not all agricultural activities will remain viable in a scenario where polluters pay for damage done to the environment.<sup>55</sup>

The BBB's story, however, illustrates that a new and upcoming political force – heavily focused on a single issue – can easily be surpassed when other topics surface. At the same time, the farmers' protests have spurred other protests that subsequently moved to the far-right when migration came up as topic for the general elections.

The European Green Deal has lost its appeal as an overarching growth strategy for Europe, but many EU environmental policies are still in place and parts of the Green Deal focusing on energy transition and green industrial policies are still very much alive. The latter are likely to affect the agricultural sector at some point. So far, it has proved impossible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for agriculture (particularly methane<sup>56</sup>), whereas they were reduced for the rest of the economy. Pressure will be on the sector to take action. This is considered one of the main future challenges in addition to water quality and levels of manure.

While the short-term measures may calm down the protests and possibly also take (some) wind out of the sails of populist parties – who may seize the farmers' protests as an opportunity to rally against EU policies in general – there remains a clear need for a narrative and a better set of instruments. If election results should tell us one thing, it is that Brussels and national governments need to handle more delicately the balance between environmental objectives, agri-industry interests and farmers' concerns.

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54 Twan Huijsmans and Emily Miltenburg “SCP: Nuance in debat over ‘de kloof’ tussen stad en platteland nodig,” SCP, 13 March 2023; Josse de Voogd and René Cuperus, “Atlas van Afgehaakt Nederland,” 17 December 2021.

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55 See for example the veal industry in the Netherlands: Rob Koster, “Einde lijkt in zicht voor huidige kalvermesterij in Nederland,” NOS.nl, 15 March 2021.

56 Wetenschappelijke Klimaatraad, “Met iedereen de transitie in,” December 2023, 46.



**Table 1. Dutch political parties mentioned in this Policy Brief**

Parties	English name	EP group	Current amount of seats (total)	
			Parliament (150)	Senate (75)
PVV	Party for Freedom	ID*	37	4
GL-PvdA	Green Left-Labour Party	S&D and Greens/EFA**	25	14
VVD	People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy	Renew	24	10
NSC	New Social Contract	EPP*	20	-
D66	Democrats 66	Renew	9	5
BBB	Farmer–Citizen Movement	EPP*	7	16
CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal	EPP	5	6
SP	Socialist Party	GUE/NGL*	5	3
CU	Christian Union	EPP	3	3

\* party currently not in the EP

\*\* combined list but MEPs will be spread over both groups

**Table 2. Timeline of events: EU**

Year	Month	Event
2019	December	Launch of the European Green Deal
2023	May	EPP pitches itself as farmers’ party
2023	September	Hoekstra to succeed Timmermans as Commissioner for Climate Action
2024	January	Eruption of farmers’ protests in several EU member states
2024	June	EP elections

**Table 3. Timeline of events: Netherlands**

Year	Month	Event
2019	May	Ruling of the Dutch Council of State
2019	September	Tjeerd de Groot proposal to halve livestock population
2019	October	Dutch farmers drive their tractors to the political capital, The Hague
2019	November	Establishment of BBB
2021	March	BBB wins one seat in Dutch parliament
2023	March	BBB becomes biggest party in all 12 provinces and Dutch senate following Dutch provincial elections
2023	March	Government builds in ‘nitrogen break’ to keep CDA in the coalition
2023	July	Rutte’s fourth government collapses over migration
2023	July	Timmermans returns to The Hague to head GL-PvdA list
2023	August	Omtzigt announces participation of NSC at the general elections
2023	November	General elections

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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