

Are you for or against us? The impact of protest on political programs

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Last weekend, climate activists again blocked the A12 highway near The Hague to draw attention to the climate crisis. The farmers' movement does not shy away from harsh, disruptive actions either. To what extent

do these disruptive actions contribute to protest groups' objectives? And what is the social impact as regards political choices and voting behavior? Sociologist Ruud Wouters is conducting research into the impact of protest on political choices and the elections. "Protest can force political parties to take a clear stand."

For a long time, the impact of protests was low on the research agenda. Sociologists looked upon [protest](#) as an obvious engine of social change and instead focused on how [social movements](#) emerge. Political scientists argued that the impact of protest was obviously minimal and rather saw protesters as beggars at the gates of policy, who were occasionally fobbed off with small change. It was not until about 20 years ago that systematic research began to be conducted into the impact of protests, a research topic that presents a number of methodological challenges. The link between protests and the electoral arena is the last in a series which is now receiving proper attention.

What does science say about the relationship between protest and elections?

Protest can have an influence on politics and elections in many ways. Firstly, protest forces [political parties](#) to take a clear stand. In fact protest is a challenge to other actors in society: are you with us or against us? In that sense, protest sparks social debate and provides clarity in an electoral campaign.

To what extent can protest truly disrupt?

Protest can reveal disagreements among coalition partners and thus disturb the harmony in a government. Protest then functions as a wedge that threatens to drive the government apart. Such a situation creates opportunities to impact policy: it is only seldom the case that all partners

want a government to fall so a compromise present itself.

A similar thing has happened in the Flemish government, that is also faced with protesting farmers following unpopular plans for measures to address the nitrogen crisis. One party, the Christian-democrat CD&V, has clearly chosen the side of the farmers, plunging the Flemish government into an unprecedented crisis. In the Netherlands, farmers' protests have led to the formation of a new party: BBB, the Farmer-Citizen Movement. Such a party functions as the institutional branch of the protest movement, allowing the protesters' interests to be represented directly in parliament.

What are the consequences?

Of course, votes are required to be really able to make a difference in political decision-making. One way in which elections may be settled in favor of one particular party is that the party campaigns on one issue and that this issue dominates the electoral campaign. Voters make their choice with that particular issue at the back of their minds, which often works out in favor of the "owners" of that issue. In scientific literature, this is referred to as "priming" and "issue ownership." If protests are organized in the run-up to the elections, such a strategy may work.

Research has shown that, for instance, in districts where many climate strike protests were held, green parties gathered more votes compared to previous elections. A different study on the impact of protests during the [economic crisis](#) showed that voters punished coalition parties harder the more mass protests were held. In sum, protests can certainly impact elections, but that does not necessarily mean that the protesters will triumph. We can't tell until the votes have been counted.

Provided by Tilburg University

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