

The “Hottest Ever January” in Germany: Farmers’ Protests and the Discourse on Agriculture and Food Production

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Abstract

Following the German Federal Government’s announcement of agricultural subsidy cuts in November 2023, farmers mobilized unprecedented protests, creating what their associations celebrated as a “hot January with more protests than the country has ever seen” (“Bauern wollen ‘Kampfansage’ der Ampel annehmen,” 2023). These actions ultimately forced the government to withdraw the proposed policy changes. Our study applies the politicization/depolicitization – policy change model to analyze the theoretical connections between politicization and policy change announcements. Using discourse network analysis, we examine the evolution of politicization/depolicitization dynamics through newspaper articles published between the initial subsidy cut announcement on November 17, 2023, and March 26, 2024. Our findings reveal a dynamic politicization process that farmers strategically amplified through protests to achieve policy reversal. Our research also identifies concerning behavioral patterns of right-wing actors and ideological infiltration within these protests, opening avenues for further investigation.

Keywords

agri-food policy; climate change; farmers’ protests; politicization

1. Introduction

Agri-food production in Germany and across the European Union (EU) contributes significantly to biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water and air pollution, and global heating (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,

2019; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019). At the same time, the sector is highly vulnerable to the ecological impacts of these crises, placing farmers in a “trilemma” of land use: balancing the urgent demands of mitigating climate change, ensuring food security, and preserving biodiversity (Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen, 2020). While the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has incorporated some “green” elements into recent reform cycles, the need for a comprehensive greening of the CAP remains critical (Alons, 2017), including in the German context (Matthews, 2023; Pe’er et al., 2019).

Aside from calls for green transformation, European rural areas are undergoing a profound socio-economic restructuring marked by demographic decline, persistent poverty, and the loss of small farms (European Commission, 2022; Hobbis et al., 2023). This has created a feeling of being “left behind” among both farmers and the rural population (Kenny & Luca, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Once central to rural social and cultural life, many farmers now feel marginalized and existentially threatened (Heinze et al., 2021) and long for greater appreciation and recognition (see also van Der Ploeg, 2020).

This constellation has created tension between proponents of sustainability transformation in agriculture and those directly affected by the corresponding measures, such as farmers and rural communities (Hobbis et al., 2023). As a result, public debate over the future of agriculture has intensified (Heinze et al., 2021) and agri-food policy has undergone progressive politicization, with discourse and media playing an increasingly influential role (Hobbis et al., 2023). Although there is substantial research on (the lack of) sustainability transformation within European agri-food governance, a critical gap remains in understanding the media discourse surrounding rural areas, particularly in relation to farmers and their protests. Despite the growing significance of the politicization of agri-food policy and the rise of agricultural protests, there remains a notable gap in empirical research examining the organizational strategies and network dynamics that underpin these movements, with a notable exception being Heinze et al. (2021).

Our study addresses this gap by examining the strategies and dynamics of the farmers’ protests in Germany, focusing on the discourse in one central news outlet surrounding disagreements between farmers’ associations and the Federal Government. On November 17, 2023, the Federal Government—composed of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90/the Greens (Greens), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP)—announced plans to cut climate-damaging agricultural subsidies as part of a broader budget renegotiation mandated by the Federal Constitutional Court just two days earlier (“Ampel darf 60 Milliarden Euro nicht verschieben,” 2023). The announcement sparked widespread protests, with farmers’ associations mobilizing nationwide and declaring a “hot January with more protests than the country has ever seen” (“Bauern wollen ‘Kampfansage’ der Ampel annehmen,” 2023).

This mobilization in response to announced subsidy cuts politicized both this specific issue and broader agri-food policy. Therefore, we draw on the theoretical politicization/depolicitization – policy change (PDPC) model to connect politicization to the (lack of an) announcement of policy change (Feindt et al., 2021). We argue that protests successfully prevented the implementation of the announced policy changes through the strategic escalation of politicization levels. We investigate instances of politicization/depolicitization by applying discourse network analysis. By mapping how competing political networks mobilize around environmental agri-food policies—particularly as a backlash—we contribute to research on the politics of environmental networks. Our dataset consists of newspaper articles published between the Federal Government’s announcement of the subsidy cuts on November 17, 2023, and March 26, 2024.

In this context, we are asking the following research questions: How did the farmers' protests in Germany shape the (hyper-)politicization of the agri-food policy transition? How effectively were they used as a politicization strategy to influence decision-making coalitions? To what extent did escalating levels of politicization contribute to the eventual withdrawal of the announced policy change?

The remainder of this article situates the research within the current literature, presents the theoretical framework linking (de)politicization to policy change, and describes the case selection and method. Our findings show that the public discourse shifted from depoliticized to politicized and back. We then discuss and conclude these findings.

2. Context of the Farmers' Protests in Germany

Historically, agri-food policy in the EU has followed an "exceptionalist" logic, prioritizing the special needs and interests of the farm sector (Skogstad, 1998). Today, a significant portion of the EU's budget supports farmers through the CAP (Grohmann & Feindt, 2024). This reflects a tradition of "agricultural welfare states," where state measures address market failures and boost farm income, recognizing the role of farmers in ensuring food security (Knudsen, 2011; Sheingate, 2021). However, trade and environmental pressures have challenged this traditional approach to agri-food policy, alongside emerging actors advocating for climate responsibility and the preservation of biodiversity. Consequently, agri-food policy has been partially modified, with exceptionalist legacies now co-existing alongside new arrangements in a system called/known as "post-exceptionalism" (Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017).

German agri-food policy also reflects post-exceptionalism. Its tenets are anchored in the Agricultural Act of 1955. This Act's objectives still apply today, such as the participation of agriculture in national economic development, the best possible food security, the compensation of any natural and economic disadvantages, increasing productivity, and ensuring social equality. The implementation of the German agricultural strategy for a sustainable transformation of agriculture within the framework of the EU's CAP (2023–2027) is managed by the federal ministries of agriculture using an array of policy instruments.

In many agricultural regions, large-scale agribusinesses have expanded at the expense of small and medium-sized family farms. In fact, the number of German farms decreased from 905,000 in 1975 to 256,000 in 2022, despite stable agricultural land area, due to technological advances and economies of scale (Deutscher Bauernverband, 2024).

The German agri-food policy operates within the framework of EU policies, particularly the CAP and the more recent Farm to Fork Strategy, which is part of the European Green Deal. The latter especially mandates shifting toward more environmentally friendly agricultural practices, which farmers worry will increase their operational costs. Heinze et al. (2021, p. 363) analyzed the initial German farmers' protests that took place in the fall of 2019, identifying three primary triggers: economic existential concerns, excessive bureaucratic requirements, and socio-cultural status loss. The authors note that recent years have seen the food industry shift toward lower product prices, driven by large retail chain power and consumer behavior. While German food prices generally align with EU averages, the situation has become particularly dire due to exceptionally low prices for milk and meat (Heinze et al., 2021, p. 364). Their research also revealed that farmers' associations were increasingly distancing themselves from established political entities, with agricultural protesters showing a tendency to adopt right-wing populist perspectives.

In addition to the detrimental economic developments mentioned above, the consequences of climate change will exacerbate the situation of farmers, as acknowledged by organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Rivera-Ferre, 2020).

Against this backdrop, in November 2023 the German Federal Government proposed cuts in the agricultural sector as part of the general budget cuts in response to the ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court. Among these were the abolition of subsidies for diesel and the introduction of a vehicle tax for agricultural vehicles. The result was nationwide protests by farmers on a scale not previously seen. These intensified on January 4 2024, when protesters confronted Federal Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Greens) at the Schlüttsiel ferry terminal in Schleswig-Holstein, leading to clashes with police. While investigations into coercion charges continue, evidence suggests that far-right groups orchestrated these protests (Fuchs & Pausch, 2024). The same day, the Federal Government partially backtracked, announcing a three-year phase-out of agricultural vehicle tax concessions rather than immediate implementation, although the diesel subsidy cuts remained in place. Farmers argue that misguided agricultural policies threaten their survival, particularly those running small farms. While existing subsidies help to offset challenges from war in Ukraine, inflation, and volatile grain prices, their proposed reduction has triggered strong opposition from farmers.

3. The PDPC model

This study aims to examine how agricultural subsidies became a politicized issue within the discourse on farmers' protests. Politicization describes the phenomenon whereby a previously apolitical matter becomes the subject of political and/or public discussion, creating demand for action (Broekema, 2016; De Wilde & Zürn, 2012). Depoliticization denotes the opposite phenomenon: A political matter ceases to be a matter of political and/or public debate. Potential objects of politicization are the process of decision-making (politics), the content of a decision (policy), and the decision-making venue (polity). The subjects of politicization are all the individual and collective actors who participate in the political process, including those in a position to organize political protests (De Wilde & Zürn, 2012).

Given our interest in the instrumentalization of farmers' protests as a politicization strategy to influence decision-making coalitions and policy change, we follow the conceptual framework developed by Feindt et al. (2021). The authors identify three interconnected dimensions of (de)politicization: (a) as a process in which issues become subjects of intensified public debate, (b) as a strategy where actors deliberately frame issues as matters of public policy, and (c) as an outcome measuring how established an issue is within public policy domains and political governance mechanisms. Moreover, political actors may employ politicization strategies to counter depoliticization processes, addressing participation barriers and political apathy to use depoliticization strategies to combat increasing sector politicization.

Feindt et al. (2021, pp. 512–513) link politicization to policy change, arguing that moderate politicization facilitates change, while excessive politicization hinders it (see Figure 1). In high-conflict scenarios, dominant policy networks tend to resist concessions to external actors and new ideas (Bang & Marsh, 2018; Feindt et al., 2021).

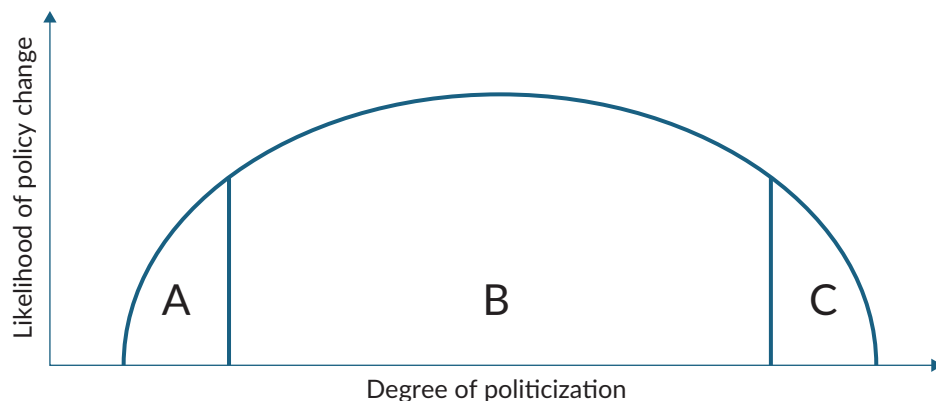


Figure 1. PDPC model. Notes: A = low level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change; B = medium degree of politicization and high likelihood of policy change; C = high level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change. Source: Adapted from Feindt et al. (2021, p. 516).

Given that the farmers' protests were triggered by the announcement of a policy change, we consider the framework put forth by Feindt et al. (2021) as fitting for guiding our research. We argue that the framework facilitates reflection on all the dimensions of politicization (process, strategy, and outcome) visible in the observed timeframe. However, it is important to emphasize that the framework does not provide guidance for explaining the dynamics of politicization.

Much of our understanding of politicization processes is rooted in the literature on European integration, which offers different conceptualizations of politicization processes. Most definitions subscribe to the crucial role of awareness (or issue salience), meaning an increasing or decreasing engagement or interest in an issue, and the polarization of actors. Actor polarization is evident when conflicts increase in scale or intensity and politicization dynamics can be observed (De Wilde, 2011; Hutter, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022). Thirdly, a large strand of the literature emphasizes the role of actor expansion, which is the range of actors involved in these processes (Hutter, 2016; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022). Thus, we conceptualize politicization in terms of awareness, actor expansion, and actor polarization.

We concur with the literature that argues that politicization strategies may be used to counter depoliticization processes and vice versa (c.f. Feindt et al., 2021) and argue that these politicization strategies may also be deployed to accelerate politicization processes. Hence, we focus on the role of strategic actions that actors use to bring about or impede policy change (e.g., Boasson & Huitema, 2017; Faling et al., 2018; Kriesi et al., 2007). We conceptualize strategic actions as deliberately employed and dynamic, meaning that the underlying strategy may adapt to contextual changes or in response to learning (Faling & Biesbroek, 2019; Faling et al., 2018).

Building on the previously discussed interconnection of the three dimensions of politicization (process, strategy, and outcome), we propose to view protests as a potential (hyper-)politicization strategy in response to increasing politicization, with the aim of averting the implementation of the announced policy change. We contend that the role of protests is to escalate pre-existing politicization into hyper-politicization, thereby increasing the likelihood of vested policy elites taking over and decreasing the likelihood of announced policy changes being implemented.

To conceptualize politicization, we draw on Grande and Hutter's (2016) four typologies of politicization, which reflect varying levels of issue salience, actor expansion, and polarization. Together with the three levels of politicization (Feindt et al., 2021), this creates the following variations:

1. Low Politicization: limited issue salience, minimal actor expansion, and low polarization;
2. Medium Politicization: increased issue salience, with either a limited range of actors adopting a broad range of positions or a broad range of actors engaging in debate but sharing similar positions;
3. Hyper-Politicization: high issue salience, a broad range of actors, polarized and contested public debate.

Dolezal et al. (2016) make four arguments as to why the study of protests is essential for understanding the dynamics of politicization—a perspective we build on to operationalize the role of farmers' protests. First, if the media reports on farmers' protests, this indicates rising public issue awareness. Following this, we contend that an increase in the media coverage of farmers' protests indicates increasing issue awareness, which is one of the three key dimensions underlying politicization processes.

Second, new protest waves point to an involvement of actors that has expanded beyond political elites. Thus, the mere coverage of farmer protests by the media indicates the presence or changing dynamics of the second key dynamic underlying politicization processes. Moreover, an increasing number of diverse actors participated in the discourse surrounding the media coverage of these protests. Therefore, we contend that in addition to regarding protest as an indicator of an increase in the number and type of actors involved, the numerical expansion of actors partaking in the discourse surrounding farmers' protests provides a deeper insight into this dimension/aspect of politicization.

Third, the move from a contained form to a more contested style of politics clearly indicates increasing polarization (among actors). Here again, we contend that the polarization of discourse coalitions around farmers' protests serves as another in-depth observation of this key dynamic.

Fourth, we posit that the effectiveness of protests as a (hyper-)politicization strategy can be assessed by changes in the discourse—specifically, through shifts in the central topics and the discourse coalitions over the observed timeframe. Typically, the effectiveness of actors' strategizing is observed in its impact on policy change (e.g., Meijerink & Huitema, 2010). In examining the intersection of protests and discourse, we consider protests an effective politicization strategy when they successfully challenge the discourse surrounding either the announcement or withdrawal of policy changes.

4. Method and Data

To study how discourse (de)politicizes, we use dynamic data to track how discourse evolves over time. Discourse network analysis is a frequently used and established method to investigate public discourse. It enables researchers to empirically trace the development of actors and issues over time (Leifeld, 2020) and has been used in numerous studies (such as Nagel & Bravo-Laguna, 2022; Nagel & Schäfer, 2023; Schaub, 2021). Discourse network analysis combines content-based text analysis and relational network analysis (Leifeld, 2017). Within the discourse, the actors and the links between them can be visualized in network graphs, represented as nodes and links (Brandes & Wagner, 2004).

As our text data source, we use newspaper articles from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a newspaper of record respected internationally. Its rigorous fact-checking and high journalistic standards ensure accurate and trustworthy information and balanced reporting, while its conservative bias is well suited to the topic under study. Farmers' interests have traditionally been strongly supported by more conservative politicians. Therefore, we expect to find an appropriately wide range of articles that cover the topic of farmers' protests in Germany. We also conducted random checks of other press outlets to compare their topic coverage but found no significant deviations among newspapers sharing similar political orientations.

Our analysis covers the period from November 17, 2023, to March 26, 2024. This timeframe begins with the German government's announcement of subsidy cuts following the Federal Constitutional Court's budget ruling. Nationwide farmers' protests commenced on November 23, 2023. Two significant events occurred on January 4, 2024: The protests at the Schlüttsiel ferry terminal intensified upon Habeck's arrival, and the government announced a three-year phase-out plan for diesel tax concessions in agriculture. The analysis period concludes on March 26, when media coverage of the issue effectively ceased after the withdrawal of the previously announced policy changes.

We selected articles using the keywords "Bauern" (farmers) AND "Protest" (protest) for the specified timeframe. The analysis included 184 articles with 804 coded concepts. Using the framework by Schaub (2021), we categorized the concepts under problem perception, policy instrument, and policy position (see the codebook in Appendices A2 and A3 in the Supplementary File). Two coders used an iteratively refined codebook, with intercoder reliability testing for quality assurance. Coding captured actor names, affiliations, concept categories, and agreement/disagreement for both direct and indirect speech.

We delineated distinct time periods to better analyze the conflict's evolution. T1 covers the initial phase of the protests and the earliest published articles on this topic, extending from November 23, 2023, until just before the Christmas period.

The second time period (T2) contains a particularly dense network with numerous nodes and links due to the heightened discourse intensity around January 4, 2024 (the day of both the ferry incident and the announcement of the subsidy phase-out plan). To manage this complexity, we divided this period into two distinct two-week sub-periods: T2.1 covering December 24, 2023, to January 5, 2024, and T2.2 spanning January 6, 2024, to January 22, 2024. T3 encompasses a one-month period ending on February 22, 2024, while T4 extends from February 23, 2024, to March 26, 2024. The final two one-month periods were established based on the duration of the initial period (T1) and to facilitate clearer observation of the dynamic developments throughout the conflict.

The analysis uses one-mode networks to connect organizations through shared issues, and issues through shared mentions of organizations. Organization names, types, and a typology of actors (and corresponding color codes used in the network graphs in Section 5: politics – black; NGOs – blue; government/administration – red; science – yellow; light blue – media; purple – grassroots/civil society) are detailed in Table A3 in the Supplementary File; emphasis is placed on organizations representing farmers' interests. Table 1 provides an overview of the most relevant organizations and the acronyms used in the network graphs in Section 5.

Table 1. Overview of acronyms most relevant for this study.

| Acronym | Name of Organization in English (and in German) |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| ABL | Working Group for Rural Agriculture (Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft) |
| AfD | Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) |
| BMEL | Federal Ministry of Nutrition and Agriculture (Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft) |
| BMF | Federal Ministry of Finance (Bundesministerium für Finanzen) |
| BMI | Federal Ministry of Interior (Bundesinnenministerium) |
| BMWK | Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz) |
| BReg | Federal Government (Bundesregierung) |
| BT | German Bundestag |
| CDU | Christian Democratic Union (Christlich-Demokratische Union) |
| CSU | Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union) |
| DBV | German Farmers' Association (Deutscher Bauernverband) |
| FaBLF | Family Businesses in Agriculture and Forestry (Familienbetriebe Land und Forst) |
| FDP | Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei) |
| Landwirtschaft schafft Verbindung | Farming Creates Connection (Landwirtschaft schafft Verbindung) |
| STMWI | Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wirtschaft, Landesentwicklung und Energie) |
| SPD | Social Democratic Party Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland) |
| ZKL | Commission for the Future of Agriculture (Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft) |

We are aware of the limitations of this approach. While newspaper data are readily available, they are not created for scientific purposes and are therefore biased. Consequently, our results must be interpreted with caution, particularly as they only pertain to the discourse in the selected *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* articles.

The results of this study are presented in the different phases (T1, T2.1, T2.2, T3, and T4) to trace the development over time and to observe (de)politicization as well as any changes in the most dominant actors and issues. In the network graphs, the size of the node represents the frequency and the link's strength represents the weight, that is, the number of concepts shared by the actors. The radial layout presents the concept nodes according to their values of degree centrality; put differently, the highest values are in the center and the lowest in the periphery. The combination of node size and link strength gives an overview of the relevant information. We then use qualitative content from other sources as an aid to interpret the findings.

5. Results

Our empirical analysis reveals several interesting patterns. First, we observe increased awareness of the issue of farmer's protests and a notable expansion in the range of participating actors. Second, we find changes in actor constellations during the (hyper-)politicization process, which was characterized by polarization and contestation around January 4, 2024; then the discourse depolarized. Third, we note changes in the content of the discourse.

5.1. Changes in the (Hyper-)Politicization Process

In line with our conceptualization of politicization, we start by examining the progression of issue awareness and actor expansion over time. Figure 2 illustrates the weekly development of these two key indicators of politicization. As shown, both the volume of publications per week and the number of statements made per week rose markedly, quickly reaching their highest levels in January. This suggests a significant increase in issue awareness, which then swiftly reduces after peaking in the observed timeframe. The sudden increase in the number of newspaper articles and lack of data starting from March 26 (13th calendar week, 2024) represents the completion of declining issue awareness, and with it, one of the key dimensions of politicization.

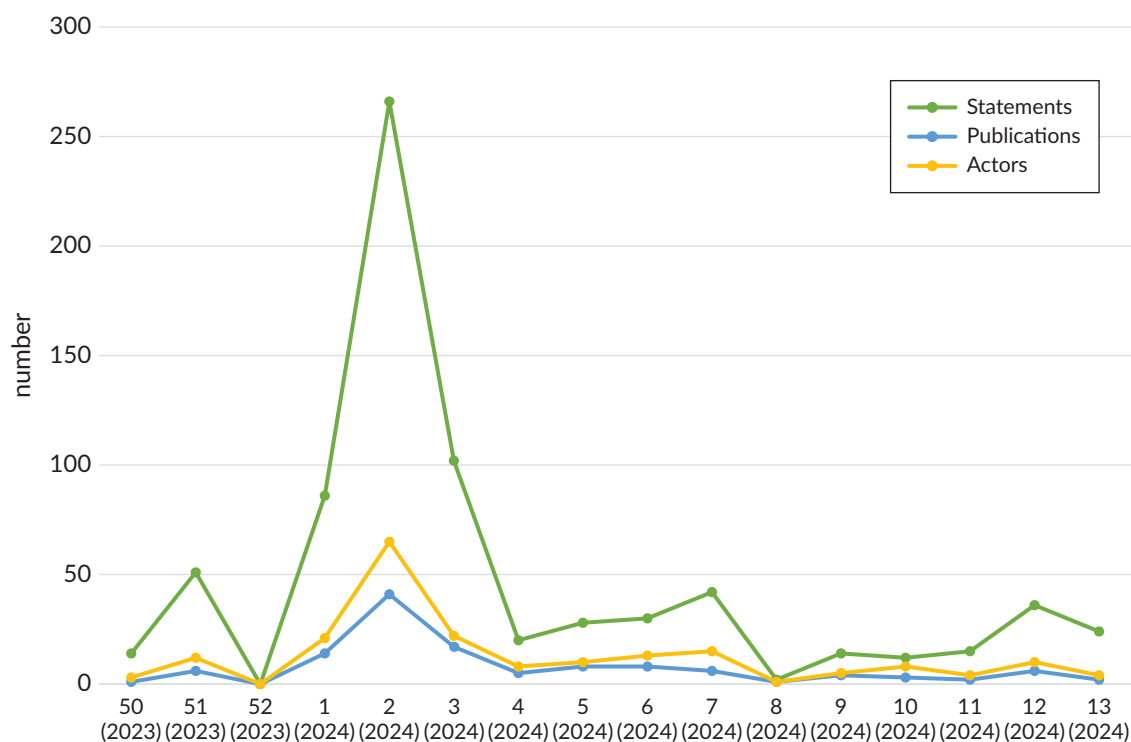


Figure 2. Issue awareness and actor expansion over time. Note: Own compilation based on DNA data, retrieved from Discourse Network Analyzer (Leifeld, 2024; Nagel, 2024).

In line with issue awareness, our data reveal a similar peak in the range of actors involved in the discourse in the second week of January, which levels off over the following eight weeks. This pattern indicates that, alongside heightened issue awareness, there was also a notable expansion in the range of participating actors, particularly during T2.1 and T2.2. Our analysis suggests that the initially low politicization levels in

December 2023 rose rapidly throughout January 2024, resulting in a phenomenon we can justifiably regard as/term hyper-politicization. To substantiate this trend and provide a more comprehensive understanding of these observations, the subsequent analysis will delve into the levels of polarization and depolarization between actors.

Consistent with the other dimensions underlying politicization processes, we also observed increasing polarization between two different discourse coalitions, namely the farmers' interest coalition and the Federal Government coalition. An overview of the processual development of politicization dynamics is provided in Figure 3.

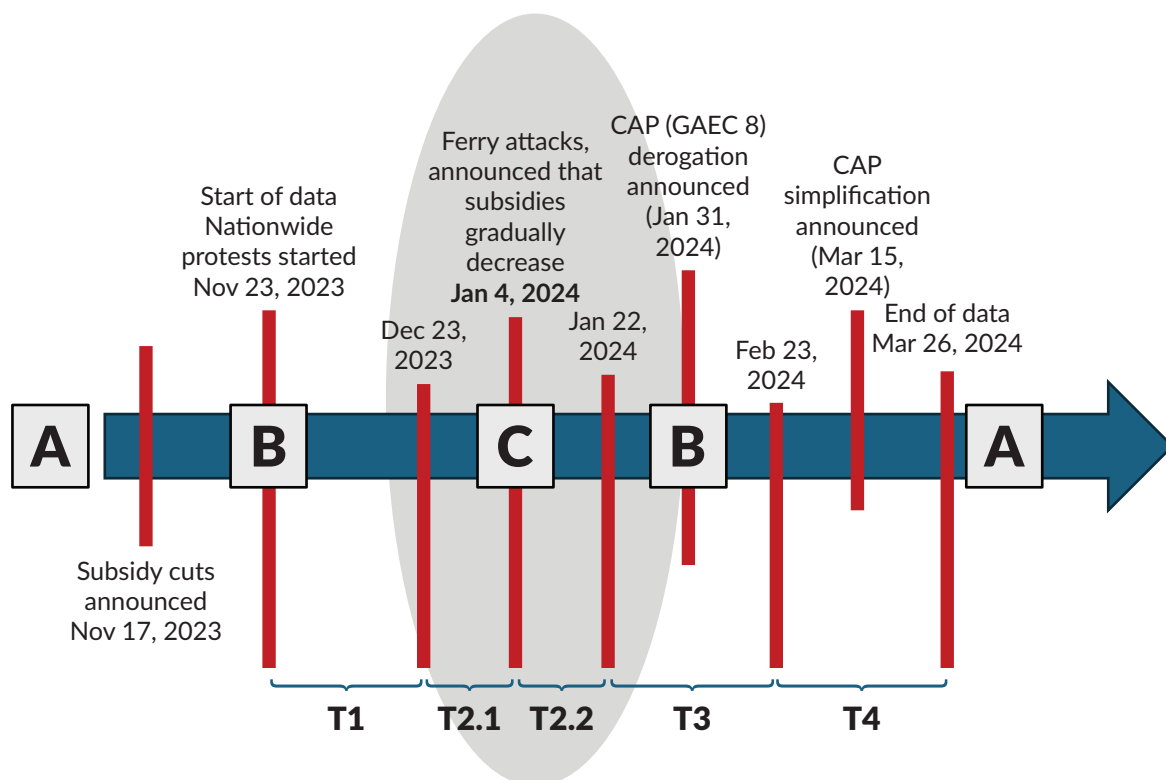


Figure 3. Timeline of the successive events between the announcement of the subsidy cuts (November 17, 2023) and the resulting decision of the European Commission to weaken the CAP (May 5, 2024). Notes: T1 = Nov 23, 2023–Dec 23, 2023; T2.1 = Dec 20, 2023–Jan 5, 2024; T2.2 = Jan 6, 2024–Jan 22, 2024; T3 = Jan 22, 2024–Feb 22, 2024; T4 = Feb 23, 2024–March 26, 2024; A = low level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change; B = medium degree of politicization and high likelihood of policy change; C = high level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change; GAEC 8 = maintain non-productive areas and landscape features, and ensure the retention of landscape features.

5.2. T1: Two Competing Discourse Coalitions

From the inception of the discourse on the farmers' protests in November and December 2023 (T1; see Figure 4), we observe two discourse coalitions. The first one consists of the conservative parties Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and Bavarian Christian Social Party (CSU), the liberal party FDP, the Ministry of Agriculture, the German Farmers' Association (DBV), the state-level farmer's association (Farmers and Winegrowers Association Rheinhessen), and the Federal Ministry of Finance (BMF).

The second, smaller coalition consists of other government bodies, NGOs, and scientific actors. This includes the Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection (BMWK), the Federal Government (BReg), and the environmental organization Greenpeace. The Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences (FH-WST) is located between the two coalitions.

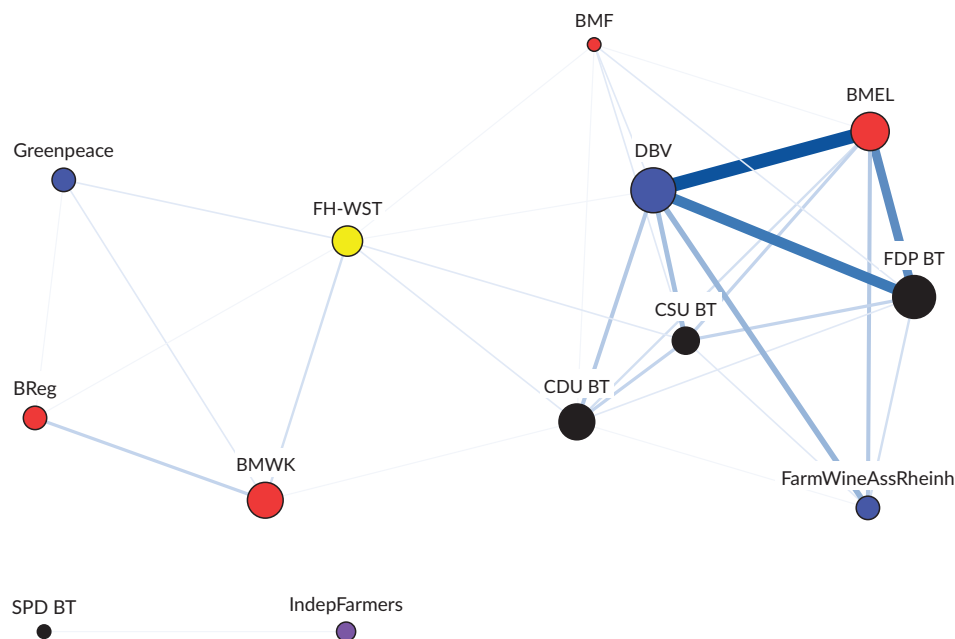


Figure 4. Organizations linked by shared concepts in T1 (November 23, 2023–December 23, 2023). Notes: Strength of ties represents shared number of concepts; node size represents frequency; the full list of acronyms and shortened names can be found in the Supplementary File S3 and all relevant acronyms necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

5.3. T2.1 and T2.2: Polarization and Contestation

Polarization is visible between the two actor groups from December 24, 2023, to January 5, 2024 (see Figure 5). The strongly connected group on the right side of the network consists of actors from government/administration and politics. Interestingly, the conservative CDU and the more liberal Greens are connected within this group. The Federal Government as well as the State Government of Lower Saxony (GovNS) connect this coalition with the group of actors on the left-hand side, which consists of three interest groups: Family Businesses in Agriculture and Forestry (FaBLF), the DBV, and the Hessian Farmers' Association (HessFarmersAss). The Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs (STMWI) is also linked to this discourse coalition dominated by interest groups.

In the time phase T2.2—from January 6, 2024, to January 22, 2024, shortly after the escalating event on January 4—the discourse became heavily politicized, with many actors stating their positions on the farmers' protests. The network graph in Figure 6 visualizes this situation using a threshold of the link weights that are higher than two (only links that appear in the data at least two times are visible). Two organizations are particularly dominant due to their high frequency (visible through bigger nodes): the Federal Ministry of Nutrition and Agriculture (BMEL) and the DBV. These two organizations are linked by shared concepts in the discourse. Each of them is also discursively connected (visible through high centrality values like a star) to other like-minded organizations with lower frequency (visible through smaller nodes).

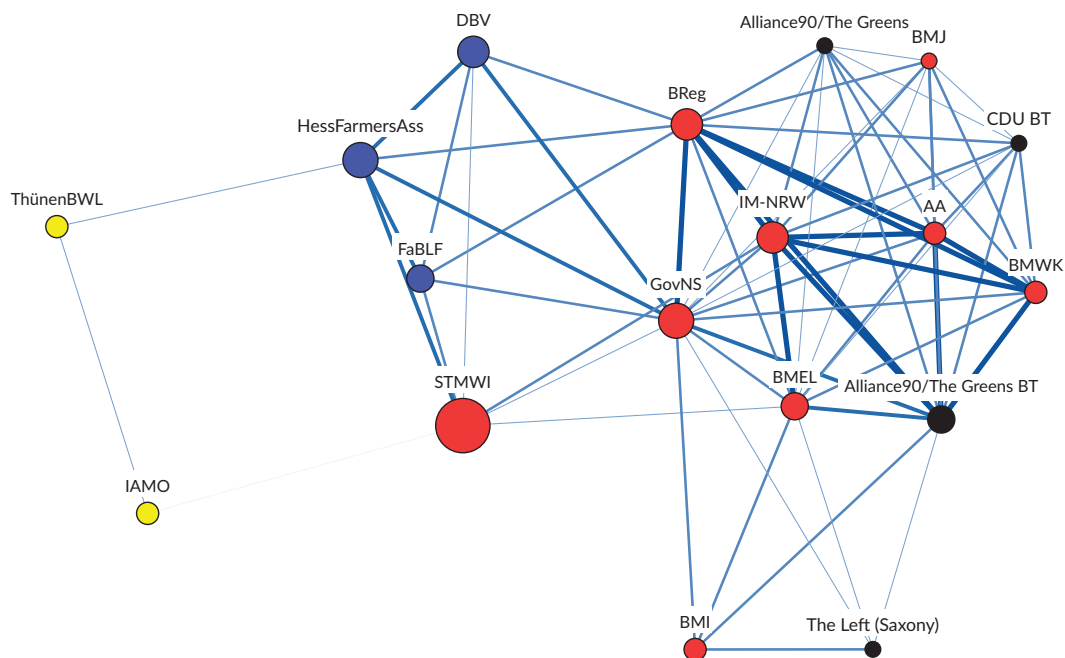


Figure 5. Organizations linked by shared concepts in T2.1 (December 24, 2023–January 5, 2024). Notes: Strength of ties represents shared number of concepts; node size represents frequency; the full list of acronyms and shortened names can be found in the Supplementary File S3 and all relevant acronyms necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

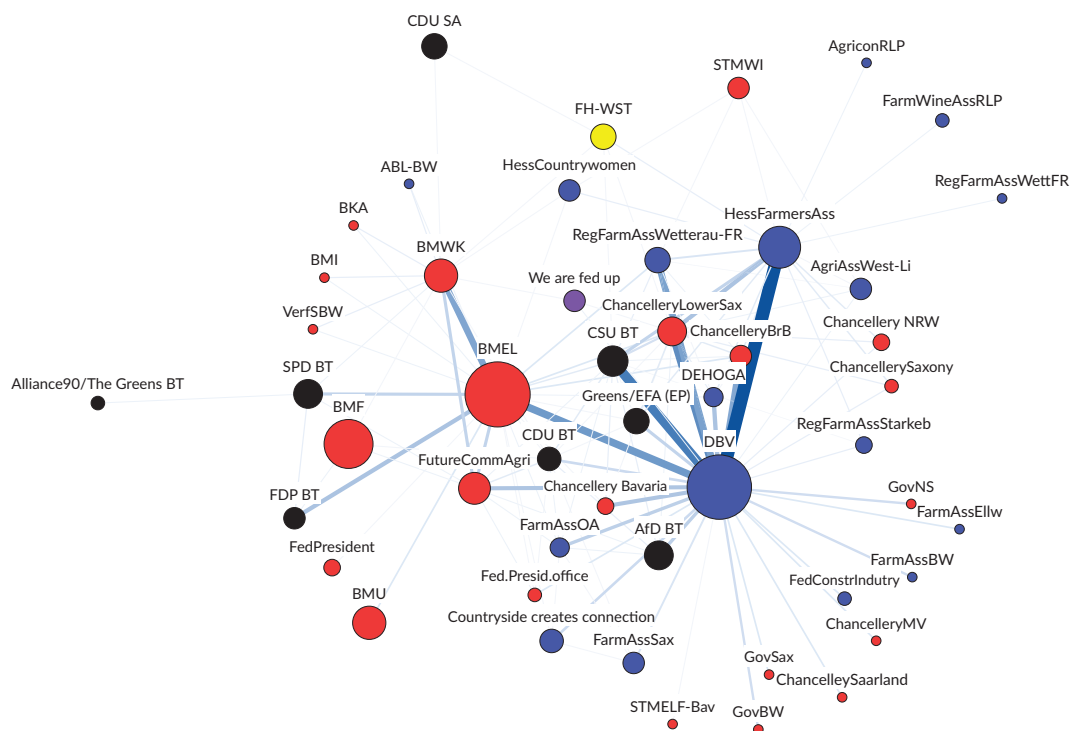


Figure 6. Organizations linked by shared concepts in T2.2 (January 6, 2024–January 22, 2024). Notes: Strength of ties represents shared number of concepts; node size represents frequency; the full list of acronyms and shortened names can be found in the Supplementary File S3 and all relevant acronyms necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

The BMEL is connected to the BMF, the BMWK, the Federal Environment Agency (BMU), and the political parties SPD and the FDP. The DBV is the center of farmers' interests and is connected to the state-level farmers' interest group HessFarmersAss and to other regional farmers' associations. It is also connected to the conservative political parties CDU and CSU. Interestingly, the Future Commission for Agriculture is connected to both central organizations: the DBV and the BMEL. This commission aims to create an equitable, sustainable future for German agri-food policy and could be interpreted as a mediating organization between the two opposing groups.

Even if there is a clear divide between the two groups of actors, we must acknowledge that the polarization is not as strong as expected and that the DBV and the BMEL are discursively linked. However, two new organizations emerge in the discourse: Farming Creates Connection (LsV), a farmer movement with close ties to right-wing actors and ideas; and the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD). The fact that the AfD blamed the Federal Government's "energy price extremism" for farmers' discontent and made other statements compatible with right-wing extremist group slogans indicates that organizations with more polarizing opinions emerged in the discourse.

5.4. T3 and T4: Depolarization of the Discourse

The actor networks evolved strongly between T3 and T4 (see Figures 7 and 8). Initially, on the upper right-hand side in Figure 7, they featured a strongly connected discursive coalition dominated by government/administration and political parties (Greens), alongside a fragmented discourse network of actors consisting mainly of farmers' interest groups on the left-hand side. Over time, this shifted to a fragmented and less polarized discourse network graph centered around the DBV, the CDU, and the BMEL in T4 (see Figure 8).

The development from a dense discourse network in T2.2 to a more polarized one in T3 and a fragmented and less dense network in T4 illustrates the depoliticization of the discourse. Interestingly, the BMEL changed coalitions over time: In the first phase (T1; see Figure 4), it formed part of the farmers' group, but in the second time period (T2.1; see Figure 5), it formed part of the governmental actors' group; following the escalation in T2.2 (Figure 6), it moved to the center of the discourse; then in T3 (Figure 7), it shifted closer to the government coalition, before becoming closely connected to the farmers' association in T4 (Figure 8).

We therefore conclude that a stable coalition of government actors is observable throughout our analysis, with the exception of the BMEL, which changed its position as the discourse depoliticized.

Overall, we conclude that following the announcement of subsidy cuts in T1, the discourse progressively polarized in T2.1 (December 24, 2023, to January 5, 2024; see Figure 5). The announcement of a policy change, which entailed the removal of climate-damaging subsidies for farmers, resulted in a sharp rise in issue politicization, peaking on January 4. This exceptionally high level of politicization after the events of January 4 can also be described as hyper-politicization. The escalation of the protesting farmers with Minister Habeck on the ferry further politicized the discourse, which soon reached its climax (T2.2; January 6, 2024–January 22, 2024; Figure 6). In this T2.2 period, we observed the highest intensity and frequency of actors, with the BMEL, the BMF, and the DBV as the most dominant ones.

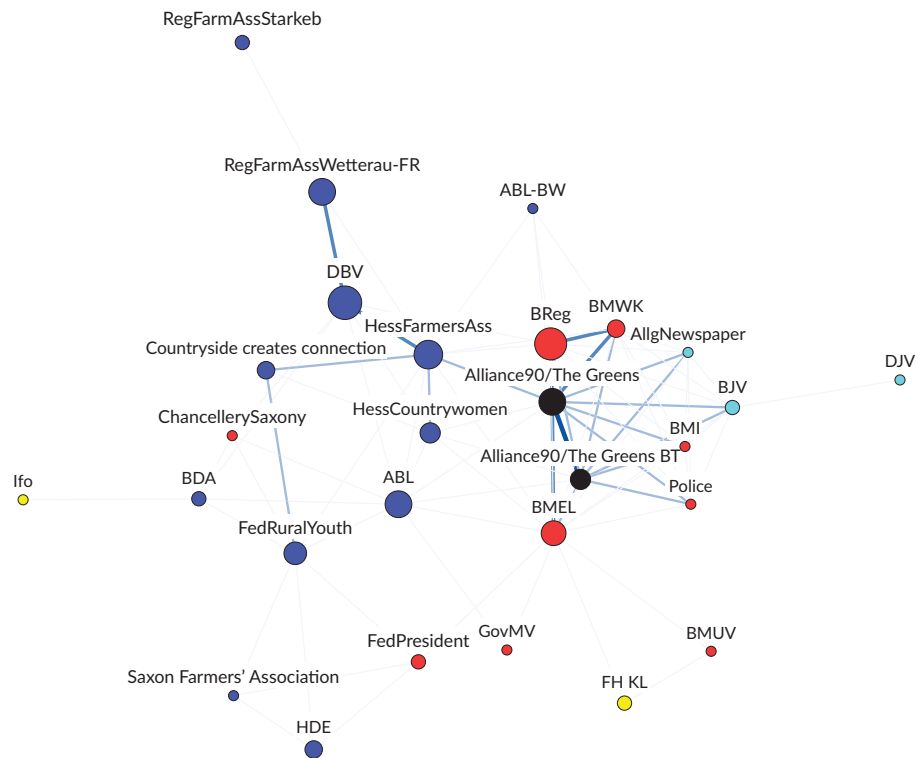


Figure 7. Organizations linked by shared concepts in T3 (January 23, 2024–February 22, 2024). Notes: Strength of ties represents shared number of concepts; node size represents frequency; the full list of acronyms and shortened names can be found in the Supplementary File S3 and all relevant acronyms necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

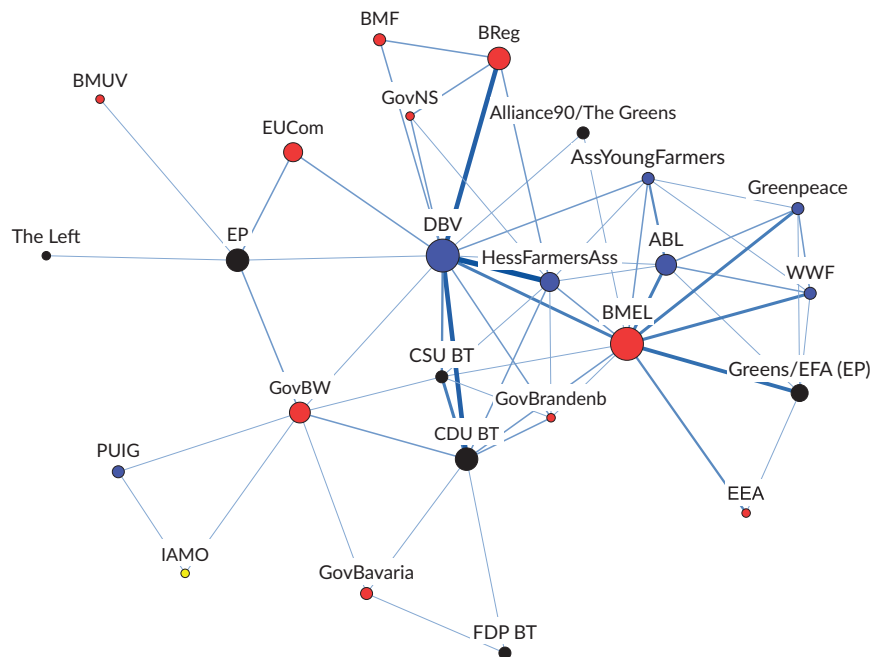


Figure 8. Organizations linked by shared concepts in T4 (February 23, 2024–March 26, 2024). Notes: Strength of ties represents shared number of concepts; node size represents frequency; the full list of acronyms and shortened names can be found in the Supplementary File S3 and all relevant acronyms necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

5.5. Changes in the Discourse Content

In the following, we examine changes in the discourse throughout the timeframe T1. The dominant concepts (Figure 9) discussed at the inception of the nationwide protests were the financial situation of farmers, the agri-motor tax exemption, and criticism of the Federal Government. The cut of diesel subsidies was also mentioned frequently but not in combination with many other concepts. The financial situation of farmers formed the nucleus of the debate, underscoring the existential threat to farmers posed by the policy change.

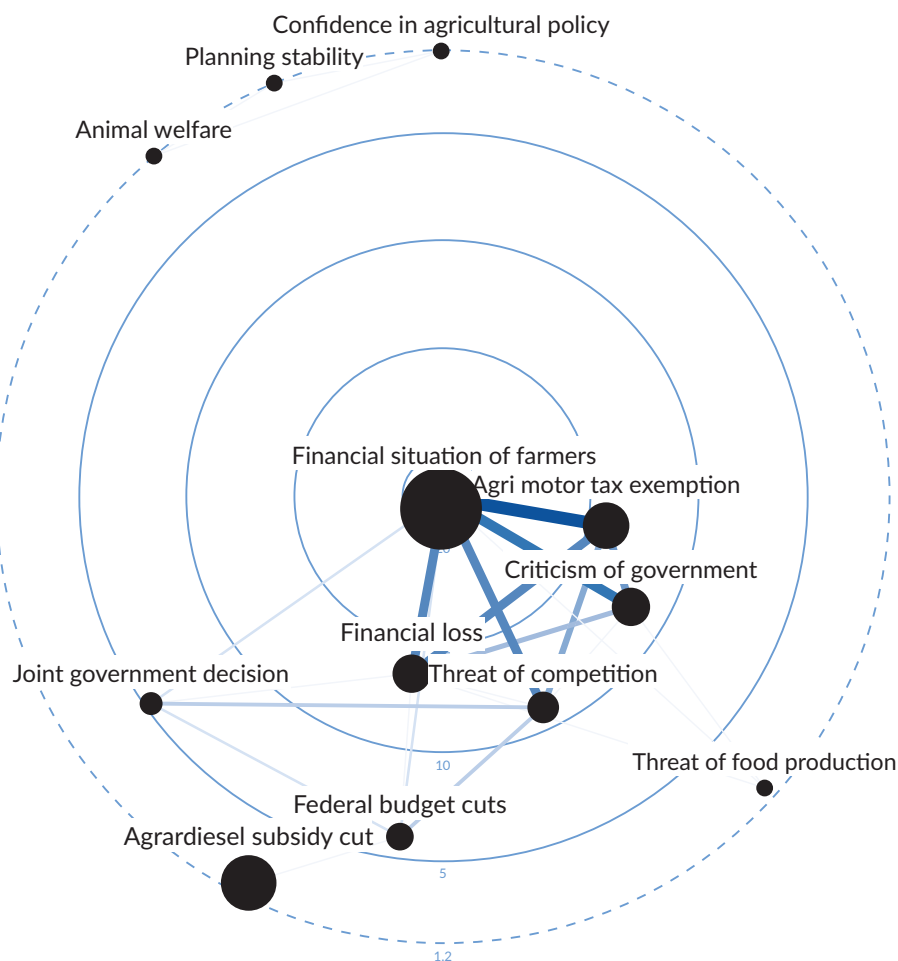


Figure 9. Concepts linked by organizations that mention both concepts in the debate (contains policy proposal, policy instrument, problem perception) in T1 (November 23, 2023–December 23, 2023). Notes: The figure visualizes the top 10, ranked by degree centrality; the full list of acronyms and shortened concept names can be found in the Supplementary File S2 and all relevant concepts necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

In this debate, DBV president Joachim Rukwied told the German Press Agency (December 18, 2024) that the plans for agricultural diesel and vehicle tax exemptions had to be withdrawn completely, stating, “If not, there will be massive resistance from January. We will not put up with that.” Federal Agriculture Minister Cem Özdemir (December 18, 2024), who was closely connected to the farmers’ interest group during this period, expressed understanding for the discontent caused by the planned abolition of tax breaks for agriculture: “I know that you have come here to Berlin with a huge amount of anger,” he said, reiterating his

own criticism of the Federal Government's decisions. Peter Breuning, professor of agricultural economics at FH-WST (December 19, 2024) criticized the relief measure itself, stating that subsidizing fossil fuels was outdated, but acknowledged that farmers are still dependent on diesel. This statement illustrates the bridging position of the FH-WST in the discourse between the two coalitions in Figure 4 (yellow node).

There are two different discourse streams during T2.1 (see Figure 10). The most dominant one was protest culture following incidents during the protests and offensive symbolism. For instance, the protestors often erected gallows with a traffic light hanging from them (symbolizing the governing coalition, which consisted of the social democrats in red, the Greens in green, and the liberal party in yellow).

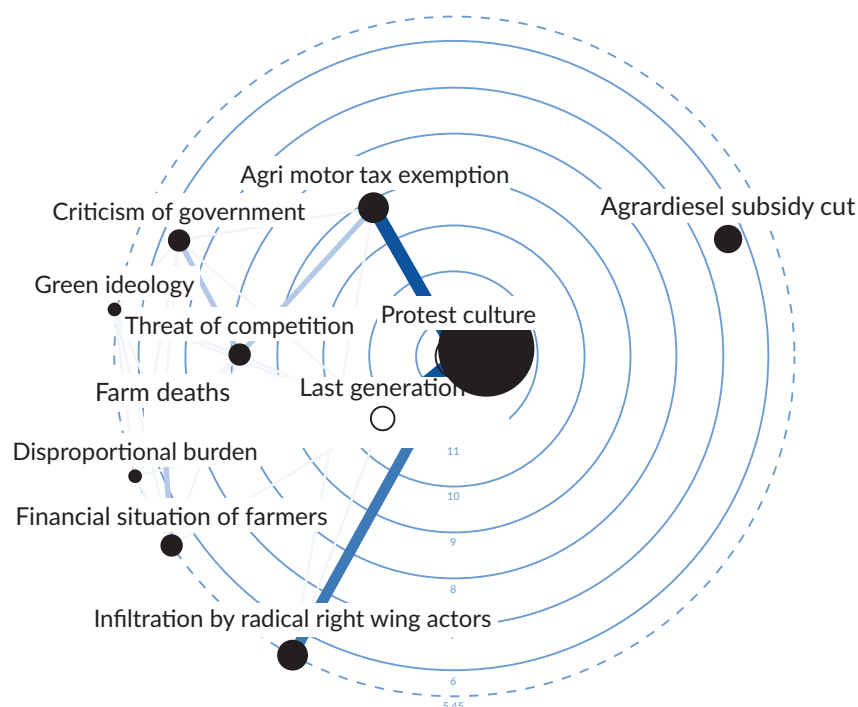


Figure 10. Concepts linked by organizations that mention both concepts in the debate (contains policy proposal, policy instrument, problem perception) in T2.1 (December 24, 2023–January 5, 2024). Note: The full list of acronyms and shortened concept names can be found in the Supplementary File S2 and all relevant concepts necessary for understanding the analysis are explained in the text.

In this context, actors participating in the discourse compared farmer protest culture to left-wing, radical climate activism. For instance, Herbert Reul (January 5, 2024), CDU interior minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, warned farmers of certain actions: “Not every form of protest benefits the cause. That applies to sticker campaigns as well as tractor blockades.” The politician of the Greens Misbah Khan (January 4, 2024) raised concerns about the undermining of the planned farmers’ action week. She noted that while the farmers’ protest was initially successful due to strong arguments, it was now being infiltrated by right-wing extremists, and groups with ties to Russia, which were inciting violence and coup fantasies.

The farmers’ protests, however, often received more support. In a different and less dominant discourse stream, diesel subsidy cuts and federal budget cuts were the focus of discussion. For example, Max von Elverfeldt (January 5, 2024), chairman of FaBLF, emphasized that avoiding this tax increase would be crucial to maintaining a competitive agricultural and forestry sector in Germany.

In the following two weeks—that is, in T2.2 (January 6, 2024–January 22, 2024; see Supplementary File, Figure 11)—we observed a strong focus on diesel subsidy cuts and the federal budget cuts, which were the central issue of the negotiations between farmers’ interest groups and the Federal Government. Additionally, the animal welfare tax featured prominently in the discourse and was framed by farmers’ interest groups as an additional “burden” on the farmers. As the Federal Government has partially withdrawn the planned cuts, the conflict would appear resolved. These developments indicate that the discussion is shifting in January 2024, with strategic attempts being made to obtain further concessions. That includes the animal welfare tax, which is unpopular for some—mainly conventional or industrial representatives of agriculture. Conservative actors, like Bavaria’s Minister of Economic Affairs Hubert Aiwanger (January 20, 2024), opposed the animal welfare tax, framing it as a “farmers’ tax” meant to redirect public anger toward farmers. In contrast, Martin Schulz (January 23, 2024), a farmer and national spokesman for the Working Group for Rural Agriculture (ABL), supports the levy, arguing it is essential for farms to finance the transition to higher husbandry standards, even if this impacts income. Without this tax, regulatory laws could force more farms to shut down, as seen with sow farming.

Figure 12 (see Supplementary File) covers the concepts categorized as policy proposals or policy instruments. At the center of the discourse is the argument that concessions should be granted to farmers (further relief for farmers). There is a cross-party consensus on this issue, as illustrated by the following statements. Federal Minister of Agriculture Cem Özdemir (Greens; March 9, 2024) has proposed relieving the burden on farms in other areas of more sustainable working, such as when converting stables for animal welfare reasons. “Any possible compromise to pacify the situation now must be discussed with the farmers,” said CDU and CSU parliamentary group deputy Steffen Bilger (March 9, 2024). Further concepts are the downsizing of bureaucracy, of the GAEC (good agricultural and environmental conditions) standards, and of the EU set-aside extension. “Tax smoothing” refers to the conflict in the then-governing coalition between the economically oriented FDP and the more environmentally oriented SPD and Greens on the abolition of climate-damaging subsidies.

Regarding the tax smoothing issue, Federal Finance Minister Christian Lindner (FDP; March 20, 2024) announced plans to reintroduce tax smoothing for agricultural businesses. This measure, which averages income over several years for tax purposes, is estimated to provide relief of around 50 million euros annually. Tax smoothing was previously available to farmers and foresters until 2022. Likewise, the Federal Government (March 26, 2024) addressed this issue, promising farmers tax smoothing in a protocol statement. This means that tax burdens will be based on the multi-year average rather than the profit of a potentially very good year. Additionally, some environmental regulations and bureaucratic hurdles will be removed. Downsizing bureaucracy and the GAEC standards are also central. Despite the ongoing prominence of discussions surrounding the cut of diesel subsidies, recent discourse has increasingly isolated or peripheralized this topic. As part of the CAP from 2023, there are a total of nine GAEC standards for land; these refer to a set of EU standards aiming to achieve a sustainable transformation of agriculture.

5.6. Impact of Politicization on Policy Change

We now examine how varying levels of politicization influenced the announcement of policy withdrawal. Earlier, we presented a timeline (Figure 3) detailing the successive events that occurred within our observation period. Figure 3 includes an overview of the accumulated indicators of politicization alongside

Feindt et al.'s (2021) conceptualization (see Figure 3: A = low level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change; B = medium degree of politicization and high likelihood of policy change; C = high level of politicization and low likelihood of policy change) per time period. In response to pressure from farmers in Germany, Belgium, and France, the European Commission proposed on January 31, 2024, to postpone set-aside requirements for one year, citing heightened pressure on international agricultural markets resulting from the war in Ukraine (Kafsack, 2024). Following this, Regulation (EU) 2024/587, which included the derogation of GAEC 8 (fallow land) for another year, was adopted on February 12, 2024. Considering that this announcement came after a hyper-politicized period just a few months prior to the European Parliament elections, when the need to downsize bureaucracy was playing a prominent role in the discourse, we interpret this as an effective instance of protest serving as a hyper-politicizing strategy.

Within the timeframe of observation, the Simplification Regulation was announced on March 15, 2024. With an eye on reducing the regulatory burden on farmers, the European Commission proposed a further review of the CAP. The resulting Simplification Regulation (EU) 2024/1468 was adopted on May 14, 2024, and included derogations of or exemptions from multiple GAEC standards (GAEC 5: low tillage; GAEC 6: soil cover; GAEC 7: crop rotation; and GAEC 8: fallow land), the exemption of small farms from conditionality, and amendments to the CAP Strategic Plans (Articles 120 and 159). This development intersected with an already highly politicized context and prominent demands for additional concessions to farmers, including reduced GAEC standards. We interpret this as further evidence of the effectiveness of the farmers' protests. Additionally, this suggests that politicization originally occurring at the member state level escalated to the EU level—though our data cannot provide further explanation of this phenomenon.

Following our expectation of a relationship connecting protest—as a hyper-politicizing strategy that has an impact on discourse—to the withdrawal of announced policy change, we observed the use of reliefs from EU policy to de-escalate the protests and depoliticize the discourse. This underlines how farmers' protests were highly effective in (hyper-)politicizing the issue of an agricultural transformation during the observed timeframe, as they contributed to averting (announcements of) policy change.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we focused on farmers' protests in Germany and employed discourse network analysis based on newspaper articles published between November 17, 2023, and March 26, 2024. Our study complements the insights provided by Finger et al. (2024), who outlined the policy responses to farmer protests by providing insights into the dynamic discourse underlying the policy processes. Beyond this specific contribution to the literature focusing on farmers' protests, our study contributes to the theoretical and empirical refinement of politicization in the agri-food policy domain. Empirically, we contribute to the emerging field of agri-food politicization by examining the role of protests in these processes and the interplay between both institutional and non-institutional arenas. Theoretically, our findings refine the PDPC model (Feindt et al., 2021) by showing that protests can result in (hyper-)politicization and that policymakers in such situations maintain the status quo by actively withdrawing their policy proposals—an aspect which the authors of the original model did not explicitly outline.

The withdrawal of policy change represents another mechanism of depoliticization, further refining the PDPC model. While our analysis centered on Germany, this finding aligns with policy responses to farmers' protests

in other regions. Notably, even the European Commission made concessions to farmers in response to these protests (Tosun et al., 2024).

Furthermore, this research contributes empirically to improving our understanding of how the mobilization of farmers' protests in Germany forms part of a changing protest landscape (see Heinze et al., 2021), demonstrating that policy studies and protest research can benefit from integration.

We examined which actors drive various issues in agri-food policy and how their efforts politicize discourse, elevating farmers' concerns on the political agenda. What stands out is the fear among small and medium-sized farms of economic losses resulting from subsidy cuts or animal welfare taxes, alongside concerns about bureaucratic burdens and the financial investments required for agricultural transformation.

While one-sided cuts to environmentally harmful subsidies faced strong resistance, effective change must address all aspects and alleviate farmers' financial anxieties. The German farmers' protests strengthened similar movements across the EU, creating unified pressure on agri-food policy before the European Parliament elections on June 9, 2024. This pressure ultimately weakened the CAP and diluted environmental legislation.

This short-term solution undermines successful transformation, allowing problems to grow rather than diminish. Given the urgent need to accelerate food system transformations, such temporary measures are counterproductive. Additional research must explore appropriate interventions and identify communication and policy instruments that can overcome current fears and break existing deadlocks.

Finally, we contribute to the growing scholarship on post-exceptionalism that sheds light on increasing issue politicization and the role of discourse in shaping policy change (Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Skogstad, 1998). Our findings indicate that the discourse on agricultural transformations in the context of German farmers' protests has further politicized this issue. Instead of facilitating policy change, policy elites have established discursive hegemony under these heightened levels of politicization. This has triggered a backlash against previously announced changes. Our data further illustrate that in the German case, hyper-politicization significantly constrained the influence of emerging green discourses.

Moreover, our data reveal that this backlash coincides with the infiltration of farmer protests and the growing presence of right-wing actors in agri-food policy discourse networks, as illustrated in T2.2. Alongside the emergence of green ideas and interests that have been discussed widely in post-exceptionalist scholarship (e.g., Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Tosun, 2017), we identify an emerging right-wing coalition (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020; Sheingate, 2021) partially tied to entrenched actors—a phenomenon we term “populist post-exceptionalism.” This aligns with recent studies on climate backlash and policy dismantling, which involves the reversal of existing decarbonization policies (Förell & Fischer, 2025; Schaub et al., 2024). Future research should explore the emergence, dynamics, and impacts of right-wing networks at both national and EU levels, including how these seek to co-opt protests and influence both discourse and policy outcomes.

In a broader sense, our study advances research on the politics of environmental networks in two ways. First, we examine how actors' interests and beliefs shape interactions—ranging from cooperation to conflict over

land use—and how these dynamics influence policy formulation (Brockhaus & Di Gregorio, 2014). Second, we advance discourse network analysis studies in climate change policy (Durel & Gosselin, 2024; Kukkonen et al., 2021).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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