

# **Facts, interests and values: why is agricultural policy so difficult to agree on?**

**• Presentation to the Nordic-Baltic food systems conference  
‘Challenging intersections: Securing sustainable food systems in turbulent times’**

**Session 1 Transformative governance: science-policy-engagements**

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**Alan Matthews**

**Professor Emeritus of European Agricultural Policy**

**Trinity College Dublin, Ireland**

**[alan.matthews@tcd.ie](mailto:alan.matthews@tcd.ie)**

# A talk in two acts

- **The polarized debate around agricultural policy**

- Agricultural policy has always been a source of contestation, this time is different?
- Deeping mistrust between key actors
- Growing public scepticism towards role of expertise and scientific evidence

- **Recent EU agricultural policy developments**

- Rise and fall of the European Green Deal/Farm to Fork Strategy
- What can we learn from this experience

- **Navigating in polarized waters**

- Disagreements on facts and differences in interests and values
- How these disagreements are structured in EU agricultural policy debates
- Navigating polarization through reflexive science-policy engagement

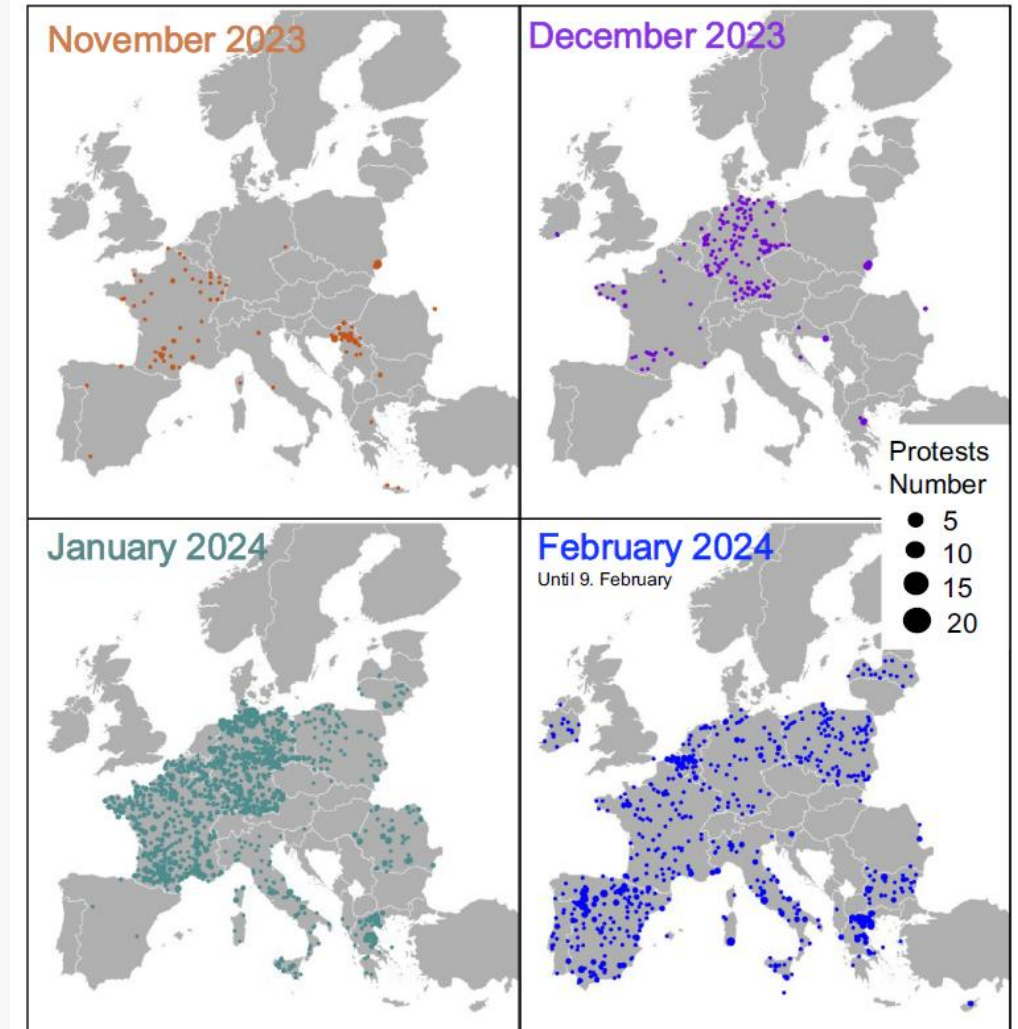
# The Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy

- **Launched post-2019 EP elections and 'green shift'**
  - Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies: agri-food pillars of European Green Deal
  - Goal: sustainable, resilient, and healthy food systems
  - Ambitious targets around reduced chemical fertilizer, pesticide and antimicrobials use, nature and animal welfare as well as integration with food policy
- **Overlap with 2021-2027 CAP reform negotiations**
  - 2018 Commission legislative proposal introduced New Delivery Model
  - Also included enhanced conditionality and repurposing of some decoupled direct payments to green eco-schemes
  - 2021 final package watered down in legislative trilogues but still represented a step up in environmental ambition (Röder et al., 2024)

# Farmer backlash and the rise of protest

- Specific triggers varied by country but common themes emerged
  - Farm income concerns
  - Burden of environmental regulation
  - Unfair import competition
- Feature was the rise of more radical farmer groups
- Protests overlapped with broader rise of right-wing populist and anti-systemic parties particularly in rural areas
- Academic work on the 'geography of discontent' seeks to understand the political dynamics behind this mobilization

Figure 1: Farmer protests in the European Union from November 2023 to February 2024



Source: Finger et al., Eurochoices, 2024



# Retreat from the Green Deal

- **Geopolitical and macroeconomic conditions led to changing priorities**
  - COVID (2020-2022) and Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022-)
  - High food price inflation and volatile input prices
  - Outcome of European Parliament elections in June 2024 reflected farmer concerns
- **Policy retreats**
  - Already evident towards end of previous Commission's term but reinforced under new Commission after November 2024
  - Series of 'simplification' packages softened environmental conditionality rules under the CAP
  - Foreseen legislative proposals were either not brought forward (Framework Law on Sustainable Food Systems), weakened (Industrial and Livestock Rearing Emissions Directive) or abandoned in face of opposition (Sustainable Use of Pesticides) or squeaked through (Nature Restoration Law).
- **Farm to Food Strategy rested on weak foundations**
  - Top-down approach, lack of impact assessment, arbitrary targets

# Seeking a new consensus: Strategic Dialogue and beyond

- **Strategic Dialogue**

- Proposed by Von der Leyen in Sept 2023 State of Union address, launched in Jan 2024
  - “We need more dialogue and less polarization”
- Produced a consensus report Sept 2024 which, however, resolved few trade-offs
- Now institutionalized in the European Board for Agriculture and Food

- **Vision for Agriculture and Food (Feb 2025)**

- While acknowledging importance of environmental goals, puts emphasis on competitiveness, resilience and maintaining attractiveness of farming as a livelihood and for next generation
- Stresses that sustainability objectives should be achieved primarily through support and incentives rather than through regulation.
- Emphasis on voluntary action will require significant additional budget resources which may not be forthcoming

- **July 16 2025**

- Commission will unveil MFF budget proposal and legislative proposal for next CAP

# Frictions around facts

- **Traditional response is to call for more evidence**
  - Technocratic approach to policymaking, assuming policymakers act on rational, evidence-based grounds
- **Science can be used in multiple ways**
  - Instrumental role, conceptual role, symbolic role
  - Symbolic use is particularly salient in agricultural policy
- **Increasing concerns about deliberate misinformation**
  - Strategies aim not only to sway policymakers but to create public confusion and delay regulation
- **More general erosion of trust in science**
  - Michael Gove “people have had enough of experts”
  - ‘False facts’ amplified by social media

# Frictions around interests

- **In pluralist systems, conflict over distribution is normal**
  - Many contentious debates reflect basic economic trade-offs
  - Typically mediated through bargaining and compromise
  - The CAP has long relied on logic of grand bargains between different interests
- **Problematic if certain actors gain disproportionate influence**
  - Policy capture occurs when one group dominates influence
  - EU agricultural policymaking provides many examples of over-representation of farm interests
- **Public sympathy for farmers despite privileged influence**
  - Farmers equate economic marginalization with political marginalization
  - Public support for farm union demands remains strikingly high
  - Farmers' concerns often intersect with wider social discontent



# Frictions around values

- **Most deep-rooted cause of policy conflicts arises from clashes in values**
  - Values result in divergent beliefs about what *ought* to matter
  - Values gain structure and coherence through **worldviews**
- **Two illustrative worldviews around agricultural policy**
  - **Technocratic worldview** sees agriculture as a system to be optimized through science, technology, and expert-led efficiency—prioritizing productivity, innovation, and global competitiveness
  - **Agroecological worldview** sees agriculture as rooted in sustainability, biodiversity, and local knowledge—prioritizing resilience, equity, and harmony with ecosystems
- **Framing : how narratives shape policy conflicts**
  - Framing defines a policy issue in a way that emphasizes certain values, causes, or solutions while sidelining others. Not just *what* is said, but *how* it's said

# Role of science in polarized policy debates



Credit: Toke Panduro, LinkedIn post May 2025



Credit: Paul Behrens, LinkedIn post May 2025

- Transformative governance is never purely technocratic but inherently political
- Science cannot act as arbitrator to dictate the 'right' answer
- Leaves open the debate between 'issue advocate' and 'honest broker' role (Pielke, 2007)
- But... emphasis on the importance of evidence can disenfranchise other forms of knowledge

# Protecting and strengthening the science-policy interface

- Enhance transparency in the production and communication of evidence
- Acknowledge value-laden assumptions embedded in models, indicators, and policy advice
- Invest in participatory platforms that engage diverse knowledge holders
- Protect institutions resilient to the politization of knowledge while remaining accountable
- Recognise the role of framing when presenting evidence and be prepared to challenge framing assumptions when needed