



HOW AGRICULTURE TIPPED THE SCALE ON EUROPE'S BIGGEST ELECTION - INSIDE SOURCES

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Many of the 370 million European Union citizens eligible to vote headed to the polls recently to elect a European Parliament. The EU's legislative body does everything from amending legislation to appointing an executive arm in Brussels, with all 720 seats up for re-election.

While Germany, France and Italy represent the largest populations, allegiances in the Parliament are formed on ideological grounds, less so national affiliation. Political parties from all 27 member states form political groups, or caucuses, that help them pass legislation in line with their manifestos.

The election shows a shift in the tide of Europe's priorities. In 2019, the focus was mainly on environmental protection and social justice. Since then, voters have increasingly expressed support for parties echoing industrial development and ease in regulation. Overall, center-right and right-wing nationalist movements have made gains. In France and the Netherlands, those movements have been stronger than ever, in a rebuke to the policies pursued by the EU in the last five years.

Not one election can be pinpointed in its results to one specific event. Since the last election, Europe has gone through the effects of COVID-19, the continuing inflation, energy shortages and war in Ukraine. Issues of migration remain high on the agenda. That said, the farmer protests of the last two years have eroded trust in the EU's institutions.

Farmers have protested environmental regulations in Belgium, the

Netherlands, France and Germany. They expressed frustration that even though their businesses are essential for consumer welfare, the regulatory state has made it increasingly impossible. Other environmentalist policies — such as a planned ban on the internal combustion engine, eco-tax schemes, or the ban on plastic single-use kitchen items — also touched consumers. The farmer protests made the issue more palpable for voters.

While farming has changed over time, it has always had a special bond with consumers. Government bureaucracies, by contrast, always seemed detached, whether it was keeping farmers poor under the feudal system up until the modern versions of farming in which every niche is over-regulated and calculated to fit a political trend. Since 2019 in Europe, agriculture has been blamed for the continent's failure to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

Ironically, the suggested policies wouldn't have done much to improve the environmental sustainability of farming; instead, they have bankrupted the sector. For instance, a since-dropped proposal to reduce pesticide usage by 50 percent would have made it even more difficult for European farmers to switch to no-till farming, which reduces soil erosion and prevents more carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere. EU institutions had become captured by anti-pesticide activists ideologically opposed to these products at the expense of scientific reasoning, consumer welfare and farmer livelihoods.

Voters in Europe have sent a clear message to policymakers: There are reasonable ways to protect and improve the environment we live in, but large-scale interventions that aren't means-tested will hurt the people who feed us. This is also why those new lawmakers will be incentivized to untangle many of the bureaucratic webs that the EU has spun over the previous mandate.

The tide has turned on radical environmentalism in Europe, and we're all better off for it.