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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rallying Around Empty Signifiers:
Understanding and Defining Anti-Government Protest in the Netherlands

Isabelle Frens*, Jelle van Buuren, and Edwin Bakker

As in many other parts of Europe, anti-government protest has been a topic of political and academic discussion in the Netherlands for some years. The definition of what anti-government protest entails and which groups and individuals it refers to is not as straightforward as it may seem. Where other institutions have attempted to place anti-governmental protest movements in frameworks of traditional extremist movements, the Dutch authorities describe the anti-government protestors as a group that is characterised by its pluriformity and fluidity. In 2022, they have even changed the term 'anti-governmental' to 'anti-institutional' to more broadly refer to the set of targets that the movement opposes, which includes government, but also the media, the scientific community, experts and the judicial system. In this paper we try to understand the anti-government, or anti-institutional, protest in the Netherlands using a different lens. We use Ernesto Laclau's discourse theory and its concept of empty signifiers to show how opposed interests and goals can be seen as a unified ideology to its proponents. Instead of trying to primarily define the group of people who are anti-government by their actions or characteristics, we look at how those actors define themselves and how they see their struggle against the authorities. We describe the rise and dynamics of anti-government protest in the Netherlands since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on "genealogies" and the eclectic topics of the protest movement. We compare our observations with the definition of anti-governmental protest and the anti-institutional narrative as used by the authorities. We arrive at the conclusion that analysing the anti-government protest through the lens of their shared ideas and grievances gives us more insight into the nature and dynamics of this movement than solely looking through the lens of the potential threat to the democratic legal order.

Keywords: Anti-government extremism, definition of extremism, empty signifier, protest, protest movement

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Introduction

As in many other parts of Europe, anti-government protest has been a topic of political and academic discussion in the Netherlands for some years. The phenomenon received even more attention after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the, sometimes violent, protesting of anti-COVID measures. Because of the eclectic nature of the protests, the Dutch authorities have found it difficult to understand and define the kind of protest they were confronted with and to determine what specific actors and groups to monitor. During the first COVID-19 protests in 2020, the Dutch authorities observed that, beyond the protesting of COVID-19 measures, there was an undercurrent of people who had stopped focusing specifically on these and instead seemed to be protesting something more fundamental.

Since this first observation, the search for how to define most accurately what it was exactly that was being observed has proved challenging. The observed undercurrent was first connected to observations of a new type of extremism that had been observed in the year prior, labelled *anti-government extremism*, which was defined by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) until 2022 as a form of extremism in which government and democracy are fundamentally rejected for non-ideological reasons.[1] The AIVD sets this narrative apart from other types of radical narratives, such as that of the extreme right, the extreme left, and that of identity extremists such as jihadists.[2] Explaining this phenomenon, it states that that this type of extremism is the result of "experienced or perceived injustice, indignation, and considerable unease."[3]

In 2022 the AIVD started to use the term anti-institutional extremism instead of anti-governmental extremism, as certain individuals and groups increasingly also started to focus on other institutions than the government within the democratic legal order, such as the police and the media.[4] In 2022 it also mentioned ideological motives behind an "extremist anti-institutional narrative."[5] The anti-institutional extremists oppose a loosely defined oppressive "elite" with which they are at war.[6] The AIVD uses the term extremism as it has observed certain individuals and groups "actively striving for or supporting profound changes in society, changes that could endanger (the continued survival of) our democratic legal order, possibly through the use of undemocratic methods …"[7] and because it sees a preparedness to carry out both non-violent and violent activities.[8]

Governmental agencies in other Western countries have used similar labels and qualifications to describe the protest movements that emerged in the context of the COVID-crisis, but give different interpretations of what the term *anti-governmental* refers to. The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission in its report *Spotlight on COVID-19, Violent Extremism and Anti-Government Movements* speaks of several extremist groups, both from the violent left and right.[9] In the United States, anti-governmental extremism is a term that often refers to the "hard right" or the Patriot movement.[10] The different interpretations of the term illustrate that the search to understand and define it is far from finished yet.

In this paper we attempt to arrive at a different understanding of anti-government, or anti-institutional, protest in the Netherlands by using an alternative lens. We look at how the actors

define themselves and how they see their struggle against the authorities. We use the concept of empty signifiers to analyse and understand the phenomenon of anti-governmental protest. An empty signifier is a word or phrase that does not have a fixed meaning in what it refers to, which means it is able to link together a broad spectrum of different demands under the same cause. The concept can help to focus on the collective purpose of the movement, instead of its stated goals, in order to better understand it. The outline of the paper is as follows. First, the concept of empty signifiers is explained, along with its use in pluralistic movements as an enabler of collective identity. Second, the rise and dynamics of anti-government and anti-governmental, or anti-institutional protest, in the Netherlands since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic is described, focusing on various categories of groups or "genealogies" of the protest movement, in which the use and function of empty signifiers is demonstrated.

Empty Signifiers

Anti-governmental protest is a complex and difficult-to-study phenomenon, because of its pluriformity and fluidity, as demonstrated in the Dutch definition of anti-institutional extremism, which can apply to a host of different themes. However, there are academic frameworks to analyse seemingly fragmented social phenomena. Ernest Laclau developed a framework for analysing the ambiguity and extreme plurality of views that is often found in populist movements.[11] This is a similar pluralism and ambiguity that can be observed in the study of anti-governmental sentiments. Populist discourse tends to rely on ambiguity as it is meant to be a tool to help band a plurality of views together to strive for a common cause.[12] The main concept of Laclau that will be used in this paper is that of the *empty signifier*.[13] The concept of the empty signifier can shed light on how the described anti-governmental movement constitutes itself and what, despite seeming incompatibilities, its common goal is for which it can make a stand.

In *On Populist Reason,* Laclau describes what characterises populist rhetoric compared to more obviously ideologically driven counterparts.[14] He identifies the use of so called *empty signifiers*. Empty signifiers are words or phrases that will be frequently used by a group that seeks to gain a voice in the political sphere, but that are in essence *empty*. What is meant by this is that the same word can be used to refer to different meanings, which means that the word itself is "emptied" of a fixed meaning. An example of a phrase like this is *the people* (e.g., *the people* won't stand for this), which can refer to different material groups at any moment, depending on the topic that the user is talking about at that moment. A phrase like *the people* functions essentially as a placeholder within the rhetoric to signify that the speaker is referring to the listener; the ingroup; the morally right side of the issue that the speaker is referring to. Conversely, an empty signifier can also be used to refer to what the ingroup is opposed to. Typical examples of empty signifiers that are used to signify an enemy concept is *the elite*, *the system* or *society*.

Although the meaning of these types of words is fluid or empty, they do serve an important role in rhetoric. A function is that it can foster a sense of collectivity across a heterogeneous group of people. By using a word that is empty and has no fixed meaning, it allows a listener to project their own personal meaning on it. The same word can be interpreted differently by every listener to fit best with what they need to hear at that moment to feel validated and potentially move

into action. This means that the same rhetoric can be used to appeal to different individuals or groups that have different material needs, demands or grievances, but still foster a sense of collectivity between them because they are using the same words to refer to them. This can result in a movement that is composed of individuals and organisations that on the surface seem like they cannot have anything in common. Individuals who have different pre-existing grievances can feel like the speaker is referring to their specific grievance and thus can all feel represented by the same piece of rhetoric, even if they may, on closer examination, find out that their interests are in fact not aligned, or in some cases, are even opposed to each other.

The use of an empty signifier is essential to the formation of a collective identity in a movement that has conflicting demands. There is always a tension between the inherent heterogeneity of the different demands within a group and the group's will to be a homogeneous totality. Populist group formation rests on the fundamental inability of a group to form itself as a coherent, unambiguous totality. This impossibility is a constant "presence of absence" that propels Laclau's political mechanism; and affection, "rhetoric", personalism and even memes, serve as empty indicators, which – instead of a linear, rational and logical articulation of all demands – can form a unit.[15]

By emptying the signifier of inherent meaning, the collective identity is able to rest on what each participant of a movement does have in common with each other. The issue of the meaning of each signifier is less important than the fact that it is a facilitator of affect. In other words: the empty signifier allows groups to communicate to each other that they are experiencing the same emotions about large social issues. Additionally, empty signifiers facilitate a type of social critique that applies to the most fundamental building blocks of a society. Because these fundamental building blocks are all encompassing, it is impossible to articulate these critiques perfectly. As Laclau states: "As I have said, in a local struggle I can be relatively clear about both the nature of my demands and the force against which we are fighting. But when I am trying to constitute a wider popular identity and a more global enemy through an articulation of sectorial demands, the identity of both the popular forces and of the enemy becomes more difficult to determine. It is here that the moment of emptiness necessarily arises, following the establishment of equivalential bonds."[16] With both of these qualities, empty signifiers allow the formation of a collective identity and thereby the ability to form a movement.[17] Laclau does not consider populism to be a threat to democracy, but rather sees it as the very embodiment of democratic politics.[18]

Although Laclau's study focuses on populism and large-scale politics, its framework can be useful to understand the formation of any collective identity in pluralistic group compositions. The theory is sometimes criticised for being a theory that focuses on rhetoric to such an extent that it becomes devoid of a clear normative horizon, but in the case of the anti-governmental movement, it can be used as a steppingstone towards understanding the various demands that seem present in it.[19] The initial observation of this paper is that the movement that is currently described as anti-governmental is so heterogeneous that it is difficult to determine what exactly is being referred to with that term. This is because, just like the movements described by Laclau, the movement is comprised of people and groups with different demands. Anti-governmental protest needs to establish an enemy to facilitate its own cohesion, but because the system is too

broad to be an effective enemy, empty signifiers need to be used to refer to it.

COVID-19 Demonstrations in the Netherlands

In March 2020, the first restrictive measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic were enforced in the Netherlands. Initially, the measures were limited to a ban on large-scale events, social distancing, and a strong advice to start working from home. On 23 March, an *intelligent lockdown* was announced, which meant that all non-essential public spaces were shut down and everyone was strongly advised to stay inside their homes whenever possible. Although these measures initially were supported by a clear majority among the public, the first demonstrations against them were quickly organised as well.

The first documented protest, on 28 April, counted a few dozen people who protested multiple issues that they felt were connected to each other. The protest was not centrally organised. The call to protest was made on Facebook under the hashtag *#Stopthelockdown*, created by a group named "Demonstratie van het Volk" ("Demonstration of the People"[20]), which was shared by various individuals and small organisations. This demonstration would be the prelude to a series of similar manifestations and demonstrations. Throughout 2020-2022 protest of various sizes were organised throughout the Netherlands on a regular basis by various organisations who were loosely connected, but who would also occasionally disagree about tactics and strategies.

On 21st June 2020, action group "Viruswaanzin" ("Virus Madness") organised a demonstration with tens of thousands of attendants. The demonstration ended in heavy riots, mostly because of the groups of hooligans who took the opportunity of the protest to instigate fights with the police.[21] During this protest the eclectic character of the protesting attendants became visible for the first time. Hooligans were standing shoulder to shoulder with classic hippies who were standing up for "love and peace". Anthroposophists were protesting vaccinations together with Reformed Christians. Libertarian-aligned small business owners demanded an end to the COVID-19 restrictions because of economic interests. Extreme-right groups mingled with the demonstrators. Farmers expressed their solidarity. Various protesters carried signs and flags, or laid flowers "in remembrance of democracy." Online, new actors, such as influencers who would normally be focused on fashion, cosmetics, healthy lifestyles, and spirituality, were starting to get entangled with more political communities. Exploiting their social media status as "micro-celebrities", they have spread misinformation, conspiratorial thinking and far-right extremist ideas.[22]

The majority of the protests was peaceful, but sometimes they ended in (heavy) rioting. When a national curfew was announced, there were riots that lasted for several days. The Dutch police reported that they had to use violence more often in 2021 than in previous years, usually at protests aimed at the COVID-19 restrictions.[23] The National Coordinator of Terrorism and Security stated in 2021 that "the persistence and intensity of protests has not been seen in many years in the Netherlands: where in previous years the deployment mobile unit was necessary only a few times to restore public order, this has now been necessary dozens of times since

June 2020".[24] In addition to riots and demonstrations that got out of hand, there have been a number of acts of vandalism against health facilities and several house visits and threat letters, intimidating government officials, journalists, and COVID-19 experts.

Although the common thread of the eclectic COVID-19 protest is resistance against what the demonstrators consider the establishment, the list of grievances that are expressed is long and diverse and spans much more than just the measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Facebook post that started the initial hashtag *#Stopthelockdown* reads: "Dear fighters, [...]. Our human rights have been ignored since the outbreak of COVID-19." The protest was described as "a call for freedom and a protest against amongst others 5G transmission towers, a restriction on freedom of movement and privacy and against the destroyed economy".[25] The protestors are against a totalitarian state, which they find exemplified in the restriction of their "freedom of movement and social freedom" and how "we are being monitored by drones, facial recognition and our fellow citizens via whistle-blow hotlines". They also mention censuring of these issues by mainstream media platforms.[26] Later, as the protests gained public awareness and grew in size, the topics and slogans of the COVID-19 protests became even more diverse. Demonstratie van het Volk, creators of the initial hashtag, linked up with "Nederland in Opstand" ("The Netherlands in Revolt")[27]. Nederland in Opstand not only fights against the COVID-19 measures, but also for more affordable health insurance, closed borders, and the preservation of *Black Pete*.[28]

As established in the theory about empty signifiers, the parts of the population that did not feel seen, heard, or represented by the political establishment were given the opportunity to manifest and give space to their pent-up resentment, embraced, and encouraged by unexpected allies in a "fundamental conflict about the future course of society."[29] Thus, new assemblies of social spheres that were formerly separate from each other were formed. A community of individuals that had long since been agitating against the health risks of electro-magnetic radiation was suddenly granted a much larger stage for their complaints and grievances; critics of vaccines and the pharmaceutical industry found an audience with big name influencers with a giant follower base. The pro-*Black Pete*[30] activists could share their idea of cultural loss with others who felt that everything had been taken from them by the establishment.

In some cases, the coalitions were the product of active attempts to digitally create connections and networks of groups that mutually supported each other. Despite protesting for a different cause, calls to join COVID-19 protests were shared in farmer's protest groups and calls to join farmer's protests were shared in platforms that rallied against the COVID-19 measures.[31]

Genealogies of the Dutch Anti-Government Protest Movement

The data are based on a study into conspiracy constructions and hatred of the system in the Netherlands between 2000-2014 by Van Buuren, which is still relevant today, and additional current research of the authors using the same methodology.[32] The data was collected on (online) platforms of anti-corona activists, such as websites, newspapers and social media. When

necessary and possible, the data was also complemented with sources from mainstream media, like digital archives of newspapers and magazines (via LexisNexis), parliamentary archives (via Parlando) and policy documents of ministries. Relevant sources were collected in the 2000-2014 study and maintained and expanded with developments as they were happening. Based on the continued observation of these sources, combined with the observation of the protests, the following assertions can be made: despite the mosaic of protest, there are a few categories of groups or "genealogies" that can be distinguished, although there is also overlap in terms of discourse and protesters. Per genealogy, the classic empty signifier *the elite* can refer to different conceptualisations of the opposing force, but because of the fluid nature of the empty signifier, the interpretation of the word can change for individuals and groups over time.

The first genealogy is formed by spiritual spheres that have traditionally been critical of vaccinations and have been proponents of alternative lifestyles and medicine. The *soft language* that permeates the protest movement is strongly influenced by this segment: the signifiers are love, connection, awakening, light, and growth[33]. When they use the empty signifier referring to *the elite*, they are protesting an institution that in their view is based on fear and hatred, which is juxtaposed with the natural intuition of *the people*. [34] Often, they see the elite as distinctly connected to the perceived control over health or nutrition, possibly from pharmaceutical companies, as these are the *opponents* to the alternative lifestyle they are proponents of. As different conspiracy theories are closely linked to spiritual ideas and practices, the phenomenon has been coined as "conspirituality".[35]

The *soft language* has also nestled itself into a second genealogy, mixed with a harsh anti-government narrative. This is the protest of angry freelancers, small business owners and entrepreneurs, in other words: the protest of the middle class and libertarians, according to Callison and Slobodian.[36] They compare it with the world of disruption and innovative capitalism and discern "a sort of neoliberal logic": there is a belief that it is not only impossible to control the economy centrally, but also the truth: to concentrate the truth in a single institute is to do it violence. Here, *the elite* threatens democracy and personal freedom. Opinions on holism and spirituality are mixed with a "dogged discourse of individual liberties", a large distrust of anything that is centralised and an ideological preference for libertarianism. COVID-19 is seen as a pretext from the global elites to push for a radical transformation of daily life.

A third genealogy is formed by a part of the Protestant-Christian communities. The insight that the establishment - represented in media, politics, and science - is malicious and that a parallel society must be established quickly, therefore presents itself as a divine message. When they refer to *the elite* versus *the people*, this can refer to a quite literal fight between good and evil: good Christians versus people under the influence of Satan. References are made from various pulpits to the Devil's plan of the "Plandemic" and the "Great Reset", a Satanic plan to enslave civilians and persecute Christians. Christian end-of days prophets with a message about the corona pandemic and the accompanying vaccine as proof of the coming apocalypse are given a new audience. Two leaders of the "Red Pill Journaal" ("Red Pill News"), a conspiracy channel that focuses mainly on the alleged Satanist paedophile networks of the elite, were re-baptised as Christians in the tradition of the Pentecostal church. The telegram channel "De Bataafse Republiek" ("The Batavian Republic"), managed by them, organised "Batavian prayer groups",

in which hundreds of people took part praying for the alleged victims of sadistic abuse, but also recounting the divine mandate to resist.[37]

A fourth genealogy is formed by the extreme right. From the beginning of the protests against the corona policy, extreme right-wing activists and groups, such as the "Nederlandse Volks-Unie" ("Dutch People's Union"), the "Dietse Volkspartij" ("Dutch Peoples Party") and the new group "Wij zijn Nederland" ("We are the Netherlands"), have joined the protests. For this genealogy, *the elite* often specifically refers to the classic conspiracy of the Jewish elite that is attempting to eliminate the white race and Dutch culture. Right wing extremists are present at numerous demonstrations with the Prince Flag and are active on the social media channels.[38] We are the Netherlands focuses on all patriots, freedom-loving and anti-vaccination activists, people for the preservation of our traditions and culture, the 100,000 Trump Fans, the Wappies[39], the conspiracy theorists, the anti-government activists, the Anti-Globalists, the nationalists, the Virus madness activists, the entrepreneurs and SMEs, the football supporters, the caravan dwellers, the craftsmen and craftsmen, the farmers and country people and every sober, Dutch and self-thinking Dutchman…[40]

Also the far right political party "Forum voor Democratie" ("Forum for Democracy") is engaged in the protests. Both in the streets, at manifestations, and in Parliament, Members of parliament from Forum are spreading narratives delegitimising the Dutch political order, calling for people's tribunals and flirting with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.[41] Moreover, Forum and other Dutch actors from the far right played a role in actively spreading and amplifying transnational narratives and conspiracy theories both at home and abroad, such as the assumed role of the World Economic Forum in exploiting corona for "The Great Reset" or the existence of "biolabs" in Ukraine in which viruses are manufactured.[42]

Finally, a fifth genealogy is formed by a mixed group of citizens who turned against the government out of dissatisfaction, resentment, and bad experiences with the authorities: the dropouts. Historian Remieg Aerts sees the corona protests as a movement without ties to institutionalised organisations, without a clear goal, but with an outspoken anti-establishment attitude. According to Aerts, the anti-establishment attitude is fuelled by social media, but it is also the result of 25 years of neoliberalism: "A large space has arisen between the government as a powerful executive apparatus and citizens who feel little or no further connection with the state. That sentiment is also fuelled by the benefits scandal, or the earthquakes in Groningen, which make citizens feel abandoned. Corona has been a pressure cooker." [43] People who fall under the banner from this perspective can feel heard and seen by the empty signifiers proclaiming that "it is not right" and can use *the elite* to refer to the government as a symbol for general failure of the social system.

This overview of the genealogies shows how the emptiness of conspiracy narratives and other protest narratives have the potential to form a discursive arena for an mix of political grievances, hopes and demands that are not accepted within the institutionalised political order.[44] However, it is important to note that the fact that these different genealogies came together during the corona protests does not mean that there are no frictions between them or that the far right is successful in trying to hegemonise the protests. Research by the British Commission for

Countering Extremism shows that right wing extremist groups do try to exploit feelings of anger and unrest over the COVID-19 measures, but that this does not mean that have managed to gain much support within the broad coalition of anti-corona demonstrators.[45] In Telegram groups of Dutch farmers there was in fact much discussion whether or not they should work together with Forum for Democracy.[46] A minority, organised in more radical organisations of farmers, such as the Farmers Defense Force, opted for close cooperation with Forum, while more moderate groups distanced themselves from them.

Still, as the protest movement progressed, ubiquitous slogans emerged, which could be observed on signs at the protests, on social media, but also on professionally produced merchandise which can be worn to show alliance to the cause.[47] Of course, due to the eclectic nature of the protesters, rallying cries were rarely linked to any particular cause, as it would alienate the protestors who do not happen to support that one. Many slogans show a radical indeterminacy that is up for interpretation for any individual, like:

> *"It is not right"; "I am done with it"; "We are tired of the lies"; "The Netherlands in Resistance"; "Giving up is not an option"; "No Great Reset"; "Freedom & Happiness"; "Make Holland Great Again"; "No pricktatorship"*[48]*; "I fight for freedom"; "I am awake"; "Stop the madness", and; "We are done with the government".*

These slogans function as empty signifiers, that provided a way to create a sense of collectivity, not based on a shared ideology or readily apparent characteristic, but based on a shared feeling that there is something very wrong in society. When further analysing the empty signifiers, we see two types of topics: shared values such as autonomy, individuality, freedom and identity, and worries over a dystopian future of invasive technologies and global institutions that are allowed to make far-reaching decisions about the future, with no accountability to the common people. The continued presence of what are commonly considered to be conspiracy theories also function as empty signifiers. Conspiracy theories may distinctly appeal to different social groups from various social structures.[49] A conspiracy theory is often described as a narrative that functions as a tool to make sense of a system that feels like it is actively working against you.[50] The components of the typical conspiracy, a secret organisation with malicious intent against those lower in the hierarchy, are able to be interpreted in the same way that any other empty signifier can: the organisation can be understood to be any material group and so can the oppressed majority and each person can decode the narrative according to their social or political interests, which may be a necessary tool for them to be able to express and mobilise around greater dissatisfactions.[51]

Comparing Empirical Observations and the Definition of Anti-Governmental Extremism

We can conclude that the authorities do struggle with labelling and interpretation of the phenomenon of anti-governmental, or anti-institutional, extremism, whereby they also (have to) look mainly from a security perspective. In this article, have looked at the phenomenon from a different perspective to allow the analysis of the movement from a non-security perspective as

well. We have introduced the populism studies concept of empty signifiers to illustrate and add to the AIVD observation of the versality of the anti-institutional narrative within the protests and to expand on our understanding of anti-government protest. By using empty signifiers, the protest is not only able to accommodate a great variety of themes and grievances, uniting various groups with different interests under the same banner, it also gives protesters the means to communicate about their shared emotions about the systematic things that they oppose.

In the search for the definition of the anti-governmental narrative, we can raise the question if we can label the above-described protest movement as anti-governmental or anti-institutional extremism. Based on observations thus far, the anti-governmental movement does not reject the basic principles of democracy – people mainly want a different interpretation of the system and its institutions, like the government, media, or technology. The potential for violence is estimated to be low – but the intimidating effect of threats is high.[52] Even so, the AIVD annual report concludes that the anti-institutional narrative undermines the democratic legal order: the narrative states that current democratic institutions are all part of, or under the control of, the malicious elite and thus erodes the legitimacy of, and trust in, the institutions in the longer term. The reasoning is that too much distrust can hinder the work of members of parliament, judges, etc., and will eventually cause civilians to drop out of society entirely. All of this can threaten the continued existence of the democratic legal order, apart from the potential of any violence occurring. Of course, restraint is required with the application of the extremism label because the milieu of anti-governmental and anti-institutional protest was, is, and will remain diverse and it is still too unclear whether the narrative embraced to a certain extent by a hundred thousand people can indeed undermine the democratic legal order by thinking and acting. Moreover, it remains complicated to determine where to draw the line. Are all anti-governmental individuals and groups 'extremist'? This type of question and the fluidity of the group of anti-government protestors make it difficult to study and understand this phenomenon. Seeing the anti-government protests through the lens of their shared ideas and grievances will give us additional insight into the nature and dynamics of this movement in addition to solely looking through the lens of security or the potential threat to the democratic legal order.

Further empirical research into the anti-governmental movement and its online and offline manifestations is needed. In particular (quantitative) studies into the language that is used by the various genealogies can help to gain insight into the use and importance of empty signifiers. It can also help to better assess the usefulness of this concept and improve its use in researching and understanding the origin and development of the anti-government protest and the anti-institutional movement in the Netherlands.

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