

# Breaking the Silence

Future Steps to a Unique Climate Change Policy

**Think Tank Global Climate Change**

**Radboud Honours Academy**

**Nijmegen**

**June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**

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## Samenvatting

In dit rapport is advies geformuleerd over hoe het CDA een unieke positie kan innemen in het klimaatdebat in lijn met de christendemocratische identiteit van de partij. Dit advies is gebaseerd op onderzoek, waaronder literatuurstudie en interviews met specialisten en partijleden op verschillende niveaus binnen het CDA. Hieronder zijn de belangrijkste bevindingen en conclusies samengevat.

Ten eerste vereist de interne communicatie van het CDA ingrijpende verbetering. Actieve interne debatten over kernwaarden, conflicten en doelen zijn de belangrijkste voorspellers voor een partij om als partij succesvol te presenteren aan de buitenwereld. Een interne discussie over de rol van het CDA rondom klimaatverandering lijkt daarom essentieel voor een duidelijk en consistent publiek imago wat betreft de houding van de partij tegenover klimaatverandering. Bijvoorbeeld het feit dat het klimaatbeleid van het CDA niet van toevoeging is aan de huidige wetgeving, is een kwestie die dringend interne discussie nodig heeft. De Green Deal is een goed voorbeeld dat laat zien hoe de christendemocratische waarden van het CDA kunnen worden opgenomen in een effectief en samenhangend klimaatbeleid. Daarom zou het integreren van de innovatieve ideeën van de Green Deal het CDA ten gunste kunnen komen: maatregelen van de Green Deal passen al bij de christendemocratische waarden doordat economische en ecologische belangen succesvol gecombineerd worden.

De verschillende kernwaarden van het CDA - namelijk die van rentmeesterschap, solidariteit en gespreide verantwoordelijkheid - hebben potentie om een solide basis te leggen voor een klimaatbeleid waar het CDA zich mee kan identificeren. Hoewel deze waarden al goed bij een klimaatbeleid passen, lijkt de wens van het CDA tot minimale overheidsinterventie (subsidiariteit) aanvankelijk in strijd met ingrijpende klimaatwetten. Effectieve klimaatactie op elk niveau van de samenleving kan echter alleen worden

gestimuleerd als eerst op regeringsniveau daadkrachtig wordt opgetreden. Het gebrek aan actie in het klimaatdebat kan daarom niet worden gerechtvaardigd door de kernwaarden van het CDA.

Doordat het CDA in het midden van het publieke spectrum is gepositioneerd en de partij zich vaak focust op economische aspecten, wordt het als moeilijk beschouwd om ook daadkrachtig op te treden in het klimaatdebat. Maar juist door deze eigenschappen kan het CDA een unieke positie innemen in dit debat. Door economische groei en klimaatactie niet te beschouwen als aspecten die elkaar uitsluiten maar juist op elkaar aan kunnen sluiten, zou de partij een unieke positie kunnen creëren, bijvoorbeeld door zich te concentreren op duurzame economische groei. De aandacht van het CDA voor de economie in combinatie met de kracht van de partij om compromissen te sluiten en realistisch te denken, zouden de basis kunnen leggen voor een geïndividualiseerd beleid, dat het CDA kan onderscheiden van andere politieke partijen. Het innemen van een unieke positie in het klimaatdebat zou de partij ook aantrekkelijker kunnen maken voor nieuwe kiezers, terwijl het versterken van traditionele waarden de betrokkenheid van reeds bestaande kiezersgroepen zou kunnen versterken.

## **Executive summary**

Advice was formulated on how the CDA could take a unique standpoint in the debate about climate change in line with their Christian democratic identity. Based on research including the analysis of literature and interviews with scholars and party members at various levels within the CDA, core findings and conclusions will be summarized.

First and foremost, the internal communication of the CDA requires far-reaching stimulation and improvement. Active internal debates about values, conflicts and goals are key predictors for any successful external representation of political parties. A passionate internal debate on the CDA's role regarding climate change seems therefore essential to convey a clear and consistent public image of the party's stance on climate change matters. A pressing issue that requires internal discussion is that the climate change policy of the CDA do not significantly add to the current legislation. The Green Deal is a good example that shows how the Christian democratic values of the CDA could be incorporated into an effective, coherent climate change policy. That is why integrating innovative ideas of the Green Deal could be beneficial for the CDA: Measures of the Green Deal have already been tailored to Christian democratic values by successfully combining economic and ecological interests.

The CDA's core values of stewardship, solidarity and shared responsibility have the potential to lay a solid basis to create a climate change policy that the CDA could identify with. Despite these values that already fit to a climate change policy, the CDA's desire of minimal governmental intervention (subsidiarity) initially seems to contradict invasive climate laws. However, it is only possible to stimulate effective climate action on every level of society if decisive action is taken at the governmental level first. Therefore, the core values of the CDA do by no means justify inaction in the climate change debate.

The CDA's centrist position of the political spectrum in combination with its focus on economic growth is often seen as incompatible with decisive climate action. However, exactly these qualities enable the CDA to take a unique position in the climate change debate. Not treating economic growth and climate action as mutually exclusive would enable the party to create a unique position by focusing on sustainable economic growth. Thus, the CDA's considerations for the economy put together with the party's strength of making compromises and thinking realistically could lay the foundation for an individualised policy that would differentiate the CDA from other political parties. Occupying a unique position in the climate debate could also make the party more attractive to new voters, while the reinforcement of traditional values could strengthen the commitment of already existing voter groups.

## **Acknowledgements**

Primarily, we would like to thank dr. Arjen Siegmann for his unconventional companionship and constructive feedback, as well as dr. Tim Houwen and dr. Harm Kaal for their continuous patience and personal guidance of our think tank. Secondly, we would like to share our appreciation with all the interviewees that took their time to explain their version of the state of the art and also the Radboud Honours Academy, for giving us the chance to explore this field deeper and providing us with all the necessities.

Nijmegen, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020

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## **Background**

The interdisciplinary think tank “*Building Bridges: Global Climate Change*” from the International Honours Academy of the Radboud University Nijmegen presents a research report about the Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA). In the setup, the Research Institute of the CDA (CDA-WI) was willing to act as ‘client’. The investigation kicked off with a study trip to The Hague, where we met with dr. Arjen Siegmann who is a researcher at the institute with a specialisation in socioeconomic matters. The institute asked us to carry out research about pivotal elements of the party, such as the opinions of its voters and party members on climate change and the voter image. After the meeting, we started with our think tank.

The party is in the government at the national level and also plays a key role in many provincial and local administrations but delving a little deeper, one also observes a party that struggles to link its ideological principles to the key issues of today. As most of the parties, the CDA is confronted with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is in need for self-identification and direction, especially regarding the inclusion of climate change in its program.

In weekly meetings, we conducted research to get a better image of the CDA. This research was done via interviews and literature reviews that lead us to the question how the CDA can take a unique standpoint in the debate about climate change that fits with its Christian democratic identity. To answer this question, we focused on two main points. First, we reviewed the internal debate within the CDA and identified points of improvement, based on its core values. Second, the CDA’s potential for creating a unique position as a party within the climate change debate was outlined. Both points are accompanied with an in-depth explanation and an advice for the CDA.

## **Disclaimer**

Please recall that this discussion paper is limited to standpoints derived from literature reviews and interviews we carried out with CDA and CDJA politicians, EPP parliament members and NGO experts. Originally, these interviews were meant to be done in person during a study trip to Brussels, but due to the COVID-19 crisis we had to adjust the medium and therefore chose Zoom or telephone calls for the meetings. Apart from the interviews, our group coherence and creativity was also limited to weekly online sessions via Zoom, which might have impacted the discussion paper. More empirical research should be done to shed light on the interrelated issues outlined in this paper.

## **Introduction: Why the CDA experiences a problem with adapting a climate change policy**

Climate change is a global challenge that already has drastic consequences such as longer periods of drought, melting ice on the poles, and rising sea levels. Although 97% of scientists agree that there is evidence for global warming caused by humans (Cook et al., 2016), there are still people doubting the human influence on climate change.

The rising prominence of climate change related issues in the media and public discourse as well as (international) political debates have made climate change an increasingly important topic in Dutch politics. A party like the CDA cannot distance itself from those issues and should become part of the debate. When the CDA wants to take part in this discussion or stay relevant on the climate change debate, it needs to take the following aspects into consideration: the future discussion and implementation of the European Green Deal and the judgement of the Urgenda case.

### *The importance of climate change on a European level: The Green Deal*

On 11 December 2019, the European Commission proposed an extensive strategy for making the EU's economy more sustainable: The Green Deal. This document contains a lot of innovative and up to date measures and creates a benchmark that any political party within the EU needs to take into consideration when creating a climate change policy. The Green Deal will become European legislation and all the member states will have to implement it in their national system due to different legal mechanisms, such as harmonisation, supremacy, and hierarchy of norms, as explained by a professor of International and European Law at the Radboud University. When this happens, the current policy of the CDA regarding sustainability will be outshined compared to the measures of the Green Deal. This can lead to the CDA losing legitimacy.

### *The importance of climate change on a national level: The Urgenda case*

On 20 December 2019, the Dutch supreme court gave its judgement in the Urgenda case, confirming that the government had neglected its positive obligation to prevent irreparable damage to the climate (Urgenda, n.d). This judgement was groundbreaking and captured the importance of positive obligations coming from fundamental human rights. Irreparable damage to the climate will infringe the right to life (article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)), the right to respect for private and family life (article 8 ECHR), and the right to an effective remedy (article 13 ECHR). Positive obligations are not binding for the government because a certain result is not needed, but it needs to make an effort. The Urgenda case made it beneficial for citizens and organisations to litigate against the government for its lack of action to minimize climate change, because under certain circumstances they can win the case. Given that most citizens want to becoming more sustainable (Mommers, 2020), the government, thus, the CDA, could avoid several lawsuits by being more active regarding the implementation of environmental legislation. According to the professor of International and European Law, the CDA is not only responsible for climate change policy as part of the government but also as a political party. It is a role model for the citizens of the Netherlands and should rise above individual needs.

### *The CDA's position on climate change: Values of the CDA*

Christian democratic parties like the CDA used to respond with hesitation to the debate of climate change in the past. However, societal pressure demanding political climate action has increased so that currently, Christian democrats find themselves confronted with a situation of doubt and uncertainty about their role and image in the combat of climate change. Their political opponents, such as green parties like GroenLinks, or populist parties like the PVV and FvD, attract their voters by means of concrete and radical opinions (Record of policy

statements, n.d.) to introduce sustainable standards of living (GroenLinks, n.d.-a) or to contest climate change as an issue altogether (Wilders, 2019). GroenLinks does not put much emphasis on economic prosperity but rather values the importance of natural resources, health and wellbeing (GroenLinks, n.d.-b). In order to achieve societal and environmental change, GroenLinks demands governmental interventions. Favoured interventions include subsidies to encourage environmentally and socially beneficial practices as well as taxes on different kinds of detrimental behaviours. Populist parties, such as the PVV and FvD, are sceptical about the existence of climate change and claim that it is just a way for the "climate mafia" to profit from taxpayers' money (Straver, 2019). They do not believe action should be taken.

The CDA takes a rather cautious stance and has been described as being “careful with big measures” and “always a bit reserved with new things”. This is connected with its centrist position in the political spectrum. The party is trying to avoid political extremes by taking an ideologically intermediate position. Just like other centrist parties, the CDA has difficulties with establishing and conveying a solid, precise strategy that incorporates its core values and at the same time is powerful enough to differentiate from other political parties.

Difficulties also arise due to conflicting interests of the CDA between the protection of global climate on the one hand and safeguarding the economy on the other hand (A. Siegmann, personal communication, February 14, 2020). Originally, the CDA is inspired by the value of stewardship. This refers to the idea that humans should take care of the earth and make sure that the earth is in good condition when they pass it on to the next generation (CDA, n.d.-a). This core value suggests a strong focus on climate change politics for the CDA.

Looking at the Netherlands however, we see that the CDA has long been part of the government without much improvement in fighting climate change (Van den Beukel, 2012).

This could be explained by looking at the other core values that are important for the CDA. Christian democrats have always paid high attention to strengthening the economy by giving responsibility to the people and by supporting a social market economy, in which all people are included (M. Albania, personal communication, March 27, 2020). The social market economy can be considered to be a middle ground between a liberal market and a welfare state. A free market is protected while simultaneously, all people in society are offered the opportunity to participate (Oele & Soeting, 2014). If possible, the (civil) society is held responsible and top-down approaches are avoided. The party believes that civil society and companies know what is good for themselves and know how to expand their businesses, which is good for the economy. This means that responsibility is shared across different people and organizations (CDA, n.d.-b) which is called square sovereignty.

Environmental policies can have negative consequences for the economy. In the process of sustainable transition, individuals in traditional sectors of the labour market could lose their jobs due to high investment costs and modernisation procedures by the companies. Those investments are not always financially fruitful, resulting in damage to some economic sectors (Ministerie van Economische Zaken en Klimaat, 2019). Furthermore, politicians can be hesitant to impose rules on major companies that would reduce their profits, as politicians are not willing to take a risk of experiencing resistance from these companies (Goulder, 2000). Thus, the CDA will have to come up with a climate change policy that allows for a sustainable transition with economically beneficial opportunities. The party's core values are excellently suited to develop a convincing, compelling and clear stance on climate change, but this still needs to be acknowledged by the CDA.

### *The CDA's position on climate change: Image of the CDA*

So far, the CDA has not taken much action on climate change. Part of the uncertainty about the integration of climate change policy into its party programme could be the problem of identifying potential target groups, as mentioned during our visit to the Hague. Past voter patterns could turn out to be unreliable, especially in times when voter behaviour is known to strongly fluctuate (Meer, Van der Kolk & Rekker, 2017). Due to this electoral volatility, it is more difficult to predict "the electorate" of a political party. This can have two consequences: On the one hand this uncertainty could lead to unclarities in its focus and standpoints, as the CDA wants to be a catch-all party, which means that standpoints have to be broad and vague to serve the interest of (almost) all the people (Katz & Mair, 1995). On the other hand, the CDA could still be based too much on possibly incorrect assumptions regarding the effects of a climate change policy on its electorate, which could hold the party back from formulating a greener climate change policy.

When it comes to climate change, the CDA acknowledges its existence and the importance to act against it, but hesitates to force certain actions on the public because of the possibility of losing its current voters (Brandsma, 2019; "CDA discussieert zonder crisis", 2019). The concern to let down traditional voter groups of the CDA, like farmers, could interfere with adapting a climate change policy.

It is time for the CDA to act on climate change, since it has become a very important topic in the Netherlands, at the level of the EU and on a global scale as well. The Urgenda case and the Green Deal set the framework in which political parties must conduct their climate change policy and are called to action. The CDA should play a key role in framing the issues at stake and take part in creating the climate change policy. Right now the party is just responding to the issues at hand instead of setting the agenda. The problems are getting

bigger and the society needs the government to act, since it cannot solve the problems by itself. Time is running out while the CDA is running behind. It is finally time to catch up.

### **Sparking the internal debate within the CDA**

#### *Divergent opinions and its need of a platform*

It stood out from the interviews that on a local level, the perceptions on climate change are very divergent. It ranges between comments on the Green Deal like “we can easily take 10 more steps” and outright opposition to a CO<sub>2</sub> tax. In contrast to the locally embedded CDA politicians, national politicians are rather occupied with steering the country into a fruitful and prosperous future and therefore are not as concerned as they could be about the “base”; the voters. Some allude to the solidarity of climate change issues across borders and mention that “the strongest shoulders should carry the heaviest weight” and want to promote climate change politics. Others do not know where CDA stands on a national level. Seemingly, there is not much communication across the different levels within the party. Some mention the latest vision ‘Zij aan zijn’ from the scientific institute of the CDA but not everyone from the CDA reads or has access to the report the research institute published on a climate change policy. Internally, there is no passionate internal debate on climate change. We conclude that there is fruitful ground for an internal debate but the CDA is missing a vehicle which allows the opinions to clash.

Paradoxically, despite the aforementioned divergence of opinions and knowledge within the CDA, too little ideological conflict or discussion has emerged to trigger a climate change debate within the party. In the following, the public climate change image and the external communication are reviewed at the backdrop of internal debate problems.

In order to gain a climate change public image, there needs to be consensus about the CDA’s view on climate change and the vast majority of the CDA needs to feel comfortable

and competent on defending it. According to Farquhar (2006), “ideological conflict is crucial for meaning-making and to achieve hegemony.” Only if a multitude of opinions collide and are being discussed, full and homogenous external communication outputs can be created. Otherwise, party members might feel overheard and thereby develop a negative attitude towards the climate change discussion within the CDA.

The credibility issue of delving into green politics is best described in the words of a political scientist (anonymous), contacted by us for an interview on the topic. He accuses the CDA of “greenwashing operations” and “blocking ecologic progress”. Knowing that parties tend to converge their policies (Van den Brug, 1999), a strong public image cannot only enrapture the public but also makes the CDA stand out from its political rivals.

Public opinion theories epitomise the perceived competence of a party on an issue, performance evaluations and generalised competence (Green & Jennings, 2017). To acquire a new publicly perceived competence in the field of climate change issues, the CDA should root the eligibility and justification in core values and competences it has already built (Green & Jennings, 2017).

#### Advice:

The suggestions described above are elements that can be contextualised in a larger, more in-depth process of party renewal and the resurrection of the CDA and should be placed post disputationum upon the core values and ideology. In order to be able to carry out such a discussion, one should create a communication platform for the CDA politicians through which they can channel their beliefs and opinions on climate change. A platform could be for example an intraweb which features discussion forums and comment sections that are accessible for every party member. Given the variety of perspectives outlined above, such an apparatus would trigger discussion immediately. Furthermore, the chair of a workgroup of the

CDJA proposes that one could add workgroups and initiatives such as the “sustainability network” or the “Duurzaamheidsoverleg Politieke Jongeren (DOPJ)” to the platform or collective of public party events (D. Otten, personal communication, May 15, 2020) in order to provoke a vivid discussion within the whole party. A good starting point for an internal debate on climate change could be the core values of the CDA.

### *Core values at the heart of the climate change policy*

The core values of the CDA have the potential to be at the heart of the climate change policy of the CDA. Especially stewardship is a value that goes well with it. This value was also often mentioned in the interviews with the local and national CDA members when we talked about a Christian democratic approach to climate change. It encompasses exactly the goal of a climate change policy: to protect the earth and pass it on in a good condition. The party could use this value to take more action and initiate an internal debate on the topic of climate change within the party.

Not only stewardship fits well with a climate change policy, but also shared responsibility and solidarity. Protecting the earth is a mutual obligation, and the participation of all individuals and organizations is needed. Not all people will be able to contribute as much. That is why the ones who do have the resources to contribute to climate mitigation should at least partially carry the burden for people who have less resources available.

All these core values fit perfectly with the topic of climate change and can help the CDA to create its climate change policy. Nonetheless, there also seem to be values that don't go well with a more active stance on climate change. For example, the CDA prefers to have a government with a withdrawn attitude, to give people the chance to decide for themselves how to deal with a problem and only interfere when necessary. In principle, different people and organisations are responsible for the things that are going on in society

(square sovereignty). Primarily, individuals have a big responsibility for themselves and their society. The CDA believes in a strong civil society because it catalyses competences and knowledge of individuals to take care of a specific social aspect. Only when the society cannot take care of a certain problem on its own, the government takes responsibility (CDA, n.d.). Climate change is such a pervasive problem that the government now needs to intervene with a climate change policy. It is still a shared responsibility, which means that everyone has to help to solve the problem. But the CDA has to give the right example to the people.

#### Advice:

The CDA can use its core values to develop its own standpoint on climate change and think about a climate change policy that fit the party. The CDA needs to give the right example and be a good role model to make the people more aware of climate change, which was also mentioned by a professor of international and European law at the Radboud University. It could for example look for a climate change policy that has an economical advantage but is also sustainable, or use an approach where the government works together with the civil society, like working on local initiatives to make a municipality more sustainable.

### **The opportunity to occupy a unique position**

#### *Combining the economy and climate change*

In the current political landscape, it is difficult for a Christian democratic, centrist party to occupy a meaningful position that clearly distinguishes it from other parties (Ten Napel & Lucardie, 1994).

The CDA supports competition and growth without excessive state intervention (Pellikaan, de Lange, & van der Meer, 2007). Based on its values of subsidiarity and shared

responsibility the CDA is also in favour of letting stakeholders take responsibility at the lowest possible level. Currently the debate on climate change is being led by parties on the left side of the political spectrum, like GroenLinks. These parties have a different economic orientation than the CDA, since they are in favour of restrictive state intervention. The CDA does not endorse controlling measures (such as strict in- and output limits). In contrast to liberal parties however, the CDA is in favor of market based environmental policy instruments. Therefore, the CDA occupies a centrist role in this discussion on state intervention in the debate on climate change mitigation.

The current inaction of the CDA is a result of its concern about the possible negative effects of a climate change policy for the economy. If businesses are subjected to restrictive emission regulations, competitiveness, jobs and economic growth appear to be at risk. On the other hand, to reach climate goals like the Paris agreement and in face of the Urgenda case, it is inevitable that the government takes decisive action in climate mitigation, especially in emission reduction. So far, this conflict to both meet the climate goals and ensure economic growth has only contributed to the CDA's vague position in the debate.

#### Advice:

Instead of keeping silent on the issue of climate change, the CDA should use its centrist position on the political spectrum to its advantage. The party should come up with realistic solutions to act as a mediator between social democratic and liberal agents to find a middle ground for state intervention in the climate debate. If the CDA is able to create a clear standpoint in the climate change debate in coherence with its values, the apparent downside of its centrist position could be turned into a strength. A centrist position can be perceived as vague and requires more explanation than a polarised position. Nevertheless, if the CDA is able to effectively communicate its standpoint, it can differentiate itself from other parties.

So far, parties that actively address climate change are less concerned about the

effects of a climate change policy on free markets and economic growth, which leaves room for the CDA to take a constructive position in the debate. Even though there appears to be a conflict between the values and economic position of the CDA and effective climate action, there are many ways to incorporate economic principles of the CDA into a sustainable climate strategy. Examples are market based climate change policy instruments that are already part of the Green Deal, like the industrial strategy for a clean and circular economy.

Furthermore, the economic interests of the CDA and the resulting relationships with industries are what makes its position in the debate on a climate change policy especially relevant. As the senior policy advisor of the European Environment Bureau, Barbara Mariani, elaborated, the CDA should make use of its potentially mediating role.

*“That’s the contribution this political area in the parliament here but also in the Netherlands should make. Starting with a very close, regular dialogue with industry, which are the stakeholders that interest them most so far, in order to come up with concrete solutions, not just statements - concrete solutions - on how to transition their polluting industries towards new businesses.”*

In conclusion, the CDA must proactively transform the economy in a sustainable way. Caring about economic growth and job stability should not be considered an antagonist to a climate change policy but rather integrated into a unique, comprehensive approach to responsibly transform the economy. The CDA can create a different narrative in the debate on climate change, based on its position on the political spectrum, especially regarding economic orientation.

*A climate change policy and new voters*

The CDA is a Christian democratic party. For a long time, the CDA attracted voters from the Christian pillars in the Netherlands. However, there has been a decreasing trend in the amount of people voting for the CDA, with the historically big loss of voters in 2010 as the epitome (from 41 to 21 seats). In 2012, the amount of seats declined even further. An important explanation for this decreasing trend is the *ontzuiling* of the Netherlands, combined with the secularisation of society (Te Grotenhuis et al., 2012). Acknowledging the fact that religion and a religious pillar no longer play major roles in the lives of people in the Netherlands, the CDA presented itself as a party looking after the interests of farmers and (middle-class) families (Brandsma, 2019; Siegmann, 2019), among others.

However, it is questionable to what extent these groups in society are a crucial part of the electorate of the CDA. Electoral research can give an idea of these constituencies. The Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) (2017) in the Netherlands has done research on the characteristics of the CDA voters of the national elections in 2012. On an educational level of the electorate there is no consensus: Research of the Ipsos bureau on European elections in 2019 shows that 46% of the voters for the CDA were highly educated (Kanne, Hoofwegen, Van Kooiman & Van Engeland, 2019), while data collected by the CBS on the demographic characteristics of voters of the National Elections in 2010 and 2012 (CBS Statline 2011; CBS Statline 2013) shows that people who voted for the CDA mostly had a lower educational level (see also Table 1). When looking at the urbanity, we see that the biggest part of the voters come from rural areas in the Netherlands. This strongly suggests that a part of the electorate still consists of farmers or possibly people that sympathise with farmers.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from Table 1 is that not many young voters support the CDA (more than one third is aged 65 or older). Having a more climate change oriented policy could change that for several reasons. People who are born after 1980 are generally more concerned about the impact of climate change. Research indicates that in

the age group of 18 to 34, 61% is concerned about climate change compared to 48% among people who are older than 35 years (“Netherlands: concern about climate change, by age group 2019,” n.d.).

This concern is not only visible in attitudes, but also in behaviour: 74% of the age group until 35 would spend more money on sustainable products (Curtin, 2020). Moreover, 87% thinks that urgent environmental issues need to be addressed in politics. This is why younger people have a bigger likelihood to vote for a party that addresses climate change. However, the CDA is not among those parties, possibly because the mean age of the party members is 52 (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2019) and climate change is for these people considered less of an urgency. This leads to the fact that young, environment-oriented voters probably do not feel attracted by the CDA.

### Gemiddelde leeftijd raadsleden naar politieke partij

De gemiddelde leeftijd van raadsleden per politieke partij in te zien in tabel 7 en in figuur 7.

**Tabel 7** Gemiddelde leeftijd raadsleden naar politieke partij

	2006	2010	2014	2018	2019
<b>CDA</b>	52,0	51,7	50,8	51,1	51,5
<b>ChristenUnie</b>	50,6	49,8	49,9	51,3	51,2
<b>D66</b>	51,2	48,0	47,3	48,0	48,5
<b>GroenLinks</b>	48,5	48,6	48,2	49,6	50,0
<b>Lokale partijen</b>	54,6	54,1	54,2	55,6	56,3
<b>Overige partijen</b>		51,7	51,1	49,6	50,7
<b>PvdA</b>	49,6	50,3	50,8	51,8	52,1
<b>SGP</b>	49,6	47,8	46,9	47,5	48,5
<b>SP</b>	46,7	48,0	48,2	50,4	51,5
<b>VVD</b>	52,0	50,6	49,7	49,5	49,9
<b>Totaal</b>	51,9	51,5	51,2	52,2	52,8

*Image 1:* Gemiddelde leeftijd raadsleden naar politieke partij.  
Source: Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2019

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of voters of the CDA in 2010 and 2012**

	2010	2012
	CDA (%)	CDA (%)
<b>Sex: Male</b>	8	6
<b>Sex: Female</b>	12	6
<b>Age: 18 to 25</b>	6	4
<b>Age: 25 to 35</b>	7	1
<b>Age: 35 to 45</b>	9	5
<b>Age: 45 to 55</b>	8	4
<b>Age: 55 to 65</b>	10	5
<b>Age: 65 to 75</b>	17	11
<b>Age: 75 or older</b>	23	22
<b>Education: Low*</b>	22	14
<b>Education: Middle*</b>	11	6
<b>Education: High*</b>	8	5
<b>Urbanity: Very strong urban</b>	5	2
<b>Urbanity: Strong urban</b>	6	6
<b>Urbanity: Mediate urban</b>	11	6
<b>Urbanity: Low urban</b>	16	9
<b>Urbanity: Not urban</b>	17	10

Source: CBS Statline 2011-2013.

Notes: \*Low: Lower vocational education and first 3 years of havo, Middle: Middle

Vocational Education, Havo, Pre-University Education, High: Higher Vocational Education,

University

### Advice:

Thus, it is clear that there are some unclarities regarding the electorate of the CDA. First of all, it would be wise to do research on important characteristics of the voters, in order to verify or falsify claims on which party strategies are now based. Regarding climate change policy, it would be important to know if it is true that farmers are still a core constituency of the CDA. Also, age, religion, income and educational level could be important predictors of attitudes concerning climate change (Kanne et al., 2019). This information would give the CDA a clear view of its target groups and of its possible strategies when it comes to a climate change policy.

The biggest risk perceived by the CDA in terms of losing voters by adopting a climate change policy is losing the electoral support of farmers. A climate change policy can put restrictions on the farmers, making them choose other parties that have a policy that focuses less on climate change and sustainability. Meanwhile, competition with other political parties regarding the appealing of farmers' interests is rising. For instance, Thierry Baudet, leader of the FvD, has claimed to become the new party supporting the farmers as a reaction on the protests of farmers against emission regulations (Engelbart, 2020). This competition can also be seen on a provincial level. In the government of the province of Brabant, where the CDA has always had a strong position, this party will now need to cooperate with the FvD in order to reach a majority (Smit, 2020). The CDA should view this competition as an extra incentive to take a clear stance on a climate change policy and the role of farmers. Concerning the adaptation of this climate change policy, the party shouldn't be too afraid of losing voters. The idea of losing all the farmers might not be correct, as expressed in the following quote from an assistant professor in Sociology at the Radboud University:

*"From the idea of stewardship, a new agenda could be formulated, in which the farmers will be involved. The CDA does have a good connection with the farmers, while other parties do not. Most farmers have compassion with animals and are not asking for the enormous industrial farms or pesticides, as long as they bring home the bacon. So, the approach of the CDA should be to look at sustainable solutions, together with the farmers."*

Obviously, this does not apply to all farmers according to the before-mentioned assistant professor in Sociology. Yet, this risk of losing farmers is problematic when we look at the short term. In the long run however, there is almost no escape from a more sustainable agriculture. The European Green Deal proposes a new vision on agriculture, and it will be impossible to ignore this as a country (European Commission, n.d.). The CDA could see this need for change as an opportunity to become the party that has taken important steps in making agriculture more sustainable, while also taking the considerations of farmers into account. In order to do so, the party could start considering the ideas proposed by its own scientific institute, that has written a vision on the future in which it gives an outline of the Netherlands in 10 years. In this report, the institute proposes to invest more in sustainable farming, where about half of the farmers produce for the world market, while the other half sells their produce straight to the people living close by (Wetenschappelijk Instituut CDA, 2019). It is also possible to ask the help of farmers that already have sustainable farms. They could share knowledge to more traditional farmers on how to become more sustainable, which would also fit the core value of shared responsibility. So, the CDA could view this as a win-win situation. If the party has a wrong image of its voters and farmers are not a big part of the electorate anymore, as some data suggests, it could regain the votes of these farmers by introducing a sustainable policy in which this group feels taken into account. If the CDA has the right image of its voters, it should not be afraid of losing them, because there are solutions that include intact relationships with farmers.

The number of voters for the CDA could even increase, if it focused more on attracting young people. To guarantee that the party can be appealing to younger people, it is wise for the CDA to include climate change in its policy. Additionally, there is a higher probability to gain younger party members when addressing climate change in its program with sticking to its core values. Additionally, younger party members can be a helpful tool when addressing climate change. These younger party members can be an inspiration for young voters to vote for the CDA, because it is easier to identify with the ideas of people of the same age group (Cary, Chasteen & Cadieux, 2013).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to “break the silence” and make some of the unspoken concerns within the CDA explicit. We intended to provoke and criticize, to stimulate thoughts and self-reflection and to most importantly inspire and encourage CDA politicians to finally initiate an internal debate on one of today’s key social and political issues: climate change.

By analysing the current situation of the CDA, we recognized that the difficulties and dilemmas the party is currently facing are anything but easy to deal with. However, it is crucial to address these problems. This is because uncertainty about the compatibility of core values and implicit attitudes of the CDA is what in the end leads to inactivity concerning climate change.

Creating a unique Christian democratic climate strategy might seem like a big challenge, but we believe that if the CDA manages to get going and change perspective, this challenge could be used to the party’s advantage. Climate change is an important issue today and will be a pressing issue tomorrow. In the future, people will progressively attach more and more importance to climate change mitigation.

Particularly with regard to the upcoming elections, there seems to be growing opportunity for the CDA to occupy a unique position in the climate change debate and in that way attract new voters. By providing more considerate and reasonable solutions than other parties, their position would be highly valuable for the broad public. Thereby, the CDA would ensure that every level of society is being actively involved in the issue of climate change mitigation.

Besides the potential of gaining new voters, there is also the opportunity of reinforcing the commitment of traditional voters, especially regarding farmers. This goal could be achieved by once again guiding major sustainability transitions in the agricultural

sector. In case of success, the CDA could take a leading position in that domain and simultaneously strengthen the trust of the farmers.

Now, it is in the CDA's hands to take the first step in the right direction and proactively discuss, share opinions, criticize and stimulate thoughts and ideas. Workshops, seminars or discussion rounds of various kinds will be necessary to get the process of creating a unique position in the climate debate going. Now is the time to take this huge opportunity and integrate an effective climate change policy with existing core values of the party. All the CDA needs to do is build up on what is already there.

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## **Appendix - List of Interviewees**

### **Aaltsje Meinderts**

Council member, CDA Leeuwarden

### **Arjen Siegmann**

Researcher in socioeconomic matters, scientific research institute of the CDA Den Haag

### **Barbara Mariani**

Senior policy officer for climate, European Environmental Bureau

### **Christian Egenhofer**

Senior research fellow and head of the Energy and Climate programme, CEPS think tank

### **Dirk Otten**

Chair of the workgroup Sustainability, Nature and Agriculture, CDJA

### **Frank Beck**

Communication and marketing, national CDA

### **Franc Bogovič**

Committee of regional development and of agriculture and rural development, EPP

### **Frank Jonk**

Council member, CDA Berkelland

### **Henri de Waele**

Professor of International and European Law, Radboud University Nijmegen,

### **Hielke Onnink**

Chair of the CDJA

### **Jan Pieter van der Schans**

Floor leader and council member, CDA Ede

### **Lasse Böhm**

Head of Economy and Environment working group, EPP

### **Marc Pittie**

Agricultural sector working group, ClientEarth

### **Matteo Albania**

Communication and marketing officer, EPP

### **Milan Elkerbout**

Research fellow in the Energy, Resources and Climate Change Unit, CEPS think tank

### **Niels Spierings**

Assistant Professor for Sociology, Radboud University

**Sebastian Hense**

Council member, CDU Wesel (Germany)

**Uilke Attema**

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**Ward Scheelen**

Specialist in European policy-making processes in sustainability and energy, Dr2 Consultants