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### Escalated Force as a Model of Protest Policing: A Case Study of the Rotterdam 2021 Protests

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# Escalated Force as a Model of Protest Policing: A Case Study of the Rotterdam 2021 Protests<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract<sup>3</sup>

Since the pandemic outbreak, the Netherlands has been repeatedly gripped by protests over successive restrictions. Protesters were often characterized by aggression and violence, so they had to be demobilized to restore order to the streets. In some cases, the police were forced to use coercive measures. Nonetheless, the November 2021 protest in Rotterdam caused considerable controversy. During the demonstration, gunshots were fired at demonstrators for the first time in a dozen years. This article aims to attribute the strategy of police action during the Rotterdam protests to one of the two models determined by McPhail, Schweingruber, and McCarthy and operationalized by Rak. The study draws on qualitative source analysis and the content analysis technique. The most opinion-forming Dutch news sites, both Dutch- and English-language, were used as sources. These sources were supported by international news sites and channels on the streaming service YouTube. Additionally, the Rotterdam police's Twitter account and the official politie.nl website were analyzed. A theoretically grounded hypothesis was posited that: during the Rotterdam protests in November 2021, the police, due to the dynamic development of the rally, used a model closer to an escalated force. However, it did not occur in its pure form.

**Keywords:** Protest; protest policing; police; riots; civil disorder.

## Introduction

Since the pandemic outbreak in the Netherlands, protesters have opposed the restrictions. Nevertheless, the initial protests were peaceful. The first significant unrest occurred in January 2021, when the rulers decided to impose a curfew to protect the public from the spread of coronavirus. After the announcement, violent clashes lasted for three days in cities such as Eindhoven and Amsterdam. Cars were set on fire, public property was destroyed, and there were attacks targeting police officers carrying out orders. Despite previous demonstrations, the most controversial protests occurred in Rotterdam on November 19, 2021. During the earlier gatherings, police were permitted to use water cannons and dogs or mounted police to end demonstrations. There were also multiple arrests, but it was not until Rotterdam that the first gunshots were fired. It caused a stir among the public both in the Netherlands and internationally. This article aims to attribute the strategy of police action during the Rotterdam protests to one of the two models of protest policing, i.e., escalated force and negotiated management.

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## Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Clark McPhail, David Schweingruber, and John McCarthy determined two models of protest policing, i.e., negotiated management and escalated force. Joanna Rak (2021) operationalized them. Police behavior is on the continuum determined by the following dimensions: (I) the extent to which the police respect and protect the rights of protesters; (II) the extent to which the police are tolerant of disruptions occurring during an ongoing protest; (III) the nature of communication between the police and demonstrators; (IV) the extent and manner of the use of arrests as a method of managing demonstrators; (V) the extent and manner of the use of force or in combination with arrests to control demonstrators (Rak, 2021). The extreme values of protest policing determine a continuum. The first is a value corresponding to escalated force, while the second is that of negotiated management.

The extent to which police respect and protect the rights of protesters: (1) officers do not recognize freedom of assembly. Moreover, permits for protests are not issued. (2) officers protect freedoms, which is its primary purpose occurring on par with protecting life and property.

The extent of police tolerance for disturbances occurring during an ongoing protest: (1) The police only recognize peaceful forms of protest. Any disruptions that occur that include conditions previously unknown to protest officials are not tolerated by law enforcement. (2) All of the protesters are protected. Unregistered protests that arise spontaneously do not require a permit. While the police seek to limit possible disruptions caused by demonstrations, these are not a reason to end them.

The nature of communication between police and demonstrators: (1) communication between law enforcement and demonstrators is minimal. Police avoid consulting and negotiating with protesters before and during gatherings. (2) Communication is a necessary form of organized assemblies that protects the right to assemble and maintains control over it. It keeps the disruptions that occur at a level acceptable to the police. The police strive to support interaction with protesters before and during the assembly. Protesters need the police to protect a given gathering. The police do not have total control over the protest, as part of it is handed over to the protesters, who have their coordinators (Rak, 2022).

The scope and use of arrests as a method of managing demonstrators: (1) arrests are not necessarily supported by legal grounds; they also occur in the absence of violations of legal norms. The response to breaches of the law is immediate. During arrests, physical force is applied, particularly to protesters who appear to be the most active; (2) They are used arrests as a last resort and only against those protesters who have committed violations of legal norms. The necessary documentation is drawn up

from the conduct of such actions, and numerous warnings precede the arrests themselves. Protesters are repeatedly informed that they are violating the law and allowed to stop their activities.

The extent and manner of using force instead of or in conjunction with arrests to control demonstrators: (1) despite the occurrence of arrests, the use of force as physical punishment against protesters is also emerging. By physical force, we mean using tear gas, batons, electric stun guns, horses, and dogs. The force gradually escalates until the goal is achieved - compliance with police orders; (2) force is used only when required to carry out duties such as protecting people, public order, and property. Clashes with protesters are avoided, and negotiation and cordoning off the demonstration area is essential (Rak, 2021).

Qualitative source analysis using the content analysis technique has been used to conduct this study. As a research tool, the models presented by McPhail, McCarthy, and Schweingruber and operationalized by Rak (2021), sources such as the most opinion-forming Dutch news sites and English-language Dutch news sites will be analyzed. The analysis will be supplemented by international sources such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, and The Guardian. It should be noted that most of these broadcasters also have their channels on the YouTube streaming portal, so in addition to written information, footage of November 19, 2021, protest in Rotterdam can also be found. In addition, the Twitter feed of the Rotterdam police (POL\_Rotterdam) will be analyzed as an additional source as the official police website (politie.nl). The analysis will consist of reviewing written information and videos, as well as photos of the protests. Then, based on the literature, an attempt will be made to assign to which of the two extremes of the five variables the actions taken by officers fit. Based on the literature, a theoretically grounded hypothesis was established: During the November 2021 protests in Rotterdam, the police used an escalated force model due to the dynamic nature of the rally.

## **Research findings**

The cause of the outbreak of the protest, and subsequent rioting, was the tightening of existing regulations in the Netherlands regarding the coronavirus pandemic. After the resurgence of infections, the Dutch government decided to introduce a partial lockdown whereby bars and restaurants could be open until a maximum of 8 p.m. At the same time, stores had to close at 6 p.m. When the present riots broke out in November, they considered introducing a 2G rule (DeTelegraaf, 2021). The introduction of this rule would have restricted the use of sectors such as culture and food service to unvaccinated people, who until now had been able to use these sectors with a negative test for COVID-19 (Deutsch, 2021). This proposal could have been perceived as an attempt to segregate society. Further consequences may have been the feeling born in the protesters portrayed by Reicher

and Stott (2020), that is, a division between "us" (the unvaccinated, who do not support restrictions) and "them" (those in power and the police officers who carry out the orders of those in power). The Netherlands was the first Western European country to decide to implement a partial lockdown starting in the summer of 2021.

On November 19 at around 8 p.m., about 100 people gathered on the Coolsingel in Rotterdam for an unregistered protest (DutchNews, 2021). Initially, according to the mayor, they knew of the upcoming demonstration thanks to intelligence services and wanted to give the protesters a place to express their views. Nevertheless, more people showed up than expected, and the situation developed rapidly. The police quickly lost control of the aggressively behaving crowd (Volkskrant, 2021). Therefore, the mayor issued an emergency order (Noodbevel), which prohibited people from being in and around Coolsingel and the two train stations. This emergency order is given in the event of disturbances or riots but can also be issued in fear of them (Article 175). Train services have also been suspended. These legal regulations, which automatically qualify the protest as illegal, meet the criteria of the escalated force model.

The tolerance for community disruption is much closer to the escalated force model. From the onset of the first aggressive behavior considered disruption, the mayor of the city of Rotterdam introduced the previously mentioned emergency order. As the recordings and police statements on Twitter (post from 9:27 p.m.) show, warning shots were fired initially (1-1-2 Renkum, 2021).

Communication between protesters and police also leans closer to the escalated force model. During the many previous protests in the Netherlands, a high level of police activity could be seen, among other channels such as Twitter or directly at the rally through voice messages with requests to leave the area. However, in the footage analyzed, the police only use sound signals like sirens and light signals (NBC News, 2021). Missing are any voice announcements that could have been heard during previous protests in the Netherlands (BBC, 2021).

The fourth dimension, regarding arrests, is questionable, as hundreds of demonstrators showed up at the demonstration, but only 49 people were arrested, according to a Rotterdam police release (Politie, 2021a). Police also asked for footage and photos of the riots to arrest those who acted unlawfully during these protests. They sought to apprehend all law-breaking protesters, as evidenced by posts on Twitter and the official police website. As mentioned earlier, voice announcements and warnings about law-breaking demonstrators are not heard in the riot footage, which locates protest policing closer to the escalated force model. Nevertheless, the footage of arrests does not show special police brutality as it did a few months earlier in Hague, which situates protest policing close to the negotiated

management (NBC News, 2021). Accordingly, in the absence of unambiguous characterizations of extreme police behavior, the present arrests must be placed between the model of negotiated management and the escalated force.

The final dimension is the extent and manner of the use of force. Officers took actions that caused much controversy after the events in Rotterdam. Rotterdam Police admitted to using firearms in an official statement. Warning and target shots were fired (Politie, 2021b). They were to protect the protesters and people from other institutions (fire departments) that had come to deal with the unrest and prevailing chaos in the streets (The Guardian, 2021). In the end, four people were injured by gunfire in the protest, while the total number of injured people who required assistance was 7. However, firearms were not the only means of using force to secure this protest. Both dogs, horses, special police forces, and water cannons were used to demobilize and disperse demonstrators in the streets. These measures aimed to bring the chaos that engulfed Rotterdam that night under control as quickly and effectively as possible.

## Conclusions

Police used a model closer to the escalated force than negotiated management when securing the Rotterdam protests on November 19, 2021. This conclusion allows us to accept the previously stated hypothesis. An essential element in this regard was the failure to issue voice commands before using force, as was the case during previous protests. Moreover, the definition of the protest as illegal, the lack of tolerance for any disruption, or the previously mentioned lack of communication between the police and the protesters proves that the police acted against the protesters and did not protect them and secure the demonstration.

The protesters were characterized by aggression and violence from the very beginning. The riots also resulted in injuries to officers, one of whom required hospitalization. Setting fire to cars and throwing bicycles, stones, or fireworks at police officers was not a peaceful attempt to express their views. Moreover, the radicalization of the protesters may have resulted from the division between "us" (the protesters) and "them" (the police, the mayor of Rotterdam, and the government). Media reports and a press conference by Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb indicate that police recognized hooligan fan groups during the riots. It may have influenced the course of the current protest, but it does not justify how the police acted with so much force in such a relatively short period.

Not all actions taken by the police could be placed on the extreme value continuum for the escalated force model. The protesters' behavior limited the use of the negotiated management model by the police. However, the decisions and reactions they made were immediate. Nevertheless, their steps



were closer to escalated force model. During the protest, there was a lack of communication between protesters and the police. It was decided to suppress the protest in the shortest possible time, with all available means authorized by the mayor of Rotterdam.

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