



Comment



Reaching the Right: Engaging Conservatives in Animal Welfare

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Across the world, many democracies have recently witnessed a shift towards the political right. This trend presents a challenge for the animal advocacy movement, as animal welfare concerns tend to be stronger among individuals holding left, rather than right political ideologies. Right-leaning individuals are more likely to endorse traditions, resist societal change, and are more supportive of human dominance over animals—factors predicting lower openness to animal welfare measures (e.g., [Dhont & Hodson, 2014](#); [Dhont et al., 2016](#); [Hoffarth et al., 2019](#)). Nonetheless, given the growing influence of the right, some animal advocates have begun to question whether the movement’s close association with the political left should be reconsidered ([Arévalo & Ólafsson, 2024](#); [Anthis, 2020](#); [Dhont & Ioannidou, 2025](#)).

The Arguments

A primary rationale for engaging right-leaning constituents is that their support may be essential for securing and implementing animal-friendly policies. Policies that improve animals’ living conditions or reform the food system require broad electoral support to surpass critical thresholds and to allow lawmakers to act without fear of public backlash. For example, in 2022, a referendum aimed at abolishing factory farming was rejected by



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62.9% of Swiss voters, with post-vote polls suggesting majority support among left-, but low support among center and right-leaning voters. By contrast, measures such as the U.S. “Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture Act” and the Danish “Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods” succeeded with considerable cross-party support. Essentially, considering current right-wing shifts, advocates may have little choice but to engage right-leaning voters and politicians if they want to advance animal welfare reforms.

Although the movement’s core values tend to fundamentally align with left-wing ideologies, focusing exclusively on left-leaning audiences risks further exacerbating existing polarization. If animal welfare continues to be perceived predominantly as a left-wing cause, it may be dragged into broader “culture war” dynamics, much like climate change. Rapidly depolarizing animal welfare is therefore critical, as intensified polarization could prove difficult to reverse later.

One important facilitating factor for engaging the right, discussed among advocates and academics, is that many right-leaning individuals may be receptive to animal suffering appeals. This hypothesis is based on the finding that people on opposing sides of the political spectrum typically show only small differences in how much they value preventing harm to others (Kivikangas et al., 2021). Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests that animal welfare arguments resonate quite considerably with (some) people on the right, and possibly more than comparable arguments about other issues associated with animal agriculture (e.g., environmental damage; Dhont et al., in preparation; Jenni & Hopwood, forthcoming).

Conversely, objections to engaging the right in animal welfare often emphasize potential unintended side effects and questions of feasibility. Even if many conservatives are sympathetic to animal welfare issues, they may have different ideals for policies (e.g., voluntary measures over regulations) and the treatment of animals (e.g., welfarist over rights-based approach) compared to their left-leaning counterparts. This has important implications for how to appeal to this audience. Advocates may need to tailor or reframe their arguments to resonate with right-leaning ideals. However, this approach may require softening core messages and risks alienating existing left-leaning supporters. Efforts to tailor these appeals may also require left-leaning advocates to exercise moral flexibility, potentially leading to feelings of inauthenticity (Isiminger & Giner-Sorolla, 2024).

Relatedly, advocates would need to avoid engaging with other connected, but highly polarized issues such as climate policy and social justice debates, that could alienate right-leaning individuals. In the long term, reorienting advocacy towards the right could risk unintentionally undermining group cohesions and creating tensions among existing supporters. It could also estrange potential allies (e.g., environmental organizations) and members whose cooperation and resources may be important for legislative success.

Given these concerns, it may be preferable for right-leaning advocates to engage with right-leaning audiences. This could also address another barrier, that is, people on

the right might have low trust in advocacy organizations they perceive as left-wing. Organizations with a conservative identity might be more credible and authentic, yet they are relatively rare. Thus, an opportunity (and challenge) for the animal welfare movement may be to support the creation and growth of these types of organizations.

Ideas for Future Research

Although these arguments are plausible, many rest on untested assumptions, making further research essential. A necessary first step is to generate an evidence-based understanding of what matters to conservative audiences regarding animals and the broader food and agriculture system. For example, they may envision somewhat different versions of animal welfare compared to individuals on the left. Moreover, it will be crucial to examine how animal-welfare concerns rank relative to related issues, such as environmental protection, public health, food security, and economic livelihood. Understanding these relative priorities can help inform which messages and policy designs are most likely to resonate. Future studies should test the extent to which messages and policies tailored to conservative ideals are more effective in evoking supportive opinions and behavior change.

Among left-leaning advocates, potential side-effects of reframing messages warrant examination. Key research questions include: how willing are advocates to adapt their arguments? Does tailoring messages to right-leaning audiences undermine their feelings of authenticity or moral commitment, even when it improves persuasion among the right? And what are the internal and external consequences of message adaptation, for example, effects on group cohesion and volunteer morale, as well as how adjacent movements or potential allies perceive and collaborate with reframed campaigns.

Beyond message content, messenger identity matters. Research should assess whether traditional advocacy organizations are perceived as overtly left-wing and whether this undermines attempts to engage the right. Relatedly, relying on theory on collective action and movement building, future work could examine how advocates might facilitate the creation of organizations with more conservative identities.

A lack of empirically backed arguments hinders progress in animal advocacy. It is therefore crucial for psychological research to examine the potential benefits and unintended consequences of engaging the political right, as well as the practical barriers to doing so. Such evidence will empower advocates to make informed decisions, guide the trajectory of the movement, and hopefully enhance the lives of more animals globally.

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