



The Political Salience of Animal Protection in the Netherlands (2012–2021) and Belgium (2010–2019): What do Dutch and Belgian Political Parties Pledge on Animal Welfare and Wildlife Conservation?

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Abstract

The Netherlands and Belgium are European Union (EU) states with a shared border and cultural similarities. Article 13 of the EU Treaty of Lisbon recognises animals as sentient beings. EU laws protect animal welfare and conservation, and member states can implement more stringent legislation. Political salience refers to the extent to which citizens are concerned about political issues. Issue salience can be measured by assessing references to animal protection in party political manifestos. This research analyses the political salience of animal protection in the Netherlands and Belgium. It analyses over 2600 statements on animal protection in Dutch (2012–2021) and Belgian (2010–2019) party manifestos across three consecutive national elections. Quantitative analysis reveals that in both the Netherlands and Belgium, animal protection became more salient during successive elections, with the total number of positive statements increasing and the total number of negative statements decreasing. Farmed animal welfare and wildlife/biodiversity were the most salient issues, although the focus in countries and regions differed. Dutch parties and those in the Walloon region of Belgium focused on farmed animal health and unnecessary suffering; Flemish parties stressed intensive agriculture and animal welfare. In Belgium, wildlife/biodiversity statements stressed the protection of local species; Dutch statements were strongly linked to agriculture. In both the Netherlands and Belgium, left-wing parties had more progressive policy statements, whilst right-wing parties prioritised economic prosperity over animal protection. This research provides the first academic analysis of animal protection policies in political manifestos in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Keywords Animal protection · Animal welfare · Issue salience · Wildlife conservation · Netherlands · Belgium

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Introduction

Across the European Union (EU) around 4.7 billion animals are used in agriculture and 11 million in research. Furthermore, EU citizens keep 65 million dogs, 99 million cats, and 7 million horses (McCulloch, 2018). Article 13 of Title II on the functioning of the EU (The Lisbon Treaty) recognises that animals are sentient and mandates member states to pay full regard to the welfare of animals in the formulation and implementation of policy in agriculture, fisheries, transport, internal market, research, and technological development (European Commission, 2007). The EU protects animals through legal directives and regulations in its areas of competence, though member states can implement more stringent animal welfare standards.

This research investigates the political salience of animal protection¹ by analysing political manifestos in the Netherlands (2012–2021) and Belgium (2010–2019).² Both countries follow a multiparty political system, in which parties compete and are elected to govern under a proportional representation system. The Netherlands and Belgium, which formed the United Kingdom of the Netherlands until 1830, share a common border and important parts of their history and culture. Furthermore, they were founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, which developed into the EU under the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. In a 2016 European Commission Eurobarometer survey, 70% of respondents in the Netherlands and 53% in Belgium considered it a duty to respect all animals (European Commission, 2016). This research analyses the political manifestos in the Netherlands and Belgium. It then provides a comparative analysis of the manifestos in both countries to provide further insight into different theoretical perspectives which influence policy-making (Vogeler, 2019).

Political salience is the degree to which citizens are concerned about a particular political issue and how this may influence their voting behaviour (Wlezien, 2005). Political parties draft manifestos with the aim to maximise electoral success. These programmes can thus be used as a measure of the importance voters attach to various policy issues (Däubler, 2012). They provide representative and accurate information on political parties' viewpoints at a certain moment in time (Chaney, 2014a). This is especially true in recent decades, as political manifestos have evolved from a few sheets of paper to political reference works written by various experts, focusing on policy, public opinion, and voter preference (Däubler, 2012). Politicisation explains how a policy issue gains electoral prominence, enters the political agenda, and becomes the subject of inter-party competition (Carter, 2006). Issue salience is used as an indicator to assess party competition through manifesto studies (Chaney et al., 2020).

The following section provides an overview of the literature on political salience and the development of policy in animal protection. It explores Chaney's work in

¹ In this paper, the term 'animal protection' is used as an umbrella term to cover animal welfare, wildlife conservation, and animal rights.

² The manifestos of the most recent three elections in the Netherlands and Belgium were analysed. At the beginning of the study in 2021, these were 2012, 2017 and 2021 for the Netherlands, and 2010, 2014 and 2019 for Belgium.

the United Kingdom (UK) (). Next, it discusses Vogeler's research on farmed animal welfare in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (2017a), animal welfare in German political party competition (2017b) and farmed animal welfare regulations in the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain (2019). The paper then addresses the legal and political features relevant to animal protection governance and policy in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Salience in Animal Protection

Chaney (2014b) used a mixed methods approach, analysing parliamentary Early Day Motions (EDMs)³ and election manifestos, to examine the policy framework and importance of animal welfare in the UK. Furthermore, Chaney (2014a) examined party politicisation of the environment, by analysing pledges in party manifestos for elections in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the context of multi-level governance. Chaney et al. (2020) used the same approach to examine animal welfare. Vogeler conducted a systematic policy analysis of farmed animal welfare in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Vogeler, 2017a), and a classification of the policy field of animal welfare in German political party competition (Vogeler, 2017b). Vogeler (2019) also systematically compared farmed animal welfare regulations in the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain, identifying societal concerns and political parties' emphasis on farmed animal welfare.

Vogeler (2017b) noted that most governing parties addressed farmed animal welfare. Chaney et al. (2020) concluded that meso-level⁴ pledges indicate that all parties want to take advantage of the growing support for farmed animal welfare. Vogeler (2017b, 2019) and Chaney (2014b) found that left-wing parties generally show a greater tendency to promote animal welfare. Chaney (2014b) noted that right-wing parties in the UK rely on the individual actions of MPs. Vogeler (2017b) illustrated how farmed animal welfare received more attention in German politics when the Green Party was active in the government and ministries responsible for animal welfare. Furthermore, she noticed that animal welfare policies have the potential to gain importance against the backdrop of socioeconomic developments and a change in societal priorities. This study could reveal similar patterns in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Chaney et al. (2020) noticed that animal welfare electoral politics are shaped by political parties' relationships with different policy communities. Furthermore, the study found that multi-level electoral politics offers new political spaces to promote animal welfare. Chaney (2014a) confirmed this trend, as the study showed that multi-level politics offers opportunities for greater environmental consideration. Vogeler's (2019) systematic comparison of farmed animal welfare regulations in the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain revealed societal concerns and political parties' emphasis on farmed animal welfare. Vogeler's (2017a) systematic policy

³ EDMs are one-sentence motions submitted by Members of Parliament (MPs) formally requesting a debate. It is unusual for EDMs to be debated due to Parliamentary time, but MPs can demonstrate support by signing the EDM.

⁴ Meso-level refers to community, county or in this case state level.

analysis of farmed animal welfare for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland showed how animal welfare policies differ between countries. It is expected that this research could show similar trends in the Netherlands and Belgium.

This manifesto study complements the work of Chaney and Vogeler, as it examines the animal protection trends and highlights the most salient animal protection issues in the Netherlands (2012 to 2021) and Belgium (2010 to 2019). Furthermore, it researches the relationship between parties' political preferences and statements on animal protection, whilst comparing Belgian and Dutch party programmes regarding animal protection policies. The politicisation of animal protection is the process by which an issue enters the political agenda, becoming the subject of competition between parties (Carter, 2006). It is predicted that the examination of party manifestos in the Netherlands (2012 to 2021) and Belgium (2010 to 2019) will reveal the politicisation of animal protection.

Specifically, the research investigates the following four questions:

1. What are the trends of animal protection salience from 2012 to 2021 in the Netherlands and from 2010 to 2019 for Belgium?
2. What animal protection issues are politically salient in both nations?
3. What is the relation between the political leaning of parties and their animal protection pledges?
4. How do Belgium and the Netherlands party manifestos compare?

The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a unitary state with a parliamentary political system, a constitutional monarchy and a proportional representation system of government. Mark Rutte, leader of People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, has been the Dutch Prime Minister since 2010. Over the past decades, the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, the conservative Christian Democratic Appeal and the centre-left Labour Party have dominated the political landscape. The first two represent agricultural interests; the latter favours a more environmentally conscious policy. In addition, the centre party Democrats 66 and left-wing parties GreenLeft and Socialist Party have also focused on environmental policy, whilst the conservative Christian Union and the right-wing Political Reformed Party have ties with rural agricultural communities. The far-right Party for Freedom supports animal protection policies but is sceptical about climate change issues (Otjes, 2016).

Animal Protection in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is Europe's most livestock-dense country, farming 100 million chickens, 12.5 million pigs and 4 million cows (Tweede Kamer, 2021). Furthermore, it is the world's largest exporter of live animals, with 363 million animals exported in 2017 alone (Levitt, 2020). The livestock industry has significantly affected biodiversity, with little or no pristine natural environment remaining. About two-thirds of the reptile, butterfly, mayfly and mushroom species are on the International Union

for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, many of which are not legally protected (Government of the Netherlands, 2020).

In 2006, the Netherlands became the first nation globally to have an animal advocacy party elected to its national parliament. Party for the Animals entered the Dutch Lower House with the aim of putting animal welfare on the political agenda (Otjes, 2016). It influenced the introduction of stricter rules for animal testing in 2013, the ban on mink breeding in 2020 and the revision of the Animals Act in 2021 (Partij voor de Dieren, 2022). According to the Animals Act, animals must have sufficient water, food and a suitable habitat with adequate space and good facilities. They should also be protected from injury, disease and stress, and have company from conspecifics. Transporting and killing animals must be done in a welfare-friendly manner (NVWA, 2022).

Belgium

Belgium is a federal state with three regions: northern Dutch-speaking Flanders, bilingual Brussels, and southern French-speaking Wallonia. It is a constitutional monarchy with a system of proportional representation in federal and regional governments. Political parties limit their electoral engagement to either Flanders or the Walloon region (van Haute et al., 2017). In the Brussels region, inhabitants can choose whether they vote for a Flemish or Walloon party. Therefore, this study only focuses on the Flanders and Walloon region.

Animal Protection in Belgium

The Belgian livestock industry is half the size of the Dutch livestock industry (Statbel, 2020). Due to heavy industrialization and urbanisation, Belgium's wildlife biodiversity is under serious threat. In 2014, the sixth state reform decentralized animal welfare from the federal to the regional governments (Vlaamse overheid, 2021). Belgium became the first EU member state with regional animal welfare ministers, which has led to considerable regional differences. Walloon minister Carlo di Antonio (Humanist Democratic Centre) initiated the Walloon Animal Welfare Code, banning cage systems for laying hens, dolphinariums and fairground ponies. Flemish minister Ben Weyts (New Flemish Alliance) introduced measures against animal abuse in slaughterhouses and implemented a positive list for reptiles kept as pets. Both ministers introduced a ban on unanaesthetised (non-stun) slaughter and fur farming, and mandated the compulsory neutering of cats (Gaia, 2019). Furthermore, both regions have animal welfare regulations for the keeping of pets and the breeding, transport and slaughter of farmed animals. There are also regulations for animal experimentation, zoos, fairs and circuses (Departement Omgeving, 2022).

Methodology

Salience is a key concept in political science research. Issue salience refers to the importance of certain topics and the degree to which they are a problem (Wlezien, 2005). As an indicator to assess competition between political parties, issue salience can identify the importance individual parties attach to specific policy issues. Party manifestos provide information on parties' viewpoints at a certain moment in time. Although manifestos can have limitations as data sources, they are useful for systematic analysis over time (Chaney, 2014a). This study follows the approach of other election studies, like Chaney (2014a) and Chaney et al. (2020), in which issue salience is determined by content analysis of manifestos (Neuendorf, 2002). It focuses on the absolute number of statements on animal protection.

Research Design

The research was conducted for three consecutive national elections: 2012, 2017 and 2021 in the Netherlands⁵ and 2010, 2014 and 2019 in Belgium.⁶ Only the manifestos of political parties that participated in all elections were included (see Table 1). Since 2014, the federal and regional elections in Belgium have taken place on the same day, with all parties launching one general election programme.

The manifestos from the Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium) were published in Dutch, whilst those from the Walloon region of Belgium were in French. Manifestos were downloaded as PDF files from the Manifesto Project website⁷ or requested through the political parties. A quantitative analysis was conducted by identifying sentences related to animal protection, reading relevant sections, and entering key words and phrases in the search bar of the PDF. For example, search terms included 'animal(s)', 'agriculture', 'fish(eries)', 'biodiversity', 'slaughter', 'transport', 'wild-life', etc. In line with Chaney et al. (2020), and in accordance with established practice in election studies (Volkens, 2004), the manifesto texts were broken down into *quasi-sentences*, i.e., the expression of a political idea or issue in verbal form. These *quasi-sentences* were tagged using a coding framework based on issues addressed in animal welfare policy literature (Chaney et al., 2020). Henceforth, these *quasi-sentences* are referred to in the paper as *statements*.

⁵ Dutch manifestos included in the study: Christen-Democratisch Appèl (2012, 2017, 2021), ChristenUnie (2012, 2017, 2021), Democraten 66 (2012, 2017, 2021), GroenLinks (2012, 2017, 2021), Partij van de Arbeid (2012, 2017, 2021), Partij voor de Dieren (2012, 2017, 2021), Partij voor de Vrijheid (2012, 2017, 2021), Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (2012a, 2012b, 2017, 2021), Socialistische Partij (2012a, 2012b, 2017, 2021), Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (2012, 2017, 2021).

⁶ Belgian manifestos included in the study: Bonte (2010), Centre démocrate humaniste (2010, 2014, 2019), Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams (2010, 2014, 2019), Ecolo (2010, 2014, 2019), Groen (2010, 2014, 2019), Mouvement Réformateur (2010, 2014, 2019), Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (2010, 2014, 2019), Open VLD (2010, 2014, 2019), Parti Socialiste (2010, 2014, 2019), Socialistische Partij Anders (2014, 2019), Vlaams Belang (2010, 2014, 2019).

⁷ URL: <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>

Table 1 Dutch political parties that published manifestos for national elections in 2012, 2017 and 2021, which are analysed in this research, and their location on the political spectrum (Otjes, 2016); and Belgian political parties that published manifestos for federal elections (2010) and regional and federal elections (2014 and 2019), which are analysed in this research, and their location on the political spectrum (van Haute et al., 2017)

Political spectrum	Political parties Netherlands	Political parties Belgium
Right	Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid)	Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang)
Centre-right	Political Reformed Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij) People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie)	Reformist Movement (Mouvement Réformateur) New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie)
Centre	Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl) Christian Union (ChristenUnie)	Christian Democratic and Flemish (Christen-Democratisch & Vlaams) Humanist Democratic Centre (Centre démocrate humaniste) Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD)
Centre-left	Democrats 66 (Democraten 66) GreenLeft (GroenLinks) Labour Party (Partij voor de Arbeid) Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren)	Socialist Party Different (Socilaistische Partij Anders—since 2020 Vooruit) Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste)
Left	Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij)	

Quantitative analysis may provide significant insights into the salience of animal protection. However, it cannot register the statement made or the strength of a party's position on a particular issue. To compensate for these limitations, a complementary qualitative analysis was used to reveal political intrigue between parties in their attempts to own an issue (Chaney, 2014a). Additionally, all statements were coded as pro or anti animal protection or neutral, using the notion of direction method. This method was first applied by Reingold (2000) to study the feminist, anti-feminist or neutral notion of parliamentary debates. All topics belonging to a certain issue category were clearly defined (see Table 2).

Only statements explicitly referring to animals were tagged. For example, statements to improve biodiversity were only tagged when animals were directly mentioned or involved.⁸ When certain statements were mentioned multiple times in the

⁸ For example, *Protect bees and bumblebees* (Groen, 2019) received a tag. *Our water must be cleaner* (GroenLinks, 2021) did not receive a tag.

Table 2 Animal protection tags and corresponding issue categories

Tag	Issue categories
Experimenting/testing	Animal testing, genetic engineering
Farmed animal welfare	Livestock, fish, fur farming; use of medication; related regulations; promotion of meat replacers and plant-based diets
Hunting/culling	Related issues and regulations
Sport	Competitions with animals, related regulation
Transport	Live animal transport, import, export
Pets	Animals kept as pets: dogs, horses, exotic pets, related regulation
Trade	Import/export of animals and animal products, WTO, related regulation
Slaughter	Regulations regarding slaughterhouses, ritual slaughter
EU	Related regulation
Wildlife/biodiversity	Fishing industry; wild animals in nature, water and cities; insects; regulations referring to biodiversity and animal protection
Regulation/criminal justice	General animal protection rules; proposed changes to legislation, governance structure; criminal law; food labelling; VAT rates for animal products; animal protection services (e.g., vet, rehoming); sanctions, punishments regarding animal abuse, neglect; support for animal protection organizations; animal helplines, police, other services
Entertainment	Statements regarding circuses, (petting) zoos, dolphinariums, animal fairs

same manifesto, for example those that were repeated in introductions and summaries, they were tagged once. Statements that referred to more than one issue were tagged once. The analysis of the manifestos was carried out by the first author, a native Dutch speaker with fluency in French and English. The second author is a native English speaker and does not speak or read Dutch and French. The analysis was conducted twice, in 2021 and 2022, to guarantee the robustness of the results.

Limitations

The methodological approach is in line with the work of Chaney et al. (2020), but differs in some respects. Chaney et al. (2020) coded statements twice or more when applying to different issue categories (for example, ‘we will legislate to introduce compulsory microchipping for dogs and cats’, was coded under *regulation* and *pets*). In contrast, in this research all statements were coded once only. The benefit of providing one code to each issue statement is that it provides a more reliable comparison of the number of statements in manifestos across election years, in order to measure salience quantitatively. Nevertheless, the use of a single code raises the question of which tag to use when statements cover multiple policy issues (e.g., both *EU* and *transport*). Although all topics belonging to a certain issue category were clearly defined (see Table 2), at times, it was difficult to assign a specific tag. For example, when animal transport was mentioned without reference to the EU, the statement was labelled *transport* as it could also refer to regional legislation. When the EU was mentioned, the statement on transport was labelled *EU*.

Another limitation relates to the findings on the evolution of the number of statements over time. Since the size of manifestos is inconsistent, measuring the number of statements only as an absolute number could be unreliable. In general, larger manifestos contain more statements. To rectify this, the election pages of each manifesto were counted and used as a benchmark to improve the reliability of the statements covered in the discussion section.

Findings

The findings are reported in three parts. In the first section, the analysis of manifestos from Dutch elections in 2012, 2017, and 2021 is presented. In the second section, the analysis of the Belgian manifestos from 2010, 2014, and 2019 is presented. For both the Netherlands and Belgium, there are three subsections: trends in animal protection salience, analysis of salience of animal protection issues by issue, and party-political analysis. In the third and final part, the Dutch and Belgian manifestos are compared.

The Netherlands

Trends in Animal Protection Salience

Figure 1 illustrates the increasing trend in political salience in Dutch national elections. In total, there were 462 statements in 2012, 497 in 2017, and 573 in 2021. The total number of statements increased over the course of the election cycles, as did the number of positive statements. The number of neutral statements remained largely unchanged. The proportion of negative or anti-animal protection statements was relatively consistent, with 23 (5.0%) in 2012, 23 (4.6%) in 2017, and 22 (3.9%) in 2021 (see Fig. 1). The absolute figures are considerably influenced by Party for the Animals.⁹

Analysis of Salience of Animal Protection Issues by Issue

In the Dutch national elections in 2012, 2017 and 2021, *farmed animal welfare* (27.9%) and *wildlife/biodiversity* (19.0%) were the most salient issues (see Fig. 2). While *farmed animal welfare* experienced a slight increase over election cycles, with 133 statements in 2012 and 148 statements in 2021, the focus on *wildlife/biodiversity* fluctuated. The attention to *slaughter*, *hunting/culling* and *entertainment* grew gradually over successive elections, while the attention to other issue categories fluctuated.

⁹ The party considerably influenced the absolute figures, as it accounted for 184 statements in 2012, 271 in 2017 and 295 in 2021. Since its establishment, Party for the Animals has developed from a one-issue party to a political party with a comprehensive political programme.

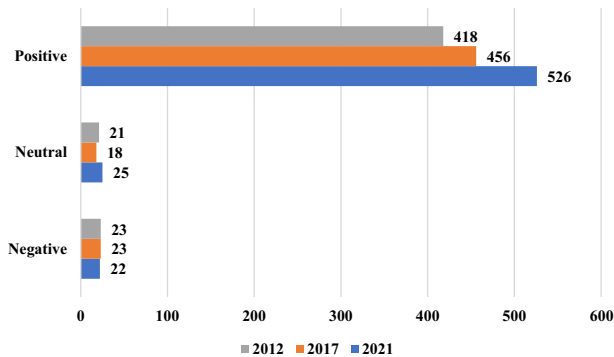


Fig. 1 Number of positive, negative, and neutral animal protection statements in Dutch manifestos for the 2012, 2017, and 2021 national elections

Party Political Analysis

Regarding *farmed animal welfare*, most Dutch parties stressed the importance of animal health and the use of antibiotics. Left-wing parties favoured phasing out livestock farming, alongside increased supervision of the sector, and more ambitious standards. Right-wing parties opposed restrictions on the number of farmed animals, advocating self-regulation, and remaining within the remit of EU standards. Out of all the parties, Political Reformed Party made the most anti-animal protection statements over the three elections (38.2%), with the proposal to reverse the ban on beak cutting (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, 2017, p. 70) being one example. People's Party for Freedom and Democracy represented 33.8% of the anti-animal protection statement, suggesting that there should be 'no legal requirement for grazing'¹⁰ (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, 2021, p. 91). Other parties that made anti-animal protection statements were the Christian Union (14.7%), Christian Democratic Appeal (8.8%), Party for Freedom (1.5%) and Labour Party (2.8%).

Concerning *wildlife/biodiversity*, right-wing parties focused on improving the fishing industry, whilst left-wing parties were concerned with improving biodiversity and marine life. Party for Freedom demanded 'no ban on pulse fishing'¹¹ (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2021, p. 41), People's Party for Freedom and Democracy stated that 'no more fishing areas should be closed than required by European legislation'¹² (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, 2017, p. 82). Left-wing parties were determined to tackle harmful fishing methods, to promote marine conservation and ambitious Natura 2000 legislation.¹³ Right-wing parties considered Natura 2000 to be a threat and administrative burden for the fishing and farming industry. The party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the centre-right People's Party for Freedom

¹⁰ 'Geen wettelijke verplichting tot weidegang'.

¹¹ 'Geen verbod pulsvisserij'.

¹² 'Er mogen niet meer visgebieden worden gesloten dan noodzakelijk is vanuit Europese wetgeving'.

¹³ Natura 2000 stands for a European network of natural and semi-natural areas, which are important as habitats for various animal and plant species.

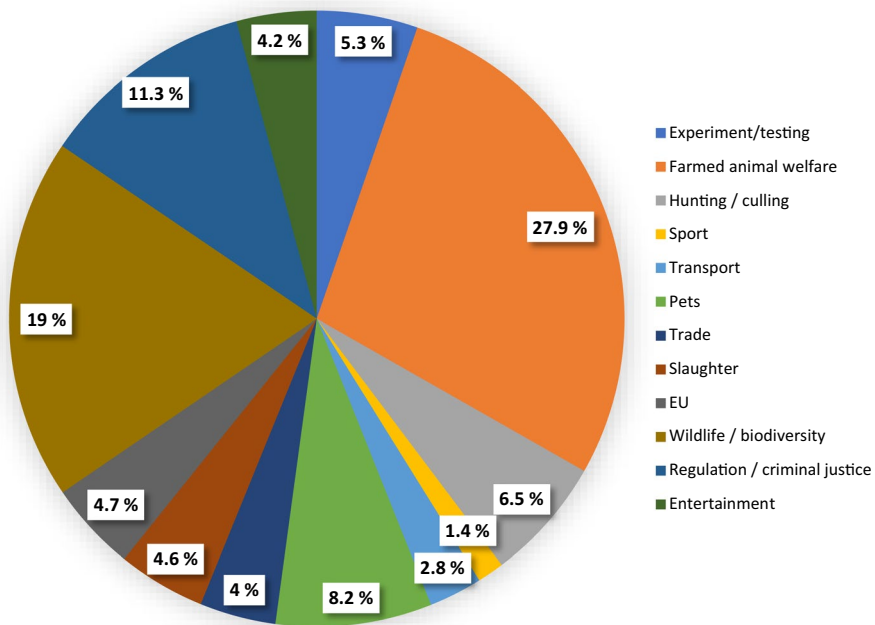


Fig. 2 Total number of animal protection statements per issue category, for the Dutch national elections of 2012, 2017 and 2021 combined

and Democracy, paid increasing attention to animal protection. The party progressed from 11 statements in 2012 to 48 in 2021. Political Reformed Party followed a similar pattern of increasing attention to animal protection. The far-right Party for Freedom was responsible for 2.0% of the total number of statements ($n = 1532$), and did not comment on 40% of the issue categories. However, the party did pay attention to *farmed animal welfare* and *wildlife/biodiversity* during the 2021 elections, issue categories that it had omitted in previous elections. Party for the Animals was the only Dutch party to address all issue categories (Fig. 3).

Belgium

Trends in Animal Protection Salience

Looking at the absolute figures over the election cycles of the Belgian national elections, there has been an increase in the salience of animal protection. Together, the Belgian political parties accounted for 115 statements in 2010, 454 in 2014, and 554 in 2019 (see Fig. 4). Especially in Flanders, it was not until 2014 that animal protection became more prominent in party manifestos. As the decade progressed, animal protection statements became more detailed and covered more issue categories. In

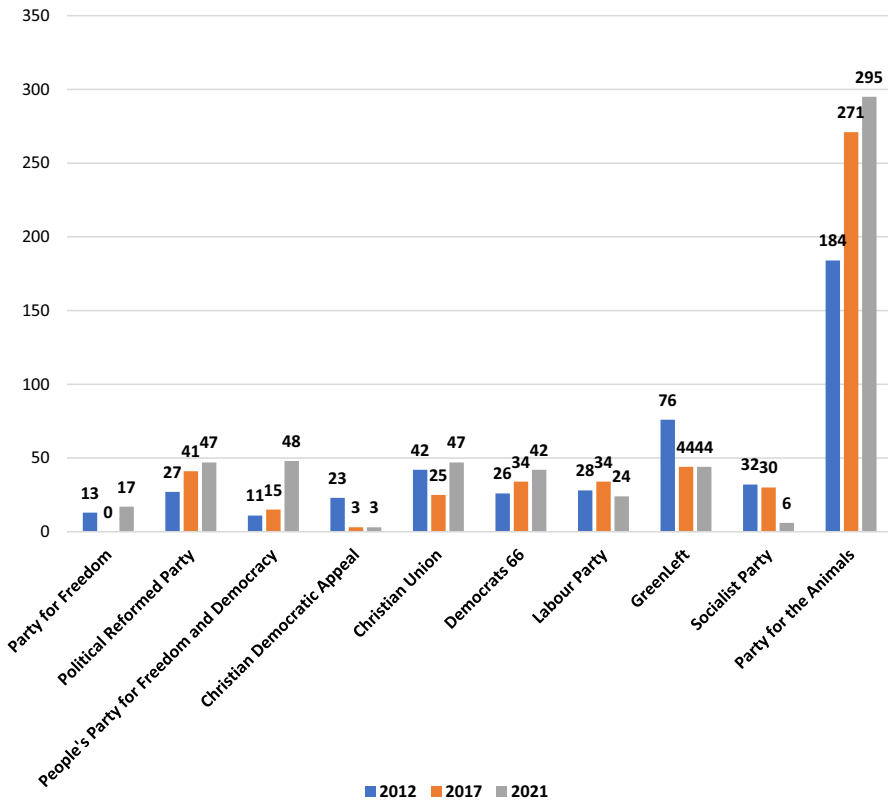


Fig. 3 Total number of animal protection statements per political party for Dutch national elections in 2012, 2017, and 2021. Parties organised from most right-wing (Party for Freedom) on the left-hand side, to most left-wing (Socialist Party) on the right-hand side

2010, 4.3% of all statements were anti-animal protection, compared to 4% and 1.4% in 2019 (see Fig. 4).

Analysis of Salience of Animal Protection Issues

Wildlife/biodiversity (21.3%) and *farmed animal welfare* (19.9%) were the most salient issue categories in Belgium (see Fig. 5). The focus on *wildlife/biodiversity* fluctuated, from 14 statements in 2010 to 129 in 2014, and 96 in 2019. The total number of statements on *farmed animal welfare* increased from 28 in 2010, 91 in 2014, to 105 in 2019. Apart from *sport*, an issue only mentioned by Green Party in 2014, all topics showed an upward trend from 2010 to 2019, with *regulation/criminal justice* being another notable outlier (9 statements in 2010, 34 in 2014 and 99 in 2019).

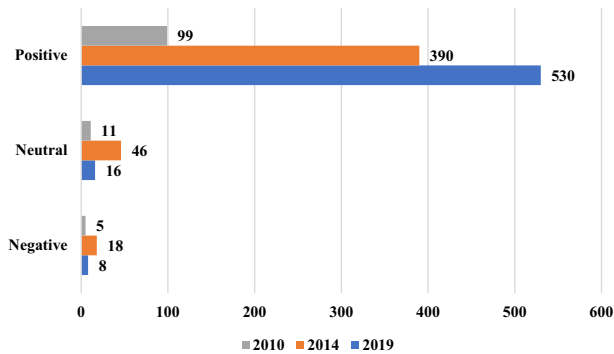


Fig. 4 Number of positive, negative, and neutral animal protection statements in Belgian manifestos for the 2010, 2014, and 2019 national elections

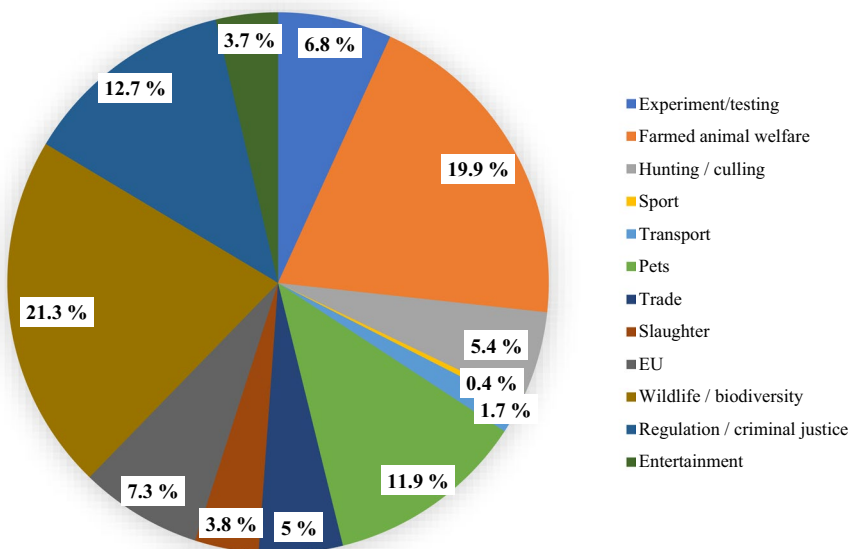


Fig. 5 Total number of animal protection statements per issue category, for the national elections of 2010, 2014 and 2019 combined

Party Political Analysis

The manifestos of six Flemish and four Walloon parties were analysed. In 2010, Walloon parties accounted for 78% of all animal protection statements ($n=115$). New Flemish Alliance, Flemish Interest and Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats did not mention animal protection in 2010 and accounted for the fewest statements from 2010 to 2019 (see Fig. 6). When all elections were considered, only Green Party provided an animal welfare programme that covered all issue categories.

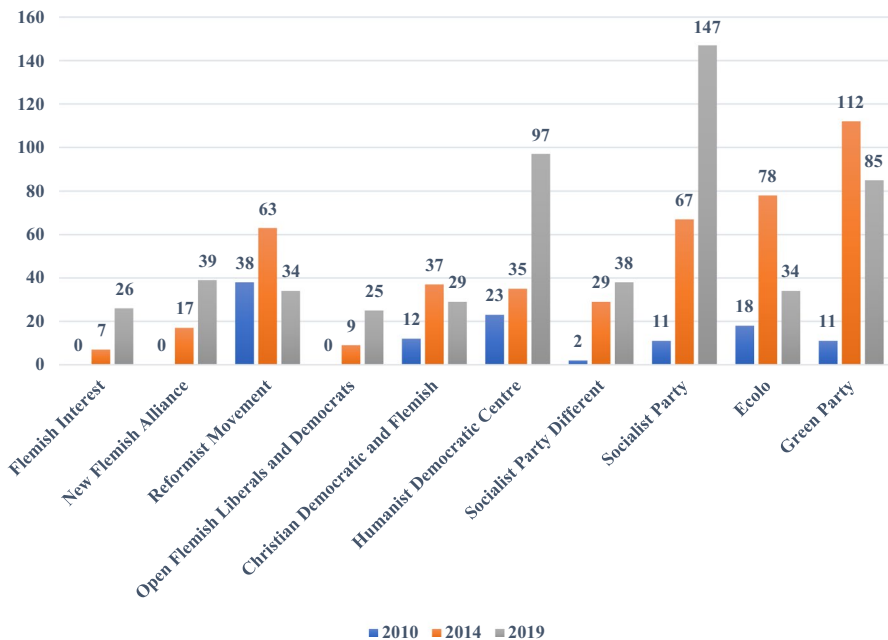


Fig. 6 Total number of animal protection statements per political party for Belgian national elections in 2010, 2014, and 2019. Parties organised from most right-wing (Flemish Interest) on the left-hand side, to most left-wing (Green Party) on the right-hand side

Regarding *wildlife/biodiversity*, invasive species is a shared concern in Flanders and Wallonia. From 2010 to 2019, the fishing industry, Natura 2000 areas, and bee welfare became more salient. Walloon parties and the Flemish Green Party launched the most ambitious proposals to protect wildlife and biodiversity. In 2010, the right-wing Reformist Movement addressed the potential biodiversity loss as a result of invasive species, highlighting the pet industry as a possible culprit, stating regulations for keeping new pets should ‘take into account the welfare of these animals, but also the necessary protection of biodiversity’¹⁴ (Mouvement Réformateur, 2014, p. 398).

The second most salient issue category was *farmed animal welfare*, with Green Party and Walloon parties producing the most statements. Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats, New Flemish Alliance and Flemish Interest paid little attention to *farmed animal welfare*, although the two former parties considered aquaculture to be an emerging farming method, with New Flemish Alliance stating that ‘the development of dynamic aquaculture can increase the self-sufficiency of the sector’¹⁵ (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, 2014, p. 20). Flemish parties emphasised intensive farming and related animal welfare concerns. Walloon parties focussed on eradicating

¹⁴ ‘Encadrer la détention des « Nouveaux animaux de compagnie », tenant compte du bien-être de ces animaux, mais aussi de la nécessaire protection de la biodiversité’.

¹⁵ ‘De ontwikkeling van een dynamische aquacultuur kan de zelfvoorziening van de sector verhogen’.

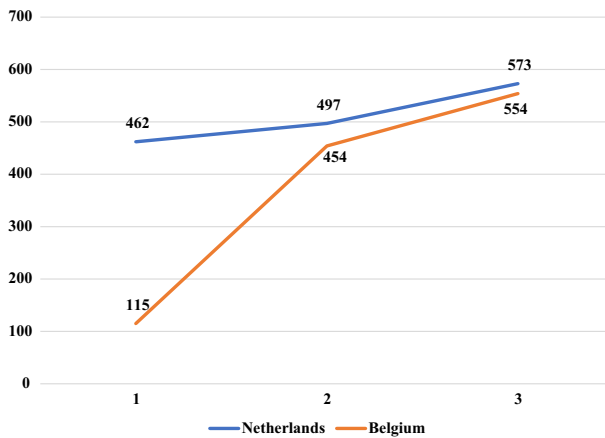


Fig. 7 Comparison of total number of animal protection statements for Belgian national elections in 2010 (1), 2014 (2), and 2019 (3) and Dutch national elections in 2012 (1), 2017 (2) and 2021 (3)

diseases, restricting the use of antibiotics, improving *farmed animal welfare*, and preventing unnecessary suffering by focusing on education, research, and shorter food chains. The Walloon Socialist Party and the Flemish Green Party pursued the most ambitious agendas, highlighting *farmed animal welfare* regulations that go beyond EU minimum standards. For instance, in 2019, the Flemish Green Party proposed the following: ‘Farmed animals are kept in a way that allows them to exhibit species-specific behaviour’ (Groen, 2019, p. 11).¹⁶

Comparing Manifestos of Political Parties in The Netherlands (2012–2021) and Belgium (2010–2019)

Issue Salience

From 2010 to 2019, animal protection has become increasingly salient in Belgium. In the Netherlands, parties already made a significant number of statements during the national elections of 2012 (see Fig. 7). Dutch political parties paid more attention to *farmed animal welfare* (27.9%), compared to Belgian political parties (19.9%). Whilst *farmed animal welfare* salience remained stable in the Netherlands, it became increasingly salient in Belgium.

For *wildlife/biodiversity*, the attention was comparable, with 21.3% of Belgian and 19% of Dutch statements referring to the issue. However, the salience of the issue fluctuated in both countries.

In addition, the increasing focus on animal protection can also be observed from the average number of statements per election, and the average number of pages per manifesto. In the Netherlands, the average number of manifesto pages fluctuated, from 64.8 in 2012 to 83.1 in 2017 and 72.8 in 2021. The average number of

¹⁶ ‘Landbouwdieren worden zo gehouden dat zij soorteigen gedrag kunnen vertonen’.

statements on animal protection increased across election cycles, from 46.2 in 2012 to 49.7 in 2017 and 57.3 in 2021. In Belgium, the average number of pages per manifesto varied, from 141 in 2010 to 323.5 in 2014 and 220.5 in 2021. The average number of statements increased from 11.5 in 2010 to 45.4 in 2014 and 55.4 in 2019. Thus, while the total number of manifesto pages fluctuated, the number of statements on animal protection increased.

Partisan Differences

There were both similarities and differences between the Netherlands and Belgium in the context of parties' political leaning. The Dutch Party for the Animals, the Flemish Green Party and the Walloon Socialist Party were responsible for the most animal protection statements. These left-wing parties had a broader and more in-depth view of animal protection. They paid more attention to the different issue categories, and provided more detailed statements to introduce new policies, and improve existing policies. In absolute figures, the Walloon Socialist Party was the most animal friendly party in Belgium, accounting for 225 statements over the last three elections. Both in the Netherlands and Belgium, centre, centre-right and right parties were in favour of animal protection, provided that measures would not affect the local economy and employment. However, the Walloon centre party Humanist Democratic Centre had a more positive attitude towards animal protection than its political ally Christian-Democratic and Flemish, which is situated more to the right. In the Netherlands, conservative parties and especially Reformed Political Party were often inclined to oppose measures they considered too far-reaching. The Dutch Party for Freedom and Flemish Interest (both far-right parties) placed particular emphasis on tougher penalties and higher fines for animal abuse and neglect. Furthermore, they wanted to give law enforcement authorities the ability to intervene more quickly and harshly. Nevertheless, both parties neglected to mention issues, such as sports, transport, and entertainment.

Discussion

Trends in Animal Protection Salience

During three consecutive national elections, animal protection has become a more salient issue in both the Netherlands (2012–2021) and Belgium (2010–2019) (see Fig. 7). Under the growing influence of Party for the Animals, the Netherlands saw the number of statements gradually increase, from 462 in 2012 to 573 in 2021 (see Fig. 3). Belgian political parties paid more attention to animal protection in consecutive elections, from 115 in 2010, to 554 in 2019, making more positive statements in the manifestos as the decade progressed (see Fig. 7). In both nations *farmed animal welfare* and *wildlife/biodiversity* received the most attention. Whereas left-wing parties tended to be in favour of more progressive animal protection measures,

right-wing parties had a more conservative view on the matter, resulting in less ambitious statements. Especially in the Netherlands, right-wing parties Political Reformed Party and People's Party for Freedom and Democracy have in some cases pledged to roll back animal-friendly policies as they might hamper the economy. Whilst the devolution of animal welfare may have affected the issue salience of animal protection in Belgium and Party for the Animals could have influenced the total number of animal protection statements in the Netherlands, other factors could also have influenced the increasing attention for animal protection.

Politically Salient Topics of Animal Protection

Farmed Animal Welfare

Farmed animal welfare was the most salient issue category in the Netherlands, the most livestock-dense country (Tweede Kamer, 2021) and the largest exporter of live animals worldwide (Levitt, 2020). Following outbreaks of Q fever (van der Hoek et al., 2010) and highly pathogenic avian influenza in recent years (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, 2021), animal health in agriculture has been a major area of concern in the Netherlands. Chaney et al. (2020) noticed the same course of events in the UK, with the salience of statements referring to animal diseases increasing in the 2003 elections, as a response to the 2001 Foot and Mouth disease outbreak. The increased attention to *farmed animal welfare* in the Netherlands may also be due to Party for the Animals, as Otjes' (2016) research suggested that the party's entrance into the national parliament may have led to increased attention to the issue.

In Belgium, *farmed animal welfare* was the second most salient issue and received more attention after the devolution of animal welfare in 2014. From that moment on, Flemish political parties emphasized intensive farming and related welfare concerns, whilst Walloon parties focused more on eradicating diseases, restricting antibiotics use and preventing unnecessary suffering of animals. Population density and physical conditions may explain these regional differences. Flanders is characterized by high population density and sandy plains, where farming is dominated by intensive farming of pigs, poultry and dairy cows. The less populated Wallonia is a region with loamy soils and medium to large-scale (mixed) livestock farms for meat production, where farmers are seen as an important part of the local and regional development (Van Hecke et al., 2000). These findings are consistent with Chaney et al. (2020), who argued that electoral politics at multiple levels provides new political space to promote animal welfare. As Vogeler (2017b) noted, that *farmed animal welfare* was addressed by most governing parties in Germany, this research has found that in both the Netherlands and Belgium, all political parties addressed *farmed animal welfare* as elections progressed.

Wildlife/Biodiversity

Wildlife/biodiversity was the most salient issue in Belgium, and the second most salient issue in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, *wildlife/biodiversity* was strongly linked to agriculture. Whilst left-wing parties often pledged to reduce the number of livestock and connecting nature sites, right-wing parties tended to be less focused on nature, and preferred greater space for agriculture and other economic activities. Measures to increase agricultural productivity, such as the use of fertilizers and the drainage of wet areas, along with pollution and overfishing, have led to a significant decline in biodiversity. This has resulted in nearly 40% of the native species being threatened to a greater or lesser extent (Sanders et al., 2019).

In Belgium, many manifesto statements referred to the protection of local species, the dangers of invasive species, and the importance of protecting natural areas and biodiversity. Again, regional differences are evident. Walloon parties, along with the Flemish Green Party, proposed the most ambitious policies. This may be explained by the fact that 78.9% of the 700,000 ha of Belgian forests are in Wallonia (Koninklijke Belgische Bosbouwmaatschappij, 2021). Nevertheless, both Flanders and Wallonia introduced positive lists for both mammals and reptiles, taking into account the concerns about invasive species and the protection of native species (Toland et al., 2020). These findings are in line with those of Chaney (2014a), who indicated that multi-level systems can facilitate greater attention to environmental issues at the meso-level, encouraging parties to compete with each other with distinctive proposals.

Political Leaning and Animal Protection

In the Netherlands and Belgium, the far-right parties Party for Freedom and Flemish Interest put the issue of ritual slaughter on the political agenda, resulting in an increasing salience over the past decade. Although both parties played a decisive role in the debate on ritual slaughter, the parties' programmes did not express concern for other issues related to farmed animals. As Zúquete (2008) noted, greater political attention to Islam also led to greater opposition to the ritual slaughter of animals, a theme that far-right parties tend to emphasise. Dutch and Flemish conservative parties were opposed to banning non-stun slaughter, based on respect for religious freedoms. Centre and centre-right parties in both the Netherlands and Flanders in particular tended to put farmers first. These parties formulated statements that protected farmers and the economy. They were also willing to counter or reverse animal protection measures that would hamper the sector. These findings are consistent with those of Vogeler (2017b) and Chaney et al. (2020), who argued that electoral policies on animal welfare are determined by political parties' relationships with different policy communities. Vogeler's analysis (2017a) of partisan differences on *farmed animal welfare* also referred to the close connection between conservative parties and farmers' unions. Richardson (2000) also found that new initiatives may pose a certain threat as they can disrupt existing policy systems, policies, and power relationships. This could possibly reveal why some liberal parties were also hesitant towards far-reaching animal welfare statements.

Nevertheless, there was a clear distinction between Dutch liberals on the left and right, as the centre-left D66 proposed more animal-friendly and ambitious policies than the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy. In Belgium, it was the other way around, the centre-right Reformist Movement put forward more animal-friendly proposals than the centre Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats. This may be due to the fact that the Walloon parties pay more attention to animal protection. The subject may therefore be discussed more extensively, with more concrete proposals instead of vague terms, which is more typical for Flanders. Along with the Dutch Party for the Animals, the Walloon Socialist Party (PS) and the Flemish and Dutch green parties made the most ambitious statements, which is in line with previous research. Vogeler (2017a) found that green parties in Germany and Austria are more likely to focus on animal welfare, with detailed proposals on policy changes. Chaney et al. (2020) also confirmed the progressive role of the Green Party in the UK. Furthermore, Vogeler (2017a) highlighted that concrete policies vary from country to country, which aligned with variations found between concrete policies in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of party manifestos for the Netherlands (2012–2021) and Belgium (2010–2019) reveals that animal protection is becoming a more salient policy issue in both countries. In the Netherlands, the participation of Party for the Animals in the Lower House of Parliament may have influenced the politicisation of animal protection and motivated other parties to debate, and even compete on animal protection issues. Further factors may have influenced the increased attention to animal protection, as the Netherlands has experienced several zoonotic disease outbreaks and is struggling with an ongoing decline in biodiversity. Whilst right-wing parties tend to favour economic growth, and further expansion of the agricultural sector, left-wing parties support greater protection of *wildlife/biodiversity*, and a less intensive agriculture sector. The same trend can be seen in Belgium, where left-wing parties are launching more ambitious statements to protect biodiversity and wildlife, whilst showing a preference for phasing out the intensive livestock industry. Although it is not clear whether the devolution of animal welfare in Belgium has led to a significant increase in policy statements, it has resulted in more region-specific differences, with Walloon parties making noticeably more statements. Even though the salience of animal protection has increased over election cycles, both in the Netherlands and Belgium, further research is needed to confirm this upward trend.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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