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Can We Build Support for Welfare Enforcement?

Research Report

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Summary of findings

This study recruited 1,749 participants through an online research participant platform, and examined public attitudes towards animal protection, plant-based farming, and general views about our relationship with other animals. The participants were divided into 26 groups and exposed to various message frames about animal rights and farming practices. They then responded to questions about their likelihood of supporting petitions for enforcing animal protection laws or subsidising plant-based farming, along with questions about their general attitudes towards animals.

Key findings

High support for animal protection laws: A significant majority (84%) expressed a likelihood of supporting a petition to enforce existing animal protection laws for farmed animals. Even those primed with an industry-framed message were in high support, showing how little the UK public need to be persuaded to support this issue.

Mixed response to plant-based farming subsidies

Support was more divided regarding providing subsidies for farmers to transition to plant-based farming, with 52% in favour. Further testing may benefit from understanding the barriers to their support (e.g. fear of increased taxes to pay for the subsidies, reduced 'meat' availability, etc).

Age and gender had little effect on levels of support: There was virtually no difference in levels

of support across age groups or gender of participants.

Attitudes were not improved by message framing

- Relative to the neutral control, the type of message presented to participants had no effect on their support for the enforcement petition or the attitude questions.
- While no messages improved support for the subsidies petition beyond the control message, three messages resulted in statistically reliable lower support than the neutral control message (with 95% confidence):
 - welfare vs cost (industry)
 - violated values
 - Animal Equality message.
- Further testing may benefit from testing messages that directly speak to the call to action (transitioning to a plant-based food system).

In summary: This study reveals significant public support for enforcing existing animal protection laws and weaker support towards subsidising plant-based farming transitions. It also suggests that there is little evidence that the different messaging strategies tested here significantly improve public opinion on these issues.

Method

Participants

1,749 participants were recruited through the online research participant pool Prolific. Participants were paid £0.85 for taking part in a 5-minute survey. The median age was 39 (SD: 13.5, Range: 18-83). 1,083 participants were female, 649 were male, and 10 preferred not to say. 87% of the sample were white, 5% were Asian, 2% were black, 2% were mixed, and the remaining were unreported or other.

Procedure

Participants were split into 26 groups (each group corresponding to a different message) and were asked to carefully read the information presented to them. They were then shown one of the 26 messages (Appendix one). This was then followed by two sets of questions. The first set asked them how likely they would be to sign a petition asking the government to either enforce existing animal protection laws for farmed animals, or to provide subsidies that support farmers to transition to plant-based farming. The second set of questions asked more general attitudes towards animals. There were 9 questions, which tapped into beliefs surrounding the necessity and importance of meat, anthropocentrism, and animal abilities. The order of the questions within each section was randomised.

Materials

One of the following message frames was presented to each participant (for the full message,

see Appendix one):

1. Control 1: Animal Equality text
2. Control 2: Neutral control
3. Control 3: Standard industry text
4. Social progress
5. Morality
6. Animal abilities
7. Rights
8. Shared values
9. Violated values
10. National identity
11. Welfare vs. cost (consumer)
12. Welfare vs profit (industry)
13. Better future.

Each message frame was followed with one of two calls-to-action:

1. To petition the government to enforce existing animal protection laws for farmed animals.
2. To petition the government to provide subsidies to farmers to transition to plant-based farming.

Participants were then asked the following questions:

Question 1: If given the opportunity, how likely are you to sign the following petitions? [The response options were: Definitely not, Highly unlikely, Somewhat unlikely, Somewhat likely, Highly likely, Definitely.]

1. A petition to pressure the government to enforce existing animal protection laws for farmed animals.

2. A petition to pressure the government to provide subsidies that support farmers to transition to plant-based farmed.

Question 2: Participants were asked how much they agreed with the following statements. [The response options were: Strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree.]

1. Animals are a necessary resource for human benefit.
2. Killing animals for food is unnecessary (reverse coded).
3. We should all try to reduce our meat consumption (reverse coded).
4. Many animal species possess intelligence levels similar to humans.
5. Many animals are capable of feeling emotions similar to humans.
6. Many animals have conscious experiences.
7. Different species have different levels of worth
8. Human life is more valuable than the life of other animals.
9. It's acceptable to prioritise the needs of humans over those of other animals.

Results

We analysed each petition question with a Bayesian ordinal logistic regression, with the neutral control message as the referent, using the BRMS package in R. The priors were normal distributions with mean 0 and standard deviation 5 for all slopes and intercepts. Model fits were assessed by posterior predictive checks and visual inspection of the trace-plots. The distribution of responses to each message are plotted in figures 1-2, and the posterior distributions of the model coefficients for each message are plotted in figures 3-4. The coefficients should be interpreted as the log-odds of the outcome variable being in a higher category versus the referent. We also fitted intercept-only models in order to calculate Bayes factors, which were 2.32×10^{15} and 2.38×10^{14} in favour of the null for the enforcement petition and subsidies petitions respectively.

Overall, there was high support for signing the enforcement petition (84% responded one of "Somewhat likely", "Highly likely" or "Definitely"). In contrast, support for the subsidies petition was more mixed, with 52% saying they would sign the petition.

According to an analysis based on Bayes factors, we should reject the model with differences between groups for both petitions. Similarly, according to analysis based on the model coefficient credible intervals (figures 3-4), there appears to be no differences between messages for the enforcement campaign. For the subsidies campaign, most messages did not differ from the control message - in fact, the control message was one of the highest rated - except for the three lowest scoring messages: welfare vs cost (industry), violated values, and the Animal Equality message. There was no effect of which call to action they saw in their message on their ratings of either the enforcement petition [BF01 = 58.37] or the subsidies petition [BF01 = 30.25].

For the nine attitude items, we fitted a Bayesian ordinal logistic regression with message as the predictor with random slopes across items, with item response as the dependant variable. The

priors were normal distributions with mean 0 and standard deviation 5 for all fixed and random coefficients. Model fits were assessed by posterior predictive checks and visual inspection of the trace-plots. The posterior distributions of the model coefficients for each message are plotted in figures 5. Assessment of the credible intervals of this model indicates that there was no effect of message type on the animal attitude scales.

Weighting the data by representativeness of age and gender had a miniscule effect on levels of support: a difference of 0.2% for age and 0.57% for gender.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses when asked about how likely they would sign a petition calling for the government to enforce existing animal protection laws for farmed animals, split by message.

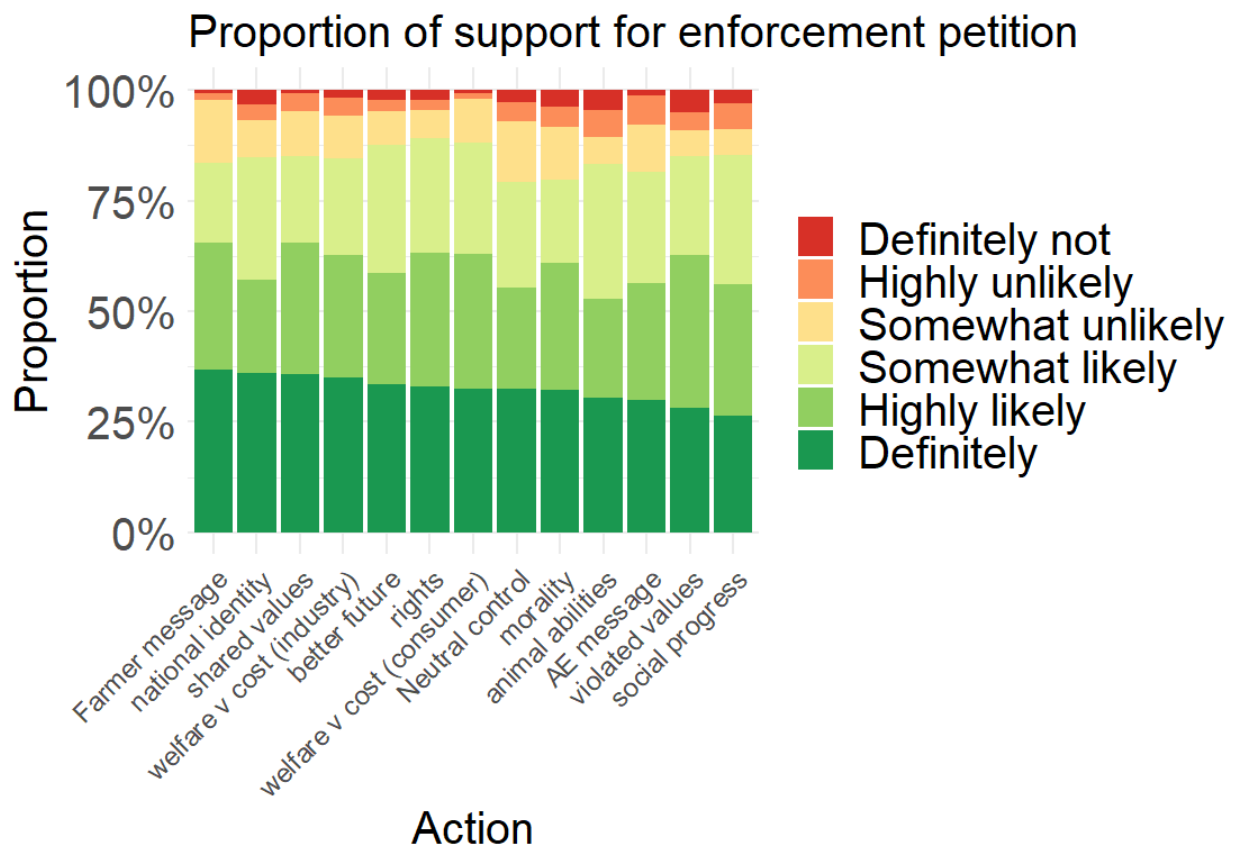


Figure 2. Distribution of responses when asked about how likely they would sign a petition calling for the government to provide subsidies to farmers for a plant-based transition, split by message

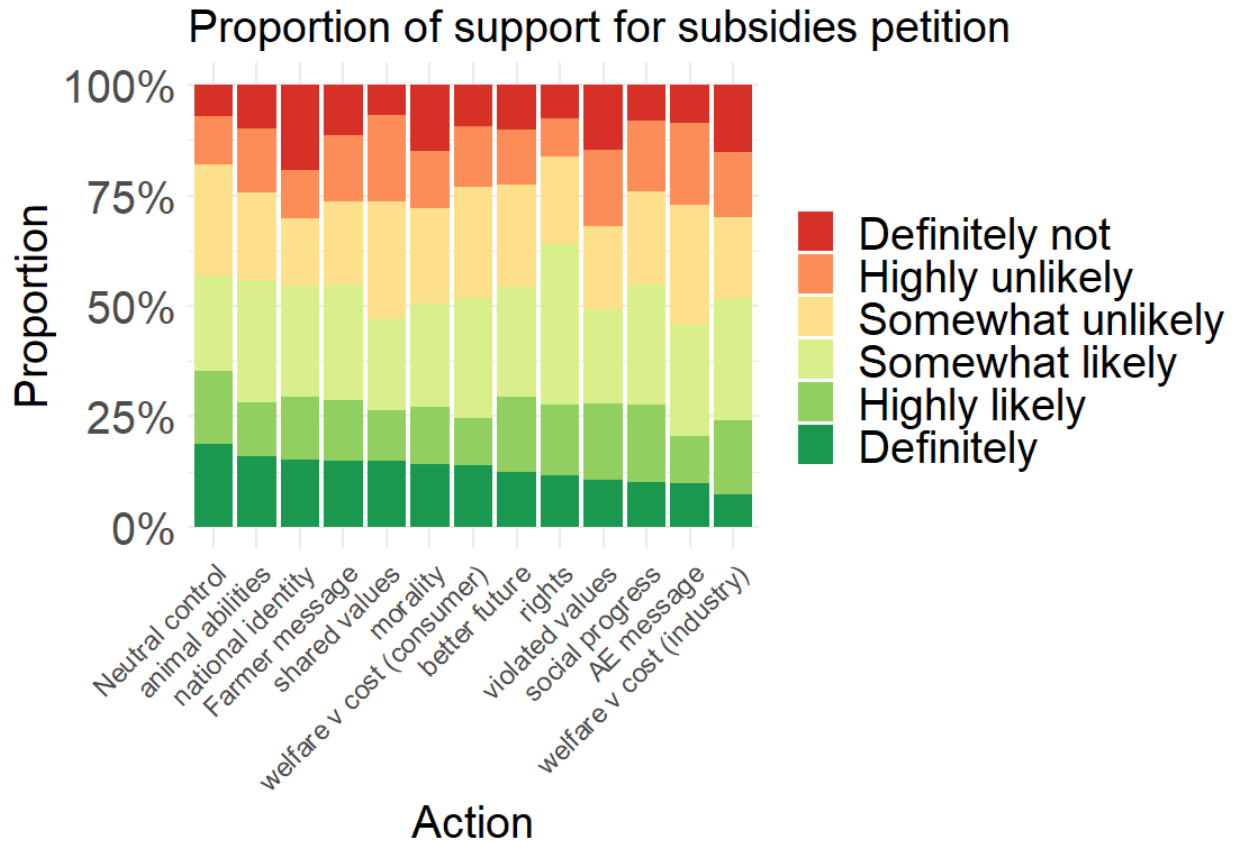


Figure 3. Posterior distributions of the log-odds that the responses to the enforcement petition are higher than in the neutral control condition, split by message. The solid vertical line indicates the mean, and the shaded area represents the 95% highest density interval. A value of 0 on the x-axis indicates equal log odds.

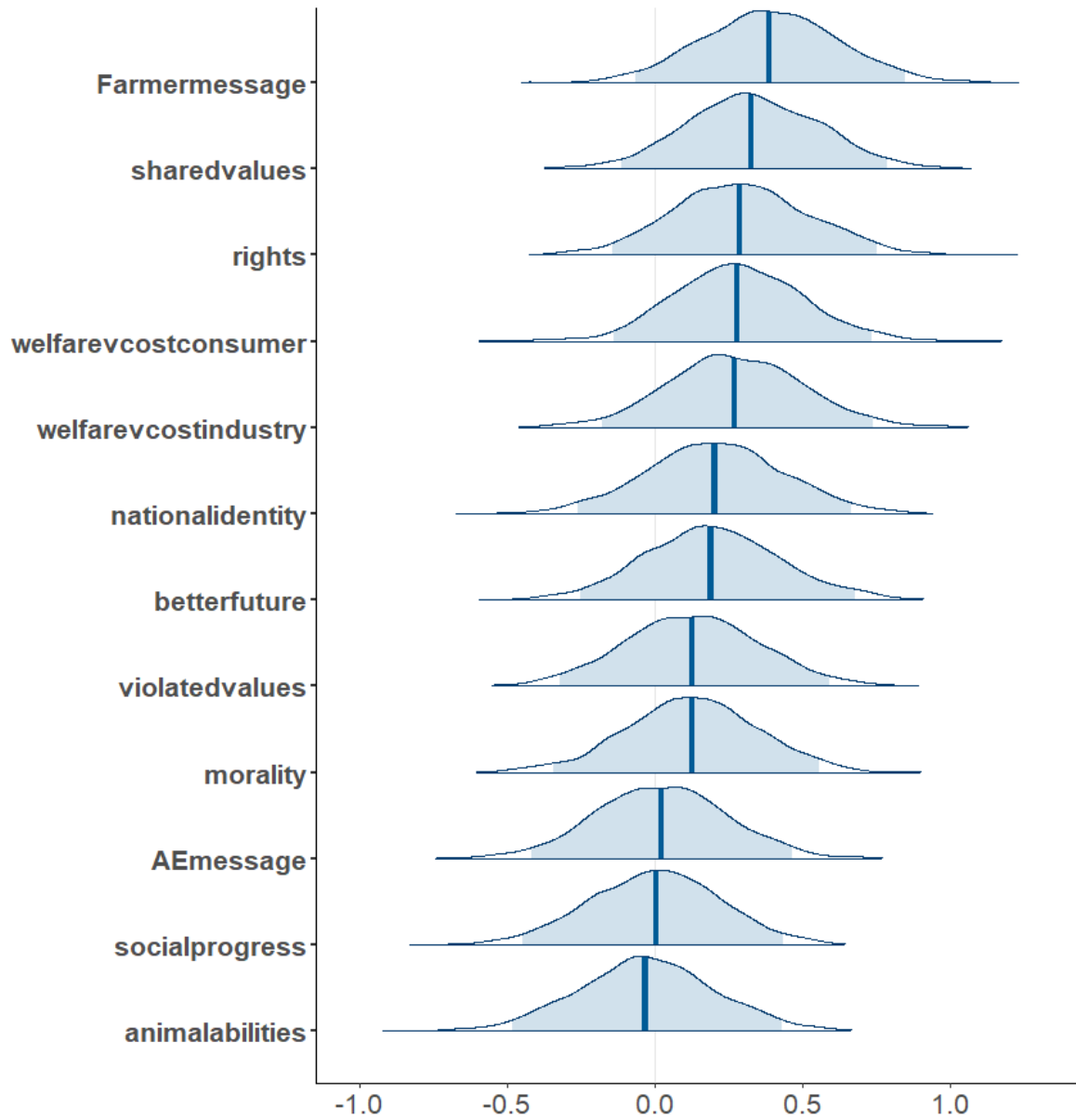


Figure 4. Posterior distributions of the log-odds that the responses to the subsidies petition are higher than in the neutral control condition, split by message. The solid vertical line indicates the mean, and the shaded area represents the 95% highest density interval. A value of 0 on the x-axis indicates equal log odds.

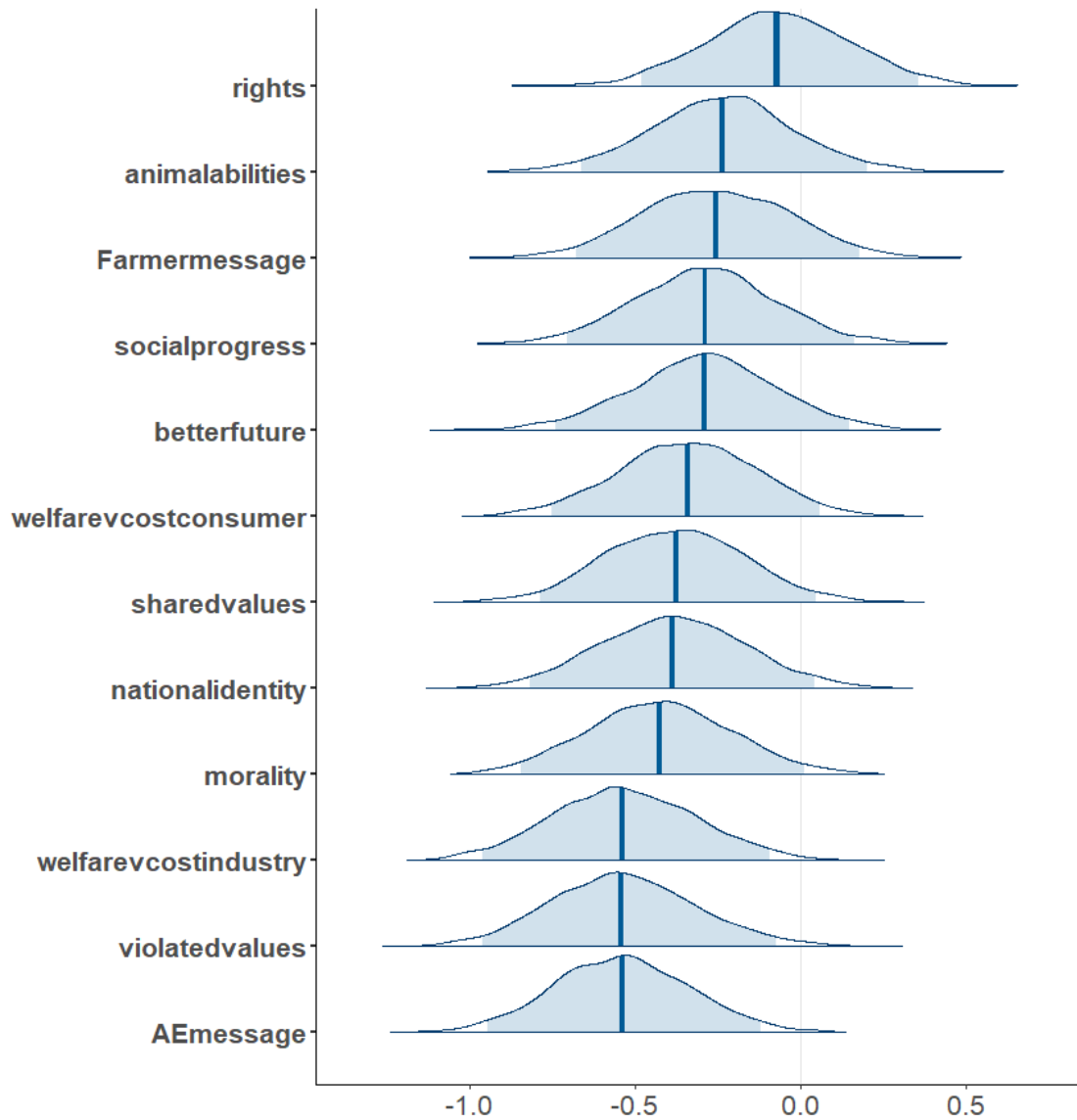
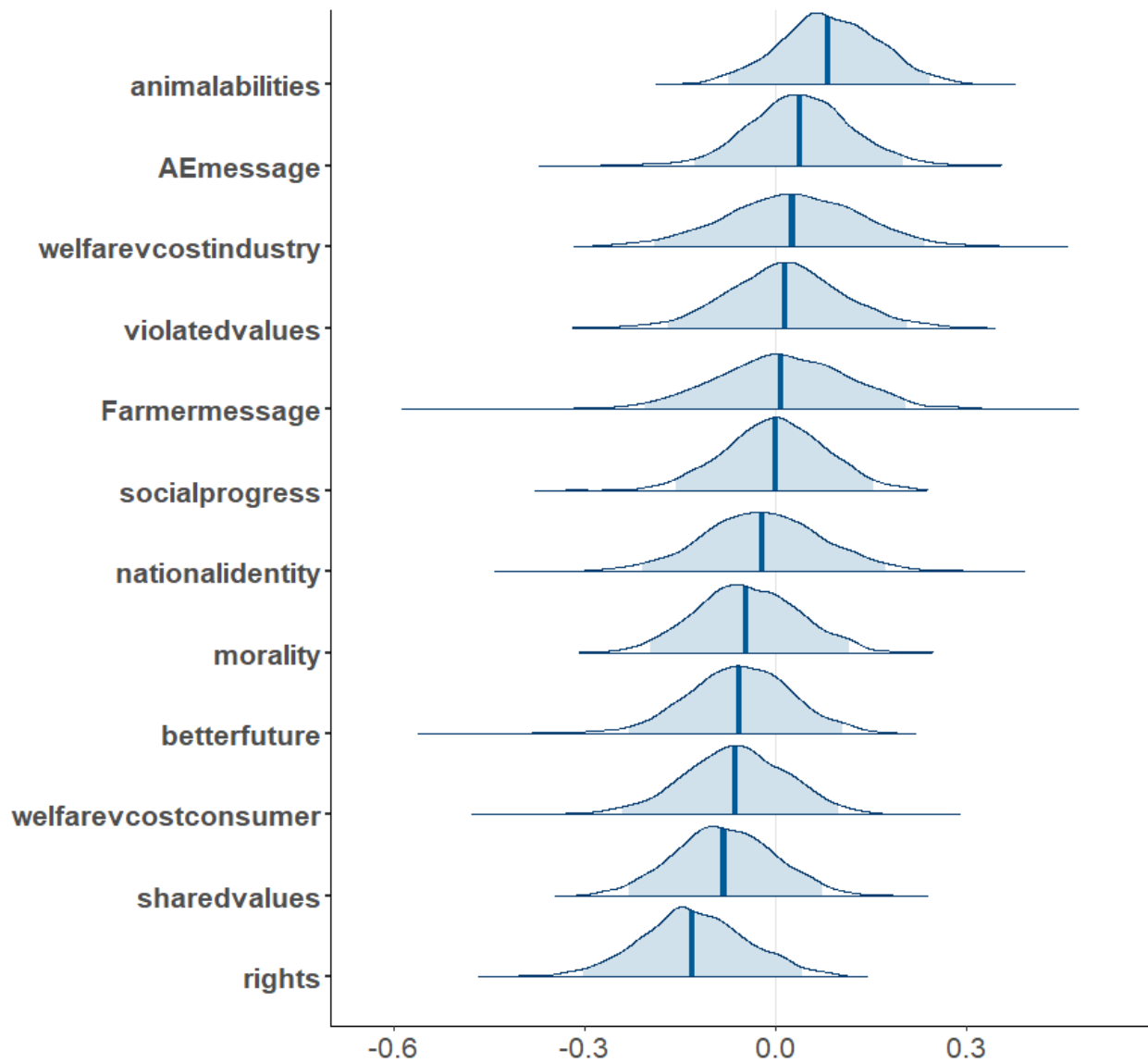


Figure 5. Posterior distributions of the log-odds that the responses to the attitude scales are higher than in the neutral control condition, split by message. The solid vertical line indicates the mean, and the shaded area represents the 95% highest density interval. A value of 0 on the x-axis indicates equal log odds.



Appendix:

Experiment messages

Message structure:

The following structure was used for all messages, except for the three control messages.

1. Narrative values: [framing changes for each message].
2. Narrative problem: [framing changes for each message].
3. Standard information (all messages): A UK investigation discovered that fewer than 3% of UK farms are inspected each year on average. And just half of complaints made against farms in the UK are investigated. When wrongdoing is found, animal abusers often receive little more than a written caution. The situation is clear. Animal protection laws are being broken time and time again and the government is failing to stop it.
4. Narrative solution & vision: [framing changes for each message].
5. Call to action (Either action 1 or action 2).
 - a. Action 1 (Enforcement): The government needs to enforce existing animal protection laws and prosecute those who abuse animals. Please sign the petition now to take action for farmed animals.
 - b. Action 2 (PB subsidies): The government needs to provide subsidies that support farmers to transition to plant-based farming. Please sign the petition now to take action for farmed animals.

Control message 1 (Animal Equality text)

Farms and slaughterhouses in the UK currently do not require any form of registration or licensing to operate. This is a clear oversight and it leaves animals vulnerable to further exploitation and illegal abuse and neglect.

A UK investigation discovered that fewer than 3% of UK farms are inspected each year on average. And just half of complaints made against farms in the UK are investigated. When wrongdoing is found, animal abusers often receive little more than a written caution. The situation is clear. Animal protection laws are being broken time and time again and the government is failing to stop it.

Leading UK animal charities are urging the government to [Action 1/ Action 2]

Control message 2 (neutral - scientific)

Animals are diverse in species and exist in various ecosystems across the planet. They exhibit a range of physical forms and adopt numerous survival strategies. From a biological viewpoint, each species represents a unique sequence in the tapestry of life and evolution.

Understanding animals and their interactions within ecosystems is crucial for several scientific and practical reasons. Different perspectives, such as those centred around economics or conservation, inform how human societies interact with other animal species.

It is important for the government to [Action 1/ Action 2]

Control message 3 (standard industry message)

[NB. Industry terminology, such as 'animal husbandry' and 'livestock', was intentionally used.]

UK farmers are the cornerstone of our nation, tirelessly providing fresh, nutritious produce while navigating numerous challenges and maintaining exemplary animal welfare standards. Their commitment to sustainable farming intertwines with their duty to uphold an ethical, humane approach to animal husbandry, always adhering to and exceeding strict regulatory requirements.

As custodians of the land and providers of sustenance, they're adapting to the global climate crisis by embracing eco-friendly practices and technologies, thereby ensuring the future of food production is both resilient and responsible. Farmers sustain our communities, preserve our rich agricultural heritage, and fortify our nation's food security, seamlessly integrating sustainability with premium care for livestock.

Yet isolated instances of abuse on farms are bringing the reputation of the UK farming industry into question. To remedy this, [Action 1/ Action 2]

Social progress

Narrative values:

Here in the UK, we live in a fairer and more caring society thanks to people who pushed for greater rights and legal protections, whether it be for women, people of colour, the LGBT+ community, disabled people or animals.

Narrative problem:

Yet our progress as a society is held back by a government that does not protect and enforce our laws, and instead lets corporate industries prioritise profit over animals' wellbeing.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

We know that true progress includes all of us, and how we treat animals signifies who we are as a society. To create a fairer, more caring society, it's time the government ensured animal rights were protected, not neglected. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Morality

Narrative values:

At the heart of UK society is the shared belief that the wellbeing of animals matter, and the laws that protect them matter. Our care and compassion towards animals has always reflected our morals as a society.

Narrative problem:

Yet our care and compassion for animals is undermined by a government that does not respect and enforce animal protection laws, and allows corporate industries to prioritise profit over animals' wellbeing.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

We know that how we treat animals signifies who we are as a society. To create a society that truly reflects our morals and values, it's time the government ensured animal rights were protected, not neglected. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Animal abilities

Narrative values:

All of us have a unique perspective and experience of the world. No matter if we're an adult, baby, dog, pig or chicken, we all have the ability to feel joy, fear and pain. Pigs are extremely social individuals, forming close friendships with other animals and humans. Mother cows are very maternal and are known to sing to their babies. While chickens are highly empathetic animals, responding to the distress of their chicks and other flock members.

Narrative problem:

Yet our government and profit-driven industries disregard the emotional lives and experiences of these animals by not respecting and enforcing animal protection laws.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

We know that animals' lives and experiences matter just as much to them as ours do to us. It's time the government ensured animal rights were protected, not neglected. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Rights

Narrative values:

Here in the UK, our human rights are protected in law, which protects all of us, no matter our gender, race or sexuality. As well as human rights, most people in UK society support animals having greater rights.

Narrative problem:

Yet the rights of all of us are threatened when our government does not protect and enforce our laws, and instead lets corporate industries prioritise profit over animals' wellbeing.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

We know the rights of all of us matter, regardless of our gender, race or even species. It's time the government ensured animal rights were protected, not neglected, which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Shared values (positive frame)

Narrative values:

At the heart of UK society is the shared belief that the wellbeing of animals matter and should be respected, whether they're the animals in our homes or animals who are farmed.

Narrative problem:

Yet our care and compassion for animals is undermined when laws that should protect them are not respected and enforced by the government, and instead corporate industries are allowed to prioritise profit over farmed animals' wellbeing.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

It's time the government shows that they truly care about the wellbeing of animals and ensure their rights are protected. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Violated values (negative frame)

Narrative values:

At the heart of UK society is the belief that the needs and wellbeing of animals shouldn't be neglected and they shouldn't suffer, whether they're the animals in our homes or animals who are farmed.

Narrative problem:

Yet our care and compassion for animals is betrayed when laws that should protect them are not respected and enforced by the government, and instead corporate industries are allowed to prioritise profit while farmed animals' suffer.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

It's time the government stopped neglecting farmed animals and ensured their rights are no longer ignored. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

National identity

Narrative values:

In the UK, we see ourselves as a nation of animal lovers and have always felt a strong bond with animals. Part of what makes Great Britain great is the shared belief that animals should be treated with care and compassion, and should live free from harm and suffering.

Narrative problem:

Yet our shared love for animals is betrayed when the government does not respect and enforce animal protection laws, and instead allows corporate industries to prioritise profit over animals' wellbeing.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

We know that how we treat each other signifies who we are as a nation. To create a society that truly reflects the UK's love of animals, [Action 1/ Action 2]

Welfare vs cost (consumer)

Narrative values:

Whether they're the animals in our homes or animals who are farmed, animals deserve to be protected and cared for. But there's a tough choice we're facing: should saving a few pounds mean lower welfare for the animals who are farmed for food?

Narrative problem:

It's wrong when the laws meant to protect farmed animals are ignored just to cut costs, and instead corporate industries prioritise affordability over farmed animals' wellbeing. Animals shouldn't pay the price for cheaper products.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

It's time the government shows that they're serious about animal welfare and ensure their rights are protected, no matter what. It's about doing what's right, not just what's cheap. Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Welfare vs profit (industry)

Narrative values:

Whether they're the animals in our homes or animals who are farmed, animals deserve to be protected and cared for. But the farming industry faces a tough choice: should cutting costs mean lower welfare for the animals who are farmed for food?

Narrative problem:

It's wrong when the laws meant to protect farmed animals are ignored just to cut costs, and instead corporate industries are allowed to prioritise profit over farmed animals' wellbeing. Animals shouldn't pay the price so industries can profit.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

It's time the government shows that they're serious about animal welfare and ensure their rights are protected, no matter what. It's about doing what's right, not just what's profitable.

Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]

Better future

Narrative values:

All of us dream of a better future. No matter who we are, we all want to feel safe and protected, and live free from suffering and fear.

Narrative problem:

Yet a better future for farmed animals and UK farmers is being denied by our government, who fail to enforce animal protection laws and continually allow the corporate farming industry to prioritise profit at the expense of farmed animals and local farmers.

[Standard information]

Narrative solution & vision:

A better future is possible. It's time the government ensure farmed animals are protected, not neglected, and the future livelihoods of local farmers are prioritised, not corporate industries.

Which is why [Action 1/ Action 2]