



Political parties' framing of farm animal welfare: A fragmented picture

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Abstract

In this article, we draw from qualitative interviews with political parties' representatives and a content analysis of party programs to identify how political parties frame animal welfare policies in Norway. In analyzing the framing of animal welfare and its significance for understanding agricultural post-exceptionalism, we found that though they frame animal welfare issues in conflicting ways, most see Norwegian animal welfare as reasonably good but perceive potential for improvement. They also generally understand societal claims as lacking or having an unclear factual basis, which has legitimized their nonaction as political parties. Even so, because of active new actors such as animal welfare organizations and retailers, the parties do not believe that public pressure will wane. Although introducing new farm animal welfare policies can represent a move towards post-exceptionalism in Europe's agri-food sector, the discourse on animal welfare policies amongst political parties implies that such is not the case in Norway.

KEYWORDS

agricultural policy, animal welfare, discursive institutionalism, polarization, post-exceptionalism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a saying, ascribed to Otto von Bismarck, that there are two things people really don't want to know about: how sausages and policies are made. Today, nearly 200 years later, people seem to disagree. In fact, they want to know both. In the field of farm animal welfare policy, the two things overlap, and over the last decade, media coverage about and public interest in animal welfare have both intensified. Part of the reason why is that animal welfare has important scientific, ethical, economic, and political dimensions (Lund et al., 2006). In this article, we address how political parties in Norway respond to public demand for animal welfare policies and, more generally, how policy in the form of institutional stability and change can be understood.

Farm animal welfare policies are not only debated in many countries but also vary considerably both within and between countries, as does governance of animal welfare issues (e.g., Vogeler, 2017, 2019b, 2020). Those circumstances raise questions about both the determinants of, and processes towards, change or stability in such policies. In the scientific literature on partisan politics, it remains unclear if and how increased public attention and partisan politics translates into policy (Allern & Bale, 2012; Castles, 1982; Fleig & Tosun, 2017; Katz & Mair, 1995; Vogeler, 2019b; Wenzelburger & Zohlnhöfer, 2021). The literature also shows that, in several cases, animal welfare policy is subject to nongovernance and that the government is not necessarily a driving force for altering political ideas or changing such policies (Chen, 2016; Swinbank, 2006). In their study on shifting understandings about animal welfare in the political arena since the 1960s, Bock and Buller (2013) found that political authorities tend to be passive when it comes to animal welfare. In their article, they describe how such non-governance, or state passivity, may prompt grocery chains and interest groups to turn to the market and differentiate food products according to animal welfare. Given their results, the trend seems to be that as the state withdraws, the market takes over. Meanwhile, in a study on agricultural policy in Australia, Chen (2016) found that animal welfare policy sits on a continuum across the standard left–right political spectrum, wherein the willingness to generate positive policy, opposed to nondecision-making, belongs to the left, whereas the right is relatively averse to changing such policy. By extension, more recent studies by Vogeler (2019b, 2020) have examined political parties' responses to increased pressure for animal welfare and shown that parties respond more to society's focus on animal welfare in European countries than in the United States. Even so, parties' responses indeed differ within Europe, where their focus in different countries varies depending on the degree of societal concern. Yet, even though the role of political parties as key players in policymaking is essential, studies on the activity of political parties in farm animal welfare policy have been few (Vogeler, 2020).

As animal welfare becomes an increasingly politicized, polarizing topic whose problems and solutions are differently conceived, identifying and analyzing discursive frames of farm animal welfare within political parties can help to illuminate the ideational and discursive political landscape surrounding the topic, as well as whether such trends imply policy change or institutional inertia. These issues inform the question addressed in this article: *How do political parties in Norway frame problems and solutions concerning farm animal welfare policy?* Guided by that question, the article identifies and investigates different frames drawn from a qualitative analysis of interviews with representatives of Norwegian political parties and a content analysis of their party programs. Our empirical findings indicate that the framing of animal welfare can be discussed along four themes: individualization; industrialization;

marketization; and polarization. Based on the discussion we reflect on the likelihood of change or stability in farm animal welfare policies.

In this article, we next describe some background on the topic of farm animal welfare and the Norwegian case. Next, we present our study's theoretical framework, which encompasses theories on framing combined with discursive institutionalism and ideas to analyse political change and continuity, as well as the debate on agricultural postexceptionalism. After that, we present the data and method used in the research, followed by our empirical findings from interviews and party programs. Finally, before concluding the paper, we discuss the findings in light of our theoretical framework and previous research on animal welfare.

2 | BACKGROUND

Skogstad (1998) introduced the concept of agricultural exceptionalism. Even though Skogstad seminal article addressed the EU and the United States, Norway is a case in point when it comes to exceptionalist agricultural policy: Due to poor overall climatic and agricultural conditions, Norway's agricultural production is oriented towards the domestic market and subject to a high level of subsidies and trade barriers. Nevertheless, only approximately 40% of the food consumed in Norway is produced domestically (e.g., Forbord & Vik, 2017; Vik, 2020). Moreover, due to the country's social-corporate system, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and the two major farmer associations negotiate annually over subsidies and prices, and large producer cooperatives are heavily involved in implementing agricultural policy.

Regarding animal welfare, Norway is also an interesting case. Although Norway traditionally has taken pride in very high veterinary and animal health standards, animal welfare attention and activism have risen in recent years. From 2000 to 2019, before the covid pandemic, edited media articles on animal welfare in Norway increased from 22 to 7102 (Retriever, 2022)¹. See Figure 1.

Furthermore, in 2019, a new law was implemented, prohibiting the production of fur. Several high-profile media cases addressed the animal welfare conditions in poultry (Brustad & Bjørkhaug, 2015) and pork industries (NRK, 2019). As a result, the Ministry of Agriculture and

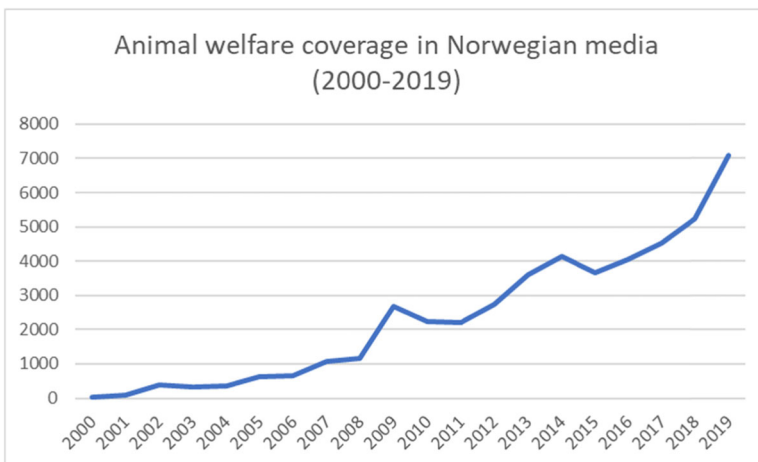


FIGURE 1 Media coverage of animal welfare in Norway (source: Retriever, 2022).

TABLE 1 Parties in the Norwegian Parliament (*source*: Stortinget, 2021).

Party name	Members in parliament	Orientation
The Labour Party	48	Social democratic, centre-left
The Conservative Party	36	Conservative
The Centre Party	28	Centre—agrarian party
The Progress Party	21	Right wing
The Socialist Left Party	13	Socialist
The Red Party	8	Radical left
The Liberal Party	8	Liberal, centre-right
The Green Party	3	Green party
The Christian Democratic Party	3	Christian Democratic—centre-right
Patient Focus	1	Independent one issue MEP

Food decided to issue a new white paper on farm animal welfare (Norwegian Government, 2021). Thus, there are rising tensions between understandings of animal welfare. Even so, the literature provides no clear-cut indication on whether this is a situation that leads to change or continuity in animal welfare policies.

Politically, Norway has a multiparty system with 10 political parties currently represented in Parliament by the body's 169 members. An overview of the parties is presented in Table 1.

With 48 members in Parliament, the largest party is the Labour Party, a social democratic party positioned at the centre-left of the political spectrum (Stortinget, 2021). After the 2021 elections, the Labour Party formed a minority government with the Centre Party, an agrarian political party in the centre on the political spectrum (Centre Party, 2021; Norwegian Labour Party, 2021), with parliamentary support from The Socialist Left Party. The second-largest party is the Conservative Party, a liberal-conservative party and the major party of the centre-right wing in Norway (Conservative Party, 2021). In the period between 2013 and 2021, The Conservative Party formed several governments with various participation from the Progress Party, the Christian Democratic Party, and the Liberal Party.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are several theoretical approaches available to elaborate on the formulation of policy. We suggest that discursive institutionalism and the concept of framing is useful additions to perspectives from partisan theory when addressing the formulation of animal welfare policy. Below, we will describe why.

The role of political parties is a classical theme in the literature on partisan politics. Castles (1982) aimed at specifying “under what circumstances party politics does matter” (p. 2). Many have followed Hibbs (1977) and his interest in studying the relationship between partisan politics and macroeconomic policy (e.g., Imbeau et al., 2001; Potrafke, 2017). Moving beyond macroeconomic policy and the right-left divide, Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer (2021) review offer an agency based approach, where “actors in the parties themselves—members as well as the party elite—are key for the development of party positions and the policies parties adopt in government,” as an alternative to

what they describe as “the vote-seeking perspective” (p. 1062), where policy preferences differ according occupational position. Yet another approach is offered by Allern and Bale (2012), who elaborate on Katz and Mair (1995) cartel party hypothesis, and argue that the changing relationship between parties and interest groups is understudied within the partisan literature, and deserve more empirical research across a wide range of polities where we might expect different results.

Animal welfare policy is such a case. It is a case of “the new politics of agriculture and food” (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2012) marked both by conflicting economic interests as well as values. Extensive research on agricultural policy in political science has recently revolved around the concept of *agricultural exceptionalism* (Attorp & McAreavey, 2020; Grant, 2012; Greer, 2017; Skogstad, 1998). Some scholars have argued that exceptionalism is being replaced by *post-exceptionalism*, as agriculture is being linked to new policy areas (Attorp & McAreavey, 2020; Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Vogeler, 2019a). Greer (2017), by contrast, has averred that *post-exceptionalism* is an inaccurate term and has instead proposed *shallow post-exceptionalism*, primarily because agricultural policies in many countries still focus on maintaining or increasing farmers' incomes via policy instruments, not market solutions. However, that trend may be conditional (Vogeler, 2017).

For analyses of partisan politics, animal welfare is therefore a policy field well-suited for empirical studies of how political parties develop and frame policy options. In addressing animal welfare, Vogeler (2019b) describes how political parties derive policy either from what they think that the electorate prefers and society demands, called *vote-seeking*, or what the party's members and their political allies prefer, called *policy-seeking* (Vogeler, 2019b). Political parties indeed respond to societal change, as demonstrated by Fleig and Tosun (2017), who along have shown that parties' focus on issues increases together with societal concern for those issues.

However, when the purpose is to understand the process whereby political parties formulate policy that leads to changes and continuity in political institutions, institutional theory is also a reasonable ingredient (Schmidt, 2010). Several neo-institutional theories emphasize how human activity is guided by rules, sanctions, and norms in institutions (Schmidt, 2010). A common view, however, is that institutional theory is generally better at explaining continuity, often via path dependency and lock-ins, than explaining change. In response, the concepts of ideas and discourse have been introduced to such theory and Schmidt (2008) has hailed the shift to ideas and discourse ‘the fourth neo-institutionalism’, a discursive institutionalism (cf. Campbell, 1998; Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Unlike discourse theories that view actors engaged in discourse as unconscious co-creators, the idea-focused theories are concerned with how actors, including policymakers, use ideas strategically while participating in the discourses that they also seek to control (Schmidt, 2008).

Within that theoretical framework, the concept of framing is a helpful tool for operationalizing analyses of ideas and the significance of various discourses (Peters, 2012). A well-established concept used to understand contentious topics, including ones concerning the environment, the climate, and animal welfare (Aasetre & Vik, 2013; Freeman, 2010), framing is often associated with concepts such as storylines, discourses, ideologies, paradigms, and worldviews. Early on, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) defined a *frame* as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” and “suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (p. 143). To operationalize framing, users of the concept can divide the process into *problem framing*, which is the basis for framing issues and the starting point for the subsequent part of the process, *solution framing* (Freeman, 2010; Knaggård, 2015; Rein & Schön, 1996). A problem frame operates as the definition of the problem, what it is and who is responsible, as well as guides and explains what may be done in

response. Problem framing implies emphasizing certain aspects of an event or issue and tying them together to present a particular interpretation of the problem and/or a solution—that is, the solution frame (Knaggård, 2015). Connecting framing to the ideational turn discussed above (Campbell, 1998; Schmidt, 2008) thus underscores how the framing of ideas matters for decisions of action or nonaction. In short, ideas are the foundation for deciding what to do, while frames organize events and ideas and, in turn, guide (non-)action (Rein & Schön, 1996).

The contentiousness of frames can be clarified in light of Schattschneider's (1975) notion of the "conflict of conflicts." It is precisely the battle over how conflicts are defined that is the conflict, and 'the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power' (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 66). Power is therefore a core element of the framing of political issues: the person 'who determines what politics is about running the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflict allocates power' (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 66). But what then gives some frames or ideas power that can cause change? According to Schmidt (2008), such change depends on the idea's relevance to the issue or problem, its applicability, and its resonance. At the same time, a discourse's potential influence also depends on its consistency and coherence across political sectors and amongst political actors. Thus, as Chong and Druckman (2007) have posited, issue framing is an influential political tool by which actors draw on dividing lines to mobilize other actors who agree on one topic to agree on another topic by reframing it.

At the same time, as a resource for politicians interested in mobilizing politically like-minded citizens to agree on solutions to new political problems (Jacoby, 2000), issue framing has often been associated with the concept of polarization. *Polarization* can be described as a process in which potential political problems are related to one dimension or continuum, such that people increasingly perceive an atmosphere of us versus them (McCoy et al., 2018; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). Although it has become common to state that society has become increasingly polarized, few research findings provide evidence of such a phenomenon (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). Beyond that, the literature often understands polarization in different ways. From one perspective, society and its actors can be polarized on certain topics, or "take-off issues", that receive extraordinary attention for a time (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). Political polarization, however, occurs when issues are polarized based on political ideology, often meaning the ideological right versus the ideological left (McCoy et al., 2018; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). In that case, polarization takes place along party political lines and within politically engaged groups of people. In the United States, the two-party system is often used to explain political polarization to the extent that multiparty states, including in European countries, are assumed to have less political polarization (Knudsen, 2021). Although polarization can mobilize groups and voters, strengthen political parties and help to interest people in politics (McCoy et al., 2018), problems arise when differences in opinion become divided into two camps with mutually exclusive identities and interests and political orientation on issues such as climate or animal welfare coincides with other issues—for instance, residence or social class—under a single identity. Therefore, determining how the framing of an issue such as animal welfare relates to already existing lines of conflict is essential for understanding how political parties approach the issue.

4 | DATA AND METHOD

The analyses in this paper are based on two sources of data. First, our qualitative analysis examined a series of in-depth interviews with representatives from six political parties in Norway conducted in spring 2021. These were The Labour Party, The Conservative Party, The

Socialist Left Party, The Liberal Party, The Green Party, and The Christian Democratic Party. For interviewees, we strategically selected the parties' spokespersons or critical actors when it comes to animal welfare and who thus represent the parties' official stances on the issue. Ultimately, we interviewed representatives from the largest parties in the Norwegian Parliament and from various smaller parties representing the right, left, and centre. Second, our content analysis examined the 2021–2025 party programs of nine parties with members currently in Parliament.² The programs are not only a good source of data in themselves but also provided data that complemented the interviews (Fleig & Tosun, 2017; Vogeler, 2017). In particular, analyzing the programs helped us to establish whether perspectives voiced in interviews aligned with how the parties promoted animal welfare in their policy documents intended for the electorate. It also provided a more detailed picture of main objectives and helped us to identify personal emphases in the interviews.

Taken together, the six in-depth interviews and nine party programs furnished an extensive amount of qualitative data, all of which we coded and organized in NVivo. Our initial thematic coding was based on a pragmatic combination of deductive and inductive approaches. First, based on deductive logic, we examined the data in light of the literature addressing ideas and framing, including problem framing and solution framing (Freeman, 2010). However, qualitative analysis with manual coding also opens for a more inductive approach where it also is room for unexpected findings and insights. Moving from thematic coding to analytical coding (Gibbs, 2007) we were able to identify four key concepts to characterize the animal welfare framing: individualization, industrialization, marketization, and polarization. In our discussion, where we connected these concepts to the relevant literature on institutional change, we highlighted fragmentation, de-polarization, and the ongoing debate on post-exceptionalism.

5 | EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: PROBLEM FRAMES, SOLUTION FRAMES, AND FRAGMENTED ANIMAL WELFARE POLICY

Our analyses of the empirical material revealed how the political parties differentiate their positions and framing on animal welfare and ways to approach the issue. Below we will describe those.

5.1 | Individualization

First, we found that the parties either largely underscore the individual factors of welfare and view poor animal welfare as one-off incidents or else understand poor animal welfare as a structural problem. Broadly speaking, the centre-right parties—the Christian Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, and the Progress Party—stress individual responsibility and the singular character of animal welfare tragedies. The representative of the Christian Democratic Party, a member of the right-wing government at the time, elaborated that frame when discussing measures for improving farm animal welfare:

We must build the trust towards the people who perform inspections to get targeted measures perceived as being useful when they meet individual farmers.

We need to reach out to each individual farm to ensure that completely. At the same time, in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Norwegian Food Safety Authority and the industry in general, we have to be willing to change things if we see things that aren't working. As it stands now, I think that we've done what we can to optimize the situation, but when some farmers can't follow the regulations, then we have to find out why.

Centre-right parties also promote that framing by viewing poor animal welfare as “animal welfare tragedies”, and a result of a few individual farmers' poor mental health, which they view to be central to the animal welfare problem more than parties further to the left. For example, the Conservative Party's representative described overall farm animal welfare in Norway as follows:

I find that it's very good animal welfare in general. We hear less and less about animal tragedies where animals die and are left to rot... And better technology contributes to the situation such that it's become better and perhaps more manageable for farmers to keep up and not wear themselves out. Too many of those animal tragedies are due to farmers with mental problems. There's something about grasping the whole picture here.

From that view, poor animal welfare is a problem at the individual level and related to either the health or attitudes of some “bad apples,” so to speak, which tarnish the reputations of and public confidence in the rest of the farmers who operate livestock production according to regulations. Likewise, the solution frame for those parties is individually focused, and the Animal Police and stricter penalties are some of the primary measures put forward by the Progress Party and the Conservative Party. Because the problem is not perceived to lie in the structure of Norwegian agriculture, the state perceives having less responsibility for solving it and does not initiate significant changes in agricultural policy. As that case shows, the framing of animal welfare legitimizes nongovernance.

5.2 | Industrialization

Amongst the smaller, centre, and centre-left parties, including the Socialist Left Party, the Green Party, and the Liberal Party, another frame holds that poor animal welfare has arisen due to the increased industrialization of agriculture and more efficient, intensive production methods. In particular, those parties highlight that the production of chicken, eggs, and pork presents significant challenges for animal welfare. For those parties, the solution is thus to prioritize small and medium-sized farms over large production units. The representative of the Green Party explained the ideas legitimizing that solution frame as follows:

I would go so far as to say that it's not the farmer but the farmer's framework conditions. Farmers can be pressured to neglect animal welfare and can simply neglect to keep up due to the economy and having to run a large production facility. Therefore, we [members of the Green Party] are fighting to turn the agricultural policy around by introducing size restrictions and shifting the policy back to having more farmers, more farms, more housing, and less intensive

production. That can turn the tide that we fear will result in worse and worse animal welfare so that we can have better and better animal welfare.

Following up on this point, the MEP from the Green Party frame an explanation on the difference between Norwegian animal welfare and the perception of animal welfare in countries with a more industrialized agricultural sector.

... It's been a common perception that animal welfare is very good in Norway but very poor in many other countries. There's probably something true in that, but the reason for that difference is that the other countries have driven the same industrialization even further than Norway has. In that case, there's no reason for us to advance further in that direction.

Such framing stands in stark contrast to the problem and solution framing of the parties on the right, especially the Progress Party and the Conservative Party, as exemplified in what the Conservative Party's representative viewed as a solution to some problems in animal welfare:

There may be structuring in which we close down smaller farms. That can both improve and worsen animal welfare. As I said, I think they [farms] should be slightly bigger, and I believe that such farms can lead to better animal welfare than farms that are inefficient, as is often the case with small farms with small herds.

That argument stands in direct opposition to the industrialization frame of the Green Party, for example, because it holds that larger farms and the continued concentration of agriculture can improve farm animal welfare, not reduce it.

Although the Labour Party also explains today's challenges with animal welfare in terms of the industrialization of agriculture, conflicting objectives prevent them from initiating significant changes in the field. In the Labour Party's program, a core goal for Norwegian agriculture policy is to ensure active agriculture throughout the country in complement to rural policy objectives for employment. Thus, they are sceptical about placing an increased economic burden on farmers, which is viewed as a major threat to preserving jobs in agriculture. On the whole, the potential benefits for animal welfare related to the cost of making stricter animal welfare standards for farmers are perceived as being too diffuse. According to the Labour Party's representative, the party is

concerned that regulations cut out production in Norway and make the country dependent on importing meat from other countries with even poorer animal welfare and animal health. On the contrary, we need to have a feasible policy for the [agricultural] sector that considers the economic limitations to which they are subject.

Consequently, competing pressure for attention to other issues and conflicting aims in agricultural policy come at the expense of animal welfare. In response, the Labour Party seems to downplay animal welfare as a matter of conflict and attempts to depoliticize the issue. According to the party's representative, farm animal welfare is not as polarized in Parliament as it is in the media: "I'd say that in the Parliament, there's been relatively broad consensus between us and the other large parties, both in opposition and in government. So we actually

cooperate quite broadly.” The representative added, “If you think about the cooperation between the opposition and the government, it’s less polarized than some issues sharpened by the media.... Amongst the parties, or at least amongst the largest parties, there’s a greater degree of consensus on what’s important to prioritise.” Thus, though the Labour Party clearly identifies potential for improvement in animal welfare policy and shares concerns about intensive food production, it also stands firm in framing animal welfare in Norway as already being quite good and holds that making major changes is too risky.

By extension, the Norwegian case shows that even though the largest political party believes that ensuring good farm animal welfare is the state’s responsibility, the combination of built-in conflicting objectives and the framing of animal welfare as being subordinate to other political issues has meant that new policies are not advocated. In that way, the largest party on the left and the largest party on the right have somewhat ironically come to the same conclusion: that no significant change is needed in farm animal welfare policy in Norway. Even so, in their frames the parties justify that conclusion with different ideas. As shown, whereas the Conservative Party frames poor animal welfare as mostly deriving from single incidents, not a general problem in the structure of Norwegian agriculture, the Labour Party does not perceive poor animal welfare as being such a significant problem that it should be prioritized over, for instance, ensuring a sustainable economy in agriculture.

5.3 | Marketization

Some of the parties have also proposed higher prices for farmers’ goods backed by certification schemes and animal welfare labeling with rewards for more space per animal and more outdoor grazing. The representatives of the smaller parties—the Green Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Liberal Party—were all willing to use the market to promote labeling schemes that would put pressure on improving farm animal welfare. Such willingness is somewhat inconsistent with the ideas of parties on the left that emphasize regulating animal welfare via the state, not the market. At the same time, it indicates that they view the market as allowing the greatest room to maneuver. Thus, though stating that animal welfare is the state’s responsibility, they paradoxically do not view a politically initiated change in animal welfare policy as being realistic. The assessment of the Socialist Left Party’s representative regarding the prospects for political change from Parliament exemplifies that:

I think that the basic responsibility definitely lies with Parliament (...) on the topic of animal welfare, there are very few parties in Parliament that push in that particular direction. The Socialist Left Party and the Liberal Party and now the Green Party have been the parties that have pushed. It’s not a lot of muscle, just some political force, and it hasn’t had a particularly big impact. Therefore, I think that if there’s to be a change in Norway, it will hardly be in Parliament. It will probably happen through different types of processes outside Parliament, through professional groups and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, for example.

The Green Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Liberal Party, though being the parties with the strongest emphasis on animal welfare, are aware of their limited political power. Thus, there is a lack of common frames amongst the parties to seek change. At the same time, although all of the parties’ representatives characterized the increased interest and

public concern for animal welfare as a nearly unstoppable force, and none of the parties seem to believe that pressure from animal welfare organizations and consumers will subside, our analyses revealed limited initiative for change from any of the political parties. Therefore, what lies behind such inertia in the parliamentary political landscape needs to be investigated.

5.4 | Polarization

In analyzing how political parties in Norway frame farm animal welfare, we have examined what they frame as the problem(s) and their solutions in response. Most of the parties frame the overall situation for farm animal welfare in Norway as being generally good and better than in other countries. It however seems as though the parties trace problems with animal welfare not to the agricultural sector but rather to the public debate about farm animal welfare, specifically the lack of knowledge about the topic within the population, interest groups, and the media. As the Labour Party's representative put it, "Few people in Norway have direct contact with production animals themselves. So, first-hand knowledge about animals in practice is probably low." The representative of the Liberal Party, by extension, elaborated on the role of social media and consumers as an essential feature of that development:

The biggest dilemmas, regardless of topic, are easy slogans on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which of course affect the debate. Online newspapers pick up these, and then they spread much faster than ever before. ... Consumers now govern agriculture to a far greater extent than before.

Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Party's representative shared concern for public debates with uncertain factual bases: "Discussions about the humanization of animals are extremely important.... They're about who should define what good animal health and good animal welfare are. What should be emphasized—? Humanization of animals or expertise, knowledge and experience?" When describing that development, several other representatives pointed to polarization in the public debate as well.

However, polarization has also emerged within the parties, especially in the Socialist Left Party, the Liberal Party, the Green Party and the Labour Party, in which differences in opinion abound. Several interviewees additionally pointed out that the divide is between the urban population and the population closer to agriculture and production animals. For example, the Socialist Left Party's representative characterized the "rural" part of the party as having less concern for animal welfare, while the Liberal Party's representative characterized the more "urban" part of the party as being more concerned. Therefore, the parties seem to recognize a centre-periphery divide in concern for farm animal welfare, a divide presented as being active both in society and within the parties. The Liberal Party's representative framed the reasons for the divide as follows:

Even though the urban population is farthest away from food production, they are perhaps the most concerned about it, because the population in the countryside probably thinks that farm animal welfare is quite good, almost inevitably, even maybe when it isn't.

In that way, in our data farm animal welfare has two dimensions of polarization. In one, political parties address the outspoken issue of polarization both within their ranks and in society. In the other, they polarize animal welfare by suggesting an us-versus-them situation when explaining public attention to animal welfare as resulting from a lack of knowledge not amongst “us” but amongst “them.” As a consequence, they frame the debate as a problem, one that is exaggerated and prone to arguments based on feelings, so-called facts, and biased arguments from interest groups with integrated agendas (e.g., mixing climate change with animal welfare).

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | Fragmentation

Several findings from our analyses show that Norway’s landscape concerning animal welfare policy is fragmented. First, we found a distinction between the parties’ framing of the issue that occurs along the political lines of right and left ideologies. Right-wing parties attribute poor farm animal welfare to individual problems and one-off incidents, whereas left-wing parties view it as a problem at the structural level. Thus, poor farm animal welfare becomes an argument for the left-wing to advocate more government intervention to change the structure of agricultural policy and thereby limit increasingly intensive production. That finding aligns with Chen’s (2016) results from Australia, which shows greater demand for formulating new animal welfare policies amongst parties on the political left than ones on the right, the latter of which generally want less state interference at the individual level. However, that single distinction does not explain the whole picture. Our analysis of party programs also revealed that the three parties most concerned with animal welfare are spread across the right-left divide, with the Socialist Left Party on the left, the Green Party on the centre-left, and the Liberal Party on the centre-right. Thus, the animal welfare issue criss-crosses the traditional left-right spectrum.

We also found that there seems to be too little power amongst political actors who want change that they cannot realistically expect any changes. The reasoning behind such thinking is twofold. First, the parties that want change are relatively small and seem unable to unite their forces. Within their ranks, there is a framing conflict even amongst the parties most concerned about animal welfare. The Liberal Party places far more emphasis on the individual level instead of framing poor farm animal welfare as a structural problem and therefore differs from the Socialist Left and the Green Party. Although they are all concerned about animal welfare, the problem is not framed in the same way, which may block further policy design (Rein & Schön, 1996). Second, the largest party on the centre-left, the Labour Party, seems disinterested in promoting substantial change in animal welfare policy. They do not seem to follow the same framing as either the other centre-left parties or the Centre Party, for several possible reasons. According to Fleig and Tosun (2017) and Vogeler (2019b), political parties’ attention to an issue increases as societal concern for the issue intensifies. However, according to Vogeler (2019b), that dynamic does not apply to the largest parties in countries that do not experience any sizeable societal concern.

That a large party such as the Labour Party has chosen not to prioritize animal welfare on the political agenda despite its seeming importance in society exemplifies how an issue can come out short in a cost-benefit analysis (Chen, 2016). Just as Attorp and McAreavey (2020)

observed amongst political parties in Australia, for Norway's Labour Party it may seem that though the population occasionally wants stricter animal welfare policies, the benefit of prioritizing animal welfare on the agenda remains unclear. By contrast, the costs are obvious for the Labour Party, perceiving animal welfare as clearly conflicting with economic sustainability in agriculture and the maintenance of jobs in rural areas, both of which are top concerns for the party. For that reason, animal welfare does not weigh heavily in the governing parties' weighing of costs and benefits (Chen, 2016; Vogeler, 2019b). Following Vogeler (2019b), we conclude that it seems safer to prioritize policy-seeking in the form of support from other parties and actors in the corporate agricultural system over vote-seeking when it is uncertain whether the public debate accurately represents people's demands for animal welfare.

6.2 | Depolarization

In our analyses, Norwegian political parties are shown to discuss polarization in the public debate but to downplay political polarization amongst and within parties while recognizing it nonetheless. They refer not to a right-left polarization but to a centre-periphery division instead, a division that runs across party lines. As shown in our empirical results, the urban population is perceived as being most concerned with farm animal welfare, while groups closer to agriculture perceive that animal welfare is good enough. The relatively broad consensus that the overall objective for Norwegian agriculture should be food production throughout the country, with Norwegian resources, and for national food security, seems to obscure conflicts on the issue of farm animal welfare. In that way, institutional discourse tones down polarization, and conflict on farm animal welfare issues does not develop as it does in public debate in the media and on social media (Schmidt, 2010).

The parties' ideas about animal welfare policy in our results appear to be so fragmented that ideas about animal welfare cannot be simply lumped together in two camps. Paradoxically, that reality does not mean that the issue is not polarized in the public debate or that politicians do not contribute to polarization. An us-versus-them atmosphere is thus created between politicians and actors who participate in the public debate on animal welfare (McCoy et al., 2018). Policymakers act strategically when using framing to define what issues are really about (Aasetre & Vik, 2013; Schattschneider, 1975; Schmidt, 2008). When the public debate is framed as being based on limited knowledge, as promoting the humanization of animals, marrying climate change with animal welfare, and as involving actors with a hidden agenda to end all livestock production in Norway, it is easy for politicians to frame the debate as being untethered and thus irrelevant to decision-makers. In turn, it can make perfect sense for the parties to abstain from action. After all, theories on polarization stress that the politically active part of the population expresses itself most (McCoy et al., 2018; McCright & Dunlap, 2011) but does not represent the mass of voters. Moreover, animal welfare can be viewed as a take-off issue, one that does not lead to much polarization in the macrostructure (Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007).

According to Schmidt (2008), whether some ideas or discourses have more impact than others, depends on consistency and coherence across political sectors and political actors. Our analyses have revealed that although political parties in Norway differ in their approaches to animal welfare, all of them have an important overlapping frame, namely that 'farm animal welfare is already very good in Norway'. That frame is so concise and consistent amongst all

parties that it can be perceived as the winning frame in the discourse (Schattschneider, 1975). Consequently, policy formulation that may compromise the current agricultural model gains little political traction.

6.3 | Shallow postexceptionalism

The way in which the political parties that we studied have linked animal welfare and agricultural policy is telling of agriculture as a field of policy, one that Atorp and McAreavey (2020) and Grant (2012) have characterized as being exceptional. According to our analyses, however, the parties have stated that animal welfare is an important topic but framed it so that it legitimates maintaining current policy, or what Greer (2017) has called *shallow post-exceptionalism*. The political parties' idea is clearly that Norwegian agriculture already has good animal welfare and that the current model should therefore be protected. That trend aligns with Vogeler's (2017) findings that countries that import agricultural products focus on animal welfare more than the exporting countries, which permits protectionism and decelerates institutional action. Thus, the economic argument becomes essential. Stricter animal welfare regulation in a country that already has good animal welfare is therefore framed as a policy for unbalancing the Norwegian agriculture system – that is, the system that has facilitated the good animal welfare already in existence.

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

As in other cases, the Norwegian case shows that change in animal welfare policy is not primarily driven by political parties (Bock & Buller, 2013; Chen, 2016; Vogeler, 2019a, 2019b). Our analysis, therefore, supports the “politics does not matter”—side of the partisan theory debate. The reason though, is that the framing points to a lack of significant political strength or numerical power for any major changes in public animal welfare policy in the short term. However, despite the institutional inertia this leads to, the result is not necessarily that no change will occur. In fact, a clear lack of change in policy can galvanize other actors to mobilize and take action (Chen, 2016). As shown in other countries, retailers, together with active animal welfare organizations, have taken on the responsibility of promoting animal welfare via market mechanisms. Such is especially the case in countries where authorities are perceived as being passive or where they directly advocate using the market to address the issue, as in Australia (Bock & Buller, 2013; Chen, 2016). In Norway too, collaborations between new societal actors and economic interests are already underway, and one has even produced the first animal welfare label for foodstuffs (REMA 1000, 2021). For that reason, if authorities leave space for other actors to determine what constitutes good animal welfare, strategic actors may use that space to shape new animal welfare policies and practices outside what we see as public policy. In that light, the dynamic can become a new form of governance in agriculture, one in which private actors claim more room in the governance structure, particularly by using private labels and certification schemes.

The analyses presented in this article contribute to a number of ongoing political science debates. Many authors have pointed out that the analytical toolbox for public policy contains institutional theories that can indeed explain stability (Daugbjerg & Swinbank, 2012; Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Proponents of ideational approaches and discursive institutionalism

have argued that their approaches are more suitable due to their ability to explain change (Hall, 1993; Schmidt, 2008). However, developing theory merely to explain change is as fruitless for research as developing theory only to explain stability. We believe that our study on frames in farm animal welfare policy in Norway showcases a framework that is indifferent to whether change or continuity is observed.

Our work also contributes to the literature on political parties and their role in policymaking, which rarely addresses agricultural policy, especially not farm animal welfare policy, a field in which other actors have received focus (Grant, 2012; Vogeler, 2020). Because many such studies have already highlighted passive authorities and the influence of active interest groups, retailers and activists, it is important to study and explain not only processes surrounding actors active in a field but also why passive actors remain passive (Bock & Buller, 2013; Chen, 2016; Vogeler, 2020). In that context, our study has shown that ideas and discourses may be fruitful starting points for analyzing the development of farm animal welfare governance.

Last, we have described how political parties maneuver in a new political field, as well as how they frame problems and present solutions, which generally affords insight into how such fields are formed. Greer (2017) has pointed to research showing that external crises, including food crises and climate crises, have made agricultural policy more exceptionalist and protectionist. Considering the recent pandemic and, more recently, the war in Ukraine, it is conceivable that animal welfare maybe even further de-prioritized due to what are perceived as more urgent crises. Even so, there is no sign that interest in improved animal welfare in agriculture will vanish any time soon. And when public policy does not respond to societal groups—the market might.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Retriever is a company that provides the media archive “Atekst” who covers Norwegian newspapers, journals, and media resources.

² We did not include Patient Focus, since this is not a party, but an organization that ran for election on a single issue in one electoral district.

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