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# Using Private Interviews to Deeply Probe the General Public's Views on Farming Animals

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*This is the fourth in a series of five reports on a multi-phase messaging study for animal advocates. The full series is summarized here.*

## Summary & Key Recommendations

The FrameWorks Institute (whose methods heavily informed this series of reports) recently published **new research** examining the change in Americans' thinking over time, specifically individualistic vs. systemic thinking. FrameWorks found promising signs that Americans' capacity for systemic thinking about political issues is on the rise. There was one glaring exception: health, and by extension, food. Consistent with their earlier research (discussed in the first report in this series), FrameWorks found that individualistic thinking through the *consumer frame* dominates the public's relationship to food. This is a problem for animal advocates: the consumer frame, connected to strong values of personal choice and freedom, creates opposition to our goals.

However, while the consumer frame is dominant, other frames may already exist through which the public would be more sympathetic. In this phase of the research, we conducted interviews with ordinary American meat eaters in an attempt to discover what frames underpin latent public support for the goals of the animal movement, and what messages advocates could use to activate that support.

We identified promising frames animal advocates can use to build support for a future without using animals for food. We also observed several common patterns people use to justify their opposition to the movement, patterns we believe advocates are not currently addressing. We experimented with several strategies to overcome these rationalizations and found which were most effective.

Throughout the study, the decisive factor determining how sympathetic an interviewee was to animal advocates was whether we successfully shifted their perspective away from the consumer frame. Our core recommendation is that animal advocates must work to replace the consumer frame: in our own thinking about farming animals, in our messages to the public, and ultimately, in the public discourse.



## Just the Headlines

- **Much of the public, especially to the socio-political left, is deeply ambivalent about eating animals.** Feelings of guilt and shame are hidden behind a layer of deliberate avoidance. When that layer is penetrated, people use rationalizations to resolve their ethical discomfort.
- **These rationalizations rely on deep values of *culture, tradition, nature, and freedom of choice*.** The public is widely aware of the harms of animal agriculture. In addition to reminding people of those harms, advocates must address these deeper concerns.
- **The most effective pro-meat rationalization people have is *futility*:** some version of “Things will never change, so it doesn’t matter what I do. Even if I stop, others will continue eating meat.” Stuck in the *consumer frame*, people cannot imagine society changing.
- **Overcoming futility is closely tied to replacing the consumer frame.**
- **Use the metaphor of *evolution* to help people envision the change advocates know is possible:** “Society is evolving beyond using animals for food.” Enrich the *evolve together* narrative with notions of modernity and progress. This was the most promising strategy for deactivating the consumer frame.
- **Besides *futility*, different rationalizations require different strategies.** For instance, in our interviews *culture* justifications were best met with empathy and validation; *freedom of choice* was best met with a carefully considered counter-argument; and *naturalness* was overcome by simply stating the argument in its plainest form, allowing people to see the frame and the underlying illogic.



## Primary Questions & Research Design

After analyzing materials published by animal advocates, industry, and news media to map out the narrative landscape concerning farming animals, we turned our attention to the general public. Overall, we designed these interviews to *uncover the frames, narratives, metaphors, values, and beliefs underpinning latent public support for abolishing animal agriculture*. It was, of course, a hypothesis that such latent public support exists to begin with. We often framed that hypothesis in terms of survey findings from the previous ten years or so. In these surveys (discussed at length in the second report in this series), surprisingly large numbers of people agreed with statements as radical as supporting a **ban on slaughterhouses (48%)**, a total ban on farming animals (33%), or the view that **“all animals deserve the same rights as humans...” (32%)**. In some of these same samples, however, over 95% agreed with the statement “eating meat is a personal choice and nobody can tell me what to do.”

Contradictions like these are abundant in public opinion surveys about all kinds of topics. The explanation probably has a lot to do with framing. According to the cognitive linguist George Lakoff, narrative frames (metaphors, values, beliefs, and stories that help us understand the world) often function with a quality of *mutual inhibition* similar to muscle pairs. When you flex your bicep, your tricep automatically disengages; it's awkward to flex both at the same time. Similarly, our brain has the ability to look at a particular issue from different perspectives, but usually not at the same time, at least not without a struggle.

Frames are the way our brains make sense of the world. There is no “neutral” frame, and there is often no such thing as “neutral” language. This poses a serious challenge for surveys. The language in surveys often activates one frame, while another question a few moments later can activate a different frame. For anyone responding to questions about a topic they aren't an expert on, it can be extremely easy to flip back and forth between different frames without noticing contradictions in the consequences of different statements.

Accordingly, we hypothesized that these surveys pointed to promising frames in the minds of one third to one half of respondents. The frame behind the personal choice question was obviously the familiar *consumer frame* discussed in earlier reports in this series. The consumer frame corresponds much more to the daily behaviors of these respondents, nearly all of whom eat meat regularly. But what frames were respondents looking through when expressing support for a total ban on farming animals? If we can identify these frames and design messages which activate them while deactivating the consumer frame, we may dramatically expand support for our movement. That is precisely what our 1:1 interviews were designed to do.

Thanks to existing research, we already suspected that non-experts would have different ways of understanding the issue than the advocate frames of *rights* and *welfare*. We



were curious to see whether their ways of talking about the issue tracked more closely to any of the narratives preferred by journalists and opposition groups.

## Sampling

We recruited participants from Reddit and Facebook with an announcement of a paid public opinion study on “food and agriculture.” They were first asked to fill out an intake survey collecting demographic data. U.S.-based respondents of voting age were invited to participate in a 30-minute interview and paid \$20 upon completion of the interview and an exit survey that asked how the discussion affected their views. Several hundred completed the survey, of which nearly 50% were disqualified for being outside the U.S. Roughly 150 eligible candidates were invited to participate in the order they had filled out the form until a final 70 interviews were completed.

We focused on the large majority of Americans who rarely think critically about eating animals, or the movement to end the farming of animals, and excluded vegans and vegetarians from the study entirely. Even among meat-eaters, however, we did not expect a monolithic viewpoint. Rather, we expected participants would roughly fall into a friendly base, the persuadable middle, or the intractable opposition, which would correlate with political affiliation, age, and gender. We were especially interested in 33-48% of people who might express the sort of contradiction described above (i.e. agreeing that animals should have the same rights as humans while also agreeing that eating meat is a personal choice).

To identify those segments, we collected responses to a **model animal rights question** used in those earlier surveys. Participants also selected their political leaning from a list: conservative, liberal, moderate leaning conservative/liberal, progressive, and unaffiliated, along with their presidential vote in the 2020 election. Respondents who indicated “moderate leaning [conservative/liberal]” are quoted in this report as conservative or liberal if their presidential vote matched that answer, or as moderate if it did not.

However, other than vegetarians and vegans, we did not use this demographic information to exclude participants. We were not confident enough in our model for predicting base, persuadable, and opposition inclinations. We also wanted to see if the frames leading the base to express sympathy may in fact be present among the public more broadly, but be more difficult to activate. While this was not deliberate on our part, our sample was moderately skewed toward young, female, and liberal/progressive people. In effect, the segment of the population most receptive to animal advocates was well represented.

## Methods



Interviews were conducted iteratively in rounds. For each round, we created a script, conducted 7-10 interviews, and manually performed thematic analysis of the transcripts using the open-source qualitative research software Taguette. (Transcripts were generated automatically with Otter.ai then manually edited for accuracy.) Then we identified the themes relating to latent support for the animal movement's goals and made changes to the script enabling us to dig deeper into those particular themes in the next round of interviews.

Before and during the interview, participants were told the study was being conducted by "The Institute for the Study of Cultural Trends," a fictional organization, in order to minimize social desirability bias. (This deception was revealed after the interview.) Interviewers wore professional clothing and made our best efforts to conceal our interest in the study. By the end of the interview, 50% of participants correctly identified that the study was run by an "animal advocacy group", with 43% guessing a "university department" and 7% guessing an "animal agriculture business". Accordingly, social desirability bias may have played a role in some responses.

The first script consisted of very open-ended questions including "What comes to mind when you think of animals used for food?" and "Are you aware of any problems associated with using animals for food?" As the research progressed and later scripts evolved, the questions became more specific, often borrowing language from earlier participants, for instance, "Some people oppose a transition away from using animals for food because they feel that it's natural, that humans belong in the food chain and are meant to eat other animals. What do you think about that?" Our hope was to use this lay-person language, which differed significantly from common advocate language, to get a more honest insight into respondents' views. Gradually, we replaced the open-ended with potential advocate messages. All the interview scripts and transcripts are available in the materials.

Ultimately, we conducted 9 rounds of interviews for a total of 70, each lasting about half an hour. Each transcript was reviewed and coded independently by two reviewers, chosen on a rotating basis from a total of three reviewers. At the end of each round, the reviewers met to share their notes and develop the next script.



# Avoidance, Dissonance, Rationalization: Mapping Public Reactions

## A Model of Public Attitudes

A common debate among animal advocates is whether messaging should focus on animal suffering, environmental harm, human health, or a combination thereof, with worker abuse or other injustices increasingly considered as well. All of these options reflect an intuitive assumption that advocacy should focus on convincing the public to stop farming and eating animals because of how harmful it is. However, our interviews suggest this is a losing strategy.

The simple reason is that the public is already familiar with much of this information (or at least the people in this study, who skewed a bit to the socio-political left). All of our interviews opened with the question, “What comes to mind when you think of animals used for food?” The wording of this question was chosen in consultation with other researchers to be as “neutral” as possible, yet most interviewees began their answers describing a sense of guilt or shame about their meat consumption in light of the harms they were aware of. For our participants, this simple question brought out memories of seeing footage from inside factory farms and slaughterhouses, reasonably accurate information about the environmental impact of industrial animal agriculture, and philosophical questions about the basic ethics of breeding animals just to kill and eat them. For the minority who didn’t respond this way at first, the follow-up question “Are you aware of any problems associated with using animals for food?” usually sufficed.

This does not mean that every respondent renounced meat-eating as a result of their interview. Instead, we witnessed repeating patterns in how people grapple with their discomfort. We listened to what seemed like well-rehearsed rhetorical strategies people used to escape from this cognitive dissonance. This involved a number of rationalizations (such as tradition, naturalness, and futility) which will be familiar to any experienced animal advocate, along with a surprisingly self-aware determination to avoid thinking about the topic. But the relationships we saw between these patterns could inform a different messaging strategy than advocates are using currently.

In a nutshell, many (if not most) members of the public are already well aware of the harms of animal agriculture; they rely on more nuanced justifications to rationalize their meat consumption (which we believe is driven more by social norms than by rational thinking). Crucially, when advocates speak only about the industrial harms (regardless of whether the focus is animals, environment, or health), we come across as disconnected and lacking empathy



for these deeper objections. To connect with the public, advocates must direct far more of our communication efforts toward these concerns, while presenting a credible pathway for people to become movement supporters without the **social risks associated with veganism**.

We grouped these patterns into four categories:

- **Avoidance:** most people are engaged in a conscious effort to avoid thinking about where meat comes from. In this setting, however, participants agreed to discuss the subject, revealing feelings of...
- **Dissonance:** feelings of guilt and shame, along with strong social habits of meat consumption. After churning inside these uncomfortable contradictions, participants sought relief by turning to...
- **Rationalization:** insecure appeals to culture and tradition, naturalness, necessity, and other justifications. By thinking out loud, participants could often refute these objections by themselves. There was one justification, however, which participants rarely talked themselves out of...
- **Futility:** by confidently asserting that meat would always be here and that their personal choices didn't make a difference either way, participants resolved their dissonance and removed themselves from the equation.

Now we'll examine each of these in depth.

## Avoidance

Avoidance is most people's first line of defense on the subject of eating animals. What surprised us, however, was how many people were not only aware of their own use of this strategy, but willing to admit to it with minimal prodding. These representative quotes each came almost immediately in response to the open-ended questions described above:

*I'm a little ashamed to say that I stick my head in the sand. Like, I don't want to know how cruel the slaughter is. I don't want to know how scared the chicken is right before its head gets chopped off. (Moderate woman, 61)*

*I had read something that was describing animals being led to the slaughter and how scared they were at the end. And just I can't even think about that, because I've been an animal lover all my life. (Liberal woman, 51)*

*It makes me sad. I try not to think too hard when I'm at a restaurant, or when I'm eating meat. It just kind of ruins it. (Progressive woman, 22)*





*If I think very hard about it, I will end up not wanting meat for a while.  
(Progressive woman, 45)*

Right away, responses like these present a complication to common survey findings about public opinion of farming animals. In surveys, only a small percentage of people report being uneasy with the facts of using animals for food. We believe this reflects the superficial nature of surveys, and that for many people, short survey questions simply don't break through their habitual avoidance.

In the interview setting, however, it didn't take much for people to both acknowledge their avoidance and (temporarily) move through it. The simple question "What comes to mind when you think of animals used for food?" was originally intended to be as neutral as possible, but it proved to be a very effective tool to invite people into their full dissonance around the topic. **The key was that this question did not trigger defensiveness.** Unlike advocate messages about the harms of animal agriculture, this open-ended question created enough psychological safety for the respondent to explore their own ethical misgivings around eating animals.

This touches on another key theme of this report: advocates must not underestimate the tendency of meat eaters to have a defensive reaction to even the mildest messages about the harms of farming animals. Whether it is because of past experiences they've had with advocates (even as impersonal as seeing a video of a PETA protest) or simply because food is such a sensitive, personal topic, participants were hypersensitive to any language from the researchers which could imply a negative moral judgment of meat consumption on the individual level. Yet when invited to share their own thoughts, these same participants could deeply question the ethics of farming and slaughtering animals. In some cases, participants reacted defensively to language which was similar or even less condemnatory than language they themselves had used moments ago.

This was our key finding about avoidance: **in order to break through avoidance, we recommend advocates lead with questions and empathic language**, making space for the audience to reflect on their own misgivings. The quotes above show how people are willing to open up in response to the right question, as opposed to a strongly-worded advocate message which usually brings up defensiveness. Many skilled advocates already use questions this way on the interpersonal level, but we can apply the same principle to mass-scale messaging as well. For instance, consider a social media ad asking "How do you feel when you think about what happens to animals used for food?" Another strategy is to anticipate some of their more nuanced rationalizations and offer empathy and even validation of them. First, let's take a closer look at the emotional turmoil lurking right underneath avoidance.



## Dissonance

Beneath a hardened but thin layer of avoidance, most of our interview subjects revealed a disorganized landscape of contradictory data and emotions. A jumble of facts and images each person has heard and seen about the harms of industrial animal agriculture is stored here alongside feelings of guilt and shame (and memories of the time they tried being vegetarian for a couple of weeks), but also strong feelings of attachment to meat as familiar and delicious. While operating at this layer, our participants seemed trapped between these forces. These quotes were typical:

*I can't remember everything that I saw, but it was enough that it made me nauseous to think about eating meat. I've had issues with it since I was a child really. There were times I took a week or two weeks off from eating meat. Because thinking about it, that was a live animal. It just disgusts me so much. (Progressive woman, 45)*

*I just feel discomfort generally, trying to reconcile the nature of needing to eat with loving animals. So I get uncomfortable with that for sure. (Liberal woman, 48)*

*There's a big sense of guilt for humanity, and the environment... There's a sense of conflict, where I feel really indecisive on what I want to choose, and how I can progress from whatever I grew up with. (Liberal woman, 22)*

*Being an animal lover, but also knowing that we need animals for certain things... it makes me be on the fence a little bit about that. I want to do the right thing, to... care about these animals, but at the same time, [meat] is just something that's all I know.*

*Talking about it out loud almost makes me feel guilty... I love animals. But at the same time, I'm a meat eater... I've always wanted to not be that way, but then I'm like, what would I eat? (Conservative woman, 41)*

The subject of this dissonance differed somewhat among participants. Environmental harm was occasionally spoken of this way but usually was discussed in much more sterile terms. Instead, animal suffering was clearly the most common theme. Later in the interviews, participants commonly distinguished between the conditions animals live in and the ethical questions around slaughter itself, but when initially expressing this kind of dissonance, such distinctions were often absent.

This was exactly what we were searching for, a frame of mind in which respondents were most receptive to the possibility of abolishing the farming of animals. Many participants



wondered out loud whether it might be possible after all to stop using animals for food, or expressed remorse that they didn't know what they could do to support that goal. Others mentioned their efforts to consume less meat. For a brief window of time, the subtext of their responses seemed to be: *If I could see a way that this change was possible, I would support it.* It seemed that an advocate message which could get people into this frame, and offer a credible path toward abolition, would find an enthusiastic audience. However, without such a message, people did not stay here for long.

## Rationalization

After stewing for perhaps a few minutes in moral distress, participants would begin to find their footing. At this point, they would deploy a series of intellectual justifications for continuing to eat animals. These seemed mostly defensive in nature and were generally communicated in a tone of uncertainty. As often as not, participants would follow up one of their own rationalizations with a rebuttal. Each of the most common objections is given a full discussion later in this report. For now, consider how these quotes reflect the pattern of rationalizing away the dissonance expressed moments before:

*Part of me feels sad, you know, animals do have to die in order for us to eat them. But on the other hand, it's kind of what's called the food cycle... even if we don't eat them, there are other animals that eat other animals.*  
(Progressive woman, 22)

*This is something I would want to say yes to. But then when I think of it, I know there's a lot of cultures that have a lot of cultural dishes. And then even the dishes aside, you have aspects of religion where like, even if you're using the animals that you've killed, it's like a sacrifice, you do it with the animal in mind.* (Moderate woman, 19)

*We've been doing it for a while. That's not to say that we've always done it this way. That's kind of the context of the argument that a lot of people will say, obviously that's not always like sound logic... eventually you're supposed to progress in society and get better.* (Liberal man, 22)

*Nature's cold. There's a lot of cruelty in the human condition... humans can be capable of horrible, atrocious, atrocious cruelty. But it's part of the package.*  
(Moderate woman, 61)

This is not to say these justifications were generated on the spot. In their responses, many participants showed that they had indeed thought about the topic more than they might have admitted at first. Different people also preferred different rationalizations. For instance, they



might reject a common “naturalness” rationalization after hearing a paraphrased statement from an earlier interview, but agree with an argument based on culture and tradition.

While some rationalizations were more common than others, there was only one argument that a clear majority of participants preferred. This rationalization was so consistent and effective that it performed a different function entirely: futility.

## Futility

Up to this point in the conversation, the participants appeared to be grasping, trying on different arguments, searching for something that could remedy the uncomfortable dissonance present in their relationship to meat. Many participants seemed to find that solution in the futility argument, which basically states: *Humans will never stop eating meat, so it doesn't matter what I do:*

*I'm not sure how we as a society get to a place where that doesn't happen. I could go on a boycott tomorrow and say, 'I'm not paying until the meat industry improves.' But there's a billion other people in this country that will continue to eat Big Macs. (Liberal man, 28)*

*If I stopped eating meat, somebody else is gonna eat meat. Everyday there is a child born that's going to eat meat. So am I really making a difference if I don't eat meat? No, it's just a personal choice. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*Until our political system is fixed, and FYI, it's not going to get fixed... We will have coal, and they will slaughter animals, as long as Trump and his guys can go play golf and be rich. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*I kind of see it as a necessary evil... There's no way everybody's gonna change. (Liberal, nonbinary, 27)*

The intractability of farming animals was *common sense* in our interviews, and it made other questions seem unimportant. We came to see futility as the first and most important framing obstacle to overcome; in order to activate support, we needed to create a sense that change was possible to begin with.

Many of the quotes and observations shared thus far are focused on the participants' own meat-eating and their thoughts about it. These quotes largely came in response to our open-ended questions about “using animals for food.” In these questions, participants seemed to hear an implicit ask to become vegetarian or explain why they weren't already. The prevalence of the *consumer frame* in their responses shows how this is the default frame for people to think about food and animals. The consumer frame was deeply tied to futility; as



consumers, the subjects we interviewed saw no credible way their actions (or anybody's actions) could make a difference. Subverting the consumer frame proved crucial to our efforts to subvert futility. Let's examine how.

## Overcoming Futility by *Evolving Together*

Futility presented a uniquely challenging framing obstacle. While participants employed a range of other justifications, many participants also disagreed with these using lay-person language. Borrowing this language and presenting it back to later interviewees was our preferred way to address these justifications. However, participants rarely attempted to refute futility and the consumer frame.

Attempts by animal advocates to reframe the issue as one of collective systemic change (in contrast to individual consumer change, which is met with this sense of futility) are not novel. For example, since its founding in 2013, Direct Action Everywhere was one animal advocacy group attempting to relay a message that animal oppression is a "systemic issue" requiring a political solution. From our early interviews, however, we began to get a sense of why these reframing efforts may have fallen short. Americans are deeply habituated to thinking about food as a consumer issue. Their understanding of the food system beyond their trips to the grocery store is severely limited. As a result, messages about "systemic change" appear to have taken for granted a level of understanding that simply wasn't there. For example, the public may imagine the government playing a minor role in ensuring food is safe, but rarely imagine government policy has any effect on their food choices through subsidies and regulations, and may question whether it ever could. Advocates seem to understand the need for reframing, yet in practice continue to underestimate the challenge it poses. Some activist messaging has explicitly contrasted "individual" and "consumer change" with "systemic" or "social change." Yet our interview subjects almost never used these phrases or phrases like them, suggesting they do not map well to the public's model of animals and food, and even societal change processes in general.

When there is a mismatch between the way experts, advocates, and the public understand the issue, often the first step is for advocates to become aware of when they may be using jargon (the meaning of which is as obvious to them as it is confounding to the public) and replace that jargon with clear, accessible explanations of the concepts it stands in for. This is easier said than done and requires both discipline and experimentation. It took us several iterations of our script (corresponding to several rounds of feedback from real people) to hone in on language which was at least modestly successful in overcoming the gap in understanding between interviewer and participant.



What was that gap in understanding? Essentially, a vision of how a societal evolution away from relying on animals for food could unfold. Advocates, who enjoy staying informed about the latest developments in alternative foods, and understand the power of government to shape the market dynamics of animal meat, have an easy time seeing how society could undergo a rapid transition if the right forces aligned. For members of the public who lack this understanding, the task of imagining such a transition is staggering.

This isn't to say they are aware of no evidence that this change could happen. Rather, they don't have a conceptual model to organize that evidence, or at least one that is called to mind by messages about "systemic change." In early interviews, for instance, we saw that thinking about the trajectory of new meat alternatives could temporarily lead to openness about the possibility of change. The task was to form this into a coherent vision, in lay-accessible language, for how all this could lead to a future without animal meat, involving a clear role for public policy as well as for the listener themselves.

## The Evolve Together Frame

The most potent metaphor we identified for communicating that vision is an *evolution* away from meat at the societal level. We first noticed some participants using this metaphor, both explicitly and implicitly. Then we created a message based on it. After several iterations and rounds of feedback from dozens of interviews, the following paragraph took shape:

*In recent years, as meat alternatives have become widely available, concerns have grown about various problems arising from using animals for food. Some people think that society is evolving away from using animals for food altogether. Imagining a scenario where consumers, food producers, restaurants and grocery stores work together with policymakers to phase out meat, would you be in favor of a complete transition away from killing animals for food?*

The paragraph above is not a silver bullet. It was able to clearly communicate to participants that advocates are concerned with a gradual society-wide transition, rather than demanding they go vegan right then and there (which participants otherwise assumed). At its best, this language was able to overcome the dominant belief that a future without slaughtering animals is impossible. This still didn't resolve many other rationalizations which participants would then fall back upon. It also rarely generated support for government action; while most participants said they would be in favor of the transition, they often emphasized that it should come from consumers, not the government. Further, this excerpt functioned within a 30-minute conversation about animals used for food, during which participants had usually already expressed some degree of remorse on the topic. This context was a rare luxury, differing substantially from the determined avoidance which characterizes so many people's attitudes on a day-to-day basis.



That said, to the extent futility often presented a barrier to productive conversations about participants' other rationalizations, the *evolution* frame represented a major turning point in our interviews. As the message above gradually took shape over several rounds of interviews, futility came to play a smaller and smaller role. Here's why each part of it was included:

*In recent years...*

Futility partly stems from people's lived reality: almost everyone they know eats animals, while every restaurant and institution they frequent serves animals. It would be strange to look at this and think meat was on the way out. However, while meat reduction may be socially marginal, if it is showing signs of becoming *less* marginal, it just might be en route to take over. Borrowing from the work of sociologist Gregg Sparkman and his colleagues, we attempted to **frame meat dissonance as a dynamic norm**, that is, a norm in the process of shifting, emphasizing the growth of meat alternatives and concerns rather than their minority status.

*...as meat alternatives have become widely available...*

Many participants independently brought up the increasing visibility of meat alternatives, especially Beyond and Impossible. This was the closest most participants came on their own to questioning futility. Other participants earnestly asked what they would be expected to eat in a meat-free future; to them, reminders about Beyond and Impossible meats were reassuring. Leading with this reminder anticipated these objections so we could keep the focus on more substantive issues.

*...concerns have grown about various problems arising from using animals for food.*

In the course of our conversations, we learned that we could not skip directly to addressing futility and other rationalizations. Drawing out dissonance first was necessary so people could remind themselves why they might support a transition away from animal meat. Otherwise, they wouldn't even think of justifications, because they normally don't need to actively defend their meat consumption. This sentence left room for the listener to think of whatever problem seems most important to them, whether related to animal suffering, environmental harm, or something else.

*Some people think that society is evolving away from using animals for food altogether.*



**The shift away from the consumer frame is anchored in the explanatory metaphor of *evolution*.** This metaphor was much more effective than analogies to other social justice movements for helping participants start to envision the change process. Instead of an implicit demand to go vegan, *evolution* helped participants envision a gradual transition across society. This addressed one of our participants' top concerns: that change would be forced on people too quickly for them to adapt.

*Imagining a scenario where consumers, food producers, restaurants and grocery stores work together with policymakers to phase out meat...*

This drives home the previous sentence, reiterating it and adding detail. Because the consumer frame is so dominant, a counterframe will require a great deal of repetition in order to sink in, as well as elaboration to close the knowledge gap between advocate and audience. We already discussed the need to replace jargon with clear, accessible explanations. Naming the different actors involved in the food system was one way to do that.

Remember that the inclusion of “policymakers” did invite resistance from many participants. Later, we will discuss further efforts to build in a role for government action.

*...would you be in favor of a complete transition away from killing animals for food?*

Because their attitude towards the topic is characterized by avoidance and dissonance, urging participants to take a clear position in favor or against killing animals for food is crucial. Generally, people would love to be able to avoid taking a hard stance either way while continuing with their current behavior. However, when pressed, many of those same people will come down in favor of evolving away from meat. Of course, it is a strategic question for organizations how they can create this dilemma for people in the real world (e.g. by presenting them with ballot measures or animal-friendly candidates for office).

Though each addition to this paragraph seemed to improve participants' understanding, the key is the *evolution* metaphor. In order for a new frame to catch on, it needs to be sticky. That is, people can not only remember it but adopt it after hearing it. This is why we hoped to draw out frames from our participants rather than create one from scratch. The *evolution* frame demonstrated this quality, with many participants repeatedly referring back to it once they heard it, in stark contrast to the *consumer*-centric futility that dominated earlier interviews:





*...everything is evolving now, so why not adapt current times to our needs now?... We can totally create new traditions. (Liberal woman, 34)*

*...we have evolved so much that we shouldn't really need to [eat meat], and it does kind of seem a bit primitive, now that you're mentioning it that way. (Liberal woman, 29)*

*Everything is changing and evolving all the time, just look at, you know, today's world compared to even a year ago. So it's inevitable that change is going to happen... most people, if they can see the lasting harm from continuing to eat meat and the slaughter of animals and everything, I think that they would at least attempt to make the change. (Liberal man, 26)*

*...we are evolving into a more progressive society as a species very, very slowly. The future can be plant based... (Conservative man, 26)*

*...evolution went that way [towards eating meat]. But we're still evolving, so much that we can evolve away from it. (Liberal woman, 29)*

*I'm thinking about society as a whole. And like how we consume food, or use resources... I think it's really useful to kind of move onward, or think critically about what we really want to do. And how we can maybe seek out other alternatives... sustainable practices with food and other related areas. (Liberal woman, 22)*

Why was this frame effective? One dimension of the evolution frame is *modernity*. Some participants framed their support for the goals of animal advocates in terms of modernity, emphasizing the *technological progress* represented by meat alternatives and comparing them to renewable energy, itself connected to the *modern problem* of the climate crisis:

*Obviously, I support anything where we can use science and technology in a positive way... I just think we need to look for alternatives. We can't be going back to coal and all this other stuff that's killing the environment. So now we have, you know, 3d printers that can make food... I think they're changing the way farming is and making things that are more sustainable. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*I think it's definitely what we're shifting towards anyways. I think all this going green and trying to be efficient... being conscious of the environment around us, and the other animals and stuff. (Liberal woman, 20)*



While modernity and technological progress are useful frames for animal advocates, *evolution* goes further. First, it contains a stronger element of motion, inviting participants to envision a future different from the present, which most people **rarely do**. For our participants, evolution also emphasized that the change would be gradual, as opposed to people being “forced to change overnight.”

*Evolution* is also more versatile than *modernity*. While *modernity* conjures scientific progress, and to a lesser extent moral progress, evolution as a metaphor can be applied broadly. Accordingly, our participants adopted the evolution frame to dismiss both culture and naturalness rationalizations (two of the most persistent rationalizations discussed in more length below):

*Talking about culture, I feel it kind of evolves as we move forward in the future. Coming from maybe 100 years ago, things have changed drastically. (Progressive woman, 23)*

*We've evolved quite a bit from the thousands and millions of years that we've lived here. With that evolution needs to come change... if we eat less meat and then at the same time start introducing the alternatives, that's what we need to see. (Liberal man, 26)*

Altogether, *evolution* presents a potent metaphor that can be applied to many key aspects of the debate about animals used for food. Advocates can emphasize *technological*, *cultural*, or *moral* evolution to expose and disarm a range of opposing frames focused on keeping the way we do things now.

We hope advocates will consider how to carefully incorporate the *evolution* frame into your messages, to disarm the public of the most effective justification they have to ignore you. Also see the “Stuff That Didn’t Work” section below for some more strategies we found to be ineffective in overcoming futility, such as analogizing animal rights to other social justice movements.

## Disarming Common Rationalizations

At first, many of our conversations followed a common pattern, starting with avoidance, moving through dissonance and guilt, then turning to rationalization, with futility being a particularly effective and universal rationalization. When we were able to subvert the futility argument, several other common arguments remained. We sought ways to undermine the narrative power of these arguments, in order to mobilize participants’ discomfort and guilt to build support for an animal-free transition.



Broadly speaking, different responses to opposition arguments could be grouped into three categories: **ignore, refute, and empathize**. Ignoring is similar to the strategy described by cognitive scientist George Lakoff in his book *Don't Think of an Elephant*. Lakoff suggests that responding to an argument directly often plays into the underlying frame of that argument. Instead, we can respond by reiterating our own frame and values.

The animal advocate messages we reviewed earlier in this study focused on a combination of the first two strategies, either ignoring or attempting to directly refute opposition arguments. In our interviews, these strategies were effective against some of the rationalizations we commonly encountered. For other arguments, however, an approach based on empathy and even validation appeared to be much more productive. One example is the *culture & tradition* frame. When the interviewer reflected the underlying values behind this common objection, participants would often relax and show more willingness to consider how those values could be preserved without farming animals.

**These objections** (which we will examine in depth below) **are the source of much disconnection between animal advocates and the public**. While animal advocates continue to focus their messaging on the harms of animal agriculture, much of the public's resistance actually lies in deeper values such as culture, tradition, and naturalness, which remain largely unaddressed by animal advocates. These are reinforced by more familiar concerns like cost, taste, convenience, and personal choice. Together, these are the core opposing frames that animal advocates must anticipate and overcome in their communications to the public. Watching interviewees wrestle with these rationalizations out loud, we observed patterns that could help advocates more effectively address them. The following sections examine each of these in turn.

## Culture

The essence of objections focused on culture is that in calling for a transition away from meat, animal advocates are showing insufficient respect for the important role meat plays in people's cultural identities. Participants mentioned traditions large and small, e.g. family traditions as well as the practices of major religions. They also invoked human evolution and thousands of years of ancestry to further legitimize cultural practices of meat eating. (We'll examine those more closely in a moment.)

These cultural appeals came in different flavors. Some interviewees (including most conservatives as well as Muslims and other religious people) focused on the role meat played in their own culture, traditions, and upbringing, while others (especially more progressive participants) focused on the important role meat plays in other people's cultures around the world, and immigrant cultures in the U.S. (Indigenous cultures, in particular, were idealized and instrumentalized for this argument.) The underlying values here may be quite different, with



the more liberal tendency emphasizing *multiculturalism* and cultural relativity, while conservatives focused on *upholding tradition*. The difference is evident in these representative quotes:

*I don't have a problem with that at all. I'm from the south, just about every person in my family, friends, they're hunters, they're fishermen. That's just part of our lifestyle here, our culture. (Conservative woman, 53)*

*There are a lot of places in the world where that's a necessity. And the way they treat an animal may not be to our standard or something else, but it is a necessity for their society, and they're using their local ecosystem to survive, which they've been doing for centuries, millennia, probably... In America, we're a melting pot, so many people are coming from cultures where you're expecting them to essentially give up their own identity... it has a lot to do with our privilege in this country. (Progressive man, 29)*

*I remember my mom telling me that she grew up with her dad, basically he owned a little small farm. And so she's just used to being raised eating natural meats. And because of the way she grew up, that also influences us as a family as a whole. I feel like with alternatives... the recipes or traditions probably don't feel as good. (Liberal woman, 22)*

*It would be very privileged of us, because it's easy to say that when we're white people with a very Christian background who do not have a biblical reverence the way indigenous practitioners and people would, it's very easy for us to say that it's not necessary or that it's cruel, but we haven't really experienced a life where we see or are interconnected in such a loving and respectful way where we dedicate ourselves to making sure there is zero waste with any animal we consume. (Progressive man, 27)*

Some versions of this rationale focused down on a micro level to the individual's upbringing. As if thinking out loud, many participants chalked their meat consumption habits up to the fact that they were *raised that way*:

*I prefer to eat meat, just because I guess I was raised like that. And I would still prefer to eat that to mainly get my protein source... I know, I can also get protein through a vegetarian diet or vegan diet, but it would be much harder to do. (Liberal man, 26)*

*I wouldn't say I felt guilt or regret about the animals themselves, but about the overall sustainability of animals being used for food, but not about the*



*individual animal. Just probably because I was brought up in a way that eating animals for food was a normalized thing, since I was young. (Moderate man, 30)*

Upbringing was linked to culture by an element of defensiveness that was often associated with both sets of responses. These arguments appeared to be a way for participants to reassure themselves that *I am not a bad person for eating meat*. This defensiveness was undoubtedly something participants brought into the interview with them. Culture arguments reassured them that meat eating is normal among people they respect, including their family:

*It's something that you're, you're raised to eat meat, nobody told me how bad it was. And now, people might think it's too late, because you've already lived a quarter of your life. That's the way I guess you were raised. When we were younger, nobody talked about stuff like that, you know? (Conservative woman, 41)*

*I wouldn't necessarily be against it. But at the same time, I do have cultural beliefs where there are some dishes that have cultural foods in them that I like, lamb and whatnot, that I eat once a year. I don't think I'm an awful person for eating lamb once a year. (Liberal woman, 24)*

*When I visited Asia, I went to Bangkok. They have this floating market. The fishermen are out, they live on their boats, and they fish. So that's their livelihood. Does that make them a bad person? No... That's their way of life. (Liberal woman, 47)*

Interviewees had a habit of hearing personal attacks and moral judgments even in the mildest advocate language. Advocates would be well advised to anticipate this defensiveness from the general public and explore ways to get out ahead of it in their messaging. One way is to emphasize that we do not blame individuals. This can be done overtly in the message, or more discreetly by using meat-eating messengers whenever possible (the next report discusses messengers at length). Another subtle strategy is to connect with the public over precisely the values behind these objections. When appropriate, animal advocates should emphasize the ways we value respect for cultural identities and traditions. Even further, we can empathize with the sense of loss people might feel about adapting certain cultural traditions that involve meat.

Validating these culture-based rationalizations may seem counterintuitive, but in our interviews, people who received genuine empathy about their attachments to meat often responded by being more willing to question it. Some participants were able to gracefully



summarize this rich duality. In fact, moments like this is exactly where the *evolution* metaphor first presented itself:

*We've been hunting for hundreds of thousands of years. If my ancestors didn't hunt, I probably wouldn't be here today. That's what we had to do for survival. But I think some people would also say that it's kind of unethical when we're at a point in the world where we don't have to do that. It's not like 1850, and I'm a pioneer in California, killing a bear for meat or something, it just doesn't work like that anymore. (Liberal man, 22)*

*Talking about culture, I feel it kind of evolves as we move forward... coming in from 100 years ago, things have changed drastically. So I think now looking at the kind of concerns we have, we would have to adapt and meet midway and be able to reduce pollution or the exploitation which is taking place. I would say that culture would probably adapt to what's going on right now. (Progressive woman, 23)*

*These are people who haven't been shown any other way... And some people are very scared of science, as we've seen now in the recent pandemic. So it seems natural that people would be scared of just not eating meat... But I do think they're being closed-minded about the fact that there could be other alternatives that can taste just as good. It can be incorporated into our culture. (Liberal woman, 25)*

## Naturalness

Closely related to culture was the *natural* frame. Culture and Nature make a similar appeal: *let's continue with the way we've always done things*. However, they focus on different values. While appeals framed around culture were rooted in values of tradition and multiculturalism, these appeals were based on the *order of nature*. Many participants mentioned the *food chain* and the vaguely religious notion that some animals are *meant* to be eaten and humans are *meant* to be omnivores. As with culture, there was a generally liberal framing focused on harmony and the circle of life, and a more conservative frame focused on an amoral hierarchy of beings, the ability of the strong to dominate the weak. These were complimentary with justifications based on culture, and they sometimes came in quick succession.

*People have been killing animals since the beginning of time... I just kind of feel like it's just, that's that's the way it is, man. Someone's on top and someone's at the bottom. You know, you're an animal. I don't think people*



*should abuse animals. That's a different thing. But like, we're gonna eat animals. That's what they're here for. (Liberal woman, 19)*

*Part of me feels sad, you know, animals do have to die in order for us to eat them. But on the other hand, it's kind of what's called the food cycle... There are other animals that eat other animals, too, right? (Progressive woman, 22)*

*Hunting animals and eating animals has been a part of our anthropology. While I do feel for the animals that are killed, I feel like hunting and eating meat are connected to us in a very primal way... it adheres to the natural order of things, to consume meat products. (Moderate man, 24)*

*We're technically omnivores. Meat is part of our diet and biologically, [part of] us too. For that argument's sake, it's also a cultural thing. A lot of cultures will eat meat, but they will respect the animal by using the whole animal. (Liberal woman, 23)*

*They are the food chain, if you will. They're meant to be eaten. (Liberal man, 27)*

Participants also expressed concerns about the *naturalness* of meat alternatives. Many people mentioned that plant-based meat alternatives are made with “fillers,” which appeared to be a stand-in for any mysterious or untrustworthy ingredients. Concerns about cultivated meat were more on the moral level, questioning whether it should be done at all (though many other participants were enthusiastic about the technology). Disgust was evident in both types of response:

*I didn't know until recently that a lot of these [plant-based meats] are still made with fillers... They're just without meat but filled with fillers. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*I think it's not normal... I just can't believe that something like that would be good for you. I'm sure they have all their protocols and everything that they test, but it just seems too abnormal to do something like that. (Conservative woman, 53)*

Generally speaking, the *nature* justification seemed less connected to defensiveness and guilt than *culture*, and empathy did not have the same effect. Instead, we tried anticipating objections based on naturalness. Often, simply hearing the *natural* frame stated clearly was enough to make people question it. We call this strategy “pulling back the curtain.” **Some research has shown** that when the frame behind a message is pointed out clearly, it often



becomes less persuasive. After presenting different versions of the “evolve together” message discussed above, we asked participants this question:

Some people want society to continue using animals for food because they feel that it's natural, that humans belong in the food chain and are meant to eat other animals. What comes up when you think about that?

Before we started asking this question, participants often used precisely this kind of reasoning to argue in favor of eating animals. But in later interviews where we presented this overt language, most people ridiculed it, especially once they'd been armed with the *evolution* frame:

*I think that was something prevalent in the stone age, where the only availability was to kill an animal and eat. Right now we have so, so much. So many alternatives. We have the ability to grow any crop... to go to those primitive times and think about the food chain, I think it's kind of insulting to the evolution that has occurred. (Progressive woman, 23)*

*That's not true... We're the top of the food chain, we could kill and then get rid of an entire species and take it for its tusks, or its fur or its meat, or its ambergris, or whatever it might be. Just because we can doesn't mean it's right... in the past, you had... to eat animals, but it's different now. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*I have friends who are staunchly anti-vegan... that's kind of the argument they say. I don't really believe in that... It's not like we had medicine for so long, like medicine in itself is innately unnatural, but it's something that we are very glad to have nowadays. (Progressive man, 24)*

In 31 interviews where this question was asked, 21 respondents dismissed the *naturalness* objection while only 8 still agreed with it (2 responses were neither positive nor negative).

When it came to *naturalness*, simply presenting the common pro-meat argument back was more effective than any of the counter-arguments we formulated. For instance, we tested one message based on the analogy to modern medicine from the participant above. In effect, this just gave participants something else to argue with and poke holes in. (Participants were hostile to most analogies in general, as we discuss below.)

In practice, advocates can experiment with communications that “pull back the curtain” on common opposition arguments and the frames underpinning them. Our interviews did not suggest that there is an opportunity for animal advocates to co-opt the *naturalness* frame; like the *consumer* frame, it is loaded against us. But the *naturalness* frame (like the *legacy* frame discussed later) is a great opportunity for animal advocates to play the *trickster* archetype,





mocking this vulnerable opposition argument without exposing our message to a counter-argument. We can also employ what George Lakoff calls a “truth sandwich.” Start by delivering our message framed on our terms, then point out the illogic of the opposition frame, before reiterating our own message.

## Price, Taste, Convenience, and Health

*Culture* and *nature* represented one cluster of rationalizations based on deep values. Price, taste, convenience and health were a different cluster based on practical concerns. Of course it is not surprising that respondents turned to practicality to explain their preference for animal meat. What is notable is how often these concerns seemed divorced from personal experience. Rather, it was *common sense* among our participants that animal-free diets are an expensive sacrifice for privileged people.

*The vitamins and minerals, along with the level of protein that's provided by eating meat, chicken, or meat, poultry, and fish... I don't know that that can be accomplished by being meatless because I don't know that there's enough options. (Liberal woman, 47)*

*You're so used to it, because it's just habit, eating all this food. You know what it tastes like. You know it tastes good... but then I feel so bad after seeing all these videos, and like seeing what it's like, when I can't experience it in real life. (Moderate woman, 19)*

*I think affordability is also a major issue. Like if I want to get cheese, in my area, [for an amount] the size of my palm, I'll have to pay a good \$18 to \$25 to get that amount of cheese. And for some people that's a daily staple, and they can't afford that. (Liberal woman, 24)*

*I've thought about entirely cutting meat out a lot. For me, it kind of comes down to convenience. I know that my boyfriend wouldn't be open to it. We cook meals together. And so it would kind of make it more complicated in the sense of me having to cook separately and things like that. It kind of makes more work, which I know is a lazy, really poor excuse. (Liberal woman, 29)*

Thanks to **Melanie Joy's work**, many animal advocates understand the importance that the perception of the *normalcy* of meat eating plays in individuals' decisions to consume. In our interviews, we observed two different patterns connected to normalcy. One is the *culture* rationalization already discussed. In the second, *normalcy* was mentioned as a much more practical concern:



*[My views on using animals for food are] somewhat negative, especially with the way animals are treated, like there's some guilt involved with me eating animals. But not extremely negative, just because so many people do it around me. (Liberal woman, 24)*

*I know logically, if everyone individually stopped eating meat, there would not be the meat industry. Simultaneously, it is just impossible to escape that feeling of like, all my friends eat meat, right? Especially when you have 20 people that you hang out with, and they only eat meat. (Progressive man, 21)*

We were struck by how honest participants were about these practical concerns, as well as their self-awareness when describing the role that the behavior of those around them played in their own decision to eat meat. This finding reinforces the notion that animal advocates should target community-level interventions rather than individual-level diet change advocacy, because many people are not willing to be the only one in their social group to change their habits around meat.

Animal advocates focused on developing and promoting alternative proteins are well aware of practical concerns among the public, especially cost, taste, and accessibility. That said, those advocates should be aware of common health concerns. The notion that plant-based meats are dangerously high in sodium in particular had firmly taken root among our sample and was mentioned numerous times.

Our interviews suggested that the public's views of these products lag somewhat behind reality. For instance, many participants' negative opinions about taste were based on one experience they had years ago, and impressions of cost and accessibility were also sometimes outdated or exaggerated. (A large number of participants also reported positive taste experiences.) This suggests that for some consumers, a less-than-satisfying experience can lead to years of disinterest in meat alternatives. This all means that while advocates work to make meat alternatives match or exceed animal meat in *reality*, there is also a great deal of work needed to help the zeitgeist catch up with the developments in these unfamiliar products.

This is not to say that the increased visibility of meat alternatives has had no effect. To the contrary, the presence of plant-based burgers at fast food chains was perhaps the most effective message we tested for suppressing practical objections, especially concerning taste and convenience. (From our earliest interviews, many participants expressed overall positive views towards meat and dairy alternatives.) Almost all interviewees had heard about fast food chains offering plant-based options. Along with other frames, discussing this trend helped people imagine a total transition away from animal meat. We'll discuss further testing with this message in the final report of this series.



These findings endorse animal advocates' efforts to publicize the spread of plant-based meats, especially by chains associated with affordability and convenience. At the same time, advocates and producers should be wary of the damage that can be done to consumer trust in the entire sector by bringing an unsatisfying product to market. Also, cost still remained a strongly held concern which we were unable to find a way around through messaging alone. In the next report, we will discuss the potential for advocates to build trust with the public by naming cost as a problem and focusing our political demands on policies that would close the price gap between animal-based and animal-free foods.

## Freedom of Choice

Practical concerns like price, taste, and convenience represent the surface layer of the consumer frame. Clearly, these questions come to mind when someone is thinking about what products to buy. However, the consumer frame also relates to core values, just like the *culture* and *natural* frames. The values underpinning the consumer frame are personal choice, independence, and freedom. Through this frame, the role of forces beyond the individual (e.g. cultural norms, our peers' behavior) in shaping our behavior is obscured. Instead, maximizing each individual's personal choice is held up as an essential moral good.

*I had to stop cooking ground beef, because I couldn't tolerate the smell of it... But outside of that, when I see people eat it, it's not like I'm just like "ew", I don't do that. I don't want anybody to do that with me about my food choices... I wouldn't dare walk up to a stranger and be like 'don't eat that steak,' you know?" (Liberal woman, 45)*

*I feel like everyone should have a choice... people like what they like... a lot of people are eating different things for survival. I wouldn't really blame the consumers, because maybe that's all that they have." (Liberal woman, 38)*

*I love dogs, I love cats... I could never eat an animal that I love... But I mean, if someone else wants to, I'm not here to dictate their life. It's a cultural value." (Liberal man, 22)*

The consumer frame is a source of opposition to the goals of animal advocates. Advocates may sometimes be tempted to try to co-opt the value of *consumer choice*, for instance when arguing for the inclusion of more plant-based menu items. While this may be appropriate at times, advocates should be aware that this strategy may have long-term consequences: reinforcing the consumer frame as the primary frame used to understand food and food policy may create greater obstacles in the future.



The ultimate goal of animal advocates is to restrict people's ability to make choices that harm sentient animals and ecological systems. Such restrictions are commonplace in modern society and are the very foundation of law-based societies. By ignoring this, the consumer frame creates a highly simplistic mythology about the world. (All frames do this to some extent; frames are defined as much in terms of what information they exclude as what they focus on.)

Countering the consumer frame is about disrupting that mythology, for instance by bringing in compelling information that contradicts it. In our interviews, the strongest example of this was government subsidies to meat producers. The existence of large government subsidies breaks through the simplistic worldview of the consumer frame by highlighting the major role of a third-party actor. Farm subsidies in the U.S. are enormously complicated and communicating about them to the general public presents numerous challenges, so we were surprised by how much promise this approach showed.

Perhaps the central theme of this report is that animal advocates should work hard to replace the consumer frame: in our own thinking about farming animals, in our messages to the public, and ultimately, in the public discourse. In the subsequent report discussing the next stage of our research, we'll look at dozens of candidates for new narratives animal advocates might focus on. The rest of this report looks at various other findings from the interviews which informed those candidates.



Table: Primary Meat-Eating Rationalizations

Values underlying meat-eating rationalization	Common language	Recommended strategies
Freedom of choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not dictating to other people what to do</li> <li>• Everyone should have a choice</li> </ul>	Provide information about extensive federal subsidies to show the government is heavily involved in food choices.
Practical (taste, cost, convenience, health)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meat is an affordable source of nutrients; animal-free diets are an expensive luxury</li> <li>• Mentioning “food deserts”</li> <li>• Nutrients in meat</li> </ul>	Political demands focused on making animal-free food more affordable and accessible show the public that we care about what they care about.
Culture/Tradition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was raised that way</li> <li>• Meat is important to cultural dishes</li> <li>• It’s necessary in some places</li> <li>• Veganism is privileged</li> </ul>	Empathy: acknowledge the loss of one cultural tradition before reminding that cultures have always needed to evolve in order to survive.
Naturalness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food chain/circle of life</li> <li>• Ancestors and evolution</li> <li>• Humans are omnivores</li> <li>• Animals are <i>meant</i> to be eaten (by God or nature)</li> </ul>	<i>Pull back the curtain:</i> merely state the frame in its simplest form to reveal the underlying illogic, or use mockery/satire.



## Activating Latent Support

Thus far, we have presented a model in which, when asked to consider animals used for food, meat eaters progress from avoidance, to dissonance, to rationalization, settling on futility. Dissonance is the sweet spot: if advocates can break through avoidance, then disarm common rationalizations, they can leverage the public's deep dissonance and guilt about meat to build support for change.

None of this is easy. The rationalizations we have discussed so far represent (at least in part) the *dominant narratives* about animals used for food. For every message somebody receives from an animal advocate, they may receive dozens or hundreds reinforcing these dominant narratives. Nonetheless, our interviews pointed to some promising strategies for disarming these rationalizations. In the following report, we explore whether those strategies might be effective at the level of public communications, as opposed to one-on-one dialogues.

Breaking through avoidance is its own challenge, for similar reasons: social norms and institutions are currently arranged to spare consumers any ethical discomfort concerning the topic of animals used for food. On the personal level, we were able to penetrate this defensive layer with open-ended, minimally judgemental questions like “What comes to mind when you think of animals used for food?” (At the macro level, overcoming society's practiced avoidance of these ethical problems is a strategic question outside the scope of this report.)

In the face of these challenges, the present research was searching for a diamond in the rough: between these habits of avoidance and rationalization, are there already frames embedded in the minds of ordinary people which, if activated, could provide a basis for a mass shift in public opinion against farming animals? Surveys suggested there might be. Our interviews found further evidence of such frames. The metaphor of *evolution* was one that we kept returning to, but there were others. We also experimented with some common advocate arguments which backfired in surprising ways. Based on all of this, here are our recommendations.

## Stuff That Works

### The Rise of Veganism

In his book *Change*, social networks researcher Damon Centola describes a problem change initiatives encounter when awareness of the initiative is widespread, but adoption rates are low:



*By itself, awareness is clearly a good thing for any product campaign. And, by itself, lack of use is not necessarily a problem, particularly if your product is just getting started. But if you combine massive awareness with widespread lack of use, it can... be lethal. Why? Because if everyone in the world knows about your memorable, remarkable, discussion-worthy product, they will also be sure to notice if no one around them is using it. The more that people's awareness of a product outpaces its actual uptake, the stronger the implicit signal from all of those non-adopters that there's something wrong with it.*

It would be difficult to generate an example of a change initiative more vulnerable to this dynamic than veganism. The vegan movement has garnered significant attention, yet uptake has stalled.

In previous reports, we discussed the narrative of the “rise of veganism.” This narrative, expressed by advocates, journalists, and many members of the public including in our interviews, holds that recent years have seen a significant increase in the popularity of veganism. However, studies do not find that the number of strict vegans has increased. Instead, this narrative can be explained by increased media coverage, the mainstream spread of plant-based meat alternatives, and increases in meat-reduction *intentions* among the general public.

This narrative certainly presents an opportunity for the animal movement to avoid the trap of increased awareness without increased adoption. Our interviewees mostly spoke positively about what they perceived as the increasing popularity of veganism and vegan foods (even if their feelings about actual vegans were less positive), even those who were least receptive to our message such as this moderate 61-year-old woman:

*I think we're going away from [using animals for food]. A huge factor has been the last couple of years, of more and more plant proteins being available. I guess it was two years ago, I saw my first commercial for a meatless burger at Burger King. We're there. I mean, when fast food's getting in on it, you know, and apparently they still have the product. So I would say we're certainly headed in that direction.*

In the long term, the “rise of veganism” narrative is not without risk. Specifically, it could recreate precisely the dynamic described by Centola above. If decades from now, people remember having the impression in the 20s that veganism was on the rise, yet it failed to reach a tipping point, it could become even more difficult to overcome futility and stagnation. Advocates should take comfort that cultural memory rarely endures that long. Overall, we recommend continuing to trumpet the rise of alternative proteins, while specifically associating it with increasing concern for farmed animals.



## **Farmers' Legacy: The Opposition's Weakest Frame**

One of the most popular narratives journalists use to write about farming animals is the highly romantic image of a family farmer with calloused hands waking up before dawn to eke out a living from the same land their great-great-grandparents toiled on. (See the third report in this series for a full discussion.) Because this narrative was common in the news articles we reviewed, we were surprised that it did not come up more frequently with our early participants. Participants expressed concern for the economic struggle of the average farmer, but without the connection to *legacy* and *preserving tradition* present in news coverage.

In fact, once we started asking more directly about the *farmers' legacy* narrative, we found participants were scornful of it for resisting *modernity*. We asked:

Another concern we've heard is that farmers might lose their jobs. So some people oppose a transition away from meat, saying we should protect the legacy of farmers, some of whom come from families that have spent generations working hard to make a living raising animals. Do you feel that this should be cause for concern?

Here's a sample of what we heard:

*I don't, simply because I feel like... there's always an alternative. The jobs and the resources needed to make that work are still there. If we alter from like a cow based meat product to like a soy based one, they'll need a lot more soy farmers and so I think you just see a shift. (Progressive man, 24)*

*From what I've seen in documentaries, a lot of farmers at this point are in severe debt, and they're having to take out massive loans, not really living quite great lives themselves... At this point, farming really seems to be more like, the government is giving people loans so they can farm rather than farming [being profitable] on an individual level. (Liberal woman, 26)*

*If that's the way society is moving, that's the way it's moving. Should we have protected the beeper phone people when they were about to lose their job? Technology moves that way. People need to adapt. It's the way the world works. (Liberal man, 31)*

*If a company didn't evolve from horseback when cars were made... then they would be left behind. I think we do need to evolve. So if they want to continue farming, they need to farm soybeans or farm something else that would be moving into the future. (Conservative man, 37)*

To our surprise, pulling back the curtain on the *farmer legacy* narrative was one of the most effective ways to bring up the *modernity* frame, a very positive frame for animal





advocates and a close cousin of *evolution*. Essentially, our participants wanted to look after the economic well-being of people who are currently farming, but they do not agree that farming animals as a career is sacred or should be protected from a changing world.

When undermining this common media and opposition narrative, keep in mind that you don't need to be hyperbolic; often, the most effective thing to do is simply pull back the curtain on the narrative as it truly is presented by the opposition. Presenting a caricature may undermine your credibility with your audience and is unnecessary. Instead, animal advocates can position ourselves as the realists, creating economic security for animal farmers by offering them a path to a more sustainable career, instead of keeping them trapped in a dying industry.

## Mutual Reinforcement Between Animal- and Environment-Centered Messages

In the second report in this series, we examined evidence on the relative efficacy of health, environmental, and animal-centered messages. In short, while a majority of the public say health would be the most persuasive reason to consider changing their diets, those people find none of the arguments very persuasive. Those who find animal or environmental messages more persuasive find all the arguments to be more persuasive compared to the health group. We described these as qualities of a “base” group that is amenable to viewing the issue of animals used for food through an altruistic lens, vs. a “persuadable middle” group whose behavior on this issue can likely only be influenced by social norms.

We further hypothesized that, while some people are more responsive to animal arguments compared to environmental arguments and vice versa, these two groups are better understood by their similarities than their differences. This is because the *values* underpinning concern for animal suffering and environmental harm are complimentary. At the beginning of this report, we discussed how some frames demonstrate a pattern of mutual inhibition, where activating one frame suppresses the other. For most of our interview participants, animal- and environment-centered messages instead had a complimentary effect.

Without a doubt, between messages about animal suffering and the environment, many participants expressed a clear preference for one or the other. But by and large, people who followed the “base” pattern and showed greater willingness to entertain altruistic reasons for society to evolve away from meat did not find either argument offensive; they simply preferred one. Furthermore, for those people who placed more value on environmental protection, hearing a message about animal suffering simply brought to mind their environmental concerns about meat production. Particularly when envisioning a future with less or no meat, participants seemed to think it was perfectly natural to talk about these two issues in the same



breath. Some respondents went a step further, explicitly linking respect for animals and respect for the environment as the same value.

*Animal cruelty would be reduced. And then there's also no need for all the space being taken up by factories, or the pollution... (Moderate woman, 20)*

*It comes down to... our relationships [with animals], our environment, and our ecosystem, I think that's so important. (Progressive man, 29)*

*I think it's definitely what we're shifting towards anyways... being conscious of the environment around us, and the other animals and stuff. (Liberal woman, 20)*

Altogether, we suggest advocates do not necessarily need to choose between focusing their messaging on animal suffering or the environment. For much of our audience, seeing these two appeals joined together is perfectly natural, because they both ask people to consider impacts of their food they are normally far removed from. Health-based messaging, however, presents a more complicated picture.

## Stuff That Doesn't Work

Our main strategy in this research was to try to draw favorable frames out of our participants, then present them back to future participants to test whether they might have promise as a messaging strategy. We experimented with several frames in this way, many of which proved ineffective for a majority of our participants. The most striking failures are described in this section, especially *social justice analogies* and the *dog/pig comparison*.

### Verbal Triggers of the *Consumer Frame*

The consumer frame is pervasive in the public's thinking about food. In an earlier report, we contrasted this with *health care*, which people are used to thinking about as a political issue, an industry with many public and private actors whose decisions shape the options available to consumers. In comparison, most members of the general public have a hard time thinking about the "food system" beyond their trips to the grocery store. This is one reason the consumer frame poses a challenge for animal advocates: it covers up legal and political pathways to phasing out the meat industry.

The consumer frame is the default way that people engage with the food-related goals of animal advocates. Virtually every moment an advocate is communicating with a member of the public presents opportunities to inadvertently trigger this counterproductive frame, potentially undoing all the advocate's careful work up to that point to reframe the issue. It



doesn't help that advocates, like everyone else, are habituated to view food issues through the consumer frame (an easy habit to fall back on in a moment of uncertainty) and that much of the animal movement's messaging historically has been couched in it, as well. It should be clear by now that messages about "going vegan," "plant-based diets," and "reducing your meat consumption" engage the consumer frame.

Health is a particularly treacherous topic. While it is possible to consider diet through a public health and government policy lens, the FrameWorks Institute has **recently reaffirmed** that health is perhaps the single topic which Americans are most resistant to viewing through a systems lens. Instead, the topic brings up individualistic thinking, with both healthy/fit and less healthy/fit people attributing health primarily to good or bad personal choices.

Advocates who wish to address the health consequences of animal meat while avoiding the consumer frame must go to great lengths to maintain their focus on systemic factors. They should never assume either an understanding of those factors or that the public health lens will be familiar to their audience. These may seem obvious, yet we reviewed numerous advocate materials which mentioned "public health" in passing. Based on these interviews, we doubt shorthand mentions of health have much effect other than potentially triggering the consumer frame. The public is broadly aware that animals suffer tremendously for meat; in our interviews, short allusions to this suffering brought up clear images in participants' minds. By contrast, many participants were unconvinced that eliminating meat from their diet would be healthy, and allusions to public health typically created confusion.

## Contextual Triggers of the *Consumer Frame*

For advocates who wish to avoid the trap of the consumer frame, doing so requires discipline and practice. Yet even the most disciplined reframing can be undermined by context.

A good example of both of these challenges comes from the early years of Direct Action Everywhere (most of the authors of this report were involved at that time). DxE had a very clear intention to substitute the dominant consumer change message with a message about "systems change" for animals. This message was often delivered in dramatic protests inside restaurants and grocery stores.

During our interviews, two issues with this messaging strategy became clear. First is that the term "systems change" simply does not mean much to the general public. It turns out this was an example of jargon. DxE activists described the world they envisioned without violence against animals, but our attempts to describe the mechanism by which that change could come about fell short of connecting with the audience. Lacking a clear mechanism from us, most people defaulted to the consumer frame, assuming we were asking them to change their diet despite our insistence to the contrary.



Thus one major pitfall is a disconnect in language between advocates and their audience. This can be overcome by carefully testing messages with laypeople who may be representative of your audience, and taking a disciplined approach to noticing and replacing jargon in your speech.

The second pitfall has nothing to do with the words advocates used, instead relating to *where* advocates said them. By locating our protests inside restaurants and grocery stores, the precise location where people are most engaged in consumer decisions about food, DxE undercut our message of systemic rather than individual change. Regardless of our words (which most people made their best effort to ignore anyways), our *actions* clearly suggested we were protesting their decision to buy meat.

In this sense, messaging is inextricably linked to the context the message is delivered in. This puts the onus on advocates to design strategies that reinforce their message and vice versa. While this may seem obvious, we recommend advocates specifically reconsider their messaging strategies in light of the *consumer frame*. Keep in mind that because the consumer frame is so dominant, it isn't enough to avoid it. Instead, public-facing strategies must actively work to assert a contrasting frame like *evolving together*.

## Analogies to Social Justice Movements Are Consistently Offensive

Messages that analogize the animal freedom movement to other social justice movements (past or present) have been a source of controversy, to say the least. During the course of these interviews, we experimented with such analogies. We were partly interested in whether analogies would help participants see the use of animals as a moral or political issue. Primarily, however, we hoped to use analogies with social justice movements of the past to help participants envision a mechanism for change, in order to overcome *futility*. We wanted to use these analogies to remind participants about dramatic, unforeseen social changes in the past, in the hopes they might entertain a similar change regarding animals used for food.

Before we started testing with analogies directly, a few of our early participants made nonspecific comparisons to animal rights and other “progressive movements.” This gave us hope that there would be a non-offensive way to draw these comparisons.

If such a thing exists, however, we didn't find it. We experimented broadly with social justice movement analogies. When preparing our questions, we were careful to limit the scope of these analogies to the mechanism of change, rather than comparing the importance of the two issues:

*Supporters of this transition see parallels between major social changes in the past, such as the civil rights movement or the LGBT movement, where the culture and laws of this country evolved and expanded. They hope a*



*movement to protect animals from slaughter could achieve similar changes to culture and law. Do you see any comparison to be made there?*

We also experimented with distant social movements that we thought would not carry much emotional charge, such as the U.S. child labor movement of the early 20th century.

The response to these overtures was overwhelmingly negative. Some participants who were already expressing favorable views were able to see the analogy, but far more often, people expressed disgust. Very often, people would fixate on details that, in their view, invalidated the comparison. Their disgust reaction rendered them unable or unwilling to consider the narrow comparison the question was trying to make. Analogies virtually never won over an interviewee who had been skeptical up to that point.

*I see the comparison. But I also think it's a pretty horrible thing to compare animal rights to the rights of actual people. (Liberal man, 33)*

*No, for me, it's like night and day. You're not really eating people, or, you know, needing people to live off of... (Liberal woman, 38)*

One way to interpret this pattern is to say that the general public simply is not ready for unadulterated anti-speciesist messages. If that is the case, advocates should simply be mindful of how explicit they can be before becoming disconnected from the general public. This does not mean advocates should not present anti-speciesist arguments or even use the term *speciesism*, merely that comparisons with other social justice movements that benefited humans are usually a bridge too far.

## Dogs, Pigs, and Cultural Relativity

Of the common messages currently used by advocates that we tested, comparing pigs to dogs was the most surprising flop. By reminding people of their beloved pets, advocates hope to cause them to extend empathy and compassion to animals used for food. Essentially, this strategy creates a dilemma for the listener: either they condemn eating pigs, or condone eating dogs. Nearly all of our respondents chose the latter:

*That whole argument of like, would you eat a dog? ...The idea of like a domesticated pet is something that's specific to cultures. For some cultures, dogs are just another animal... Some people make them pets, some people eat them. (Liberal woman, 23)*

*It's just a social construct. I have two dogs that I love. I would never consider eating dogs for meat. But you know, cows and pigs, they're supposed to be as smart as dogs. But I have no problem eating bacon. I've grown up eating those*



*things. So I wouldn't consider that wrong. I wouldn't consider myself evil. But maybe in certain countries eating dogs is okay... I think it's just the way you're brought up. (Liberal man, 26)*

Advocates may be especially tempted to use this in response to the *culture* rationalization. For advocates, this reasoning clearly demonstrates that cultural norms can sometimes lead people to commit grievous moral harms. In practice, this message often backfired.

To be sure, some participants responded favorably to this comparison or even raised it themselves. However, these were usually people who were already sympathetic to animal advocates. In our interviews, the dog/pig comparison did not seem to play a productive role in winning people over.

### **Low Predictive Power of the Standard “Animal Rights” Question**

We have repeatedly discussed how the public's conceptual models differ substantially from those of experts. In particular, the public's thinking reflects neither the “animal rights” nor “animal welfare” models common among experts.

Some researchers have used a standardized question to measure the public's support for animal rights. Respondents are asked to choose which best reflects their views from a list of three options:

- Animals deserve the exact same rights as people to be free from harm and exploitation.
- Animals deserve some protection from harm and exploitation, but it is still appropriate to use them for the benefit of humans.
- Animals don't need much protection from harm and exploitation since they are just animals.

In fact, research using this question was a key inspiration for the present study. As discussed at the beginning of this report, our goal was to investigate the large segment of people who chose the strong animal rights response yet have not aligned themselves with the animal movement. Accordingly, we asked our participants to answer this question before the interview. Comparable to other studies, one third of respondents chose the strong animal rights answer and two thirds chose the middle answer.

However, even setting the interview aside, it was clear from the pre-screening form that something was amiss. Immediately after the standard question, we asked an open-ended question: “Tell the story of a particular experience you've had that caused you to think differently about how food is produced.” This question did not directly address animals, but because it came after the animal rights question, most participants discussed animals used for food.



There was a striking disconnection between responses to these two questions. Consider these responses to the second question:

*I feel that animals were put on earth to satisfy the needs of humans but I feel that when animals are killed for human consumption, they should be killed humanely.*

*I believe that animals should be slaughtered in [a] humane way. Animals give their lives to give us life.*

*I saw lobster being put inside a hot cauldron when I was at an outdoor event and it was horrible. I can't imagine what that must've been like for the lobster. What a horrible, long-death way to die.*

*Death of a pet made me realize how important and special animals are and how unique they are. They are beings with emotions and lives and deserve rights.*

As you might be able to guess by now, the first two respondents chose the strong animal rights answer, while the latter two chose the moderate answer. Yet at least to our research team, the latter two responses clearly suggest greater sympathies for the goals of animal advocates.

The same pattern held in the interviews themselves. Here's how a few people who gave the moderate answer responded to our very first question, "What comes to mind when you think about animals used for food?"

*I just feel guilty because as long as I don't see it, I'm cool with that. But as soon as I start watching videos about it, I pretty much go vegetarian for a few weeks... I think it's like if you see the actual animal with the eyes, that's what gets me.*

*I think everyone has the PETA pamphlets that have the scarring images on them... the meat industry is cruel. That's undoubtedly true... because it's so distant for me I have no way of knowing or understanding the way that animals are kept.*

Meanwhile, here are some first reactions from people who chose the strong animal rights response:

*The first word that comes to mind is activists. I feel that there's a lot of individuals who are very vocal about being vegan or vegetarian... I think that it's a little much, you know... I don't feel that the impact is enough to kind of warrant the vocalization.*



*These animals aren't always treated that well before they're slaughtered, and, and used for consumption. And I'm sure that there are many steps that could be taken to give them a better life before they are inevitably slaughtered for consumption.*

To be clear, it's not that people's subjective responses were *always* the opposite of their response to the multiple choice question. It simply didn't seem to correlate with people's actual attitudes at all.

What do we make of this discrepancy? One explanation would be that people are in a rush to fill out a survey and aren't putting much thought into their responses. Another is that the public's idea of "animal rights" is different from advocates. Many of these respondents may resonate with the strong animal rights response because they believe animals have a right to be slaughtered in a certain way. This is not what most animal advocates are thinking of when they discuss rights for animals.

Because this question is widely in use, its efficacy and meaning could be a valuable subject of future research. Until then, we recommend advocates consume a hefty dose of salt with any research relying on this question or questions like it. In fact, in the next report, we cast similar doubt on surveys showing that as much as 48% of the public would support a ban on slaughterhouses.





## Conclusion: From Dialogue to Messaging

Interesting survey results from the last decade suggested that there may be widespread, latent support for abolishing animal farming among the American public. These interviews were designed to identify what frames (especially values, metaphors, and narratives) underpin that support, and design messages that could activate it. While the survey results that originally inspired this study may have been misleading, we found our own clear evidence that much of the public is deeply uncomfortable with farming animals. We identified some promising frames and messaging strategies for activating pro-animal attitudes and suppressing opposition arguments. The most potent and sticky strategy was using *evolution* as a metaphor to help the public envision a gradual change away from using animals for food. Evolution plays on *modernity* and *progress* to effectively reframe the issue, with the help of other strategies.

The next step was to see whether these findings would translate beyond the lab setting. In these interviews, we had an extensive back-and-forth with participants over the course of half an hour. While some important advocacy happens in settings like this, our goal was to build a narrative that could perform at the macro level as well, through mass messaging to the public.

This proved to be quite a challenge.