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(De)politicizing animal-related policies and rights: discourses and institutional dynamics in Finnish city councils

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how animal-related concerns are (de)politicized within the city councils of Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu (Finland). Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), it identifies four discourses: (1) animals as resources, (2) animals as subjects of consideration, (3) animals as part of nature and city environments, and (4) animals as emissions. The findings show that animal-related policy concerns were often addressed without reference to animals. They became politicized when linked to broader agendas, such as climate, health, culture, or economy, but otherwise tended to be treated as technical or administrative matters. Animal rights concerns were rarely politicized and often absent. The study advances debates in animal politics and critical policy studies by demonstrating how discursive and institutional structures delimit political space while also revealing openings for more inclusive policymaking.

KEYWORDS

Animal politics; (de)politicization; policymaking; local governance; critical policy studies

1. Introduction

Political systems are increasingly criticized for their inability to address interconnected societal and environmental crises (Paterson 2022; Van Bommel 2024), such as climate change, biodiversity loss and public health risks (Ripple et al. 2014), many of which are deeply influenced by the treatment and role of animals[1] in human systems. These crises both stem from and perpetuate systemic issues in human-animal relationships, highlighting the need for profound transformations in decision-making frameworks (Paterson 2022).

These challenges have contributed to the emergence of animal politics, a field that examines how animals are integrated into political decision-making processes, addressing the framing, debating, and resolving of animal-related issues within governance systems and advocating for the recognition of animals as individuals with rights and interests (Ahlhaus and Niesen 2015; Ratamäki and Tynkkynen 2006).

Traditional ethical approaches (Francione and Garner 2010; Regan 1985; Singer 1975) have failed to bring systemic change, as the exploitation of animals has only intensified (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015, 45). In response, theorists have proposed structural solutions to address systemic barriers such as the property status of animals (Francione 1995)

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and their construction as resources (Schmitz 2016, 43–49). These proposals include extending citizenship to animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), granting them legal personhood (Kurki 2019), or integrating animals into a post-anthropocentric human rights framework (Stucki 2023). Building on these debates, the political turn in animal ethics has emphasized democratic inclusion, representation, and legitimacy as central dimensions of justice for animals (Cochrane 2018; Garner 2016), thereby contributing to the emergence of animal politics.

Although theoretical debates in animal politics are well-developed, empirical research on how animal-related issues are processed within political arenas remains limited. Much of the existing research has focused on regulation and farm animal welfare, particularly within agricultural contexts (Bornett, Guy, and Cain 2003; Hawkesworth 1988; Molitorisová and Burke 2023; Savory 2004; Vogeler 2017a, 2019, 2020). In addition, scholars have explored earlier stages of the policy process, including agenda-setting, issue framing, and policymaker motivations (Chaney 2014; Chaney, Rees Jones, and Fevre 2020; Vogeler, Hornung, and Bandelow 2020), as well as the growing visibility of animals in urban governance, such as in animal control ordinances, companion animal policies, and the broader presence of animals in cities (Reese and Remer 2017; Hunter and Brisbin 2016; Pearson 2021; Shingne and Reese 2022; Mitchell 2025).

Despite these developments, little is known about how animal issues emerge, are framed, and either gain or fail to gain political traction in local decision-making. This gap is critical, as the early framing of issues – including how they are (de)politicized – shapes long-term policy outcomes (Kingdon 2003). Politicization refers to making issues visible and subject of debate (Wilde 2011), whereas depoliticization is the process by which issues are presented as neutral and technical, excluding them from wider discussion (Wood and Flinders 2014). Sustained politicization can open policy domains to diverse actors and foster paradigm shifts, whereas prolonged depoliticization tends to entrench existing arrangements and limit transformative change (Feindt, Schwindenhammer, and Tosun 2021).

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how animal-related concerns are addressed and (de)politicized in city policymaking. Animal-related concerns are understood in two distinct ways. Animal-related policy concerns refer to political issues that affect animals, such as species protection, conservation, and food policy. By contrast, animal rights concerns reflect animals' own interests, such as the interest not to be killed or used as property (Francione 1995; Regan 1985).

The analysis focuses on discursive strategies that shape the visibility, legitimacy, and advancement of animal-related issues within city councils. Drawing on political documents and debates from Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu, the study contributes to both animal politics and calls to integrate nonhuman perspectives into critical policy studies (Van Bommel 2024).

2. (De)politicization and animal issues in policy processes

Politicization and depoliticization conceptualize how issues move into or out of the realm of public and political contestation. Drawing on Wilde (2011) and Feindt, Schwindenhammer, and Tosun (2021), politicization can be understood as a process through which issues become more contested and visible over time. This involves rising

public awareness, mobilization of resources for political engagement, and increased polarization around competing claims and values (Wilde 2011).

In contrast, depoliticization refers to mechanisms and strategies deliberately employed by actors such as politicians, public officials or interest groups that remove issues from political debate or decision-making and enable political actors to distance themselves from responsibility while retaining control (Buller et al. 2019; Flinders and Buller 2006; Wood and Flinders 2014). Jessop (2014) complicates this view by suggesting that depoliticization may not always be intentional. It can emerge as an unintended consequence of broader societal trends, institutional routines, or practices oriented toward other goals. While depoliticization can enhance long-term policy stability by limiting short-term political interference (Flinders and Buller 2006), it can also weaken democratic accountability, reduce transparency, and limit the scope for public debate by shifting responsibility to less politicized arenas, reframing collective issues as matters of individual choice, or promoting a logic of inevitability (Wood and Flinders 2014).

Understanding how depoliticization operates in practice requires attention to its mechanisms, spaces, and levels, which remain contested by researchers (Fawcett et al. 2017). Flinders and Buller (2006) identify three modes of depoliticization: institutional, rule-based, and preference-shaping.

Institutional depoliticization occurs when politicians delegate authority to technocratic actors, thereby distancing themselves from direct responsibility while still retaining strategic oversight. Rule-based depoliticization takes place when political leaders or officials introduce binding frameworks that restrict discretionary political intervention. Rather than transferring authority, this mode constrains how decisions are made by embedding policy implementation within predefined rules, turning it into a mainly technical and administrative task and shifting the focus from political debate to bureaucratic management. Preference-shaping depoliticization refers to the use of discourse by politicians, governments, international organizations, or other political actors to present certain issues as lying beyond the state's legitimate scope of action. This constructs a political reality where the state appears neutral and politicians seem bound by external constraints. Its influence depends on how well this normative framing aligns with public expectations (Flinders and Buller 2006.). Together, these modes of depoliticization both reframe issues and shape boundaries of what is considered politically actionable.

The different forms of depoliticization shape not only how issues are framed and managed, but also the conditions for policy change. A certain degree of politicization is generally necessary to initiate political processes, yet the intensity of politicization can be contained through depoliticization strategies, keeping debate limited and decisions within routine politics (Feindt, Schwindenhammer, and Tosun 2021). Even when issues become politicized, the prospects for change depend on how political parties respond to them (Skogstad 2020).

Parties are more likely to politicize issues that align with their ideology and electoral interests but may avoid doing so if it risks internal division (Hooghe and Marks 2012). These dynamics are evident in animal politics: right-wing parties tend to depoliticize animal welfare by individualizing concerns, while left-wing parties politicize them by framing them as structural and systemic (Chen 2016; Hårstad and Vik 2023). Nevertheless, parties advocating improvements to animal welfare policies may lack political leverage or coherent framing strategies (Hårstad and Vik 2023). While left-

leaning parties are generally more supportive of animal welfare (Chaney 2014; Hus and McCulloch 2023; Vogeler 2017a, 2017b, 2019), policy change is often driven less by parties themselves than by advocacy coalitions and public pressure (Bock and Buller 2013; Vogeler 2020).

Similar to formal politics, animal issues are often depoliticized in markets and civil society by framing them as matters of consumer choice or corporate responsibility rather than collective political concern (Bock and Buller 2013; Chen, O'Sullivan, and Pyke 2023; Van Wessel 2018). Civil society actors such as animal welfare and rights organizations can politicize these questions through lobbying and public opinion, yet their influence can become limited when their agendas are absorbed into corporate strategies, reduced to lifestyle choices, or even criminalized (Bromberg 2021; Rutledge-Prior 2024; Tauber 2010). These dynamics illustrate how depoliticization extends beyond state institutions, reinforcing the need to examine how animal issues are addressed in political arenas.

Building on these insights, this study examines how (de)politicization operates in Finnish city councils. While animal politics has been studied at national and EU levels – particularly in relation to agriculture – less is known about how animal-related issues are addressed in local governance, despite cities' key role in shaping everyday human – animal relations.

Against this backdrop, the study seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent are animal-related policy concerns and animal rights concerns (de)politicized within the city councils of Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu?

In doing so, the study contributes to animal and critical policy studies by analyzing how local political actors shape the legitimacy, visibility, and framing of animal-related concerns.

3. Context, methods and data

While animal welfare legislation is enacted at the national level in Finland (2023), cities hold significant power due to their statutory autonomy, managing services such as zoning, animal protection enforcement, veterinary care, and waste management, all of which directly impact animals (2015). In addition, cities can implement measures like plant-based meals in public institutions and animal-conscious land-use policies, making them key actors in shaping local animal welfare. For example, many cities have vegetarian days in schools, and the City of Helsinki is currently preparing a city-wide Animal Welfare Promotion Programme (City Council of Helsinki 2024).

In Finland, cities can be led either by a city manager, a nonpolitical civil servant, or a mayor, who is a political appointee elected by the city council. Traditionally, the Finnish model has relied on city managers, but a small number of cities, including Helsinki and Tampere, have adopted the mayoral model (Jäntti, Haveri, and Airaksinen 2021.). The city council is the highest decision-making authority, elected every four years, and determines both budgetary priorities and how responsibilities are distributed between elected and administrative actors (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities).

The cities selected for this study, Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu, represent diverse contexts for analyzing the political dynamics of animal-related decision-making due to their differences in size, location, and political landscapes. Helsinki, Finland's largest city and capital, reflects a politically diverse urban center where both right-leaning parties like the National Coalition Party (NCP) and left-leaning

parties, particularly the Green League (GL), hold significant influence. Tampere, an industrial city with working-class roots, has a traditionally left-leaning orientation (Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak 2020), while Joensuu, a smaller eastern city, features a more balanced political spectrum, with rural-focused parties like the Centre Party playing a key role (Yle 2017, 2021). Although these cases illustrate important contrasts, they do not capture full variation across Finnish cities; for instance, cities with a strong fishery, animal agriculture or reindeer husbandry may frame animal issues differently. To contextualize the political dynamics in each city, Table 1 presents the distribution of council seats by party and term.

The political parties' approaches to animal issues vary, and these ideological orientations influence local decision-making. Table 2 outlines the general positions of Finnish parties based on recent studies and policy documents (Wass et al. 2023 see appendix 1).

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the discursive struggles and power relations that shape city decision-making (N. Fairclough 1997, 75). CDA provides a framework for analyzing how discursive practices through text and speech reinforce or challenge social orders and power structures, shaping reality by making certain perspectives more acceptable than others (N. Fairclough 2010, 57; I. Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, 78; Van Dijk 2001, 466). Central to CDA is the premise that discourses not only reflect but also construct social practices, identities, and values (N. Fairclough et al. 2004, 5).

Methodologically, the study applies three forms of CDA (Fairclough et al. 2004, 5). Ideological critique investigates how discourse sustains power relations; for example, by naturalizing dominant norms and interests in ways that marginalize alternative ethical or political perspectives. Rhetorical critique focuses on persuasive language strategies such as metaphors, framing devices, and evaluative language used to persuade or evoke emotional responses. Strategic critique, in turn, examines how actors employ discourse to influence societal directions, for instance, to steer debates or justify policies.

Table 1. Number of city council members by party, term and city (2017–2025).

	Helsinki		Tampere		Joensuu	
Party.[6]	6/2017–6/2021	6/2021–6/2025	6/2017–6/2021	6/2021–6/2025	6/2017–6/2021	6/2021–6/2025
National Coalition Party (NCP)	25	23	15	17	9	9
Social Democratic Party (SDP)	12	13	16	17	15	14
Green League (GL)	21	18	14	11	9	7
Left Alliance (LA)	10	11	7	7	6	5
Finns Party (FP)	6	9	4	10	5	8
Center Party (CP)	2	2	4	3	12	13
Christian Democrats (CD)	2	1	2	2	3	2
Swedish People's Party (SPP)	5	5	1	0	0	0
Movement Now (MN)	0	3	0	0		1
Open Party/Pirate Party[7]	1	0	0	0	0	0
Feminist Party (FemP)	1	0	0	0	0	0
TaPu			3			
VaTa			1			
Total	85	85	67	67	59	59

Table 2. Left- and right-wing party approaches to animal policy in Finland.

Ideological Orientation[8]	Included Parties	Key Focus in Animal Policy[9]
Left-wing Parties	• Social Democratic Party (SDP) • Green League (GL) • Left Alliance (LA) • Pirate Party (PP)/Open Party (OP) • Feminist Party (FemP)	Environmental and climate concerns. Advocate for plant-based diets and nature conservation.
Right-wing Parties	• National Coalition Party (NCP) • Finns Party (FP) • Centre Party (CP) • Swedish People's Party (SPP) • Christian Democrats (CD) • Movement Now (MN)	Economic growth, rural interests, and agricultural traditions. Advocate for farm animal production.

The research material consists of city council initiatives, agenda items, and related documents as well as the associated speeches from Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu during 2019–2023 collected from city council archives. This period encompasses two council terms since the elections were held in 2017 and 2021 and allows for an analysis of local political activity around animal-related issues.

The analysis focuses on initiatives and agenda items explicitly mentioning animals, as well as the associated council discussions identified through a combination of full-text review and keyword searches. The dataset comprised 33 initiatives in Helsinki, 22 in Tampere, and 14 in Joensuu, along with 39 other agenda items mentioning animals in Helsinki for example, in budget planning, environmental reports, city planning, and infrastructure projects. All associated speeches were also included: 219 in Helsinki, 106 in Tampere, and 124 in Joensuu.

The analysis followed an iterative and comparative coding process conducted by the author. Documents were grouped by type and coded inductively in multiple rounds, allowing the coding frame to be refined as patterns emerged. Each representative's position was coded once per issue per debate, with multiple framings within a speech recorded under separate themes. This approach captured both the breadth and nuance of the discourses. While materials were first reviewed separately by type, the discourses were ultimately constructed from the dataset as a whole. For this reason, differences between material types are not discussed in detail, and no inter-coder reliability testing was applicable.

Table 3 presents the discourses identified from the dataset, along with subdiscourses and their frequency across cities. While some topics could plausibly belong to multiple categories due to thematic overlap, each has been assigned to a single discourse for analytical clarity. The analytical sections that follow are structured according to these discourses.

In addition to mapping discursive patterns, Table 4 summarizes how initiatives included in the dataset advanced through the policy process between 2019 and 2023. The initiatives have been categorized by theme[2] and political alignment.[3] to illustrate how proposals progressed across the cities.

This empirical overview provides context for the following sections, which analyze how animal-related concerns were (de)politicized within city councils.

Table 3. Frequency of the discourses and subdiscourses in city councils.

Discourse	Subdiscourse	Helsinki	Tampere	Joensuu
Animals as Resources: Depoliticizing Animal Rights through Human-Centered Interests				
Animals as Resources in Food Policy: Navigating Ideological Struggles	Advocating plant-based food for its health benefits	69	18	7
	Portraying plant-based diets as ideologically driven	24	13	16
	Depicting domestic/local food as pure, trustworthy and traditional		16	13
	Constructing animal-based food as healthy and plant-based food as harmful	13	16	2
	Promoting fish as a pragmatic and sustainable substitute for meat	5	2	10
	Highlighting affordability and subsidies as structural constraints to plant-based food	16		
Animals as Providers of Human Benefit: Human-Centered Discourses in Urban Policy	Framing companion animals as contributors to human well-being	20	13	9
	Framing pollinators as essential to ecosystem services	5		
	Framing working and hunting dogs as functional tools	10		4
Animals as Subjects of Consideration: Depoliticizing Frames and Marginal Political Spaces				
Contested Conservation: The Politics of Protecting Wild and Endangered Species	Justifying wild and endangered species protection through ecological utility or legal compliance	69	18	14
	Positioning conservation as cultural vs. environmental conflict	14		
Defending Domestic Practices: Welfarism and Nationalist Ethics in Animal Welfare Debate	Framing Finnish meat as ethical, safe, and vital to the national economy		26	13
	Arguing that animal welfare in production deserves consideration		8	
A Marginal Ethical Perspective: An Attempt to Integrate Animal Rights into City Policies	Advocating for animal rights	77	5	
Animals as Part of Nature and City Environments: Depoliticization through Conservation and Technical Management	Framing animals as depersonalized part of nature	32	21	5
	Framing certain species as nuisances	10		
	Framing urban wildlife as co-inhabitants	5		
Animals as Emissions: Depoliticization of Animals Rights within Politicized Climate Debates	Framing farmed animals as contributors to climate change	44	16	12
	Framing climate policies as ineffective or paternalistic	8	7	2

4. Animals as resources: depoliticizing animal rights through human-centered interests

4.1. Animals as resources in food policy: navigating ideological struggles

Food-related issues generated the most discussion across all three city councils. While these debates typically originate from left-wing efforts to reduce emissions from public catering (as discussed further in Section 7), the discussions focused more on nutritional and cultural arguments, which serve as proxies for broader ideological struggles while depoliticizing animal rights concerns and framing animals as resources.

Table 4. Advancement of initiatives mentioning animals by theme and political alignment (2019–2023).

City	Helsinki		Tampere		Joensuu	
Political alignment	left	right	left	right	left	right
Theme	advanced initiatives/total initiatives					
Biodiversity and ecosystem protection	8/12	1/2	5/7	1/2	2/3	1/1
Consideration of (wild) animal welfare[10]	4/7	0/1	1/2	0/1		
Promotion of plant-based diets	2/4		1/1		1/1	
Promotion of animal-based diets		0/2	0/1[11]	0/2		0/1
Emission reduction and climate mitigation	1/1		0/2		0/1	
Recreational activities (dog parks, fishing, hunting)			0/3	0/1	1/3	2/3
Other initiatives[12]	0/2	0/2				1/1

Proponents of plant-based policies, particularly left-wing representatives, justified their proposals on both climate and health grounds. Right-wing representatives, in contrast, often portrayed plant-based diets as nutritionally inadequate or even harmful, especially for vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly, while presenting animal-based foods as a healthier and more reliable option. Animal-based foods were thus framed as indispensable resources for safeguarding public health and social stability. For example, Veikko Vallin (FP, Tampere) expressed the following concern:

> Especially young girls are in a sensitive state, and if too much emphasis is placed on food with plant-based diets and guilt is associated with diet choices, it could lead to eating disorders, making the issue primarily dangerous.

Left-wing representatives contested these claims by citing the nutritional adequacy of fortified plant-based alternatives and correcting misinformation. These exchanges reveal how emotional appeals and evidence-based arguments are strategically employed in the debate, highlighting the highly politicized and ideologically charged nature of the issue. Although the debates were intense, discussions centered on food policy rather than animals, reflecting preference-shaping depoliticization that framed them as resources while ignoring their interests as individuals.

Despite ideological resistance, left-wing proposals for low-emission diets or increased plant-based meals often succeeded, albeit with compromises and after extensive debate.[4] For example, in Helsinki, proposals to expand plant-based options in public dining progressed. An initiative to replace dairy with oat milk, however, failed to gain the city council's approval. This outcome was largely attributed to the higher cost of oat milk compared to dairy, which benefits from EU subsidies, illustrating how structural economic policies contribute to rule-based depoliticization by presenting choices as constrained by existing economic systems. Left-wing representatives from the Green League and the Left Alliance frequently challenge these subsidies at both EU and national levels, arguing that current funding structures distort market dynamics and entrench animal-based diets. As Fatim Diarra (GL, Helsinki) noted:

> I do want to talk a bit about the fact that milk is cheaper. That's because of the school milk subsidy, which is a political decision, meaning we want to use taxpayer money (in this case EU subsidies) to support milk consumption. Drinking milk isn't actually that necessary. As long as

> the school milk subsidy exists, it's unfortunate that we supposedly can't move away from pushing milk and offering it to children.

By contrast, right-wing representatives frequently framed food policy debates in terms of individual freedom, tradition, and cultural continuity. They positioned themselves as defenders of traditional diets, often portraying animal-based food systems as essential for both cultural identity and economic resilience. In this framing, plant-based policies were often depicted as ideologically motivated attempts to reshape everyday practices. Some representatives expressed concern that such initiatives could stigmatize those who consume meat and dairy. For example, Asko Miettinen (CP, Joensuu) questioned whether schoolchildren and the elderly should be 'pawns in ideological games,' while Lassi Kaleva (FP, Tampere) argued:

> How to ensure that dairy and meat consumption is not judged while promoting vegetarian food, if children and young people are given full freedom to choose their diet? Freedom of choice is not genuine if children vulnerable to influence are given one-sided information about the dangers of meat or milk and the virtues of plant-based food.

In response, several left-wing representatives in Helsinki challenged the notion that plant-based food is inherently ideological. On the contrary, some argued that offering vegetarian options should be seen as a way to increase freedom of choice. These exchanges illustrate how both right- and left-wing actors engaged in preference-shaping depoliticization, attempting to define what counts as neutral, legitimate, or ideological in food policy debates.

Despite their rhetorical emphasis on traditional dietary practices, right-wing parties' proposals favoring animal-based food systems, such as opposing plant-based policies or promoting domestic animal products, often failed to gain traction. These proposals conflict with broader priorities emphasizing health and climate goals. In Finland, school meals follow national nutrition guidelines, which are grounded in both public health and environmental sustainability (Finnish Food Authority 2025; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2025). As such, they limit the extent to which animal-based foods can be promoted, reflecting rule-based depoliticization: decisions are shaped by established frameworks. Many cities also have local climate strategies that treat public dining as a tool for reducing emissions.[5]

In Tampere and Joensuu, particularly Centre Party representatives steered discussions toward domestic production, food security, organic and local food, and food waste, without distinguishing between plant- and animal-based products. This rhetorical strategy deflected ecological and ethical critique and strategically narrowed the scope of political discussion, focusing on themes favorable to their political objectives. Similarly, the role of animal agriculture was framed in terms of supporting local economies and national identity (see section 5.2.).

In all cities, the promotion of fish as a food source was broadly regarded as a pragmatic approach to increase the consumption of domestic products while reducing emissions. This reflects framing of fish as a versatile resource, positioned to support sustainability not by questioning the use of animals per se, but by promoting a more environmentally acceptable model of animal use. Many left-wing politicians supported initiatives to expand the use of fish in public dining, presenting

it as a moderate compromise between maintaining traditional diets and transitioning to more sustainable plant-based options. However, these proposals frequently encountered barriers, including cost constraints and the limited availability of domestically processed fish.

In sum, food policy was one of the most politicized arenas in city councils, with parties advancing competing positions on health, culture, economics, and climate. Animals were consistently framed as resources, and even when the necessity of milk or meat was questioned, the critique was justified in terms of health or emissions rather than in reference to animals' interests. As a result, animal rights concerns remained depoliticized through preference-shaping, with only occasional exceptions (see section 5.3).

4.2. Animals as providers of human benefit: human-centered discourses in urban policy

In Joensuu and Tampere, initiatives such as constructing dog parks and dog friendly beaches were typically presented as technical matters receiving minimal debate. This rule-based depoliticization frames animal-related actions as neutral, bureaucratic procedures. Although companion animals are widely regarded as family members in everyday discourse, this emotional and social significance did not translate into political recognition.

A notable exception was Arto Grönroos' (FP, Tampere) initiative in Tampere proposing the replacement of city fireworks with light and music shows, partly justified by the reduced stress on wild and companion animals. The actual reason for discontinuing fireworks in Tampere, however, was the updated event concept and tightened safety regulations. This and similar initiatives were typically justified based on their benefits to humans, such as improving dog owners' well-being. Similarly, references to working dogs in mapping the habitats of flying squirrels or to recreational hunting appeared only in passing and were framed in neutral, functional terms, portraying animals as tools to serve human interests.

In Helsinki, initiatives aimed at improving the living conditions of pollinators highlight their ecological importance but frame them as resources essential for human survival, such as food security and ecosystem services. Amanda Pasanen (GL, Helsinki) emphasized: 'The number of insects is in radical decline. This is not just a "nice to have" issue – having insects and pollinators is crucial for our food security and for the vital natural systems that sustain human life.' While such statements signal concern for environmental decline, they maintain a strategic discourse in which animals are protected primarily as a means of sustaining human interests.

These types of initiatives aligning with human priorities tended to pass more easily through political processes, provided sufficient funding is available. Even when animal or environmental protection was understood as inherently important, animals were framed as resources, and neither animal rights concerns nor animal-related policy concerns were politicized.

5. Animals as subjects of consideration: depoliticizing frames and marginal political spaces

5.1. Contested conservation: the politics of protecting wild and endangered species

Protecting habitats for wild and endangered species emerged as a politically significant yet ideologically contested concern. In Helsinki, most initiatives focus on endangered species, while Tampere and Joensuu emphasize environmental conservation with a focus on wildlife. Commonly targeted species include migratory fish, birds, pollinators, and flying squirrels. While there is broad agreement across political lines on the importance of protecting wildlife, particularly endangered species, habitat protection is frequently justified through ecosystem services, biodiversity, or legal compliance rather than animal welfare or rights. These initiatives often succeeded, when supported by environmental impact reports or legal mandates, as these provide a neutral, depoliticized framework that recasts decisions as technical matters of environmental management.

At the same time, some conservation issues became highly politicized due to their intersection with broader societal and economic concerns, such as urban development and land use planning. In Helsinki, a key example concerns the redevelopment of the former airport area, where aviation activities were discontinued with support from left-wing parties. The site, however, includes ecologically valuable habitats and plans to build housing on the area have raised concerns over biodiversity loss.

Right-wing representatives used this case to highlight what they perceive as contradictions in green urban policy. As Nuutti Hyttinen (FP, Helsinki) remarked: 'As long as flying is prevented, the green-left wing in the hall doesn't seem to mind that valuable meadow biotopes with butterflies, flying squirrels, and the trout of Longinoja are also destroyed.' This rhetorical strategy reframes the issue to portray the Greens as ideologically selective, opposing air travel due to environmental concerns, yet accepting local biodiversity loss in pursuit of urban development. The case illustrates how animal and habitat protection can become tools in broader political agendas.

In addition, many representatives advocated protecting fish habitats, but it remains difficult to assess whether this stems from a recognition of the intrinsic value of fish or if species are primarily valued as resources to ensure their continued availability for fishing. In Helsinki, the council debated whether or not to remove a dam to facilitate the migration of fish. Laura Kolbe (CP, Helsinki) dismissed the political consideration of fish, rhetorically tying political agency to voting rights:

> And now we are ready to throw away—excuse me for saying this—migratory fish, which can't even vote. Who knows who the migratory fish would vote for, but I vote for us respecting our city political and administrative ability to produce modern urbanism through technology.

Kolbe's framing exemplified preference-shaping depoliticization. By equating political agency with voting rights, she appealed to prevailing norms of participation, drawing on Aristotelian notions that restrict political agency to rational human beings (Miller 1997). In doing so, she excluded a key aspect of animal rights concerns from the legitimate scope of city politics. However, this perspective was challenged by representatives from the right-wing National Coalition Party and the left-wing Green League, who

argued for an ethical obligation to represent animal interests. Otto Meri (NCP, Helsinki) countered:

> It is true that migratory fish do not have the right to vote. Neither do children or many other animal species. However, in my view, the fact that some children and animal species do not have the right to vote perhaps emphasizes our duty as decision-makers to also consider their interests.

This more inclusive framing aligns with arguments for recognizing animals as political stakeholders whose interests should be represented by human actors (Garner 2016). It illustrates how individual representatives can advocate for engagement with animal rights concerns, even though wild and endangered species are typically framed within depoliticized, technical discourses.

5.2. Defending domestic practices: welfarism and nationalist ethics in animal welfare debate

Debates on animal production and welfare were linked to food policy and frequently intersect with national identity and economic interests. Right wing representatives often employed a welfarist framework, which permits animal use as long as suffering is minimized (Singer 1975), to justify Finnish agricultural practices as ethically superior to foreign alternatives. Emphasizing transparency and higher welfare standards, this discourse constructs domestic production as both necessary and morally sound, while deflecting attention from systemic welfare issues. This reflects preference-shaping depoliticization, where national identity and moral legitimacy are used discursively to define what counts as ethical.

This logic extends beyond right-wing parties: in Tampere, Social Democratic Party representatives also defended domestic production. Mahmoud Machaal (SDP) argued that the global meat market's lack of transparency compromises animal welfare abroad, while Ari Vigelius (SDP) described foreign practices as inhumane, citing videos of animals being 'pushed into meat presses' in the U.S.

Particularly Finns Party representatives highlighted practices such as avoiding tail docking and providing clean living conditions as evidence of ethical standards that justify domestic meat consumption. As Lassi Kaleva (FP, Tampere) stated:

> Domestic meat should also be favored for the ethical treatment of livestock. In Finland, we are responsible: pigs' tails are not docked, and the animals' living conditions themselves prevent abnormal behavior. The food is clean and safe, which can also be more closely monitored when it comes from nearby.

This discourse overlooks that many of the mentioned welfare measures are also standard in several other European countries and not unique to Finland. The comparison strategically legitimizes domestic animal production within nationalist and economic discourses, masking welfare issues. Some representatives, however, also pointed out that greater attention should be paid to the welfare of production animals.

Support for domestic food production crossed party lines, extending also to plant-based options. However, plant-based food was at times framed as foreign. For example, Matti Järvinen (CP, Tampere) contrasted Finnish meat with soy from Brazil, framing the

choice as one between domestic and imported products. In Joensuu, Terhi Savolainen (GL) challenged this view: 'It's strange how any talk of domestic food ends up in a discussion about plant-based food – as if plant-based food couldn't be domestic.'

These examples illustrate that nationalist and welfarist framings present animal production as ethically superior to foreign alternatives, while simultaneously portraying plant-based options as foreign, which in turn narrows the scope for addressing animal rights concerns.

5.3. A marginal ethical perspective: an attempt to integrate animal rights into city policies

While animal rights concerns were raised frequently in Helsinki, they originated from a small number of active individual representatives and gained little traction among other representatives. In Helsinki, representatives from the Left Alliance, Green League, and Open Party advocated for recognizing animals' intrinsic value in city policies, drawing on animal rights theories (Francione 1995; Regan 1985) that emphasize animals' inherent worth beyond their utility to humans. Such views appeared only occasionally in Tampere, and not at all in Joensuu, further illustrating how rare such views are in local politics. As Mai Kivelä (LA, Helsinki) stated in support of Atte Harjanne's (GL, Helsinki) initiative to halve the city's meat and dairy consumption by 2025:

> Animal rights issues are something that almost never come up here, even though we have a huge responsibility to critically examine how much responsibility we, as decision-makers, bear for the immense suffering and violence that we continuously cause other species and let it happen.

These representatives consistently attempted to politicize animal rights, often expanding the debate beyond the formal agenda. By combining ethical arguments with empirical evidence, sustainability goals and urban development, they aimed to build broader support. However, these perspectives typically remained isolated and garner minimal support. This reflects institutional depoliticization, where formal political processes and structures limit the space available for ethical framings that fall outside administrative norms. At the same time, the marginality of animal rights discourse also points to preference-shaping depoliticization, as dominant societal narratives define which issues are considered politically legitimate or appropriate.

This marginal position reflects a broader inconsistency in political discourse, where animals' roles and value are shaped by how they are categorized according to their intended use (DeMello 2021, 62). This inconsistency was addressed by Elina Kauppila (LA, Helsinki) in support of her initiative to continue aid for wild animals:

> In our society and city, we often see the paradox of our relationship with animals, where on the one hand, we care passionately about some animals, but on the other hand, we eat, clothe ourselves, and live our daily lives exploiting other animals.

Although representatives often spoke on behalf of animals without success, some of their initiatives progressed, particularly in Helsinki and Tampere. Initiatives included proposals to extend aid to wild animals, promote bird-friendly construction, install insect hotels, and restrict logging during bird nesting seasons. It is important to note that these initiatives

focused on wild animals and could be aligned with existing urban strategies, such as biodiversity goals or environmental planning, highlighting how animal rights concerns can gain traction when embedded within dominant policy frameworks.

6. Animals as part of nature and city environments: depoliticization through conservation and technical management

Nature conservation was a frequent topic in city policies, but animals rarely feature directly in these discussions. Both right- and left-wing initiatives and debates typically reference biodiversity or ecosystems in general terms, paying little attention to specific animal species. This reflects preference-shaping depoliticization: animals are seen primarily as part of nature rather than as subjects of direct concern, while technical frameworks determine which species merit attention. This dynamic is particularly evident in Tampere and Joensuu.

In contrast, in Helsinki there is some discussion of animals' roles in the city. While certain representatives framed urban wildlife as nuisances, others emphasized their status as co-inhabitants, thereby articulating animal rights concerns and aligning with the notion of animals as members of a shared political community (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). For instance, Atte Harjanne (GL, Helsinki) expressed views consistent with this inclusive orientation.

> I believe that these geese belong in Helsinki … Biodiversity is rapidly declining, and one major reason is habitat fragmentation. In this context, I personally welcome the living nature into Helsinki, and the measures should be proportionate to the harm.

In addition, statements like Mauri Venemies's (CD, Helsinki) reflect conditional inclusion, where animals are welcome only when they do not disrupt human comfort:

> It would be an ideal situation if we, the people of Helsinki, could enjoy those waterfront parks and meadows together with the animals. That no single individual or group would dominate any meadow, as in this situation, where, in some places, the barnacle geese have taken over an area, and no one wants to go there for a walk.

Debates around managing urban geese, linked to crop damage or urban inconvenience, show how nationally politicized issues infiltrate local conservation discussions. Efforts to regulate goose populations in city politics fail, as existing legal frameworks render the matter administratively settled. This constitutes a form of institutional depoliticization that allows representatives to avoid politically sensitive engagement unless it supports their agenda.

A similar pattern appeared with other species, including seagulls and endangered flying squirrel. In Finland, flying squirrel habitats are protected by law, which can prevent or postpone construction unless an exemption is granted (Directive 92/43/EEC; 2023). While the legal framework formally settles the issue, some representatives politicized it by portraying these animals as obstacles to human priorities. For example, Jussi Halla-Aho (FP, Helsinki) remarked, 'The flying squirrel has become a kind of general pest. If there is an attempt to build something somewhere, flying squirrel droppings are almost certainly found there next.' Such rhetoric delegitimizes species protection by casting legal obligations as irrational when they obstruct human goals.

Debates on invasive species further illustrated this classificatory logic. Petrus Pennanen (OP, Helsinki) proposed enhancing breeding conditions for native predators such as foxes, weasels, owls, hawks to naturally reduce species perceived as harmful, such as geese and rabbits. This reflects an ecological management logic that frames some species as allies and others as threats.

These examples illustrate how animals are framed as part of nature, while preference-shaping depoliticization prevents them from being considered from animal rights perspectives. In most cases, animals become politically relevant only when their presence disrupts human interests. Even then, the issue is typically reframed as a technical or administrative matter, which reinforces the idea that animals belong to *nature* rather than to political or urban spaces.

7. Animals as emissions: depoliticization of animal rights within politicized climate debates

Left-wing representatives introduced proposals to reduce the use of animal products in public dining and to ban climate-harmful advertising, framing animals as sources of emissions. While these proposals identified animals as contributors to emissions, the political debates focused more broadly on food systems and consumer choices, leaving animal rights concerns largely unexplored (see Section 4.1 and Section 5.2).

Although these proposals originated primarily from the left, they occasionally received right-wing support. For example, Jenni Pajunen (NCP, Helsinki) acknowledged the climate impact of animal production: 'Reducing meat and milk production is a significant way to reduce emissions in the fight against climate change.'

The Finns Party representatives, in particular, actively engaged with these proposals to highlight what they framed as ideological bias, threats to individual freedom, or inconsistencies in climate policy. For instance, Mari Rantanen (FP, Helsinki) described the measures as insignificant and paternalistic: 'This has absolutely no impact on the climate in these quantities. This is nothing more than paternalism and finger-wagging.' Similarly, Nuutti Hyttinen (FP, Helsinki) compared dairy emissions to emissions associated with coffee production to question the logic of targeting animal products while excluding other products associated with high emissions.

In Joensuu, similar tensions emerged. Jere Nuutinen (CP) argued that calculating precise food emissions is impractical and unfair without comprehensive data on entire production chains, invoking rule-based depoliticization by framing the issue as a matter of technical feasibility. This was challenged by Alia Dannenberg (LA), who countered: 'It's entirely possible to calculate emissions – it's not even practically difficult.'

These debates illustrate how representatives sought to politicize the issue of emissions in line with their broader ideological positions, while animal rights concerns remained depoliticized through preference-shaping that excluded their interests from political consideration.

8. Concluding discussion

This study examined how animal-related policy concerns and animal rights concerns were (de)politicized within the city councils of Helsinki, Tampere, and Joensuu. Political

debate unfolded through four main discourses: animals as resources, animals as subjects of consideration, animals as part of nature and city environments, and animals as emissions. Yet many issues with clear animal implications, such as urban planning, environmental reporting, and climate strategies, were addressed without direct reference to animals, leaving both animal-related policy concerns and animal rights concerns unpoliticized.

When politicization did occur, animal-related policy concerns were typically framed through broader ideological agendas, echoing earlier research that shows how animal issues are often instrumentalized to serve wider political objectives (Chaney 2014; Hus and McCulloch 2023; Vogeler 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Left-wing representatives linked such concerns to climate, environmental, or health goals, whereas right-wing actors emphasized tradition, identity, and economic arguments. Some left-wing representatives sought to politicize animal rights concerns, but these rarely triggered broader debate even when initiatives advanced. Right-wing representatives occasionally supported animal interests as well, and there was broad consensus on protecting nature and endangered species.

Animal-related policy concerns and animal rights concerns were depoliticized through overlapping mechanisms. Some animal-related proposals were dismissed as falling outside the mandate of city authority, reflecting institutional depoliticization. In other cases, existing frameworks such as nutrition guidelines, climate targets, or technical regulations restricted political discretion, illustrating rule-based depoliticization. In the case of animal rights concerns, rule-based depoliticization operated indirectly: because legal and institutional frameworks did not require animals' moral status to be considered, such questions did not emerge. Most commonly, preference-shaping depoliticization cast animals as parts of emissions, food, nature, or national identity, subordinating their interests to broader political or administrative goals and leaving animal rights concerns not only depoliticized but often unpoliticized.

Local political context shaped these dynamics. Helsinki's political diversity and active advocates fostered more debate on animals, while Tampere focused more on nature conservation, and Joensuu reflected agrarian priorities. This corresponds with prior research suggesting that in larger cities animal-related processes, such as regulation, governance, and political attention, often become more detailed (Beeri 2025; Reese and Remer 2017; Shingne and Reese 2022).

These findings contribute to animal politics and critical policy studies by showing that, although city politics often addresses issues that affect animals, animals themselves are frequently overlooked and rarely treated as political subjects or individuals. Critical discourse analysis is therefore valuable for revealing the silences and exclusions that structure policymaking and for showing how discourse shapes the boundaries of legitimate debate.

The relative openness of Finnish city councils to environmental framing, combined with cross-party support for nature and wildlife protection, suggests that animal issues may gain traction when embedded in mainstream concerns. Future research could explore how national politics, advocacy, and civic engagement interact with local governance, and how institutional contexts shape the (de)politicization of both animal-related policy concerns and animal rights concerns.

Notes

1. In this study, the term *animal* is used for clarity and readability, despite the common use of terms like *non-human animals* or *more-than-human* that challenge anthropocentric perspectives and highlight interconnectedness in ecosystems (Chan and Harris 2012; Clark 2023).
2. Initiatives have been categorized broadly according to their main theme, acknowledging that some initiatives could fall under multiple categories.
3. The parties have been categorized into left- and right-wing groups as in Table 2.
4. In Helsinki, Atte Harjanne, who proposed halving the consumption of meat and dairy in public catering by 2025, later reflected that the initiative succeeded partly due to timing. It was passed shortly before the parliamentary elections, when climate and environmental issues were more prominent in public debate. Cross-party cooperation also played a key role (Vegans 2025, 25:30).
5. For example, Tampere has a climate strategy: https://tampereenseutu.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Kaupunkiseudun-ilmastostrategia.pdf.
6. Parties are listed in approximate order of size. TaPu 'For Tampere' (Tampereen Puolesta,) and VaTa 'Alternative Tampere' (Vaihtoehto Tampere) are local groups in Tampere that did not appear in the data and therefore they are not represented in Table 2.
7. Petrus Pennanen, initially a representative for the Pirate Party, founded the Open Party in 2019 and has since served as its representative (Malmberg 2019).
8. Parties are grouped by general ideological orientation based on electoral research (Wass et al. 2023). The order of parties within each group reflects their relative significance in city councils during the study period.
9. 'Key focus in animal policy' is based on the analysis of party programmes and policy documents included in the reference list. While the table summarizes general tendencies, individual parties and representatives may hold differing views on specific issues, such as plant-based diets.
10. Most of these initiatives focused on supporting wild animals. Finns Party initiative concerned replacing city fireworks with light and music shows, which do not disturb animals or people.
11. This initiative aimed to increase the use of fish in public dining and was partly justified as a way to reduce the consumption of other meats.
12. Other initiatives included proposals to avoid imported food in public dining in Joensuu, and in Helsinki, to address issues related to geese, gulls, and littering.

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Appendix 1. Sources Used to Map Finnish Parties' Approaches to Animal Policy (Table 2)

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