



The Farm Animal Welfare Movement’s Corporate Campaigns

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1. Introduction

Animal advocates made sustained efforts to reduce inhumane and cruel treatment of horses, pets, and wildlife beginning in the early 19th century. Despite important legislative achievements, by the mid-20th century humane societies had accomplished little to nothing to reduce the suffering of animals living on farms. Although this may have been a mere oversight in the 19th century, by the mid-20th century, farmers around the world had introduced industrial methods for rearing livestock. Chickens and calves spent their short lives in tight cages, pigs were prevented from roaming and foraging freely as

they had done for most of their species' history, and beef and dairy cattle were increasingly concentrated into factory-style operations.

Factory farming operated out of sight and out of mind for the billions of consumers who, over the course of the 20th century, came to rely on industrial agriculture for their increasing consumption of meat and animal products. Meanwhile, even after a revival of animal advocacy in the 1970s, most committed animal activists tended to focus on the problems faced by animals in the lab and in the wild, including charismatic (but not numerous) megafauna, such as polar bears and whales. The suffering experienced by billions of factory-farmed chickens, cattle, hogs, and fish remained almost as invisible for advocates as it was for most consumers.

A decade into the 21st century, however, campaigners in the animal advocacy movement honed tactics that directly improved the lives of billions of farm animals. By adopting pragmatic strategies targeting transformations in corporate supply chains, organizations including the Humane Society of the United States,¹ The Humane League and the Open Wing Alliance, Compassion in World Farming, and Mercy for Animals convinced large-scale food and agribusiness corporations to commit to improving the conditions under which farm animals were raised. Waging campaigns for cage-free chickens and crate-free hogs and calves, these organizations drew attention and philanthropic funding into a space that had been largely neglected until the early 2000s.

Today, more than 3,000 companies around the world—including many globally visible brands such as Carrefour, McDonald's, and Starbucks—have pledged to procure “cage-free” eggs and “crate-free” pork. Certification schemes negotiated between animal advocates and corporate interests increasingly seek to improve the conditions of animals—including chickens raised for meat and farmed fish and shrimp—that until very recently attracted remarkably little attention. Shareholder activists and corporate social responsibility managers, meanwhile, have learned to leverage the power of multinational corporations to achieve improvements in farm animal welfare in ways that would have been inconceivable in 1990. With an estimated 23 billion land-based farm animals living in intensive, factory-like conditions at any given time, the corporate animal welfare campaigns of the past two decades have demonstrated enormous capacity for reducing suffering on a global scale.²

This case study seeks to explain how and why the corporate strategy emerged in the animal advocacy movement, and to evaluate the contextual factors that condition both its successes and challenges. A brief historical exploration of the humane movement of the 19th and 20th century (sections 3 and 4) illustrates that the recent increase in attention to farm animal welfare issues is not entirely without precedent. The lessons of both the distant past and the recent history of farm animal advocacy, however, highlight the substantive challenges that lie ahead.

The five key findings of this case study follow:

¹ Renamed as Humane World for Animals in 2025, the Humane Society of the United States will be referred to by the name it was known by during the time period covered in this study.

² Hannah Ritchie, “How Many Animals Are Factory-Farmed?” Our World in Data, November 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/how-many-animals-are-factory-farmed>.

- In the absence of significant governmental intervention into farm animal welfare (particularly in the United States), corporate engagement has proven a necessary mode for animal advocates to pursue improved practices in the food industry.
- Corporate campaigns that have flourished since the early 2000s were enabled by a more pragmatic and less internally divisive approach to animal advocacy than was customary from the 1970s into the 1990s.
- Corporate campaigns became effective because key leaders, including the animal welfare pioneer Henry Spira, found ways to turn those ideas into specific actions, spearheading a wide range of innovations in tactics, strategies, and funding models that have allowed a relatively small movement to leverage power greater than the sum of its parts.
- Agrifood companies targeted by campaigners are subject to economic dynamics that have, over the course of the past seventy years, led food corporations to be both structurally vulnerable to reputational risk and strategically capable of managing that risk by coordinating global supply chains in ways that both enable and constrain opportunities for animal advocates.
- Corporate animal welfare campaigners face ongoing challenges—ranging from difficulties enforcing corporate commitments to the strategic risks of institutional isomorphism and diminishing returns—that highlight the necessity and value of continuous strategic innovation in the field.

2. Methodology

This study seeks to understand when and how the animal welfare movement’s strategy of pursuing corporate reforms emerged to evaluate the causes and consequences of specific tactics, innovations, and contextual factors that have conditioned the success of this approach. The research approach is inductive and focused on qualitative data.

This is an area of research that has received surprisingly little attention from academics or other researchers, so the source base is scattered and fragmentary. Among the sources most useful for this project have been academic monographs and commissioned histories of animal charities that present a relatively objective overview and interpretation of key historical events and periods.³ More fine-grained analysis has been enabled by collection of primary sources, including a series of anonymized semi-structured interviews with eight animal advocates, strategy documents and websites, media reports, government documents, and activists’ published writings and publicly available interviews. Notably, repeated attempts to interview representatives of the food industry were unsuccessful.

³ Elizabeth Cherry, *Culture and Activism: Animal Rights in France and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2016); F. Bailey Norwood and Jayson L. Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound: The Economics of Farm Animal Welfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Bernard Unti, *Protecting All Animals: A Fifty-Year History of the Humane Society of the United States* (Washington, DC: Humane Society Press, 2004).

An important proviso is that no comprehensive archive of the farm animal welfare movement exists.⁴ As this exploratory case study reveals, a panoply of organizations are involved in campaigning for, or enacting, corporate reforms for the improved treatment of farm animals (see appendix A). Some of these organizations have existed for more than a century while others have existed only briefly; some span multiple continents and have substantial resources, while others are small and depend entirely on individual donations and volunteer labor. For both animal advocates and corporate representatives, viewpoints and priorities vary widely. In locating and selecting primary sources, then, I have strived to represent the breadth and depth of perspectives of a wide range of individual actors and organizational entities.

My published academic research has focused on the history and strategy of large agribusinesses. I have drawn to some extent on my existing knowledge (both empirical and theoretical) of business structures, policies, and governance in the agrifood industry to inform my interpretation of the conditions for the success of the corporate-reform strategy pursued by animal welfare advocates, as well as to evaluate some potential limitations to the approach. No historical interpretation is perfectly objective; however, it is worth noting that I am not an active campaigner in the animal welfare movement, and as a scholar employed in a business school, I reject simplistic characterizations of the motivations or behaviors of corporate organizational actors.

The case study proceeds as follows. Section 3 briefly summarizes how farm animal concerns both were and were not the focus of the early humane movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The next section covers the period from the 1950s to the 1990s, exploring how influential figures and organizations including Ruth Harrison, the Humane Society of the United States, Peter Singer, and Henry Spira developed unprecedented campaigns to reduce the suffering of farm animals. Section 5 explores in narrative form how corporate campaigns for such issues as cage-free hens and crate-free sows became effective in the 2000s and 2010s, highlighting the work of organizations including The Humane League, Animal Charity Evaluators, and Open Philanthropy inspired by ideas from the effective altruism movement. Section 6 is more granular and evaluative in approach and explores specific elements of corporate campaign strategies as well as structural aspects of agrifood business practice and governance to highlight key contextual factors conditioning the strengths and limitations of corporate campaigning. Finally, the concluding section briefly highlights some of the major challenges faced by farm animal welfare campaigners as they seek to build on the achievements of the past two decades.

⁴ Long-running organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States do have archival records (in this case, held at North Carolina State University), but newer organizations such as The Humane League have not, to my knowledge, deposited archival records in any professionally curated format. Most “archival” records for the past two decades are limited to online websites, with many historical records no longer available except via The Wayback Machine. One exception is the very useful material collected at the Wellbeing Institute’s repository at <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/sc/>, which although sporadic does include useful documents such as some of Henry Spira’s correspondence with fast-food chains in the 1990s.

3. Sins of Omission? The Humane Movement of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Animal welfare campaigns of the 21st century have surprisingly deep roots in the 19th century, when rapid urbanization transformed relationships between humans and non-human animals. Draft horses, milk cows, and pigs were among the millions of animals facing increasingly stressful, crowded, and unsanitary conditions in growing cities. Growing human populations, along with the introduction of mass transportation and mass production technologies, led to industrial-scale demands for animal flesh, hides, bones, and tallow. Railcars and steamships transported live animals ever-longer distances, often with little regard for proper temperature regulation, ventilation, or access to food or drink during the journey.⁵

London, the world's largest industrial city in the early 19th century, became a focal point for rising concerns about urbanization. Underfed carthorses flogged in city streets, cattle beaten on the way to painful slaughter, and abandoned pets were highly *visible* manifestations of a moral crisis of urban life. Richard Martin, a British MP, successfully pushed for passage of the Cruel Treatment of Cattle Act in 1822—landmark legislation that enacted unprecedented protections for a wide range of farm and draft animals. In 1824, a group of Londoners co-founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to extend the reach of anti-cruelty laws. Later appending a Queen Victoria-approved “Royal” to its name, the RSPCA spearheaded a transatlantic movement that gained momentum throughout the 19th century. Cities and states in Europe and the Americas founded humane societies and vegetarian groups to change the way people thought about the treatment of animals.⁶

Legislation outlawing cruel treatment of farm animals was a signal achievement of the humane movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. In the US, the Twenty-Eight Hour Law of 1873 insisted that livestock transported across state lines needed five hours of rest, feed, and watering after every 28 hours in transit. In the UK, the 1911 Protection of Animals Act clearly specified unacceptable forms of cruelty, and included both “sins of omission and commission”—that is, not only was it illegal to “beat, kick, ill treat, over-ride, over-drive, torture, infuriate or terrify an animal” but it was also illegal to *omit* to act to prevent unnecessary suffering.⁷ The 1933 Slaughter of Animals Act required British meatpackers to mechanically stun animals prior to killing to reduce pain and suffering.⁸

Importantly, although these significant laws applied to farm animals as they made their way to slaughter for human consumption, the anti-cruelty laws had almost no impact on how animals were treated *on farms*. There were three reasons for what might be seen as a “sin of omission”—a failure to improve the lived experiences of animals on farms. First, the early humane movement was responding to urbanization. Most of the concerns raised by 19th-century animal campaigners in industrial cities such as London, Berlin, Chicago, and New York were responses to the visible shock of animal

⁵ J. L. Anderson, *Capitalist Pigs: Pigs, Pork, and Power in America* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019).

⁶ Norwood and Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound*, 35–36; Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 125–166; Cherry, *Culture and Activism*, 12–15.

⁷ Abigail Woods, “From Cruelty to Welfare: The Emergence of Farm Animal Welfare in Britain, 1964–1971,” *Endeavour* 36 (2012): 15.

⁸ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 6, 44–45.

mistreatment. The idiom “beating a dead horse,” for instance, was popularized at the moment when city dwellers increasingly witnessed cruel treatment of work animals in public spaces.⁹ Although the 1911 Protection of Animals Act specifically defined animal cruelty, its promulgations applied only to public (urban) spaces, not privately owned (rural) farms.¹⁰ Second, by the early 20th century, the top priority of most humane societies was mistreated pets and stray animals, highly visible issues that were of broadly shared moral concern.¹¹

Third, and most importantly, the first five decades of the 20th century witnessed the industrialization of agriculture. Increasingly capital-intensive and technologically sophisticated agriculture transformed the nature of livestock rearing, with farmers increasingly turning to confined feeding operations to increase efficiency. Live cattle, pigs, and chickens that in previous decades had been visible in city markets, streets, and urban stockyards became increasingly segregated to the distant and increasingly un-bucolic countryside. Hens in the US, for instance, found themselves laying eggs in tightly confined “battery cages” from the 1920s onwards.¹² The industrialization of livestock rearing was (and still is) largely invisible to most urban food consumers, a fact that would only become apparent to some animal advocates in the decades after World War II.

Despite the early humane societies’ lack of attention to farming practices, reformers fought to limit suffering endured by animals in transport and slaughter. Sometimes humane societies sought to collaborate with agribusinesses in efforts to improve conditions. The American Humane Association (AHA), for instance, was founded in 1877 with the goal of working with livestock dealers and meatpackers to improve conditions in farm animal transportation. The AHA’s corporate-focused approach emerged in response to perceived failings of government oversight, specifically the ambiguous and largely unenforced 1873 Twenty-Eight Hour Law.¹³ The AHA would come under fire from some animal advocates in the mid-20th century for its moderate, non-confrontational approach to corporate campaigns.¹⁴ The fact that its leaders saw business reforms rather than legislation as a potentially powerful means to ameliorate animal suffering, however, set a precedent for strategists who would substantially revive the approach in the 1990s.

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first usage of “flogging [the UK variant] a dead horse” as 1872 (OED, s.v. “horse (n.),” III.iii, “dead horse”).

¹⁰ Woods, “From Cruelty to Welfare,” 15.

¹¹ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 41–42; Norwood and Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound*, 37.

¹² J. L. Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt: Agriculture, Technology, and Environment, 1945–1972* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008); Deborah K. Fitzgerald, *Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Kendra Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History Since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Steve Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America’s Favorite Food* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹³ Norwood and Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound*, 36. Under pressure from the AHA, the act was ultimately repealed and reenacted in 1906, and substantially updated in the mid-1990s. Animal advocates maintain that despite improvements the legislation remains largely unenforced; see, “A Review: The Twenty-Eight Hour Law and Its Enforcement,” Animal Welfare Institute, accessed February 4, 2025, <https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/20TwentyEightHourLawReport.pdf>.

¹⁴ Norwood and Lusk, *Compassion, by the Pound*, 36.

Until that revival, government policy and legislation remained the primary focus of most farm animal advocacy organizations in the mid-20th century. Perhaps most indicative is the 1954 creation of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Founded by a group of dissidents who had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the AHA's moderate and often narrowly targeted campaigns, HSUS based itself in Washington, DC, with the explicit goal of influencing nationwide legislation on a wide range of animal issues, from farm animal transportation and slaughtering to the use of animals in laboratory experiments. Among its signal achievements on behalf of farm animals, gained after a hard-fought national campaign, was the passage of the Humane Slaughter Act in 1958. This legislation was significant in part because it upended several decades of relative inactivity in US government policies regarding farm animal welfare. Like similar acts passed in the 1950s in the UK, Canada, and continental Europe, the law insisted that cattle and pigs be made quickly and effectively unconscious ("stunned") prior to slaughter, substantively improving conditions in federally inspected meatpacking facilities.¹⁵

The act was also significant, however, for relying on the centralized buying power of the federal government as an enforcement mechanism. Partly due to the canny efforts of Minnesota Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, the Humane Slaughter Act of 1958 prohibited all federal government agencies—including the military, a particularly large buyer—from purchasing meat from facilities that did not comply with the humane standards.¹⁶ Although perhaps not recognized by animal advocates at the time, this marked a precedent that would likewise be revitalized in the 1990's turn to corporate campaigning—namely, realizing the capacity of using the centralized purchasing power of a very large organization to rapidly transform business practices throughout an entire supply chain.¹⁷

4. Animal Machines and the Pragmatic Discourse of Welfare

The invisibility of industrial agriculture prevented both ordinary consumers and committed animal advocates from giving much attention to the lives of farm animals. A rapid change in worldview occurred in 1964 with the publication of Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines*. In calm, measured tones, Harrison used existing scientific reports and photographic evidence to lay out some of the most disturbing aspects of intensive livestock rearing for a mass audience of readers in the UK. "I wondered how many people knew anything of these new farming methods," Harrison explained to her readers, as she drew them into the disturbing corners of what she called "factory farming." Decrying intensive livestock rearing as a "lowering of standards," Harrison's book used reams of evidence—much of it drawn from the agricultural press—alongside stark imagery such as hens squashed tightly in battery cages and a baby calf confined in a "dark, windowless shed."¹⁸ Serialized in *The Guardian* and

¹⁵ Christopher Deutsch, "'We Dislike to See Suffering': The Fight for Humane Slaughter in the United States in the 1950s," *History of Retailing and Consumption* 5, no. 1 (2019): 8–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373518X.2019.1589857>.

¹⁶ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 44–45.

¹⁷ For more on centralized buying power—known by economists as monopsony or oligopsony power—see Hamilton, *Trucking Country* and Shane Hamilton, *Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), both of which focus on agriculture (including livestock) specifically. In regard to government—especially military—monopsony power, see Mark R. Wilson, *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Ruth Harrison, *Animal Machines: The New Factory Farming Industry* (London: Vincent Stuart, 1964), 36.

championed by *Silent Spring* author Rachel Carson, the book became a bestseller and ignited mass protests in the UK demanding the “end of factory farms.”¹⁹ Harrison revealed to urban consumers what had become invisible over the first six decades of 20th-century agriculture, opening a significant new phase in the animal advocacy movement.

Harrison’s book was important for raising consciousness but also for spurring the rise of a new discourse of animal “welfare.” Early humane societies focused on “cruelty,” highlighting extreme episodes of pain and misery rather than more subtle, long-term suffering. But as Harrison put it in *Animal Machines*, intensively reared farm animals experienced “discomfort, boredom and actual denial of health.... The animal is not allowed to live before it dies.”²⁰ They had become machines of production, commodified organisms rather than sentient beings with emotion and desires. Drawing attention to the welfare of farm animals broadened the scope of moral concern, raising questions about the emotions and behaviors of animals, in addition to their physical pain, hunger, or thirst. One British dairy farmer, Peter Roberts, was inspired by this emerging discourse to found Compassion in World Farming in 1967, one of the earliest organizations to put farm animals front and center in its agenda.

The emerging discourse of “welfare” also appealed to the British government’s Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) as more positive sounding than “cruelty.” In June 1964, responding to Harrison’s critiques of factory farming, MAFF appointed the Technical Committee to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals Kept under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems. Named after its chair, Professor Francis Brambell, the Brambell Committee produced a 1965 report detailing an extensive range of mental and physical suffering by intensively reared animals. The 94-page report drew on substantial evidence, including from the field of ethology—the science of animal behavior—to call for policy reforms that would include “a fuller definition of suffering” attendant to a wider array of issues beyond physical pain.²¹

The most significant result of the Brambell Committee’s work was the codification of an enduring set of welfare criteria known as the “Five Freedoms.” Responding to the report, MAFF created a Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee in 1967—composed of animal scientists, farmers, farmworkers, and Ruth Harrison—charged with developing welfare standards and oversight mechanisms for commercially farm animals.²² By 1979, when the group was renamed the Farm Animal Welfare Council, a codified set of “freedoms” was developed, which continue to guide farm animal welfare advocates today. Farm animals were to be provided with the following:

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger or malnutrition

¹⁹ Karen Sayers, “Animal Machines: The Public Response to Intensification in Great Britain, C. 1960–C. 1973,” *Agricultural History* 87, no. 4 (2013): 473–501, <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2013.87.4.473>.

²⁰ Harrison, *Animal Machines*, 3, cited in Woods, “From Cruelty to Welfare,” 17.

²¹ Francis William Rogers Brambell, *Report of the Technical Committee to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals Kept under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems*, Cmnd. 2836 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1965), quote on 63.

²² Hansard HC Deb Vol 751 Col 120, July 25, 1967, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1967-07-25/debates/312e1e3a-5403-4f72-88f2-f9c39c91d360/FarmAnimalWelfareAdvisoryCommittee>.

2. Appropriate comfort and shelter
3. Prevention, or rapid diagnosis and treatment, of injury and disease
4. Freedom to display most normal patterns of behaviour
5. Freedom from fear²³

Two words sum up the strategic significance of *Animal Machines* and the five freedoms: “pragmatic” and “policy.” In terms of pragmatism, Harrison’s book framed improvement of animal welfare not as an attack on farmers, but as a financial opportunity and an investment in the future of British farming.²⁴ For instance, when discussing how broilers—chickens raised for meat rather than to lay eggs—engaged in feather-pecking and cannibalism due to crowded conditions, Harrison rooted the problem not in farmer cruelty but in farmers’ economic precarity.²⁵ She also argued that better welfare would produce higher quality food for consumers. Despite being herself a vegetarian, Harrison believed that improvements were most likely if she encouraged mainstream consumers to demand better conditions for animals, rather than insist they transform their diets.²⁶

In terms of policy, Harrison’s work highlighted a key continuity between the work of earlier humane societies and the new era of animal welfare discourse. The primary strategic objective of most animal advocates from the 1960s to the 1990s was to secure policy reforms. Governments and public institutions, not corporations, remained the focus of strategic action. In the United States, for instance, the Humane Society of the United States ramped up efforts to secure federal legislation addressing intensive livestock confinement operations under the leadership of Michael Fox, director of the Institute for the Study of Animal Problems.²⁷

The increasing visibility of farm animal welfare issues gained a transformative boost in the 1970s when philosopher Peter Singer began advocating for “animal liberation.”²⁸ Singer’s work, like Harrison’s, addressed the moral implications of inflicting suffering upon animals in laboratories and on farms. Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975) spurred renewed vigor in the animal activism community. In the so-called “second wave” of animal advocacy, protesters demanded liberation of animals from testing and research facilities; pushed for more humane treatment of animals on farms, in transport, and at slaughter; and promoted vegetarianism.²⁹ Singer equated animal advocacy to inspirational movements

²³ Farm Animal Welfare Council, Press Statement, December 5, 1979, Archived Websites, UK Government Web Archive, London, UK, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20121007104210/http://www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/fivefreedoms1979.pdf>. Note that the word “most” in Freedom 4 has largely disappeared in contemporary renderings, although no clear evidence of when or why this occurred has been found.

²⁴ Marian Stamp Dawkins, “Why We Still Need to Read *Animal Machines*,” in *Animal Machines* (Ruth Harrison) (Wallingford, UK: CABI, 2013), 1–4.

²⁵ Harrison, *Animal Machines*, 41.

²⁶ Heleen A. Van de Weerd and Victoria Sandilands, “Bringing the Issue of Animal Welfare to the Public: A Biography of Ruth Harrison (1920–2000),” *Farm Animal Welfare since the Brambell Report* 113, no. 4 (2008): 404–410, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2008.01.014>.

²⁷ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 53.

²⁸ Singer’s arguments first became known to a wide audience in an April 1973 essay in *The New York Review of Books*, which served as a foundation for one of the chapters of his influential 1975 book *Animal Liberation*.

²⁹ Cherry, *Culture and Activism*, 12–19.

for social justice, including Black rights, women’s liberation, and gay liberation. In so doing, Singer translated the moral problems of animal welfare into political problems, inspiring some individuals such as Henry Spira to transition from their prior focus on human social justice to lifelong efforts to minimize the suffering of non-human animals.³⁰

Singer’s work, like Harrison’s, emphasized the achievement of practical, measurable results. Singer’s utilitarian ethics—promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number of beings—resonated strongly for the increasing number of animal advocates who subscribed to the welfare discourse of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet even as “welfare” increasingly replaced “humane” as the core language of the movement, a strong subculture of abolitionists continued to advocate for a more radical stance. Rather than seeking what they saw as merely ameliorative improvements in animals’ lives, abolitionists insisted on formal rights for animals, including an immediate end to factory farming and widespread adoption of vegan diets. Tom Regan’s 1975 article “The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism” was one influential text in this field, as were the arguments of legal philosopher Gary Francione and feminist vegetarian Carol Adams. In some countries, including France, the abolitionists far outnumbered the welfare community. However, in the United States and Great Britain, the more pragmatic, utilitarian approach of welfarism gained ground through the 1980s.³¹ Even in the United States, however, the perception of an ethical divide between welfarism and abolitionism created organizational tensions for decades. Some groups, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA, founded in 1980) pursued more radical demands for animal rights, while others, including the Humane Society of the United States, urged pragmatic, policy-driven change.³²

Even as tensions limited the efficacy of animal advocacy, the scale and scope of factory farming continued to expand. Prior to the late 1940s, chicken meat was not widely consumed by Americans. But after the “Chicken of Tomorrow” contest first held in 1946, sponsored by A&P (the world’s largest supermarket at the time), American poultry producers transformed birds to create a new mass market. With genetically turbocharged meat-producing capabilities, the new breeds of “broilers” were fed scientifically to maximize production and subjected to increasingly confined spaces to reduce costs. By the late 1980s, chicken meat cost one-third less per pound than in 1955. In the 1990s, per capita chicken consumption outpaced pork in the US, and by 2010 dethroned beef as Americans’ most-consumed meat (see figure 1). The intensive rearing of broilers for cheap meat globalized, as countries ranging from the UK to Brazil to China emulated American production techniques.³³ Looking back half a century after the Chicken of Tomorrow contest, some scientists proposed using the evidence of a global layer of discarded chicken bones as the marker of a new epoch in geological history, the Anthropocene—

³⁰ Peter Singer, *Ethics into Action: Henry Spira and the Animal Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), esp. 45–52.

³¹ Cherry, *Culture and Activism*, ch. 2 and passim.

³² Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 27.

³³ Striffler, *Chicken*; Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, 39–40, 15–156, 189–192; Andrew C. Godley, “The Emergence of Agribusiness in Europe and the Development of the Western European Broiler Chicken Industry, 1945 to 1973,” *Agricultural History Review* 62, no. 2 (2014): 315–36.

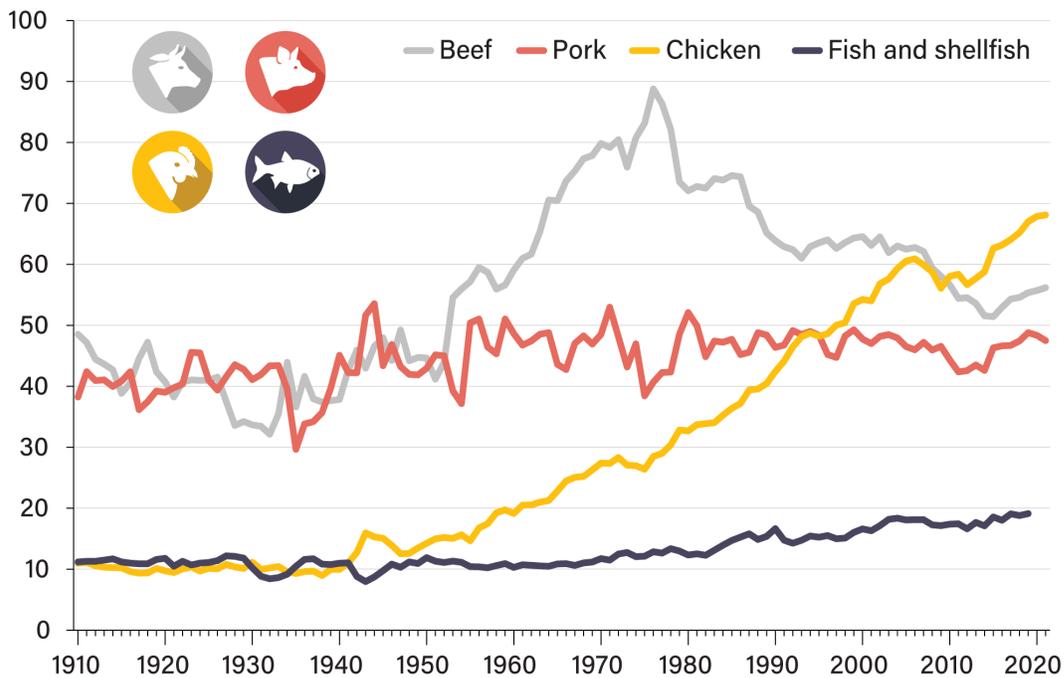
suggesting that in geological timescales, factory farming signaled a tipping point at which human impacts on the Earth outpaced natural processes.³⁴

FIGURE 1
Meat Consumption trends in the US Illustrate the Rapid Increase in Chicken Consumption after 1946

Availability per person of beef, pork, chicken, fish/shellfish, 1910–2021



Pounds per person



Note: **Pounds per person** is calculated on the basis of raw and edible meat in boneless, trimmed (edible) weight. Includes skin, neck, and giblets from chicken. Does not include edible offal, bones, viscera, and game from beef and pork. Also does not include chicken used for commercially prepared pet food. **Fish and shellfish** data are available only through 2019.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Food Availability Data.

Despite rising attention to the welfare of farm animals, however, the most visible campaigns of animal advocates in the 1980s targeted vivisection, cosmetics testing, and fur coats. Organizations such as PETA gained fame (and notoriety) in the 1980s for their highly publicized attacks on corporations but achieved very little in regard to improving farm animal welfare. Henry Spira, who was inspired by animal

³⁴ Damian Carrington, “H-Bombs or Chicken Bones: The Race to Define the Start of the Anthropocene,” *Guardian*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/06/h-bombs-chicken-bones-scientists-race-to-define-start-of-the-anthropocene>.

advocacy after reading Singer’s work, initially pursued a similar approach in the 1970s and 80s. Spira sought out research institutions and companies that, due to their public visibility, seemed vulnerable targets. This included the Museum of Natural History in New York, the National Institutes of Health, and cosmetics firm Revlon—all organizations that prided themselves on stellar reputations but also conducted painful testing on animals.

Yet as Spira targeted these organizations with media campaigns to expose the suffering they enabled, he increasingly tied his reading of Singer’s utilitarian ethics to his previous experience as a Trotskyite labor organizer and social justice campaigner. Rather than try to challenge a single organization at a time, Spira increasingly conceived a ratcheting or “stepping stone” strategy. Why target Revlon alone, when the entire cosmetics industry, or all university medical research, might be pushed to rethink the necessity for animal testing? Spira began reaching out to corporate leaders, including executives at Procter & Gamble in the early 1980s, offering to work with them to devise achievable plans for improvement. The offer of collaboration was backed up by the threat of exposure, forcing corporate executives to take Spira’s offer seriously. Once a corporate commitment was in hand, Spira would then champion the progress made, effectively burnishing rather than tarnishing the company’s reputation and thus encouraging other companies to make similar commitments.³⁵

Spira’s tactics clearly echoed those of powerful trade unions including the Teamsters in the mid-20th century. Particularly under the leadership of Jimmy Hoffa in the 1950s and 1960s, the Teamsters made impressive gains for workers by linking the union’s success to that of the businesses they organized. Firms that signed union contracts with the Teamsters gained powerful allies who supported the industry’s broader efforts to restrain competition. Although sometimes criticized for brokering “sweetheart deals” in a package of “business unionism,” the Teamsters also backed up their pro-business pragmatism with serious threats, including using their structural power to bring entire distribution systems to a halt via secondary strikes. When all else failed, the Teamsters resorted to violence and intimidation.³⁶ Combining “carrot” and “stick” to bring business interests to the bargaining table was, as Henry Spira well knew from his time in the merchant marine, an effective approach for forcing corporate interests to rebalance their priorities.

Spira’s approach proved successful in the cosmetics industry, so much so that by the mid-1980s he set his sights on agribusiness. Perdue Farms was one of the corporations that benefited most from the industrialization of the chicken in the latter half of the 20th century. The company’s founder, Frank Perdue, relied on many of the same structural features of factory farming as did major competitors Tyson Foods and Ralston-Purina. Perdue, however, pursued a differentiation strategy in his marketing, famously insisting in television commercials that Perdue chickens were “happy” chickens, and therefore consumers could expect them to taste better.³⁷ Although Spira reached out to Perdue and then in 1987 took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* challenging the truthfulness of Perdue’s claims about animal welfare, the company rebuffed his efforts. Spira’s ability to inflict reputational damage on a firm

³⁵ Singer, *Ethics into Action*, 52–140.

³⁶ Hamilton, *Trucking Country*; Thaddeus Russell, *Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

³⁷ Striffler, *Chicken*, 26.

like Perdue was limited at the time by the media channels available to him; not only was a full-page ad in the *Times* very expensive (tens of thousands of dollars minimum),³⁸ but its impact on middle-American consumer habits was uncertain and unmeasurable. In later years, campaigners with access to social media would discover more cost-effective means of gaining the attention of consumers and corporate leaders.

Another corporate target of Spira's was the fast-food giant McDonald's. McDonald's was not only one of the single largest buyers of meat in the world, but it was also one of the most recognizable brand names. Seeking to leverage the threat of reputational risk in exchange for the company exercising its centralized buying power to effect industry-wide change in cattle confinement and slaughtering practices, Spira requested in 1989 that McDonald's "investigate the effect of factory farming" in its supply chains and "use these findings to encourage their suppliers to develop and implement less stressful and less painful methods of raising these animals." McDonald's responded by hosting a one-day workshop in 1990, with limited practical results. Spira then ramped up his campaign, insisting to McDonald's CEO Mike Quinlan that additional steps be taken given "McDonald's vast resources, and the fact that McDonald's...serves up more than one billion eggs and more than half a billion pounds of beef a year."³⁹ Spira understood that if McDonald's made a commitment to improved welfare, animal advocates could pressure other food retailers to agree to similar standards.

Repeatedly rebuffed by corporate executives, Spira devised a new tactic. With a partner, he bought enough stock in the company and held it for over a year, giving him the right to file a shareholder's resolution in 1994. That resolution made specific, actionable demands that for most people would seem quite reasonable—calling for the "least restrictive alternative" for animal housing, feeding, and transportation; provision of veterinary care to all livestock; and humane slaughter practices. The resolution further set a relatively low bar for McDonald's commitments, simply asking the fast-food company to "encourage the company's suppliers to take all reasonable steps" to improve animal welfare. Finally, the resolution emphasized the upside opportunities for a globally visible brand that committed to improvements, stating that endorsement of the shareholder resolution would "favorably impress consumers by showing that the company is taking positive action on an issue of growing public concern."⁴⁰

McDonald's executives responded with all the legal resources at their command, informing the Securities and Exchange Commission that the company would not present the proxy resolution at its 1994 shareholder meeting. But McDonald's General Counsel Shelby Yastrow, with whom Spira had been meeting and exchanging letters for years, also reached out to ask what might convince Spira to

³⁸ Exact figures for a full-page ad in 1987 are unknown; however, in that year Donald J. Trump placed full-page ads in four newspapers including the *NYT* at a total cost of \$94,801: Michael Oreskes, "Trump Gives a Vague Hint of Candidacy," *New York Times*, September 2, 1987, B3.

³⁹ Henry Spira, Letter to Mike Quinlan, July 23, 1992, WBI Studies Repository, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/faracam/317-23-1992>.

⁴⁰ Peter Lovenheim and Joseph H. Gordon, To the Secretary of McDonald's Corporation, December 13, 1993, WBI Studies Repository, accessed February 26, 2025, https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/faracam/index.html#year_1993.

withdraw the resolution voluntarily.⁴¹ In February 1994, negotiations led to McDonald’s issuing a letter to all its suppliers insisting they take “all reasonable steps” to improve animal welfare, including annual reporting to McDonald’s headquarters.⁴² In turn, Spira withdrew the shareholder resolution, not because he saw the supplier letter as a tremendous victory, but because he sensed the resolution would not be supported by the firm’s largest shareholders.⁴³

Over time, McDonald’s and other fast-food chains, including Burger King, would turn to Spira’s ally, Temple Grandin, for advice on improving conditions for livestock in their supply chains. Grandin, an ethologist, had gained a reputation for working closely with managers and executives in the meat industry to find practical means of improving animal welfare without undermining the companies’ business models. For Spira, the initial challenge to McDonald’s represented an ambiguous but important vindication of his “stepping stones” approach, for although the letter to suppliers did not produce immediate widespread change, it pointed a clear path forward.⁴⁴ Large, well-known retailers held the power to transform conditions in agricultural supply chains—if their executives could be brought to the bargaining table by a compelling offer of gaining reputational credibility, rather than suffering media exposure and long-term reputational damage. By the early decades of the 21st century, animal welfare advocates would learn to sharpen this approach, devising tactics to more cost effectively raise the risk register for corporate brands and to gain access to the most powerful levers of corporate decision-making—including shareholder proxy resolutions.

5. Pragmatic Strategies and the Rise of Corporate Campaigns

When Henry Spira first sought to work with corporate interests in the 1980s and 1990s, his approach was not widely emulated. At the turn of the 21st century, however, a rising tide of new animal organizations and a string of successes—particularly in relation to “cage-free” eggs—convinced many activists to follow Spira’s lead and develop targeted corporate strategies rooted in clearly articulated theories of change. Getting measurable results for animal welfare in corporate supply chains became increasingly prized within the movement.

5.a. The First Cage-Free Campaigns

An important exemplar was set by the cage-free campaigns initiated by HSUS in the 1990s. Although HSUS had aggressively pursued policy reforms for farm animals since its founding in 1954, the organization achieved limited successes through the 1980s. Media campaigns drew attention to the disquieting conditions faced by farm animals, but HSUS efforts to attain significant legislative changes were stymied by well-organized resistance from agribusiness leaders and farm-state legislators. In 1993, HSUS took a new tack, seeking to use a targeted public relations campaign to convince retailers to

⁴¹ Singer, *Ethics in to Action*, 169.

⁴² Shelby Yastrow, Letter to Simon Billenness, February 16, 1994, WBI Studies Repository, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/faracam/33>.

⁴³ Singer, *Ethics into Action*, 169–170.

⁴⁴ Singer, *Ethics into Action*, 158–172; Lewis Bollard, interview by Luke Muehlhauser, February 23, 2017, Notes compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project, accessed November 15, 2024, https://www.openphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/Lewis_Bollard_02-23-17_public.pdf.

promote eggs laid by uncaged hens as a more humane option. Educating and mobilizing consumer purchasing power was the core tactic deployed. Concerned citizens could request an “action packet” from HSUS with instructions on how to start an “egg effort” in their city, focused on convincing grocers to stock eggs from “uncaged hens.”⁴⁵ (The phrase “cage-free eggs” did not come into widespread use in American English until a decade later.⁴⁶)

Framing better animal welfare as both good business and compassionate consumption, “uncaged eggs” offered an achievable win for animals at minimal cost. For food businesses, the costs of implementing cage-free systems for laying hens were relatively small because nothing prevented egg suppliers from continuing to raise animals in large-scale indoor facilities. For HSUS, the cost of the campaign was also low. Most of the “egg effort” work was done by volunteer consumer activists, at a much lower cost to HSUS than its expensive legislative work (which entailed paying the high salaries demanded by skilled policy advocates). Within months of the campaign’s launch in April 1993, consumer pressure led to commitments from a handful of supermarket chains in specific cities and regions: Kroger in Columbus and Toledo, Ohio as well as “select areas” in West Virginia, as well as all Albertson’s, Cub, and King Soopers stores in Denver, Colorado.⁴⁷ By 1995, the HSUS campaign had successfully brought cage-free eggs to supermarket shelves in eight American cities, including some Publix stores in Florida, all major supermarkets in Sacramento, California, and a large chain in Kansas City, Missouri.⁴⁸

The HSUS egg campaigns of the 1990s revealed that targeting supermarkets with actionable, low-risk suggestions that supported a company’s bottom line could substantially improve animal welfare at low cost. The tightly confined geographical impact of the strategy, however, also highlighted the limited leverage that consumers could exercise without direct access to corporate headquarters. Pamphleting outside select stores in Ohio might convince a regional purchasing director to begin stocking uncaged eggs in some stores, but it did not drive transformative change across nationwide supply chains. There was, furthermore, little mass media attention to the HSUS egg campaigns. Searches of major historical newspapers of the period reveal that major media outlets ignored the campaign entirely.⁴⁹

5.b. Proposition 2

The limited success of 1990s cage-free campaigns in the US was in stark contrast to policy achievements in several European countries. Legislation was passed to ban battery cages in countries including Sweden (1988) and Switzerland (1992). In 1999, the European Union (EU) passed a directive

⁴⁵ Melanie Adcock, “The Truth Behind a Hen’s Life,” *HSUS News* 38, no. 2 (1993): 11–13, <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hsusnews/8/>.

⁴⁶ “Cage-Free Eggs,” Books Ngram Viewer, accessed February 25, 2025, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=cage-free+eggs&year_start=1980&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false.

⁴⁷ “HSUS Food Campaign Gaining Speed,” *HSUS News* 38, no. 3 (1993): 3, <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hsusnews/7/>.

⁴⁸ “More Good News for Hens,” *HSUS News* 40, no. 1 (1995): 3, <https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/hsusnews/17/>; Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 54–57.

⁴⁹ A search of ProQuest Historical Newspapers archives for “humane AND eggs AND hens” between 1993 and 1996 produced no hits for articles on the HSUS uncaged egg campaigns, but did produce hits for articles in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post* covering the plight of “wild baby animals” and the violence of cockfighting.

setting minimum standards for laying hens, effectively banning battery cages in the EU by 2012. With the momentum behind “cage-free” building, HSUS targeted California voters with ballot Proposition 2 in 2008.

The scale of the Prop 2 campaign was unprecedented, although it did build on previous successes. Since 1990, animal campaigners had attained 28 state laws via ballot initiatives, addressing issues ranging from bans on cockfighting and bearbaiting to regulation of steel-jawed traps. Another important precedent for Prop 2 was the Hallmark “downer” scandal of 2007-2008, when HSUS investigators discovered cruel practices in a slaughterhouse in Chino, California. Hallmark Meat Packing was the second-largest supplier of beef to the national school lunch program. HSUS videographers captured footage of workers slaughtering animals who were too sick to stand on their own—so-called “downer” cattle—and using shockingly cruel practices to force them toward slaughter. Video evidence and coverage in media outlets including the *Los Angeles Times* triggered a mass response, including the announcement by 150 school districts around the country that they would not buy meat from the company distributing Hallmark meat products.⁵⁰

The response to Hallmark set the stage for Prop 2 by highlighting how mass consumer revulsion at animal cruelty could be harnessed to call for legislative change. Evidence from a 2003 Zogby poll, for instance, found that four-fifths of Americans supported laws to prevent cruel treatment of farm animals. Thus when campaigners put Proposition 2 to California voters in 2008, calling for a ban on battery cages for hens and crates for sows and calves, the focus was on framing the cause as both reasonable and meaningful. State ballot initiatives tend to work when the cause is clear and resonates with average citizens.⁵¹

The campaign for Prop 2 sought to capitalize on these contextual factors through three key elements. First was funding; HSUS and Farm Sanctuary, two key animal welfare organizations leading the initiative, devoted substantial resources to legal staff and organizing volunteer campaigns to gather signatures. At least 25,000 individuals made donations to the YES! on Prop 2 campaign; by October 2008, HSUS estimated that its war chest was about \$7 million, roughly equivalent to the sums available to the “no” ranks drawn from California agribusiness supporters.⁵² Second were alliances; seeking to spread the message beyond committed animal welfare advocates, HSUS teamed up with groups including the United Farm Workers, National Black Farmers Association, California Council of Churches, and the Consumer Federation of America. Finally, the campaign used savvy public relations techniques. One element was undercover video investigations, shared on social media, which made visually clear to California citizens why confinement systems were on the ballot. Mercy for Animals, for instance, shot distressing footage of chickens being handled violently and left half-dead on carcass piles at one of California’s largest egg farms in autumn 2008, which not only appeared on social media but

⁵⁰ Jonathan R. Lovvorn and Nancy V. Perry, “California Proposition 2: A Watershed Moment for Animal Law,” *Animal Law* (2025), 156–157.

⁵¹ Lovvorn and Perry, “California Proposition 2,” 153, 155.

⁵² Carla Hall, “Prop. 2 Pits Animal Rights Against Farmers’,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-oct-21-me-animals21-story.html>; Lovvorn and Perry, “California Proposition 2,” 160.

also received coverage from the *Los Angeles Times*.⁵³ Political advertising on television, meanwhile, proved effective not only in convincing many voters to support Prop 2, but also to nudge consumer choices toward more humane choices such as cage-free eggs.⁵⁴

HSUS won the fight for Prop 2, convincing a majority of voters to vote “yes”—and by a larger margin than any other issue on the ballot that year. After Prop 2, California’s statutes included a range of measures requiring more spacious cages for laying hens, banning gestation crates for sows, and outlawing confinement crates for veal calves. Passage of animal welfare legislation in one of America’s most important agricultural states was a transformative event, inspiring animal advocates to push harder for achievable but large-scale reforms in factory farming practice.⁵⁵

5.c. A New Breed of Animal Organizations

Perhaps most importantly, the success of cage-free campaigns produced an increased willingness to move beyond the longstanding welfarist vs. abolitionist divide in the animal movement. In the 1990s, a wave of farm animal advocacy organizations emerged to pursue aggressive tactics such as undercover exposés of factory farms and slaughterhouses and removing farm animals to sanctuaries. These included Vegan Outreach (1993, originally named Animal Liberation Action), Animal Outlook (1995, originally named Compassion over Killing), and Mercy for Animals (1999). By recording undercover documentaries and distributing disturbing leaflets, abolitionist activists hoped to convince the meat-eating public to convert to veganism and bring industrial agriculture to a screeching halt.⁵⁶ Leah Garcés remembers her activism during this period as an “angry phase” when “angry activism was at my core,” characterized by persistent frustration that meat-eaters simply ignored “the facts” of animal suffering.⁵⁷ Aaron Ross similarly remembers that his first forays into animal activism in the early 2000s were driven by strong emotions, leading him to “break things” and “get arrested all the time.”⁵⁸

Both Garcés and Ross, like many other American animal activists in the early 2000s, increasingly turned to pragmatic approaches as they came to realize that abolitionist tactics were not producing measurable results. “Smashing a window was not going to stop factory farming,” Ross decided before he launched his own cage-free campaign in Baltimore in 2003. Two years later, Ross helped found The Humane League to pursue corporate animal welfare campaigns on a national scale.⁵⁹ Leah Garcés similarly turned toward corporate campaigns, helping launch the US branch of Compassion in World

⁵³ Lovvorn and Perry, “California Proposition 2,” 160–161.

⁵⁴ Timothy Richards, William Allender, and Di Fang, “Media Advertising and Ballot Initiatives: The Case of Animal Welfare Regulation,” *Contemporary Economic Policy* 31, no. 1 (2013): 145–162, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7287.2011.00292.x>.

⁵⁵ Bollard interview.

⁵⁶ Cherry, *Culture and Activism*, 19.

⁵⁷ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez: Timeless Lessons from 40+ Years of Animal Advocacy,” *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/15263293>.

⁵⁸ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Aaron Ross on How to Stay Motivated and Keep Fighting for Animals for 20+ Years,” *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, February 14, 2024, <https://feeds.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/14498932-aaron-ross-on-how-to-stay-motivated-and-keep-fighting-for-animals-for-20-years>.

⁵⁹ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Aaron Ross on How to Stay Motivated.”

Farming in 2009. By the time she joined Mercy for Animals in 2018, becoming that organization's first female president, Garcés and the organization she led were as interested in working with corporations to improve animal welfare as they were in pursuing undercover investigations. Sharon Núñez, who founded Animal Equality in Spain in 2006, similarly remembers "becoming more mature" after realizing that leafletting was not convincing the Spanish population to immediately go vegan.⁶⁰

Beyond an increasing willingness to engage with food corporations, all three campaigners realized the strategic value of moving away from infighting within the animal advocacy movement. Rather than criticize vegetarians for not being vegan, or dwell on the ethical distinctions between abolitionism and welfarism, Garcés, Núñez, and Ross all came to embrace and encourage an approach that focused on achievable wins for animals. Garcés, for instance, has noted that academic research consistently finds infighting or "horizontal hostility" to be the most likely cause of failure in progressive movements.⁶¹

5.d. A More Pragmatic Approach

New streams of funding strongly encouraged this pragmatic turn. As of the late 1990s, funding sources for animal advocacy were severely limited. Animal welfare organizations depended on small donors and occasional large one-off donations, such as when television gameshow host Bob Barker donated millions of dollars to endow animal law programs at top US universities.⁶² In the early 2000s, the rise of effective altruism fundamentally altered the funding landscape for animal welfare, providing a steadier source of funding. Following the work of Peter Singer, effective altruists subscribed to a consequentialist moral theory that prioritized rationally calculating how to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.⁶³ Promoters of effective altruism included individuals who, having generated tremendous wealth in finance, technology, and science-based industries, sought to leverage that wealth to achieve systemic change in fields ranging from safe artificial intelligence to global human health campaigns. In the animal welfare space, effective altruists spotted a neglected cause. As of 2010, only 2 percent of charitable giving in the US went to animal or environmental issues. Out of that already small amount, only one grant of \$5,000 was made to a farm animal cause in 2010, with the rest targeting

⁶⁰ Odone and Ozden, "Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez."

⁶¹ Odone and Ozden, "Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez." A useful overview of the extensive literature on movement infighting is Amin Ghaziani and Kelsy Kretschmer, "Infighting and Insurrection," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 220–235.

⁶² Bollard, Interview by Luke Muehlhauser.

⁶³ Ben Gose, "A New Donor Movement Seeks to Put Data Ahead of Passion," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, November 3, 2013, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/a-new-donor-movement-seeks-to-put-data-ahead-of-passion/>; Jeff Sparrow, "Giving, Good and the Fallout of FTX: Peter Singer on Effective Altruism Now," *Guardian*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/dec/24/giving-good-and-the-fallout-of-ftx-peter-singer-on-effective-altruism-now>; Garrett M. Broad, "Effective Animal Advocacy: Effective Altruism, the Social Economy, and the Animal Protection Movement," *Agriculture and Human Values* 35, no. 4 (2018): 777–789, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-018-9873-5>.

wildlife and pets.⁶⁴ Farm animal welfare, according to the logic of effective altruism, was an area in which maximum reduction of sentient suffering could potentially be achieved at relatively low cost.⁶⁵

Animal Charity Evaluators (ACE) became one of the most influential organizations in this regard, and its creation can be understood as a form of radical innovation for the transformative change it has brought to the space. Founded in 2012 as an offshoot of the Centre for Effective Altruism, ACE sought to leverage digital tools and data-driven evaluation methods to funnel charitable giving for animal causes toward organizations that could demonstrate cost-effective impact.⁶⁶ Often compared to GiveWell (a charity evaluation organization aligned with the effective altruist movement, founded in 2007), ACE built a digital platform to simplify charitable decisions for would-be donors. Rather than wade through confusing and often contradictory claims to effectiveness made by animal advocacy organizations, donors could simply choose either an individual recommended charity or an entire slate of organizations deemed to be top performers by ACE's analysts. Analyses included both qualitative and quantitative factors, including such aspects as the number of animals affected by the organization's efforts, the extent of animal suffering mitigated, and managerial processes and procedures for ensuring effective action.⁶⁷

Open Philanthropy similarly sought to bring effectiveness-driven funding allocation to bear on farm animal welfare. The organization began as an incubator collaboration between GiveWell and Good Ventures in 2011 and became an independent entity in 2017. With substantial funding provided by Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz and his wife Cari Tuna, Open Philanthropy has overseen the distribution of over \$4 billion in public grants to agencies pursuing "high-risk" but nonetheless "tractable" agendas, particularly those overlooked by other philanthropic groups. Open Philanthropy made its first grants to farm animal welfare groups beginning in 2016. As of 2024, its donations to farm animal welfare causes were estimated to be in the tens of millions of dollars, making it the largest single donor in the space.⁶⁸

The injection of philanthropic funding enabled farm animal welfare activists to build unprecedented capacity, transforming from scrappy upstarts dependent upon volunteer labor into professional organizations with permanent staffs. Yet effective altruism principles also insisted that animal

⁶⁴ Jamie DeLeeuw, "One Health and Animal Protection Philanthropy: A Growing Sub-Sector," Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, January 18, 2022, <https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/one-health-and-animal-protection-philanthropy-a-growing-sub-sector/>.

⁶⁵ Kelsey Piper, "The Animal Rights Movement Was Once Locked in Bitter Debate," Vox, August 9, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/365147/animal-welfare-factory-farming-effective-altruism-activism>; Jess Whittlestone, "Animal Welfare," Effective Altruism, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/cause-profile-animal-welfare>.

⁶⁶ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025; Cherry, *Culture and Activism*, 115.

⁶⁷ Amy Odene and James Ozden, "Stien Van Der Ploeg on Finding the Most Effective Animal Charities," *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, November 30, 2023, <https://feeds.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/14062011-stien-van-der-ploeg-on-finding-the-most-effective-animal-charities>; Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025.

⁶⁸ "About Us," Open Philanthropy, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/about-us/>; Amy Odene and James Ozden, "Amanda Hungerford on Open Philanthropy's Funding for Farmed Animal Welfare," August 10, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/13382523>.

advocates focus on the most cost-effective strategies. Aaron Ross remembers that in his early days of advocacy, he held down a full-time job while trying to get The Humane League started in his “spare time.”⁶⁹ But Ross and his colleagues were “getting into effective altruism” and saw an opportunity for “shifting the focus” on animal advocacy, moving toward constructive rather than destructive challenges to corporate power. Activists increasingly turned to evidence-based analyses, seeking to determine which tactics and strategies led to the largest, measurable impacts on the welfare of the greatest number of farm animals. As one effective altruist has put it, “If you want to do as much good as you can for animals then you have to be able to change your mind whenever some new evidence comes along.”⁷⁰

5.e. Corporate Campaigns and Stepping Stones

In the first decade of the 21st century, evidence increasingly pointed to the cost-effective promise of targeting corporate supply chains.⁷¹ For instance, PETA launched a “McCruelty” campaign in October 1999, after two years of failed attempts to negotiate directly with McDonald’s executives. Drawing widespread attention to such visibly shocking practices as debeaking and forced molting, PETA’s “McCruelty” website skillfully inverted the firm’s core marketing message, depicting a bloodied, knife-wielding red-haired clown slashing open a bag containing an “unhappy meal.”⁷² Facing such pressure and perhaps seeking to take credit for being proactive, in 2000 both McDonald’s and Burger King began requiring their egg suppliers to provide 50 percent more cage space for laying hens.⁷³

Although animal advocates would have preferred cage-free hens, targeting fast-food chains had produced a measurable, immediate success. This was in stark contrast to the challenges of gaining state or federal legislation limiting the use of battery cages for hens and gestation crates for sows. The HSUS, for instance, waged successful state ballot initiatives to ban gestation crates in Florida (2002) and Arizona (2006), but because those states had minimal pork production the legislation affected very few animals.⁷⁴ The success of California’s Proposition 2 in 2008, by contrast, had a significant impact on animal welfare. The resulting Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act required larger cages for hens and banned confinement crates for both sows and calves in one of the nation’s most important agricultural states. But Proposition 2 also generated backlash from agribusiness interests in livestock-intensive states such as Colorado and Michigan, where farm legislators moved to preempt further animal welfare ballot initiatives.⁷⁵ Proposition 2 demonstrated that the painstaking, expensive process of state-level policy initiatives could have dramatic impacts on farm animal welfare, but the backlash in other farm

⁶⁹ Odene and Ozden, “Aaron Ross.”

⁷⁰ Odene and Ozden, “Stien Van Der Ploeg.”

⁷¹ In the farmworker social justice movement, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (founded 1993) came to a similar conclusion; see Susan L. Marquis, *I Am Not a Tractor!: How Florida Farmworkers Took on the Fast Food Giants and Won* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

⁷² PETA, “The History of McDonald’s Cruelty,” McCruelty, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.mccruelty.com/why.php>.

⁷³ Marc Kaufman, “McDonald’s Tells Farmers to Treat Chickens Better,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 2000; Bollard interview.

⁷⁴ Even as of 2022, when nine states had enacted hog welfare laws regulating or banning gestation crates, those laws only applied to about three percent of the pork industry’s production capacity. Danielle Ufer, “Hog Welfare Laws Cover 9 States and 3 Percent of the National Herd in 2022,” USDA Economic Research Service, March 16, 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail?chartId=103505>.

⁷⁵ Bollard interview.

states suggested that more rapid, lower-cost change might be attained by targeting food corporations whose supply chains spanned state boundaries.⁷⁶

Corporate campaigns waged by The Humane League, HSUS, and other advocacy organizations in the 2000s and 2010s were particularly successful at delivering measurable improvements for millions of animals at relatively low cost. Cage-free campaigners carefully targeted firms responsible for large-scale purchases of eggs—such as Costco, Dunkin’ Donuts, and Starbucks—and developed tactics to persuade managers at those firms to commit to cage-free production in their supply chains. As explained in more detail in section 6.a, these tactics were conditioned by structural factors in the agrifood industry. In addition to recognizing these structural factors, however, campaigners also became more sophisticated at convincing firm leaders that the company’s brand would be tainted by becoming synonymous with animal cruelty, unless an agreement for better animal welfare could be reached. Threatening to leverage social media, mass petitions, carefully planned protests, and other pressure techniques to bear on the cause, animal advocates successfully attained commitments from dozens of major corporations to improve conditions. (These techniques are also analyzed in more detail in section 6.a.)⁷⁷

The approach worked. Not only did corporate campaigns convince individual firms such as Costco or Perdue Farms to make significant commitments, the visible success of their actions spurred other firms to sign on lest they also become targets. Evaluating the success of The Humane League’s approach in 2016, for instance, Open Philanthropy noted the organization had been involved in “at least 67 cage-free victories,” meriting the award of a \$1 million grant to expand work that had, by that point, prevented about 60 million hens per year from being confined in battery cages.⁷⁸

Behind the approach of corporate campaigning lay an assumption that such work laid “stepping stones” to more sweeping achievements.⁷⁹ Organizations such as HSUS in particular continued to prize legislative bans on inhumane practices, seeing individual corporate campaigns as incremental steps toward more fundamental shifts in industry-wide practice. In 2018 HSUS achieved a historic victory in California with the passage of Proposition 12. By banning the sale in California of eggs produced in cages and pork produced with gestation crates, California’s new law forced suppliers across the entire country to comply with the state’s standards. Although challenged in the US Supreme Court by the

⁷⁶ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025; Anonymous interview [corporate campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025.

⁷⁷ Anonymous interview [corporate campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025; Anonymous interview [corporate campaigners], February 12, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025; Jeremy Klemin, “How the Open Wing Alliance Has Helped Free Hundreds of Millions of Chickens from Cages,” Open Philanthropy, July 30, 2024, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/how-the-open-wing-alliance-has-helped-free-hundreds-of-millions-of-chickens-from-cages/>.

⁷⁸ “The Humane League – Corporate Cage-Free Campaigns,” Open Philanthropy, accessed December 6, 2024, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/grants/the-humane-league-corporate-cage-free-campaigns/>.

⁷⁹ Tarun Bishop, “How Animal Rights and Animal Welfare Nonprofits and NGOs Use Theories of Effectiveness and Inclusivity to Promote an End to Factory Farming” (Masters Thesis, University of Eastern Finland, 2024).

National Pork Producers Council and the American Farm Bureau Federation, the court upheld Proposition 12 as valid and binding.⁸⁰

Animal welfare advocates attributed the success of Prop 12 in part to the corporate campaigns that preceded it, with stronger legislation as the consequence, rather than the cause, of corporate commitments to improve animal welfare. Additional research into how policymakers responded to the corporate campaigns could verify whether this causal attribution is correct, although interviews suggest it is a common understanding among animal supporters. As animal advocate and strategic consultant James Odene has noted, “Once you have a certain percentage of...companies that have committed” to an animal welfare improvement, “that makes it more likely that we’ll have a national scale legislation or policy.”⁸¹ Or as a director of global corporate engagement at an animal nonprofit has explained, getting company commitments is a first step to “start creating legislative change, [because] you won’t get pushback from those companies, because they’re kind of bought in, and they have a vested interest in actually seeing something legislated.”⁸²

This is an articulation of the stepping stone approach, in which activists first target “low hanging fruit,” proposing that corporations implement relatively low-cost improvements before committing to more later. This was in keeping with the pragmatic strategies developed by Ruth Harrison and Henry Spira, in which business leaders were presented not with outsize demands but instead with acceptable asks.⁸³ For some animal advocates, this pragmatic willingness to seek out compromises with agribusinesses was not an easy ask for themselves. Sharon Núñez remembers “the biggest shift in [her] thinking” occurring after she planned to do an undercover investigation of a poultry shed but was then invited to sit down in the living room of the chicken farmer, who convinced her that not everyone in the livestock industry was necessarily an “enemy.”⁸⁴ Likewise, a personally committed vegetarian explained in an interview that she would find it impossible to achieve significant improvements in animal welfare, especially in a farm state, if she approached food companies and farmers with demands that would upend their economic livelihoods. “I intentionally made [vegetarianism] not part of our agenda,” explained the crate-free campaigner, “because I knew right from the start that that would prevent me from forming genuine relationships with pork producers.” Having spent a career in marketing and public relations, this campaigner knew how to speak *with* (and not just *to*) corporate managers.⁸⁵ Getting a foot in the door with some of the largest retail chains and agrifood companies required a willingness to empathize with opposing moral positions.

Large-scale measurable impacts resulted from the turn to corporate campaigning. When HSUS first pushed for cage-free eggs in the 1990s, gaining acceptance in eight cities was considered a triumph. By 2016, one longitudinal study noted that over 200 companies had committed to implement cage-free

⁸⁰ *National Pork Producers Council v. Ross*, 598 U.S. 356 (2023).

⁸¹ Odene and Ozden, “Stien Van Der Ploeg,” at 00:12:20 – 00:13:36.

⁸² Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

⁸³ Lewis Bollard, “What Would Ruth and Henry Do? Lessons from Two Pioneering Advocates for Farmed Animals,” April 25, 2024, Open Philanthropy Farm Animal Welfare Newsletter, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://farmanimalwelfare.substack.com/p/what-would-ruth-and-henry-do>.

⁸⁴ Odene and Ozden, “Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez.”

⁸⁵ Anonymous interview [crate-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025.

practices in dozens of countries around the world and estimated that this removed 225 million hens from battery cage confinement. The study further calculated that this dramatic improvement came at remarkably low cost, estimating that 10 years of layer hen life were improved for each dollar spent on corporate campaigns.⁸⁶ Today, Open Philanthropy notes that over 3,000 companies have signed cage-free commitments, sometimes attained via negotiations rather than confrontational campaigns.⁸⁷ Evidence further highlights the promise of the “stepping stones” approach, indicating that in countries with a substantial number of corporate commitments to welfare improvement, there is a strong correlation with passage of legislation to raise standards across the industry. Whether corporate commitments drive policy change or vice versa remains unclear, although in countries where both occur in tandem the positive impacts on animal welfare are quantifiably higher.⁸⁸ More broadly, the success of cage-free campaigns has led animal advocates to launch similar campaigns in other agrifood supply chains. This includes broiler (meat-type) chickens (exemplified by the launch of the Better Chicken Commitment in 2017, discussed in more detail below) as well as farmed fish and shrimp. Particularly by the standards of effective altruism, the corporate campaign strategy has proven highly effective.

6. Contextual Factors: Strategies and Structures

Evaluating the contextual factors that have shaped both the successes and limitations of the corporate campaigning approach is not an easy task. Within the animal advocacy movement, even committed supporters of the approach sometimes bemoan the lack of unambiguous empirical evidence to attribute causal power to one or another contextual factor. An animal welfare advocate notes that the “main barrier” to further success is a “lack of empirical, high-quality research that will tell us how effective different interventions are, even with the corporate commitment campaign work.”⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the relatively rich (if fragmentary) source base that I have examined suggests two broad areas of context shaping the corporate engagement strategy of farm animal welfare advocates. First is the strategic choices made by animal advocacy organizations and their funders, in which theories of change, innovations in tactics, approaches to governance, and professionalization of staff have proven particularly important. Second are the economic structures of the contemporary agrifood system—characterized by highly concentrated buying power, high exposure to reputational risks for corporate brands, and emerging modes of corporate governance that promote corporate responsibility and accountability.

⁸⁶ Marinella Capriati, “Cause Area Report: Corporate Campaigns for Animal Welfare,” November 1, 2018, Founders Pledge, accessed November 21, 2024, <https://wwwFOUNDERSpledge.com/downloads/fp-animal-welfare>.

⁸⁷ Open Philanthropy, “Farm Animal Welfare,” 2025, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/focus/farm-animal-welfare/>; Klemin, “How the Open Wing Alliance Has Helped.”

⁸⁸ Samara Mendez and Jacob Peacock, “The Impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on Animal Welfare Standards: Evidence from the Cage-Free Egg Industry,” July 25, 2022, SSRN, accessed November 15, 2024, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4219976>.

⁸⁹ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025.

6.a. Strategies

Successful movement strategies require both clearly articulated long-term goals and detailed roadmaps for how to achieve those goals. The term “theory of change” was not used by the major social movements of the 20th century—civil rights, labor unionism, women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights—but since the turn of the 21st century the phrase has gained widespread currency within progressive movement circles. First popularized in the 1990s by sociologist Carol Weiss, the concept of theory of change insists that to achieve a long-term goal, members and leaders of an organization must explicitly lay out a detailed sequence of expected outcomes resulting from specific actions or interventions, and iteratively evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions along the way.⁹⁰ Perhaps especially for effective altruists, the appeal of the concept of theory of change is that it requires organizations to explicitly state not only how they intend to achieve positive impact, but also to develop mechanisms for measuring the success of specific strategic choices.⁹¹ For farm animal welfare organizations, developing explicit theories of change became increasingly important from the early 2000s onward, particularly after the influx of funding orchestrated by organizations including ACE and Open Philanthropy.⁹² As one animal welfare advocate explained to me, the increased emphasis on theory of change evaluation enabled “movement design from a bird’s eye view,” promoting a “kind of movement ecology” in which a relatively small number of actors could produce systemic change.⁹³

An important consequence of articulating theories of change was that animal welfare organizations such as The Humane League and Mercy for Animals homed in on specific targets, most notably “cage-free,” in no small part because the impacts of specific interventions could be quantitatively evaluated. Another consequence was that it helped members of these organizations to understand the purpose of their day-to-day actions and thus stay focused on achievable wins rather than stray into potentially ineffective tactics. As Leah Garcés puts it, “You have to prioritize...where we’ve had success is where we’re able to say ‘cage free, that’s it, one ask’—everybody can imagine it in their head.”⁹⁴ A third important consequence of adopting the theory of change concept is that animal welfare advocates have learned to systematically and critically evaluate their strategic choices, including via conference calls, social media, and web forums in which activists compare notes on which approaches do and do not work.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Carol C. Weiss, “Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives,” in *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts*, ed. James P. Connell, et al. (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1995), 65–92. A practical guide to theory of change is Andrea A. Anderson, *The Community Builder’s Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to Theory Development* (New York: Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, 2006).

⁹¹ Aidan Alexander, “Nailing the Basics – Theories of Change,” July 16, 2023, Effective Altruism Forum, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/9t7St3pfEEiDsQ2Tr/nailing-the-basics-theories-of-change>.

⁹² Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Jesse Marks on Becoming a Major Grant Maker, the Navigation Fund and Corporate Campaigning,” December 5, 2024, How I Learned to Love Shrimp, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/16220652>.

⁹³ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025.

⁹⁴ Odene and Ozden, “Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez.”

⁹⁵ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025.

Developing a theory of change involves working backward from expected outcomes to develop specific tactics for achieving those goals. In this regard, the farm animal welfare movement has demonstrated dynamic capabilities for tactical innovation. Scholars of progressive movements have noted that tactical innovation is driven in part by the relative powerlessness of activists seeking to transform entrenched institutions or behaviors.⁹⁶ Clearly this applies to the farm animal welfare movement, as the rise of corporate campaigns from the 1990s onward emerged in no small part due to frustration at limited achievements attained by other means.

Consumer boycotts, for instance, were a tried and tested tactic that had been widely and effectively used in the organized labor, civil rights, and consumer movements of the mid-20th century.⁹⁷ Although animal welfare advocates had some success with boycotts, such as late 1980s campaigns against tuna that led to “dolphin-safe” practices in commercial fishing, many boycotts achieved very little, such as HSUS’s “Breakfast of Cruelty” campaign in 1987.⁹⁸ Other common tactics used by animal activists for decades included leafletting, undercover investigations, and theatrical public protests—but as with boycotting, the results of such actions were inconsistent or difficult to measure.

The tactical innovation of targeting corporations with reputational damage, spearheaded by Henry Spira in the 1990s, thus emerged in part due to perceived inadequacies of the existing playbook. Many animal advocates draw direct inspiration from Saul Alinsky’s book *Rules for Radicals*, which calls for tactical innovations that, per rule 3, “go outside the experience of an opponent.”⁹⁹ A particularly powerful approach has been developed by the Open Wing Alliance, which trains and empowers local activists around the world to wage campaigns against multinational companies. If a commitment is not signed in a given country, the local activists will mobilize aggressively to ridicule and shame the company’s brand, raising public awareness of animal cruelty via protests outside corporate headquarters and online social media shame campaigns.¹⁰⁰

But staging public protests is the last and perhaps least desirable option, which can be destabilizing for corporate representatives expecting an immediate turn to undercover exposés and smear campaigns. As one OWA campaign coordinator notes, campaigns against multinational food companies can receive support from around the world, presenting a formidable force on a global scale. But before deploying the “scary talking points,” OWA activists will “often start with the carrot.” Echoing Spira’s approach from the 1990s, OWA campaigners first seek to gain access to sympathetic corporate representatives, such as sustainability managers. If the response is muted or produces no measurable change, OWA escalates, first by reminding the company of previous campaigns and then by putting the

⁹⁶ Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movements* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Holly J. McCammon, “‘Out of the Parlors and into the Streets’: The Changing Tactical Repertoire of the U.S. Women’s Suffrage Movements,” *Social Forces* 81, no. 3 (2003): 787–818.

⁹⁷ Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

⁹⁸ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 23.

⁹⁹ Jesse Marks comments on the impact of Saul Alinsky’s work in Odene and Ozden, “Jesse Marks” at 00:59:30.

¹⁰⁰ Klemin, “How the Open Wing Alliance Has Helped.”

targeted company on a “short list for a campaign.”¹⁰¹ This measured, calculated approach to escalation often gets the attention of corporate representatives by “framing” the desired systems change via narratives that *motivate* corporate action, rather than generate corporate rejection due to a fundamental incompatibility between the activists’ worldview and the corporation’s for-profit logic.¹⁰²

Since the rapid rise of corporate campaigning in the 2000s, animal advocates have continued to innovate. One approach has been to emulate corporate tactics. The organization Faunalytics (founded in 2000 as the Humane Research Council), for instance, adopts and promotes corporate-style marketing tools such as focus groups to aid animal welfare organizations.¹⁰³ In recent years, there has been a proliferation of similar professional services organizations that support animal advocates in researching, designing, monitoring, and evaluating their strategies—including Animal Ask, Mission Realization Partners, Rethink Priorities, and Scarlet Spark. Other animal welfare organizations, such as Chronos Consulting in the UK, have emulated corporate tactics—literally—by creating a for-profit entity to sell services supporting animal welfare improvement. Activists furthermore have increasingly adopted business-like frameworks such as SMART objectives—e.g., setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals. As Sharon Núñez recently noted, rather than simply standing outside a fast-food chain with a banner, activists will integrate a storefront protest into “part of a campaign that has a specific objective to achieve at a specific timeline.”¹⁰⁴ Deep research is valued, as animal advocates often find they need to make clear to corporate managers that they do in fact have access to levers of power to make changes to how animals are treated on farms not owned by those corporations.¹⁰⁵ Most of these innovations could be described as incremental rather than radical, yet they speak to how campaigners have learned the importance of developing organizational capabilities over time to continuously achieve goals in the face of ongoing societal and business resistance.

Corporate campaigners in the farm animal welfare movement have also innovated in developing media-savvy techniques. Mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television proved crucial to the successes of 20th-century social movements.¹⁰⁶ Animal advocates in the 21st century continued to rely on mass media, with some evidence suggesting that newspaper reports in particular can be an effective means of communicating to mainstream consumers the benefits of reducing meat in their diets.¹⁰⁷ The rise of digital social media since the 1990s, however, has provided animal advocates with a new set of tools. At relatively low cost, campaigners can use social media to inflict significant reputational damage

¹⁰¹ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹⁰² Simon Teasdale, Michael J. Roy, Alex Nicholls, and Chantal Hervieux, “Turning Rebellion into Money: Social Entrepreneurship as the Strategic Performance of Systems Change,” *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* 17, no. 1 (2023): 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sej.1452>.

¹⁰³ Faunalytics, “Our History,” 2025, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://faunalytics.org/our-history/>.

¹⁰⁴ Odene and Ozden, “Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez.”

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous interview [corporate campaigners], February 12, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Philip M. Glende, “Labor Makes the News: Newspapers, Journalism, and Organized Labor, 1933–1955,” *Enterprise and Society* 13, no. 1 (2012): 39–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/es/khr081>.

¹⁰⁷ Andrea Polanco, Jamie Parry, and Jo Anderson, “Planting Seeds: The Impact of Diet & Different Animal Advocacy Tactics,” Faunalytics, April 27, 2022, <https://faunalytics.org/relative-effectiveness/>.

on a company, drawing visual attention to disturbing or disgusting aspects of farm animal housing, transport, and slaughter.¹⁰⁸

In 2012, for instance, Mercy For Animals used disturbing videos of “piglets slammed headfirst into the ground” to shame Kmart and Costco (two large US retailers) to commit to reducing the use of gestation crates in their supply chains, adding to existing commitments from several major fast-food chains and supermarkets.¹⁰⁹ A similar campaign in 2015 was spearheaded by Mercy For Animals, targeting Perdue Farms, which had long claimed to raise only “happy chickens.” Core to the campaign was a three-minute video shared on a website called “Perdue Tortures Animals,” showing workers in a Perdue Farms facility kicking chickens, throwing them against walls, and stomping them to death.¹¹⁰ Comments on the YouTube video highlighted the power of such tactics: “It’s horrible to watch, but here’s hoping it will help stop the abuse,” “I hope you stay on Perdue’s ass,” “I can honestly say I will NEVER be purchasing any Perdue product ever again.”¹¹¹ The outraged response of consumers led CEO Jim Perdue (grandson of the founder Frank) to inform the *New York Times*: “We need happier birds.”¹¹² Mercy for Animals then worked directly with the company, convincing Perdue to commit to a plan to implement the Five Freedoms for chickens in its supply chains, providing animals with opportunities for more space, resting periods without glaring lights, and chances to play.¹¹³ Using low-cost social media tools, Mercy for Animals achieved substantially more success than, for instance, Henry Spira’s expensive *New York Times* advertising campaigns in the 1980s.

Recognizing the value of social media’s reach, animal advocates spend significant portions of their budgets on online advertising; at The Humane League, for instance, online ads account for approximately five percent of its budget.¹¹⁴ Some animal advocates question the cost-effectiveness of social media advertising campaigns, although a 2021 study of Mercy for Animals’ use of online advertisements found that animal ads were at least twice as effective as those for environmental, health, or social issues.¹¹⁵ One small-scale test suggests that social media advertising might be more effective in low-income countries with less developed animal advocacy infrastructure than in high-

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Nathan Runkle, “Victory! Costco and Kmart Commit to Ditching Gestation Crates Following MFA Investigation,” Mercy for Animals, July 18, 2012, <https://mercyforanimals.org/blog/victory-costco-and-kmart-commit-to-ditching-gestation-crates-following-mfa-investigation/>.

¹¹⁰ “Perdue Tortures Animals,” (2015), IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6660880/>.

¹¹¹ Mercy for Animals, “Watch: Perdue Workers Caught on Hidden Camera Stomping Birds to Death,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05h2hNi1S1g>.

¹¹² Stephanie Strom, “Poultry’s Cage Match: Perdue Sharply Cuts Antibiotic Use and Jobs at Its Rivals,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2015, B1, B7.

¹¹³ Mercy for Animals, “Chicken Giant Perdue Farms Announces Critical Improvements to Animal Welfare Policy,” July 17, 2017, PR Newswire, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/chicken-giant-perdue-farms-announces-critical-improvements-to-animal-welfare-policy-300488872.htmlrln>; Perdue Foods, “Commitments to Animal Care,” January 1, 2017, Perdue Farms, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://corporate.perdufarm.com/media/1612/commitments-to-animal-care-2017.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Animal Charity Evaluators, “The Humane League,” 2023, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://animalcharityevaluators.org/charity-review/the-humane-league/>.

¹¹⁵ Christopher Bryant, Brian Platt, Anthony Vultaggio, and Courtney Dillard, “Testing Social Media Advertisements for Animal Advocacy,” OSF Preprints, December 2021, https://osf.io/preprints/osf/xs5p7_v1.

income countries.¹¹⁶ Campaigners have furthermore attempted to build on the trend of “explainer” and “influencer” videos online, aiming for relatability and entertainment while educating the broader populace about the conditions of factory farming.¹¹⁷ A recent marketing study by ACE suggests that online advertising campaigns that focus on “inspiration/motivational” messages may be especially effective at gaining support from people who care about animal welfare but who have prioritized donations to pet shelters and animal sanctuaries over farm animal campaigns.¹¹⁸ Chicken Watch, a tool launched in 2018, aims to provide transparency to concerned consumers, publicly tracking progress in chicken-related welfare commitments around the world.¹¹⁹ Whether such online tools produce measurable results remains uncertain, although at relatively low cost digital media can support wider efforts to, as one campaigner puts it, “shape the narrative” and “hold companies accountable.”¹²⁰

Perhaps more importantly, advocates have effectively used digital communications tools to improve strategic action, coordination, and planning. The Humane League, for instance, introduced the Fast Action Network in 2020, a digital tool that enlists volunteers to take specific actions, such as posting on social media or writing an email to a corporate executive. Incorporating elements of “gamification,” the digital app has enrolled over 3,700 users to date and is touted by The Humane League as a cost-effective means of driving wider engagement in the movement.¹²¹ A senior campaigner, for instance, attributed causal power to the Fast Action Network in a recent campaign with a major global fast-food chain. The company had been “willing to withstand our campaign for like, four to five years,” retorting that they could block any campaign, until the Fast Action Network mobilized a rapid, multi-country threat. Within three to four months, the company improved its animal welfare policies, with the difference being “the volume of pressure we’re able to put on a company” via “digital action...right across the world.”¹²²

Members of animal welfare organizations furthermore rely on both publicly available and privately held digital tools to communicate and collaborate. Smaller organizations, for instance, often request information or advice from better funded organizations via private listservs, while larger organizations focus on developing staffs’ digital research skills for gaining access to agrifood companies’ managers and executives. Digital technologies help campaigners determine where and when to target specific

¹¹⁶ Precious Pig, “Cost Comparison of Promoting Animal Rights Content on Social Media in High Income Vs. Low Income Countries,” Effective Altruism Forum, November 20, 2023, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/QQ7TffLooTZEjzpgg/cost-comparison-of-promoting-animal-rights-content-on-social>.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance, Animal Welfare Media, “Our Work,” accessed February 28, 2025, <https://animalwelfaremedia.com/projects/>.

¹¹⁸ Holly Baines, “Reaching a New Audience: Insights from a Market Research Survey,” Effective Altruism Forum, February 12, 2025, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/nguJtnyKTLnAmswfK/reaching-a-new-audience-insights-from-a-market-research>.

¹¹⁹ “Progress Tracker,” Chicken Watch, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://chickenwatch.org/progress-tracker>

¹²⁰ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹²¹ Julia Tomkins Wisner, “The Humane League Launches the Fast Action Network for Digital Activism,” June 16, 2020, The Humane League, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/the-humane-league-launches-the-fast-action-network-for-digital-activism>; The Humane League, “Help Animals Anywhere, Anytime,” 2025, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://thehumaneleague.org/fast-action-network>.

¹²² Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

corporate managers.¹²³ More broadly, animal advocates have turned to podcasts, online forums, and email newsletters to openly debate strategic choices, and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of specific tactics.¹²⁴ Digital tools thus enable animal welfare advocates to put into practice the iterative self-evaluation principles behind the theory of change approach.

Transformative approaches to governance emerged alongside the rise of corporate campaigning in the 2000s, enabling farm animal advocates to hone their strategies for maximum impact. Most notable was the narrowing of strategic focus that emerged with groups such as The Humane League and Mercy for Animals. In contrast to the Humane Society of the United States, which since its founding in 1954 sought to improve conditions for “all animals” through a multitude of policy and activism channels, the new breed of animal welfare organizations has generally sought to focus on a more limited range of targets and activities. Some, such as Crate Free USA, put all their resources into a single issue, while others, such as Mercy for Animals, articulate a multi-pronged but nonetheless tightly specified strategy.¹²⁵ Focused strategies allowed advocacy organizations to more efficiently allocate scarce resources, avoiding the problems that business strategy scholars have explored in the “attention-based view” of the firm, in which individual capacity for decision-making is unevenly distributed throughout the organization.¹²⁶

Beyond enabling better coordination of planning within organizations, new approaches to governance have supported more open collaboration across networks and partnerships with other advocacy groups. The creation of the Open Wing Alliance (OWA) in 2016 is a clear example of this. According to Aaron Ross, OWA emerged after several years of growth at The Humane League, which since its founding in 2005 in Baltimore had branched out in a franchise model to multiple cities in the US. Around 2015, having developed branches in a dozen US cities, The Humane League sought to leap to international action in Mexico, the UK, and elsewhere. But Ross and his colleagues quickly realized that “all these existing organizations around the world...already had networks they already established; they understood the local cultures better than we ever could.”¹²⁷ Rather than compete with or duplicate the work of potential allies, The Humane League instead created the Open Wing Alliance as a dynamic coalition of international partners. Dedicating a substantial portion of its resources to nurturing and coordinating the OWA, The Humane League’s network governance approach enables global capacity to wage simultaneous campaigns targeting multinational corporations operating in hundreds of countries

¹²³ Anonymous interview [corporate campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025; Anonymous interview [corporate campaign specialist] by Shane Hamilton, February 12, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹²⁴ Examples include the *How I Learned to Love Shrimp* podcast, the Effective Altruism Forum, and the Open Philanthropy Farm Animal Welfare Newsletter.

¹²⁵ The Mercy for Animals strategic plan for 2022–24, for instance, laid out three core approaches: alternative proteins, media exposure, and corporate campaigns; see “Three-Year Strategic Plan 2022–2024,” Mercy for Animals, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://mercyforanimals.org/strategic-plan-board/#flipbook-43441/7/>.

¹²⁶ William Ocasio, “Towards an Attention-Based View of the Firm,” *Strategic Management Journal* 18 (Summer 1997): 187–206.

¹²⁷ Odene and Ozden, “Aaron Ross.”

around the world. Even though most OWA member organizations are small, the network effects gained through collaboration and cooperation, enabling a shared focus, produce outsized leverage.¹²⁸

Reflecting the increased desire to avoid infighting that has characterized farm animal welfare campaigning since the 2000s, collaboration has increasingly replaced competition in the movement. Several interviewees noted the value of openly discussing strategic options with other organizations.¹²⁹ As Jesse Marks of the Navigation Fund (a new philanthropic entrant to the farm animal welfare space as of 2024) has explained, presenting a consistent message is essential, as “one of the worst case scenarios [is] where we can’t actually get a coherent outcome out of companies because they’re hearing different things from different people.”¹³⁰

As labor union organizers have repeatedly learned, one of the most successful defensive tactics corporations have deployed is “divide and conquer.” By pitting labor allies against each other and highlighting philosophical or strategic differences between labor factions, corporations have repeatedly undermined workers’ solidarity and reduced overall labor organizing effectiveness.¹³¹ Successful animal welfare corporate campaigns have avoided this trap via formal collaboration. This is perhaps best exemplified by the Better Chicken Commitment, which began in 2017. Two motivating factors led to the Better Chicken Commitment. First was a recognition that existing industry-led welfare standards, such as Red Tractor in the UK, produced positive but severely limited improvements for broiler chickens. Red Tractor was created by the National Farmers Union in 2000 to set standards for food safety, quality, and animal welfare to reassure British consumers in the wake of food scares of the 1990s including “mad cow” disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE). Its broiler chicken welfare scheme, however, was widely criticized by animal advocates as inadequate; in 2012, for instance, Compassion in World Farming ranked Red Tractor as the “lowest” animal welfare assurance scheme in the UK, producing “little more than compliance with minimum legislation.”¹³² The Better Chicken Commitment relied on animal welfare science to set higher minimum standards for broiler welfare, including setting maximum stocking density limits to allow chickens to move more freely.¹³³ Importantly, the Commitment not only offered its own improved standards, but also raised the bar for other assurance schemes; indeed, in 2021 Red Tractor responded to the momentum of the Better Chicken Commitment

¹²⁸ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025; Anonymous interview [crate-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹²⁹ Anonymous interview [crate-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹³⁰ Odene and Ozden, “Jesse Marks.”

¹³¹ Nelson Lichtenstein, “Wal-Mart Tries to Go to Town,” American Prospect, April 19, 2011, <https://prospect.org/power/wal-mart-tries-go-town/>.

¹³² “‘Red Tractor’ Ranked Lowest on Animal Welfare,” Compassion in World Farming, May 1, 2012, <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/news/2012/05/red-tractor-ranked-lowest-on-animal-welfare>.

¹³³ Holly Spindler, “What Is the Better Chicken Commitment?” The Humane League, June 24, 2020, <https://thehumaneleague.org.uk/article/what-is-the-better-chicken-commitment>.

by setting stricter welfare standards, including requirements that only slower-growing breeds be used for free-range chicken production.¹³⁴

A second motivating factor was recognition that animal advocates could achieve more systemic change for broilers by working together than they could separately. The first Better Chicken Commitment was a joint statement among eight animal organizations laying out standards for better welfare for broiler chickens, building on earlier cage-free work for egg-laying hens. The initial proposal to major agrifood companies was explicitly framed around a collaborative, united pitch:

As you may know, we, the undersigned organizations, work individually with many food companies. In the course of that engagement, we're sometimes asked by companies if our groups can speak with one voice. That generally isn't possible—our groups don't necessarily work in tandem, and often disagree on issues, tactics, and more.¹³⁵

By 2019, the Better Chicken Commitment standards were set collaboratively by 10 organizations covering the US and Canada. By 2022 the standards had been adopted by over 200 companies.¹³⁶ Thus, in governance terms, the Better Chicken Commitment has produced two mutually reinforcing outcomes: it enables animal organizations to pool their scarce resources into one unified (and apparently largely acceptable) demand for change, and secondly, its existence creates incentives for competing welfare schemes to level up to avoid becoming irrelevant. Whether such certification schemes create a sustainable template for future changes, however, is a matter further considered below in section 6.b.

A final organizational factor that has conditioned the success of recent farm animal welfare campaigns is strategic human resource management. When Henry Spira began his corporate campaigns, he was a full-time school teacher who relied on his own sweat equity and the volunteer labor of allies to challenge business leaders to implement animal welfare reforms.¹³⁷ The influx of funding initiated by effective altruists, however, enabled more animal campaigners to work as full-time professionals, developing skills, and gaining knowledge to more confidently engage in tense meetings in corporate boardrooms. With the more carefully designed strategies that emerged in the early 2000s, even longstanding organizations increasingly found the need to recruit staff with specialized skillsets, or invest in upskilling employees in areas including design, communications, and campaigning. Particularly rare are individuals who have both the expertise and the psychological fortitude to directly confront powerful business executives, according to some members of the movement.¹³⁸ As Aaron Ross puts it, “sometimes the most radical thing you can do is put on a suit and go meet with an executive.”¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Philip Clarke, “Red Tractor Plans Stricter Standards from November 2021,” *Farmers Weekly*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.fwi.co.uk/news/red-tractor-plans-stricter-standards-from-november-2021>.

¹³⁵ Animal Equality et al., “Joint Animal Protection Organization Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare Issues,” *Poultry Progress*, July 1, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171031012143/http://www.poultryprogress.com/docs/Statement.pdf>.

¹³⁶ History of the Better Chicken Commitment, “History of the Better Chicken Commitment,” 2024, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://betterchickencommitment.com/us/history/>.

¹³⁷ Singer, *Ethics into Action*, x.

¹³⁸ Anonymous interview [corporate campaigners by Shane Hamilton, February 12, 2025; Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

¹³⁹ Odene and Ozden, Aaron Ross,” 00:19:33.

Recognizing the value of investing in and retaining human capital, Animal Charity Evaluators includes a consideration of organizational culture as one element of its evaluations, channeling funding towards organizations where both leaders and staff are committed to professionalism.¹⁴⁰

Professionalism is further aided by the educational opportunities in animal welfare studies that have become increasingly available in universities in the years since Bob Barker donated millions to establish animal law programs. Several of the campaigners I interviewed, for instance, noted that they held advanced degrees in animal welfare ethics or law. Other animal advocates, including James Ozden and Amy Odene, hold management degrees in marketing and leadership. Notably, most animal welfare master's degree programs appear to be housed in biology, veterinary science, or law departments, suggesting possible opportunities for business and management schools to offer animal welfare degrees more rooted in fields such as marketing, strategy, leadership, and organizational behavior.

6.b. Structures

The agrifood companies targeted by animal advocates formulate their corporate strategies in an environment of multiple, often conflicting, stakeholder interests. The competitive dynamics, governance mechanisms, and industry structures of agribusiness and food distribution and retailing are crucial contextual factors that have both enabled and constrained the successes of corporate farm animal welfare campaigns.

Most important is the economic concentration of buying power that has increasingly characterized the agrifood industry since the 1960s. The rise of distributor-retailers such as Walmart and Costco in the US, Carrefour in France, and Tesco in the UK, as well as global fast-food chains including McDonald's and KFC, produced intense economic concentration on the buying end of agrifood supply chains. In the 1950s a downstream supermarket or restaurant might have relied on a complex web of intermediary upstream businesses including livestock auction houses, meatpackers, and warehousing and distribution firms to deliver animals from farm to consumer. These middlemen in a disaggregated supply chain held at least some power to influence business policy in the livestock industry, generally abetted in the US at midcentury by strong antitrust laws and enforcement that restricted anticompetitive practices in meat production and distribution. From the 1970s into the 1990s, however, antitrust enforcement was undermined by conservative and neoliberal politics, while new logistics and transportation technologies transformed agrifood supply chains. Firms such as Walmart capitalized on these political and technological changes, removing ever more middlemen from their supply chains, enabling them to build concentrated buying power to dictate terms to their suppliers—including the companies producing eggs, meat, and dairy products.¹⁴¹

Statistics make clear just how concentrated the downstream agrifood chain became in the US and Europe at the end of the 20th century. In the US, the combined market share of the four biggest supermarkets was just 14 percent in 1984; by 2001, it was between 22 and 32 percent. In Sweden and Denmark, the three largest supermarkets controlled 90 percent of the market, while a 2014 EU study

¹⁴⁰ Odene and Ozden, "Stien Van Der Ploeg."

¹⁴¹ Hamilton, *Trucking Country*, chapters 4, 5, and 6; Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, chapters 5 and 6.

found that across Europe, the largest five food retailers held 80 percent of market share by the 2000s. The global fast-food industry is overall less concentrated, with many small competitors; however, a tiny number of very large firms including McDonald's, KFC, Starbucks, and Subway are among the largest global buyers of eggs, meat, and dairy products every year. McDonalds, for instance, used two billion eggs in the US in 2023, while KFC buys 60 million chickens per year in the UK alone.¹⁴²

This tight concentration of downstream buying power has several consequences for animal welfare. First, the farmers who raise chickens, pigs, and cattle are much more atomized than downstream firms. It is not necessary to romanticize the “family farm” to recognize that even relatively large factory farms are geographically dispersed and hold little power to challenge specifications set by downstream firms. US farmers who raise hogs, chickens, and cattle, for instance, generally do so under contracts that are tightly controlled by downstream multinational corporations, with most significant management decisions (including those related to animal welfare) made at corporate headquarters, not on the farm.¹⁴³ This was the fact realized by Sharon Núñez when she sat down in the living room of a chicken farmer whom she had previously perceived as an “enemy”—although the farmer had responsibility for the chickens he raised, and took on significant risks to meet production targets, he had little to no power to change the practices on his own farm, let alone in the poultry industry more broadly.¹⁴⁴ For animal welfare advocates, a clear implication of this structural factor is that targeting individual farms—e.g., via farm sanctuary rescues or liberation campaigns—is likely to be time-consuming, expensive, and highly unlikely to produce significant change in the welfare of any more than a small number of animals.

Second, concentrated buying power enables farm animal advocates to target specific firms that can potentially produce system-wide change. This was recognized in the 1950s by HSUS and Hubert Humphrey when the Humane Slaughter Act of 1958 leveraged the monopsony power of the defense department to set standards transforming an entire industry. It was also recognized by Henry Spira in his 1990s campaigns to push McDonald's toward setting higher welfare standards in its supply chains. A key difference with the corporate campaigns of the past two decades, however, has been increasing attention to multinational corporations with globalized supply chains. Josh Balk, the leader of the Prop 12 campaign in California, for instance, increasingly moved away from policy work after 2022 and more toward targeting multinational corporations, realizing “that if I want to help animals on a global scale,” focusing on just one state or even just the United States was inherently limited. But Balk saw “a path forward, and that was working with companies that have global footprints, companies that buy eggs,

¹⁴² Manuel A. Hernández, et al., “The Role of Market Concentration in the Agrifood Industry,” International Food Policy Research Institute Discussion Paper 02168, 2023; Eliana Zeballos, Xiao Dong, and Ergys Islamaj, A Disaggregated View of Market Concentration in the Food Retail Industry, ERR-314 (Washington, DC: USDA, Economic Research Service, 2023); Steve Wood, “Revisiting the U.S. Food Retail Consolidation Wave: Regulation, Market Power and Spatial Outcomes,” *Journal of Economic Geography* 13, no. 2 (2013): 299–326; McDonald's, “McDonald's Achieves Goal of Sourcing 100% Cage-Free Eggs in the U.S.,” February 6, 2024, <https://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/our-stories/article/mcdonalds-achieves-goal-sourcing-100cagefree-eggs-us.html>; “KFC First UK Fast Food Chain to Commit to New Chicken Welfare Standards,” *Guardian*, July 12, 2019, accessed March 27, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/12/kfc-first-uk-fast-food-chain-to-commit-to-new-chicken-welfare-standards>.

¹⁴³ Donald D. Stull, “Chickenizing American Farmers,” in *In Defense of Farmers: The Future of Agriculture in the Shadow of Corporate Power*, eds. Jane W. Gibson and Sara E. Alexander (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 63–83.

¹⁴⁴ Odene and Ozden, “Leah Garcés and Sharon Núñez.”

pork, other animal products around the world.” Gaining a cage-free commitment from a global consumer packed goods (CPG) company like Kraft-Heinz or a fast-food chain like Burger King could potentially transform a global supply chain.¹⁴⁵ As another corporate campaign strategist puts it, the oligopolistic structure of buyer-driven supply chains makes large consumer-facing corporations very “vulnerable to public pressure,” opening an “unbelievable sweet spot” that would not be available in a more atomized industry structure.¹⁴⁶ Fundamental to the strategy pursued by organizations such as The Humane League is an attempt to achieve “superlinear returns,” in which an entire industry commits to a higher welfare standard in the wake of a small number of powerful firms agreeing to do so.¹⁴⁷

A third related consequence is that in countries outside North America and Europe, a relative lack of concentration in agrifood structures can stymie animal advocacy efforts. In India, for instance, the poultry industry is highly atomized, with little evidence of either horizontal or vertical integration. With many sales of chicken eggs occurring in the “informal market” (e.g., urban street vending), Indian animal advocates have faced an uphill battle in attaining “big wins.”¹⁴⁸ Wu Hung, a Taiwan-based animal campaigner, has noted that Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan (EAST) has had more success with animal welfare schemes for dairy cattle than for egg-laying hens because government policies intentionally support a large number of small poultry farmers, whereas the Taiwanese dairy sector is more concentrated.¹⁴⁹ However, a global cage-free campaigner I interviewed acknowledged that the small scale of the formal market in the Global South presents a challenge, but expressed optimism that even if large-scale corporations only controlled 10 or 20 percent of a market, “they will still have the most power over the government.” Furthermore, aware of the economic history of agrifood in the US and Europe, the campaigner thinks it is “inevitable that that formal market will just continue to grow,” which in the near future will justify present-day targeting of the largest firms despite the overall atomization of agrifood in the Global South.¹⁵⁰

A fourth consequence of concentrated buying power is the vulnerability it produces for firms with high public visibility. The most valuable asset of a global consumer-facing company is its brand. McDonald’s, Starbucks, and KFC, for instance, are the world’s three most valuable restaurant brands, valued between \$15.4 billion and \$40.5 billion.¹⁵¹ The value of the brand is such that reputational risk is exceedingly significant for such firms; as one animal campaigner puts it, “I don’t think a food company goes out to be, like, ‘What products can we have that ensure the most animal cruelty.’”¹⁵² A core factor conditioning success for animal welfare advocates is their ability to raise the risk register for companies

¹⁴⁵ Josh Balk, interview by Shane Hamilton, February 17, 2025.

¹⁴⁶ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

¹⁴⁷ Open Philanthropy, “The Humane League – Corporate Cage-Free Campaigns,” 2016, accessed December 6, 2024, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/grants/the-humane-league-corporate-cage-free-campaigns/>.

¹⁴⁸ Klemin, “How the Open Wing Has Helped.”

¹⁴⁹ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Wu Hung on How Buddhism Has Influenced His 30 Years of Activism for Animals in Taiwan,” *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/15677317>.

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

¹⁵¹ Alicia Kelso, “McDonald’s Passes Starbucks as the World’s Most Valuable Restaurant Brand,” *Nation’s Restaurant News*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.nrn.com/restaurant-finance/mcdonald-s-passes-starbucks-as-the-world-s-most-valuable-restaurant-brand>.

¹⁵² Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

with valuable brands to protect. There is evidence indicating that if consumers become aware of a company's bad reputation for animal welfare, they will change their purchasing habits. A 2018 YouGov US poll, for instance, found that 63 percent of Americans would be less likely to buy meat from a company known to have poor animal welfare standards.¹⁵³ The direct threat of reputational damage to a company's bottom line is more than evident to food business managers and executives. Animal advocates have consequently realized that undercover videos of animal abuse may be most effective when shown to corporate executives, rather than to their own supporters, as a means of generating "more serious concern and discussion" about how a company could proactively improve animal welfare to avoid a costly public exposé such as that experienced by Hallmark Meats in the wake of the 2008 "downer cow" scandal.¹⁵⁴

Increasingly aware of the potential business risks posed by supply chain scandals, large agrifood companies have over the past two decades formulated corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies to manage reputational risk.¹⁵⁵ Academic research on CSR has often questioned the sincerity of corporate leaders, with one scholar framing CSR as "stakeholder colonialism" that intentionally limits the power of campaigners for social or environmental justice.¹⁵⁶ Even more balanced views generally emphasize the wide spectrum of CSR practices, with some companies committing to barely more than legal minimum standards while others seek to fully integrate external stakeholders' interests into internal corporate procedures and practices.¹⁵⁷ The implications for animal welfare advocates have thus been mixed. On one hand, the increasing presence of CSR managers within senior management teams has, for some campaigners, "made movement on farm animal welfare much easier to facilitate."¹⁵⁸ Wu Hung relates exactly this experience when working with Carrefour's team in Taiwan, where the firm's CSR manager was eager to "cooperate [with EAST] very tightly" to address what she saw as the "value" of addressing "appalling conditions" in Carrefour's egg supply chains. The CSR manager gained recognition both within and without the firm for bringing the issue to senior leadership and proposing, with EAST's cooperation, specific plans for improvement.¹⁵⁹

However, not all managers are sympathetic, not all executives have the attentional resources to allocate to animal welfare issues, and not all CSR strategies are aimed at much more than "welfare-washing." Animal advocates have thus developed specific tactics for raising the risk register in

¹⁵³ Jamie Ballard, "Americans Care about Animal Welfare When Buying Meat," YouGov US, November 26, 2018, <https://today.yougov.com/consumer/articles/21962-ethical-meat-price-quality-animal-rights>.

¹⁵⁴ Sara Shields, Paul Shapiro, and Andrew Rowan, "A Decade of Progress Toward Ending the Intensive Confinement of Farm Animals in the United States," *Animals* 7, no. 5 (2017): 12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani7050040>.

¹⁵⁵ Rory Sullivan, Nicky Amos, and Heleen A. Van de Weerd, "Corporate Reporting on Farm Animal Welfare: An Evaluation of Global Food Companies' Discourse and Disclosures on Farm Animal Welfare," *Animals* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani7030017>.

¹⁵⁶ Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, "Corporate Social Responsibility: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," *Critical Sociology* 34 (January 2008): 51–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920507084623>.

¹⁵⁷ Wenlong Yuan, Yongjian Bao, and Alain Verbeke, "Integrating CSR Initiatives in Business: An Organizing Framework," *Journal of Business Ethics* 101, no. 1 (2011): 75–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0710-z>; Andreas Rasche, Frank G. A. de Bakker, and Jeremy Moon, "Complete and Partial Organizing for Corporate Social Responsibility," *Journal of Business Ethics* 115, no. 4 (2013): 651–663, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1824-x>.

¹⁵⁸ Shields, Shapiro, and Rowan, "Decade of Progress Toward," 13.

¹⁵⁹ Odene and Ozden, "Wu Hung on How."

circumstances where corporate managers do not express the goodwill that Wu Hung experienced with Carrefour. One method is to leverage reputational risk, not with end consumers, but with business partners. So-called “secondary targeting” is, according to one seasoned corporate campaigner, “probably the most reliable” means of confronting an “iron wall” of resistance. By bringing animal welfare concerns to the attention of secondary companies that have business relationships with the resistant target firm, campaigners have had success in bringing reluctant senior leaders to the negotiating table.¹⁶⁰

Importantly, managing reputational risk has upside elements as well as downside. This is particularly the case for agrifood firms pursuing differentiation strategies, in which the focus is not on competing on lowest cost or price but instead on offering more distinctive or desirable products to consumers. This has been an important factor for animal advocates targeting Perdue Farms, for instance. The firm has since the 1960s founded its marketing strategy on claims that Perdue chickens are “happy” and therefore produce high quality meat. An effective differentiation strategy can enable a firm to set higher standards as a means to command higher prices.

This was recently exemplified by Perdue’s role in urging the US Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service to upgrade its definition of “pasture raised” chickens in 2024. With the new standards, American consumers can more easily distinguish between “free range” chickens (who have space to move freely but may never see the outdoors in their lives) and “pasture raised” chickens who have spent “the majority of their life span” on land covered by “grass or other plants.”¹⁶¹ Attaining this standard is essential to one element of Perdue’s growth strategy, in which the firm’s 2020 acquisition of Pasturebird was premised on a plan to scale up production of more humanely raised birds to capture market share in a sector largely untouched by its major competitors including Tyson, Pilgrim’s Pride, and Cargill.¹⁶² Pasture-raised birds command significantly higher prices than conventionally raised birds, but until Perdue’s acquisition of Pasturebird most producers have been small-scale, operating on high-margin, low-volume business models that are cost-prohibitive even for highly welfare-conscious consumers. One such small-scale farmer, for instance, estimates the cost of raising a single pastured bird at \$45—at least three times the average cost of a conventionally raised chicken, and largely due to inherent limitations of production scale and marketing scope for a small, labor-intensive farm.¹⁶³ Perdue’s ability to use economies of scale and scope to drive down the costs of producing and selling pasture-raised chicken thus presents a significant opportunity for market growth. Likewise, pork producer Hatfield Pork (part of the Clemens Food Group) has pursued a high-welfare differentiation strategy since 2017. By developing a crate-free supply chain earlier than its competitors, Hatfield witnessed unprecedented growth in market share, generating revenues exceeding \$2 billion in

¹⁶⁰ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 24, 2025.

¹⁶¹ Erica Shaffer, “Perdue Farms Applauds Update to ‘Pasture Raised’ Label Guidelines,” Supermarket Perimeter, October 10, 2024, <https://www.supermarketperimeter.com/articles/11844-perdue-farms-applauds-update-to-pasture-raised-label-guidelines>.

¹⁶² Rachael Oatman, “Industry Reacts to USDA’S Updated ‘Pasture-Raised’ Definition,” Meat+Poultry, March 20, 2025, <https://www.meatpoultry.com/articles/31632>.

¹⁶³ Richard Bruton, “Pasture-Raised Chicken; the Real Cost,” Natural Pasture Farms, February 21, 2023, <https://naturalpasturefarms.com/pasture-raised-chicken-real-costs/>.

2023.¹⁶⁴ Even in China, where producer responses to animal welfare concerns have been more limited than in many other countries, a recent study found that egg producers would be highly willing to go cage-free if doing so generated more revenue or market growth.¹⁶⁵

In food retailing, however, there is a delicate balancing act between the upside risks of offering higher-margin, higher-welfare animal products and the downside risk posed by limits to consumers' willingness to pay premium prices.¹⁶⁶ Although food retailers must protect their brand reputations, they also tend to operate on investment horizons measured in months, not years, which limits purchasing agents' willingness to take risks on potentially costly experiments.¹⁶⁷ Retailers are also aware, for instance, that some higher-welfare products (such as free range chicken) have remained relatively niche products, with high-welfare meat generally accounting for only around 5 percent of sales even in northern European countries such as Denmark and the UK where consumers are relatively conscious of animal welfare issues.¹⁶⁸ Some upmarket food retailers, such as Whole Foods in the US and Waitrose in the UK, intentionally target more affluent customers and thus integrate animal welfare concerns into their business models at a very high level of commitment. For a company like IKEA, however, where sales of Swedish meatballs are strategically important for attracting footfall to stores but generate miniscule revenues in comparison to flatpack furniture, even a highly committed CSR manager might struggle to convince other members of the corporation that investments in higher animal welfare can support the firm's bottom line.¹⁶⁹

Thus, although animal campaigners have successfully realized the significance of economic concentration in the agrifood industry, as their pragmatic corporate strategies have matured, they have also had to apprehend the competitive dynamics of the sector. Not all companies have the capability or market power to enact meaningful animal welfare reforms in their supply chains. Particularly for firms whose brand reputation is tied to low costs, investing in higher welfare standards would in fact pose significant business risks, as other low-cost competitors would likely rush to fill the void in what is often described as a "race to the bottom."¹⁷⁰ One means of raising the "bottom" in a competitive market is to

¹⁶⁴ Chloe Sorvino, "Meet the Billionaire Pig Farming Family Going Hog Wild for Ethical Products," *Forbes*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chloesorvino/2024/03/18/meet-the-billionaire-pig-farming-family-clemens-food-group-brad-clemens-prop-12>.

¹⁶⁵ Qing Yang, Cathy M. Dwyer, Belinda Vigors, Ruqian Zhao, and Fritha M. Langford, "Animal Welfare with Chinese Characteristics: Chinese Poultry Producers' Perceptions Of, and Attitudes Towards, Animal Welfare," *PLOS ONE* 19, no. 7 (2024): e0307061, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0307061>.

¹⁶⁶ Errol Schweizer, "Grocery Supply Chains: Understanding Why Eggs Cost What They Cost," *Salon*, January 8, 2023, <https://www.salon.com/2023/01/08/grocery-supply-chains-understanding-why-eggs-cost-what-they-cost-partner/>.

¹⁶⁷ Lars Esbjerg, Klaus Brønd Laursen, and Maureen Schulze, "Who Are the Drivers of Change? On the Growing Role of Retailers in Ongoing Attempts to Reorient Markets for Animal Welfare," *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* 32, no. 4 (2022): 468–487, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593969.2022.2090992>.

¹⁶⁸ Esbjerg, Laursen, and Schulze, "Who Are the Drivers," 475; Anonymous interview [farm animal welfare consultant] by Shane Hamilton, February 7, 2025.

¹⁶⁹ Priya Motupalli, "Applying the Science of Animal Welfare to Build More Responsible Food Supply Chains: Reflections from a Corporate Sustainability Professional," in *Changing Human Behaviour to Enhance Animal Welfare*, ed. Rebecca Sommerville (Wallingford, UK: CABI, 2021), 97–112.

¹⁷⁰ Steven McMullen, "Competition, Regulation, and the Race to the Bottom in Animal Agriculture," in *Animals and Business Ethics*, ed. Natalie Thomas (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 113–130.

use government regulation or taxation to internalize the cost of “externalities” (such as harms to animals). This was precisely the aim of Prop 2 and Prop 12 in California, for instance, both of which set minimum legal standards for a range of animal welfare issues. Taxation could in theory produce similar results (e.g., a government could levy a tax on battery hens such that firms would have a built-in incentive to invest in higher-welfare operations). No such levies of Pigouvian taxes currently exist in the animal welfare space, although at least one German policymaker has proposed the possibility of a “meat tax.”¹⁷¹ In a political environment intensely hostile to both regulation and taxation, however, animal advocates have increasingly turned their attention to *corporate governance* as an alternative or hybrid mode of rebalancing competitive dynamics in favor of animal welfare.

Corporate governance includes the rules and procedures by which a company is controlled, and how it sets and implements its strategies. For publicly listed companies, formal ownership lies with shareholders, and control of the company is exercised by its board of directors—who are themselves (especially in Anglo-American law) legally beholden to uphold shareholders’ interests. In the past decade in particular, some animal welfare advocates have realized that drawing investor attention to animal welfare issues may be a particularly powerful lever for effecting change.

One key element of corporate governance is transparency, for if investors (the principals of a firm) do not know what managers (their appointed agents) are doing, the shareholders’ interests may be undermined in what economists call the “agency problem.” Over the past two decades, disclosure reporting has become an increasingly common means of addressing this problem, particularly after a 2004 United Nations report introduced the term Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) to the language of corporate governance.¹⁷² Disclosure reports and social auditing indexes have increasingly ranked how companies perform on issues beyond profitability, including gender parity, ecological sustainability, and labor rights. The Carbon Disclosure Project, for instance, was founded in 2000 to coordinate “a global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states and regions to manage their environmental impacts,” specifically regarding greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁷³ Many similar ESG bodies emerged in the early 2000s, but none focused primarily on farm animal welfare.

Animal welfare advocates have begun to address this with institutional innovations such as the Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare (BBFAW), founded in 2012. The founders of BBFAW included animal advocates (Compassion in World Farming and World Society for the Protection of Animals), alongside representatives of responsible investment firms (including Henderson Global Investors).¹⁷⁴ The aim was to enable transparent disclosure of animal welfare practices and policies, producing a “dialogue between investors and companies” that would “stimulate companies’ efforts to adopt higher farm animal welfare standards and practices.”¹⁷⁵ In its first two reports, BBFAW found

¹⁷¹ Romain Espinosa and Nicolas Treich, “The Animal-Welfare Levy,” SSRN, March 27, 2024, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4901342>.

¹⁷² Dan Byrne, “What Is the History of ESG?” 2025, Corporate Governance Institute, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.thecorporategovernanceinstitute.com/insights/lexicon/what-is-the-history-of-esg/>.

¹⁷³ CDP, “Who We Are,” accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.cdp.net/en/info/about-us>.

¹⁷⁴ Nicky Amos and Rory Sullivan, “The Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare 2012 Report,” BBFAW, accessed November 29, 2024, https://www.bbfa.com/media/1061/bbfa_report_2012.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ Sullivan, Amos, and Van de Weerd, “Corporate Reporting on Farm Animal Welfare,” 3.

that just 34 percent (2012) and 44 percent (2013) of food companies had any formal reporting at all on farm animal welfare issues. Seeking to address an asymmetry of information, enabling investors who care about animal welfare but have little knowledge of company practices, the BBFAW provides “valuable” advice both to investors and to food company managers who learn “what to say and how to report” on animal welfare.¹⁷⁶

The BBFAW thus positions itself as a valuable service to both investors and companies, and in fact its revenues are generated by fees paid by businesses, not charities. This is in contrast to animal welfare charities that have also sought to produce more transparency for investors, such as the non-profit Cruelty Free Investing service, which since 2017 has highlighted American firms that “do not exploit animals” as well as those that “do exploit animals.” Notably, unlike the BBFAW, the Cruelty Free Investing list does not focus solely or even primarily on farm animal welfare, nor does it provide advice to companies on how to improve practices.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, beyond providing a simplistic “good” and “bad” list, the BBFAW produces detailed “tiers” of rankings, distinguishing firms based on how strongly and how detailed the firm’s strategic management of farm animal welfare is integrated into the company’s vision, procedures, and structures.¹⁷⁸ In its 2024 report, BBFAW found that 95 percent of companies were complying with reporting on animal welfare policies (a major improvement since the 34 percent of 2012), although the vast majority (93 percent) of companies were achieving very low (E and F) ratings on actual practices.¹⁷⁹

A more aggressive response to agency problems in corporate governance is the pursuit of shareholder activism. Shareholder activism is a process whereby owners of company stock use mechanisms such as proxy votes to force managers to institute changes to corporate structure, governance, or practice to better align with the interests of shareholders. Shareholder activism has long been perceived primarily as a capitalist weapon rather than a promoter of social or environmental justice. When Gordon Gekko, the cynical shareholder activist in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* famously declared “greed is good,” he outlined how investors could force company managers to bend to the will of the firm’s owners, boosting profitability at the expense of other stakeholders, such as workers facing layoffs.¹⁸⁰ But even in the decade when *Wall Street* highlighted the economic and social inequality that could result from shareholder value theory, animal welfare advocates at HSUS realized the potential for using shareholder resolutions as a means of driving change, such as drawing attention to force-feeding

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous interview [farm animal welfare consultant], interview by Shane Hamilton, February 7, 2025.

¹⁷⁷ “About Us,” Cruelty Free Investing, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://crueltyfreeinvesting.org/about-us/>; Katrina Fox, “Ethical Investors Have Been Missing Something When It Comes to Animals, but Now It’s Here,” *Forbes*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katrinafox/2017/11/30/ethical-investors-have-been-missing-something-when-it-comes-to-animals-but-now-its-here/#25dd425c39d5>.

¹⁷⁸ Joaquín Fernández-Mateo and Alberto José Franco-Barrera, “Animal Welfare for Corporate Sustainability: The Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare,” *Journal of Sustainability Research* 2, no. 3 (2020): e200030, <https://doi.org/10.20900/jsr20200030>.

¹⁷⁹ BBFAW, “New Baseline for Animal Welfare Improvement Launched, as Leading Benchmark Beefs Up Criteria,” April 25, 2024, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://www.bbfaw.com/news-and-events/press-release/new-baseline-for-animal-welfare-improvement-launched-as-leading-benchmark-beefs-up-criteria/>.

¹⁸⁰ Lynn Parramore, “How Shareholder Activism Became Toxic—and How to Fix It,” Institute for New Economic Thinking, January 28, 2025, <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/how-shareholder-activism-became-toxic-and-how-to-fix-it>.

of geese to produce foie gras in the 1980s. HSUS began buying the minimum number of shares required by US corporate governance law to file shareholder proposals, and after holding the shares for a minimum of 12 months, would file proposals that highlighted to other (larger) investors how their portfolios faced reputational risks due to poor animal welfare practices.¹⁸¹ And as discussed earlier, Henry Spira used this tactic in the 1990s, albeit with limited success, to push McDonald's to begin upgrading welfare standards in its egg and meat supply chains.

A more confrontational approach to shareholder activism has been developed at the Accountability Board. Josh Balk and Matt Prescott founded the organization in 2022 after utilizing shareholder activism while working on farm animal welfare at HSUS in the 2000s and 2010s. The Accountability Board explicitly seeks to push shareholder activism beyond the informational approach spearheaded by HSUS and Spira.¹⁸² Their work is partly inspired by the shareholder activism of Carl Icahn, who gained fame as a *Wall Street*-like “corporate raider” in the 1980s but who also, in 2012, spearheaded an activist campaign urging McDonald's to ban the use of gestation crates in its pork supply chains. The campaign worked to the extent that McDonald's pledged to phase out gestation crates, and was understood by animal advocates as a “major catalyst for other pledges in the fast-food sector.”¹⁸³ But 10 years later, the founding of the Accountability Board emerged in part due to recognition that firms including McDonald's might *pledge* to make sweeping animal welfare reforms, but nonetheless fail to follow through on implementation—as was indeed the case at McDonald's, which as of February 2022 had not lived up to its promise to fully ban the use of gestation crates by its pork suppliers. Josh Balk, then vice president at HSUS, worked with Carl Icahn to launch a proxy fight, seeking to nominate two animal-friendly candidates for the board of directors. This was perceived by McDonald's executives as a hostile act, highlighted by Icahn's own framing of the antagonistic process: “We're not going to fool around with them anymore.” Although Icahn's proxy fight was not successful, Balk and Prescott sought to double down on the more assertive approach by founding a new organization devoted solely to shareholder activism, encouraged by the fact that McDonald's executives agreed in the wake of the battle to implement more substantial changes to the use of gestation crates.¹⁸⁴

With funding provided by Open Philanthropy, The Accountability Board targeted the “G” in ESG. Rather than use shareholder proposals to highlight reputational risks, the Accountability Board seeks to transform governance practices *within* the firm. Much like the BBFAW, the overarching goal is to help agrifood companies incorporate better animal welfare practices and policies into their strategies and structures, including mechanisms for reporting on compliance. In stark contrast to the “good cop” insider-based approach of the BBFAW, however, Balk and Prescott pursue their activism in the mold of

¹⁸¹ Unti, *Protecting All Animals*, 54, 12.

¹⁸² Josh Balk interview.

¹⁸³ Kenny Torrella, “The Corporate Raider Taking Aim at McDonald's over the Treatment of Pigs,” March 3, 2022, Vox, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22958698/mcdonalds-icahn-pork-pigs-gestation-crates-animal-welfare>; Bollard, Interview by Luke Muehlhauser.

¹⁸⁴ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Josh Balk on Using Shareholder Activism to Win Change from the World's Largest Food Companies,” *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, October 18, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/13796144>; Edward Helmore, “Carl Icahn Pressuring McDonald's to Improve Welfare of Pigs Raised for Meat,” *Guardian*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/feb/22/carl-icahn-pressuring-mcdonalds-improve-welfare-pigs>.

Icahn, using corporate raider style tactics to challenge corporate leadership at the highest levels of strategic decisionmaking. Currently the Board holds stock in over 100 publicly traded companies, including global supermarket and fast-food chains (including Walmart, Kroger, McDonald's, Wendy's), CPG firms (including Nestle and KraftHeinz), agribusinesses (Tyson, Pilgrim's Pride), and casual-dining restaurants (Denny's, Chipotle), among others.¹⁸⁵

Despite a very short existence, the Accountability Board has attained rapid changes in corporate strategies. Balk noted in a 2023 interview that in less than one year, the organization had “had some of the biggest global successes with corporate politics that I think we’ve ever seen.”¹⁸⁶ In spring 2024, the organization used a shareholder proposal to successfully push McDonald's to move up their timeframe for moving to 100 percent cage-free eggs globally, highlighting the firm's success in doing so within the United States two years earlier than initially pledged.¹⁸⁷ It has convinced Starbucks to go crate-free, and forced BJ's Wholesale (a large discount grocery chain akin to Costco) to follow through on an unfulfilled pledge to switch to nearly all cage-free eggs. These examples illustrate how the Board draws on established norms in Anglo-American corporate governance to influence the board of directors, who are obligated to represent shareholders' interests in monitoring and controlling how managers formulate and implement company commitments.¹⁸⁸

Furthermore, the Accountability Board's approach has significant force of law to back it up. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) regulations, for instance, ensure that any shareholder with a minimum number of stocks held for a minimum length of time has a legal right to file a shareholder proposal that *must* be considered by the board of directors. If effectively crafted to attract the attention of very large investors, such as pension funds or asset managers, a shareholder proposal can be “hugely humiliating” for senior management.¹⁸⁹ Much as Carl Icahn used leveraged buyouts to amplify the power of his own shares in a firm to achieve large-scale corporate restructuring, the Accountability Board is able to use its stake in any given firm as a fulcrum that can produce very large changes very quickly. Balk has recounted how in his earlier work with HSUS, he was often happy to make productive contact with a corporate sustainability manager in a target firm, but with the Accountability Board, access goes straight to “the highest levels of power within the company.”¹⁹⁰ Importantly, while a mid-level sustainability manager might think every day about animal welfare issues yet have little power to

¹⁸⁵ Odene and Ozden, “Josh Balk on Using”; “Accountability Board—Advocacy Campaigns,” Open Philanthropy, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/grants/accountability-board-advocacy-campaigns/>; “Portfolio,” Accountability Board, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://accountabilityboard.org/portfolio/>.

¹⁸⁶ Odene and Ozden, “Josh Balk on Using.”

¹⁸⁷ Principles for Responsible Investment Resolution Database, “Advisory Vote on Worldwide Switch to Cage-Free Eggs at McDonald's Corporation,” April 9, 2024, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://collaborate.unpri.org/group/24866/stream>.

¹⁸⁸ Josh Balk, interview by Shane Hamilton, February 17, 2025; Steven Boivie, Michael C. Withers, Scott D. Graffin, and Kevin G. Corley, “Corporate Directors' Implicit Theories of the Roles and Duties of Boards,” *Strategic Management Journal* 42, no. 9 (2021): 1662–1695, <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3320>.

¹⁸⁹ Josh Balk interview.

¹⁹⁰ Odene and Ozden, “Josh Balk on Using.”

enact company-wide strategic change, a CEO or board director might rarely have the time to consider animal welfare but surely has the power to implement strategic transformation.¹⁹¹

Despite its leverage, the Accountability Board’s approach does have inherent limitations. For one, it is rooted in an Anglo-American framework for corporate governance that prioritizes shareholder interests; in so-called “varieties of capitalism” literature, it is routine to note that governance practices and priorities in central Europe, East Asia, and Latin America are often substantially different.¹⁹² The Accountability Board has good reason to target US-based firms, of course, given the disproportional power of US-based multinationals in the global agrifood economy: eight of the ten largest food manufacturers in the world have American headquarters, as do six of the top ten largest food retailers and all ten of the top global fast-food chains. Nonetheless, as the farm animal welfare movement increasingly seeks to move beyond its strongest bases in the US and northern Europe, strategists pursuing corporate governance-based reforms may need to consider important variations in corporate law and practice around the world.

In addition, the shareholder activism tactic can by definition only work with publicly traded firms. The agrifood sector is something of an outlier from the perspective of institutional economics, as there are a surprising number of very large, privately held firms—including ADM, Aldi, Cargill, REWE (a German supermarket chain), and SPAR (a Dutch food retailer). It is unclear, however, to what extent private ownership conditions a firm’s approach to animal welfare. There are important examples of private firms embracing higher-welfare practices, including Clemens Food Group (discussed earlier) and Aldi. German animal advocate Mahi Klosterhalfen believes that in the case of Aldi (the world’s fourth largest supermarket chain, with operations in 20 countries), the lack of shareholder pressure to produce short-term financial results has enabled the company’s managers to push for long-term, industry-leading welfare improvements including higher broiler welfare and attention to species beyond chickens.¹⁹³ By contrast, however, at least one animal advocate believes it is an “exceedingly rare thing” for a privately held firm to voluntarily enact higher animal welfare policies.¹⁹⁴

Finally, although the Accountability Board holds stock in over 100 companies, its holdings pale in comparison to the extraordinary leverage exercised by asset management firms including the “Big Three”—BlackRock, State Street, and Vanguard—which together hold enough stake in S&P 500 companies to account for nearly 25 percent of the voting power at their annual meetings.¹⁹⁵ Notably, although all of the Big Three tout their advocacy of environmental, social, and governance

¹⁹¹ Josh Balk interview.

¹⁹² Peter Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁹³ Amy Odene and James Ozden, “Mahi Klosterhalfen on Progressive Strategies for Animals in Germany and the Importance of Sharing Mistakes,” *How I Learned to Love Shrimp*, July 16, 2024, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/15422768>.

¹⁹⁴ Josh Balk interview.

¹⁹⁵ Lucian A. Bebchuk and Scott Hirst, “Big Three Power, and Why It Matters,” Harvard Law School Program on Corporate Governance Working Paper 2022-8, 2022, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4300447>.

improvements, none of them prioritize animal welfare. BlackRock, for instance, is on the Cruelty Free Investing blacklist “for investing in companies that exploit animals.”¹⁹⁶

Corporate governance goes beyond the relationship between a firm’s principals and agents, however. Increasing attention to stakeholder theory as opposed to shareholder agency has helped transform business strategy and structure since the 1990s. Stakeholder theory broadly outlines ways in which for-profit businesses can (and/or must) balance the interests of multiple stakeholders in the firm—including not only shareholders but also workers, customers, regulators, suppliers, and from a non-anthropocentric viewpoint, non-human animals—in order to generate returns to everyone with a legitimate stake in how the firm creates and captures value.¹⁹⁷

Such ideas have been particularly important in enabling the emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) dedicated to setting socioecological standards and monitoring the implementation of those standards (e.g., through creation of certification schemes). Such MSIs now operate across nearly every globally significant industry, but they are particularly prevalent in agrifood, as represented by such organizations as GlobalGAP, FairTrade International, Rainforest Alliance, Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, and SAI Platform (to name just a few).¹⁹⁸ As a form of non-state governance, MSIs offer opportunities for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private businesses to collaboratively and voluntarily develop procedures and practices that can improve social welfare and environmental sustainability. They can be seen as a response to the perceived difficulties of attaining and enforcing publicly mandatory regulation in a neoliberal era, but they are also understood by the businesses that support them as key means of maintaining brand legitimacy and trust-based relationships with customers and suppliers.¹⁹⁹

Standards are an essential element of global governance, and in both theory and practice a fundamental question is: who sets the standard? Some animal welfare standards are set and enforced by governments. Proposition 12 in California, for instance, led to publicly enforced mandatory animal welfare standards that egg and pork producers must comply with if they are to sell those products in that state. Other public standards for animal welfare are likewise backed with the force of law, including the USDA’s standards for “organic” and “pasture-raised” food labeling, Germany’s mandatory labeling for hog welfare (introduced in 2023), and the European Union’s standards for the protection of chickens, calves, and pigs which have been repeatedly updated since the first EU farm animal rules were

¹⁹⁶ “Black Rock Inc. Company Profile,” Cruelty-Free Investing, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://crueltyfreeinvesting.org/companies/blackrock-inc/>.

¹⁹⁷ Flore Bridoux and J. W. Stoelhorst, “Stakeholder Governance: Solving the Collective Action Problems in Joint Value Creation,” *Academy of Management Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 214–236,

<https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2019.0441>; Wim Verbeke, “Stakeholder, Citizen and Consumer Interests in Farm Animal Welfare,” *Animal Welfare* 18, no. 4 (2009): 325–333.

¹⁹⁸ Shane Hamilton and Andrew C. Godley, “Structure and Meaning in Strategic Paradoxes: Exploring Historical Context in the Emergence of Agrifood Standards,” *Business History* 67, no. 2 (2025): 608–628, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2024.2317205>.

¹⁹⁹ Carolina Toschi Maciel and Bettina Bock, “Modern Politics in Animal Welfare: The Changing Character of Governance of Animal Welfare and the Role of Private Standards,” *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 20, no. 2 (2013): 219–235.

adopted in 1986.²⁰⁰ As discussed earlier, government animal welfare policies are effectively the gold standard for preventing a “race to the bottom” in agrifood industries, but they take significant time and money to put in place.

Many animal welfare standards, by contrast, are privately set, with the costs borne solely by those who participate in the market for the product. Food retailers were among the first to set private standards for animal welfare, largely as a form of reputational risk management in response to “food scares” of the 1990s such as BSE and rising concerns about antibiotics in animal feed.²⁰¹ In the 1990s, Tesco offered “Freedom Food,” until 2015 Albert Heijn sold “Puur&Eerlijk” products, and to this day Carrefour offers “Filiere Qualité” and Waitrose sells only “Higher Welfare” chicken—all labels proclaiming to customers that the foods have been produced under high standards for animal welfare. The use of such private standards enables retailers to advertise to customers that the premium price for a high-welfare food is justified, and furthermore that the customer can (and should) place their trust in the retailer’s brand.²⁰² And as animal welfare advocate Temple Grandin has argued, even in the less public-facing meatpacking industry, private standards can be a powerful tool by which large-scale buyers can exercise their influence to set, improve, and enforce high standards.²⁰³ Furthermore, some private standards are not tied directly to individual companies but instead to multiple collaborating firms, such as the Global Coalition for Animal Welfare, which was founded in 2018 and includes food service firms such as Sodexo, non-supermarket food retailers such as IKEA, retailers (Kroger), and meat processing firms (Tyson, Maple Leaf Foods). As an MSI, the Global Coalition for Animal Welfare enables firms to pool resources and set minimum standards across an entire industry, potentially producing a “precompetitive space” that obviates a race to the bottom.²⁰⁴

Farm animal welfare is a credence attribute, however, meaning that the quality of the standard cannot be assessed independently by the consumer at the point of sale. Neither the price tag nor the label nor the customer’s previous experience provide enough information for the individual to make a fully informed choice. Private welfare standards are thus subject to significant consumer mistrust and

²⁰⁰ Antonia Rudolf, “New Mandatory Animal Husbandry Labeling Law,” September 26, 2023, United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/Report/NewMandatoryAnimalHusbandryLabelingLawBerlinGermany.pdf>; European Commission, “Animal Welfare on the Farm,” accessed March 28, 2025, https://food.ec.europa.eu/animals/animal-welfare/eu-animal-welfare-legislation/animal-welfare-farm_en.

²⁰¹ Hamilton and Godley, “Structure and Meaning”; Maciel and Bock, “Modern Politics in Animal”; Diogo Souza-Monteiro and Neal H. Hooker, “Comparing UK Food Retailers’ Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies,” *British Food Journal* 119, no. 3 (2017): 658–675, <https://doi.org/10.1108/bfj-04-2016-0152>.

²⁰² Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort, “Animal Welfare and Major Food Retailers,” *Athens Journal of Business & Economics* 8, no. 1 (2022): 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajbe.8-1-1>.

²⁰³ Temple Grandin, “A Successful Case of Implementation of Farm Animal Welfare Audits by Large Meat Buyers,” *Animal Behaviour and Welfare Cases*, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1079/abwcases.2023.0013>.

²⁰⁴ “Leading Food Companies Form the Global Coalition for Animal Welfare,” Sodexo, October 21, 2018, <https://www.sodexo.com/news/newsroom/2018/leading-food-companies-form-the-who-we-are>; “Who We Are,” Global Coalition of Animal Welfare, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.gc-animalwelfare.org/about-us/3065-2/>; Susanne Freidberg, “Assembled but Unrehearsed: Corporate Food Power and the ‘Dance’ of Supply Chain Sustainability,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 47, no. 2 (2020): 383–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1534835>.

confusion—a problem inherent to all food labeling to some degree.²⁰⁵ This explains, for instance, why Albert Heijn dropped its “Puur&Eerlijk” label under pressure from Dutch animal advocates who challenged whether it was honest (*eerlijk*) for the supermarket to claim that its “animal-unfriendly meat” was actually “produced with extra care for people, animals, nature or the environment.”²⁰⁶

The limitations of both public and private standards have therefore led to the increasing prominence of third-party auditing and certification schemes, in which independent organizations (such as animal welfare charities) or MSIs use hybrid modes of governance to set or enforce standards. There are a surprisingly large number of such certification bodies; in Germany, KAT provides animal welfare certification at standards higher than those set by government²⁰⁷, Australia has RSPCA Approved, the UK has Red Tractor and RSPCA Assured,²⁰⁸ and among the important schemes in the US are Certified Animal Welfare, Food Alliance Certified, Humane Animal Farm Care (Certified Humane), and as discussed in more detail below, Global Animal Partnership.²⁰⁹

There are many more such bodies around the world, with each organization setting very different welfare standards, all using a multitude of approaches to auditing farms and food companies. On one hand, the proliferation of such diversity in certification schemes is an indication of the substantial market demand for such services; clearly the schemes produce significant value in the food chain. As with private standards, a third-party certification provides food businesses with a powerful risk management tool, both offering protection against reputational damage and providing a means of assuring customers that animal welfare has been attended to in the production of a particular food. On the other hand, though, the extraordinary diversity of standards and certification schemes can produce consumer confusion and loss of trust. Indeed, many animal welfare advocates have sharply accused certification schemes of “welfare-washing,” for instance, making uncredible or false claims regarding animal welfare. In the UK, both RSPCA Assured and Red Tractor have recently been sharply criticized for welfare-washing; in 2024, undercover investigations of RSPCA Assured farms discovered practices that did not even meet legal requirements, let alone higher welfare standards.²¹⁰ In the US, a \$5 million class action lawsuit filed in March 2025 accuses Humane Animal Farm Care of allowing a dairy farm to label its products as “Certified Humane” despite use of animal husbandry practices that did not meet the certifiers’ minimum standards. The lawsuit alleges consumer deception and fraud, suggesting the

²⁰⁵ Xaq Frohlich, *From Label to Table: Regulating Food in America in the Information Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

²⁰⁶ FoodWatch, “Albert Heijn Pure&Honest,” January 13, 2015, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.foodwatch.org/nl/onze-campagne-themas/onderwerpen/misleidende-marketing/producten/uit-de-schappen/albert-heijn-puureerlijk>.

²⁰⁷ Odene and Ozden, “Mahi Klosterhalfen on Progressive.”

²⁰⁸ Peter John Chen, Siobhan O’Sullivan, and Susan Pyke, “Hybrid Governance and Welfare Standards for Broiler Chickens Raised for Human Consumption,” *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 84, no. 2 (2024): 296 - 319, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12625>.

²⁰⁹ Animal Welfare Institute, “A Consumer’s Guide to Food Labels and Animal Welfare,” 2019, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://www.awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/FA-AWI-Food-Label-Guide-Full.pdf>.

²¹⁰ Malcom Prior, “RSPCA Launches Review of Its Farm Animal Welfare Scheme,” BBC News, September 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czi9nl88k0mo>.

possibility that both opportunistic and unintentional fraudulent practices might be rife in the animal welfare certification market.²¹¹

Global Animal Partnership (GAP) is an important third-party certification body that has both been upheld as a model for animal welfare improvement and has been criticized for welfare-washing. In 2005, the upmarket American food retailer Whole Foods launched the Animal Compassion Foundation; in 2008, the scheme was renamed GAP and was spun off as an independent non-profit organization. GAP offers its services to multiple retailers and food service outlets, but its most important customer remains Whole Foods, which since 2011 has committed to only sell GAP-certified fresh meats. Some animal advocates have understood GAP as a powerful force for positive change; indeed, the organization proudly touts on its website such awards as “Best Farm Animal Welfare Organization 2018.” Its standards follow a tiered approach ranging from low to high, with the intention of drawing farmers into a system of continuous improvement, rather than simply setting a minimum floor. Step 3, for instance, includes “enhanced outdoor access,” while Step 4 is “pasture raised,” 5 is “animal centered” and 5+ is “entire life on farm.” Standards are set in a multi-stakeholder approach, with GAP seeking input from working groups including producers and industry experts as well as scientists and animal advocacy organizations (including ASPCA and HSUS). Furthermore, GAP does not perform its own audits, but instead accredits independent organizations to audit production practices, a governance model intended to prevent opportunism. Open Philanthropy awarded significant grants to GAP between 2016 and 2022 for work on broiler chicken welfare, fish welfare, and corporate outreach, with expectations that its approach to certification could help prevent food retailers from turning to less stringent private standards.²¹²

Yet GAP has faced criticism, including from PETA and Animal Rising, for misleading consumers. In GAP’s early years, the tiered system of standards was communicated to customers via labels that differentiated, for instance, between Step 3 (“outdoor access”) and Step 5 (“animal centered”). Today, customers at Whole Foods will see a label stating simply “Animal Welfare Certified,” with no further indication of the level of welfare provided. A Step 1 chicken certification, for instance, would mean the bird had lived with minimum space requirements, some enrichment (such as straw bales), and six hours of darkness for rest per day—but no outdoor access. In a market of many competing welfare certification schemes, American consumers routinely overestimate how much welfare improvement is actually represented by a certification label. Given that the primary purpose of certification is to enable retailers to foster trust with customers and assure them of the quality of the higher-priced credence good on offer, for GAP an ongoing problem is how to continue driving continuous improvement on farms while effectively communicating to consumers that the certification is meaningful. An important element of this ongoing project, as highlighted by Open Philanthropy’s Director of Farm Animal

²¹¹ *Leilani Taylor v. Humane Animal Farm Care DBA Certified Humane and Alexandre Family Farm*, Class Action Complaint, United States District Court Southern District of California, March 7, 2025.

²¹² ASPCA, “In Depth: Global Animal Partnership,” October 2019, https://www.aspc.org/sites/default/files/gap_farmanimalwelfarecertificationguide2019-123019.pdf; Open Philanthropy, “Global Animal Partnership,” 2016, <https://www.openphilanthropy.org/grants/global-animal-partnership-general-support-2016/>.

Welfare, Lewis Bollard, is continued engagement with animal advocacy groups: “Without the ASPCA and HSUS, GAP would fall more firmly under the control [of corporate interests].”²¹³

Institutional innovations have been a powerful and significant factor in restructuring the governance of animal welfare issues in agrifood industries. Ranging from investor-oriented disclosure projects and shareholder activism campaigns to public, private, and hybrid standard-setting bodies, over the past twenty years these institutional innovations have fundamentally transformed power dynamics in ways that have measurably improved the lives of billions of farm animals. Indeed, recognition of the power of hybrid governance to initiate change has recently led to a spate of innovations, including the creation of the Shrimp Welfare Project in 2021 and the Crustacean Welfare Benchmark in 2022, both successfully targeting highly neglected industries affecting the lives of billions of animals. Criticisms of third-party certification schemes clearly have validity, suggesting the need for continued innovations in both institutions and strategies for animal advocates. Yet certifiers, along with business benchmarks and shareholder proxy fights, provide important and often enormously powerful levers for preventing agrifood businesses from engaging in a “race to the bottom”—a race that could very well return factory farming conditions to the distressing state publicly revealed by Ruth Harrison in the 1960s.

7. Conclusion: Confronting Challenges

The scale and speed of farm animal welfare reforms ramped up dramatically in the first two decades of the 21st century. After many years of uphill, underfunded battles to bring the often-hidden consequences of factory farming to light, animal advocates found ways to convince many of the world’s largest multinational food corporations to rewrite the rules of their supply chains. Cage-free commitments brought billions of egg-laying hens more space, as have campaigns to improve conditions for broiler chickens. Crate-free commitments have produced important improvements for sows and calves, albeit more limited than those for chickens. Increased attention to the welfare of farmed fish and crustaceans in recent years likewise demonstrates the power of corporate campaigning.

Three fundamental factors have enabled these achievements. First was the turn to pragmatism, enabled by a discourse of animal welfare rather than rights. Influential figures including Ruth Harrison and Peter Singer provided inspiration and ideas for how animal advocates could more effectively achieve common goals. Passionate animal activists increasingly found themselves able to move beyond ideological infighting, focusing instead on achieving measurable results. Second, farm animal advocates learned where the levers of power are in a globalized, oligopolistic agrifood industry. Concentrated buying power, particularly in the hands of large food retailers and restaurant chains with valuable brands in need of protection from reputational damage, provides a fulcrum upon which carefully targeted pressure can produce system-wide change at surprising scale and speed. Third, the strategic insights of individuals such as Henry Spira set the movement on a path of continuous innovation from the 1990s onward. Organizations have generated both radical and incremental innovations in tactics,

²¹³ Lewis Bollard, “In Defense of the Certifiers: They’re Imperfect Agents of Change,” January 24, 2025, Open Philanthropy Farm Animal Welfare Newsletter, accessed February 7, 2025, <https://farmanimalwelfare.substack.com/p/in-defense-of-the-certifiers>; “Chicken Standards,” Global Animal Partnership, accessed July 17, 2025, <https://globalanimalpartnership.org/standards/chicken/>.

strategies, and funding models. Developing explicit theories of change, finding ways to funnel charitable giving to cost-effective campaigns, and cannily using new digital technologies are among the most important innovations pioneered since the turn of the century.

Yet there are at least two broad areas in which continuing challenges face those seeking to reduce or eliminate harms to farm animals. The first is ongoing problems of implementation, enforcement, and accountability. The core strategy of corporate campaigns since the 1990s has been to convince business managers to commit to reforms in the food supply chain. Yet companies have routinely agreed to a welfare standard, publicly committed to it, and then proceeded to do little or nothing to implement the reform. One estimate has placed the follow-through rate of corporate cage-free pledges to range between 48 and 84 percent.²¹⁴ Crate-free commitments may have even lower implementation rates. Walmart, for instance, pledged in 2015 to force its pork suppliers to reduce the use of gestation crates for pregnant sows. As the largest supermarket in the US at the time, the planned changes would have had sweeping effects—had they been implemented. Nine years later, Walmart acknowledged that it had set no deadlines for implementation, and admitted that “progress has been slow” on crate-free reforms.²¹⁵ One of the advocates I interviewed expressed frustration with company managers who used vague language such as “we expect our suppliers to transition” when communicating welfare commitments to suppliers.²¹⁶ Or as Josh Balk has noted, “When you actually talk to the people who are meant to implement [welfare commitments] they’re like, ‘Wait, did we agree to even doing that?’”²¹⁷

Indeed, a key motivating factor for Balk to co-found the Accountability Board was to find a way to keep corporate managers and executives focused on delivering on their promises. This push for mechanisms for institutionalizing accountability is likewise a driving force behind the reporting elements in the Better Chicken Commitment, the Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare, the Chicken Watch transparency tool, and Mercy for Animals’ recently unveiled Canada Animal Welfare Scorecard. As is widely acknowledged within the farm animal welfare movement, corporate leaders are accountable to many stakeholders, and if animal advocates do not invest in monitoring, other executive and managerial commitments will take priority over animal welfare reforms.²¹⁸ This problem is compounded by the fact that although it is undoubtedly true that major agrifood companies with concentrated buying power exercise significant leverage over their suppliers, it is also true that agrifood corporations devote the vast bulk of their resources to marketing, meaning that it is much easier for a

²¹⁴ Animal Charity Evaluators, “The Humane League,” 2023, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://animalcharityevaluators.org/charity-review/the-humane-league/>.

²¹⁵ “Editorial: Walmart Hasn’t Stopped Pork Suppliers from Confining Pregnant Sows in Cruel Cages,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 2024, accessed January 9, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-05-29/time-for-walmart-to-make-its-suppliers-get-pregnant-pigs-out-of-crates-on-farms>.

²¹⁶ Anonymous interview [crate-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025.

²¹⁷ Odene and Ozden, “Josh Balk on Using.”

²¹⁸ Capriati, “Cause Area Report,” 36; Grandin, “Successful Case of Implementation,” 8; Sullivan, Amos, and Van de Weerd, “Corporate Reporting on Farm Animal Welfare,” 16; Anonymous interview [corporate campaigners] by Shane Hamilton, February 12, 2025.

purchasing manager to expand a supply chain by adding a new SKU (stock keeping unit) than to constrict the supply chain by implementing a new standard.²¹⁹

The second broad area of ongoing challenges for farm animal advocates involves strategic risks. Very broadly, effective altruism's focus on attaining quantifiably measurable impacts has been criticized by some animal supporters for skewing activity away from what some activists see as important but less easily assessed efforts. In 2016, for instance, Direct Action Everywhere challenged the validity of cage-free campaigns, arguing among other things that freeing birds from battery cages might unintentionally produce more animal suffering than less, while over the long term "reducing pressure on the industry" to transition "toward actually superior systems (e.g., pasture-raised...) or reduced egg production."²²⁰ Animal advocates following effective altruism principles take such critiques seriously, as is to be expected given the approach's expectations of iterative self-evaluation, and remain convinced that corporate campaigns are a cost-effective means of achieving the greatest possible good for the greatest number of animals. Animal welfare scientists, for instance, have determined that cage-free systems are "clearly superior" in reducing pain and suffering, validating the approach.²²¹ Yet even committed effective altruists are aware of normative ethical critiques, such as those raised by philosopher Alice Crary, which question the moral validity of consequentialist ethics and see the pragmatic amelioration of animal suffering as a prop for industrial agriculture's continuance. Others challenge effective altruism on its own consequentialist territory, e.g., asking whether "enamoration" with corporate animal welfare commitments "leads us to underinvest in other approaches in a way that is suboptimal."²²²

Such comments highlight the danger of institutional isomorphism. As DiMaggio and Powell explored in a highly influential 1983 article, isomorphism is "a context in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture, and output." The risk is that institutional innovations may reach a "threshold beyond which adoption provides legitimacy rather than improves performance."²²³ If all animal charities essentially copy each others' assumptions, norms, tactics, and strategies, there will be a reduction of innovation and a loss of checks and balances. Many animal advocates are acutely aware of this risk; as Amanda Hungerford of Open Philanthropy has noted, "You need to be very, very thoughtful about not overusing the tactic [of corporate campaigns]."²²⁴ The problem is further highlighted by the risk of "diminishing

²¹⁹ Anonymous interview [corporate campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025; Schweizer, "Grocery Supply Chains."

²²⁰ Direct Action Everywhere, "Memo and Review of Literature Aviary Systems and Corporate Campaigns," March 14, 2016, accessed December 19, 2024,

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mEoaEm9xRuVvkX3nWggRPz700RU7_Z_OgRuEtQMWiMbM.

²²¹ Welfare Footprint Institute, "The Welfare of Laying Hens: Quantifying the Welfare Impact of the Transition to Indoor Cage-Free Housing Systems," 2019, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://welfarefootprint.org/laying-hens/>.

²²² Alice Crary, "Against 'Effective Altruism'," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 10 (2021): 33–43; Kato, "EAA Is Relatively Overinvesting in Corporate Welfare Reforms," January 6, 2022, Effective Altruism Forum, accessed March 31, 2025, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/kHdKWmTcS3FfcYAZj/ea-is-relatively-overinvesting-in-corporate-welfare-reforms>.

²²³ Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147, 148.

²²⁴ Amy Odene and James Ozden, "Amanda Hungerford on Open Philanthropy's Funding for Farmed Animal Welfare," August 10, 2023, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2122817/episodes/13382523>.

returns” (e.g., the first 80 percent of agrifood companies in a particular sector may be relatively easy to sign up, while the next 20 percent may prove futile or excessively costly to organize).²²⁵ Even the radical innovation represented by the shareholder activism of the Accountability Board may face this problem, as one 2024 report suggests that US investor willingness to support ESG shareholder proposals is at an all-time low.²²⁶

Another ongoing strategic risk is that posed by the rising global demand for meat, dairy, and seafood. Demand for animal products is on the steepest upward trajectories in countries where industry structures and cultural norms are less conducive to the corporate campaign strategies that have been effective in the US and Europe. In China, for instance, 90 percent of egg-laying hens are still raised in battery cages, and “animal welfare” is defined by producers almost solely in terms of efficiency in production.²²⁷ China and India together account for more than one-third of the world’s human population, and are home to many farm animals; India is estimated to have the world’s largest livestock population. Yet at least one organization—the Navigation Fund, an effective altruist philanthropy founded in 2023—has announced that it does not expect to fund animal welfare projects in either China or India due to “highly challenging regulatory frameworks for philanthropy and NGOs.”²²⁸ Farm animal advocates broadly see the Global South, where meat production and consumption is rising fastest, as challenging territory for animal campaigners who are often more drawn to the activist tactics of an earlier era. As one campaigner who works with animal organizations around the world explains, “It’s almost like they’re the underground band that hasn’t gone mainstream yet, and they want to keep that, like underground sort of thing...rather than connecting with a bigger pragmatic movement [in Global North countries].”²²⁹

Finally, animal advocates face a continuous battle to make animal welfare a priority for consumers and businesses. Food company managers tend to think that consumers prioritize cost, taste, food safety, and the environment more highly than animal welfare.²³⁰ Studies of consumer preferences for credence characteristics have not produced consistent results in regard to concern for animal welfare, while even committed cage-free campaigners sometimes acknowledge that the primary motivating factor for consumers to buy cage-free eggs is a belief that they “taste better.”²³¹ Both consumers and corporations may find animal welfare reforms to be in conflict with other progressive goals, including social justice for agrifood workers and climate change mitigation. In regard to climate change, for instance, widespread implementation of the Better Chicken Commitment’s calls for slower-growing breeds of birds would surely improve the animals’ welfare, but it would also drive up greenhouse gas emissions (although

²²⁵ Anonymous interview [animal welfare advocate] by Shane Hamilton, January 28, 2025.

²²⁶ ShareAction, “Voting Matters: Are Asset Managers Using Their Proxy Votes for Action on Environmental and Social Issues?” February 18, 2025, <https://shareaction.org/reports/voting-matters-2024>.

²²⁷ Yang, Dwyer, Vigors, Zhao, and Langford, “Animal Welfare with Chinese Characteristics.”

²²⁸ The Navigation Fund, “Summary: 2024 Farm Animal Welfare Strategy,” May 3, 2024, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.navigation.org/grants/farm-animal-welfare>.

²²⁹ Anonymous interview [cage-free campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, January 30, 2025.

²³⁰ Diogo Souza-Monteiro and Neal H. Hooker, “Comparing UK Food Retailers’ Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies,” *British Food Journal* 119, no. 3 (2017): 658–675, <https://doi.org/10.1108/bfj-04-2016-0152>.

²³¹ Charlotta Harju et al., “Consumers’ Views on Egg Quality and Preferences for Responsible Production—Results from Nine European Countries,” *British Food Journal* 126, no. 2 (2024): 623–644, <https://doi.org/10.1108/bfj-03-2023-0183>; Anonymous interview [corporate campaigner] by Shane Hamilton, February 3, 2025.

chicken production generates significantly less greenhouse gas emissions than beef and lamb).²³² Companies reporting on their animal welfare progress to the BBFAW often struggle with where, structurally, to address the issue in their annual sustainability reports, finding that it “falls between the gaps” as not “neatly tied with climate, and it doesn’t tie neatly with human social issues.”²³³

And yet, as animal studies scholar Alex Blanchette has forcefully argued, farm animals are not the only animals imbricated in capitalist industrial agriculture.²³⁴ Our food systems affect all of us, whether we are vegan activists, meat-eating consumers, human laborers in a factory farm, active or potential donors to animal charities, or animals unable to directly convey suffering or desires. Following the lead of Henry Spira, it seems likely that the future of the farm animal welfare movement lies in continuously innovating, finding ways to build unlikely coalitions and collaborations, to make the suffering of the unheard and overlooked more visible to the widest possible population, and to fuse social and environmental progress with that of animal concerns.

²³² L. Karlsson, L. Keeling, and Elin Röö, “What Is a Better Chicken? Exploring Trade-Offs between Animal Welfare and Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Higher-Welfare Broiler Systems,” *Sustainable Production and Consumption* 55 (2025): 203–216, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2025.02.015>.

²³³ Anonymous interview [farm animal welfare consultant] by Shane Hamilton, February 7, 2025.

²³⁴ Alex Blanchette, *Porkopolis: American Animality, Standardized Life, and the Factory Farm* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

Appendix: Organizations Involved in Farm Animal Welfare Campaigns

Arranged in chronological order by date of founding

ASPCA (1866), a mainstream animal welfare organization that has, for most of its history, focused primarily on pets and wildlife

American Humane Association/Society (1877), created in part to deal with farm animal transport, but often critiqued as pro-industry when it comes to farm animals due to its pragmatism

Animal Welfare Institute (1951), initial focus was on animals in experiments; current attention to farm animal welfare focuses on policy engagement, as do its seven other areas of focus (e.g., lab animals, equines, etc.)

Humane Society of US (1954), founded by former members of American Humane Association, currently the largest organization with a strong focus on farm animal welfare; renamed as **Humane World for Animals** in February 2025, after merging with Humane Society International

Compassion in World Farming (1967), created by an English dairy farmer and responsible for many of the animal welfare improvements in the UK

PETA (1980), famous for aggressive and controversial campaigns promoting animal rights, with some attention to farm animal welfare but more known for work on laboratory testing, animal-derived clothing, and treatment of circus and media animals

World Animal Protection (2014), a product of 1981 merger of two groups formed in 1950s

Four Paws (1988), formed in Vienna by Heli Dungler, increasingly involved in farm animal welfare in recent years

Compassion over Killing (1995), initial focus was on undercover investigations and educational campaigns, renamed **Animal Outlook** in 2020 as its strategies evolved

Mercy for Animals (1999), initially pursued undercover investigations, has increasingly turned toward corporate engagement

EAST (1999), Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan, one of a small number of animal welfare organizations in East Asia

Faunalytics (2000), called Humane Research Council until 2015

Albert Schweitzer Foundation (2000), founded in Germany with Albert Schweitzer's fundamental maxim of "reverence for life" as their guiding philosophy, and a focus on "the single greatest source of pain and death for animals: the use of animals and animal products as a food source"

The Humane League (2005), major recipient of funds from Open Philanthropy and focuses primarily on farmed chickens, with some attention to pigs and fish, primarily via corporate campaigns

Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals (2005) a relatively small group in Canada, but with a specific focus on farm animals

Animal Equality (2006), initially focused on bullfighting in Spain, but has increasingly turned to effective altruism principles and corporate campaigning

Centre for Effective Altruism (2011), emerged out of 80,000 Hours, based in Oxford

Open Philanthropy (2011), originally a partnership between GiveWell (2007) and Good Ventures (2011)

Animal Charity Evaluators (2012), seeks to direct charitable giving towards charities deemed most effective at improving animal welfare

Crate Free USA (2015), founded by a corporate marketer with an initial focus on animal welfare legislation, but then turned focus to national retail chains to urge crate-free pork production

Open Wing Alliance (2016), an informal global coalition overseen by The Humane League, devoted to cage-free campaigns around the world

The Accountability Board (2022), ESG shareholder activists

The Navigation Fund (2023), a private effective altruist foundation funded by billionaire crypto entrepreneur Jed McCaleb

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