

## 35. Citizen views on animal welfare and animal rights in Flanders

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### Abstract

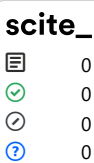
In Flanders (Belgium) there is no reference to animal rights, or even sentience, in the constitution, nor in the Animal Welfare Act. Recently, the Belgian (Federal) government introduced a third category in the Civil Code, specifically aimed to grant animals a special status, somewhere between goods and humans. In this paper, we will show there is a great support among the public for such addition, and probably more (as on average 87% indicates that they would support including animal rights in the Constitution). Furthermore, we will analyse the demographic and other factors influencing the opinion of the Flemish public with regard to animal welfare and animal rights. The study is based on a sample of 871 respondents of different ages, educational level, and rural/urban background. Unsurprisingly, support for animal rights is stronger with women (who also gave notably more extreme scores) and younger people, but more than half of the respondents oppose animal experimentation (with a striking gender difference with women being three times less supportive) and the use of animals for entertainment. Also, half of them support stronger measures against commercial dog breeding, consider agricultural animals as important as pets, find animal lives as important as human lives, and believe that animals can suffer in the same way as humans. We will also show that these beliefs are not always compatible with the stated lifestyles of the respondents. Indeed, 63% identified as omnivores, and an additional 23% as flexitarians. This was certainly apparent when omnivores gave high (average) scores to the importance of animal lives and suffering. This supports the notion of a psychological disconnection between animals and meat among the consumers. Although the sequence cannot be derived from this study, the data supports the hypothesis that people become flexitarians first, before moving on to vegetarianism, and finally to veganism, based on age, time spent within the lifestyles, and average scores on different statements.

**Keywords:** animal ethics, consumers, survey

### Introduction

More than 35 years ago, the first general animal welfare legislation was drafted in Belgium (Animal Welfare Act, 1986), for the first time extending protection of animals beyond the mere protection against cruelty. In European law, animals are also described as 'sentient beings', see for example article 13 in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Simonin and Gavinelli, 2019), building upon an earlier Protocol dating back to 1997 (Verniers, 2019). This provision has not found its way into the Belgian animal welfare act before the subject was devolved to the three regional entities (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels). As a consequence, in 2022, in Belgium animals are regarded as 'living beings with sentience, their own interests and dignity, deserving of special protection' [own translation] only in the capital region of Brussels (Animal Welfare Act, 1986). Interestingly, a recent update to the federal Civil Code on goods, explicitly refers to animals as sentient beings (Art. 3.39; Civil Code, 2020). At this point, there is no reference to animal welfare in the Belgian Constitution (Verniers, 2021), although some other states do have such provisions (Verniers, 2020).

In this paper we investigate how the Flemish public (representing about 60% of the Belgian population) perceives animal welfare, and possibly animal rights. Furthermore, we will analyse the demographic and other factors influencing the opinion of the Flemish public with regard to these subjects.



## Materials and methods

We have collected data through a structured online survey, including questions on demographic variables, and 17 statements probing different positions on ethical and legal issues with regard to animals (keeping total completion time under 5 minutes), using display logic and skip logic to prevent early drop-out of respondents. The ethical and legal positions were operationalised in measurable indicators, avoiding heavy jargon, in order to prevent misinterpretation of the questions. Respondents were asked to score their support for the statements ranging from ‘totally agree’ (score 5) to ‘totally disagree’ (score 1). This survey was programmed into Qualtrics and distributed through social media and e-mail. Responses were analysed using SPSS, and (depending on data type and research question) subjected to Mann Whitney U, Kruskal Wallis, Post-hoc test with Bonferroni correction, Spearman correlation or Fisher’s exact test.

871 responses have been collected, with 77,3% female and 22,6% male respondents, ages vary between 14 and 81. There was a considerable overrepresentation of ages from 20 to 30. 70% of the respondents lived in a rural community, which is about the same as the average Flemish population. Educational level was also quite on par with the general public, as 48% did not have any higher education. Importantly, 63% identified as omnivores, and an additional 23% as flexitarians. Only 5% identified as vegetarians, 4% as pescatarian, 3% as vegans, and 2% as ‘other’. Again, this is similar to the population in general.

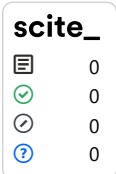
## Results

In line with popular belief, support for animal rights is stronger by women (who also gave notably more extreme scores) and younger people. Support for legislation on animal rights was strong among both sexes (87% of respondents agree when asked a yes/no question). When presented with a 5-point Likert scale, a clear majority of the respondents (84%) ‘agree’ or ‘totally agree’ that animal rights should be regulated by law (i.e. not necessarily via the constitution). A further 12% expresses a neutral stance on the issue. This mirrors the situation where 84% agrees animals shouldn’t be legally equal to an object. Even if 59% of respondents ‘totally disagree’ with such a situation, women were even more pronounced than men (Mann Whitney U,  $P < 0.001$ ). Similarly, women were more pronounced in their support for inclusion of animal rights in the constitution (women: 92%, men: 75%; Mann Whitney U,  $P < 0.001$ ) or other legislation (Fisher’s exact test,  $P < 0.001$ ) which is reflected in that women more often ‘totally agree’ with the statements in the survey.

More than half of the respondents oppose animal experimentation: 54% believe this is useful but oppose animal experiments, and an additional 28% oppose and think this is not useful. There is a striking gender difference with women being three times less likely to be supportive than men (Fisher’s exact test,  $P < 0.001$ ).

Older respondents are more likely to agree that animals can be used as entertainment (Spearman correlation,  $CC = 0,129^{**}$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Overall 65% oppose such use, and again women are clearer in their opposition (Mann Whitney U,  $P = 0.001$ ).

Almost all respondents support stronger measures against commercial dog breeding (70% ‘totally agree’, an additional 20% ‘agree’). The support was more pronounced among women (compared to men; Mann Whitney U,  $P < 0.001$ ), and non-omnivores in comparison with omnivores (Kruskal Wallis,  $P = 0.003$ ).



The clear majority (almost 80%) of respondents considered agricultural animals as important as pets. Here too, a difference could be noted between men and women: men were less in agreement that an agricultural animal is equally important (Mann Whitney U,  $P=0.008$ ). Respondents who lived in an urban environment agreed more with the statement than those living in a rural environment (Mann Whitney U,  $P=0.007$ ).

Respondents find animal lives as important as human lives (61% agree or totally agree). Apparently women and younger people find this more important than men and older people (Spearman correlation,  $CC=-0.77^*$ ,  $P=0.022$ ). In other words: the younger one is, the more one thinks that an animal life is equivalent to a human life. Building on this, a clear majority of all respondents (86%) agreed with the statement that animals can suffer in the same way as humans.

These beliefs are not always compatible with the stated lifestyles of the respondents. Indeed, 63% identified as omnivores, and an additional 23% as flexitarians. This was certainly apparent when omnivores gave high scores to the importance of animal lives: a median score of 4 (out of 5). An overview of scores across lifestyles is given in figure 1. A similar situation appeared as the majority of omnivores agreed with the statement that animals suffer in the same way as humans. However, a similar majority (74%) also indicated that meat can be produced in an animal-friendly way. Again, younger people are more sceptic towards such notion (Spearman correlation,  $CC=0.119^{**}$ ,  $P<0.001$ ).

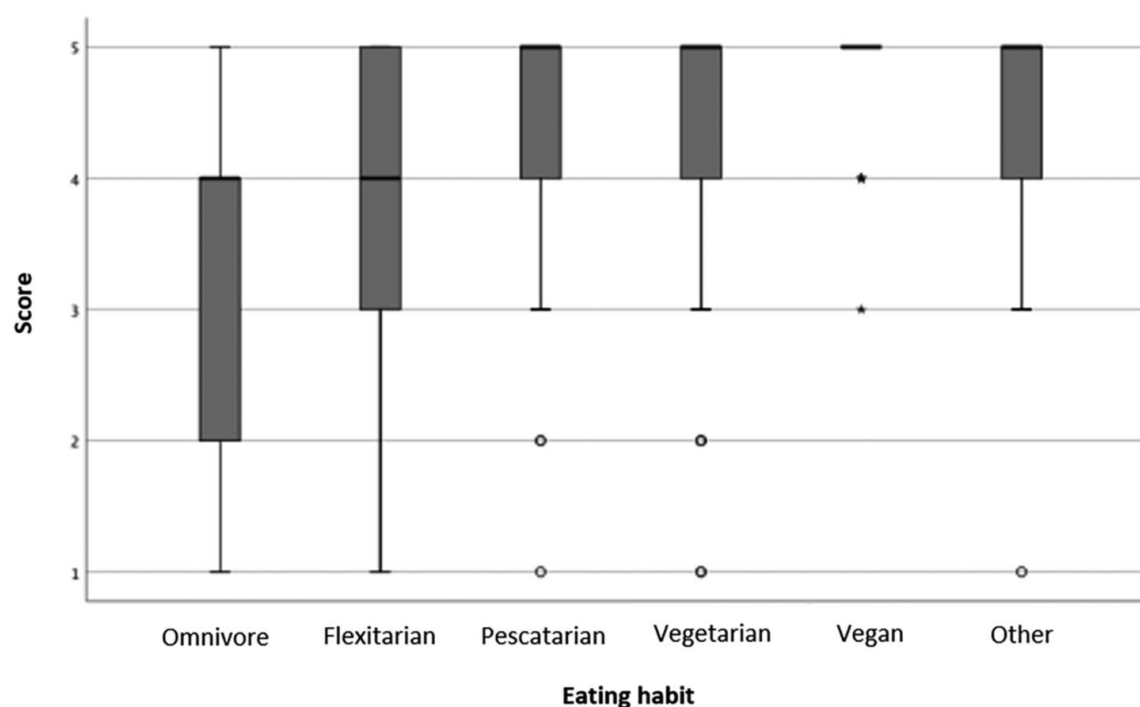


Figure 1. Scores on the statement 'Animal lives are as valuable as human lives' (5 = totally agree, 1 = totally disagree).

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## Section 4

In our sample, vegans are usually younger than vegetarians, and have spent less time in that lifestyle (Figure 2).

## Discussion

A sufficient large subgroup was questioned, which resulted in a good representation of the population (= Flemish people). An even more representative and balanced result would have been reached with a smaller overrepresentation of the young people, and an even distribution of the sexes.

The results of our survey indicate a 4% higher support for animal rights in the constitution compared to earlier research reported by the Belgian leading animal rights action group (87% compared to 83% in Gaia, 2017). This may be the result of media campaigns about meat consumption, pets and animal shelters in the years between both surveys, but methodological differences (representativeness, Belgium vs Flanders) are more probable causes.

Very apparent throughout the study is the fact that support for animal rights is stronger among women, not only in the percentage of respondents, but also in the level of support (measured by the higher scores). Most strikingly, women are three times less likely to be supportive for animal experimentation. Similarly, younger people are almost always more supportive with regard to statements about animal welfare and animal rights.

In general, public support is high, with more than half of the respondents opposing animal experimentation and the use of animals for entertainment. Also, the majority of respondents support stronger measures against commercial dog breeding, consider agricultural animals as important as pets, find animal lives as important as human lives, and believe that animals can suffer the same way as humans.

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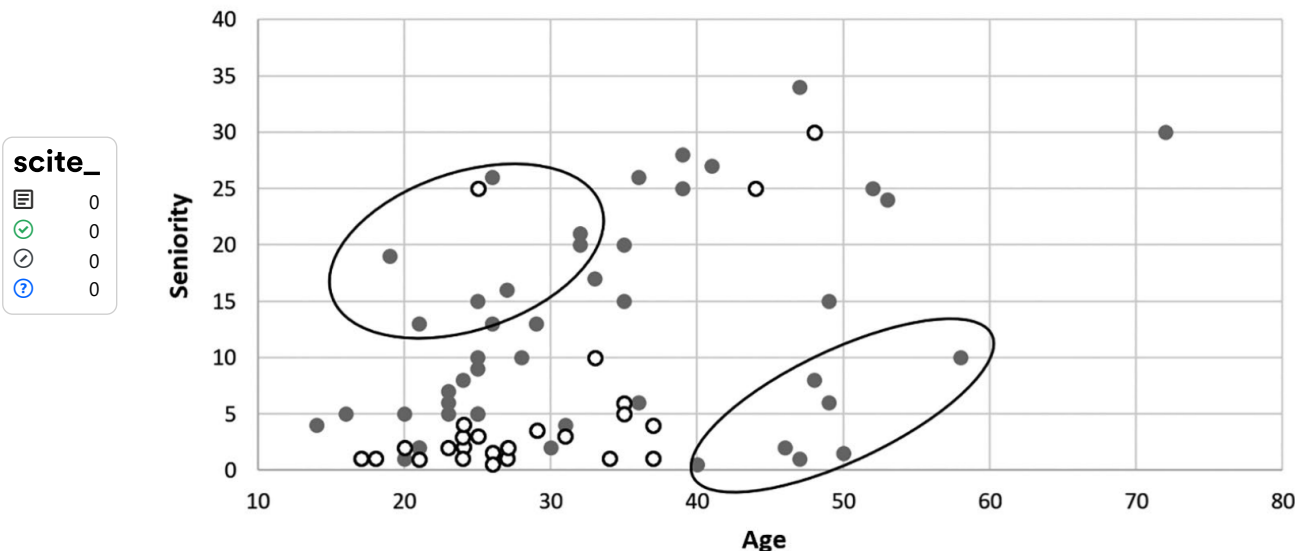


Figure 2. Age and years within a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle (vegans in open dots, vegetarians in full dots).



## Conclusions

It is clear that the stated beliefs are not always compatible with the lifestyles of the respondents. Indeed, 86% of respondents regularly eat meat and other animal products. This supports the notion of a psychological disconnection between animals and meat among the consumers.

Although the sequence cannot be derived from this study, the data supports the hypothesis that people become flexitarians first, before moving on to vegetarianism, and finally to veganism. This may be inferred from the age, the time spent within those lifestyles, and the average scores given to different statements (where a gradual shift is apparent from omnivores towards vegans). Further qualitative research should be able to shed light on this trend.

In general, we can state that public support for animal rights is high in Flanders, both moral and legal rights. About 84% agree that animal rights should be regulated by law, and when presented with a binary choice, even more (87%) respondents agree that animal rights should be included in the Constitution.

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