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# The Farmer-Citizen's Participation in Politics

*By Charles M. Hardin*

At last we are at the very well-spring of democracy, the grass roots. Lord Bryce wrote:

Towering over Presidents and State Governors, over Congress and State legislatures, over conventions and the vast machinery of party, public opinion stands out, in the United States, as the great source of power, the master of servants who tremble before it.<sup>1</sup>

Reverence for the popular will is supreme — even though our Constitution separates, divides, checks, and balances power; even though the bill of rights throws a road-block in the way of power; and even though some groups (like the American Farm Bureau Federation) urge that ours is a representative rather than a democratic government. But representatives are supposed to translate the will of the people, or at least the will of the majority, into law. The collective intelligence must be right. If some hardy souls include the public in the blame for the demobilization of 1945, the inference is usually that the leaders failed to inform the people. The “general will” may be misled; it is never wrong. The very different idea that majority rule is justified because there is no other civilized way ultimately to resolve disputes is unpleasantly shocking. Even if, on reconsideration, the latter idea is seen to provide a valuable corrective for the easy equation of the voice of the people with the voice of God, it too is insufficient. Governments must sometimes make extremely critical decisions where the public appears sharply divided; on such occasions the power of the government can hardly rest upon mere “convenience.”

This paper will examine political participation of farmers (and other citizens). As are all problems of constitutional democracy, this is three-sided: how to organize power, yet control it and criticize the ends it works for. The conviction, however, seems widespread that at the grass roots all problems disappear except how to ascertain and reflect the authentic voice of the

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<sup>1</sup>*The American Commonwealth*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1910 ed., Vol. II, p. 267.

people. The inference is readily made that the task of public policy education is merely to enlighten the people about public issues. The role of the people in our constitutional democracy, however, is not this simple; and neither (it follows) is the task of education for citizenship.

Let us explore these statements.

### WHY THE FARMER-CITIZEN?

What justifies the special study of farmers in politics? Are they a nobler breed? Farmers have been called the salt of the earth. But too much salt may contribute to hardening of the arteries. To cite facts and figures bearing on this question would be presumptuous. Christian theology holds that all men are sinners, yet that all have souls worth saving. The Ten Commandments are just as brittle under the elms as in the shadow of the elevated — anyone whose reflection and experience has not convinced him of it will hardly be converted by statistics.

Well, then, if farmers are not better human beings, are they better citizens? What is a good citizen? Is he the same in a constitutional democracy, a feudal oligarchy, a fascist or communist dictatorship? Clearly, the question implies an inquiry into forms of government: what is the ideal form; what is the best practical form; are they the same or different according to conditions; and what does good citizenship mean in each? These ancient questions of political philosophy are now condemned as “unscientific” by many of my profession; others still defend them as basic. We have to notice these matters, but to probe them would take us until Christmas and probably Easter. So let us here be content with a few inquiries bearing upon the “good citizenship” of the farmer.

DO FARMERS VOTE MORE HEAVILY THAN OTHER GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES? The prevalence of “get-out-the-vote” campaigns suggests that electoral participation is widely — if not necessarily justifiably — believed to be a mark of good citizenship. Information on voting behavior of farmers and others is insufficient to permit us to develop a “scale,” however.

DO FARMERS EXCEL IN KNOWLEDGE OF POLITICAL ISSUES? This inquiry is vitiated when one asks who and what issues are

to be compared. Still, a few remarks may be made. Farmers are often thought to have a natural advantage in the ability to inform themselves about local candidates for political office as well as about issues having to do with roads, schools, tax assessments, and law enforcement; with drainage, irrigation, soil conservation, flood control, pest abatement, etc. Urbanites are usually confronted by long lists of unknown candidates and issues of similar concern to them are often decided in remote places and by little-understood processes.

The comparison becomes idyllic, however, unless we remember that local rural government is generally considered among the least effective and progressive that we have. Further, do farmers really have an extraordinary grasp of issues which are vital to their welfare? Only eight percent of a sample of Michigan farmers were found to have a "good understanding" of the relationship between support prices and parity.<sup>2</sup> And even if farmers be proven unusually knowledgeable of issues of immediate concern to them, it would not follow that they have a superior understanding of general political problems — state-wide, national, or international.

ARE RURAL POLITICS LESS VENAL? The easy answer is "yes." Bosses and machine politics have flourished in the cities, partly because of the opportunities to exploit immigrants. Corruption has been on a lavish scale, whether inspired by favors for legitimate business (contracts, franchises, deposits of public funds, etc.) or provided by the squeeze on the rackets. But the city organizations helped Americanize the immigrant and eased life for the poor. If expensive, these services can also be argued as necessary. Of late, political scientists have hesitated to discuss corruption on the grounds that one man's graft is another man's poison; but when they did point the finger of scorn, they did not wholly overlook the country. This criterion of distinction of the farmers as especially good citizens can be dismissed as of little, if any, significance.

Let us raise a more substantial question: *Are farmers relatively immune to the mob spirit?* The following section will suggest an answer.

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<sup>2</sup>Dale E. Hathaway, E. E. Peterson, and Lawrence Witt. "Michigan Farmers and the Price Support Program. II, Farmers' Attitudes . . .," Michigan Agr. Expt. Sta. Tech. Bul. 235, December 1952, p. 15.

## PARTICIPATOR—FRUSTRATED, INDIFFERENT, APATHETIC, OR DICTATOR-BAIT?

Study well the words in this heading, for they suggest some of the most difficult problems of democracy. Suppose the farmer (or other citizen) wants to increase the price supports for farm products, add to funds for agricultural research, promote the St. Lawrence Seaway, ease the entry of Mexican farm labor, or the like. Beyond voting, what can he do? Paul Appleby writes:

Citizens vote, then, by adding their names and energies to membership rolls. They vote by swelling, or failing to swell, the circulations of particular newspapers or periodicals. They vote by contributing to the popularity of particular radio or newspaper commentators. They vote by writing "letters to the editor." They vote much more potently than they know when they write or talk to members of legislative bodies and to administrative officials. They vote as they express themselves in labor unions, farm organizations, business and professional bodies. They vote in every contribution they make to the climate of opinion in a thoroughly political society. They vote effectively still as they organize to exert influence. They vote more effectively in proportion to the persistence of their efforts, for persistence is an index to intensity of feeling.<sup>3</sup>

This is an inspiring vision, and the vitality of democracy certainly requires that these various paths be kept open and well advertized. Still, it is well known that only a small proportion even of the highly literate populations ordinarily multiply their political influence in the way Appleby has suggested.

The participator, then, is likely to be a professional. If he has the time and the interest to study political issues and make his position known on them, he will want to join organizations and organizations will want him. But how about the unusual fellow who, though not a "joiner," soaks up information on public issues and then feels moved to action? Frustration may well be his lot. In the first place, political questions are rarely settled on the basis of analyses which outsiders have the facts and perspective to make. For verification, see the common defense of favors for some local interest, be it cheese producers, wool growers, a power company, a labor union, or horse racing, on the grounds that "If I didn't my opponent would win the next election, and *that* would be a tragedy!"

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<sup>3</sup>*Policy and Administration*, University of Alabama Press, 1949, p. 169.

In the second place, political decisions result partly from analysis, partly from pressure, and partly from strategy, timing, and the calculation of group advantage. Thus our enthusiastic citizen may be a grain farmer who wants higher price supports, but dairy farmers for whom grain is a production cost must be considered. Or, if he is a dairy farmer who wants to penalize margarine, he must deal with cotton and soybean growers. Or, better, they must be dealt with for him. For if he becomes the negotiator, he is no longer our proper subject. Nor can he really put himself in the shoes of the fellow who negotiates for him. The all-night meetings, the deals that come unstuck, the facts to reveal or to conceal, the time to bluff and call, the wondering if the boys will back him up — all these the farmer-constituent-citizen gets only in their pale shadow, if at all.

What can he do to avoid the inevitable frustration of not getting what he wants, of having to accept half a loaf, of being deprived of his share in the negotiations that clinch the final agreements? In great numbers he can (and does) avoid frustration by never getting much concerned in the first place. The massive indifference to things political is fabulous. Even reform movements which blaze up like fires fed by old Christmas trees die out as quickly. Let it be stressed that considerable public indifference toward politics may not be a bad thing; nor may the quick subsiding of public passions, once a heated political campaign is over.

Indifference, however, is not always the right word. The ordinary competent American, knowledgeable about his own affairs, intensely concerned with them as he must be to enjoy success in this vigorous, driving, competitive world, is suddenly confronted with the threat of a depression, or of domestic subversion, or of foreign war — is he now indifferent to politics? Hardly, but he cannot meet these great political crises as he does his accustomed problems. His usual optimism, built on a confident grasp of the operating facts, fades. In the new situation he cannot formulate precisely what he wants (except in vague terms of “peace,” “prosperity,” “loyalty”); he is not apprised of the controlling facts and would not be equipped to handle them if he were. He may then become deeply pessimistic

— and how many Americans shared his mood in 1940, after Pearl Harbor, during the dark days of 1942, or the closing weeks of 1950?

This citizen of moods, of deep frustrations, of profound anxieties may be most unstable when he needs to stand steadiest in his shoes. If some social psychologists are correct, he may respond to the hucksters of the great oversimplifications — especially the scapegoats, be it international finance capital, Wall Street, the Jews, the Catholics, the Negroes, the labor unions, or the “traitors who sold China down the river.” When this citizen bitterly measures his meager achievements against his inflated expectations, he may find it easy and perversely solacing to project the causes of his failure upon others. But it is not just that one looks for someone to hate, humiliate, or kill. There is also the wish for leadership arising perhaps from the unbearable insecurities of modern life.

ARE FARMERS RELATIVELY IMMUNE TO THIS MOB SPIRIT — THIS MODERN SOCIAL DISEASE? As promised, the question has re-emerged. Sometimes the answer depends upon one's position in society. On the eve of the formation of the Republic, the Founding Fathers were mightily disturbed by the “mob spirit” of Shay's rebellion. Indeed, the fear of what rural political majorities might do prodded creditors and men of property to support the Constitution with its many restraints upon political power. Grangers, Green-Backers, Populists, Non-Partisan Leaguers, the Farm Holiday Association, and the Farmers Union have presented an intermittent challenge to respectability from the 1870's to the present. Many conservatives have felt that at least these farmers were filled with the “mob spirit.” On the other hand, the hatred which some farmers and their spokesmen express toward urban labor and labor unions may evidence a tendency to violent and anti-labor action, if the time should ripen. Thus far, however, all classes and groups in the United States have been highly resistant to both brands of the twentieth century totalitarianism.

What of foreign experience? In Germany farmers are believed to have lent support to Hitler's rise to power. On the other hand, farmers have commonly been a serious obstacle to com-

munism, and Marx's scorn for the peasantry was monumental. Still, communism's main victories have been in agrarian Russia and China, where communist leaders acquired peasant support or, at least acquiescence, by distributing land to them.

Hard as it may be to admit, no good reason supports the conclusion that farmers are especially immune to political fanaticism and violence. Farmers have their peculiar interests, some of which are pursued through government. These interests and the location of farmers in the political process are what gives farm politics particular meaning — not the peculiar virtues of farmers as human beings or as citizens. We have examined this meaning for the separation of powers, parties and pressure groups, and federalism. We could examine it for other problems, such as the control of bureaucracy, the accommodation of the rising claims of metropolitan centers in politics, and the role and scope of government generally.

Here, however, we are dealing with farmer-citizens in politics, and the more we consider them, the more like other citizens they are. It is "the people" that empowers constitutional democracy's leaders. "The people" are the source of crude political impulses which politicians vie with each other to crystallize into public programs. "The people's" response nourishes the politicians' hopes; its indifference blights them. "The people" have many faces. They are the electorate; the bearers of public opinion; the great conglomeration of organized interests; and the usually unorganized but incipiently powerful groups like income or age classes, urbanites, "native whites," "northerners," or non-Semites. And "the people" are all these things at once.

When one ponders the theory of government by the people, keeping this many-faceted multitude in mind, he is awed by the political potential of democracy — the incalculable power which such governments may enlist for good or ill. What refines the popular impulses so that the people support leaders who fully understand and respect the essentials of our constitutional system — and who thus accept during their political life the constant obligation to adjust the democratic principle of majority rule to the constitutional principles of minority and individual rights? What keeps the people from dividing into irreconcilable factions,

as they did in 1861? Or perhaps this restraint, this moderation, is illusory. We may have no real check upon the popular power which an uninhibited leadership might generate.

Our good fortune consists of long periods of unbroken peace, of "inexhaustible" resources, of insulation from the quarrels of Europe, and of the constant promise of better material living. Suppose we are tested by a series of grinding crises comparable to those besetting the French, Germans, or Italians in the twentieth century. Are our governmental practices sufficiently ingrained to withstand long periods of unremitting political tension, or will they prove to be pretty customs that break when they are really tested? Only the future will supply the answer, for which, if we are interested in our human fate, we are, nevertheless, impelled to search. Here we are concerned with that part of the answer which is inherent in popular political behavior, and we turn naturally to psychology and sociology for assistance.

#### SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PROVIDES AN ILLUMINATING BUT IMPRACTICABLE ANSWER

Social psychology, using psycho-analytical techniques, has found in the influence of the culture the source of modern man's neuroses — his anxieties and insecurities, and his tendencies to rid himself of these by aggressive action, either his own or that of a leader with whom he identifies himself. The remedy proposed is as impressive as the diagnosis. Harold Lasswell advances a concept of democracy as a

... network of congenial and creative interpersonal relations. Whatever deviates from this pattern is both antidemocratic and destructive.

Evidently man's greatest enemy is man; or, speaking more precisely, human destructiveness . . .

... It is impossible to abolish acute destructiveness without altering the equilibrium of the entire social process, since such acute disturbances mainly give vent to stress that has accumulated through the social system as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The sweep of the proposal is fascinating, but its very ambition condemns it as impracticable. Despite the excesses of some so-called statesmen, American political institutions are still sufficiently balanced and our parties have enough leaders of good

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<sup>4</sup>*Power and Personality*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1948, pp. 110-11, 146; cf. pp. 115-18, 137, 150, 152, 160, 175, and 211.

sense so that we need not attempt these desperate remedies. Finally, the psychological analysis and cure do not allow sufficiently for the responsibility of the mature individual for choosing between alternatives. As a contemporary political philosopher has said:

In the moment the insufficiency of mere institutions becomes apparent, institutions are replaced by social conditioning in the most comprehensive sense. That conditioning takes the place of the direct, straight-forward simple awakening, and possibly mortifying, moral appeal.<sup>5</sup>

With respect for their insights into the subconscious springs of human cruelty and vindictiveness rather than with acceptance of their corrective programs for society, we leave the social psychologists for the sociologists.

#### THE SAFEGUARDS WHICH POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY DESIGNATES

A leading political sociologist<sup>6</sup> has offered two answers to the threat that intergroup conflicts, tensions, and hatreds pose to democratic constitutionalism. First and foremost is the protection of overlapping groups. As examination of political behavior centers upon the individual, society comes — paradoxically — into focus. The closer we look at political man, the more we perceive his connections with others — his family (including his forebears, if like the D.A.R. or the Chinese, he is given to ancestor worship); his farm organization, union, trade group, or professional association; his school, veterans' organization, social clubs, and political party; his church, and his neighborhood, occupational or income groupings, social class, and the associations he shares because of derivations, national or ethnic. The individual is increased in political significance, first, by the number of others who share his sentiments and attitudes, second, by the intensity of the shared feeling, and third, by the common disposition to act accordingly.

The influences of one's several group memberships may all work in the same direction (that is, they may prompt the same

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<sup>5</sup>Leo Strauss, "Natural Right and History," *Walgreen Lectures*, University of Chicago, 1949 (mimeo.), chapter 6, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1950.

kind of political action), or they may be neutral. Many mid-western farmers inherit a tradition of Republicanism, for example. The same tendency is reinforced by their income level, the newspapers they read, including many farm journals, their Farm Bureau membership, and so on. On the other hand, one's group influences may pull him in different directions. He may be subject to cross-pressures or divided loyalties. Such multiple memberships and the cross-pressures derived from them may have the effect of modifying social conflicts. The farmer's son who gets an industrial job in the city and joins the C.I.O. is a living representative of this influence. When he goes back to the farm, he is prone to reject the argument that radical labor unions are ruining the country. In the city he will be inclined to defend farmers against charges of ultra-conservatism.

David B. Truman considers multiple memberships to be the most important stabilizing influence or "governor" in our social and political system, but he acknowledges that they may be divisive; if they fail to cross the class lines, they may not only fail to mitigate interclass hatreds — they may even strengthen them. Individuals or groups, furthermore, who have lost prestige or feel about to lose it may threaten the social order. These groups and individuals are forced into multiple memberships against their will. Born into one social stratum, circumstances force them into a lower one; trained for a prestige-laden occupation, they are compelled to accept menial labor. The prominence in the Nazi movement of persons who felt themselves losing out has been repeatedly argued, and, indeed, demonstrated with considerable evidence; the prime exhibit, of course, is Hitler himself. Finally, when the restraints imposed by multiple loyalties in a given society are broken through, violence often surpasses itself. Since Cain slew Abel, civil wars have been surpassingly brutal.

The second safeguard advanced by political sociologists for democratic constitutionalism is the "rules of the game." Equality, majority rule, the right to a fair trial, freedom to organize and to write and speak, the separation of church and state, the proposition that "too much power" shall not reside anywhere (in government, the army, businesses, unions, or whatever group), and states' rights — these are possible examples. Clearly, none

of them is the sole property of any organized group; rather, they are the kind of ideals to which large numbers of usually unorganized people may respond. Conflict is implicit in them. President Roosevelt's proposal to increase the size of the Supreme Court in 1937 seemed to many an attack upon the ideal of the independence of the judiciary; on the other hand, the Court (in the judgment of many others) had been irresponsibly imposing political vetoes on New Deal measures.

At this point, a serious question is being asked of political sociology. If interpretations of the rules of the game conflict, which is preferable? In joining formally organized associations, in maintaining membership in them, and in his actions as a member, the individual may not be capable of querying whether he is strengthening or weakening constitutional democracy. If he does, what criteria can he employ? Leading political sociologists tend to consider such questions unscientific, at least, in the present state of scientific knowledge. The reason that they are unscientific is that no criteria to which all will agree are available for choosing between different constructions of the rules of the game or for judging the effect of group memberships. Preferences, prejudices, biases, or subjective values enter in. Virtually all writers articulate their democratic preferences, but they also make it clear that when preferences enter, science departs.

Others, including the present writer, are dissatisfied by this division between science and not-science. Some of us, at least can acknowledge a profound debt to certain psychological and social-psychological schools while still asserting a sharp departure from them on this vital matter. This departure stresses the role in human affairs of judgments in which responsible adults have some free choice. Rational thought can be applied to the choice itself, and to the objectives sought, as well as to an examination of the conditions in which the choice is made.

#### **THE IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION IN THE PUBLIC POLICY FIELD**

The foregoing analysis suggests a re-examination of the conceptions held by public policy educators of the role of the people in constitutional democracies such as ours. Considerable moral courage may be required to carry this reappraisal through; for

it may well mean replacing the simple and satisfying formula of general-will democracy with a complex formula in which even the number of variables is unknown, let alone the relationships among them, or their weights.

Let us be absolutely clear on one point. The emergent conception of the popular role in our form of government assumes the need for a politically sophisticated public and for widespread, vigorous citizen participation in politics — assumes the need as much as the conception of primitive democracy ever did. But the content of the assumption has radically changed. No longer is democracy fulfilled by the simple translation into public programs of the will of an enlightened people. As professionals in this field, we ourselves are unable to master the analysis bearing upon more than one or two issues of public policy — out of the myriad of issues that must be resolved. How can we expect more of the citizen? It follows that public policy education is not maximized by reaching the greatest number of citizens with the best information on the most issues.

What is appropriate to teach? Careful, detailed analyses of policy questions of immediate interest to the clientele are appropriate, as the agricultural extension program in public policy has commendably recognized, especially in the areas of agricultural price and adjustment policies. But what is the implication of such education? Is it to encourage farmers to support Congressmen who are sound on farm credit, farm price supports, conservation, rural electrification, and so on, regardless of the Congressman's stand on immigration, foreign policy, fiscal policy, labor-management relationships, or the maintenance of the guarantees of the First Amendment? The questions answer themselves. Few farmers would vote for a Congressman, however sound on farm policy, who proposed to share our advances in the atomic sciences freely with Russia.

If the ventilation of all the issues is not the answer, what is it? Public policy educators can stress the division of labor inherent in the complex political processes of our form of government. The people as arbitrators between competing political parties can be stressed over the people as generators of specific policies. Indeed, the conditions which make democracy a viable

form of government may be examined. Peremptory demands upon democracy may be tempered by studies of the slow evolution of farm policy during the twenties and thirties, or of the income tax, or of public land policies. Perspective upon the political process and the citizen's role therein may be improved by examining the careers of political leaders, in and out of government. Many of these men got on the first rung of the political ladder — as county prosecutor or judge or superintendent of schools or Farm Bureau president — perhaps because their neighbors who know them put them there. In the nature of things the influence of John Citizen and his neighbors on the great national decisions of the day must be microscopic, but their influence upon the ability and character of persons who assume responsibility in our government can be very real.

Public policy education can go deeper than this. Although untrained in psycho-analysis, individuals can employ "free association" to discern something of the causes of their own anxieties and the tendencies to aggression that may grow out of them. Is there any reason why farm groups studying public policy should not examine the role of the public in popular government? It might be well to discuss whether the size of the vote is necessarily an index of the health of democracy. The value of the subsidence of public indignation could be examined, with attention to Pendleton Herring's aphorism, "If all men are partisan, who is to umpire?"

The next step might well be to dig into stereotypes and blind spots; and from there . . . ? As readers well know, or will soon discover if they follow up the leads in this paper, there is virtually no limit to the inquiry that can take place into the social system, human personality, and the relationships between them. There is, however, a question of how far it is practicable or even prudent to go. To unsettle some popular myths about public opinion as a panacea is one thing. To turn these tentative probings into a full-dress sociological and psychological inquiry is quite another. On some themes a certain reluctance is becoming. No doubt this reluctance and the skepticism of the clientele will prevent our losing ourselves in the interstices of the structure of social action or sinking ourselves without a trace in the depths of the subconscious.