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FARM FUNDAMENTALISM SUPPORT FOR FARMERS IS WIDESPREAD, BUT IT MAY FADE

— by Luther Tweeten
and Brenda Jordan —

■ Farm fundamentalism is pervasive in the United States. It is held strongest among rural people. But a very high percentage of urban people also embrace farm fundamentalism. This helps explain the political base for expensive commodity programs. Support of farmers is lower among younger, more educated and higher income people, suggesting that this support may diminish over time.

With less than two percent of the nation's population on farms and with well under one percent on commercial farms, farmers are in no position to dictate policy by brute force, especially a policy disapproved by the public. Yet farmers have fared well in Washington.

Political scientists and others have searched for reasons behind that success. Some attribute it to farm fundamentalism—a belief that agriculture and the family farm are an essential part of our heritage necessary for the future socioeconomic and political vitality of the

nation. Others suggest that the success is linked to fear of food shortages in the event that large corporations replace family farms. Still others note that farmers are "switch voters"—normally conservative but who vote their pocketbook in response to political appeals—and that farmers are naturally scattered across the nation giving them the strength to decide narrow elections. Farmers are also well organized in the grass roots general and commodity organizations that provide two-way communication between farmers and government.

Farm Fundamentalism Alive

A recent survey sheds light on the issue of farm fundamentalism suggesting it is more pervasive in society and a more important force behind the political influence of farmers than previously thought by social scientists and by farmers themselves.

Documentation is from a 1986 nationwide random, 7,040 sample of all U.S. (rural and urban) adults, a study initiated by the S-198 Regional Committee of Agricultural Economists and Rural Sociologists on Farm Structure. Two items on the mailed questionnaire measured farm fundamentalism. Respondents were asked if they agreed, disagreed, or were undecided with these two statements:

Statement A: Agriculture is the most basic occupation in our society, and almost all other occupations depend on it.

Statement B: The family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage.

Fully 80 percent of the 3,239 persons who responded agreed with A and 82 percent agreed with B.

All but one of 32 characteristics of the respondents (age,

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Nationwide Responses Show Widespread Support of Farmers

Characteristic	Statement*	Percent		
		Agree	Disagree	Undecided
Total	A	80	8	12
	B	82	9	9
Where live now				
Large city	A	64	11	26
	B	77	14	10
Country	A	86	8	6
	B	86	7	6
Age				
Under 21	A	74	2	25
	B	84	13	3
Over 65	A	90	6	4
	B	88	4	8
Education				
Less than high school	A	80	5	15
	B	93	6	3
College graduate	A	70	14	16
	B	68	12	20
Income from all sources				
Under \$5,000	A	83	1	16
	B	93	4	4
\$60,000 or more	A	66	16	17
	B	68	22	10
Ever take a course in economics				
No	A	80	7	13
	B	84	8	8
Yes	A	79	12	9
	B	78	11	1

**Statement A:* Agriculture is the most basic occupation in our society, and almost all other occupations depend on it.

**Statement B:* The family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage.

race, sex, etc.) were statistically significant. That is, younger persons responded differently than older persons, whites responded differently than blacks, and males than females. It is notable that only "political party" was statistically not significant. Five characteristics are included in the table because they suggest future changes in farm fundamentalism.

It is not surprising that 99 percent of respondents who lived on farms agreed with statement A. The big surprise was that they were joined by nearly two-thirds of the city dwellers and that over three-fourths of the city dwellers agreed with statement B. Farm fundamentalism was strongest among the country, the older, less educated, low income respondents. Having had a course in economics reduced farm fundamentalism, especially on statement B. The survey implies that as today's young people age (unless they change their attitudes) and as people become more educated, wealthy and urban, farm fundamentalism will diminish and there will be less support for legislation and government programs that transfer money to farmers.

So What?

The survey results indicate that the good will toward farmers is widespread. At issue, however, and more difficult to ascertain is the meaning of this good will. Despite our best intentions in designing the questionnaire, the survey raises as many questions as it answers.

The survey did not reveal whether farm fundamentalism was based on fact or fantasy. The strong association of "closeness to agriculture" (as measured by 15 characteristics such as whether the respondent or his/her parents farm) suggests a positive correlation between knowledge of farming and fundamentalism. On the other hand, more schooling seemed to reduce fundamentalism. Farm experience as a child yields knowledge of crops and livestock but not of larger policy issues.

The survey did not ascertain whether respondents had an understanding of the farm economy. Fragmentary evidence from the survey suggests that farm fundamentalism among respondents was ascriptive (based on feelings and empathy) rather than cognitive (reasoned thought). Many of us undoubtedly cling to a romantic-nostalgic image of the family farm, symbolic of an early, simple time free from the pressures of modern city life. Perhaps many of the respondents wish to preserve that image.

Many questions arise. How many respondents would become farmers if they had the opportunity? How much would respondents pay for food or farm programs to preserve the family farm? And do small, part-time family farms (where the vast majority of family income is derived from off-farm sources) qualify for preservation as family farms? Do very large farms having several hired hands but where management is mostly provided by one family qualify as a family farm? Answers to these kinds of questions might clarify the nature and the depth of farm fundamentalism. If large farms and part-time farms qualify in the minds of the public as "family farms," then the future of government farm programs is indeed secure because the number of farms in both categories have increased in numbers and is likely to do so in the future.

Although the survey indicates broad-based political support for preserving the family farm, objective arguments for heroic efforts to maintain the number of family farms are not convincing. Sociological and other types of studies indicate that the values, attitudes, and behavior of farm people are converging with those of nonfarmers. Farm people rank high in some attributes desired by society (low divorce and crime rates) but low on other attributes (less tolerance of others), so it is not possible to conclude that farm people are unequivocally "better" than other people. Furthermore, even if they were, the numbers are no longer sufficient to have much socio-political impact on society. Also, the data do not indicate that family farms are more efficient than larger farms.

What is the role of the economist in all this? The economist's role is to inform; the political process makes policy. If people are informed (presumably with the help of social scientists), and choose to spend \$25 billion per year for programs intended to preserve the family farm, economists have no sound basis to oppose this decision. Economists could inform society that the Liberty Bell has a salvage value of \$50.00. Then if the informed society through a truly representative political process decides to spend \$2 million per year to preserve the bell and its heritage, economists cannot quarrel with that decision. At issue is whether the public is sufficiently informed on farm policy issues to make sound decisions through the political process.