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Agriculture and the Political Process

By Ernest A. Engelbert

The political process is the most embracing social activity of democratic society. It may be defined as the process whereby public values are determined and public policies formulated and executed. No other activity covers such a multitude of social phenomena and groups or involves such a variety of institutional arrangements. A broad understanding of the environment and operation of the political process is essential for any individual or group which endeavors to influence and guide the nature of public decisions and the agencies of policy formulation.

Those who are interested in agricultural politics and policies in particular need to understand the nature of the political process for at least three major reasons. First, the political environment in which agriculture operates is rapidly changing with disadvantage to the voice and position of agriculture in national policy. Agriculture has been steadily declining both in relative industrial importance and in terms of the number of people directly engaged in its activities. The nation is moving farther and farther away from the farmer-rural dominated society of the nineteenth century. These changes have significant implications for the way in which agriculture should operate politically.

Second, the formulation of agricultural policy has increasingly involved issues that cut clear across our national political and economic fabric. Such issues as farm subsidies, controls, tariffs, credit, and manpower, to mention but a few, need to be appraised not only by farmers but other political groups in terms of their impact on the general economic situation. It is dangerous for agriculturists to assume that policies should be made by farmers for farmers.

Third, agriculturists need to acquire a better understanding of the political process to guard against the employment of political pressures and devices which in the long run undermine the cause of agriculture. No group which is in the political minority in a democracy can afford to use outmoded political, legislative, and governmental organization to perpetuate itself in political power.

FUNCTIONS OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Any analysis of the role of the citizen, the interest group, the political party, or other agents in the political process depends upon an understanding of the functions of the political process. There are many who operate on the principle that the main function of the political process is simply to capture sufficient political power to control the policies and operations of government. But this is far too simple a rationale for a democratic political society where power is but one facet of the policy-making process. There are others who interpret the political process in terms of political organization, but again the political process is not measured by formal structures alone, for it is an informal as well as formal process and cannot be neatly identified in terms of a specific group, function, or activity. Furthermore, the political process is not necessarily a visible process. Indeed, the policies that may emerge from the political process may not be the product of any overt political or administrative action but instead may be the result of countless citizen activities molding public opinion.¹

The first function of the political process should be to *provide comprehensive representation*. Representation is an intricate activity and, contrary to much popular notion, involves something more than the designation of a Congressional representative or the counting of heads to ascertain majorities. Comprehensive representation means drawing upon all of the insights possible in the decision-making process and weighing the validity of the decision not simply in terms of the number of people for and against the problem. In terms of agriculture, for example, it means balancing the demands of individuals who wish freedom to exploit the land resources with the social need for conservation. It means ascertaining the wishes and needs of tenant farmers or other minority groups which may not be adequately represented through the established political channels. It means balancing the judgments of the experts in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics on some technical question with the collective opinion

¹Paul Appleby in his book, *Policy and Administration* (University of Alabama Press, 1949) has a particularly good chapter (7) on the way the citizen informally participates in the political process. In another chapter (2) of the same book Appleby identifies eight distinct political processes: (1) the presidential nominating process, (2) the general nominating process, (3) the electoral process, (4) the legislative process, (5) the judicial process, (6) the party maintenance and operation process, (7) the agitational process, and (8) the administrative process.

of the layman farmer. Comprehensive representation involves the measurement of economic conflicts not only among the competing interests of agriculture but reconciling balanced development within a region with national requirements for specialization of a region's agriculture. As one example of the difficulty of applying national policy to regional needs, the United States Departments of Agriculture and the Interior have, in terms of the national welfare and food supply, consistently supported the development of any feasible irrigation project in the West. Yet from the standpoint of limited water resources in the Pacific Southwest the wisest regional policy may be to limit the expansion of irrigated acreage and increase industrial development. This brings national and regional objectives into conflict.

A second major function of the political process should be *to assure the free and continuous flow of information and communication*. The sources of knowledge need to be kept in constant contact with the decision-making agents. This means that the political process of agriculture should not be dominated by any interest group, region, or bureaucracy to the point where the dominating group is able to short circuit and control the types of information upon which public judgments must be made. Moreover, the political process needs to be kept operative between elections, Congressional sessions, or at other times when decisions are reached. Agricultural representatives bear an even bigger obligation for formulating and interpreting policies during off-political sessions than when the more formal political organization is at work.

Closely linked with comprehensive representation and the free flow of information is the function of *providing maximum participation in the decision-making process*. Extensive participation in this process gives greater assurance that judgments have been democratically, if not always correctly, reached. Bringing people and groups close to the source of decisions heightens citizen awareness of the problems involved and makes the public more willing to bear the consequences of the policy that is established. In agricultural programs of the PMA and the SCS we have some of the most notable examples in our entire political scene of efforts to proliferate the decision-making process. But, as Phillip Selznick's study of agricultural participation in

the TVA shows, precaution needs to be taken that citizen participation is not merely administrative involvement or a facade for the purpose of obscuring concentration of power in other places.²

A fourth task of the political process should be *to organize representative views into manageable decisions*. This requires bringing the various kinds of issues into perspective and seeing that a course of action is not adopted simply because of specific political pressures. It involves the formulation of legislation and administrative programs that will protect the interest of flax farmers vis-a-vis cotton farmers not in terms of their numbers or the market value of their products, but in terms of the importance of flax vis-a-vis cotton to the national welfare and economy. The attainment of manageable decisions also requires the formulation of programs that are popularly understood and acceptable and administratively workable. Inasmuch as the political process operates both within and without the formal political structure, the job of distilling judgments is the responsibility of all groups and organizations, both formal and informal, that are operating in the agricultural environment, and, as will be subsequently noted, each brings a special contribution to the task.

Finally, the political process should *provide a means of follow-up to see that the implementation of programs adequately reflects the values and objectives of the political decisions that were made*. Huge, embrasive farm programs which involve multi-purpose political values and goals can be consciously or unconsciously distorted in their execution. Likewise, in the administration of programs, political values and goals emerge which may warrant political reformulations of the problems involved. Here again agricultural policy makers need to see that this revaluation of programs is continually taking place. Moreover, this is a task which must be done both inside and outside of government to assure balanced treatment.

The aforementioned functions of the political process cannot be neatly regulated or measured. The political process is not susceptible of being wholly reduced to quantitative or mechanical terms. Such factors as the number of farmers affected by a

²*TVA and the Grass Roots*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1949.

problem, the dollar loss incurred, and the costs of rehabilitation may all be useful quantitative measurements for the purpose of gauging whether a particular policy should be adopted, but in the final analysis numbers may be less important than considerations which appear to be relatively remote from the immediate problem involved. This does not imply, however, that agriculture should not try through attitude polls, sampling surveys, and other methods to objectify its political process as much as possible, though these quantitative measurements always need to be balanced with the less tangible forces of policy.

Similarly, the political process will not always be consistent nor will the wisest policies necessarily result from those political pressures which have produced the most numerous political compromises. As W. R. Parks has pointed out, the agricultural policy maker "may have to suggest a pluralistic, perhaps at points even inconsistent policy" as he moves along several avenues of agricultural improvement.³ Moreover, though the vitality of the political process depends upon compromise, the policy which emerges from this process, as farmers well know, may be quite inadequate to meet the situation at hand.

Nor will the political process always deal with the most important policy issues. There is frequently a great lag between what the technical expert sees as the most important policy problem and what the public recognizes as important. It should not be forgotten that a problem has to have some sort of collective impact upon the public before the public will recognize it as an issue and before duly constituted political organs will use the issue for political capital.

Furthermore, the political process is not always rational. People's opinions and actions do not necessarily logically follow the consequences of events. Though an educated and informed electorate may be less susceptible to irrational factors, nevertheless, there will always be a political conflict over what appears to be rational action in terms of present needs vis-a-vis the needs of the future.

³"Political and Administrative Guide-Lines in Developing Public Agricultural Policies," *Journal of Farm Economics*, May 1951, p. 161.

Above all, it should be remembered that the political process operates adequately only as people participate actively in political functions. Where people are apathetic or indifferent to their civic responsibilities, the political process is sabotaged. The people themselves, not kind fate, stand benevolent guard over the future of democracy.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AGENCIES

Enough has been said to indicate that in a democratic society the political process is not easily controlled or channelized. Moreover, it should be clear that different policy insights will emerge from various sources depending upon the location of the agency or group in the political environment and its function in the political process. The agricultural policy maker needs to understand what special insights the respective political agents contribute to the political process so that he can arrive at better judgments as to how much weight each should be given in a particular problem.

Dealing briefly with the major political agents, we find that each has both advantages and limitations in terms of the insights that are contributed to the policy-making process. Focusing upon agricultural policy we find on the positive side that the *farmers as individuals* represent a wider range of public opinion than any other agricultural organization, constitute the least inhibited critics of policies, and are the best judges of normative values. On the negative side, farmers are less informed upon complicated and technical agricultural issues than are the agricultural experts, are more prone to emotional swings, and are more concerned with immediate rather than long-time issues.

What can be said about the contributions to policy of *agricultural interest organizations* such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Grange, the National Farmers Union, the American Dairy Association, or the National Wool Growers Association? Again, taken collectively, these groups identify the most important problems of agriculture and separate important agricultural policies from other more general political policies. They stimulate agricultural improvement, serve as a broker between the technical expert and the layman, and police the actions of other political groups and government agencies. On the other

hand, the interest group possesses the limitations of being a vested fraternity, of being not wholly representative either by clientele or region, and of trying to be the sole spokesman for a membership which greatly overlaps with other groups.

The political party is in many respects the counterpart of the interest group in the political process. Its membership is more broadly based, it endeavors to harmonize the conflicts between farm policies and other political policies, and it serves to check the single purpose programs of interest groups. Contrariwise, the political party has a large proportion of floating membership, operates intensively only before elections, and often compromises issues for the sake of political expediency rather than wise policy.

The roles of two other large national political agencies, the Congress and the President, are well covered in Charles Hardin's paper on "Farm Politics and the Separation of Powers." Some brief consideration should be given to the policy-making role of the *governmental agencies and personnel*. Contrary to much popular belief the contributions of administrator-technicians to policy formulation is both healthy and inevitable. As agents of the popularly elected chief executive, the agricultural experts are presumed to represent all clientele and regions. By virtue of contacts with the legislators and with interest group pressures which funnel into administrative agencies and through direct field contact, they are able to follow closely the pulse of the political process. The experts bring more training and knowledge to highly technical problems and are more apt to perceive the long-range implications of policies. Through the government's wide range of powers and activities they have greater access to data and information, something which is indispensable to the decision-making process.

To be sure, the agricultural experts likewise may exhibit shortcomings in policy formulation. Administrative agencies can easily become bureaucratic and preoccupied with vested interests. Poor direction and organization may cause agencies and personnel to be cut off from wholesome political contacts. Administrative agencies may make alliances with private groups which further special interests rather than the public good.

UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF AGRICULTURE

In addition to some of the general characteristics of the political process which have been pointed out, a few comments about some distinctive political conditions which apply to agriculture appear in order. These somewhat unique characteristics have in the past been both a source of agriculture's political strength and weakness. Some of these conditions, however, will need to be modified for agriculture to remain politically successful in the future.

First, there has been a tendency ever since the mid-nineteenth century to treat the farmers and agriculture as a somewhat separate political problem. Until recently at least the prevailing outlook has been that the economic and social problems of agriculture are so different that they cannot be dealt with in the same context with other national problems. To some extent separate attention appeared warranted because of the frequent disparity between farm prices and economic conditions generally, and because the farmer by virtue of nature and the elements was not master over his own economic environment. This situation has led to the development of a set of unusual political conditions for agriculture and frequently caused agriculture to try to operate through its own established channels and outside of the general political process.

Second, agricultural politics has always been permeated with the ideology that the ideals and virtues of an agrarian society were best for civilization. Consequently, agricultural policies have been weighted with a strong carry-over of nineteenth century concepts and traditions which have not always made sense to other groups of American society, who interpret political and economic processes in terms of technology and urbanization. The claims of agricultural leaders on behalf of the superior moral values of rural life alienate general political support and make cooperation between agriculture and other groups more difficult.

Third, in the United States it has perhaps been harder to achieve unity in farm policies than for any other economic segment of our society because of regional cleavages and differences in approach among farm groups. The competitive struggle between farm products, between relative scales of farm operations,

and between geographically different areas produces many agricultural blocs in the political process which are not easily encompassed by an organization even as broad as the American Farm Bureau Federation. Because of its economic and social complexities, agriculture has often found it hard to interpret itself effectively in the maelstrom of the political process.

Fourth, farmers have, more than other interest groups, relied upon Congress as the agency to protect their political fortunes. Inasmuch as Congressional constituencies are so distributed as to give rural people representation in Congress far out of proportion to their numbers, the farmers' alliance with Congress is natural. Farmer groups have assiduously groomed agricultural spokesmen in Congress and have encouraged the existence of a Congressional farm bloc. Congress in turn has continued to exercise considerable leadership in the formulation of agricultural policy despite the rapid growth in influence and power of the President and agricultural agencies.

Fifth, the agricultural political environment is distinctive because of the unusual relationships that have been worked out between governmental agencies and farm groups. Indeed, no other political group has developed such a close liaison with public officials through the land-grant colleges, the Extension Service, the experiment stations, PMA, SCS, and other programs or participated to such an extent in administrative decisions and the operation of programs. These ties have enabled farmers to partially circumvent established political channels in acquiring assistance and aids. Though such governmental arrangements have, on the whole, probably strengthened agriculture's influence on the general political scene, farmers need to be careful that they do not rely on them to the exclusion of effective participation in the general political process.

In conclusion, all evidence indicates that agriculture currently needs to reappraise its political effectiveness. Not only is it an industry which has been relatively declining in national political power, but it has been operating too much as an independent segment of political life. The ideological framework and political techniques of the nineteenth century rural man are no longer appropriate.

To exercise influence on public policy proportionate to their importance in the national economy, farmers will have to reshape some of their political outlook. Basically this involves changing the political strategems and organization which will offset the loss of power at the voting booth. Strengthened political influence implies something more, however, than an increase of activities by agricultural pressure groups and administrative agencies. It calls for nothing less than a reorientation of agricultural relationships to other interests and segments of our society.

A reoriented political program for agriculture calls for action on several fronts. Farmers need to develop a new program of education designed to interpret the problems and goals of agriculture to labor, industry, and urban groups. In turn, farmers should be more sympathetic to the aspirations of the nonagricultural groups. Farm organizations need to broaden their programs to show the relationships of agricultural economic growth and development to the welfare of other segments of the economy. In particular farm organizations should support issues which have the interests of the consumer as well as the producer in mind. Agricultural policies need to be increasingly formulated from the standpoint of their impact upon the national economy and not exclusively in terms of the interests of farmers. A recent report emphasizes this note in several places. For example:

We take it for granted that our agricultural policy should be one that would make the greatest contribution to the prosperity and economic stability of the whole nation. It should not be designed to confer special or short-run benefits on farmers as a class or on particular branches of agriculture. The farming industry is an interdependent part of our total economy. Not only is its welfare dependent on the prosperity of the country as a whole, but the stream of influence moves also in the opposite direction. Industry and trade can be fully prosperous only as raw materials and cost-of-living items produced on farms are adequate in supply and moderately priced and if the income levels for the farmer are such as to provide a good rural market for industrial goods and services.⁴

Most important of all, the forces of agriculture should not use questionable political techniques and devices to block political reforms desired by other groups. Agriculture is in no position to run the risk of winning temporary but dubious political victories at the expense of losing the long-time gains of a more enlightened political campaign.

⁴*Turning the Searchlight on Farm Policy*, Farm Foundation, 1952, p. 53.