Political Party and Pressure Group Considerations in Agricultural Politics

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Approximately since the turn of the century, agricultural thinking has been dominated by the belief that farm policy should be kept out of the rough and tumble of partisan politics. Farm leaders live in fear that farm issues will be thrust into the political maelstrom and be forced to compete with the proposals of other political groups for survival. Though the major farm groups, the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the Grange, are far apart politically on many issues they, nevertheless, have frequently tried to compromise their differences in order to maintain a united voice for agriculture.[1]

The extent to which agriculture can maintain its position depends upon how effectively it influences public opinion through the medium of political parties and interest groups. This paper will deal briefly with: (1) some of the general considerations which should guide the operations of agriculture in political activity, (2) the position of agriculture in party politics, and (3) the role of agricultural pressure groups.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Any analysis of how agriculture should operate politically is not without Machiavellian implications. Nevertheless, agriculture needs to realistically and constantly weigh its political influence and power vis-a-vis that of other political organizations and pressure groups. The manner in which agriculture should operate politically will vary from period to period depending upon changing conditions in the political environment. Such factors as the relative strengths of political parties, the degree of prosperity which exists, the cohesiveness of agricultural groups, and the measure of leadership given by the administration in power need to be carefully gauged before the appropriate political action is selected. Although agriculture should be guided by

[1]The American Farm Bureau Federation's efforts to close ranks with other agricultural groups are traced in Grant McConnell's *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1953 (see particularly Chapter 7).

democratic ideals and principals, there can be no single or irrevocable program of political action.

In view of the fact that agriculture is declining in political power, what steps can be taken to bolster its position? The following paragraphs set forth some political conditions which should guide agricultural actions in the future. These criteria, however, should not be regarded as providing acceptable substitutes for well-formulated agricultural policies. Agriculture cannot expect to influence the political environment democratically without programs which have been worked out with logic and integrity.

Perhaps the first political condition for agriculture to observe is that as a political minority it needs to be proportionately more watchful of its political strategy and power base than if it were a majority group. Although minority groups do not necessarily suffer a disproportionate loss of political power as they grow smaller, nevertheless, unlike majority groups, they are not able to dominate the situation by sheer numbers alone. This means that minority groups have to follow more closely the impact of their policies and tactics upon other segments of the political environment and to carry on corollary programs of education and influence.

That agriculture has much to learn on this score is reflected by the political walls it has tried to build around its activities. To be sure, there have been no greater masters in pressure group politics than some of the leaders of the farm bloc, but their center of influence has been the Congress and the administration and not the public at large. The agricultural rank and file have certainly not been indoctrinated with the importance of interpreting farm policies to other political groups or of influencing the stands of nonagricultural organizations to which they belong. Both in the professional as well as the more popular agricultural journals there has been a dearth of attention to political analysis and evaluation. Agricultural colleges are partly responsible for the way the study of agricultural politics has been underplayed in comparison with agricultural economics and rural sociology. Similarly, courses in rural government in departments of political science have with few exceptions neglected to give agriculture any special treatment. Probably not more than a half dozen persons in academic institutions today are specializing in the political

science of agriculture. Agriculture needs to recognize that it must proliferate its points of contact with the public in numerous ways and that to do so calls for better understanding of the political outlook and methods of nonfarm people and organizations.

Another political fact of life which agriculture should recognize is that a minority group must either exhibit great internal solidarity and cohesiveness or form alliances with other pressure groups if it wishes to exercise maximum influence on public policy.[2] It appears likely that in the future various farm organizations will try increasingly to work out alliances with other groups to give them more bargaining power. This trend which has already begun is illustrated by the informal agreements that have occasionally been reached by the Farm Bureau and business organizations in some states on legislation, by the sympathy that has been shown by the Farmers Union toward labor in some communities, and by the collaboration that has occurred between agriculture and educational groups in some areas to promote better understanding about the objectives of soil conservation, thereby securing support for soil-building farm programs. The trend toward intergroup cooperation will, of course, inevitably push farmers farther out into the sea of partisan politics.

Closely associated with group strength is the need for farmers to take advantage of the regional characteristics of agriculture to promote regional alliances which will foster the interests of the regional economy, including the interests of agriculture. Whereas agriculture may not be able to work out political cooperation with another pressure group on a national basis, it may be able quite easily to arrange regional alliances.

There is also reason to believe that farmers as a significant political minority group should increasingly operate on the basis of acquiring and maintaining the balance of political power. For example, there is evidence that agriculture is currently in a position to tip the scales between industry and labor or to shift decisively the relative strength of the two major political parties. Maintaining the balance of power, however, calls for a different kind of political strategy from the tactics that might be employed if the main objective were to seek dominance or to gain recognition as a strident and vociferous minority. A minor-

[2]The importance of group cohesion for policy making is well treated in David B. Truman's *The Governmental Process,* Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951, Chapter 6.

ity group which hopes to gain a pivotal political position needs to win political respect from other groups and to appear as a compromising agent between more divergent forces. This calls for tolerant outlooks, artful negotiations, and accommodating actions. It must be admitted that to play this role, agriculture will have to undergo nothing short of a metamorphosis of its own political values and habits.

The nature of agriculture's political action at any particular time needs also to be conditioned by the relative strength of the two major political parties in their relation to other groups as well as to the administration. While agriculture's role in the party will be treated in greater detail in the next section, it should be noted at this point that agriculture should not try to use one party solely as its vehicle. Agriculture embraces far too many varying issues, regions, and political viewpoints for it to make best progress in one political party. Moreover, the major political parties, as past American experience has shown, have frequently shifted roles, so agricultural interests may be best served by likewise shifting political ground with the parties. It will probably always be more advantageous for agriculture to exert its greater influence upon whichever party is in power, particularly because of the strong working relationships that farm groups have with administrative agencies at the national level. However, agriculture needs to be careful not to press its political-administrative advantages to the point where it falls out of favor with the political groups that will constitute the controlling forces of power when a party change takes place. A minority political group which wishes to hold the balance of power cannot afford to act in the same manner as a major group which hopes to dominate the political party.

Changes that may occur in the distribution of power and functions among the federal, state, and local levels of government will affect the future course of agricultural political action. If more agricultural activities gravitate to the national level, farmers will probably find it to their advantage to strengthen the activities of the national farm organizations as well as their base in the political parties to provide a countervailing balance of power. Contrariwise, the political organization of farmers can probably be somewhat looser and dispersed if certain functions and responsibilities are returned to the states.

The types of political action which farmers should take also vary with the degree of economic prosperity which prevails and the relative economic status of farmers in comparison with other groups. Unfortunately, farmers have suffered so many years of below parity standards during the last three-quarters of a century that they have been unconsciously employing the same political tactics during good as well as bad years. They have not recognized that it is more difficult politically to demand the same types of economic assistance in times of prosperity as in times of depression. Yet if anything is certain in the political environment, it is that interest groups, political parties, and administrative agencies respond differently to pressures for policy changes depending upon the economic status of the group making the request and the general condition of the economy.

It is also natural that farm organizations should be most vocal and active during periods of farm distress.[3] But it should also not be forgotten that group tensions may be sharper during periods of economic dislocation, and that the best time to work out major policy changes is when there is enough play in the economic system to permit easy compromises with other groups. This suggests that as a minority political group, farmers may find it increasingly advisable to rely more upon forward planning. In other words, periods of political good will should be used advantageously to formulate policies and legislation to cover future contingencies.

Finally, political action by farm groups will be determined by the nature of the ties that have been developed between various segments of agriculture and administrative agencies. Given the condition of declining political power for agriculture, farmers will increasingly need to turn to administrative agencies for assistance and protection in the political environment. Administrative agencies are expected to be the spokesmen, not for specific political forces, but for the problems involving the public interest which these forces represent. Administrative agencies, therefore, acquire a certain measure of political power by virtue of being part of a government responsible to the total public, which specific interests such as agriculture cannot attain. Indeed, insofar as agriculture remains important to the national welfare, it may be expected that the political influence of administrative

[3] R. B. Held, "Our Farm Organizations," *Farm Policy Forum,* November 1950, p. 21.

agencies will increase in much the same proportion as the political influence of the farm population declines. How farmers can get the maximum political support of administrative agencies without sacrificing an undue amount of political freedom is, of course, a difficult question. Needless to say, the more complicated private-governmental-agricultural relations become, the more discerning agricultural people will have to be concerning relationships between administrative agencies and private groups.

AGRICULTURE IN PARTY POLITICS

The best protection the farmers have against the new types of power relationships and economic involvements that are being generated by our interdependent society is the political party. The party is not only the best instrument yet devised to equate competing values in our political system but it is likewise the best organ to assure democratic rationalization of values. No other human institution approaches the party in its effectiveness to oversee and police the total political process.

The rank and file farmer today, however, does not take party organization seriously. Although individual farmers may be extremely influential in rural party politics and may indeed even be pillars of the "county courthouse gang" political leadership among farmers is for the most part personal rather than organizational. While no definitive studies have been made, the available evidence indicates that participation in party organization in rural areas is likely to be dominated by the village dweller and that farmers have not been a distinctive force as such in county or state political organizations. Farmer impact upon party policies and farmer access to party organizations has been largely through the influence of agricultural spokesmen in legislative bodies and the leaders of farm groups, and not from the lower ranks of the precinct worker up through the hierarchical levels of party organization.

Because of agriculture's strength in Congress and state legislatures, the parties have had to be particularly solicitous of agriculture's demands since agriculture has usually been in a position to collar enough votes in legislative bodies to block the enactment of more general party policies. Drawing up the agricultural planks in party platforms has, particularly at the national level, been regarded as the special responsibility of agricultural

spokesmen. Farmers and farm groups, on the other hand, have not objected to farm spokesmen also being leaders in the party, as long as the farm leaders were not so beholden to other party interests that they could not speak uncompromisingly on behalf of the farmer.

Over the years agriculture's influence in the political party has dropped as the strength of other groups has risen. As agriculture's ties to the political party have weakened, the farmers have turned more to the use of pressure group organization to accomplish their objectives. Efforts to control the party were forsaken in favor of efforts to be independent of the party.

But as has been pointed out, agriculture's efforts to keep farm policies out of partisan politics go counter to broad developments which are taking place in the American political scene. Farmers are bound to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having more and more decisions affecting the welfare of agriculture made in areas of the political arena over which they have no control. To protect its political position agriculture needs to reshape its approach to the party and its methods of party influence.

Farmers need to play a bigger part in party activity to offset agriculture's declining political influence. More party participation does not necessarily mean that agriculture should operate strictly on a partisan basis nor choose one major party over the other. As has been pointed out earlier, the interests of agriculture are far too heterogeneous to permit it to find its future in one party. Moreover, so long as both of the major parties maintain a broad and diversified base and are not strictly divided into conservative and liberal coalitions, agriculture will find it to its advantage to press for its policies in both organizations, even though at any particular moment it may favor one party over the other as the best vehicle to push its program.

Specifically what should be agriculture's program in connection with political party organization? Though a detailed program is not easily spelled out the following trends should be fostered:

Agriculture should frankly recognize the dangers of becoming a politically isolated and narrow-minded interest group. The party should be viewed as a medium of keeping in contact with the

over-all political environment and the social values of the non-agricultural society. Agricultural leaders who are in a commanding position to influence farm opinion should take the lead in changing the attitudes of farmers toward political parties. Farm groups should encourage their membership to participate freely in party organizational activities.

The party should be used as a means of acquiring access to and influencing other groups. This needs to be done at all echelons of the party organization and not, as in the past, simply at the top. A concerted program of interpreting farm problems and selling farm policies to the rest of the party membership can be profitably carried on by both individual farmers and farm groups. Farmers should not try to pin the party down on a host of specific issues or get it to spell out a detailed farm program in its platform. Instead, farmers should focus upon a minimum number of basic policies and on these push for firm party commitments and support.

Finally, farmers should look upon the parties as instruments for policing the actions of other political organizations. Party surveillance of other organizations also applies to administrative agencies. Farmers can protect their own welfare by seeing to it that the parties are always strong enough to offset the threat of being dominated by a specific interest group. Farmers have as great a stake in democracy as any other group and, therefore, cannot afford to let the political parties become unrepresentative and corrupt.

AGRICULTURAL PRESSURE GROUPS

The role of agricultural groups is somewhat more difficult to spell out than agriculture's role in the party because agricultural groups constitute such a conglomeration of purposes and activities. Over half a hundred agricultural groups are operating as national associations, and these, together with affiliated local and branch chapters and other organizations which are only regional or local in scope, bring the number well into the thousands.[4] Moreover, many groups are subject to more frequent changes in purpose and organizational character than the political party so that prescriptions for action for specific groups may rapidly go out of date.

[4] U. S. Department of Commerce, *National Associations of the United States*, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1949.

At the risk of gross oversimplification, agricultural groups can be divided into three broad categories. In the first category fall those organizations such as the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the Grange, which are concerned with the over-all aspects of farm policies. Groups such as these try to maintain a sufficiently broad and representative farm membership to permit them to pose as an authoritative spokesman for the farmer's welfare.[5] Although their membership may encompass regional and economic cleavages, the policies and organization of the group need to be sufficiently flexible and susceptible to compromise to enable the group to be politically strong and prosperous.

The second category of agricultural organizations is the specialized interest groups, such as the American Cotton Cooperative Association or the Vegetable Growers Association of America, which have formed around a specific agricultural commodity or function. These groups cater to a specialized membership and generally focus only upon those policies which directly affect the economic welfare of their group. They frequently achieve political strength out of proportion to their numbers because they usually act as a well-disciplined bloc concentrating upon a few distinct issues.

The third category of agricultural groups is composed of those built around specific agricultural programs, such as the Soil Conservation Service, the Production and Marketing Administration, and the Extension Service. The membership (it may not be formal) constitutes both the personnel of administrative agencies and farmers who are participating in the program.

Despite their different objectives and methods of operation, all of these groups have much in common and, as anyone who has watched the activities of these groups at close hand knows, there is frequently much complementary interplay. Although they all represent some vested interest, the interests are often merged to achieve multi-group objectives. While figures are not available, we know that there is a high degree of overlapping membership in these various types of farm organizations and

[5]In 1949 the Farm Bureau was composed of approximately 18,000 local units and a membership of 1,250,000 farm families; the National Grange of approximately 8,000 locals and a membership of 800,000; and the National Farmers Union of about 8,000 locals and a farm family membership of 450,000. Source: *National Associations of the United States,* Section 18.

that in many rural areas the same farmers may be the dominant leaders in several groups. Furthermore, we know that practically all of these groups are stronger in some regions than in others, and that for many regional strength constitutes their greatest political weapon.

But if the scores of agricultural groups endeavoring to better agriculture's lot in this country are essential to the democratic process, nevertheless, some basic questions can be raised about the desirable activities and limits of agricultural group action in a democratic society. Three problems in particular stand out: How many agricultural interest groups should exist to best advance the cause of agriculture? To what degree are agricultural groups actually representative of farm interests? And what should be the relationships of agricultural groups to the governmental process?

Agricultural interest groups have, on the whole, been growing both in numbers and size of membership during the last quarter of a century despite the decline in the number of farm families. This growth has been due to the increasing technological and economic specialization of agriculture as well as to the growing interest by farmers in collective action to offset the economic and social insecurities of an ever more impersonal society. There has been a belief in some quarters, however, that the proliferation of agricultural groups is detrimental to the best interests of farmers and that better policies and political effectiveness would result if the farmers' energies were not so dispersed among a countless number of farm organizations. Indeed, there has even been some feeling that what agriculture needs to develop most is integrated power that could compete favorably with the power structure of other segments of society.[6]

Neither a plethora of weak farm organizations nor the consolidation of all farm organizations into one monolithic structure, however, is in agriculture's best political interests. What is desirable in agricultural organization is a dynamic and pervasive group structure which at the same time does not impede the formation of general farm policies. Care needs to be taken that special purpose groups do not dominate the general farm organizations or that the general farm organizations do not suppress

[6]Note for example the conclusions drawn in a book by J. K. Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power,* 1952. See also the discussion entitled "That Controversial Farm Policy Report," *Farm Policy Forum,* July 1952, pp. 6-25.

minority points of view. It is more than likely, however, that with increasing economic specialization and proliferation of groups, more emphasis will have to be placed in the future on strengthening organizations which are formulating general farm policies.

Currently there is a tendency for general farm policies to be relatively neglected or obscured by the pressures of strong commodity and specialized program groups. Moreover, the dominating influence that has been exercised by commodity groups upon agricultural policy has weakened agriculture's position in the general political process because the more functionalized the pressures, the greater the difficulty to compromise politically. In the face of the great need today for relating the interests of agriculture to the welfare of the national economy, organizations such as the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, and the Grange have a responsibility which the more specialized groups cannot undertake. Though farmers can use the political party more effectively to formulate general agricultural policies, their cause will be immeasurably aided by strong group organizations which endeavor to be truly representative of all farm interests and which are dedicated to the task of interpreting farm policies to the rest of the political society.

The attainment of equitable representation poses another serious problem for farm group organizations. An impartial study of over-all membership in agricultural interest groups and associations would show that the wealthier farmers are better represented both in terms of numbers and influence than the less well-to-do agriculturists. Classifying farmers by economic status into three categories, high, medium, and low, a public opinion survey conducted in 1942[7] found that better than fifty percent of the farmers in the high economic bracket had membership in a farm organization, nearly thirty percent in the medium bracket claimed memberships, but less than fifteen percent of the low economic group were farm organization members. Although a valid case can be made for property receiving special recognition in economic group representation, nevertheless, an unfairly weighted system implies that the agricultural conditions of the underrepresented may be less important for the

[7]*Public Opinion, 1935-1946,* edited by Hadley Cantril, Princeton University Press, p. 5.

over-all welfare of agriculture, when actually the reverse may be the case. Inequalities in agricultural group representation have, of course, provided a partial rationale for government programs, such as the Farm Security Administration, which have been directed to the underprivileged farmer.

Of even deeper concern is the fact that the policy-making process within many agricultural groups is not fully representative of the membership. Farm organizations like to boast about grass-roots participation, but there is increasing evidence that farm organizations, like labor unions and other large groups of our society, do not have wholesome participation by the rank and file membership. Officer-dominated organizations, overlapping directors among groups, meetings steered behind the scenes, controlled appearances before legislative bodies, and an all-too-often inarticulate and passive membership all combine to make many agricultural groups far from democratic organizations. Moreover, the manner in which some agricultural groups have operated has caused them to be the objects of suspicion and criticism by nonagricultural groups with whom they must cooperate in the political process.

There is no sure way whereby agricultural groups can maintain a representative character. Many organizational and procedural checks may, of course, be placed by the membership upon the officers of a group, but these constitute only the form and not the substance of democratic policy making. Pressures from the political parties and other groups can also aid in keeping the agricultural groups representative. But ultimately much depends upon the integrity of farm leadership and the extent to which individual farmers understand and appreciate the importance of democratic processes in group organization. In this connection agricultural researchers need to pay far more attention than they have to the decision-making process in various agricultural groups so that farmers can perceive the major shortcomings of the over-all agricultural group structure and process. As a political minority, agriculture cannot expect to command maximum influence over other groups in the political process if the policies which it espouses have not been democratically formulated.

The involvement of agricultural groups in the governmental process is another problem which is being viewed with growing

alarm by a substantial portion of the farm population. Many agricultural leaders are afraid that agriculture is losing its political freedom as a result of commitments and ties to administrative agencies and programs. They also see the new power blocs which have been formed by the bureaucracy and participating farmers around administrative programs as a threat to the status of other farm organizations. For many farm leaders the ideal situation would be to have farm groups in a position where they could formulate policies that would have to be accepted by administrative agencies without any corresponding involvements on their part in the actual governmental process.

No agency of government which represents the public interest, however, can afford to allow pressure groups to become the controlling voice in its policies. It is both natural and healthy for agricultural agencies to seek the counsel of farm groups, and it is desirable that farm groups should try to influence agency activities. But both parties always need to recognize that governmental decisions must be reached in the light of all public considerations rather than simply upon the basis of a specific agency's activities.

Basically three alternatives are open to farm groups in their relationships with government agencies and programs. First, they can try to stay completely clear of any actual governmental involvements and concentrate primarily upon influencing Congress and the political representatives of the administration. This alternative would not only reverse a long-time trend of farmer-administration collaboration, but it would force agriculture to strengthen its political fences with the public at large. Salutary as this action might be, it is unlikely to occur inasmuch as a political minority, such as the farm population, derives political strength through group identification with government programs.

The second alternative is for farmers and representatives of farm groups to participate in government programs in an advisory capacity only, such as serving upon government-appointed advisory boards and committees. This procedure, which is generally favored by experts in public administration, has the advantage of keeping groups close to the administrative process but places the final responsibility for the decision upon the public official. But as one authority has pointed out, advisory bodies turn out "to be no panacea to the problem of obtaining the essential agreement between the group representatives and the adminis-

trative agency. Freedom of action is formally assured, but, in the absence of the administration's active cooperation and joint concurrence with recommendations of the advisory body, this freedom may result in complete defection from the agency of the groups represented on the committee."[8]

The third course of action is for farmers and farm groups to push for the right of active participation in the administration of farm programs. As a result of the opportunities for farmer participation that were developed by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, the Taylor Grazing Districts, and other programs, no segment of our society has had greater experience in this activity than agriculture. Administrative participation has the advantage of placing farmers in a position where they can partially formulate and control agency policies and programs. Its outstanding disadvantage from the standpoint of farm groups is that it frequently forces farmers to compromise what is best in terms of their economic and group interests with the public interest. As an over-all generalization, it can perhaps be stated that farmer participation in administrative programs is most successful at the local levels, where the policies are being applied and less successful at the top levels of administration, where a host of nonfarm considerations enter into the decision-making process.

The degree to which farmer groups should become involved in the governmental process will naturally vary with the political and economic situation and with the nature of the program. Where emergency action is necessary, as was the case in the inauguration of the AAA, farmers may find it to their advantage to participate in order to get the program underway expeditiously. Actually, however, the degree of governmental involvement is probably less significant from the standpoint of agricultural group interests than are some other considerations. Most important is that the administrative decision-making process should be kept visible no matter how or at what level it is exercised. Farmers and farm groups need to remember that the best guarantee against an unhealthy concentration of administrative power is to make the exercise of that power as public as possible.

Farm groups can protect themselves against undue administrative bureaucracy by seeing that no more agricultural functions

[8]Avery Leiserson, *Administrative Regulation: A Study in Representation of Interests,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1942, p. 273.

or responsibilities are placed at one level of government or in one agency than are necessary to formulate effective policies. By forcing administrative agencies to decentralize the decision-making process, more political checks and controls can be brought into play. By seeing that the responsibility for decisions is carefully fixed and easily reviewed and by supporting organizational and administrative arrangements that foster responsible action, farmers will have less to fear from administrative entanglements.

Farmers and agricultural organizations also need to keep firmly in mind that it is equally as important to view administrative agencies as vehicles for general public influence as it is to view them as objects for farmer control. Although average citizens may have less direct interest in agricultural programs than farmers have, they, nevertheless, consider agricultural officials of governmental agencies as their representatives. Farm groups should, therefore, use tactics in administrative participation which will widen their area of influence, particularly with nonfarm groups. This means that farm organizations should not always press for solely agricultural representation or participation in an administrative program. By trying to acquire exclusive administrative jurisdiction, they may win the immediate struggle of program control but lose the more significant battle of general political support.

In conclusion, agriculture's influence in the political arena depends upon how well farm organizations understand the functions and limits of the group process in a democracy. Molders of agricultural opinion urgently need to assist farmers in appraising group organization and tactics. Farmers need to appreciate that a democratic group structure in agriculture is a foundation stone for the maintenance of democracy in America.