



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY ISSUES AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

*Dale L. Stansbury
Senate Agriculture Committee
Washington, D.C.*

What is policy and why is it important?

Let me look at the second part of my question first. Clearly the term imparts importance to what might be otherwise dull issues. A policy person is much more important than just a person, and policy meetings are at least three times more critical than just meetings. I think the term does carry a mystique of importance, but I would suggest that the thing most often called policy, ain't policy. I would like to briefly think about the differences among the three concepts—policy, program, and issues, and the interrelated questions of government involvement in the political economy.

First, we have a basic policy in the United States called freedom. That is nonintervention by government in individual activities. The Jeffersonian concept of the government that governs least is the best, is the foundation policy statement for our nation. However, it is also the policy that is most often ignored in policy discussions.

What is most often called policy is when the government for one reason or another intervenes into freedom. For this to occur there is usually a national consensus that there is something wrong with the free market—or a majority agrees that something is wrong. As a result, we end up with generic statements of policy that are broadly accepted.

For instance, in agriculture, there are several broadly accepted generic policies. The first is that government should encourage farm production and ensure an adequate food supply. This is probably the oldest involvement of the federal government in agriculture and has a long history. Informal efforts were made by early Presidents and legislators to find new plant varieties. More formal statements of support resulted in the establishment of the Agriculture Department in 1862, and the Experiment Stations and Extension Service in 1887 and 1914 respectively.

Another generally accepted policy is that farm incomes should be equitable with non-farm incomes, and that some government intervention is warranted in this area. This is a fairly recent development inasmuch as major government intervention in this area only started in the 1930's with the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

There is a belief that our food supply should be wholesome, safe, and unadulterated. This position has been basically achieved in this century. It is almost universally accepted as being appropriate. We have a belief that our resources should be conserved. That is, our soil and water should be managed in such a way that our sons and daughters will have it as good as, or better than, we.

It is commonly accepted that markets should function efficiently, and that where unfair practices occur the government should intervene. Thus we have grading and standards, and other government programs to support marketing efficiency and fairness.

There is the widely accepted belief that rural development is an appropriate goal for the federal government. Intervention and support is needed in this area to give the people in rural America an adequate chance to live the good life. REA and Farmers Home Administration are indicative of this support for rural development.

We have a firm conviction that free international trade should prevail; and further, that there is need for international shipments for humanitarian reasons.

We have accepted a policy that we should look to the future and make ongoing investments in research and extension to meet the unknown.

Each of these generic policies tends to be described with high-sounding terms for which there is general agreement. For instance, everyone agrees we should have adequate food at reasonable prices, that farmers deserve a fair income, that food should be safe and wholesome, that rural America should be as good a place to live as urban America, that products should move efficiently in the marketplace, that resources should be conserved, and trade should go unfettered around the world.

It should be noted, however, that we have not always reached these positions without controversy. The higher the interventions the greater the controversy—only the most benign is accepted without debate. The food safety issue took 30 years. Even after these general policy statements are agreed upon there is the necessity to implement programs.

Programs are legislative and executive efforts to achieve the recognized goal of policy. Policy statements tend to deal in generalities but, programs must deal with specifics. Policy can be the essence of an idea conjured up in the mind of the beholder. For instance, when someone says conservation practices, a producer may

think about channelization of wetlands and turning them into a beautiful alfalfa field, whereas an environmentalist is thinking of cat-o-nine-tails, wood ducks, and no people. No conflict yet, but when that policy statement is turned into the program, be it the channelization or a reservation for ducks, we have conflict.

Beauty to some is warts to others. The warts are the differences of opinion about the appropriateness of programs in achieving the policy objectives. These differences yield the thing I referred to as issues. The number and intensity of the issues are directly related to the degree of intervention and amount of controversy that accompanies the original policy concept. However, it usually focuses on program specifics.

I suggest that the issues in fact are both the seed and fruit of policy. An issue arises when someone views the "freedom policy" as being inadequate. It is this concern about a perceived fault in the basic policy that contributes to the development of programs to rectify the problem. But in so doing, the program will often interfere with some part of society. Thus issues arise as fruit of a program that is not universally accepted.

Quite often new issues arise due to societal changes—changes in the general condition of the society or the changing positions of some groups.

For instance, today there is much talk about nutrition as a policy issue. I suggest that we have no nutritional policy, although nutrition is tangential to many policy areas that are discussed in the food area.

One reason that nutrition is getting attention at this time is that we have had a societal change from our quantity focus. The specter of hunger no longer haunts the American people. The desire for growing two blades of grass where one grew before is being viewed as inadequate. There now is a very strong preoccupation with the quality of the blades of grass. Thus, we have an issue that could be a seed factor. However, I think that it is going to be more of a modifying influence on other policies.

Let me now turn to the legislative process. It is the legislative process that is involved in program creation. Creation of programs through law only occurs when someone perceives a problem. Uniquely, these people generally want protection from freedom. Farmers want protection from the wrath of mother nature, protection from the productivity of their fellow farmers or protection from "subsidized imports". Consumers want to be protected from sawdust in sausage, and price gouging. Many "free enterprisers" dislike the competitiveness of the freemarkets, and seek the creation of programs to give them protection from competition. The people who identify the problems as well as the reactors against the proposal are reflecting their special interests. Although many argue that they are only thinking about the national interest.

Issues about policy or programs are often very emotional because they affect the people involved. Each side is biased and each exaggerates, making balance and objectivity difficult. Frequently the groups who have a financial interest in the issue are condemned as being rather crass and venal. However, the public interest groups, consumer or environmental groups are sometimes thought of as good or altruistic. Both are special interests and I would again emphasize that they are both biased. Neither group comes unattached or with objective inputs.

This is the nature of the system. The individuals who get involved are usually affected by the issue, thus have a problem being perfectly objective. So we seek compromise. My personal definition of achieving appropriate solutions is that when both sides are unhappy with the solution it must be pretty good. If either seems to be overly happy, we know we have erred someplace along the way.

In this situation it strikes me that there is a very natural role for the university and extension. By definition you are supposed to be objective. This may be one of the great myths of all time, since I have noticed that objectivity in the university community sometimes disappears in the face of the dollar. However, there is the tradition and training that should give you a higher level of objectivity than can be expected from the interest groups.

Extension in fact has had a role as validator of information and technology. It is very possible that extension could be a validator in the policy arena. To do it, however, requires that you get dirty. You have to get involved in the process and not stand back making comments about the failure of the political process. Further, it requires that you be honest and exercise a severe self discipline. Most important, anyone who wants to be a mediator and validator has to ask very tough questions about his own beliefs and values. Further, you need to know the participants—the nuts as well as the reasonable people—and you need to understand and know your enemies as well as your friends.

Let me warn you, there is a distinct danger in assuming such a role because a mediator in an emotional debate will be taking lots of lumps. Both sides are going to be mad at you, which, as I suggested before might be a good indication of your fairness and judgment. But it is not the traditional role of extension and for that reason may be very difficult. Probably you would be smart to stay out of the process. However, I believe that if the process is going to be good, then good, honest, objective people have to get involved.

I want to conclude with a few capsulated thoughts: Policy is always a reflection of our past. The specific policy statements, programs and issues reflect where we have been and what we have done in the past.

Today is different than yesterday, just as tomorrow is going to be different from today. Policy is always a struggle between the despotism of custom and the anarchy of untried theory.

One of the best protections that our system of government has, is its methodical almost immovable inertia. While policy formation seems to move with the speed of molasses in January, it does serve as a safeguard against making the big mistake. Policy changes and moves from side to side on the road as the various pressures push it back and forth, but generally, it stays on the road and continues toward an ultimate goal of society.

The value and importance of the objective inputs that you might bring is that they could reduce our weaving from ditch to ditch and perhaps move us toward the ultimate objective a little bit faster.

Workshops and Conference Summary

