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ILLINOIS AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS STAFF PAPER

HOW AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY IS DEVELOPED

by

R. G. F. Spitze

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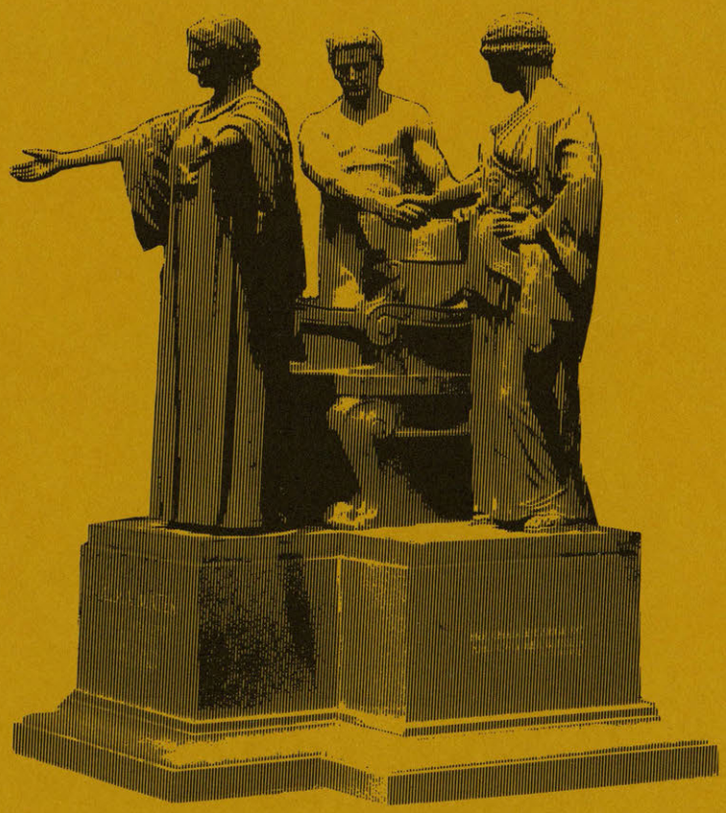

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HOW AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD POLICY IS DEVELOPED

R. G. F. Spitze*

Discussion about what kind of agricultural and food policy we should have had has assumed increasing prominence over the past thirty years. At the same time, relatively little attention has been given the more fundamental question of how any policy is developed in our society. Policy of some kind prevails in all organized society and people with ties to the rural community have an interest in such policy irrespective of the prevailing political system. However, people fortunate enough to live in a democratic type of political system have both an opportunity and a responsibility to help shape the policy of their society. Agricultural policy affects your community and your community can affect policy.

Agricultural and food policy itself is continually changing in response to alternating periods of surpluses and scarcity. Secondly, traditional procedures in agricultural policy development may have to change as traditional representation by power blocs gives way to facts, reason, and compromise.

This analysis will include four points: (1) meaning of agricultural policy; (2) stages in the policy-making process; (3) implications for science, organizations, and a changing agriculture; and (4) individual's participation in policy-making.

Definitions and Theories

Let us be clear at the outset of our subject matter. The place to commence is with the meaning of agricultural policy.[1] In many discussions on policy the problem of semantics is equally as critical as that of substantive issues. Too often, controversy prevails about which policy is most desirable, when in reality, the point of contention is what forms of

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[1] Additional discussion may be found in: Halcrow, H. G., Agricultural Policy Analysis, McGraw Hill, 1984, Chapter 1; Hathaway, D. E., Government and Agriculture, Macmillan, 1963, Chapter 7; Schickele, R., Agricultural Policy, McGraw-Hill, 1954, Chapters 1, 2; Knutson, Penn, & Boehm, Agricultural and Food Policy, Prentice-Hall, 1983, Chapter 1; Spitze, "1985 Food and Agricultural Policy in Perspective," Choices, Premier Edition, 1986, pp. 46-7.

governmental action are consistent with the existing political system. That is, the economic considerations of a policy proposal, like price supports, will be argued when the fundamental disagreement is about whether price supports are compatible with a democracy.

First, in spelling out our definition, let us remember we are discussing policy development in the U.S., a society organized as a representative political system--or democracy, if you please. Regardless of our varying concepts of a democracy or representative political system, there is probably agreement that the U. S. is not a perfect example. Yet, this hardly prevents a distinction being drawn between our system and one essentially autocratic and dictatorial in operation. Such a distinction must be made. The distinguishing criterion is whether numerous individuals and interest groups usually participate in running the government or whether it is usually run by one individual or single interest group. Societies organized in both ways surely have and do exist.

Discussions of policy development run a risk of serious error if all forms of political systems are lumped together. In this event, the form of the policy can become the focal point of discussion rather than how the policy is chosen. Both democracies and dictatorships may exhibit some identical policies, like compulsory vaccination, but also have diametrically opposed policies, like compulsory enforcement of a free press. The process of policy-making is the distinguishing characteristic.

As a second step in our definition, policy means an action, a decision, an overt occurrence sure to bring results different from those previously existing.[2] It is more than an idea, a hope, an attitude, or a belief. Though these tentative goal-like propositions play a strategic role in policy-making, they should not be confused with policy itself which possesses a more definitive existential category. Let me illustrate this confusion. We talk about equality of education as a hope or goal, yet enact a policy which results in twice the expenditures per pupil in one area compared to another.

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[2] Webster defines it with such terms as management, administration, a settled course of action, or method adapted.

Who can take action--that is, develop policy--in our society? It can emerge from several sources--individuals, interest groups, and organized society itself through its government. Thus, our policy can be essentially private or public in origin. The U. S. federal government can have agricultural policy but so can farmer Jones and a farm organization in Illinois.

Thirdly, with our discussion focused primarily on U. S. Governmental policy, there is one further crucial characteristic, namely, public policy represents a compromise.[3] Since democratic governments are run by numerous interest groups, governmental policy invariably develops as a compromise, a conciliation, a negotiated agreement among those individuals and groups being represented. In contrast, an individual develops policy by deciding what action is preferred. Not functioning in such a monistic fashion, a democratic government finds its policy emerging as a composite of other decisions, or private policies if you please. The U. S. Food Security Act of 1985 was an example of a major agricultural and food public policy, and also represented two years of intense discussion and bargaining involving every interest group in the nation, innumerable separate congressional bills, and such difficult compromising that few strong proponents remained at the end.[4] Yet, governmental policy-making is akin to a person's decision-making. And theories or models of decision-making are logically akin to more general theories of knowledge, value, and inquiry, of which there are several and about which scholarly controversy persists. However, it does seem safe to assume that an individual's personally accepted theory of value and inquiry will carry over into that person's view of governmental policy-making.

A fourth characteristic of policy pertains to its origin. I would like to argue that policy, whether individual or group and whether private or public, develops only when there is some specific difficulty--a hurting

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[3] J. G. Maddox used the interesting term, temporary armistice. Goals and Values in Agricultural Policy, Iowa State Press, 1961, pp. 19-24.

[4] Highlighted in Spitze, "The Food Security Act of 1985: Process and Product," Ill. Res., 28:1/2 1986, pp. 28-30.

problem, if you please. Hence, we act through our government to solve collectively some problem experienced individually by innumerable participants. I want to argue further that the policy decision embodies at once an action and expected results or goals, both forged out of the policy-making process itself. This contrasts with a view that policy is only a means selected in the policy-making process to achieve previously decided goals and values existing apart from this process. Herein lurks possible confusions borne of semantic if not logical misconceptions.

Let us examine the difficulties created when we attempt to separate goals and policy. It may be suggested that governmental policy is precipitated, not by specific problems, but by society's failure to realize goals. If so, when are the goals chosen and where may they be identified? For example, for what goals was the "Food for Peace Act of 1966" designed to serve? It may also be contended that particular organizations agreed upon the goals of the public policy but simply disagreed over means. If so, why did they differ about the means? Was it not in fact a disagreement over both the means and the results or ends expected, quite apart from any general societal goals? The kind of goals sometimes alleged to be in agreement may have little relevance to the problem and contribute little to its resolution. For example, I suspect most individuals and organizations participating in the great 1985 agricultural and food policy debate gladly accepted such goals as equal opportunity, freedom, stability, security, progress, and efficiency, but this did little for the problem of what to do about persistent surpluses, faltering farm product prices, hunger at home and abroad, and the termination of existing 1981 legislation.

As a fifth and final addition to our definition, an agricultural and food policy is developed in response to a problem primarily involving the agricultural sector of our economy and society, analogous to a health policy, labor policy, business policy, etc. Now to piece together the meaning and definition of governmental agricultural policy in the U. S.: Agricultural and food public policy is a decision and action taken in some branch of one of the many levels of representative governments in U. S., and is a compromise among the private policies of numerous interest groups and individuals for the purpose of solving a problem involving primarily the agricultural and food sector. Examples are plentiful, such as the Homestead

Act, Smith-Level and Morrill Acts, Farmers Home Administration Act of 1946, and Illinois Water Quality Management Plan of 1979.

Stages of Policy-Making--A Model Suggested

With policy defined and policy making in a democratic society differentiated, we can now pursue the more practical sides of our topics. What are the steps in the development of governmental agricultural and food policy? There seems to be four: the problem, public awareness, alternative proposals, and public action and consequence.

Problem. Policy-making commences only when the otherwise normal tide of daily activity by individuals and organizations is interrupted by a problem for which private action seems insufficient. Only people have problems and they alone can vouch for their reality. Something disturbing has occurred, or expected to do so, in the endless panorama of social, economic, political, religious experiences of man. The trigger can be a new understanding or creative reflection about what exists as well as changes in the environment itself. Problems can be anticipated difficulties as well as current. It is a safe assumption that somebody at all times thinks there is a problem such as these. But enough people with dynamic influence must establish the difficulty as worthy of the community's attention. For example, farmers may keep asking why their market cannot be expanded by selling farm products abroad for foreign currency as well as for dollars, until others and groups begin asking the same question. Such was the beginning of P. L. 480 through which over twelve (12) billion dollars worth of farm products have been sold for foreign currency since 1954.

Public Awareness. It takes more than a few unhappy people to precipitate a public policy in a democracy. The concern of a few must spread contagiously to public awareness and most private problems never survive this second step for a public policy. Yet a lone crusader has occasionally transferred his anxiety to public awareness. After all, at what point does the chirping, darting flock of blackbirds feeding on the meadow really begin to fly to another feeding area and when did they really begin to settle there in the first place? Commonly, public awareness is achieved only when a problem

gains respectability with at least one important interest group or recognized leader to serve as sponsor and spokesman. The public awareness step permits two functions to be performed: sharpening the identity of the problem through study and discussion to achieve broad public understanding; initial development of ideas and actions that might serve as solutions to the problem. For example, it took years of discussion, private fund raising, and lobbying before the U. S. Congress seriously considered an agricultural extension service as a public policy.

Alternative Proposals. When a problem has developed to this stage, the policy-making process has reached a crossroads. What promising alternative proposals can be conceived to mitigate the problem, now of general concern of society? Is the solution to be a private policy, a public policy, or more likely a combination? It is now that the body politic stages a period of continuous debate usually relying heavily upon the professional, the politician, and the resources of the multitude of interest groups. Alternative policies with their expected results are identified, refined, and become rallying points for major crusades. Knowledge, objectivity, and responsibility are at a premium; otherwise false dichotomies, unreliable expectations, and prejudiced leadership can be perpetrated on society. A valid model of policy-making must permit, during this third stage, that the best solution to the problem may be found to exclude governmental policy. Likewise, it must permit the opposite. One of the most vivid examples of this stage of policy-making occurred in the late 1940's and early 1950's with a nation-wide discussion of the alternative agricultural price policies of rigid supports, flexible supports, or no supports.

Public Action and Consequence. At this final step, policy-making moves to a legislature, executive, or court. The judgment can be to leave the problem entirely in the private policy area and have no governmental action. Until society decides through one of its avenues of government to take action, public policy-making is indeterminant. Likewise, the particulars of any public policy remain unknown until that moment of decision. Being a compromise, often into the eleventh hour, the final policy will only by accident mirror any particular proposal developed during the previous stage.

Public policy development has not and may well never be subject to a dependable predictive formula. At most, it can be characterized as a composite of individual and group influences proportionate to their intellectual, economic, social, and political power as determined through existing procedures, also established in previous policy-making.

However, there is one certainty if step four is taken. Some action and its consequences will ensue, certain to bring changes to a particular sector or the entire economy. In Illinois for many years, farmers have placed the tax problem in their top list of problems. The result was a land assessment process based on net farm returns, not just market value, which was responding to previously highly inflated land values. However, when farm incomes dramatically dropped, local governments faced revenue crises. Some of the consequences are already known and the severity of the problem is almost certain to spawn yet additional tax policies of concern to rural people in Illinois.

Implications of the Policy-Making Process

From this definition and model of agricultural policy development in our society flow important implications for science and the educator, for organizations, and for a changing agriculture of the future. First, what is the role of science in policy development? The frustrating complexity of problems, such as low farm income, inadequate rural education, or wastage of natural resources, often encourages us to look to science for the answer--a quest perhaps encouraged by miraculous achievements in medicine, space, and biology. But a fundamental dilemma is posed. If democracy is preferred, and if in such a system, public policy by necessity is the composite evaluation of innumerable individuals, then no external source, such as science, can serve up a substitute solution. Science and research can, however, make the significant contributions of telling us what causes problems, what alternative remedies exist, and what results are to be expected of alternative actions. To ask more of science is to invite subjugation to scientists' limited insights and personal beliefs. To use less than science does offer is to destine society's problem-solving to mediocrity. Even now, research is sketching for us a picture of our declining farm population, our limited curricula in many rural schools, and

some alternative educational policies, but do not rely on research to decide the future education policy of Illinois. Such is the public's responsibility.

Secondly, what is the role of the private organization and interest group in policy development? They may well be the prerequisite for survival of contemporary democracy. The larger the population, the greater the area governed, the more interdependence between sectors of society, the more rapid the growth of technology, then the more that interest groups may need to shoulder the heavier burden in public policy formation. The private organization provides the vehicle for the individuals to express their "hurts", their ideas for solving existing problems, and their preferences among the alternative policies. Likewise, the organization is the vehicle for the individual to receive an awareness of problems, dependable knowledge about them, and suggested solutions. It is a means for each person to be identified and to identify in a democracy without completely losing individuality. It can provide a hearing for people <u>affected by a proposed policy</u> as well as those <u>affected by the problem</u>. The maturity of democracy may well be measured by the extent to which private organizations participating responsibly in policy development are considered honorable institutions and their lobbyists as statesmen. Farm organizations, rural churches, cooperatives, community clubs, and similar groups are leading actors in the drama of policy development.

Thirdly, what is the implication of our model of policy development to a changing agriculture? A changing agriculture is sure to experience new problems to which new public policy may be needed, but is equally sure to witness the obliteration of some existing problems and policies. The future organization of American agriculture, and its associated problems, is another important subject for analysis. Whether our society can best solve these problems with private or with public policy cannot and should not be prejudged. What does remain unchanged is the heavy mantel of responsibility resting upon every rural organization to help rural and urban alike to

understand not only the important problems of the time, but also to understand the vital processes of policy development.[5]

In Conclusion--The Individual

The individual remains the sole excuse for a democracy, for an interest group, and for a model of policy development. Disavow that supremacy of the individual and alternative political systems emerge superior. Yet, democracy cannot survive without participating individuals. Given people's indifference, policy development becomes an empty gesture and public policy devoid of public value.

Thus, fundamental to how agricultural and food policy is developed is how the individual participates in this development. Among these means of individual participation are the following: (1) keep informed about society, (2) solve and help others solve problems appropriately a private responsibility, (3) identify and create public awareness about problems appropriately a public responsibility, (4) initiate policy proposals, (5) express approval and disapproval on policy questions, (6) participate in meaningful interest groups, (7) exercise the voting franchise, (8) strive to preserve democratic processes and give lawful respect to the policies they generate.

In a democracy, public agricultural and food policy is developed by you. Its goodness or badness, its adequacy or inadequacy is your and my responsibility.

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[5] W. J. Block, political scientist and agricultural researcher observed, "Farmers' problems are going to be to communicate their interests and problems to people one or two generations from the farm, and to walk the tight rope between independent consideration of issues and the establishment of fairly firm alliances in the urban community. This calls for statesmanship of a high order. Politics in the United States are group politics and many of the participants are associations of relatively small membership. What they lack in numbers they make up in their use of the resources and the influence which they have." "Reapportionment and Its Implications" in Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies, Farm Foundation, 1965.