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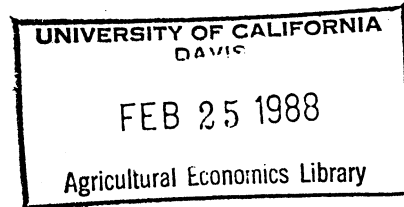
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Public Perceptions of Agricultural Policy in the U.S.

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*Experiment, GA.*

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### Abstract

#### Public Perceptions of Agricultural Policy in the U.S.

A nationwide survey was conducted to determine public attitudes toward agriculture. This paper examines 13 of the questions, focusing on government policy. While the respondents supported government policy toward agriculture, as income and educational levels increased the willingness to support the family farm via government programs and higher food prices decreased.

## Public Perceptions of Agricultural Policy in the U.S.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine public attitudes toward government agricultural policy. Federal government spending on agriculture increased to record levels during the 1980s, thus creating new problems for policy makers. Even though the agricultural financial crisis continues, the federal deficit makes the USDA budget a target for reduction. All of this is in the face of sentiments about the agrarian foundations of the U.S. (Cochrane 1979; Molnar and Duffy). Although most farm programs are still supported by Congress, there are indications that the ideological framework which accords special treatment to farmers is changing (Cochrane, 1986).

In 1986, the S-198 Regional Research Project, "Socioeconomic dimensions of agricultural change, natural resource use and agricultural structure," conducted a nationwide survey to determine the nonfarm public views of the changes taking place in the structure of agriculture. The questionnaire, "Farming in American Life," was developed on a collaborative basis by members of the S-198 technical committee. The questions were drawn from previous research on public attitudes toward farmers and farm issues.

The survey contained over 150 questions, including standardized questions to obtain socioeconomic background data (Van Dusen and Zill). The items in the survey included questions to determine the level of knowledge of farming, and the support for farmers and farm issues. For this paper, 13 questions regarding government policy were selected for analysis.

## DATA

The following discussion on the survey sample is from the S-198 technical document (Molnar). The data for this paper consists of 3,239 respondents.

The sample was a stratified random sample of persons in the United States, purchased from a national marketing firm (Donnelly Marketing, Nevada, Iowa). The population for which the sample was drawn consisted of a computer-merged list of residential telephone subscribers and automobile owners. Thus, the population should include almost all households in the United States. For example, households which do not list a telephone number and in which no member registers an automobile would be excluded, but most households with unlisted telephone numbers would be included.

The sample consisted of 10,000 names in eight strata. Four thousand households were sampled nationwide; 1500 households were drawn from Michigan; and 750 households were drawn from each of the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma and South Carolina. The respondents from each state were assigned appropriate weights to represent the proportion of that state's population in the national population.

To improve the return rate, the questionnaire was mailed three times with three reminder postcards. Including the completed, refused, and deceased questionnaires, and correcting for bad addresses, the return rate was 46 percent. While this is below the desired 70 percent return rate, it is high by actual experience with comparable surveys on similar issues and populations.

In order to enhance the representativeness of the data a statistical weighting procedure was undertaken. Poststratification or statistical weighting restores proportional representation of subgroups or categories of respondents that are over- or under-represented due to disproportionate sampling in the seven states as well as the vagaries of nonresponse, sampling error, or other sources of bias (Frankel; Sonquist and Dunkelberg).<sup>1</sup>

#### SURVEY RESPONSE

Although the increase in government spending for agriculture has been widely reported, when asked whether farmers receive too much money from government programs, nearly 45 percent of the respondents disagreed with that statement (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> However, when asked whether the government should treat farmers like other businesses, over 54 percent agreed. Although recent government policy has as a stated goal "to get government out of farming," the survey respondents did not view this as an alternative. Over 59 percent did not agree with the statement that the government should not be involved at all in agriculture.

Although most of the respondents favored treating farmers like other businesses, when asked about potential programs to aid farmers, the majority also favored these programs. Over 52 percent agreed that the government should help as many farmers as possible to own their farmland (Table 1). Further, nearly 62 percent agreed that government programs should help young people get started in farming. However, this consensus changes regarding government price support policies. When asked whether the government should guarantee a minimum price to

farmers for their products, 43 percent favored such a program, while over 37 percent disagreed, with nearly 20 percent undecided.

Much of the debate on farm policy centers on the desirability of protecting the so-called "family farm" and on the concentration of farm land in larger enterprises. When asked whether the government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive, close to 60 percent agreed; 3.3 percent strongly disagreed (Table 1). Yet when asked whether family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices, 36.6 percent agreed and 37.2 percent disagreed. When asked whether publicly-funded agricultural research should be primarily directed to small farms, more responded negatively than positively.

The respondents view of the affects of government policy on consumers and farmers indicates that farmers retain sympathy in the country. When asked if government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers, 38 percent agreed, and less than 30 percent disagreed. When asked whether government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers, over 43 percent agreed (Table 2).

Policy-makers are considering targeting farm spending since the amount of benefits for large farms has become an issue. When asked whether large farms get too much government support, nearly 48 percent agreed, and only 14.8 percent disagreed (Table 2). However, the problem of farm definition was also evident. Over 54 percent agreed with the statement that people who live on farms, but get most of their income somewhere else, really aren't farmers.

The questionnaire included demographic characteristics to identify the responses of population groups. For this paper, the demographic

characteristics for race, sex, education, income, and place of residence, were used to further explore the responses to three key questions.<sup>3</sup> A contingency table estimation was employed using the Chi-square statistic. The null hypothesis tests whether the probability of a joint occurrence between a demographic characteristic and a certain response is independent of the probability for the occurrence under an expected distribution.

Farmers receive too much money from government:

This question focused on how people perceive the level of government spending for agriculture. For the total sample, 27 percent agreed that too much government money goes to farmers, while 45 percent disagreed. The Chi-square statistic indicated that for all demographic characteristics tested, responses varied by category. By race, only 16 percent of the black respondents agreed with the statement, while 28 percent of the white respondents agreed. Nearly 60 percent of the black respondents did not think farmers received too much government money, while only 43 percent of the white's responded in this manner. By sex, males were more likely to think farmers received too much money, 33 percent, than females, 16 percent.

Place of residence had little effect on whether a person felt farmers received too much money from the government: 25 percent of the people who live on a farm felt this way; 26 percent of those who live in the country, and 28 percent of the large city residents. Income and educational levels however had an important impact on how this question was answered. Only 14 percent of those with incomes under \$5,000 per year believe farmers receive too much in government funds.



However, 40 percent of those with income above \$60,000 felt this way. For income levels between \$5,000 and \$25,000, the agree response rates to this question ranged from 17 percent to 22 percent. For incomes from \$25,000 to \$60,000, the agree response rate was between 27 percent and 35 percent.

Levels of education showed a similar pattern. As income and educational levels increase, which are highly correlated, the attitude that farmers receive too much federal funds also increases.

#### Minimum Price Supports:

When asked whether the government should guarantee a minimum price to farmers, 43 percent of the total survey agreed and 37 percent disagreed. The Chi-square statistic indicated that for all categories, responses varied. Men were most likely to not support minimum prices; 44 percent of the male respondents disagreed with the statement while only 21 percent of the women did not support price guarantees. Blacks were more likely than whites to support price guarantees, 59 percent of the black respondents agreed with price support, while 41 percent of the white's responded in this manner.

Price guarantees were supported by 49 percent of the farm residents, and 38 percent of the large city residents. Conversely, while 34 percent of those living on a farm did not support price guarantees, 39 percent of the large city residents responded similarly.

As with the previous question, levels of income and education had a strong impact on how this question was answered. For those with incomes above \$60,000 a year, 25 percent supported price guarantees, while 63 percent of those with less that a \$5,000 income favored price

supports. As income increased, the level of support for price guarantees declined. Similarly, as educational level increased the support for price guarantees declined. Only 24 percent of those with graduate degrees, and 32 percent of college graduates, supported price guarantees, while 50 percent of those with graduate degrees and 47 percent of the college graduates did not favor price supports. High school graduates favored price supports at a 50 percent rate while those with less than a high school degree favored price supports at a 60 percent rate.

#### Higher Prices for Survival of Family Farm:

When asked whether the family farm should be supported even if it meant higher food prices, the total sample was split evenly; 37 percent agreed and disagreed. The Chi-square statistic indicated that there was no statistical difference from the expected distribution by race. By sex, males were more likely to disagree than females, 41 percent to 30 percent, respectively. By place of residence, urban dwellers were less likely to want to pay higher food prices than rural residents. Forty-one percent of the large city residence did not support higher food prices and 25 percent of the farm residence also did not want to ensure the family farm through higher food prices.

Again, income and educational levels produced the most significant responses. As income and educational levels rose, the willingness to pay higher food prices declined.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion that can be drawn from this survey include:

1. People did not appear to believe that farmers receive too much money from the government, but thought the government should

treat agriculture like any other business. This did not mean however, that the government should get out of agriculture all together.

2. The majority of the respondents did support government programs to help farmers own their farmland and to assist young people to enter farming. However, support for minimum price guarantees was split.
3. A large majority of respondents felt that the government's policy should be to ensure the survival of the family farm, but not necessarily at the expense of higher food prices. The respondents slightly disagreed that agriculture research should be aimed at small farms.
4. The respondents viewed federal government involvement in agriculture as a benefit to consumers but a detriment to farmers.
5. While there is a bias evident against large, especially corporate, farms, there was evidence that the respondents do not think part-time farmers, especially those that get most of their income off-farm, are really farmers.
6. In general, blacks and women are more likely to support government programs that aid farmers than whites or men. Those with high incomes and educational levels are less likely to support government spending on agriculture.

Table 1. Attitudes Toward the Role of Government in Agriculture.

| Item   | Response (percent) |       |                |               |                      | No answer<br>(number) |
|--|--------------------|-------|----------------|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
|  | Strongly<br>agree  | Agree | Unde-<br>cided | Dis-<br>agree | Strongly<br>disagree |                       |
| 1. Farmers get too much money from government programs                         | 6.4                | 20.6  | 28.1           | 33.0          | 11.8                 | 77                    |
| 2. The government should treat farmers just like other businesses              | 12.5               | 41.8  | 16.4           | 24.0          | 5.3                  | 60                    |
| 3. The government should not be involved at all in agriculture                 | 7.1                | 11.0  | 22.6           | 46.8          | 12.5                 | 72                    |
| 4. Government should help as many farmers as possible to own their farmland    | 10.2               | 42.0  | 16.9           | 26.3          | 4.6                  | 61                    |
| 5. Government programs should help young people get started in farming         | 10.5               | 51.3  | 16.7           | 18.8          | 2.7                  | 64                    |
| 6. Government should guarantee a minimum price to farmers for their products   | 14.3               | 28.7  | 19.9           | 28.6          | 8.5                  | 64                    |
| 7. Government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive | 16.8               | 42.8  | 18.3           | 18.7          | 3.3                  | 72                    |
| 8. Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices        | 4.8                | 31.8  | 26.2           | 31.4          | 5.8                  | 66                    |
| 9. Publicly-funded agri. research should be primarily directed to small farms  | 5.5                | 29.9  | 25.4           | 36.0          | 3.3                  | 73                    |

Table 2. Attitudes Toward the Effect of Government Policy and Farm Size.

| Item   | Response (percent) |       |           |          |                   | No answer<br>(number) |
|--|--------------------|-------|-----------|----------|-------------------|-----------------------|
|  | Strongly agree     | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly disagree |                       |
| 1. Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers                                | 3.2                | 31.6  | 35.5      | 23.2     | 6.5               | 87                    |
| 2. Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers                                    | 9.1                | 34.2  | 32.8      | 21.6     | 2.3               | 77                    |
| 3. Large farms get too many government benefits  | 13.8               | 33.8  | 37.6      | 13.1     | 1.7               | 57                    |
| 4. People who live on farms but get most of their money somewhere else really aren't farmers | 9.6                | 45.0  | 14.2      | 28.7     | 2.6               | 61                    |

## NOTES

1. The first step in developing weights for the Farming in American Life data set corresponds to Babbie's discussion of disproportionate sampling and weighting. The seven states were disproportionately sampled to ensure adequate numbers for state-level analysis. To restore the proportionate representation respondents in the states in the national sample, weights were computed. The weight was equal to the percent that State represents in the U.S. population divided by the percent in the sample. The next weighting step examined age-sex-race differentials. The distribution of the U.S. population in 12 categories of male-female, white-nonwhite, and age (18 to 35, 35 to 64, and 65 and over) were calculated (U.S. Bureau of Census). The percents in the population were divided by the percents in the sample (as weighted by the previous step) to derive weights for age-sex-race subgroups. New weights were calculated by multiplying the previous weights (1 except for the 7 states) by the age-sex-race weights. The next step adjusted for differences by income. Weights were computed by dividing population by sample proportions. The previous weights were multiplied by the new weights to further adjust the data. In the final stage, the data were weighted by education. Final weights were computed by dividing population percents by sample percents and multiplying by the previously established weight variable.

2. In the discussion, percentages of strongly disagree and disagree, and strongly agree and agree, are combined into the two categories, disagree and agree.

3. For the demographic variables used, the respondents were categorized as:

|                   |                       |              |
|-------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Male:             | 67.4 percent          |              |
| Female:           | 32.6 percent          |              |
| White:            | 88.9 percent          |              |
| Black:            | 11.1 percent          |              |
| Education:        | Less than high school | 4.8 percent  |
|                   | Some high school      | 9.5 percent  |
|                   | High school graduate  | 26.0 percent |
|                   | Some college          | 27.1 percent |
|                   | College graduate      | 21.6 percent |
|                   | Graduate degree       | 11.0 percent |
| Income:           | Under 5,000           | 2.7 percent  |
|                   | 5,000 - 9,999         | 5.9 percent  |
|                   | 10,000 - 14,999       | 10.9 percent |
|                   | 15,000 - 19,999       | 11.6 percent |
|                   | 20,000 - 24,999       | 12.7 percent |
|                   | 25,000 - 29,999       | 13.5 percent |
|                   | 30,000 - 39,999       | 17.4 percent |
|                   | 40,000 - 59,999       | 16.6 percent |
|                   | Over 60,000           | 8.7 percent  |
| Presently living: | Large city            | 18.8 percent |
|                   | Medium city           | 23.6 percent |
|                   | Small city            | 19.7 percent |
|                   | Town                  | 16.4 percent |
|                   | Country               | 15.5 percent |
|                   | Farm                  | 6.0 percent  |

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