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ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURE: RESULTS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY

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Abstract

This study reports results from a nationwide survey of public attitudes toward agriculture. The study focuses on attitudes toward government involvement in agriculture across regions of the county and residential categories.

Key words: survey, farm programs, public attitudes.

Although farm programs have been in existence for more than 50 years, there is no clear consensus about how these programs have affected either producers or consumers. Although in the short run the programs may provide important income support to producers, in the long run farm policies may lead to resource misallocation and result in higher prices for agricultural assets, particularly land. The effects of farm policies on consumers are also uncertain. Some consumers, looking only at price support and supply reduction programs, may believe that farm programs cause market prices to be higher than they would be in the absence of the programs, but commodity stock accumulation under the price supports and direct subsidies that encourage production probably have a depressing effect on market prices. Also, the risk reduction under farm programs should have a stimulative effect on production, thus ensuring adequate supplies.

Although it may be impossible to determine once and for all what the long-run effects of commodity policies have been, popular perceptions of the effects of farm programs will be important in determining the future of farm programs. Because of the relatively high cost

of the 1985 Farm Bill, there has been interest in making a radical change in the direction of farm policies. The administration has proposed making large cuts in the target price without a corresponding increase in the loan rate. The much-discussed Harkin bill calls for strict production controls linked to high support prices. The administration's proposal is a decisive step toward "taking government out of agriculture," while the Harkin bill is an equally decisive step toward more government involvement.

The objective of this study is to examine public attitudes toward government involvement in agriculture. Popular perceptions of the equity of and need for farm programs have important implications for agricultural policy, which is determined by public will as enacted in the political system. In the study, respondents are initially divided into Southern and non-Southern categories, following the census definition of the South. Because many farm program crops are unique to the South (cotton, rice, peanuts, and tobacco), Southerners' attitudes toward farm programs may differ from those of other respondents. In a second analysis, respondents are further categorized by the size of community in which they live. Distinct attitudinal differences between rural and urban residents could signal the possibility of conflict in determining future agricultural legislation.

BACKGROUND—THE POLITICAL POWER BASE OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture's declining influence on farm policy has long been predicted (Talbot and Hadwiger; Paarlberg), and currently less than 3 percent of the population is directly involved

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in agricultural production. Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since the 1964 legislative reapportionment believed by many to signal the end of the political dominance of agriculture. Agricultural interests, however, are still powerful, as can be seen in the high cost of the 1985 Farm Bill. Some possible explanations for the continued political strength of agriculture are summarized below.

(1) In a popular essay, Friedman hypothesized that as farm numbers decline the political power of farm leaders increases. This hypothesis is consistent with the increased importance of single- or special-interest politics.

(2) The agricultural lobbyists have substituted food stamps and political action committee (PAC) dollars for farm numbers. Farm bills now attract urban votes through food stamps and other nutrition programs. PAC dollars have been particularly important for milk.

(3) Food continues to be recognized by consumers, trade, and foreign policy makers as being important, and these groups are willing to support policies designed to ensure adequate food supplies at reasonable prices. Additionally, nearly 20 percent of employment and GNP is related to the food industry.

(4) Southern congressmen and senators, who are supportive of agricultural legislation, generally have longer tenure than others, and Congress continues to operate primarily by the seniority system. The influence of the southern delegation can be seen in programs for rice, cotton, peanuts, tobacco, and sugar.

(5) In the Senate, agricultural states have a representation that is disproportional to their populations. Although the House has previously taken the lead in developing farm bills, in time there may be some observable shift in leadership toward the Senate.

(6) Tweeten (1983) has argued that agricultural values persist in the general population because of an "inertia" which keeps the basic values of a formerly agrarian culture from yielding to change. An "agrarian ideal" may still exist among urban residents, making them supportive of expenditures for agricultural programs designed to "save the family farm." (See also Comstock and Molnar and Wu.)

Whatever the reason for the continued political strength of agriculture, there are some signs that in the future the ideological framework that supports agricultural programs may weaken (Cochrane). For the last two decades, food stamps and nutrition programs have been included in the farm bills to increase urban

support. More recently, the Reagan administration has actively campaigned for a dramatic reduction in farm program benefits. Also, at the state and local level, laws are being passed to protect community residents from hazards caused by agricultural chemicals and wastes (Tripp).

In the future, policy makers will face difficult choices about the future of the commodity programs and the level of environmental regulation affecting farm operations. Because policies are shaped by perceptions, it is important to understand how the public perceives agricultural programs.

DATA SOURCE

Data for this study were obtained from the Farming in American Life Study, a nationwide mail survey of American households conducted in 1986 (Molnar et al.). The questionnaire was designed to assess beliefs about various issues related to: (a) the role of farming in society, (b) the appropriate role of the U.S. government in agriculture, and (c) the socially "desirable" size and structure of farms. A subset of the survey questions that relates to government involvement in agriculture was selected for this study. A full questionnaire is available upon request from the authors.

The sample was drawn from a computer-merged listing of residential telephone subscribers and automobile owners maintained by a national marketing firm. Questionnaires were mailed to 9,250 households, and 3,239 completed, usable questionnaires were returned, representing a return rate of 46 percent adjusting for incorrect addresses and decesses.

Respondents were asked to provide selected background characteristics, including the size of the community in which they resided at the time of answering the survey. There were six resident categories on the questionnaire: (a) large city (population more than 500,000), (b) medium-sized city (50,000 to 500,000), (c) small city (10,000 to 50,000), (d) town or village (less than 10,000), (e) in country but not on a farm, and (f) farm or ranch. For purposes of this analysis, categories b and c were combined into a category labeled "small city" and categories d and e were combined into a "small town" category.

Beliefs about the role of government in the agricultural sector were assessed with a fixed format response framework to tap direction and intensity of sentiment. Five response cate-

gories were provided: "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree," and "undecided."

The data were weighted to allow national analysis based on a sample design that featured oversampling in selected states. Sample weights were also calculated to counter differential response rates by population characteristics. In terms of age, sex, race, and income, the sample resembles the general population fairly closely. People with high levels of education are somewhat overrepresented, however. The weighting procedures retain the original sample size while improving the representativeness of the sample.

METHODS

Two different analytic strategies are employed in this study. First, responses to individual questionnaire items showing the level of support in the general population for different types of government involvement in agriculture are presented. In this analysis, the five response categories are collapsed into three, "agree," "undecided," and "disagree" to summarize more parsimoniously patterns of response to these items (Zeisel).

In this analysis, the sample is divided into the "South" and the "non-South," using the Census regions. Thus, the responses from Southern participants can be compared to those from non-Southern participants. To identify statistically significant differences in response patterns across regions, a chi-square "contingency" test is reported. The chi-square test of independence is a test of statistical significance used to assess the likelihood that an observed relationship differs significantly from that which could have occurred by chance.

A second analysis was performed to identify differences in response associated with residential category in terms of the rural to urban spectrum. A percentage agreement for each residential category was calculated. This percentage agreement is the percentage of each group that either agreed or strongly agreed with the item's statement. The percentage agreement provides a parsimonious method of summarizing differences in responses by residential category (Zeisel). Again, the respondents were divided into two regions, South and non-South, for purposes of comparison.

REGIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD FARM PROGRAMS

In Table 1, the percentage response distributions for the South and non-South are presented. The items in this table indicate the general level of public support for various aspects of farm policy. A number of the questions relate to the same theme but involve either differences in intensity of the sentiment or variations in question wording that bear on the relative acceptability of the perception of the issue. These questions are intended to identify consistent themes and gradients of opinions toward these topics.

Chi-square statistics indicate significant differences between Southern and non-Southern respondents in 15 out of the 25 items. The differences seem particularly striking in questions pertaining either to the family farm or to foreign policy.

Family Farming

Although the "family farm" concept appears to be favored by all respondents, Southerners are somewhat less likely than non-Southerners to support it. The notion that the family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage (item 1) met with wide support from both groups of respondents, with more than 80 percent in agreement. Responses to other items related to the family farm differed across regions of the country, however. Twenty-nine percent of Southerners believe efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm (item 2), compared to 19 percent of non-Southerners. In a related question, 42 percent of non-Southerners believe family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices (item 3), compared to 38 percent of Southerners.

The drop in support for the family farm when a personal "cost" might be involved was noticeable for both groups. There was overwhelming support for the family farm as a vital part of our heritage (item 1), but much less support for family farms if their preservation involves a cost to consumers (items 3, 4). When asked if the government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive (item 5), 69 percent of non-Southerners agreed, compared to 63 percent of Southerners. The differences between Southern and non-Southern responses to these items is not large, but a relatively consistent pattern of differences suggests that non-Southern

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE RESPONSE DISTRIBUTION FOR ENTIRE SAMPLE

Item		Response			x ²
		Agree	Undecided	Disagree	
Family Farming					
1) The family farm must be preserved because it's a vital part of our heritage.	South	80.2	10.2	9.6	4.9
	non-South	82.9	7.9	9.2	
2) Obtaining greater efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm.	South	29.3	25.8	44.9	65.2*
	non-South	19.2	20.9	59.9	
3) Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices.	South	37.7	27.1	35.2	13.8*
	non-South	42.4	28.9	28.6	
4) Most consumers would be willing to have food prices raised to help preserve the family farm.	South	25.7	23.6	50.6	2.7
	non-South	23.5	22.9	53.7	
5) Government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive.	South	63.3	23.5	13.2	15.9*
	non-South	69.0	17.5	13.5	
6) We should have laws that limit the ownership of farmland by corporations.	South	51.3	18.0	30.7	8.3
	non-South	56.7	16.8	26.5	
7) Corporate farms should pay more taxes than family farms.	South	66.0	13.8	20.1	16.7*
	non-South	67.2	17.7	15.1	
Government Involvement					
8) The government should not be involved in agriculture at all.	South	11.9	28.9	59.1	14.7*
	non-South	17.2	25.8	57.0	
9) Government involvement in agriculture has been about right.	South	13.6	48.2	38.2	4.9
	non-South	14.8	44.0	41.2	
10) The government should treat farms just like other businesses.	South	50.7	19.9	29.3	7.9*
	non-South	53.5	15.9	30.6	
11) Farmers should compete in a free market without government support.	South	34.0	33.4	32.6	7.2
	non-South	32.4	38.3	29.3	
12) Government should guarantee a minimum price to farmers for their products.	South	53.5	22.8	23.7	0.5
	non-South	53.1	22.1	24.8	
13) Large farms get too many government benefits.	South	39.6	38.3	22.1	41.2*
	non-South	44.7	42.2	13.1	
14) Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers.	South	33.3	39.6	27.1	1.9
	non-South	30.9	40.8	28.3	
15) Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers.	South	32.9	43.0	24.1	29.3*
	non-South	42.7	38.8	18.5	
16) Farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits.	South	18.8	26.9	54.3	16.6*
	non-South	15.3	33.8	50.9	
Foreign Assistance					
17) The U.S. government should use food as a political weapon when dealing with other countries.	South	30.6	22.8	46.6	10.0*
	non-South	25.3	23.3	51.4	

18) Farm products should be sold only to countries that support the U.S. in world affairs.	South	63.0	16.5	20.5	10.1*
	non-South	58.7	15.5	25.8	
19) The U.S. should help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production.	South	75.1	14.1	10.8	29.4*
	non-South	82.1	8.0	9.9	
20) The U.S. should help developing countries produce more food even if they might later compete with us in the world market.	South	49.7	24.0	26.3	22.6*
	non-South	56.7	24.3	19.0	
21) The U.S. should help feed the poor in developing nations.	South	50.9	26.5	22.6	1.2
	non-South	51.8	27.3	20.9	

Soil Conservation

22) Given the economic realities, soil conservation programs are often carried too far.	South	31.0	36.1	32.9	47.8*
	non-South	21.8	33.4	44.8	
23) Laws regulating excess soil erosion are badly needed.	South	53.6	39.5	6.9	9.6*
	non-South	58.3	33.8	7.9	
24) The government should pay farmers to practice soil conservation.	South	42.7	27.4	29.9	3.0
	non-South	39.5	29.7	30.9	

There were 967 Southern respondents. 2239 non-Southern respondents.

*Indicates significant difference at the .001 level.

TABLE 2. PERCENT AGREEMENT BY RESIDENTIAL CATEGORY

		Percent Agreement			
		Large City	Small City	Small Town	Farm
Family Farming					
1) The family farm must be preserved because it's a vital part of our heritage.	South	76.8	78.8	84.2	91.6
	non-South	79.8	87.1	83.5	91.6
2) Obtaining greater efficiency in food production is more important than preserving the family farm.	South	33.3	20.0	27.7	28.3
	non-South	19.5	18.3	19.2	13.9
3) Most consumers would be willing to have food prices raised to help preserve the family farm.	South	18.9	34.3	25.5	25.2
	non-South	22.2	28.4	24.1	13.4
4) Family farms should be supported even if it means higher food prices.	South	34.3	52.7	33.1	48.5
	non-South	41.9	48.6	39.7	45.3
5) Government should have a special policy to ensure that family farms survive.	South	58.3	55.6	65.7	77.6
	non-South	69.5	66.6	67.0	57.1
6) We should have laws that limit the ownership of farmland by corporations.	South	43.1	57.2	55.4	65.8
	non-South	56.3	45.9	58.5	64.7
7) Corporate farms should pay more taxes than family farms.	South	60.6	68.5	67.8	83.4
	non-South	69.6	67.0	66.5	83.7

Government Involvement

8) The government should not be involved in agriculture at all.	South	14.4	17.1	7.8	10.7
	non-South	12.3	21.2	16.2	30.3
9) Government involvement in agriculture has been about right.	South	14.7	12.1	12.8	32.1
	non-South	13.1	15.0	12.2	17.2
10) The government should treat farms just like other businesses.	South	45.6	59.2	44.7	56.4
	non-South	51.4	43.5	60.0	55.1
11) Farmers should compete in a free market without government support.	South	33.8	50.1	25.5	34.6
	non-South	23.7	39.2	39.4	45.4
12) Government should guarantee a minimum price to farmers for their products.	South	52.1	53.9	48.1	70.2
	non-South	51.5	52.8	52.2	43.2
13) Large farms get too many government benefits.	South	30.2	44.2	44.9	72.9
	non-South	42.2	43.8	46.8	68.1
14) Government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers.	South	41.7	38.0	25.0	50.5
	non-South	34.9	26.7	27.5	41.1
15) Government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers.	South	28.1	49.4	28.4	46.6
	non-South	36.2	44.2	49.1	59.5
16) Farmers get more than their fair share of government benefits.	South	18.9	21.9	13.6	36.1
	non-South	13.7	24.0	16.7	6.4

Foreign Assistance

17) The U.S. government should use food as a political weapon when dealing with other countries.	South	26.5	36.4	29.4	44.4
	non-South	21.9	20.5	30.0	48.6
18) Farm products should be sold only to countries that support the U.S. in world affairs.	South	56.6	64.7	64.6	67.8
	non-South	63.0	51.4	52.6	67.5
19) The U.S. should help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production.	South	73.7	84.9	73.3	83.0
	non-South	88.2	82.1	80.2	79.0
20) The U.S. should help developing countries produce more food even if they might later compete with us in the world market.	South	55.7	60.5	38.6	45.8
	non-South	59.3	53.8	58.8	53.2
21) The U.S. should help feed the poor in developing nations.	South	52.4	41.4	51.4	66.2
	non-South	59.3	50.5	47.5	44.2

Soil Conservation

22) Given the economic realities, soil conservation programs are often carried too far.	South	25.6	28.8	29.2	59.4
	non-South	18.5	18.8	21.6	38.5
23) Laws regulating excess soil erosion are badly needed.	South	55.1	52.0	44.4	69.2
	non-South	57.5	52.0	62.5	46.2
24) The government should pay farmers to practice soil conservation.	South	39.1	34.5	48.4	41.5
	non-South	40.4	38.3	35.6	29.1

responders are somewhat more inclined to support the "family farm" ideal.

In contrast to family farming, "corporate" agriculture was not viewed favorably. Slightly more than half the respondents believe that there should be laws to limit corporate ownership of farmland (item 6), and two-thirds believe that corporations should pay more taxes than family farms (item 7). While the level of agreement was similar for both groups, Southern respondents were more likely than non-Southern respondents to disagree with these statements. Although corporate ownership of farmland evokes negative reactions, there is currently very little basis for alarm. According to the 1982 census, less than 2 percent of U.S. farm acreage is held in non-family corporations.

Government Involvement

Both groups of respondents are generally supportive of government involvement in agriculture. Only 12 percent of Southern respondents and 17 percent of non-Southern respondents feel that the government should not be involved in agriculture at all (item 8), but only about 14 percent of all respondents believe that historic levels of involvement have been about right (item 9). The public seems to recognize a proper role for government in agriculture, but seems dissatisfied with current and past programs. Although more than half of the respondents believe that the government should treat farms just like other businesses (item 10), this is not necessarily an inconsistency. The respondents may perceive that other types of businesses receive government support.

When asked if farmers should compete in a free market without any government support (item 11), roughly one-third of all respondents agreed, a far higher percentage than those who agreed with the statement that the government should not be involved in agriculture at all. Perhaps respondents perceive a difference between a regulatory function of government and the specific farm programs aimed at supporting farm incomes. On the other hand, this inconsistency may be related to the phrasing of the statement. The term "free market" may have certain positive connotations that trigger a higher rate of agreement. While Southern respondents were less likely than non-Southerners to agree that the government should not be involved in agriculture at all, they were somewhat more likely to agree

that farmers should compete in a free market.

When asked if the government should guarantee a minimum price to farmers for their products (item 12), a little more than half of all respondents agreed, and another 22 percent were undecided. Thus, price support programs, while not overwhelmingly supported, are not politically unpopular. Southern and non-Southern responses were virtually identical for this item.

Approximately 40 percent of all respondents believe large farms get too many government benefits (item 13), with Southerners less likely than non-Southerners to agree with this statement. In an often-cited study, Lin et al. found that a disproportionately high amount of farm program benefits does, in fact, accrue to large farms. Because farm program benefits have almost always been tied in some way to production, these results are not surprising. The pattern of dependence on farm program commodities by farm size, however, shows that the medium-size "family" farms may be the most reliant on farm programs. Using 1982 census data, Tweeten (1986) calculated cash receipts from different commodities for different-sized farms. Farms in the \$40,000-\$99,999 cash-receipts range received more than 63 percent of cash receipts from farm program commodities, compared to only 21 percent for the largest farms (more than \$500,000 annual cash receipts). Although more total benefits accrue to the largest farms, it would appear that medium-sized farms may be more reliant on farm programs for income.

Questions about the overall benefits of farm programs evoked mixed responses. Approximately one-third of all respondents believe that government involvement in agriculture has helped consumers, while less than one-third disagree with this statement, and approximately 40 percent are undecided (item 14). Respondents were also split over whether government involvement in agriculture hurt farmers (item 15), but Southerners were less likely to agree with this statement than non-Southerners.

The lack of general public consensus over whether farm programs have ultimately benefited either producers or consumers is not surprising given the complexities involved in assessing the overall effects of farm programs. Even among agricultural economists, who presumably are much more knowledgeable about the history of farm programs than are members of the general public, there is considerable diversity of opinion regarding the effects

and social desirability of agricultural programs (Pope and Hallam). The large number of undecided responses to items 14 and 15 suggests that additional information may need to be provided to the public about the farm programs. In particular, there may be an opportunity for attitudes to be influenced either in favor of or against the programs.

Foreign Assistance

Items 17-20 were designed to assess attitudes about agriculture and foreign policy. Because 30 to 50 percent of production of many commodities is sold in the export market, international trade is crucial to the financial well-being of the American farmers. The 1973 soybean embargo and the more recent Russian grain embargo are both believed by many to have harmed the competitive position of the United States in world markets. Unlike the soybean embargo, the grain embargo was politically motivated and constitutes "using food as a political weapon" (item 17).

When asked if food should be used as a political weapon (item 17), only 31 percent of Southern respondents and 25 percent of non-Southern respondents agreed, perhaps indicating a lack of support for the Russian grain embargo. However, a milder rephrasing of the same theme (item 18) elicited a much higher level of agreement from both groups. This divergence may underscore the importance of "packaging" a program to gain public support or it may indicate a public acceptance of long-term policies in which our political allies are accorded preferential treatment and a lack of acceptance for short-term "punitive" policies which may cost the United States more than they do the intended victim.

More than 80 percent of non-Southern respondents believe the United States should help poor countries become self-sufficient in food production (item 19). Southerners are less likely to agree with this statement (75 percent agree), but support still remains high. When a caveat regarding the country's probability of competing with the United States later on is included (item 20), support falls considerably to 57 percent among non-Southerners and 50 percent among Southerners. P.L. 480 programs are apparently supported by a slim majority of respondents (item 21). Responses to this set of questions suggest that self-help programs for very poor nations, such as those provided by the U.S. A.I.D. and the Peace Corps, would be viewed more favorably than food give-away programs. South-

erners, in general, are more willing to support using food to obtain political ends and less willing to support food aid programs.

Soil Conservation

Respondents generally saw the need for soil conservation programs (items 22, 23), but only about 40 percent of all respondents were willing to pay farmers to practice soil conservation (item 24). The decrease in support may be due to awareness of the high budgetary costs of the farm programs. Southern respondents were more likely to agree that soil conservation programs are often carried too far (item 22) and less likely to agree that laws regulating soil erosion are badly needed (item 23). Thus, conservation as a farm program goal may be somewhat more attractive to non-Southern respondents.

DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE

Table 2 provides the percent agreement for each item by residential category, with respondents again divided into two regional groups. Most of the items did not result in startlingly different patterns of agreement across residential categories, although Southern farmers responded quite differently to some items (9, 12, 16, 22, 23) than did the rest of the sample.

Family Farming

Although the family farm concept is more highly supported by farm residents, the urban respondents were generally favorable, with more than three-quarters of all urban respondents agreeing that the family farm must be preserved because it is a vital part of our heritage (item 1). Although this is a distinct drop in percent agreement from the 92 percent reported for farmers, a solid majority of urban residents supports the family farm concept. This result follows Tweeten's hypothesis of a lingering "agrarianism" that provides a broad base of support for farm programs among non-farm residents.

Government Involvement

Outside the South, farmers were more likely than nonfarmers to endorse free market agriculture (item 11), but in the South, no such clear trend across residence can be seen. Only 35 percent of Southern farmers agree with this statement, compared to 45 percent among non-Southern farmers. Southern farmers were

far more likely than other Southerners or even non-Southerner farmers to agree that the government should guarantee a minimum price (item 12), with 70 percent in agreement. In general, it seems that Southern farmers, more than any other group, support the commodity programs. This support seems to be reflected in the Congress where Southern legislators tend to advocate farm programs with favorable provisions for Southern commodities.

Non-Southern farmers are more inclined than others to believe government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers (item 15), with 60 percent in agreement. Among Southern farmers, percent agreement is lower than among non-Southern farmers, but nevertheless a fairly large percentage (47 percent) agreed with this statement. Although this result may be surprising, it should be remembered that cattle and hog farmers have often opposed the government commodity programs because they perceive that the programs increase feed cost.

Additionally, farmers may be more aware of the long-term consequences of farm programs. The capitalization of farm program benefits into the value of rentable allotments has been a problem in both the peanut and tobacco programs (Maier et al.; Seagraves and Williams). In the less restrictive programs (cotton, grains, rice), subsidies tend to increase land values. Increased land values hurt both renters and new entrants.

The distinction between owner-operators and renters may be another important reason for the farm residents' agreement with item 15. Although less than 30 percent of all harvested acres is controlled by full owners, farm programs continue to be designed for the owner-operator and not the tenant. The land value distortion mentioned above is only one aspect of the problem. The "base" acreage, common to row crop programs, is tied to the land and does not accrue to the producer. A tenant may actively build up a program base, but if the rental arrangement terminates, the base remains tied to the land. Soil conservation programs may also benefit land owners at the expense of tenants. The conservation reserve program originally caused much concern among land renters. Although the program was modified somewhat in consideration of the concerns of tenants, it was clearly designed to benefit the full owner-operator.

Foreign Assistance

Farmers are more consistent than other groups in their responses to the questions that relate to using food for political aims (items 17, 18) and more inclined than others to support using food as a political weapon. This is somewhat surprising given the dependence of U.S. agriculture on a strong export market. The politically motivated Soviet grain embargo is generally believed to have adversely affected U.S. farmers far more than it hurt the Soviet Union. In spite of the realities of a highly competitive international market, many farmers may still be living in the past when our food exports were vital to the well-being of many countries.

Soil Conservation

With regard to the soil conservation programs, non-Southern farmers were less likely than other non-Southerners to agree that laws regulating soil erosion are badly needed (item 25). Conversely, Southern farmers, with 69 percent agreement, were more likely than other Southerners to agree with this statement. Southern farmers were also supportive of the idea that soil conservation programs are often carried too far (item 22), with more than 59 percent agreement to this statement.

Overall, the response patterns by residential category indicate some clear differences but do not suggest a rapidly developing political show-down over farm programs between rural and urban groups. Southern farmers as a group, though, often differ in their responses from other groups. They seem more supportive of government programs, particularly those aimed at supporting commodity prices (item 12) or ensuring the survival of the family farm (item 5).

SUMMARY

Results of the survey indicate that the general public is supportive of agriculture and the family farm concept, while "corporate" agriculture evokes negative reactions. Given the favorable public view of the "family farm," developers of agricultural policy should not downplay the objective of saving the family farm if they seek popular support. While only half of respondents favored price support programs, two-thirds favored a "government policy to ensure that family farms survive."

Few respondents believed that the government should not be involved in agriculture at all, but there was no consensus about the overall effect of the government programs. A siz-

able group of respondents was undecided about the effect of government programs on consumers or producers. This high level of public indecision suggests that public education efforts (either for or against certain provisions of agricultural policy) could strongly influence popular thinking by establishing a simple and direct framework for interpreting agricultural policy.

When the population is taken as a whole without regard to residential category, few important differences emerge between Southerners and non-Southerners. Examining South-non-South response patterns by place of residence, however, indicates that Southern farmers often differ from other groups in terms of their attitudes toward farm programs. Southern farmers, more than any other group, favor support prices and government policies to ensure family farm survival. Given the

Southern dominance of the agricultural policy agenda, it is not surprising that past commodity programs have often featured support prices.

Both Southern and non-Southern farmers are somewhat more likely than non-farmers to endorse the family farm concept, but support for this concept is high even in the urban sector. Farmers, particularly non-Southern farmers, were also more likely to believe that government involvement in agriculture has hurt farmers.

Overall, the survey responses indicate that the public is not satisfied with the farm policies of the past, but neither are they inclined to favor an across-the-board free market agriculture. Given the responses of the urban majority, it is unlikely that Congress will be sharply divided along rural-urban lines during future negotiations on farm policy.

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