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The changing political character of American farmers: 1954–2008



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ABSTRACT

Early studies of political attitudes and behaviors of agrarian voters in the United States argue that farmers are one of the most volatile voting groups in American history and that they have fluctuated over the 19th and 20th centuries in their political loyalties. More recent studies have produced contradictory findings about their partisan loyalties, ideology, efficacy, and participation rates, though, leaving the nature of this voting group unclear. Furthermore, as the size of the farm population has declined, studies of their political loyalties have become scarce. I review the previous research on farmers and their political attitudes; I then update these studies by examining farmers' party loyalties and political attitudes (partisanship, interest in public affairs, political trust, and efficacy) over time from the 1950s through 2008 using pooled American National Election Studies (ANES) data. I examine whether the changes result from aging, period, or generational (cohort) forces. I then compare the changes identified in this study with previous findings to assess whether agrarian attitudes remain unique and changing or have stabilized and become more like the rest of the population.

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1. Introduction

Farmers' political attitudes have been of interest for at least the last 150 years because as a group they have exhibited unique political attitudes compared to other occupational groups such as laborers. In the United States, farmers' responses to economic downturns have varied over the years, ranging from switching between the established political parties to organizing their own political parties, protests, and social movements. They have not only shifted their loyalties between the major parties, but have also shown loyalty to socialist parties, populist parties, and authoritarian movements (Lipset, 1981, 244). This varied history has given rise to many studies of farmer movements, and more recently of farmers' political attitudes and behaviors.

As the number of individual farms and farmers has begun to decline with the rise in corporate farms and large scale farming (see Danbom, 2006), the studies of agrarian voters have dwindled. Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, I undertake an update of earlier studies with a focus on the period from 1954 through 2008. I confine the analysis to several basic political attitudes: party identification, ideology, interest in public affairs, trust in government, and political efficacy. Party identification is of continuing interest given the switches in loyalty that farmers have

displayed over the years, and I am especially interested in how they respond to economic problems such as those in the 1970s, early 1980s, and 1990s. As for ideology, farmers have been difficult to characterize over the years; in fact, historians have characterized the populist movement of mid-1890s America as being both radical and reactionary. In addition, political scientists characterize farmers as being alternatively conservative or liberal depending on the time period under examination. With their shrinking numbers in the second half of the twentieth century and the declining influence that accompanies the reduced size of their voting group, the civic attitudes of farmers might have changed as well; hence, I include feelings concerning trust in government, efficacy, and interest in politics in my analysis. In short, given farmers' varied responses over the years to declining political influence and changing economic circumstances, it is reasonable to expect that farmers might have changed over the last half of the twentieth century in a manner that parallels the past.

My analysis asks several questions about the changes in farmers' political attitudes: First, I examine the aggregate trends among farmers in order to identify the most substantial changes between 1954 and 2008. Next, among those attitudes displaying change, I examine the forces motivating such changes, in order to determine the nature of the changes in agrarian political attitudes. I ask whether particular changes among farmers between 1954 and 2008 are driven by period forces in the identified time periods, by changes in the population due to aging, or by differences between

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generations of farmers. Finally, I consider whether these trends are a continuation of the fluctuations in attitudes observed in the past, or whether they reflect broader trends present outside of the agrarian population.

2. Agrarian political behavior: an overview

2.1. The American voter and responses

Early attempts to examine agrarian voters in the United States emphasize that these voters are unique from others in the population. The main characterization of farmers comes from *The American Voter*, a foundational study of political attitudes and behaviors that established a paradigm for scholarly research on voting (Campbell et al., 1960; see also Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Preface). The characterization of farmers in this text is of particular importance to this analysis as the same data source is used, allowing for a direct comparison of this early characterization to any changes observed in agrarian attitudes and behaviors over time. Their chapter focused on agrarian political behavior (Ch. 15) finds that farmers are a unique population more responsive to economic shocks and less participative than other voters. The authors' explanation for this difference is that farmers, like laborers, are handicapped by their lower levels of education and political information, and that their physical remoteness only serves to enhance such problems. Further evidence of their unique nature comes from research examining whether farmers are isolationists, finding evidence of isolationist attitudes, but little support for isolationist candidates (Taylor, 1944). Findings such as these suggest that one should detect unstable political attitudes over time among agrarian voters. Conversely, one might expect to find that their behaviors, such as interest in politics and level of participation remain stable and low.

Studies that respond to these early claims concerning agrarian voters in the United States produce quite different results, however. *The American Voter Revisited*, in its attempt to replicate *The American Voter*, is unfortunately unable to analyze agrarian voters in the same manner due to the small number of cases¹ (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). However, the authors are able to provide a partial update to an earlier study by Lewis-Beck (1977a), where he finds that farmers are nearly as participative as urban professionals, and participate far more than their counterparts – urban laborers. He goes on to argue that past research underestimates the political participation levels of farmers due to the different nature of political and civic activities in rural and urban areas (Lewis-Beck, 1977a; see also Rich, 1999). He does provide some conclusions consistent with earlier findings, as his evidence suggests that farmers are individualistic in their political activity and identify with parties less than other voters do (Lewis-Beck, 1977a).

Knoke and Henry (1977) also reexamine *The American Voter*, with an additional consideration of agrarian ideology. They, too, produce evidence contrary to *The American Voter*. Like Lewis-Beck (1977a), they find that farmers are highly participative. They also find that agrarian voters are more Republican and conservative than the population as a whole (more so than other rural voters are, in fact). They do find that agrarian voters were likely to support extremist movements, as suggested by Lipset (1968), but overall conclude that they are no more likely to support extremist movements or exhibit attitudes of mass apathy than other voters. These findings imply that one would expect to observe great fluctuations in agrarian political attitudes and behavior over time, as the re-

examination of earlier results produces nearly opposite conclusions. Additionally, despite the difference in the nature of their findings, these later studies still characterize agrarian voters as being quite different from other voters on many dimensions.

Several other studies contribute to the mixed findings concerning the uniqueness of farmers. In addition to the history of a lack of attachment to traditional political parties, several authors find that agrarian voters exhibit ideological differences from the rest of the population (Buttel et al., 1982; Leithner, 1993; Lewis-Beck, 1977b; Wolfinger and Greenstein, 1969). Lipset (1968) argues that due to their precarious economic circumstances, agrarians in the United States and Canada are more likely than the rest of the population to support Socialists. Similarly, Leithner (1993) explains that agrarian voters may behave more individualistically than other voters because they are more sensitive to the variant nature of commodity prices, which is similar to Lewis-Beck's (1977b) explanation. Not all studies agree on the ideological leanings of agrarian voters, however. As previously mentioned, Lipset (1968) argues that they support extremists with Socialist leanings whereas Knoke and Henry (1977) argue that they support extremists with right-wing leanings. Others simply take the stance that agrarian voters do not support certain extremists, but do not make statements as to what ideological leanings these voters hold instead (Marks and Burbank, 1990; Schenck et al., 1974; Trow, 1958). Casting doubt on the findings that farmers are in some way unique, Kornberg and Clarke (1994) find no differences between the political beliefs of farmers and of other voters in agrarian prairie regions. They argue that like other voters in these regions, their beliefs cluster around the values of security, opportunities, elections-capitalism, and equality of group influence. In recent years, little attention has been paid to this population specifically – the focus has been on rural voters in general, though some recent findings do suggest that rural farming areas have shifted more strongly towards support of the Republican party than rural areas in general (Scala et al., 2015). It is therefore unclear whether one would expect farmers to exhibit attitudes similar to the remainder of the population in recent years or not.

2.2. What is driving changes in farmers' political attitudes?

Considering that past studies have produced such varied results concerning the political attitudes of agrarian voters, one might ask what forces have been driving these changes. Lewis-Beck (1977a) finds evidence that younger farmers are those exhibiting these new attitudes and behaviors. He hypothesizes that this may be due to their higher sense of political efficacy or higher socioeconomic status, though he does not examine these possibilities fully. Knoke and Henry (1977) argue that urbanization is causing farmers to converge toward urban voters (see also Leithner, 1993). Examining this convergence hypothesis, Drury and Tweeten (1997) find that attitudes such as party identification converge, but other traits of farmers, such as ideology and trust (more conservative, more trusting), remain unique from those of other voters. Although it might seem that Drury and Tweeten (1997) answer the question that I am asking, Offut et al. (1998) argue that their study asks improper questions, fails to control for sociodemographic factors, and defines concepts subjectively. Furthermore, their question is somewhat different: whereas they ask whether farmers have “lost their uniqueness,” I ask not only how but also why farmers have changed over time.

Despite the flaws cited in their study, one must consider that there is reason to expect that the attitudes and behaviors of farmers may have changed, and perhaps become less “unique” over time. Although the conclusions of my study have limitations as well, due to the small number of cases present in the data, the data do allow

¹ I encounter a similar problem in 2004, which is discussed in the final section of the paper, but I chose to present the findings with discussion of their limitations rather than exclude them altogether.

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