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The Political Preferences of Arkansas Farmers and Ranchers

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The Political Preferences of Arkansas Farmers and Ranchers

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Business
Honors Program

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May 2020

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Abstract

Agriculture generates \$21 billion to the state's GDP and provides nearly 270,000 jobs in Arkansas. Farm producers face increased debt and production issues guided by increased government mandates and regulations. Access to information is critical to improving production efficiency, but little is known about how farmers are informed on the policy or issues influencing programs related to farming. This research sought to determine the sources of communication used by farmers and ranchers to form opinions about agricultural policy and candidates, identify the issues important in voting, and the level of participation in the political process.

Face-to-face interaction is the preferred form of communication in farm organization meetings, with friends, or farm agencies. Magazines were the preferred sources of print communication and university/extension websites for internet sources. Broadcast media and social media were the least preferred sources of information about policy information, yet consulted more often about candidates. Friends and family were also the more preferred sources used to gather information about candidates along with meet the candidate event. Farm Bureau was the most frequent source of published information. Farmers and ranchers have higher than average levels of voter turnout and typically prefer to take political action by writing letters to their elected representatives. Most farmers and ranchers consider conservative issues, prioritizing gun control and abortion, as critical issues on the ballot. The candidate's values were the most important characteristic when choosing to support a candidate. While farm advocacy groups are producing information on policy and candidates, this information is frequently shared through friends. Additional research is needed on the opinion leaders trusted in face-to-face interactions.

Introduction

The Importance of Agriculture in the United States

U.S. Agriculture

The United States Department of Agriculture [USDA] Economic Research Service [ERS] estimates that agriculture contributed \$1.05 trillion to the U.S. economy in 2017 (Economic Research Service [ERS], 2019a). In the same year, agriculture and the food sector provided full-time employment for nearly 22 million Americans (ERS, 2018a). Of these jobs, 2.6 million were direct on-farm employment, indicating that the portion of people working in production agriculture is very small (ERS, 2018a). Data from the 2012 Census of Agriculture reports that over 40% of land in the United States is dedicated to production agriculture (National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2014).

Arkansas Agriculture

In 2017, Arkansas Agriculture generated \$8.9 billion in cash receipts. Ranking first in rice production and second in broiler production, Arkansas is consistently a leading state in the production of rice, broilers, catfish, cotton, and turkeys (Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability, 2020). The aggregate agriculture sector's share of the state economy is more substantial in Arkansas than any other state in the country (Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability, 2020). Agriculture added \$10.6 billion to the state's economy directly and an additional \$10.5 billion through indirect and induced impacts (Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability, 2020) for a total of more than 21 billion dollars to the state's GDP. Additionally, Arkansas agriculture provided nearly 270,000 jobs (one of every six) for Arkansans in 2016 (Center for Agricultural and Rural Sustainability, 2020).

Shrinking Farm Population

One of the major issues affecting the U.S. economy is the continuing loss of farms and farmland. Since 1997, the number of farms in the United States has decreased by nearly eight percent (Henderson, 2019). All of these farms were lost in the middle-sized farm category-- the farms that make up the backbone of the rural United States (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2017). From 2012 to 2017, there has been an 18% increase in farms less than nine acres, and a 3.5% increase in farms with 2,000 or more acres. (Henderson, 2019). Only two percent of the U.S. population is involved in production agriculture (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2019a). Trends show that net farm incomes declined in real value from a peak year in 2013 to 2019 (ERS, 2020), and since 2010, U.S. farm debt has increased from \$20 billion to more than \$425 billion (The ERS Farm Income Team, 2020).

Producer

While the shrinking population and debt have a significant impact, farm producers are facing new challenges resulting from government mandates and regulations. A survey conducted by Case IH (2011) asked producers to identify the top issues confronting operation expansion over a variety of time horizons. No matter the time horizon, the issues were consistently new government mandates and regulations. Other issues were growing global demand for commodities, price for land for expansion, global financial markets, global trade policies on food security, supply and demand for commodities, and development and use of bio-based fuels (Case IH, 2011). Broadly, these issues fit into three areas, all marked by governmental participation in trade and farm economics, environmental regulation, and land use.

Likewise, a 2020 CoBank Knowledge Exchange survey identified 10 issues that will limit the growth of the rural economy. Once again, the majority of these issues fit into the categories

broadly established earlier as trade and farm economics, environmental regulation, and land use. The plight of farmers is consistently tied to policies that affect production.

Policy

Agriculture in the United States is primarily regulated by policy directives contained in a legislative act, known as a farm bill. The United States Department of Agriculture administers the various policies of the farm bill on commodity programs and crop insurance, conservation of agricultural lands, agricultural trade, nutrition, farm credit, rural economic development, agricultural research, state and private forestry, bioenergy, and horticulture and organic agriculture (ERS, 2019b). Early policies supported family farms while recent policies are more comprehensive in support of broader initiatives influenced by environmental, energy, consumer, business, and agricultural interest groups (Reimer et al., 2016). While these factors may be outside of their control, farmers must be more attentive as their plight is consistently tied to policy that affects production.

Literature Review

Where Farmers Get Information

Access to and use of agricultural information is a critical factor in improving agricultural production in any country (Nxumalo & Oladele, 2013). Thus, the economic rationale for farmers' access to information is to enable them to manage the risks and uncertainties regarding the production and marketing of their produce. The better the farmers manage risks, the more profitable their business becomes (Parmar et al., 2019). Insufficient access to agricultural information is a barrier to improving agricultural production (Zelaya, Harder, & Roberts, 2016).

The Role of Extension

The University Cooperative Extension network was established in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act to extend outreach programs of agricultural research through land grant universities across the country to educate rural Americans about advances being made in agricultural production practices (The National Archives Foundation, n.d.). The Extension Service was established in a time when more than half of the U.S. population lived in rural areas, and almost one-third of the U.S. workforce was engaged in on-farm production. Extension work is credited with enabling the American Agricultural Revolution, which dramatically increased productivity during the First World War, the Great Depression, and through World War II into the post-war era, during which the number of farms in the U.S. dropped by over three million while production continued to increase (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.). The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (n.d.) asserts that the extension service played a major role in increasing the number of people fed by each American farmer from 15 to 140 between 1950 and 1997 due to education, training, and access to information.

The Extension Service has a long history of trust in providing useful, unbiased, science-based information via land-grant institutions (Borelli et al., 2018). In a study on trusted sources of global warming information, more producers trust extension agents than scientists, indicating that extension has credibility as a trusted source of information (Prokopy, et al., 2015). Meagy (2013) found that increased contact with extension personnel and increased agricultural knowledge were the most effective methods in resolving farmer concerns. Jones et al. (2010) indicated that experienced farmers tend to use extension resources more than other sources for production decisions due to an appreciation of the level of knowledge shared through university extension. In early studies of effective technology transfer, Tripathy and Panday (1967) found

personal contact, demonstrations, group discussion, and literature were the most effective methods used by the extension service.

The Role of Agribusinesses and Peers in Information Dissemination

As production technology and practices began to change rapidly in the late 20th century, farmers began to turn away from extension and toward agribusinesses for information used to make production decisions (Gloy et al., 2000). This could be due, in large part, to the increasing size of farms in the United States, and the increased privatization of agricultural production technology development (Bernacchi & Wulfhorst, 2017).

When farmers were asked who they “go to first” to find information about different production decisions, results consistently pointed toward trusted agribusiness community members, including seed salesmen and chemical dealers (Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2012). For conservation information, most farmers indicated that they would visit with NRCS Service center staff before seeking information from state extension agents (Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2012). In the same study, when asked about financial decisions such as crop marketing, only 12% of respondents indicated that they seek information from cooperative extension before making decisions (Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2012).

In a study conducted in 2018, researchers found that the first and second most trusted sources of information for production decisions were other local producers and crop advisors from agribusiness companies, while the third most trusted source of information was university extension (Borrelli, et al., 2018). In a series of surveys and interviews conducted by Bernacchi and Wulfhorst (2017), private consultants were described as a trusted source of information used to make production decisions because they are extremely familiar with both the specific decision to be made and the context of the decision within the farm operation. They stated:

Consultants know intimate details about farms, including personal information about a producer's family life, financial situation, and management style (e.g., aggressive adopter of new technologies or risk-averse). The consultant works within the context of the goals of the producer ('I have to know the rotation, the history of the field, and what the grower's goal is' ... 'to make recommendations [CC-5]) and provide options, based on price and effectiveness, for the producer to select from (CC-4)'. ... They visit fields, meet clients in their offices, and are available by phone, email, and text. (Bernacchi & Wulfhorst, 2017, p.4)

Accessing Information

Other than production information, farm producers access media sources in different ways. Adults over 65 regularly get news from the print newspaper while most adults under 50 receive their news from online sources (Mitchell et al., 2016). A study by Farm Journal media found that 88% of farmers surveyed (n=2,167) use a smartphone, and 43% use a tablet, with 99% using a smartphone and 61% a tablet daily or multiple times per day (Farm Journal, 2019). Of farmers with access to online media, 81% of farmers use the internet to connect to online consumer media for five or more hours per week, with only six percent of farmers consuming online media one or fewer times per week (AgWeb, 2018). In the same study conducted by AGWeb (a Farm Journal Media Brand), it was found that more than half of farmers use social media at least once per week, with the most popular platforms being Facebook and Twitter (AgWeb, 2018).

Rural Broadband

The opportunities to access information over the internet have rapidly evolved over the last decade. The 2011 Iowa State Cooperative Extension Poll showed that 70% of farmers used the

internet (Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2011). In 2019, the United Soybean Board found that 60% of U.S. farmers do not have reliable enough internet connectivity to “run their business,” indicating that they likely lack access to the internet to use for information discovery (United Soybean Board, 2019). The survey data revealed that rural internet usage is 78% compared to over 90% for urban populations (United Soybean Board, 2019)

Political Preferences

Modern Rural America

Based on recent elections, rural American voters, especially in the Southern and Midwestern United States, typically support Republican candidates. Farmers tend to favor Republican candidates more than their other rural neighbors, even when their personal economic interest is negatively impacted. In a study analyzing how a rural county’s economy impacts their political views, Scala et al. (2015) found counties whose economies were based on recreational activities rather than farm activity were less likely to vote for Republican candidates overall.

The 2016 election analysis showed that rural counties with large farm populations are statistically more likely to support Republican candidates despite the possibility of harm to the overall farm economy (Goetz et al., 2019). Across the country, as advocates of small government, Republican candidates overwhelmingly favor cuts to spending on farm aid and support programs, which represents an important part of risk management in the farm economy. Farmers often rely on government aid to bring their product to market and for their farms to survive, even in years without trade wars, natural disasters, or extremely low basis values.

Mason (2018) explained that farmers favor candidates that generally increase the risk to their farms because they are more attached to the social impact of their chosen label (liberal or conservative) than the ideology. This could explain why rural Americans vote for Republican

candidates even when the candidate's view on crucial issues do not necessarily align with the needs of the voter.

Rural voters played a critical role in the last presidential election (Nosowitz, 2016), but with so many social issues on local, state, and national ballots, little is known whether farmers are voting along with ideologies or party lines.

Arkansas Political Preferences

Arkansas voters participating in the Arkansas Poll over the last three years have consistently ranked the economy and healthcare as the most important issues (Parry & Whitby, 2019). Trends show that Arkansans, in comparison to the rest of the country, generally favor less gun control, favor increased border security, and support more lenient immigration laws (Parry & Whitby, 2019).

The Advocacy Role of a Farmer in our Political System

Grass Roots Movements

The organization that has advocated for the issues important to farm producers for the past 80 years is the American Farm Bureau. The American Farm Bureau is the largest grassroots, agricultural lobbying group, in the United States, exerting influence and acting at the local, county, state, regional, and national levels. Started in 1919, Farm Bureau has identified themselves as “the voice of agriculture,” and is often looked to as an authority on issues that affect production farming or rural life. With nearly six million members, Farm Bureau wields the power of the dollar and that of majority support (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2019b).

Similar to Farm Bureau, Grange is a grassroots organization advocating on behalf of U.S. farmers at the local, county, district, state, and national levels. The Grange was founded in 1867, in the aftermath of the Civil War, as a response to large companies monopolizing the natural

resources of the newly settled midwestern states (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). The most recognizable legacy of the Grange is the creation of “Granger Laws,” which regulated the fees that elevators and railroads could charge farmers to store or transport their grain. Today, the National Grange advocates on behalf of farmers to protect through efficient legislation and regulation and to advocate for the development of policy that enhances the quality of rural life. With only 160,000 members in 2005, National Grange has much less influence than the American Farm Bureau.

Commodity Groups

Commodity groups are funded by mandatory checkoff programs producers pay into for “generic commodity promotion, research, and information program” (Sabet, 2010). These commodity boards use most of this funding for general advertising and promotion of commodity products, such as beef or milk (Williams, 2006).

Commodity boards, such as the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association [NCBA], typically have a unit of operation dedicated exclusively to lobbying and policy development. The NCBA supports its political action committee, NCBA-PAC, which supports candidates the NCBA identifies as having an impact on the cattle industry (National Cattlemen's Beef Association, n.d.). Other commodity boards support candidates in the same manner.

Statement of Problem & Research Objectives

While multiple studies have been conducted on the sources of information for production and marketing decisions, as well as groups advocating for farmers and ranchers, little research has been conducted on how farmers prefer to vote. Little is known about whether farmers research and evaluate candidate positions or the issues that may have an impact on agricultural policies. If farmers do research and evaluate positions on ballot items, forming an educated and

carefully considered decision, before casting their vote, we should seek to understand what forces and factors can influence the way that this decision is made. This study seeks to understand the information sources and preferences that influence decisions before voting.

The objectives for this study were to:

- I. Determine the sources of information used by farmers to form opinions about agricultural policy and candidates.
- II. Determine the issues farmers consider important when voting.
- III. Determine the level of participation of farmers in the political process.

Impacts & Outcomes

Farmers should maintain a vested interest in U.S. farm legislation as they consider the future of agriculture. Farmers must be able to protect themselves through legislation by being an informed decision-maker. By understanding information sources and how farmers consume political information, commodity groups and farm advocacy organizations should find opportunities to educate farmers about current political issues. Because I hypothesize that farmers consume most of their information from social networks (i.e., utilizing connections and related human capital to gather a majority of their information), the impacts of this study should be evident to the agricultural community even if the results are only utilized in a few instances. If commodity groups utilize this data to understand the political and cultural economy of farmers, they should be able to mesh their policy with more digestible positions on a variety of topics that farmers indicate are important determining opinions. When commodity groups and farm advocacy organizations can spread information more effectively, they can devote more resources to advocating for production agriculture, which is crucial to the future of the industry from both a legislative and public relations point of view.

Materials and Methods

This study used a quantitative, nonexperimental design to describe the characteristics and political preferences of Arkansas farmers and ranchers. This approach involved data collection through the administration of a survey. The goal of this study was to assess the preferences of Arkansas producers for political information consumption and political participation in agricultural legislation and policy. The data collected was based on a convenience sample of agricultural producers across the state obtained at two events hosted by the Arkansas Farm Bureau, the 2019 Annual State Meeting in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the 2020 Young Farmers and Ranchers Conference in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Instrumentation

This survey was administered via paper copies to producers attending the meeting. The instrument consisted of 14 questions to ascertain a farmer's preferences for information sources and channels used for forming an opinion on agricultural policy and candidates running in general elections, the issues most likely considered when developing a personal voting position, past political involvement, and preferences for discussing and sharing information with peers and acquaintances. Demographic information was collected on farm size and type, acres, farmer age, years of experience in agricultural production, and agricultural leadership positions.

Questions for this survey were developed after a literature review under the influence of the study's goals and objectives. The instrument was reviewed by both a former member of the Arkansas Farm Bureau legislative team, the director of the Arkansas Poll and a panel at the University of Arkansas faculty to determine the appropriateness of questions. The clarity and precision of the instrument were tested on a producer population ineligible for participation in

this study before being administered to study participants. Institutional approval was given by the University of Arkansas (IRB #1911231867).

Results

Population

The survey population was farmers and ranchers who attended the Arkansas Farm Bureau Annual Meeting and the Arkansas Farm Bureau Young Farmers and Ranchers Conference. Only those who were actively engaged in production agriculture could take the survey. There were 90 responses to the survey.

The respondents were split between those 18 and 35 (46.4%) and those over age 50 (38.1%), with only 15.5% between the ages of 36-50. Respondents tended to be livestock producers (67.5%), with roughly one-third of the respondents being row crop or produce farmers. The respondents reported between three to 60 years of experience in farm production, with the most frequent category being 26-50 (42.2%) years of experience. The respondents' farm size (combination leased & owned acres) was most frequently 101-500 acres (43.4%). Fourteen respondents (16.9%) reported farm operations of 100 acres or less, while 11 respondents (13.25%) reported farming over 2000 acres. Of respondents, 68% had served in a leadership role of an agricultural group. This data is reported in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Farmer and Rancher Respondents*

Demographic		Count	Percent
Age (n=84)	18-35	39	46.4
	36-50	13	15.5
	51-65	23	27.9
	66+	9	10.7
Farm Type (n=77)	Livestock	52	67.5
	Crop	25	32.5
Years of Experience (n=83)	1-10	22	26.5
	11-25	25	30.1
	26-50	35	42.2
	51+	1	1.2
Farm Acre Size (n=83)	100 or under	14	16.9
	101-500	36	43.4
	501-1000	12	14.5
	1001-2000	10	12.1
	2000 +	11	13.3
Experience in a Leadership Role (n=88)			
	Yes	60	68.2
	No	28	31.8

Objective I: To determine the sources of information used by farmers to form opinions about agricultural policy and candidates.

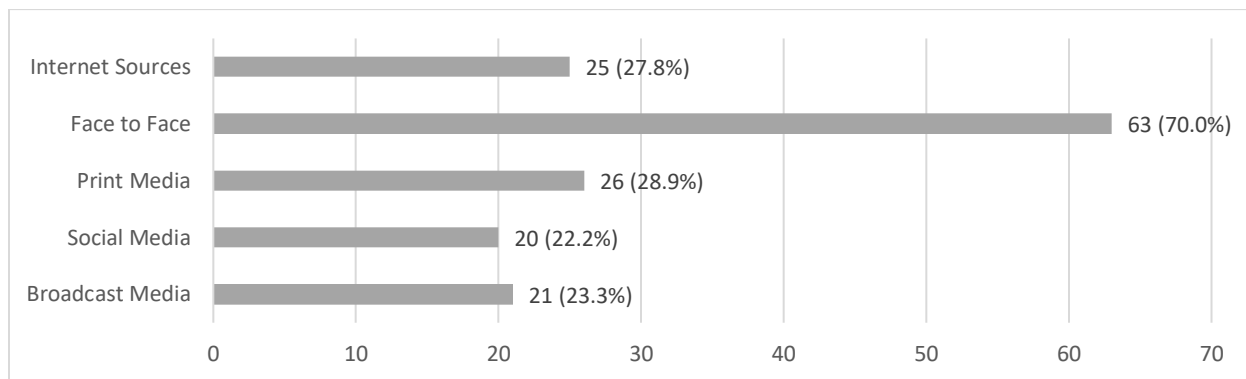
To determine objective one, a series of questions were asked about sources of information farmers consult when making a decision about a policy or candidate, the preference of consulting each source, as well as the publisher of the information consulted on agricultural policy and candidates.

Policy Sources

Respondents (n=90) were asked to choose the source(s) of communication used most frequently to gather information for evaluating policy. The sources of communication offered included internet sources, face- to- face communication, print media, social media, and broadcast media. Most respondents (70.0%) used to face- to- face communication as a primary source of information used to evaluate policy. The next highest sources were among print media (28.9%) and internet sources (27.8%). The least frequently used source was social media (22.2%). Respondents remarked to researchers during the administration of the survey that they often felt social media was too biased to be used as a source for important information. Results for all sources are reported in figure 1.

Figure 1

Communication sources frequently consulted for policy decisions (n=90)



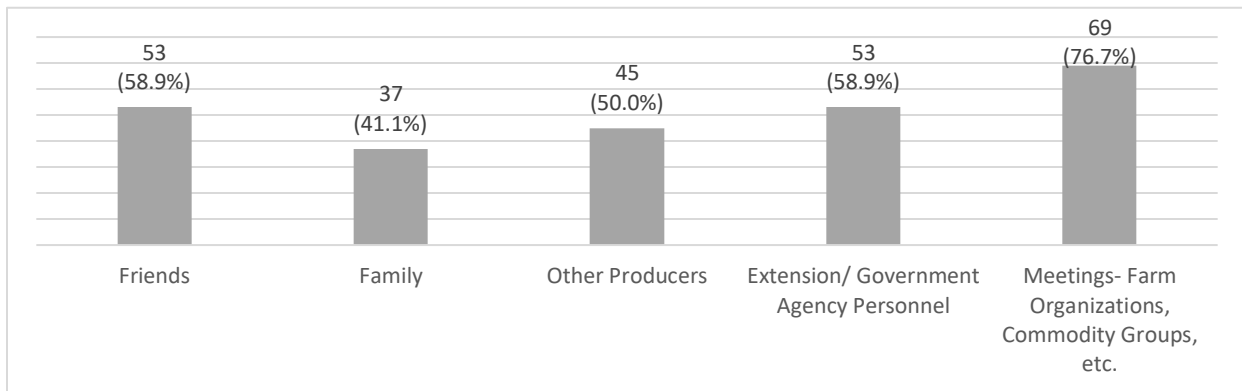
Note: Percentage will total more than 100% as respondents could select all forms of communication utilized to gather information on policy

Of the five forms of communication media, survey respondents were asked to identify further specific types of communication used in each source consulted. These results are shown in figures 2-6.

When asked to identify which type of face-to-face communication consulted, most respondents (76.7%) indicated that they rely on meetings of farm organizations and commodity groups to find information about policies. The next most utilized form of communication tied between consulting friends (58.9%) and Extension/ Government Agency personnel (58.9%). Producers rely on family (41.1%) the least when gathering information about policies. Figure 2 shows the results for all sources of face-to-face communication.

Figure 2

Types of face-to-face communication used to gather information about policy (n=90)



Note: Percentage will total more than 100% as respondents could select all forms of face-to-face communication utilized to gather information on the policy.

Print media was the second most frequent form of communication source consulted by respondents. The highest use rate of print media among respondents was for magazines (48.9%) followed by newsletter (26.7%) and newspapers (24.4%). The results for all types of print media considered in figure 3.

Figure 3

Types of Print Media used to gather information about policy (n=90)

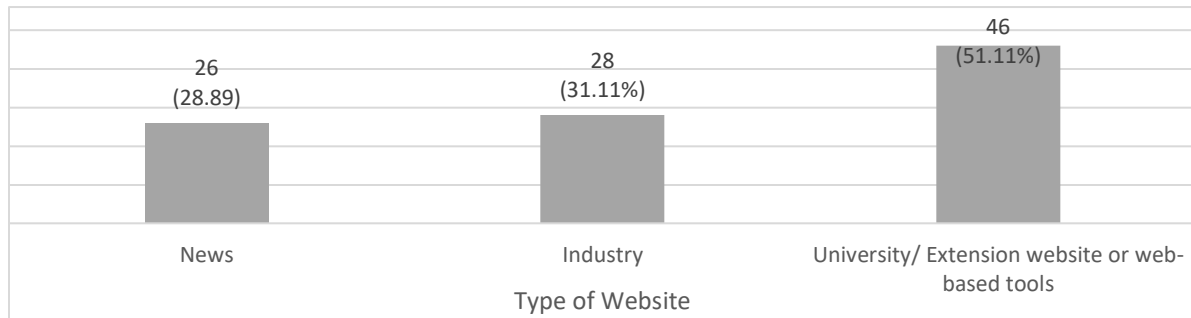


Note: Percentages are more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of print media utilized from print media for policy information.

Respondents who use the internet as a source (distinct from the use of social media) primarily use university-based sources (51.1%). The lowest use rate for internet sources was the use of news websites with a rate of 28.9% with industry sites used only slightly more frequently (31.3%). Responses for all website types are reported in figure 4.

Figure 4

Types of websites used to gather information about policy (n=90)



Note: Percentages will be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of internet sources consulted for policy information.

Broadcast Media was used as a source by 23.3% of respondents. Respondents used both radio broadcasts (41.1%), and television (53.3%) broadcasts as a source of information.

Responses for both types of broadcast media use are reported in figure 5.

Figure 5

Broadcast Media used to gather information about policy (n=90)

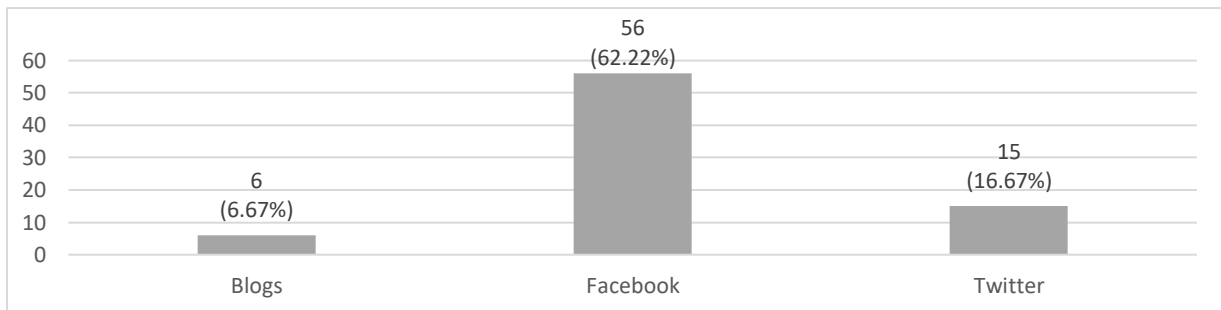


Note: Percentages could be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of broadcast sources consulted for policy information.

Social Media was the least selected source of information by respondents. Of social media sources, Facebook was the most frequently selected (62.2%). Results for all social media uses are reported in figure 6.

Figure 6

Social Media used to gather information about policy (n=90)



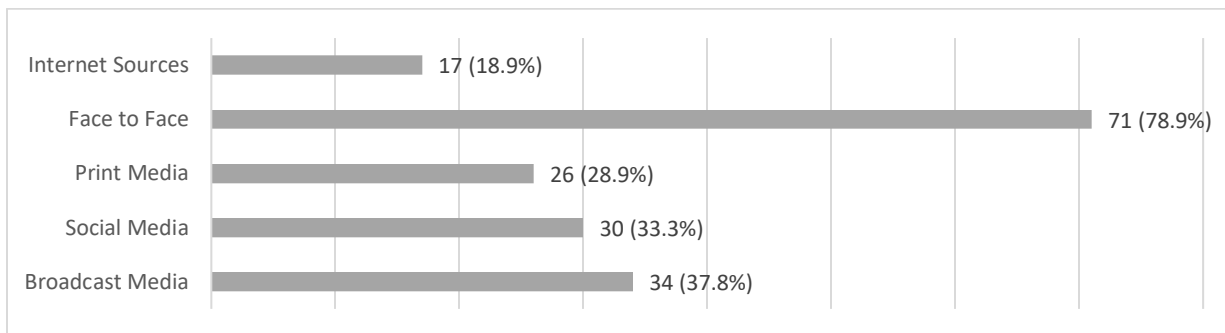
Note: Percentages will be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of social media consulted for policy information.

Candidate Sources

Producers rely more on face-to-face communication (78.9%) when evaluating a candidate than when evaluating public policy. Additionally, participants depended much more on both broadcast media (37.8%) and social media (33.3%) for candidate information. Internet sources were the least frequently consulted of all types of sources. Results for all sources consulted for candidates are reported in figure 7.

Figure 7

Sources frequently consulted for information about candidates (n=90)

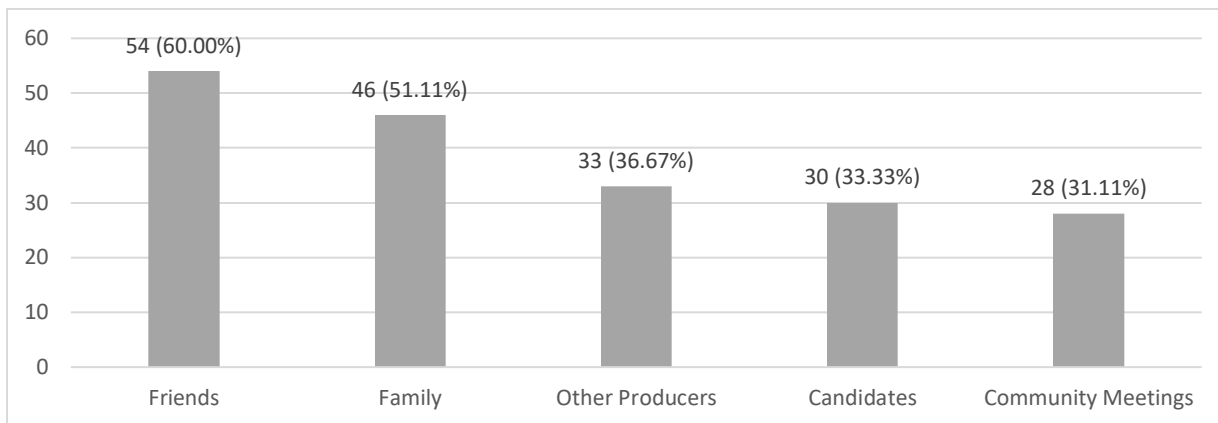


Note: The percentages are more than 100%, as some respondents indicated that they equally rely on more than one type of media.

When asked to identify the type of source consulted about candidates, the respondents turn to friends (60.0%) and family (51.1%) most often to gather information about candidates. Other forms of face-to-face communication include information from other producers (36.7%), candidates (33.3%), and interaction at community meetings (31.1%). The results of all face-to-face communication are displayed in figure 8.

Figure 8

Types of face-to-face communication used to gather information about candidates (n=90)



Note: The percentages are more than 100%, as some respondents indicated that they equally rely on more than one type of communication.

When researching candidates, Broadcast Media was the second most frequently consulted source by respondents. Most respondents who use broadcast media indicated that they rely on television broadcasts for information (53.3%). Responses for both types of broadcast media use are reported in figure 9.

Figure 9

Broadcast Media used to gather information about candidates (n=90)

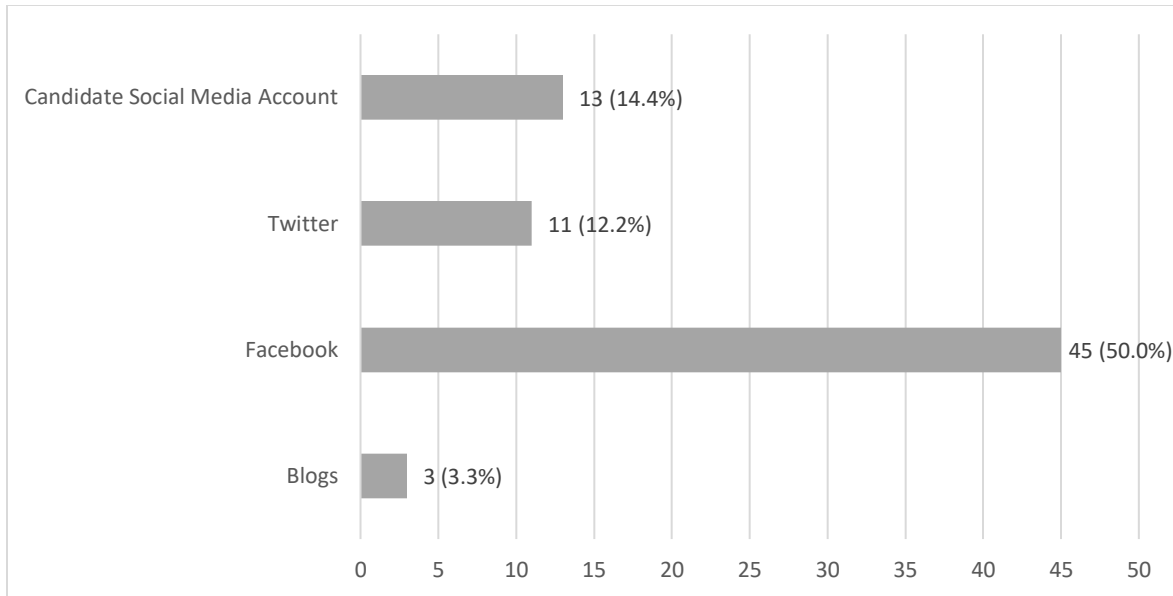


Note: Percentages could be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of broadcast sources consulted for information about candidates.

One-third of respondents indicated that they use social media as a frequently consulted source when deciding which candidate to support. Facebook was the most popular social media site, with 50.0% of respondents indicating that they used it as a source for information. The next most reported source was a candidate’s social media account (14.4%). Responses for all social media use is reported in figure 10.

Figure 10

Social Media used to gather information about candidates (n=90)

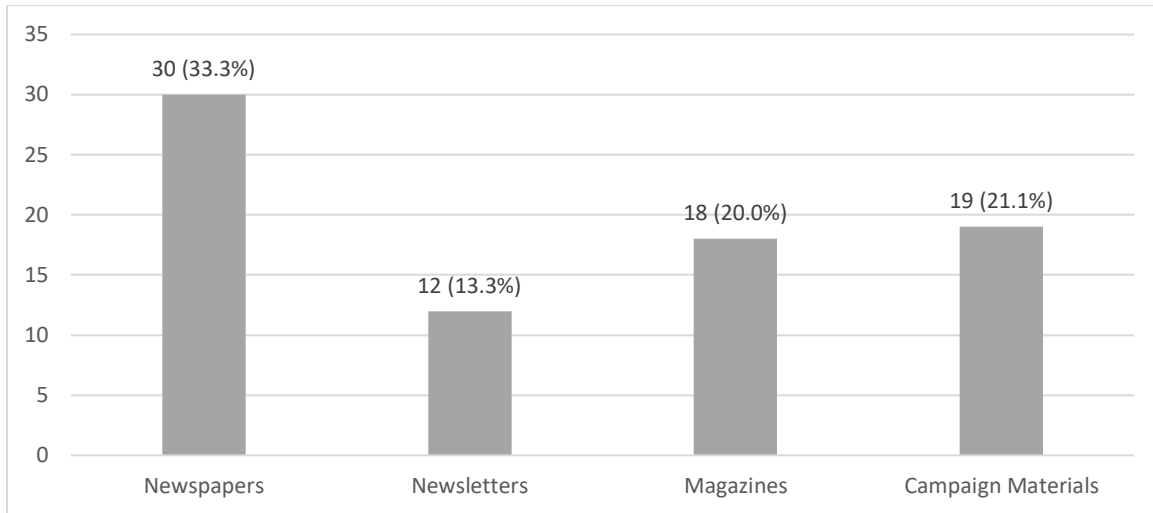


Note: Percentages will be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of social media consulted for information about candidates.

Of print media sources, the most often used were newspapers (33.3%). Respondents also indicated that they used campaign material produced by candidates as a resource for information that helped them to make decisions about which candidates to support (21.1%). Results for all types of print media use are reported in figure 11.

Figure 11

Print Media used to gather information about candidates (n=90)

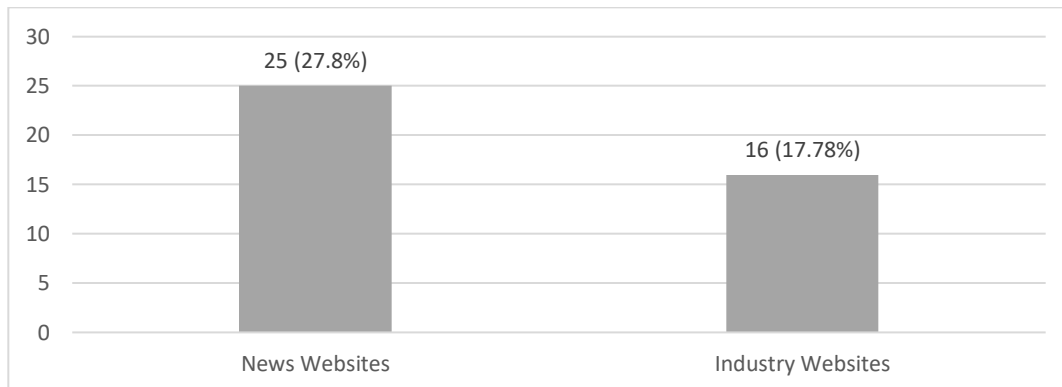


Note: Percentages will be more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of print sources consulted for information about candidates.

Respondents indicated that they use internet sources the least to gather information about candidates (distinct from social media use). Figure 12 reports the results of the types of websites used by respondents to gather information about candidates.

Figure 12

Types of Websites used to gather information about candidates (n=90)

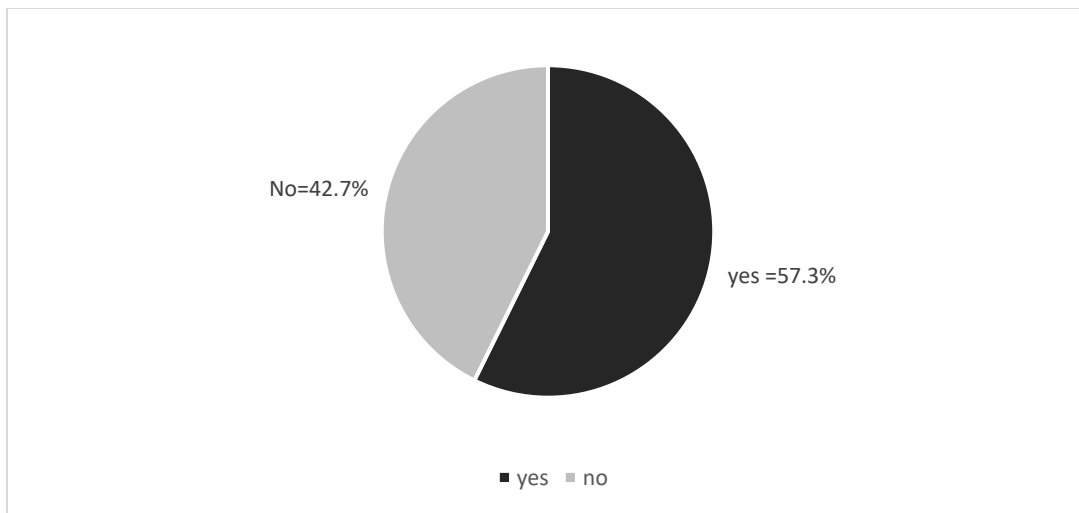


Note: Percentages will not add to 100% as respondents only selected forms of internet sources consulted for information about candidates.

When asked if they attended face-to-face events for candidate information, most respondents (57.30%) said they participated in activities designed to help candidates meet the constituency, including meet the candidate events hosted by local Farm Bureaus, town hall meetings, campaign stops, and similar events. This aligns closely with their preference for face-to-face interaction. The results of this question are reported in figure 13.

Figure 13

Participation in community events designed to meet with candidates (n=90)

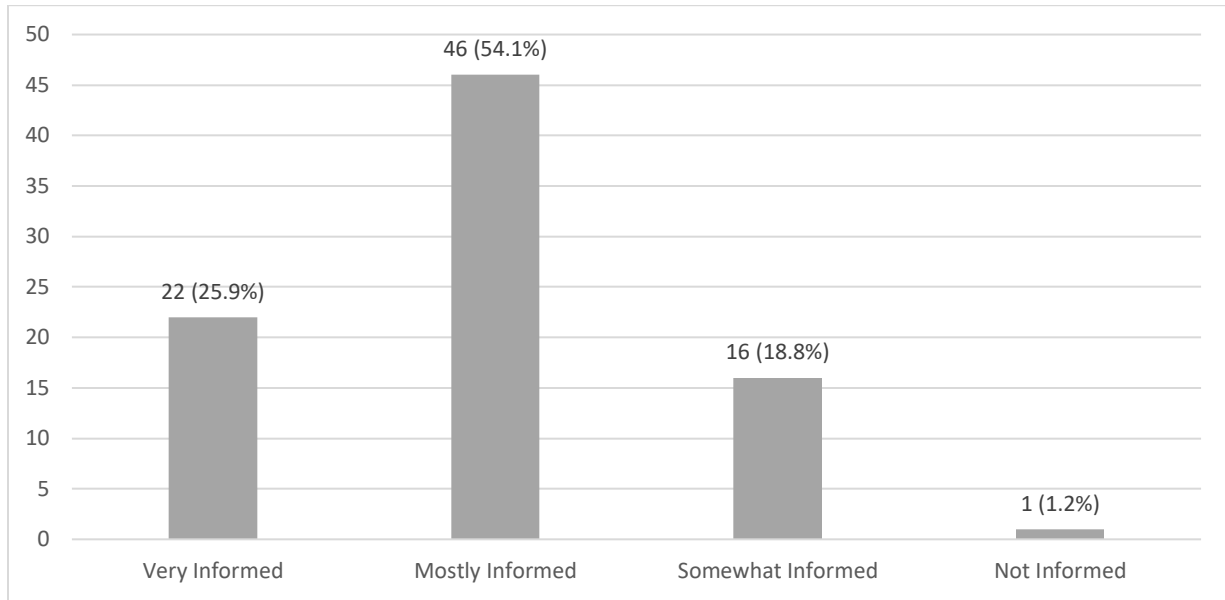


Confidence Levels in Information

Respondents were asked to rate the level of confidence of how informed they were before casting a vote based on a four-choice scale with 1=very informed, 2= mostly informed, 3- somewhat informed, and 4=not informed. A majority (54.1%) of respondents indicated that they felt “mostly informed” when casting votes for candidates or other ballot issues. Twenty-two respondents (25.9%) indicated that they were “very informed” before voting. All results for this question are reported in figure 14.

Figure 14

Confidence level in information before casting a vote (n=85)



Publishers of Information

When asked to indicate the source of published information, if known, the respondents most frequently reported Farm Bureau (79.0%) followed by University sources (63.0%) and commodity groups (61.0%). USDA was consulted for information less than half the time (40.0%), while all other groups were consulted less frequently. Table 2 displays a list of publishers and the frequency of use by farmers.

Table 2

Publishers of consulted information about policy and candidates (n=90)

Publisher	Percentage of respondents
Farm Bureau Federation	79%
University sources	63%
Commodity groups	61%
USDA	40%
Federal Government agencies	37%
Agricultural advocates	32%
Corporate Owned News Organizations	29%
State Agencies	21%
Industry	21%
Congressional Representative or Elected Officials	21%
Public Television or Radio	20%
Other	4%

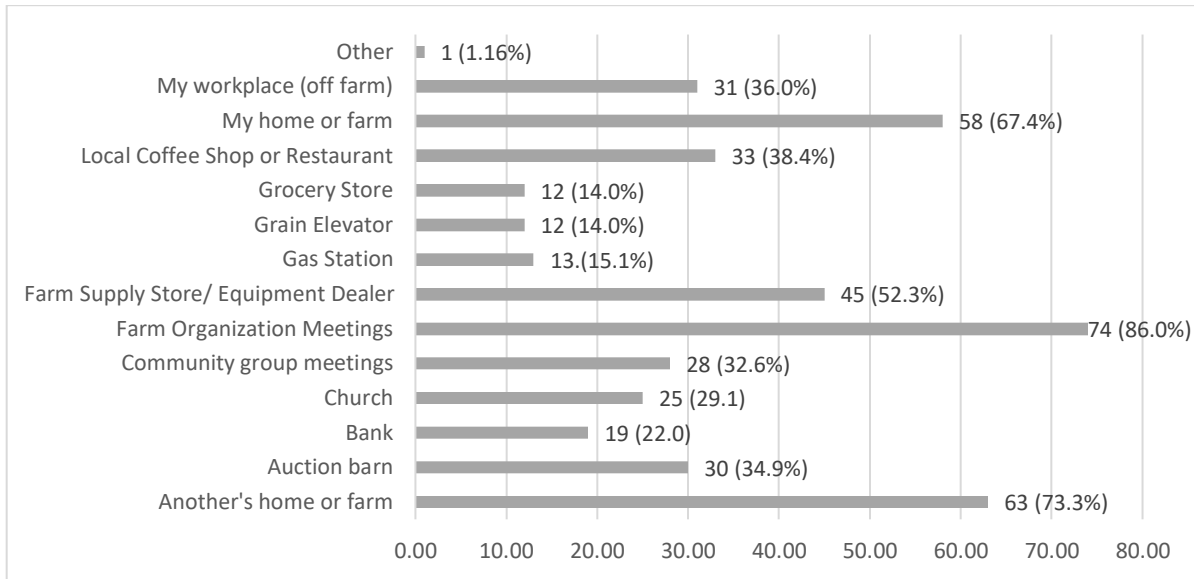
Note: Percentages will total more than 100% as respondents could select all sources consulted for information about candidates

Where political discussion takes place

Thirteen locations, identified as typical hubs of activity in rural areas and farm communities by the researcher, were ranked to indicate which of the locations they were likely to discuss politics or political issues. By far, the most frequently selected location was at farm organization meetings (86.0%). The next most frequent responses were at another's home or farm (73.3%) and at the respondent's own home or farm (67.4%). The results for all locations are reported in figure 15.

Figure 15

Locations respondents were likely to discuss political topics in their community (n=86)



Note: Percentages will be more than 100% as respondents selected all locations where they were likely to discuss politics or political issues.

Objective II: To determine the issues farmers consider important when voting.

Issues of Importance

Sixteen issues identified by state and national polls were listed for farmers to rank in importance when considering voting. Respondents used a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 = critical importance, 2 = very important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = not important when rating these issues. The results are reported in table 3.

All issues represented in the question received the minimum value of one, indicating that some respondents thought the issue was of critical importance. Conversely, all issues, except four, were considered as not important to some respondents. Taxes, trade, education, and environmental concerns were considered as somewhat important.

When mean scores were calculated, all 16 issues were either of critical importance or very important for the respondents when voting. Abortion (M = 1.48, s. d. = 0.72) and gun control (M =1.48, s. d.= 0.80) were rated as the most important issues. Since gun control has a larger standard deviation, respondents are more homogeneous on the importance of abortion. Taxes (M = 1.52, s. d. = 0.60) and property rights (M = 1.53, s. d. = 0.68) were rated third and fourth in importance while policies on inheritance (M=2.16, s. d. = 0.96) was the least important issue for the respondents, yet still considered very important. The issues were presented in alphabetical order on the survey not to influence or bias the respondent.

Table 3

Issues Considered Important when Voting (n=88)

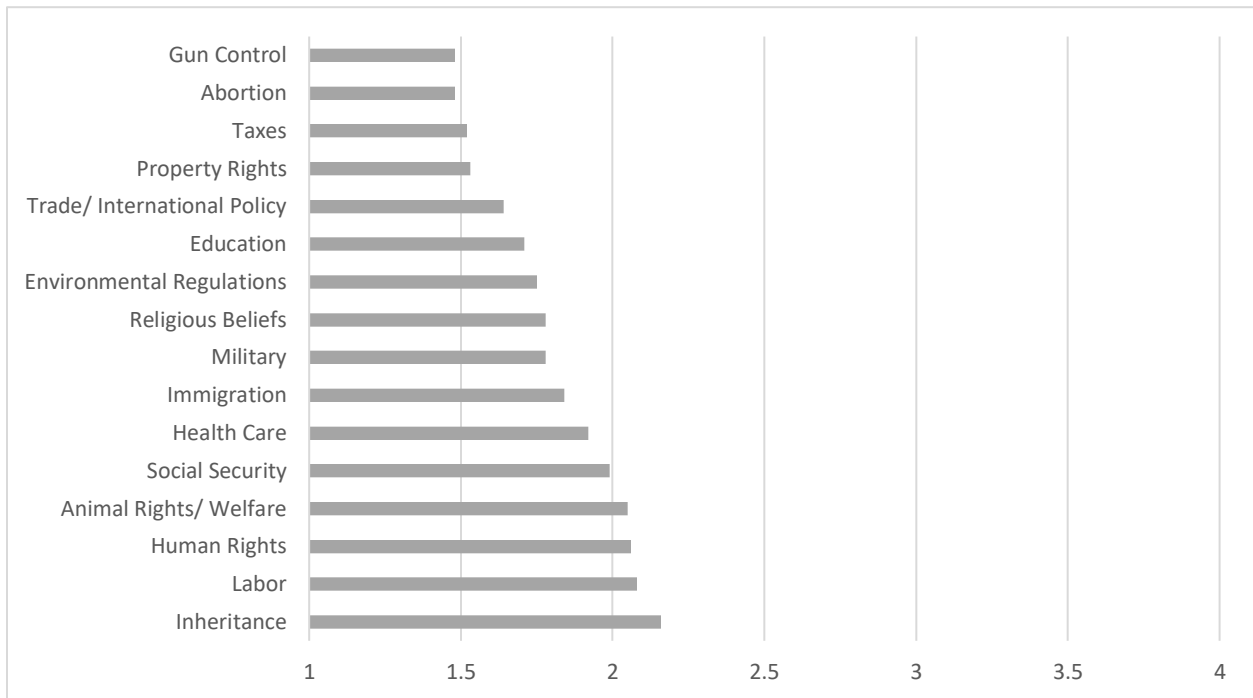
Issues	Range of responses	Mean	S.D.
Abortion	1 - 4	1.48	0.72
Animal Rights/ Welfare	1 - 4	2.05	0.87
Education	1 - 3	1.71	0.71
Environmental Regulations	1 - 3	1.75	0.75
Gun Control	1 - 4	1.48	0.80
Health Care	1 - 4	1.92	0.80
Human Rights	1 - 4	2.06	0.83
Immigration	1 - 4	1.84	0.77
Inheritance	1 - 4	2.16	0.96
Labor	1 - 4	2.08	0.81
Military	1 - 4	1.78	0.82
Property Rights	1 - 4	1.53	0.68
Religious Beliefs	1 - 4	1.78	0.93
Social Security	1 - 4	1.99	0.79
Taxes	1 - 3	1.52	0.60
Trade/ International Policy	1 - 3	1.64	0.68

Scale 1= Critical importance; 2= very important, 3=somewhat important, 4=not important,

Figure 16 presents a graphical representation of these same issues deemed critical to very important to the Arkansas farmer and rancher respondents in mean score order.

Figure 16

Mean Scores of Issues Important to Arkansas Farmers and Ranchers (n=88)



Scale: 1=Critical Importance, 2=Very Important, 3=Somewhat Important, 4=Not very important.

Most Important Candidate Qualities

Respondents were asked to rank six candidate characteristics on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 = very important, 2 = important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = not at all important. The results are given in table 4. All of the characteristics listed had a maximum value of four, indicating that at least one respondent marked the issues as not at all important. The minimum value listed in the table shows the highest level of importance respondents were willing to assign the characteristic for a candidate when voting.

The values of the candidate were the characteristic of the highest importance to respondents when deciding to support a candidate (M = 1.24, s. d. = 0.50). The least important candidate characteristics, but still somewhat important, was the candidate’s gender (M=3.62, s.

d.= 0.69) followed closely by the income and wealth of the candidate (M=3.60, s. d.=0.64). The mean scores of all characteristics show respondents considered them as important when considering the choice of a candidate when voting.

Table 4

Mean Scores of Importance of Candidate Characteristics

Field	Range	Mean	Std Deviation
Candidate's Values	1 – 4	1.24	0.50
The personality of a candidate	1 – 4	2.18	0.80
Likelihood of nominating judges	2 – 4	2.29	1.03
Candidates political party	1 – 4	2.57	0.92
Income and Wealth of Candidate	1 – 4	3.60	0.64
Gender of candidate	1 – 4	3.62	0.69

Scale 1= very important, 2=important, 3= somewhat important, 4=not at all important, n=84

Objective III: To determine farmers' level of involvement in the political process.

Political Activity

When asked to identify their involvement and type of political activities, a majority of respondents indicated they had participated in some type of action outside of the voting booth.

While most respondents had participated in more than one activity, the most frequent way of engaging in politics other than voting in elections was by writing a letter to an elected official (59.5%) followed by advocating for passage of legislation (55.7%). The least popular way of participating in political activity was through protesting (3.8%). Results are reported in Table 9.

Table 9*Activities of Political Participation (n=79)*

Type of Activity	n	Percentage
Writing a letter to a government official	47	59.9%
Advocating for the passage or failure of a specific piece of legislation	44	55.7%
Submitting comments on a proposed regulation	32	40.5%
Donating to a campaign or lobbying group	31	39.2%
Participating in a candidate's campaign	19	24.1%
Gathering signatures for a petition	16	20.3%
Protesting	3	3.8%
Other	1	1.3%
No Political Participation	9	11.4%

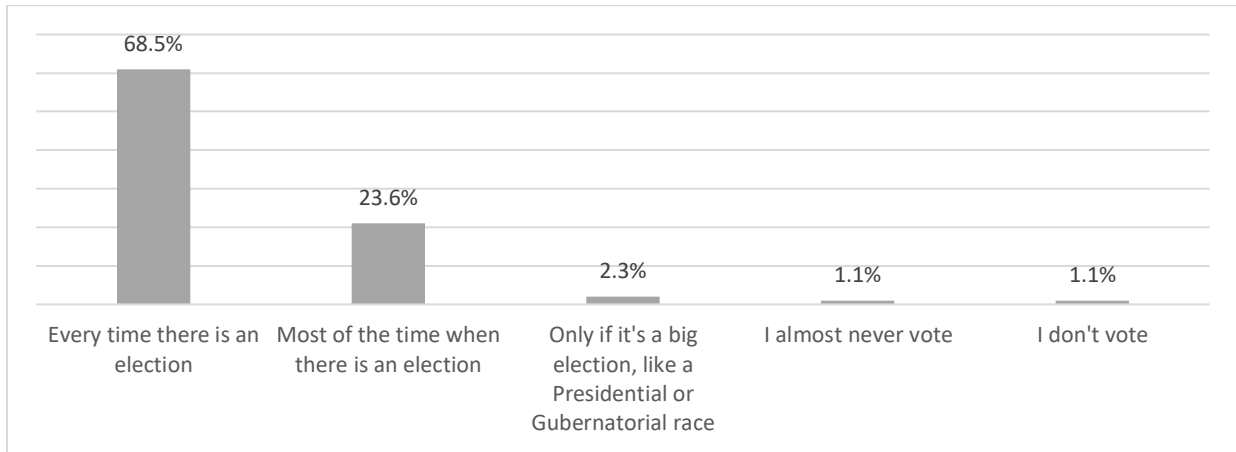
In the open response portion of the question, respondents indicated that they were often motivated to act because an issue would affect them or their family and friends directly. Many cited issues such as right to farm, water regulation by the EPA and property rights.

Voting

Farmers and rancher who responded to this survey frequently vote with 68.5% reporting they vote in every election and another 23.6% voting most of the time. Only 3.4% indicating they vote randomly or not at all. Results are shown in figure 10.

Figure 10

Voting Frequency in elections (n=86)



Discussion and Recommendations

While the limitations of this study prevent generalizations to a larger population, some meaningful information can be used for future research. By understanding the sources Arkansas farmers and ranchers use for information to evaluate policies and candidates, one can understand who has an influence over Arkansas farmer voting preferences.

The majority of farmer respondents use face to face communication as a major source of information about both policy and/or candidates but rely more on face to face communication when deciding about candidates than when evaluating policy. More respondents indicated they consult friends and family to make a decision about the candidates to support than when considering policy. With so much face to face communication facilitating the spread of information, research is needed to determine the opinion leaders influential in these situations.

Farm organization or commodity group meetings were most often consulted for policy information along with extension and other government agency personnel. Respondents indicated that Farm Bureau published the information they read most often, followed closely by cooperative extension and commodity groups. Farm Bureau has a clear process of policy

development and works with state and national legislative groups to investigate and lobby for passage of these policies. Commodity groups have similar structure supported by check-off funds so the interpretation of policies of interest to the producer is logical.

Governmental organizations are typically nonpartisan by design and provide information that will allow farmers to be informed about issues and policy (and the impact on-farm activities) and empower them to make decisions most beneficial for their operation. However, the Hatch Act prohibits government employees from participating in politics or discussing politics. The Hatch Act passed in 1939 (as the codification of an executive order from 1907) is designed to limit the partisan political activity of federal employees (Brown & Maskell, 2016). This act prohibits government employees from influencing people “for the purpose of interfering with an election or affecting the result thereof” (Brown & Maskell, 2016, p. 4). While extension agents and other government personnel function as a source of information for agricultural producers, we would not expect to see farmers using these personnel as an informational source when researching candidates or policies, at least in an official capacity (Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2012). The Extension Service has a website and newsletter on ballot issues, so additional research is needed to determine if this is the information being consulted by farmers and ranchers.

While broadcast media was used as a source of information, many respondents believed most broadcast media (televised news in particular) were far too biased to be used as a legitimate source of information. Respondents indicated they rate a candidate’s values and personality highly, so perhaps they use broadcast sources more when evaluating a candidate’s characteristics. Some additional study is needed to understand how candidate values are determined.

The most frequent type of print media was magazines. Most farm magazines are owned by large corporations, which some respondents felt were too biased as reporters of trustworthy information. Either respondents are not aware that large corporations own and publish these magazines or they read magazines that align with their values.

Internet sources are used less for information on candidates but are consulted in evaluating policy. The most frequent internet source used by respondents were university and extension websites or web-based tools. These web-based tools help farmers predict the impact of new or proposed policy and regulation on their own farm. This seems to be a trusted source of information.

By understanding the issues most important to the farmer and rancher population, we should be able to understand and explain how farmers and ranchers may vote for or advocate against some elected officials. The federal food and agriculture budget is large and covers a variety of areas and programs, some of which are influenced by special interest groups that are in opposition to production agriculture practices and support programs. It is logical that farmers and ranchers would choose to support candidates that are the most supportive of agriculture producers and aligned with their values.

Respondents of this survey can be identified as conservative based on the values considered important for voting. Conservatism is a political and social philosophy characterized by respect by American traditions and social stability (Conservative, 2020). It is a philosophy of limited government regulation of business, and individual financial responsibility. Social conservatives oppose abortion, support traditional marriage, prayers in schools and tend to identify with American nationalism and patriotism (Cal, 2011). The American Conservative movement is centered around Christian values, anti-communist sentiment, traditional families,

and the right to bear arms (Schneider, 2009). Economic conservatives believe in free trade, deregulation of the economy, lower taxes, and privatization. American conservatives consider individual liberty and believe in limiting government in size and scope. American conservatives typically favor tougher foreign policy than liberals (Hayes, 2019). These ideas align with the findings of Mason's study which asserted that voters choose which candidates to support based on the social implications of their label. Based on the findings that abortion, gun control, taxes and other social issues, identified as important in this study, this population is conservative. This is in keeping with surveys of the general public, so the differences seem to be whether it is state or national government's role in equity and social justice intervention to achieve these goals. The identification of values of a candidate as the most important characteristics further supports the identity this group is conservative as their preferences align with the socially conservative parameters.

The final objective of this research was to determine farmer's preferences for being involved in politics. The discovery of this information, compiled with knowledge about the most effective ways of engaging lawmakers and stakeholders, will enable the agricultural industry to use grass roots lobbying efforts effectively for the development of policy and regulation.

Most respondents said that they voted all of the time or most of the time. Studies and analysis of public record indicates that a majority of Americans do not turn out to vote every time there is an election, or even most of the time there is an election (FairVote, n.d.), so it seems noteworthy that we surveyed 90 Arkansans who vote in every election. In fact, since the late 18th century voter turnout for all elections has been steadily decreasing and is now hovering below 60% for the presidential elections and continues to be lower for less popular elections (FairVote, n.d.)

A majority of respondents indicated that they had engaged in some kind of political activity with only nine indicating that they had not participated in any activity outside of voting. The most popular way of engaging in politics outside of voting was to write letters to politicians followed closely by advocating for or against a specific proposal or legislative action and submitting comments on proposed regulation. Since farmers are likely to be impacted by regulations (more so than the average American due to the scope of their business), it is expected that many respondents would have participated in submitting comments on proposed legislation (such as environmental regulations or rules surrounding transportation). Advocacy groups could produce communication packets to aid in effective letter writing or speaking points.

Often the motivation for respondents to engage in politics was that they would be impacted by the issues they were advocating for or against. Many cited issues like right to farm or even specific situations such as the regulation that prevented the expansion of, and eventual closing, of C & H Hog Farms in Central Arkansas.

Farm Bureau should continue to monitor the research surrounding the second objective, which was to determine what issues were important to farmers when voting. With this information, they can more appropriately direct resources to advocate on issues that farmers feel are most important.

Since the Extension Service was a popular provider of information, they should continue to produce information related to clarifying ballot language and presenting facts around different decisions that can be made. The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service's efforts toward ballot issue education have been effective and should continue.

My recommendations for advancing this research is to conduct research around accessibility to information and the impact of a shrinking rural population on the exposure of

agricultural policy to those not involved in production agriculture. There is also the opportunity to evaluate the role of opinion leaders in face-to-face communication to determine where opinion leaders obtain information disseminated in these conversations (assuming that these conversations facilitate the flow of facts and not strictly opinions). Directed research should focus on agribusiness members and private consultants specifically. Since the respondents were Farm Bureau leaders and members, a study of non-members is recommended to determine if sources and values are different. As the number of farms in the United States shrinks, it is crucial that agricultural producers evaluate candidates and legislation to reflect their values and to help reduce detrimental effects on farm productivity and the family farmer.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is sample size. Had there been a larger sample of the farmer and rancher population, these results would have been more reliable.

An additional limitation was the make-up of the sample population. As the sample was composed of farmers and ranchers at Farm Bureau meetings, it is likely that those who responded to the survey are more likely to be active in politics and more likely to seek out information from many sources before making decisions about candidates or when evaluating policy. This also explains why Farm Bureau was the most frequent publisher of information. At the same time, the concentration of livestock producers in contrast to the number of row crop farmers leaves us to ask the question- would there have been a difference if the population were more evenly split, or even split evenly in accordance with the number of row crop versus livestock farms across the state? Likely this would have impacted the results of the survey as they have different issues and probably participate in politics and information gathering differently.

By comparing population demographics to those reported in the last agricultural census, this study was not representative of the farmer and rancher population in Arkansas. Only 14% of farms in Arkansas are larger than 500 acres- compared to nearly 40% of farms represented in our population. Additionally, only nine percent of farmers in Arkansas are under the age of 35 while a majority (58.2%) fall in the 36-65 age range. Our population was comprised more heavily of those under 35 in comparison to those between 35 and 65, with over 46% of our sample being under 35.

As should be acknowledged in any survey-based study, there was hypothetical bias among the sample. Hypothetical bias is the tendency of respondents to answer surveys in ways that make them look holistically better and seem like more well-rounded members of society, even when that is not the case. The most obvious example of this in this survey were the responses to the question asking respondents to indicate what candidate characteristics are most important to them. They indicated that gender is of less importance; however, the voting patterns of rural populations indicate that this is not the likely case.

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