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## The political preference of Arkansas farmers and ranchers

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## The political preference of Arkansas farmers and ranchers

### Cover Page Footnote

Rachel Barry is a senior honors student, with a major in Agribusiness Marketing and Management. Donna Graham, the faculty mentor, is a University Professor and Graduate Coordinator, Agricultural Education, Communication, and Technology.

# The political preference of Arkansas farmers and ranchers

## Meet the Student-Author



**Rachel Barry**

### Research at a Glance

- Arkansas farmers and ranchers should be attentive to political activity at the State and National levels as those engaging in production agriculture are more likely to have their livelihood affected by policy or legislation development than the average American.
- Arkansas Farmers and Ranchers typically rely on information obtained through face-to-face interaction to make decisions about what candidates to support and to evaluate policy.
- The Arkansas Farm Bureau and University Cooperative Extension/Government are sources frequently consulted by farmers and ranchers in a political context.
- Farmers and Ranchers prioritize issues and candidate qualities based on conservative ideology.

I am a Spring 2020 Magna Cum Laude graduate of the Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences with a degree in Agricultural Business Marketing and Management. While at the University of Arkansas, I was an active member of the Collegiate Farm Bureau, the Agricultural Business Club, and the Sigma Alpha Sorority, serving as an officer in all three. I represented Arkansas at the Young Farmers and Ranchers Collegiate Discussion meet in 2019, where I was a sweet sixteen finisher. I was active in both FFA and Farm Bureau in high school, which is where I developed a passion for politics and an understanding how policy and legislation affect production agriculture. American Farmers and Ranchers deserve informed, dedicated, and effective advocates who can ensure that production agriculture is protected through legislation. After graduation, I will go to work in the grain industry with the goal of increasing supply chain efficiency and empowering farmers to utilize risk management tools to protect their businesses. I want to extend a huge thank you to Dr. Donna Graham for her guidance and support throughout this process. I also want to thank Drs. Nathan Kemper and Lanier Nalley for serving on my thesis committee, as well as the rest of the Agribusiness department faculty for their support and encouragement throughout my undergraduate career.



Rachel competing at the Young Farmers and Ranchers Collegiate Discussion Meet in 2019.

## Undergraduate Research Articles

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# The political preference of Arkansas farmers and ranchers

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*Rachel J. Barry\* and Donna Lucas Graham†*

### Abstract

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 their level of participation in the political process. Face-to-face interaction was the preferred form of communication in farm organization meetings, with friends, or farm agencies. Magazines were the preferred source of print communication, and university/extension websites were preferred for internet sources. Broadcast media and social media were the least preferred sources for policy information, yet were consulted more often for information about candidates. Friends and family were also the preferred source used to gather information about candidates, along with meet-the-candidate events. The Farm Bureau was the most frequently preferred 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. 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 to determine the trusted opinion-leaders who convey the information from community meetings or publications to other producers through face-to-face interactions.

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\* Rachel Barry is a senior honors student, with a major in Agribusiness Marketing and Management.

† Donna Graham, the faculty mentor, is a University Professor and Graduate Coordinator, Agricultural Education, Communication, and Technology.

## Introduction

“America’s farmers and ranchers make an important contribution to the U.S. economy by ensuring safe and reliable food supply, improving energy security, and supporting job growth and economic development” (United States Congress, 2013). Yet, new government mandates and regulations, specifically trade, environmental regulations, and land use, are the top issues facing the operation expansion and growth of the rural economy according to producers (Case IH, 2011; CoBank, 2020).

Policy directives contained in a legislative act, known as a farm bill, regulate agriculture in the United States (USDA-ERS, 2019). Early farm bill programs supported family farms, while recent regulations are more comprehensive in support of broader initiatives influenced by environmental, energy, consumer, business, and agricultural interest groups (Reimer et al., 2016). For these reasons, farmers must be more attentive to legislation as their plight is consistently tied to the policy that affects production.

The economic rationale for farmers’ access to information is to enable them to manage the risks and uncertainties regarding production and marketing their products. The Extension Service has a long history of providing useful, unbiased, science-based production information. However, as production technology has rapidly changed, farmers have turned toward agribusinesses consultants, sales associates, governmental agencies, and crop consultants for information (Gloy, et al., 2000; Arbuckle Jr. et al., 2012; Borrelli et al., 2018). Information is retrieved using smartphones and tablets, accessing the internet five or more times a week, and social media at least once a week (Farm Journal, 2019). Adults under age 50 access news from online sources, while adults over age 65 obtain news from a newspaper (Mitchel et al., 2016).

While the sources of information for production and marketing decisions are known, research is limited on how farmers get information related to voting. Little is known about whether farmers research and evaluate candidate positions or the issues that may impact agricultural policies. This study sought to understand the information sources and preferences that influence decisions before voting. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine the sources of information used by farmers to form opinions about agricultural policy and candidates.
2. Determine the issues farmers consider important when voting.
3. Determine the level of participation of farmers in the political process.

## Materials and Methods

This study used a quantitative, nonexperimental design to describe the characteristics and political preferences of

Arkansas farmers and ranchers. This approach was a convenience sample of agricultural producers attending the Arkansas Farm Bureau state meeting or the Young Farmers and Ranchers Conference.

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, 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. Five sources of communication, including internet sources, face-to-face communication, print media, social media, and broadcast media, were rated by frequency of use as sources of information consulted on policy and candidates. Typical hubs of activity in rural areas were identified to indicate places farmers and ranchers were likely to discuss politics or political concerns. Issues identified by state and national polls as important to voters were listed for farmers to classify the importance of when considering candidates for voting. Means and standard deviation were calculated for all items ranked on a scale.

Demographic information was collected on farm size and type, farmer age, years of experience in agricultural production, and agricultural leadership positions. Institutional approval was given by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board.

## Results and Discussion

### Population

The survey population of 90 respondents was farmers and ranchers who were actively engaged in production agriculture. They were mostly split between the ages of 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 3 to 60 years of experience in farm production, with the most frequent category being 26 to 50 years of experience (42.2%). The most frequent (43.4%) farm size, a combination of leased and owned land, was 40.9 hectares (101 acres) to 202 hectares (500 acres). Fourteen respondents (16.9%) reported farm operations of 40.5 hectares (100 acres) or less, while 11 respondents (13.25%) reported farming over 809 hectares (2000 acres). Of these 90 respondents, 68% had served in a leadership role of an agricultural group.

### Information Sources Used

Most respondents (70.0%) used face-to-face communication as a primary source of information to evaluate policy (Table 1), followed by print media (28.4%) and internet sources (27.8%). The least used source was social

media (22.2%). Respondents remarked they often felt social media was too biased to use as a source for important information.

Face-to-face communication (78.7%) occurred in farm organization meetings and commodity groups to gather information about policies (Table 2). Friends (58.9%) and Extension and Government Agency personnel (58.9%) were equally consulted as the next most utilized form of contact. Farmers and ranchers rely on family (41.1%) the least for information about policies.

The most frequent source of print media consulted on policy information was magazines (48.9%), followed by newsletters (26.7%) and newspapers (24.4%). Respondents who used internet sources (distinct from the use of social media) primarily used university-based sources (51.1%). Of internet sources, the least used sources were news websites (28.9%), with industry sites used only slightly more frequently (31.1%). Respondents used both radio broadcasts (53.3%) and television (41.1%) broadcasts as a source of information on policies. Social media was the least selected source of information, with Facebook (62.2%) noted as the most frequently used social media source (Table 2).

Producers rely more on face-to-face communication (78.9%) when evaluating a candidate than when evaluating public policy (Table 3) and more on broadcast (37.8%)

and social media (33.3%) when assessing a candidate's position. Internet sources were the least frequently consulted of all types of sources for candidate information.

Of all face-to-face sources, friends (60.0%) and family (51.1%) were most often consulted to gather information about candidates (Table 4). Other face-to-face communication included other producers (36.7%), candidates (33.3%), and interaction at community meetings (31.1%). With such a preference for face-to-face information, additional study is needed to identify the opinion leaders who convey the information from community meetings or publications to other producers.

When researching candidates, television (53.3%) and radio (40.0%) were used often as broadcast media sources. More than half obtained candidate information from social media.

Facebook (50.0%) was the most popular social media site with other reported sources as the candidate's social media account (14.4%) and Twitter (12.2%) (Table 4). Many respondents stated that broadcast media was too biased to be used as a legitimate source of information, even though they are tuned in for information.

Of all print media used for candidate information, the most frequent source consulted to help make decisions was newspapers (33.3%), campaign material produced by candidates (21.1%), and magazines (20.0%). Respondents

**Table 1. Communication sources consulted for policy decisions (n = 90).**

Sources used	Number of responses	Percent
Face to Face	63	70.0
Print Media	26	28.4
Internet	25	27.8
Broadcast Media	21	23.3
Social Media	20	22.2

Note: the percentages will total more than 100% as respondents selected all sources of media consulted.

**Table 3. Communication sources consulted for candidate decisions (n = 90).**

Sources used	Number of responses	Percent
Face to face	71	78.9
Broadcast Media	34	37.8
Social Media	30	33.3
Print Media	26	28.9
Internet Sources	17	18.9

Note: the percentages will total more than 100% as respondents selected all sources of media consulted.

**Table 2. Type of communication sources consulted for policy information (n = 90).**

Face to face sources	Percent
Meetings	78.7
Extension/governmental agencies	58.9
Friends	58.9
Other producers	50.0
Family	41.1
<b>Print media sources</b>	
Magazines	48.9
Newsletters	26.7
Newspapers	24.4
<b>Internet sources</b>	
University/Extension	51.1
Industry	31.1
News Organizations	28.9
<b>Broadcast media sources</b>	
Radio	53.3
Television	41.1
<b>Social media sources</b>	
Facebook	62.2
Twitter	16.7
Blogs	6.7

Note: the total can equal more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of media consulted within each source.



indicated that they use internet sources (distinct from social media) the least of all communication sources to gather information about candidates. Sources used were news websites (27.8%) and industry websites (17.8%) (Table 4). Research is needed to identify the farm magazines farmers and ranchers read, and how the publications support candidates that align with farmer values.

Most respondents (57.3%) participated in activities designed to help candidates meet the constituency. These included meet-the-candidate events hosted by county Farm Bureau organizations, town hall meetings, campaign stops, and similar events. These choices align closely with their preference for face-to-face interaction.

When asked about the confidence level of information gathered from these sources, a majority (54.1%) of respondents felt 'mostly informed' when casting votes for candidates. Twenty-two respondents (25.9%) indicated that they were "very informed" before voting. Additional study is needed to understand how candidate values are determined from the communication sources consulted.

The respondents reported they rely on information published by Farm Bureau (79.0%), university sources (63.0%), and commodity groups (61.0%) for both policy and candidates (Table 5). The USDA was consulted for information less than half the time (40.0%).

By far, the most frequently selected location for face-to-face discussion of politics or political issues was at

farm organization meetings (86.0%), another's home or farm (73.3%), and at the respondent's own house or farm (67.4%).

### Issues Farmers Consider Important When Voting

Sixteen social issues were rated by respondents on a scale of importance considered on the ballot from 1 = critically important to 4 = Not important. Abortion [Mean (M) = 1.48, standard deviation (s.d.) = 0.72] and gun control (M = 1.48, s.d. = 0.80) were rated as the most important social issues when voting (Fig. 1). 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) were the least important issue for the respondents, yet still considered very important.

When considering the characteristics of candidates, values held by the candidate were the highest-rated characteristic when deciding to support a candidate (M = 1.24, s.d. = 0.50). The gender of the candidate (M = 3.62, s.d. = 0.69) was considered the least important but still in the range as somewhat important, followed closely by the income and wealth of the candidate (M = 3.60, s.d. = 0.64).

### Level of Involvement

Voting was the most frequently exercised political activity, with 68.5% of respondents reporting that they vote in every election and another 23.6% reporting that they

**Table 4. Type of communication sources consulted for candidate information (n = 90).**

Face to face sources	Percent
Friends	60.0
Family	51.1
Other producers	36.7
Candidates	33.3
Community meetings	31.1
<b>Broadcast media</b>	
Television	53.3
Radio	40.0
<b>Social media</b>	
Facebook	50.0
Twitter	12.2
Candidate's Social Media	14.4
Blogs	3.3
<b>Print media</b>	
Newspaper	33.3
Campaign Material	21.1
Magazines	20.0
Newsletters	13.3
<b>Internet sources</b>	
News websites	27.8
Industry websites	17.8

Note: the total can equal more than 100% as respondents selected all forms of media consulted within each source.

**Table 5. Publishers of information consulted about policy and candidates (n = 90).**

Publisher	Percent
Farm Bureau Federation	79.0
University sources	63.0
Commodity groups	61.0
USDA	40.0
Federal government agencies	37.0
Agricultural advocates	32.0
Corporate owned news organizations	29.0
State agencies	21.0
Industry	21.0
Congressional representative or elected officials	21.0
Public television or radio	20.0
Other	4.0

Note: the percentages can total more than 100% as respondents could select all publishers consulted.

vote most of the time. Other than voting, most respondents participated in one or more political activities with the most usual ways of engaging being writing a letter to an elected official (59.5%) and advocating for the passage of legislation (55.7%). The category with the least involvement of political activities was protesting (3.8%). Respondents indicated they were often motivated to act because a proposed bill would affect them or their family and friends directly. Examples of such issues cited included right-to-farm, EPA water regulations, or property rights.

Respondents to this study favor conservative values based on the values identified as important for voting and hold a unique social connection to other farmers with the same beliefs. Rural voters have tended to favor Republican candidates even when policies may negatively impact their economic interests. Mason (2018) explained that farmers are more attached to the social impact of their chosen label (liberal or conservative) than the ideology on issue positions when supporting candidates. The undercurrent of conflict between these ideological groups is apparent in social and mass media. Additional study is needed on whether farmers are voting on party lines or ideologies.

### Limitations

The sample size and make-up for this study limits extrapolating results to the general population. It was concentrated with livestock producers in contrast to row crop farmers and was not representative of the farmer and rancher populations in Arkansas. Additionally, the re-

spondents were members of the Farm Bureau and likely engaged in political activities of the organization where policy and candidate positions are discussed.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that Arkansas farmers and ranchers are a very engaged constituency. They tend to prioritize social issues and vote according to a more conservative agenda. Face-to-face communication is preferred for obtaining information about both policy and candidates. They view more popular forms of media (broadcast media, social media, internet sources) as too biased to be reliable. Most farmers and ranchers feel informed when they approach the ballot box and are confident with their choices when casting a ballot. The Farm Bureau organization has a developed process of policy development and communication that is a trusted source for these respondents. This research should empower advocacy groups to transmit information to farmers and ranchers more efficiently and use their limited resources to advocate on behalf of the farmer to address issues most important to this population.

### Acknowledgments

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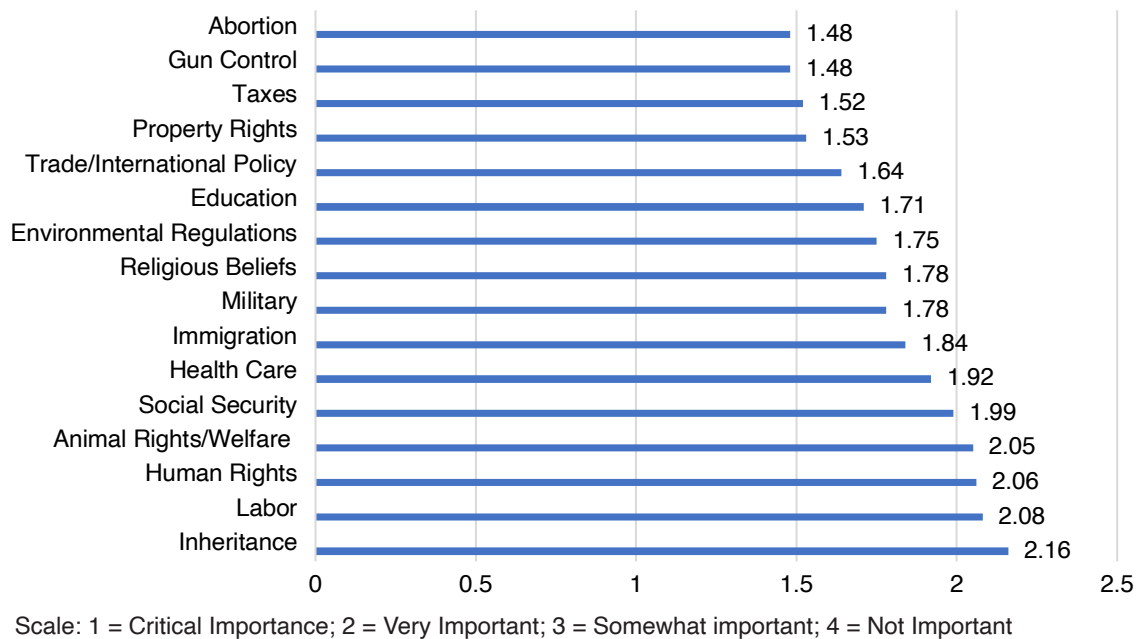


Fig. 1. Mean score of social issues important to Arkansas farmers and ranchers when voting.



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