

The Great Divide: Political Polarization and the U.S. Farm Bill

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Scholars have long noted the trend toward increased political polarization in the U.S. Congress. This paper examines the U.S. Farm Bill in connection with polarization theories. Polarization due to changing ideologies of individual congressmen, the reshaping of districts, and the reorientation of the public affects business in Washington. This paper also discusses the impact of polarization on support for the welfare state, specifically in regard to the Farm Bill and the SNAP program. A reshaped Congress, due to a dramatic shift toward hyper-partisanship, creates friction within the legislative process, heightening differences on partisan issues like welfare spending. To measure the impact of polarization on legislation, specifically the U.S. Farm Bill, this paper tracks House final passage support for each five-year farm bill beginning in 1965. The voting results are compared to DW-Nominate Scores of the same period in order to determine what role political polarization plays in the legislative process. Comparing House final passage voting and DW-Nominate Scores provides a quantitative measure of polarization and its effects on legislation, both before and after the supposed spike in broad-based polarization beginning in the 1980s.

The U.S. Congress passes a Farm Bill every five years. The Farm Bill sets federal agricultural policy by establishing federal guidelines for food pricing through commodity supports, spurring technological advances in seed and yield potential, investing in crop insurance, supporting conservation efforts, and creating a food safety net for impoverished Americans. Since the 1970s, the Farm Bill has included provisions for nutritional assistance programs, like food stamps and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which helps feed needy mothers and their children. The farm bill has grown in recent decades, gaining support for new crop insurance and subsidy programs, which have become vital for countless farmers in times of climatic and economic uncertainty. Agriculture policy since the Nixon Administration been seen as an area dominated by the type of distributive politics that has traditionally resulted in bipartisan agreement. In the most recent debate, however, congressional talks between the Democrat-controlled Senate and Republican-controlled House reached a stalemate, resulting in the 112th Congress passing the buck onto the 113th Congress. Why is this? How has a bill that impacts the daily lives of millions of Americans become the token example of legislative dysfunction in Washington?

Most scholars believe that the inability of representatives to pass a reauthorization bill stems from a growing institutional divide, both in the halls of Congress and in communities across America. The country is more polarized, with members of both parties willfully rejecting compromise and the chance to work across the aisle to pass bipartisan legislation. The failures of federal agricultural policy in the farm bill serves as a case study in polarization that can help us better understand what drives the political divisions that separate the parties in Congress. This paper tracks changes in partisanship in House final passage floor votes on the farm bill from

1980 through 2013 and examines various factors that have contributed to heightened levels of partisanship in agricultural policy.

Literature Review

Congress has changed over the past three decades. Political rhetoric has become more volatile and candidates have taken more ideological stances. It seems American politics has become more polarized, with candidates, parties, and individuals more divergent than ever before. DW-Nominate scores, the political benchmark for measuring party polarization in Congress, show polarization to be at its highest point in over a generation (Voteview). The 112th and 113th Congress were among the most divided and the most disliked in history. Some scholars (DiSalvo 2011, Schiller 2011) say polarization is not responsible for the dysfunction and resulting unpopularity. They claim that the political ills pundits pin on polarization are overstated. Coalition building, not polarization, becomes more important in times of divided government. Congressional voting data in times of divided government suggests this (DiSalvo 1). Schiller maintains that polarization cannot be the sole determinant of behavior and therefore its primacy is exaggerated (Schiller 17). Despite objections, the vast majority of scholarship supports ideas of increasing partisanship in recent decades, which many believe threatens the legislative process.

Polarization at the District Level

Most scholars point to the mid to late 1970s as the starting point for contemporary political polarization. By the end of the decade, congressional membership began to show signs of increasing polarization (Theriault 2006, 484). According to Theriault and Rohde (2011), newly elected senators, especially ones that are Republican, and/or House members and/or elected after 1978 are significantly more polarized than members before them (Theriault 2011, 1012). Likewise, Theriault (2006) argues that two-thirds of all polarization comes from member replacement rather than changes in existing senators' ideologies (Theriault 2006, 495). Newly elected congressmen are more ideologically driven than the members who they replace. Increasing levels of partisan divide hurt the legislative process. Burden (2011) suggests that by taking middle of the road congressmen out of the picture, congress has become more polarized and the legislative process has slowed to a halt (Burden 2011, 3). Why is this? What factors are driving less ideologically driven members out of congress and replacing them with polarized ideologues?

Many scholars suggest redistricting as a causal mechanism for party polarization within the House of Representatives. Gerrymandered and manipulated district lines create safer districts—more than ever before (Carson 2007, 879). Majority parties carefully redraw districts to avoid undesirable constituent groups, making districts not only more ideologically pure, but also prone to highly partisan representation. Ideological shifts are also occurring at the district level, with the median voter at the district level moving left or right as the demographics of the district change. Stonecash (2003) discusses secular realignment as a source of the division, with realignment of the party bases occurring alongside a demographic shift in the American electorate (Stonecash, 81). Demographic shifts in the electorate fuel partisanship in congress because districts are becoming more homogenous, with more like-minded people living and voting together.

Safer districts drive changes in political alignment, which allows more ideologically driven candidates to win elections. Recent trends show a rising emphasis on primary elections.

Partisan primaries drive partisan elections within partisan districts. Scholars agree (Theriault 2006, Theriault and Rohde 2011) that the House is naturally becoming more divided and thereby diluting the senatorial replacement pool with polarized candidates, in part due to an increased emphasis on primaries (Theriault 2011, 1012). Redistricting not only hurts political minorities within districts, but also drives more moderate candidates out of the race, increasing partisanship both at home and in Washington.

The Media and Party Elites Effect on Polarization

Other academic conversations on political polarization center on the role new media plays in forming opinions and steering debate within the public. With the rise of cable news, microblogging, and social networking, the way people digest their news has changed. Every political faction has an outlet defending views and driving debate. Oftentimes this information is misleading or inaccurate. Scholars argue that Americans now have the option to sort themselves, to receive information, and to interact with likeminded individuals in ways many could not have imagined until recently. Bishop and Cushing (2008) describe this phenomenon as the spheres of influence (Bishop, Cushing 2008, 129). As Americans become more polarized, they become less entertained with opposing views and more entrenched within their own spheres. The discourse, according to Bishop and Cushing (2008) has become a politicized shouting match where likeminded individuals talk with each other instead of actively engaging opposing views.

Others look at emerging forms of media as a causal mechanism for recent trends in polarization. Jones (2002) presents a case study of individuals who listen to certain radio programs. He surmises that people who already hold particularly partisan views seek outlets that support their assertions (Jones 2002, 173). When likeminded individuals speak simply to receptive audiences, debate suffers and polarization increases. Shapiro (2006) uses data to show manipulation of public opinion through a number of channels (Shapiro 2006, 23). Like the spheres of influence theory this theory works to manipulate and discourage constructive debate, leading to increased partisanship and higher levels of political polarization.

Hyper-partisanship in the new media spills over into elections as well. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) suggest that polarization stems from a growing distaste for the opponent due to negative campaigning, media portrayals, and other factors (ISL 2012, 427). Parties and the media construct the narrative for many candidates, painting the opposition as anti-American, out of touch plutocrats ruining the country. Pope and Woon (2009) discuss the effects of party reputation, which is often discussed and shaped increasingly by new media. They find that Democrats are largely favored on social welfare issues, education, and civil rights (Pope 2009, 653). Republicans are favored in regard to taxes, moral values, and law and order issues (Pope 2009, 653). Scholars look deeper by examining the role party perception plays in voting and polarization in recent decades. These views portray popular shifts in the electorate, suggesting that America itself has become more polarized (Hetherington 2009, 17). Some scholars, however, argue that polarization is not a matter of popular shifts, but rather of changes within the political elites (Druckman 2013, 57). Fiorina (2008) suggests that there is no evidence to show polarization has diffused to the masses (Fiorina 2008, 583).

Many scholars believe partisanship within the public mirrors that of the party elites, who have become more ideologically pure than in the past. Layman and Carsey (*Political Behavior* 2002) argue that polarization does not simply happen along specific issues, but rather extends out, permeating a number of issues as well as the ideological makeup of parties themselves (199). They look at NES data across recent decades and find that elite party differences work

their way to the masses, as people realign themselves with the party on issues or even change parties entirely rather than splitting a ticket. This study echoes the argument (Ensley 2005) that suggests a realignment of the parties beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

While some scholars argue that the voting patterns and ideological furor of the general population mirror that of the party elites, a growing number of academics find that the elites are waging a lonely war on the ideological front. Lauderdale (2013) purports that the mass public is not engaged in politics. There is a difference between the voting patterns of congressional members and the views of average voters on various issues. Trends in congressional voting patterns and floor speech rhetoric do not match up with survey results from the public (Lauderdale 2013, 2). Lauderdale finds, however, that the more informed of congressional debates people are, the more their opinion and voting begins to represent the distribution of the legislature (22).

Layman and Carsey (2002a) look at ANES data from 1972 to 2002 to examine trends in hotly contested topics like race, welfare, and social issues. They find that while the parties have become more polarized, there is limited popular response to these debates (Layman and Carsey 2002a, 89). Claassen and Highton (2009) also investigate the relationship between the elites and the public on hot-button issues like welfare spending has on polarization in the United States. The authors find that only well-informed, party elites respond to these changes, while mainstream Americans are widely unaffected or ill-informed on political issues (Claassen 2009, 547).

Political Polarization And Welfare Politics

In addition to the polarization driven by changing districts, new media, and party elites, changes in socio-economic status seem to drive polarization as well. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) argue that political polarization at the national level directly equates to growing levels of income inequality in the United States since the 1980s (McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal, 2006). As the wealth divide between the wealthy and the average American increases, so too does the level of party polarization. Socio-economic factors divide the parties, placing the richest and poorest Americans at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Garand (2010) looks at income inequality theory from the state level by using CANES data to examine senate roll call votes. He finds that the states with higher levels of income inequality produce more ideologically driven senators (Garand 2010, 1109). Democrats are more left, and Republicans are more right—reflecting the ideologies of the state electorate. Other works discuss the relationship between polarization and wealth redistribution (Rigby 2008), discussing the indirect effects of party divergence on support for the welfare state as the income gap widens (Rigby 2008, 2).

Jochim and Jones (2013) tracked a number of key issues over a forty-year period, finding issue polarization, not systemic, generalized polarization, to be the norm in American politics (Jochim 2013, 361). Two of the key issues they looked at are agriculture spending and support of the welfare state. Polarization of welfare politics closely follows the divergence of major parties, largely following the results of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal. As opinions diverge, what happens to the welfare state?

Forma (2002) argues that during an economic recession, opinions of welfare diverge, pitting low wage earners against higher wage earners (187). Forma takes survey data to analyze the effect recessions (and income level) have on polarization in regard to support of the welfare state, finding that higher earners were more likely to support welfare cuts and limit expansion

during the recession than low earners (202). While overall polarization was not significantly affected by the recession, welfare politics were. People diverge on issues of welfare support based primarily on income level during times of economic recession. This idea ties itself into the theory of economic inequality driving polarization. If, as Forma suggests, people support the welfare state in respect to their own wealth, it makes sense that a polarized congress would be hard pressed to pass farm bill reauthorization during an economic recession like the one from 2007-2009.

Other scholars agree. Variations in popular support for welfare spending programs reflect the degree to which income and political disadvantage are correlated (Rehm 2012, 386). Data from unemployment insurance and multinational survey results show that polarization and opposition to the welfare state is greater in situations where income inequality is greater (Rehm 2012, 403). As the income gap widens, the poorer become more politically disadvantaged, which has a two-pronged approach. First, the poor begin to cluster within one political party, and second, support for welfare spending follows the same divergent trajectory (Rehm 2012, 403).

Americans remain antagonistic toward the welfare state, with the political discussion and the majority of the population cementing a spot right of center on the issue. Terms like “compassionate conservatism” show contempt for a narrowly focused social welfare programs and distaste for any expanded role of the federal government in the welfare state (Epstein 2004, 195). Distinctions are shown among classes and races, but not enough to warrant serious consideration (Epstein 2004, 195). The distaste for a bloated welfare state can be seen in the 1996 *Personal Responsibility Act*, which Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law. Reese (2007) investigates the driving forces behind the bill—most notably the ideologically driven politics of the far right, which worked to stereotype, profile, and appeal to traditional values in order to pass the bill. The *Personal Responsibility Act* demonstrates the power of issue-based polarization. Tensions between sides heighten during times of increased polarization. Welfare reform became a major political issue in the 1990s. Is food stamp reform the recent equivalent? Have nutrition assistance programs become the next hot-button debate in welfare politics?

Research Question

Beginning in the 1970s Congress added food stamps to U.S. farm bills (Grunwald 28). The inclusion of food stamps in subsequent farm bills brought rural and urban representatives together, each having a stake in the process. The 2008 version of the bill, the *Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008*, included food stamps within its \$284 billion in projected costs, most of which was appropriated to four major areas: nutrition assistance, commodity support, conservation, and crop insurance (Monke 2010, 7). Due the most recent economic recession from 2007-2009, however, actual costs of the bill have increased by over fifty percent of what was originally budgeted (Ibid). The majority of the costs can be attributed to increases in federal food assistance funding, which have doubled annually in recent years (Ibid). Currently, the United States spends over \$70 billion a year on these programs and according to the Congressional Budget Office, the number of qualifying Americans has increased by 20 million over the last 15 years (Ferguson 2012, 2060). With over 46.7 million people qualified for food stamps, this equates to a seventy-five percent increase during the recession years.

Polarization literature suggests that, especially in hard economic times, welfare issues like SNAP spending should become more hotly contested. Both Republicans and Democrats want to decrease SNAP funding in the next farm bill. The difference between the House and Senate

proposals centers almost exclusively on differences in support of welfare spending. Is the seemingly irreconcilable difference between the parties a product of increased polarization or simply a difference in policy objectives in a single bill? Is the political storm over SNAP spending a symptom of polarization-driven welfare politics or the inability of committees and leadership to hash out effective, bipartisan legislation? By looking further into the ideological makeup of Congress and tracking the changes juxtaposed against trends in farm bill support, this paper purports that polarization, in fact, is driving a wedge in the farm bill debate. Welfare spending in the form of nutrition assistance provides a case study into the trend of polarization in America over much of the past thirty years. By looking at DW-Nominate Scores over time along with voting patterns in past farm bills, this paper can determine to what extent polarization affects, even drives, support of federal agriculture policy.

Research Design

Polarization literature suggests a fast-growing divide between parties over the past twenty-five years. To test this assertion, this paper examines partisan support for farm bills since the 1960s, comparing these results to measures of polarization during the same period. To measure partisan support, this paper looks at House final passage voting on each of the nine federal farms bill beginning in 1965. To quantify polarization, this paper examines historical fluxes in DW-Nominate Scores over the period, recording scores in years where the House voted on a new farm bill. Together, House voting records and DW-Nominate scores will provide a quantifiable case as to the effects of polarization. Though this study is limited in determining cause, it can suggest polarization to be a major contributing factor to legislative gridlock in Congress today. By examining House support in the Farm Bill, this paper assesses the impact polarization plays on voting patterns and political ideology in welfare-inclusive legislation.

A major focus in this investigation is welfare, particularly SNAP, and its role in uncovering trends toward an uptick polarization in recent years. From the *Personal Responsibility Act of 1996* to five-year farm bills, support for the welfare state among parties diverges as politics becomes more polarized. Food stamps were added to U.S. farm bills beginning in the 1970s (*Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, 1973*). Each subsequent bill has included nutritional assistance programs like SNAP and, therefore, should provide a case study in political polarization throughout the last decades of the 20th century and first decades of the 21st. This paper measures majority and minority support upon final passage in the House for farm bills beginning with the Food and Agricultural Act of 1965 through the last farm bill, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, as well as House votes on the current bill. The paper will measure support and track changes over time, mapping historical trends and investigating patterns in support between majority and minority caucuses within the House.

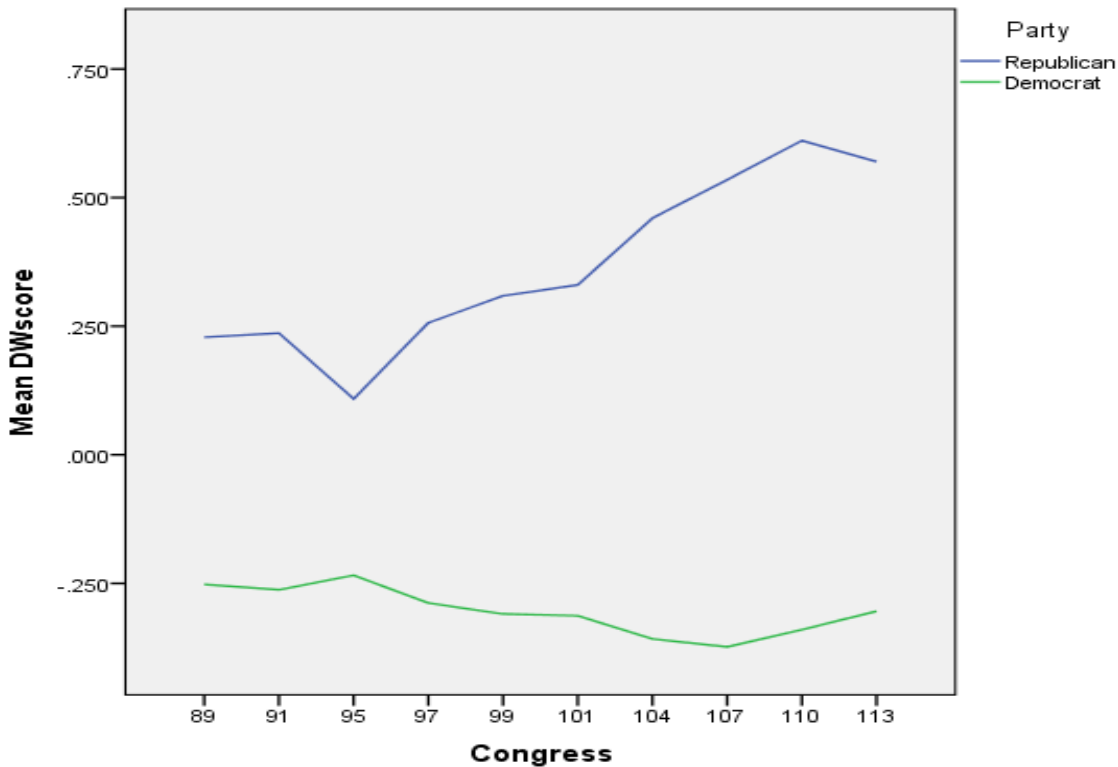
The final passage results will be compared to historical DW-Nominate scores beginning in 1965. DW-Nominate scores measure the position of individual legislators relative to other members within a given Congress. Though these measures cannot be used to directly compare members between different Congresses, they are an accurate measure of the difference in relative ideologies between members of the same Congress. In short, DW-Nominate Scores cannot be used to compare the ideological differences between congressional members of different Congresses, but can be used to effectively track ideological differences, and thus polarization, within each Congress, which can be compared over time. This paper uses historical DW-Nominate score data from farm bill years from 1965 through 2008 as well as the scores of the most recent Congress in which a new farm bill is under consideration. Including DW-Nominate

scores along with the committee voting records can work to potentially quantify the effect of polarization on the U.S. Farm Bill, especially in recent years.

Analysis

Figure 1 tracks DW-Nominate scores for each Congress from 1965-2013. Using SPSS software and congressional DW-Nominate data, this graph seems to describe a growing divide over time. DW-Nominate scores measure the position of individual legislators relative to other members within a given Congress. This data supports the ideas of Theriault and Rohde (2011), who posited that newly elected senators, especially ones that are Republican, and/or House members and/or elected after 1978 are significantly more polarized than members before them (Theriault 2011, 1012). While historical trends in DW-Nominate scores show a trend toward increased polarization, especially among Republican members, do Farm Bill votes see corresponding levels of polarization? The following section discusses final passage House votes on each Farm Bill since 1965. What do trends in final passage votes show, especially in regard to party polarization?

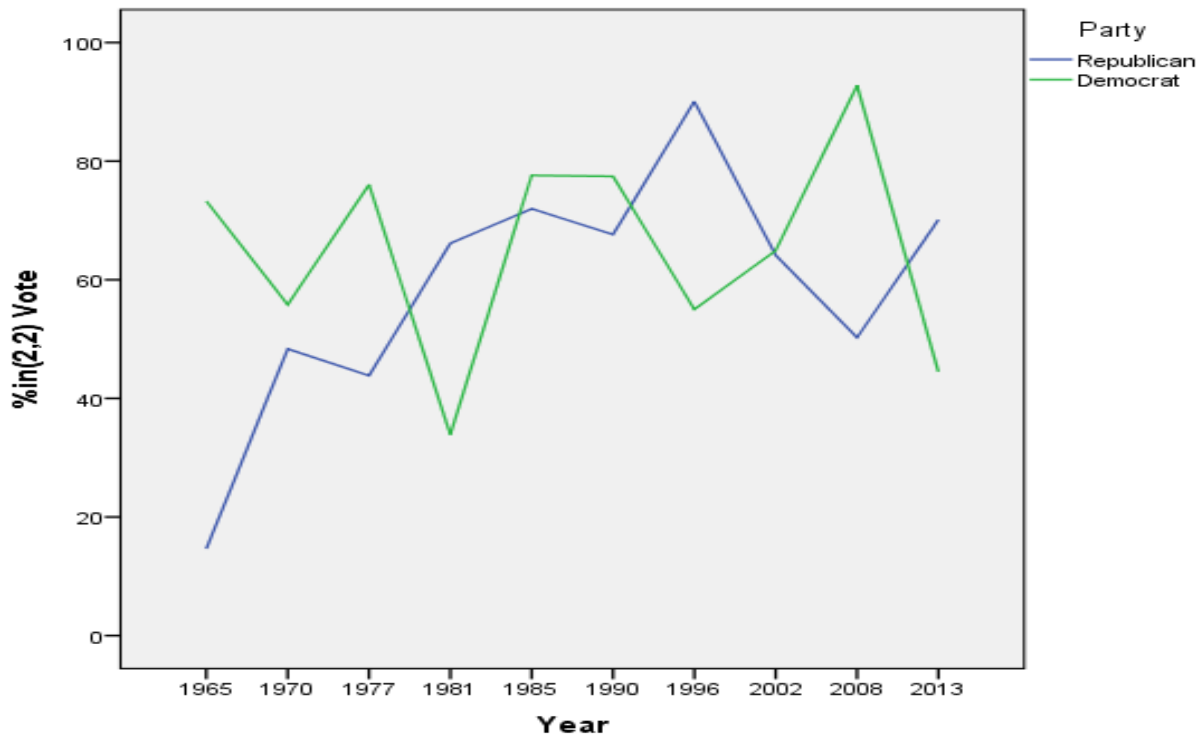
Figure 1: Mean DW-Nominate Scores for 89-113 Congress, by Party



Using SPSS software and Farm Bill vote data from the U.S House, Figure 2 shows the percent of House members voting “yes” on the Farm Bill by party since 1965. What general trends does the data show? How does this data relate to Figure 1, the measure of political polarization? The graph above shows an overall upward trend in final passage support for the Farm Bill in the House since 1965. Other than drastic swings during majority party switches, this overall trend remains constant. DW-Nominate scores have seen a dramatic split since the

1980s. According to polarization literature, increases in party polarization should create more polarized votes. Why does the Farm Bill data seem to buck this trend? Are there pieces within the bill that garner bipartisan support?

Figure 2: Percent of House final passage “yes” votes by Farm Bill, 1965-2013



One explanation for increased bipartisan support for the Farm Bill since the 1970s is the inclusion of programs that work to entice both urban and rural congressmen. Beginning in the 1970s, the Farm Bill has included provisions for nutritional assistance programs, like food stamps (SNAP), which largely attract urban congressmen. Rural congressmen see funding for commodity supports, crop insurance, and conservation programs. Together, the amount of financial benefit for each district may outweigh partisan divides. While parties may disagree on individual aspects of the bill, including welfare spending and payoffs to large-scale agribusinesses, district-level program funding works to offset polarized politics. Figures 3 and 4, shown below, depict the average food stamp participation and annual agriculture output since the late 1960s respectively.

Figure 3: Average Food Stamp (SNAP) Participation, by Thousand since 1969

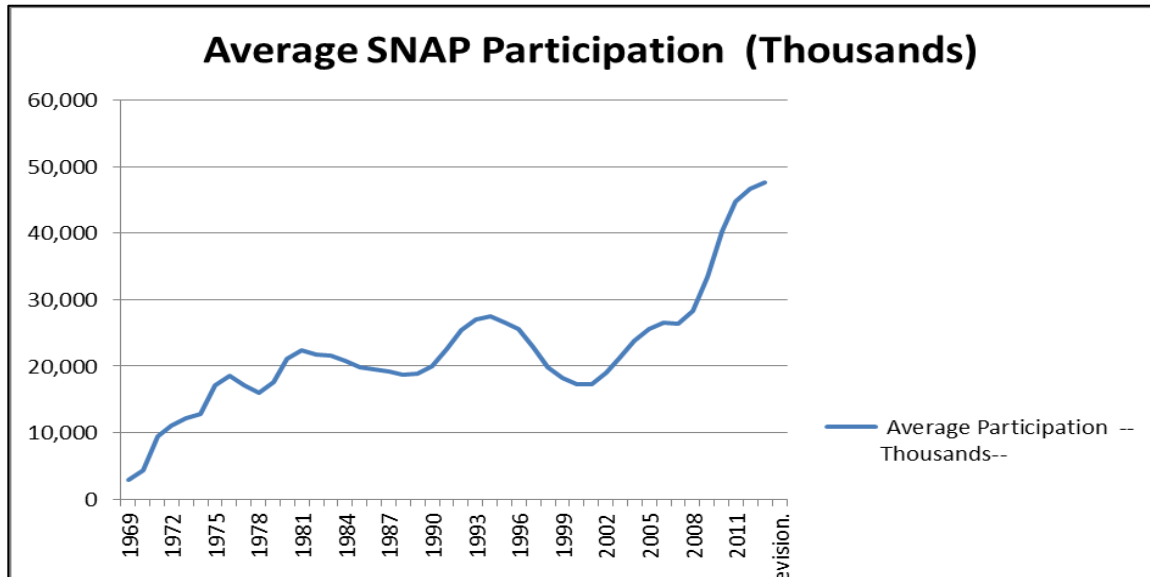
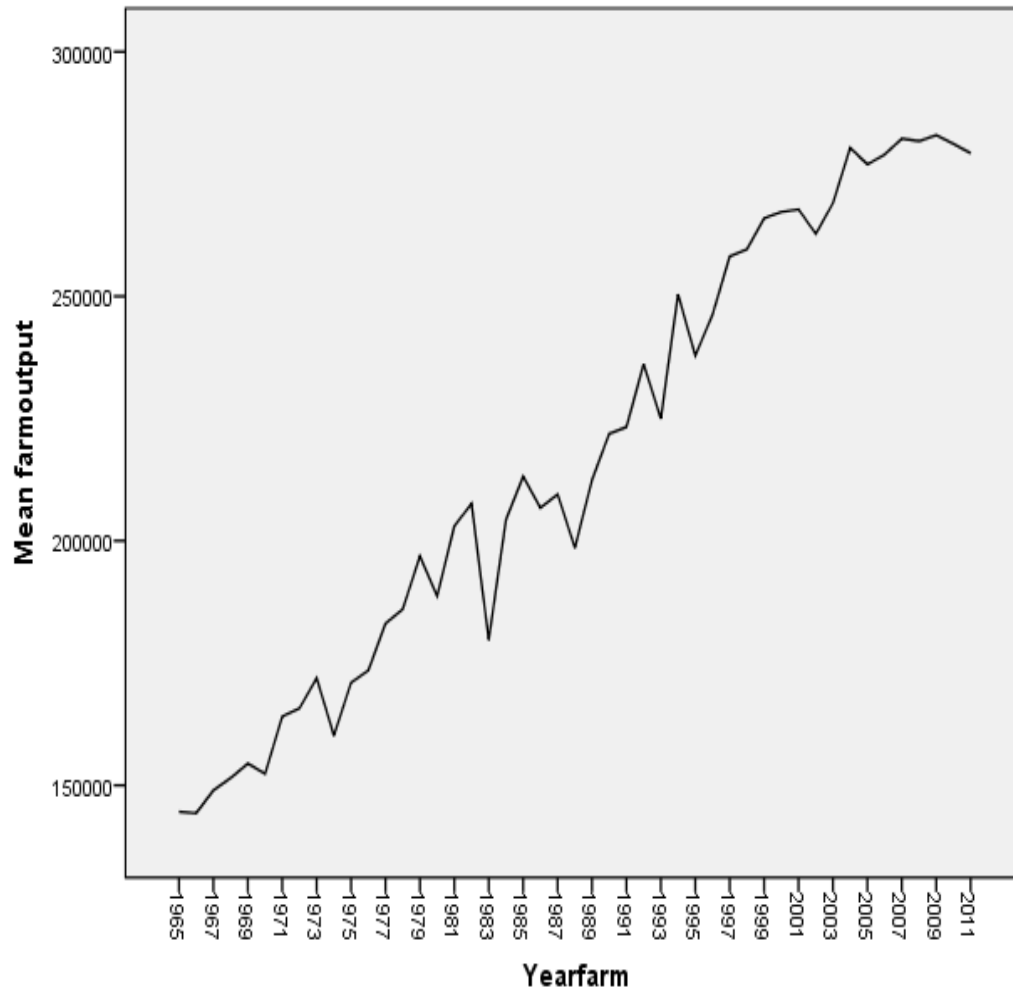


Figure 3 shows average SNAP participation by thousand since 1969. In the early 1970s, SNAP benefits were added to the Farm Bill in order to increase support from urban congressmen. This graph shows that SNAP participation rises steadily beginning in the late 1960s and jumps dramatically around the time of the Great Recession. While this data shows overall increases in SNAP participation, further studies should look at SNAP participation and Farm Bill final passage vote by district.

Figure 4 shows mean farm output from 1965-2011. Trends show steady increases in farm outputs since the creation of the current version of the Farm Bill (switch to commodity supports) under the Nixon Administration. This increase also follows increases in final passage support of the Farm Bill in those years. Whether or not increases in “yes” votes can be attributed to agriculture spending in the Farm Bill needs to be further investigated by taking House final passage vote data and comparing it to district-level agriculture output. Using farm output can help explain the lack of polarization in recent years.

While SNAP participation and mean farm output at the national level show similar trends that could be supported by historical voting data, further investigations at the district level could provide better controls. Also, looking at historical trends in committee voting data can show measures of polarization that House final passage votes may not.

Figure 4: Mean Farm Output by year (1965-2011)

Conclusion

Scholars point toward increased political polarization in the U.S. Congress since the 1980s. This paper examined historical trend U.S. Farm Bill in light of these polarization theories. To measure the impact of polarization on the U.S. Farm Bill, this paper tracked House final passage support for each five-year farm bill beginning in 1965. The voting results are compared to DW-Nominate Scores of the same period. DW-Nominate scores since the late 1960s shows large increases in party polarization, particularly in the Republican Party. This finding supports the majority of polarization literature, especially Theriault and Rohde (2011). However, when compared to House final passage vote data, my findings lack congruence. Instead of showing increased partisanship, House votes instead show a general upward trend in support between both parties. Why? Preliminary analysis of SNAP participation and agriculture output show significant increases in recent decades. Is this enough to mitigate the effects of party polarization? Further investigation is needed at the district level to show the effects of nutrition assistance program funding and agriculture spending on support of the Farm Bill. Other areas of further study include committee voting records and further investigations of majority/minority support.

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