

# **Populism, politicization and policy change in US and UK agro-food policies**

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## **Abstract**

This paper compares the effects of right-wing populism on agro-food policy in the US and UK. In both countries, populist campaigns politicized agro-food issues but the effects on policy have been variable. In the United States, policy has remained relatively stable despite the politicization of agro-food issues under Trump. In the UK, amid the uncertainty over Brexit, an opportunity exists to incorporate a wider range of goals around the environment, climate change and public health. These differences reveal how features of the policy process and the party system mediate the effects of politicization on policy change.

**Keywords: US, UK, agro-food, populism, politicization, policy**

## **Introduction**

The 2016 vote for the United Kingdom to leave the EU (Brexit) and the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States share common features of right-wing populist campaigns. These include a growing opposition to globalization, a resurgent ethno-nationalism, and the popular rejection of technocratic elites (Bang and Marsh 2018a). Although scholars have examined the causes of this populist turn and the sources of its electoral support, less attention has been paid to the policy consequences of populism (for important exceptions, see Lockwood 2018; Ketola & Nordensvard 2018). To examine what happens after successful populist campaigns, this paper focuses on agro-food policies in the United States and United Kingdom since 2016. Our findings indicate that the policy effects of right-wing populism are mediated by the institutional features of the policy process and characteristics of the party system.

Agro-food policies offer a useful case study for exploring these dynamics. For almost a century, wealthy countries in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia have heavily regulated agricultural markets in order to protect the incomes of farmers. Decisions regarding levels of government subsidy take place in closed circles of policy experts such as agricultural ministries, peak organizations of farmers, and their elected representatives (Sheingate 2003; Behringer & Feindt 2019). Based on this history, we would expect agro-food policies to be relatively immune to changes following the success of right-wing populists at the polls. To the extent that we do see changes in agro-food policies, we can identify possible mechanisms that lead to the disruption of longstanding policy regimes. However, as we also explore in this paper, farmers and rural voters are an important source of political support for right-wing populist movements. This leads to a different set of expectations about the relationship between populism and policy change. Rather than a source of disruption, populism might sustain or strengthen certain agro-food programs,

especially agricultural supports that benefit core supporters. To the extent this is the case, attention to the effects of right-wing populism may help us better understand the resilience of agro-food policies despite growing public concerns about the adverse health and environmental effects of intensive crop and livestock production.

### **Research Design**

To explore different outcomes and the mechanisms underlying them, the paper adopts an institutional approach to explaining recent policy developments in the United States and United Kingdom. These countries offer a useful combination of control and variation for comparison (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). As noted above, both countries recently witnessed the unexpected success of right-wing populist campaigns. Moreover, both display a similar cultural heritage regarding farming and rural places in the national imaginary. Alongside the similarities are important sources of variation in how the institutional context, including party system characteristics, mediates the effects of right-wing populism on policy change. Whereas US policy authority is centred in the national legislature, UK agro-food policy has been for nearly fifty years embedded in a supranational institutional structure. In addition, electoral rules and features of the party system augment the political voice of farmers and rural voters to a greater degree in the United States compared with the United Kingdom. Consequently, the impact of populism on policy and the policy debate is different in each country.

To explore within-case variation on our dependent variable, agro-food policies, we examine the effects of populism along the five dimensions of policy change set out in the introduction to this volume: the underlying policy ideas (or paradigms), policy presence (policy adoption or repeal), policy instruments, policy setting (calibration of instruments), and policy

scope (target population) (Feindt, Schwindenhammer and Tosun, forthcoming). Our findings largely confirm expectations that third-order changes in policy paradigms and presence is more difficult than second- or first-order changes in instruments, setting, or scope (Hall 1993). This is not to suggest that policy paradigms go uncontested, however, and in the case of agro-food policies we find that one effect of right-wing populism has been to reinforce claims about the exceptional character of agriculture used to justify government support to farmers (Skogstad 1998).

To operationalise our independent variable, we consider the right-wing populist campaigns surrounding Brexit and Trump, and their aftermath, as examples of politicization that increased public salience, polarized alternatives, and expanded the range of actors engaged in agro-food policies (Hooghe and Marks 2009). At a general level, right-wing populism feeds on a growing dissatisfaction with government seen as distant and technocratic, which is to say a depoliticized policy sphere (Wood 2016). Populism, in this view, is a movement of (re)politicization. As Hay (2020, 200) describes it in the UK, Brexit rejects, ‘a politics of “expertocracy” and depoliticisation...Its mantra--“taking back control”--is not just about taking back control from Brussels, but taking back control of politics from experts too.’ In the specific domain of agro-food policies, we find that populist politicians in both countries successfully politicized technical elements of policy to tap into the resentment that farmers and rural dwellers feel toward government. However, the effects of this politicization strategy have been variable. Consistent with Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, change appears more likely where politicization alters the definition of problems (policy image) and the locus of authority (policy venue) (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). However, as we also find, politicization can serve to reinforce the policy status quo by strengthening incumbent actors in the policy process. As we conclude, image and venue change varies with institutional features of the policy process and the party system.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the next section, we show how the campaigns for Brexit and Trump politicized agro-food issues in ways that tapped into ethno-nationalist tropes and reinforced ideas about farmers and rural places as deserving recipients of government aid. We also show that farmers and rural voters are an important political constituency for conservative parties aligned with right-wing populist forces. The affinities between agrarianism, populism, and conservatism provide insight into the politicization of agro-food issues in the US and UK. In the next section, we explore the policy effects of these right-wing populist campaigns in the two countries, using the five dimensions of policy change set out in the introduction to this volume. Drawing on a combination of public statements, official documents, and journalistic coverage of policy developments, we examine the degree to which the politicization of agro-food issues has altered policy or reinforced the status quo. In the discussion, we explain this variation according to institutional features of the policy process and the party system that mediate the effects of politicization on policy change.

### **Populism, Agrarianism, and Conservatism**

According to Mudde (2016, 7), radical right ideology embraces ethno-nationalist beliefs that states ‘should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group.’ Right-wing populist movements couple these nativist tendencies with calls for a “purification” of a “diluted” national culture (Mudde 2016, 10). Similarly, Bang and Marsh (2018b; 2018a, 353) describe how right-wing populism is a rejection of a “globalist technocracy” expressed through a ‘cultural backlash against...multicultural tolerance and openness to difference.’ The campaign slogans for Brexit and Trump –“Take Back Control” and “Make America Great Again”– each tapped into a similar set of ideas about a loss of national sovereignty, a rejection of globalization, and a nativist

reaction against immigration.

In this section, we explore how these right-wing populist themes resonated with ideas about the exceptional or privileged status of agriculture in the national imaginary (Skogstad 1998). In the United States, for example, an agrarian tradition celebrates farmers as a bulwark of democracy, guarding against the corrupting effects of concentrated power (Postel 2007). Elements of this agrarian vision still exist today, especially in the discourse around the “family farm” as ‘an institution imbued with shared cultural values’ (Strach2007, 129). Similarly, in the UK, many view the “rural idyll” of the British countryside as “a moral geography in which rural places and rural people...[are] the repositories of ‘true national values’” (Woods 2017, 23). There is also continuing advocacy of the social and cultural importance of the ‘small family farm’, for example in underpinning the survival of the Welsh language (NFU Cymru nd.). As Winter et al. (2016, 11) note ‘a strong positive discourse surrounding small farms has continued amongst some of those resistant to mainstream conventional agriculture’ such as the Soil Association and the Family Farms Association. In both countries, moreover, claims about the special status of farmers can include a nativist streak ‘with racist and xenophobic undertones’ expressed in opposition to government policies seen to benefit a non-white, urban population (Woods 2017, 23; Cramer 2016).

These agrarian ideas found an ideological home in conservative parties that historically drew strength from a rural electorate, and while right-wing populism is not solely a rural phenomenon, its electoral success in both countries relied on a rural base of support. In the United States, rural areas have become Republican strongholds, especially where agriculture is the predominant economic activity (Scala and Johnson 2017). Moreover, farming regions were crucial to Trump’s success. For example, a January 2016 poll of farmers taken just before the first

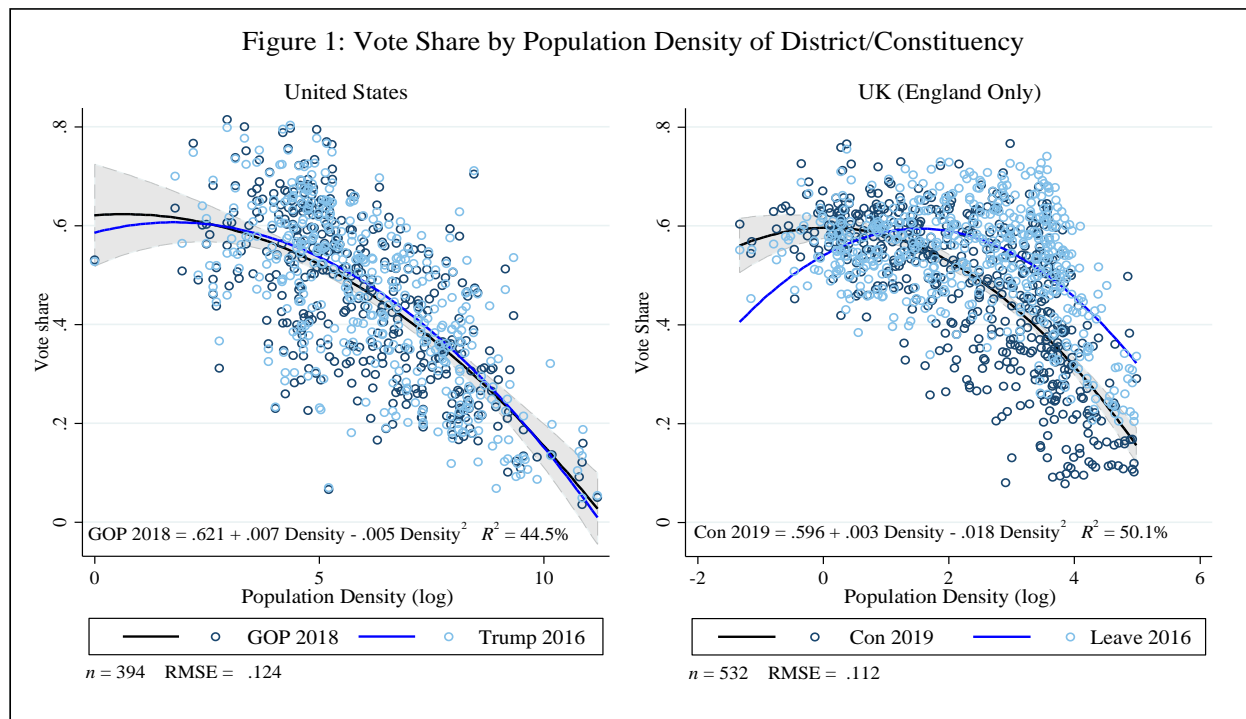
presidential primaries found that Trump was by far the most popular GOP candidate, garnering a plurality of 40 per cent of farmers in a crowded field of ten Republican hopefuls (Aimpoint 2016). An analysis of county-level voting patterns in 2016 found that ‘farming regions were both more likely to vote for President Trump and also voted for him at a statistically higher margin compared to Romney,’ the 2012 Republican nominee (Goetz et al., 2019, 719).

In the UK, apart from the regional nationalist parties (Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party), the Conservatives and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) tend to draw more support from farming regions than Labour and the Greens (Tosun 2017, 1630). Historically, the countryside has been a stronghold for the Conservative Party, although this dominance for a time weakened in the late 1990s as the Labour Party made inroads in rural areas that had become less dependent on farming (see Woods 2017; Drew 2016). More recently, right wing parties such as UKIP have attracted dissident rural Conservatives using nativist appeals that associate rurality with national identity. As Woods (2017, 90) remarks, this draws on a belief ‘that rural society represents a purer, more true, British way of life’. While voting in the referendum did not fall neatly along an urban-rural divide (Becker, Fetzer, and Novy 2017), support for Brexit was higher in rural parts of England and Wales than in urban areas.

Figure 1 visualizes the geographic support for conservative parties and right-wing populist campaigns by comparing voting shares for the U.S. Republican Party and the UK Conservative Party in the 2018 congressional and 2019 general election, respectively. The population density of congressional districts and parliamentary constituencies serves as a rough proxy for a rural-urban continuum of places. Although it is an ecological fallacy to infer individual voting behaviour from aggregate data, the regression lines in figure 1 indicate that in both countries parties on the right



tend to attract higher levels of support in less densely populated areas.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 also compares the recent lower chamber election results with the 2016 presidential and EU referendum campaigns. In the case of the United States, support for Trump tracks very closely with areas where Republicans garner large shares of the vote. In the case of Brexit, the relationship between population density and the Leave vote is curvilinear (as illustrated by the regression line), suggesting that support for Brexit was greater in small towns than in the countryside. As discussed below, this reflects the cross-cutting nature of Brexit, particularly among farmers.



<sup>1</sup>To facilitate comparison, data for the US excludes districts where Republicans ran unopposed or did not field a candidate. The UK data excludes Scotland and Wales given the importance of regional nationalist parties.

In examining the sources of rural support for Brexit and Trump, it is important to recognize that although anti-globalization and anti-immigrant appeals played a part, right-wing populist campaigns in both countries also tailored their messages to the specific economic concerns of rural residents, especially those involved in farming. In this way, agro-food policies served as a vehicle to address the resentment many rural residents feel toward a government they see as controlled by distant technocrats in Washington and Brussels.

In the United States, Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again" resonated with rural voters who feel forgotten by urban elites. As a candidate for president, Trump tapped into what Kathy Cramer describes as 'a belief that rural communities are not given their fair share of resources or respect' (2016, 51). More than a distrust of government, Cramer explains, 'people in rural areas often perceived that government was particularly dismissive of the concerns of people in rural communities' (2016, 62). Although Cramer's study focused on the rural poor and working class, farmers (who tend to be wealthier than most Americans) also display characteristics of rural resentment, especially the idea that regulations reflect an anti-rural bias of Washington bureaucrats who do not understand or care about farming.

Consider, for example, the "Waters of the United States" rule. Issued by the Obama Administration in 2015, the regulation defines which rivers, streams, and lakes are covered by the Clean Water Act. Although intended to clarify federal regulatory authority, farmers viewed the rule as an overreach that empowered the government to regulate any water on their property, from ponds to irrigation canals. The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) complained that the new rule gave the Environmental Protection Agency 'sweeping new authority to regulate land use, which they may exercise at will' (AFBF, n.d.). Although very few farmers would have been affected by the regulation, the image of remote bureaucrats telling farmers what to do with their

land became a standard part of Trump's stump speech as he promised to 'end the EPA intrusion into your family homes and your family farms' (Politico 2016). In one of his first acts as president, Trump issued an executive order suspending the rule, then formally repealed it in September 2019, a move supported by the major farm organizations (Davies 2019, AFBF 2018).

Tax policy was another issue Trump used to great effect in rallying rural support for his campaign (Nosowitz 2016). As Trump told an Iowa campaign rally, 'family farms are the backbone of this country [...] yet, Hillary Clinton wants to shut down family farms [...] by raising taxes' (Politico 2016). Here, Trump was referring to an inheritance tax he claimed would prevent farmers from transferring wealth to their children. In reality, only estates with more than \$5.5 million in property and assets would pay the tax, affecting roughly 300 farms (less than one percent of all farm businesses) (USDA ERS n.d.). Nevertheless, Trump fired up the crowd with promises 'to end this war on the American farmer' (Politico 2016). As one observer noted after the election, Trump successfully appealed to farmers by portraying policies as 'attempts by an intrusive government to regulate and ruin the lives of farmers' (Nosowitz 2016). Politicizing technical aspects of agro-food policy was an important feature of Trump's campaign strategy.

Similarly, the Brexit campaign appealed to farmers on the basis of their frustrations with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the EU's flagship approach to agro-food matters. The Leave group *Farmers for Britain* complained that the CAP failed to take account of the 'unique position' of UK farmers, and surrounded them with red tape that 'restricts innovation, growth and development' (Farmers for Britain, nd). This theme was echoed by pro-Brexit minister George Eustice who stated, 'if we have the courage to take back control, we would be free to think again and could achieve so much more for farmers and our environment' (*Telegraph*, 23 February 2016). Leave groups drew on similar promises to "take back control" to reassure farmers that there would

still be ‘plenty of money’ available to ‘continue, or even increase’ the subsidies they received (*The Guardian*, 24 Feb 2016). Claims that the UK would save £350m a week by leaving the EU resonated in rural areas and amongst many farmers.

The Leave campaign also exploited broader political concerns about sovereignty and the impact of immigration in rural areas. Indeed, a pre-referendum survey by *Farmers Weekly* revealed that half of those farmers intending to vote Leave mentioned “sovereignty/taking back control” as their main concern, with a further 20 per cent referring to immigration (*Farmers Weekly*, 16 April 2016).<sup>2</sup> The survey suggested that 58 per cent of farmers supported Brexit, compared to 31 per cent for remaining in the EU (*Farmers Weekly*, 16 April 2016). A post-referendum analysis by the Country Land and Business Association also found that 55 per cent of people in rural areas in England and Wales voted Leave (CLA 2016). On the other hand, it might be argued that there has been a tendency to over-emphasize the rural basis of the pro-Brexit vote given that farmer support for the referendum was only several points higher than the national vote of 52 per cent.

What made farmers receptive to this message? One answer can be found in the growing diversity of issues and interests in agro-food policy, what Daugbjerg and Feindt (2017) refer to as a shift to a post-exceptionalist policy domain in agriculture. Although income supports and subsidies remain the core of agro-food policy in the US and Britain, debates over food and farming also include discussion of tax policy, biofuels, environmental practices, and animal welfare (to name a few). As the agricultural issue agenda expanded, farmers have become one among many interests occupying an issue niche in an increasingly pluralistic policy domain (Browne 1988,

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<sup>2</sup>The survey was emailed to the *Farmers Weekly* data base and responses were self-selecting, although weighted for sectors and farm type etc.

1990). At the same time, as criticisms of intensive agriculture intensify, many farmers chafe at the idea that they are no longer seen exclusively as producers of food, but stewards of the environment as well (Potter and Tilzey 2005). By emphasizing traditional agrarian themes, and connecting these to ethno-nationalist tropes, right-wing populist campaigns appealed to farmers' anxieties about losing power and influence over decisions they have traditionally controlled.

In sum, the success of right-wing populism in both the US and UK partly depended on the idea that farming is central to the moral and economic health of the nation. Right-wing populism offers a powerful vehicle for the continued expression of agricultural exceptionalism because farmers and farming evoke a mythical past that resonates with those who see contemporary politics as a corruption of national values and beliefs. This connection is important for understanding the relationship between politicization and policy change. As an electoral strategy, the politicization of agro-food issues can reinforce the policy status quo. As we explore next, the degree to which this occurs depends on the mediating effects of institutions and party systems.

### **Populism, politicization and agro-food policy in the UK and US**

This section describes the trajectories of agricultural policy in the UK and US since 2016 using the five dimensions of policy change identified previously: paradigms, presence, instruments, settings and scope. Although the politicization of agro-food issues has increased political conflict along all five dimensions, we see variation both across and within the UK and US cases.

The UK government set out its post-Brexit ideas for agro-food policy in a white paper ('Heath and Harmony'), followed by introduction of the Agriculture Bill in the House of Commons in November 2018. This made little progress due to the Brexit impasse and following

the general election in late 2019 a modified Bill was introduced in Parliament in January 2020.<sup>3</sup> Essentially enabling legislation, this set out a range of ideas concerning financial assistance, environmental sustainability, marketing standards, producer organisations, and fairness in the agri-food supply chain. Along the five dimensions of policy change, the discursive framework surrounding the Bill was ambitious. In terms of policy scope (target population), and in clear contrast to the CAP, future public funding will no longer be restricted to farmers but open to all who can deliver public goods in rural areas. This includes non-farming practices such as enhancing cultural heritage and promoting wider public access to the countryside. In terms of policy settings and instruments, direct payments will be abolished (a long-standing UK policy goal) and replaced by a new contract-based system of public payments for public goods that finally severs subsidies from the land (Environmental Land Management Schemes). Despite the change in policy presence envisioned by the repeal of the CAP, it is debatable whether the Agriculture Bills represent a paradigm shift. As Daugbjerg (2003) notes, this occurs very rarely and requires changes in the ideational framework, and arguably policy remains grounded in the state-assisted paradigm. Nevertheless, the rhetoric surrounding the new approach is redolent with references to ‘a landmark bill’, ‘a historic opportunity’ to reshape domestic agricultural policy, and a ‘decisive shift’ from the CAP after years of ‘inefficient and overly bureaucratic policy dictated to farmers by the EU’ (Defra 2020, Defra 2018b, 3). Introducing the original Bill, pro-leave Defra Secretary Michael Gove spoke of the promise to ‘take back control for farmers after almost 50 years’ of ‘burdensome

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<sup>3</sup>Although both bills applied mainly to England they included some sections on Wales and Northern Ireland. However the Scottish government refused to be included in the legislation and complained that it amounted to an unacceptable ‘power-grab’ by Westminster (see House of Commons Library 2018, pp. 7-10).

and outdated' EU rules and deliver a 'green Brexit' (HM Government 2018).

In addition to linking government supports with environmental goals, the new approach pledged to free farmers from the red-tape and 'rigid bureaucratic constraints' of the CAP, such as the much-criticized (and mostly ineffective) rules on 'greening'. In its place, the government promised a 'new regulatory culture' (change in policy instruments and settings) in which enforcement 'is less disproportionately punitive' without weakening environmental standards (Defra 2018a, 49). In the longer term a system of independent regulation, streamlined "whole farm" inspections, and 'smarter regulation and enforcement' will be introduced (see Farm Inspection and Regulation Review 2018).

The parliamentary debate on the original bill focused on how to strike the right balance between the goals of food production, support for farmers, and environmental protection (see House of Commons EFRA 2018, 12; House of Commons Library 2018, 6). While there was general support among stakeholders for the principle of public money for public goods, there was concern about how to identify and deliver these goods given the lack of detail on many important issues, especially future levels of funding and trade arrangements. The reorientation of policy occasioned by Brexit left both 'remain' and 'leave' contingents of the farming sector uneasy. Around a quarter who supported Leave (as well as 90 per cent of those who wanted to remain) indicated that they had 'little faith in the government's willingness to implement farmer-friendly policies' (Farmers Weekly 2016). Organizations such as the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and The Tenant Farmers Association (TFA) expressed concern that a turn toward public payments for public goods would come at the expense of farmer competitiveness (House of Commons Library 2018, 29; *Farming UK*, 13 September 2018). In response, the NFU published ten key amendments it wanted to see to the original Bill, the first of which was the need for 'an agricultural Agriculture

Bill’ with food production at its heart (*Farmers Weekly*, 10 October 2018). It also demanded a multi-annual budgetary framework that would allow farmers to plan for the long-term and ‘avoid the agricultural budget becoming politicized’ (NFU 2018; House of Commons EFRA 2018, 13). However, there is some evidence from the 2020 Bill that such concerns have been noted, with adjustments suggesting a reinforcement of exceptionalism. In a commentary on the new Bill the NFU welcomed ‘improvements’ such as much greater emphasis on food security, encouraging food production, and improving soil quality (NFU n.d.). The Bill requires government to report to parliament on food security every five years, multi-annual ‘financial programmes’ will be developed (but not fixed budgets as under the CAP), and there is explicit reference to regulation of fertilisers and financial assistance for improving soil. Environmental organisations welcomed the continued commitment to payments for public goods and the new emphasis on soil quality. However, the increased rhetoric on food production and security left them uneasy. As one noted, ‘as pragmatists, our initial feeling is that this strikes just about the right balance. But any further moves in this direction will risk the core premise of this reform; that it is about moving away from the Common Agricultural Policy, and toward a more sustainable system of farming and land management’ (Wildlife and Countryside Link n.d.).

However, for environmental and farming groups alike, the ‘most significant deficiency...is the absence of any commitment or means of upholding British farming production standards in the context of international trade negotiations’ (NFU n.d.). Brexit has resulted in a politicization of agricultural trade, even though the issue is largely tangential to the Agriculture Bill. Despite promises to secure as ‘frictionless’ trade as possible and maintain ‘a deep and special partnership’ with the EU, a substantial element of ‘Leave’ supporters have advocated withdrawing from the EU without a deal to trade on WTO terms, with ambitious trade agreements with countries such as the



United States and Brazil envisioned as an alternative. This is easier said than done, as the US wants ‘comprehensive market access’ by reducing or eliminating tariffs, and ‘greater regulatory compatibility’ to ‘eliminate market-distorting practices that unfairly decrease U.S. market opportunities’ for its agricultural goods (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2017). This has produced heated debate about whether EU food safety rules limiting US exports of products such as chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-boosted beef should be retained after Brexit. The initial UK response was that it would not lower food safety, animal welfare, or environmental standards in future trade deals, but the revised withdrawal agreement and political declaration reached by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the EU removed references to ‘level playing field’ protections for workers’ rights and environmental standards (IPPR 2019).

Recent developments in the United States display a similar set of dynamics: along several dimensions of policy change, the politicization of agro-food issues reinforced and strengthened the status quo. This is illustrated by the recent farm bill, omnibus food and agriculture legislation Congress must reauthorize every five years (Bosso 2017). Since the 1970s, passing a farm bill required bipartisan agreement between rural supporters of farm subsidies and urban supporters of food assistance programs. In recent cycles, however, conservative Republicans have insisted on cuts to food assistance programs they argue are subject to fraud, waste, and abuse (Bosso 2017). In 2013, a group of Republican lawmakers broke with their party ranks to defeat the farm bill in the House of Representatives, in part because the final bill did not include conservative proposals such as drug testing for recipients of food assistance (Militana and Brasher 2013). In 2018, conservative Republicans in the House again sought changes to nutrition programs such as strict work requirements as a condition for receiving aid (Thrush and Kaplan 2018). If adopted, these changes would constitute a novel set of policy instruments that reveal a significant challenge to the

underlying paradigm of food assistance. Moreover, these conservative challenges to the historic bargain supporting agro-food policy threatened the reauthorization of farm subsidies in the process.

However, due to the institutional context of the U.S. policy process, the politicization of agro-food issues (especially the polarization around nutrition programs) resulted in a political stalemate that reinforced the status quo. In 2018, a narrow majority in the Republican-controlled House passed the farm bill by just two votes (213-211). The bill required that recipients of food assistance work or enter a job-training program, a change in policy setting and scope projected to reduce the number of Americans who qualified for aid and cut \$9.2 billion in spending over 10 years. The House bill also proposed eliminating a major conservation program, a move that would replace the traditional policy instrument used to compensate farmers who take environmentally sensitive land out of production (Boudreau n.d.; H.R. 2, Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 | Congressional Budget Office, n.d.).

Unlike the House, where a simple majority rules, the Senate typically requires a super-majority to pass legislation.<sup>4</sup> This meant Republicans could not pass a farm bill on a party-line vote and would need to attract a handful of Democratic votes. To do so, the Senate version removed the controversial changes to nutrition and environmental programs adopted in the House and instead passed a bill that largely continued existing farm programs with negligible effects on projected spending (S. 3042, Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 n.d.; 2018 Farm Bill

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<sup>4</sup> Under Senate rules, sixty votes (out of 100 members) are required to end debate and call a vote. Unless the majority party has sixty members, the minority party can block progress on a bill. This forces the majority party to secure just enough support from the minority party to reach the sixty vote threshold (Krehbiel 1998).

by the Numbers).

Differences between the House and Senate versions of the farm bill produced a legislative stalemate throughout 2018. Conservative Republicans in the House continued to insist on scaling back nutrition programs, provisions that made it impossible to secure enough Democratic votes to pass a farm bill in the Senate. Meanwhile, conservative Republicans in the House threatened to withdraw their support from a bill that did not include work requirements for recipients of food assistance. With neither chamber able to move forward, farm groups grew increasingly concerned: sixteen agricultural organizations wrote to the leaders of the House and Senate agriculture committees noting that low prices, extreme weather events, and growing trade tensions with China were ‘all weighing heavily on the minds of our respective members’ (Coalition Letter to House and Senate Committees on Agriculture, n.d.). Ultimately, the November 2018 elections and the impending shift to Democratic control of the House broke the stalemate. In December, House and Senate negotiators agreed to a compromise bill that removed the work requirements, clearing the way for passage in both chambers (Coppess et al. 2018). Although a handful of conservative Republicans held fast in their opposition, the final version of the bill enjoyed broad bipartisan support. In the end, Republican attempts to roll back food assistance took a back seat to the continuation of farm subsidies.

That a failure to reauthorize agricultural subsidies would carry political risks points to the continued electoral importance of farmers in the United States. As displayed in figure 1, Republican support is higher in sparsely populated rural areas. The increasing polarization of political parties, compounded by features of the electoral system, have produced a growing urban-rural cleavage in the political geography of the United States (Hopkins 2017). Agricultural areas in particular are becoming more conservative and support Republican candidates at even

higher rates than other rural places with more diverse economies (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015). The over-representation of rural areas in the Electoral College magnifies the influence of these Republican strongholds in presidential elections.<sup>5</sup> Solid support from rural America in a system skewed toward less populated areas of the country enabled Trump to win the presidency despite receiving nearly three million fewer votes than Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (Badger 2018).

The political value of the farm vote is illustrated further by the Trump Administration efforts to protect agriculture from its trade war with China. In March 2018, the U.S. announced a 25 per cent tariff on imported steel. In retaliation, China imposed tariffs on more than 800 US agricultural products valued at almost \$20 billion (Hopkinson, 2018). The Chinese tariffs hit the agricultural regions of the Midwest that supported Trump especially hard, a fact not lost on the Administration (Stewart 2018). In July 2018, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue announced \$12 billion in emergency assistance for farmers hurt by the tariffs (Schnepf et al., n.d.). In May 2019, with the trade war intensifying and historic flooding in the Midwest, the Trump Administration announced a new aid package worth \$16 billion (Tomson et al., 2019). In authorizing the aid, the government invoked a 1948 law that empowers the Agriculture Secretary to ‘assist in the disposition of surplus commodities’ (Market Facilitation Program, 2018). A legacy of the government’s long history of intervention in the farm economy, the Trump Administration turned

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<sup>5</sup>According to the Constitution, Electoral College votes are apportioned according to the size of the congressional delegation (number of representatives and senators). Because each state has two senators regardless of population, rural states are over-represented in the Senate and, by extension, the Electoral College. With a few exceptions, states award all of its electoral votes to the candidate who wins a plurality of the popular vote.

a dormant policy instrument to a new political purpose.

The trade aid package points to another important institutional factor: the power of the presidency over administrative rules. Frustrated in their attempts to influence legislation, presidents often pursue policy goals through the unilateral exercise of executive power (Rudalevige 2005). As mentioned above, the 2018 Agriculture Act removed work requirements from the final version of the bill to secure passage. Shortly thereafter, the Trump Administration announced a set of administrative changes to the implementation of nutrition programs that advance the same conservative social policy agenda blocked in Congress. Specifically, states can no longer request a waiver from the federal government that requires childless adults who receive benefits to work or participate in a job-training program at least twenty hours a week (USDA 2019). The change in policy setting and scope is expected to cut 700,000 people from the program. Another proposed change will eliminate a policy instrument that streamlines the application process for benefits by imposing administrative burdens that make it more cumbersome to prove eligibility (Herd and Moynihan 2019). If implemented, upwards of 3 million Americans could lose access to food programs (Wheaton 2019). This example illustrates how changes in policy take place through changes in venue, shifting the locus of authority where policy goals are pursued (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

## **Discussion**

In both the US and UK, right-wing populist campaigns appealed to farmers as representatives of “the people,” promising to take control of policy back from distant elites. Although the success of these right-wing populist campaigns point to the resonance of anti-globalization and ethno-nationalist appeals, they also point to the continuing influence of agricultural

exceptionalism within an increasingly diverse agro-food policy regime. Intensive crop and animal production have prompted environmental and consumer concerns about the industrial food system, bringing new issues and interests forward in policy debates. By politicizing policies previously contained in technocratic communities of experts, the Trump and Brexit campaigns found support among farmers and rural people anxious about their diminishing power and influence in matters that affect their livelihoods.

Alongside these similarities in the politicization of agro-food issues, we see variation across the five dimension of policy change. In the United States, the 2018 Farm Bill contained few substantial changes despite a contentious partisan environment that challenged the underlying paradigm of the policy regime, at least with regard to nutrition programs. The farm bill Congress ultimately passed illustrates how features of the party system interact with bicameralism in a manner that attenuates policy change, especially when it threatens a privileged political constituency such as farmers. Meanwhile, the unilateral actions of the Trump Administration repealed policy instruments such as the Waters of the U.S. Rule, altered policy settings by requiring childless adults to work in order to receive food assistance, and expanded policy scope to provide farmers hurt by Chinese tariffs with compensatory payments.

In the UK, leaving the CAP heightens the possibility of far-reaching changes in the presence, instruments and scope of agro-food policies. Although this might reorient the policy paradigm toward consumer and environmental concerns, attention toward the economic interests of export-oriented farmers show the continuing influence of agricultural exceptionalism. Indeed, the revised Agriculture Bill suggests a swing back to more productivist concerns with its renewed emphasis on food production and security. Future policy developments will also confront differences between the UK government and the territorial institutions in Scotland, Wales and

Northern Ireland over where authority for agro-food policy resides. The likely outcome from these struggles will be a ‘layered mixture of old and new policy elements’ existing in tension with one another, a characteristic feature of a “post-exceptional” policy regime (Daugbjerg and Feindt 2017, 1573).

In explaining this variation in the policy effects of politicization, two institutional factors stand out. First, policy change is more likely where there is a change in venue such as Brexit envisions with authority for agro-food policy returning to the nation-state. Leaving the European Union removes a major veto point that might otherwise frustrate the inclusion of environmental and consumer goals in agro-food policy. In the United States, authority for agro-food still mostly resides in Congress. The requirement of super-majorities in the Senate coupled with the need to pass identical bills in each chamber meant that neither Democrats nor Republicans enjoyed a level of institutional control necessary to secure major policy change. This pushes presidents to pursue changes in policy through their control of bureaucracy. Second, whether politicization produces the conditions for policy change or reinforces the status quo also depends on features of the party system. While farmers in the United States voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, support for Brexit was more mixed among UK farmers and the Conservative Party is slightly less reliant on farmers for electoral success than the Republicans. Consequently, embracing consumer and environmental goals that challenge the production-oriented paradigm in agro-food policies poses lower political risk in the UK compared to the US.

## **Conclusion**

This paper used the turn toward right-wing populism in the UK and US to explore the effects of politicization as a source of policy change. In both countries, right-wing populist campaigns

appealed to farmers and rural voters using a combination of ethno-nationalist tropes that associate agrarianism with national heritage and specific agro-food policy issues that exploited fears of diminishing political influence. However, the degree to which the politicization of agro-food issues produced change depends on political institutions and the party system. Politicization increases the possibilities for policy change when accompanied by shifts in the locus of authority. Features of the party system that magnify farmers' political influence moderates the effects of politicization and can serve to reinforce the status quo in agro-food policy.

In two respects, our findings confirm existing theories of public policy. First, although politicization increases contestation across all five dimensions of policy, changing underlying policy paradigms remains difficult and rare (Hall 1993). Instead, as expected, governments in the UK and US were more successful achieving first and second order changes through adjustments in policy setting and scope than in third order paradigmatic transformation. Second, policy struggles take place over the image and venue of public problems (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). A right-wing populist strategy of politicization did successfully reframe the image of agro-food policy to bring otherwise technical issues brings back into public contention, but this was a necessary not a sufficient condition of policy change. In addition, the possibilities for change appear greater where there is shift in venue, such as returning authority to the nation-state or pursuing policy goals through unilateral executive action.

In two other respects, our findings contribute to policy studies and point toward future avenues of research. First, although we usually conceive of politicization as a precursor to policy change, our findings suggest that politicization can also be a powerful mechanism for policy resilience and a defence of the status quo. In the case of the latter, politicization can enable privileged groups accustomed to playing an "inside" game of lobbying and expertise to



(re)discover an “outside” game of mobilization and electoral politics. Our study suggests that research should consider how politicization interacts with institutions and the party system to activate groups with differential power capacities.

Second, the focus on agro-food policies points to the importance of urban-rural political cleavages in wealthy democracies and its role in the growth of right-wing populist movements. Although a great deal of analysis is correctly focused on the working class and those who have failed to benefit from globalization, there is a rural dimension to right wing populism that depends on the traditionally conservative political orientation of farmers. This fact points to an enduring, if peculiar, feature of agricultural politics: farmers remain sceptical of government, even though many continue to benefit greatly from its protections. Moreover, a strategy that politicizes grievances without addressing them poses risks of its own. Although many of those who remain in farming are relatively successful in economic terms, governments in the US and UK have done very little to address the issues of transportation, health care, or other issues of concern in rural areas that drove the populist turn in the first place. This lack of responsiveness has political risks for conservative parties who, when unable to deliver on concrete achievements, will be tempted to place even greater emphasis on racial and ethnic identities as the basis of political affiliation.

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