

Food, Agriculture, and Democratic Participation

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy decisions should be transparent and should involve the meaningful participation of the most vulnerable stakeholders.

Introduction

The voices of those who are directly affected by public policy decisions should be involved in the decision-making process, regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic status, or gender. Decisions that are made around U.S. farm policy, however, seem to include certain voices more than others. Those with money tend to have more influence over farm policy decisions than those without money. When money is a central factor in the political influence that one has, the voices and participation of the most vulnerable are excluded from the process.

Influence Over the Legislative Process

Campaign Contributions

Agribusiness firms have much to gain from ensuring that federal legislation is in-line with their interests. This means that they are very involved in the legislative process:

- During the 2004 election cycle, the agribusiness industry contributed **\$52,593,698 to political campaigns** (www.crp.org).
- Of the more than fifty million dollars contributed by the agribusiness industry, \$4,923,904 went directly to George W. Bush's campaign, while \$785,831 went to the campaign of John Kerry (www.crp.org).

In light of these facts, it is telling that President Bush's plan to lower the maximum dollar amount of subsidies a given farmer could receive, which would have impacted large farmers the most, was dropped as a priority of the Administration a few months after the idea was introduced.

Agribusiness Political Contributions

The agribusiness industry gives significant financial contributions to political campaigns to ensure that they have sway with elected officials.

Agribusiness Campaign Contributions

Election Cycle	Total Agribusiness Contributions
2004	\$52,593,698
2002	\$54,376,954
2000	\$59,479,067
1998	\$43,070,787
1996	\$51,590,880

How Does the Agribusiness Industry Compare to Other Industries in Terms of Campaign Contributions?

Industry	2004 Campaign Contribution
Health	\$122,645,001
Agribusiness	\$52,593,698
Energy	\$52,250,361
Transportation	\$50,711,369
Defense	\$16,121,553
Tobacco	\$2,651,927
Environment	\$2,060,863

Source: Center for Responsive Politics (www.crp.org)

Direct Lobbying

In addition to making large campaign contributions, farm associations and agribusiness firms hire skilled lobbyists to put continual pressure on elected officials to vote for legislation that benefits them.

- In 2004, **Monsanto Co. spent \$3,257,000 on lobbying** efforts (www.publicintegrity.org/lobby).
- In 2004, Cargill Inc. spent \$460,000 on lobbying efforts (www.publicintegrity.org/lobby).

Influence Over Federal Agencies

The limited voice that small farmers have in the legislative branch of government (the Senate and the House of Representatives) is also seen in federal agencies, such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Many of the individuals who were previously leaders in the corporate agribusiness world are currently the people designing the regulations for agricultural policy at the USDA.

Among the top ranking political appointees at the USDA in 2004, there were nearly as many people who previously worked with agribusiness firms or their trade associations, lobbying firms, and research arms as there were career civil servants (Mattera, “USDA, Inc.,” 2004).

The high concentration of former agribusiness personnel working at top level positions within the USDA has created an unwritten “**revolving door**” policy for current agribusiness industry executives. This means that current agribusiness leaders have easy access to, and significant influence over, USDA decision-makers. Needless to say, the policies resulting from high levels of agribusiness involvement tend to benefit large corporations more than small businesses and family farmers.

International Consequences

Decisions made by elected officials on domestic policy issues in the U.S. have an impact on people around the world. Food and agricultural policy is

one area where the impacts of U.S. domestic policy decisions have enormous implications for people living in other parts of the world.

People in other countries who are affected by U.S. domestic policy decisions, however, do not have voting rights in the U.S. or official means to directly influence the decisions made by U.S. politicians. Currently, people in the international community who are affected by the domestic policies of another country are forced to look to international institutions to address their concerns. For agricultural and trade issues, countries around the world look to the **World Trade Organization** (WTO) as a forum for addressing their objections to U.S. domestic policy. There is much international debate and concern, however, about the **lack of transparency and undemocratic nature** of WTO processes. Without transparency and democratic participation at the WTO, the countries that are hurt most by U.S. agricultural policy, mainly developing countries, have no place to bring their grievances. It is important to keep this issue in mind as U.S. agricultural policy is written and implemented.

Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important that governments and international institutions function in a democratic and transparent manner?
2. What are some of the obstacles to democratic participation around food and agricultural policy in the U.S.?
3. What would you do to increase the democratic nature of the decision-making processes around food and agricultural policy?

Sources:

- Philip Mattera, “USDA, Inc: How Agribusiness has Hijacked the Regulatory Policy at the U.S. Department of Agriculture,” 2004.
- Center for Responsive Politics (www.crp.org).
- International Gender and Trade Network (www.igtn.org).
- The Center for Public Integrity (www.publicintegrity.org).
- Agribusiness Accountability Initiative (www.agribusinessaccountability.org).
- Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment (www.tradejusticeusa.org).