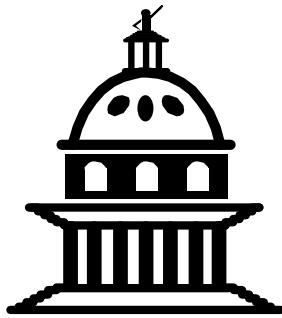


**SOUTHERN REPRESENTATION IN CONGRESS
AND U.S. AGRICULTURAL LEGISLATION**

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SOUTHERN REPRESENTATION IN CONGRESS AND U.S. AGRICULTURAL LEGISLATION¹

David P. Ernstes, Joe L. Outlaw and Ronald D. Knutson²

Abstract

The history of agricultural legislation from the New Deal to the present has been, in many ways, a southern history. Agricultural legislation contributed to the transformation of the land tenure system in the South and to changes in regional cropping patterns. During most of the past 65 years, southerners were in many key leadership positions in the Congress and on the Agriculture Committees. Yet, southern dominance of agricultural legislation is not apparent and data indicates that the committees under southern leadership were generally evenhanded in the distribution of government largess. The prospects for a resurgence of southern control of the agriculture committees, as in historic times, are not favorable.

Introduction

In politics, as in history, empires rise and fall and rise again. One such empire arose in the Agriculture Committee³ rooms of the United States Congress. Its members were southern Democrats who amassed power, not from conquest, but from longevity. Through a convergence of forces in the early 1930s, they were able to guide and implement sweeping agricultural legislation which affected the way of life for 35 million people. Through the Depression and the war years, conventional wisdom suggests that southern Democrats controlled the agricultural agenda. Southern control waned during the Republican-controlled Congresses of the late-1940s and mid-1950s; a resurgence occurred during the 1960s. In the 1970s, under southern stewardship, U.S. agriculture became orientated toward the world market. Their legacy is apparent in the transformation of the South from an ailing traditional cotton culture to a region of thriving diversified agriculture.

In the 1980s, it could be argued that the South's dominance had eroded from an iron fist to a tenuous grasp. In the 1990s, in the new political arena, southern Democrats lost control of

¹ A condensed version of this paper appears as "U.S. Agricultural Legislation and the South" in the *Southern Business and Economics Journal*, volume 21, number 1, October 1997.

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³ For the benefit of the reader, we will refer to the two committees as either the House or Senate Agriculture Committee. Purists will note that the correct titles are the House Committee on Agriculture and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry.

the agenda. Still, the South is not dead; it has been transformed. In 1997, in the 105th Congress, there are more southern Republicans on the agriculture committees than southern Democrats. Arguably, the loss of power of the southern Democrats secured the freedom to farm provisions of the 1996 farm bill.

This manuscript is designed to analyze the substance of the control issue and its impacts on the South. In doing so, the paper will trace the extent of agriculture committee dominance by the South through five political periods:

- The New Deal Era: 1929-1946
- The Republican Congresses: 1947-1954
- The Yellow Dog Dynasty: 1955-1974
- The Turnover: 1975-1993
- The New South: 1994-

In each of these sections, the makeup of the Congress will be analyzed, emphasizing the composition of the agriculture committees. This will be followed by a review of major policy thrusts. The concluding section will discuss implications for southern domination of the agricultural committees in the future.

The New Deal Era: 1929-1946

Setting the Stage

It is difficult for those of us who did not live through the period to visualize the changes that have taken place in U.S. agriculture and the South⁴ since the New Deal. In 1929, most southerners did not own the land they worked. In the postbellum South, there was scarce capital and abundant labor. Large segments of both the black and white population were landless and destitute. With the elimination of the plantation system, a tenure system had developed based on four classes: landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and laborers. Tenants rented farmland from landowners, sharecroppers used the resources of the landowner (housing, equipment, inputs and land) and shared in a portion of the crop (usually one-fourth to one-half), laborers worked for the landowner for a wage (Daniel, 1981).

In 1929, three crops were dominant in the South. A cotton belt stretched from Virginia to Texas with rice anchoring the west (Arkansas and the Gulf Coasts of Louisiana and Texas) and tobacco anchoring the east (the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia and Florida) (Daniel, 1984). In

⁴ For simplicity, we are defining the South as the states of the former Confederacy (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas and Tennessee) plus Oklahoma and Kentucky. To accurately define the South as an agricultural region, West Texas should be excised, and parts of Missouri and West Virginia should be added.

terms of production, cotton was clearly dominant. According to Kirby (1987), in 1930, more than half of the approximately 1,200 counties of the South were committed to cotton.

Farming was extremely labor intensive and labor was extremely abundant. Since tobacco required 257 man hours per acre to cultivate, tobacco patches were between three and six acres. A family could tend 10 to 20 cotton acres. With mechanization, a rice farmer could tend several hundred acres. Outside the rice culture, mechanization was almost unheard of in the South. For most southerners, the tools of cultivation were the mule, the plow, the hoe and the hand (Daniel, 1984).

Economic conditions were severely depressed in the South in the late-1920s. After an upsurge of demand during World War I, commodity prices and most importantly, cotton prices, declined. Already depleted soils were overcropped. Outmigration occurred as southerners, many of them landless African-Americans, journeyed to the northern cities in search of jobs. Between 1915 and 1922, the boll weevil crossed the Mississippi River and marched to Virginia and North Carolina, devastating cotton crops (Kirby, 1987). In 1927, a Mississippi River flood covered 16.5 million acres and displaced a million people (Daniel, 1981). The southern economy can best be characterized in the late-1920s as being in a crisis situation. With the onset of the Great Depression, the crisis deepened.

Agricultural Policy in the 1920s

Since 1919, both houses of Congress had been controlled by the Republican party and Republicans were in the White House since 1923. The McNary-Haugen bill (named for the sponsors, chairmen of the Senate and House Agriculture Committees, respectively) was first introduced in 1924. It proposed a two-price plan. A “fair price” would be set in the United States (through protective tariffs and a purchase program) with a government corporation selling surplus production on the world market (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh 1997). Initially, the McNary-Haugen bill did not gain the support of southern Democrats who were generally opposed to protective tariffs and saw little benefit in the proposal, since the most of the primary southern crop, cotton, was already exported. The bill was finally passed in 1927 (with southern support) but, was vetoed by President Coolidge. McNary-Haugen was passed again in 1928, but was vetoed once more (Coon, 1996).

As the situation continued to deteriorate, the Republican Congress passed, and newly elected President Hoover signed, the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929, which created the Federal Farm Board. The Federal Farm Board was created to assist farmers in forming cooperatives. It also authorized the establishment of stabilization corporations to purchase commodities and stabilize prices through a \$500 million loan from the Treasury (Coon, 1996). The Act suffered from being passed right before the onset of the Great Depression and being fundamentally flawed. The loans were designed to be repaid by selling surplus commodities during times of shortages, which, unfortunately, never developed (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh, 1997).

As economic conditions deteriorated during the Hoover Administration, the Democratic party made great gains in the House of Representatives. Fifty three seats were gained during the mid-term elections allowing the Democrats to gain control for the first time in twelve years, but by only six seats. With the landslide election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, the Democratic party

trounced the Republicans, picking up an additional 99 seats in the House and 13 seats in the Senate. The victories in the Senate permitted a Democratic majority for the first time in 14 years.

The South's political position was both enhanced and diminished by the Democrats' success. Franklin Roosevelt owed his nomination and, ultimately, the White House to southerners. Yet, as Grantham (1988) relates, the South "...was suddenly changed by the partisan realignment of the 1930s from a majority faction in a minority party to a minority faction in a majority party. The massive Democratic gains outside the South, which provided the foundation for the Roosevelt coalition... drastically reduced the dependence of the national party on southern voters..." (p. 102). Ultimately, the South found itself in a unique position. On many committees, especially the agriculture committees, southerners had seniority.

Until the reform-minded Congresses of the 1970s, committee chairmen amassed enormous power solely on the basis of their length of service. According to Cohn (1991), pre-1970s committee chairmen have been called "petty barons" and "powers unto themselves." Their committees have been called "little legislatures." At the same time, it would not be fair to fully characterize agriculture committee chairmen in these terms. Rieselbach (1995) indicates that compared with the other congressional committees, the agricultural committees display a "something for everything" attitude, trying to optimize benefits. In other words, although agricultural committee chairmen had greater power in the past than today, philosophically, the agricultural committees tended to minimize confrontation in order to maximize benefits to their constituencies.

A New Deal for Agriculture

With the obvious failings of the Federal Farm Board, Congress continued to grapple with agricultural policy. Despite slim majorities in the House and Senate, several proposals were debated and even passed during the lame-duck session of 1932. Regardless, by early 1933, Perkins (1969) indicates a consensus had developed among agricultural leaders that the proposed "solution" to the agricultural crisis should include production control, a parity-price standard, a processing tax, a basic-commodity concept (only the major commodities would be supported), and the idea of using marketing agreements for a number of important purposes, including the subsidization of exports. Throughout the campaign and up to inauguration, Roosevelt's agricultural advisors increasingly embraced these ideas.

Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 4, 1933 and hastily called Congress into special session to deal with the banking crisis. Originally, it was intended that the session should concentrate solely on that issue, but it was soon apparent that farm legislation should be considered as well. Roosevelt's agricultural advisors quickly convened a meeting of national agricultural kingpins on March 10 to discuss the farm crisis, possible solutions and the administration's proposal. After garnering the support of the national leaders, a bill was drafted by the administration and presented to Congress on March 16 (Perkins, 1969).

The Agricultural Committees immediately began hearings on the bill. The haste in which Congress considered the legislation is both a reflection of the gravity of the problem and the fact that by mid-March, the spring planting season had already begun and, consequently, the legislation would have to be enacted quickly in order to effect prices in 1933. Both committees initially held hearings on the bill. The Senate concluded that with the bill's processing tax provisions, it was a revenue bill and deferred consideration until the House had acted. By

working through the weekend, the House committee reported the bill after only four days. To assure a swift passage, the rule for the bill permitted only four hours of debate and no amendments from the floor. After spirited debate, the legislation passed the House only six days after its receipt by a vote of 315 to 98 (Perkins, 1969).

The South's impact on the legislation in the House is arguable. John Nance Garner (Dem.-Tex.) had been Speaker of the House in the 72nd Congress (1931-1933) before being chosen as Roosevelt's running mate. He was ultimately elected vice-president, a position he described as "not being worth a bucket of warm spit." Consequently, Henry Rainey (Dem.-Ill.), a northerner, was Speaker in the 73rd Congress (1933-35). In the House Agriculture Committee, the Democrats as the majority party controlled 17 of the 25 seats with eight of those 17 seats held by southerners (Table 1). Furthermore, the South controlled all four subcommittee chairs and had the top seven ranking members.

Interestingly, Chairman Marvin Jones (Dem.-Tex.) of the House Agriculture Committee chose not to sponsor the bill, citing that it was not the solution to the perceived problems. Consequently, it was introduced by Hampton Flumer (Dem.-S.C.), the second ranking member of the Agriculture Committee. The committee made some changes to the legislation and Jones' concerns were addressed in additional legislation (Perkins, 1969).

Two days after the House passed the bill, the Senate held four days of continuous public hearings. Although the bill had considerable support, even its most ardent supporters did not fully understand the complex legislation. An additional two weeks of hearings in the Senate Agriculture Committee followed as the committee grappled with its own disagreements and attempted to write a report. Chairman Ellison Smith (Dem.-S.C.) favored another bill, which he had authored, and other members of the committee wished to insert or delete various provisions (Perkins, 1969). The Senate committee did not have the degree of southern dominance as the House committee. Of the 19 members of the committee, 12 were Democrats and only four were southerners (Table 2). Certainly, the influence of Majority Leader Joseph Robinson (Dem.-Ark.) was present.

To overcome the impasse, Roosevelt summoned the entire committee to the White House on March 31. The next day, Chairman Smith announced he would not introduce his personal bill and the committee agreed to support the proposed legislation. On April 5, the Committee reported the bill to the full Senate with some useful amendments. The full Senate took another three weeks, with constructive debate, to pass the legislation by a vote of 64 to 20. After the differences were worked out in conference committee and passed by both bodies, the legislation finally emerged as the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Passage of the bill had taken approximately eight weeks (Perkins, 1969).

Obviously, under the circumstances of its passage, the South's ability to add to or detract from the legislation was minimized, but the legislation certainly benefitted from southern support and votes. Furthermore, southerners were in key leadership positions. Perhaps, southern congressional support in general could best be evaluated with the general assessment of Breimyer (1983); "...farm and congressional leaders were willing to gamble on an Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933 because they were scared" (p. 1155).

Table 1. House Agriculture Committee Composition, 1927-1954.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
70th	21	14	0	5	0	0
71th	20	14	1	5	0	0
72nd	23	13	10	10	0	0
73rd	25	17	8	8	4	4
74th	25	17	8	8	4	4
75th	25	17	8	8	9	7
76th	25	15	8	8	3	3
77th	25	15	11	12	3	2
78th	27	15	11	12	0	0
79th	28	16	14	15	4	3
80th	27	16	0	10	12	0
81st	27	17	10	10	9	7
82nd	30	17	12	13	6	6
83rd	30	16	2	14	7	0

Source: House Committee on Agriculture, *Legislative Calendar*, various editions.

Note: Republican-majority congresses are shaded.

Table 2. Senate Agriculture Committee Composition, 1927-1954.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
70th	17	9	0	6	No Record	No Record
71th	18	11	0	5	N.R.	N.R.
72nd	18	10	0	5	N.R.	N.R.
73rd	19	12	4	4	N.R.	N.R.
74th	19	13	5	5	N.R.	N.R.
75th	19	14	6	6	N.R.	N.R.
76th	20	14	6	6	N.R.	N.R.
77th	20	14	7	7	N.R.	N.R.
78th	20	12	7	7	N.R.	N.R.
79th	20	11	8	8	N.R.	N.R.
80th	13	7	0	5	N.R.	N.R.
81st	13	8	5	5	N.R.	N.R.
82nd	13	7	5	5	N.R.	N.R.
83rd	15	8	0	6	N.R.	N.R.

Source: *Official Congressional Directory*, various editions.

Note: Republican-majority congresses are shaded.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933

The Hundred Days agricultural legislation which was passed by the Congress on May 12, 1933 was a watershed policy change. In the 70 years since the passage of the Homestead and Morrill Acts, U.S. agricultural policy had focussed on development and improvement of agricultural resources (Paarlberg, 1983). The 1933 Act, which was introduced as a temporary emergency policy, ultimately would become the foundation of agricultural policy to the present period.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 was designed to restore farm prices to a parity period of 1909-1914. This was accomplished through the following mechanisms:

- On “basic crops,” voluntary planting reductions were initiated through direct payments.
- Agricultural processors were taxed and the assessment was used to fund acreage reductions, market expansion activities, and surplus removal.
- Voluntary marketing agreements were encouraged between producers, processors and distributors.
- A nonrecourse loan was offered to corn and cotton farmers.
- Marketing quotas were initiated for cotton and tobacco through legislation passed in 1934 (Tweeten, 1977).

While one can argue the impact of southern representation in Congress on the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the legislation would have a profound impact on the South. Four of the six program crops (cotton, corn, wheat, rice, peanuts and tobacco) were distinctively southern. Paarlberg (1983) indicates the preferential nature of the 1933 Act:

- Approximately 100 other crops were excluded from the legislation.
- The six basic crops provided only 20 percent of agriculture’s income, but received 75 percent of the program benefits.
- The top one percent of farmers received 21 percent of the benefits.

Regardless, many (perhaps a majority), of the farmers receiving those benefits were southerners.

Cotton, Rice and Tobacco

By the time the 1933 Act was signed into law, most of the cotton and tobacco crops were already planted. The farm bill was designed to raise prices to a parity level (a base of the 1909-1914 period) by reducing supply and paying farmers for acreage taken out of production.

However, most crops were already planted and farmers had planted larger acreages which made achieving parity impossible (Daniel, 1984).

In cotton, there was a carryover of 13 million bales and the 1933 crop was projected to be 17 million bales. Expectations were for continued low prices (5.5 cents per pound in February, 1933) (Daniel, 1984). Prices had averaged 35.2 cents per pound during World War I and the 1933 parity price was calculated at 12.7 cents per pound (Daniel, 1985). The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), an agency created to implement the agricultural policies, immediately began efforts to cut production. Payments, based on historic yields, were made to farmers who plowed up between 25 percent and 50 percent of their growing crops. An additional option was provided for farmers to purchase surplus cotton at 6 cents per pound equal to the amount taken out of production. The AAA efforts resulted in over four million bales of the crop being plowed under. Prices increased to 10.2 cents per pound. Interestingly, getting farmers to plow under their crops was not as difficult as farmers getting their mules (who were trained to walk between the crop rows) to plow under the crops (Perkins, 1969).

In rice, overproduction was not a problem. Many farmers had already exited the industry due to the Depression or reduced production. Regardless, rice was identified as a program crop. Due mainly to market forces, but bolstered by a marketing agreement by millers to pay the parity price and charge standard fees for milling, prices rose from \$1.55 per cwt in 1932 to \$2.81 in 1933 (Daniel, 1984).

Since the 1933 tobacco crop had already been planted and due to the many types and differing markets for tobacco, the AAA deferred a reduction program until the 1934 tobacco crop (Daniel, 1984). With the expectations of a shorter crop in 1934, the AAA worked with buyers to raise prices in 1933. Still, prices for flue-cured tobacco hovered around 10 cents per pound, much to the discontent of farmers. Ultimately, a marketing agreement was worked out whereby farmers pledged to reduce production by 30 percent in 1934 and buyers agreed to purchase tobacco at a minimum parity price of 17 cents per pound (Perkins, 1969).

Refining Farm Programs

The rationale of the 1933 Act was to raise farm prices to parity levels, an ambitious goal which was never reached. Regardless, the Supreme Court ruled the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and its processing taxes unconstitutional in January 1936. Since the elimination of the adjustment program would have been more detrimental to farmers than the depression conditions, Congress responded by passing the Soil Conservation Domestic Allotment Act of 1936 (SCDAA) only eight weeks after the Supreme Court decision (Saloutos, 1982). The SCDAA maintained the basic features of the 1933 Act (nonrecourse loans and marketing agreements) and added three new components:

- The promotion of soil conservation and improvement.
- The linkage of farm income, rather than prices, to a parity standard.
- Food and fiber security through maintaining adequate stocks of agricultural commodities (Tweeten, 1977).

The conservation provisions of SCDA were created in response to catastrophic droughts in 1934 and 1936. This was another way of continuing the acreage reduction provisions of the 1933 Act. Farmers were now being paid to plant soil-conserving crops rather than soil-depleting crops, and most of the program crops were identified as being soil-depleting. The loss of the processing tax provisions was rectified by appropriating subsidies through the treasury (Coon, 1996).

With the unusually good crop production in 1937 and 1938, the limitations of the conservation approach of the SCDA were exposed. Overproduction would have to be controlled through storage. With this in mind, agricultural policy was further refined through the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 (Saloutos, 1982). The Act incorporated the following new provisions:

- Nonrecourse loans for corn, wheat and cotton at flexible support rates.
- Income parity payments to producers of corn, cotton, rice, tobacco and wheat.
- Maintenance of adequate reserves of agricultural commodities through the nonrecourse loan program.
- Establishment of a school lunch program, food stamp program and continuation of commodity distribution.
- Establishment of federal all-risk crop insurance (Tweeten, 1977).

The 1938 Act was unable to effectively control surplus production. Actually, this was beneficial for the United States as the country geared up for war. During World War II, the main intent of agricultural legislation was to encourage production for the war effort and the Allies. Legislation was passed during the war years which increased the levels of government support and maintained that level of support until two years after the war (Tweeten, 1977).

During the period 1934-1946, the South controlled many key positions in Congress. Democrats were the majority party in both the House and the Senate. With the death of Speaker Rainey (Dem.-Ill.) in 1934, a succession of southerners would control the Speaker's gavel in the House. These gentlemen were: Joseph Byrns (Dem.-Tenn.), 1934-1935; William Bankhead (Dem.-Ala.), 1936-1940; and Sam Rayburn (Dem.-Tex.), 1940 to 1946.

Likewise, southerners were in key leadership positions of the House Agriculture Committee. Marvin Jones (Dem.-Tex.) continued as chair during this period until he was succeeded by Hampton Fulmer (Dem.-S.C.), late-1940-1944; who was then succeeded by John W. Flannagan (Dem.-Va.), 1945-1946. Southerners also controlled the subcommittee chairs. In the 74th Congress, which produced the 1936 Act, southerners were chairmen of all four subcommittees (Table 1). In the 75th Congress, which produced the 1938 Act, southerners were chairmen of the four main subcommittees and three of the five special commodity subcommittees. Throughout the remainder of this period, southern dominance of the subcommittees continued.

Furthermore, the number of southern Democrats on the House Agriculture Committee increased during this period. In the 74th Congress (1935-1937) of the 17 majority members (25

total members), eight were southern Democrats (Table 1). In the 79th Congress (1945-1947) of the 16 majority members (28 total members), 14 were southern Democrats.

In the Senate, Joseph Robinson (Dem.-Ark.), 1933-1937, continued as Majority Leader until succeeded by Alben Barkley (Dem.-Ky.), 1937-1947. Likewise, Ellison Smith (Dem.-S.C.) continued as chair until his death in 1944. He was replaced by Elmer Thomas (Dem.-Okla.), 1944-1947.

In the Senate, the number of southern Democrats increased on the Agriculture Committee during the period. In the 74th Congress (1935-1937) of the 13 majority members (19 total members), five were southern Democrats (Table 2). In the 79th Congress (1945-1947) of the 11 majority members (20 total members), eight were southern Democrats.

The Republican Congresses: 1947-1954

Winners and Losers

By 1947, significant events had occurred in southern agriculture. Recall that in the post-Civil War/Reconstruction South, a land tenure system had developed based on landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, and laborers. The New Deal farm programs, which were designed to raise farm prices and reduce production, were also swiftly dismantling and transforming what Daniel (1981) called “an almost feudal agricultural system” (p. 231).

The origin of the transformation can be traced to the 1933 plowup. The first effect of the plowup was to reduce the demand for harvest labor. Secondly and more importantly, although the 1933 farm legislation indicated that government payments should be divided between landlords and tenants, there was little mechanism to ensure this. Although checks were to be written separately to landlords and tenants, with the indebtedness inherent in the system, there was ample opportunity for abuse (Perkins, 1969). Conrad (1965) indicates that, “A tenant was lucky if he received any cash from the 1933 plowup” (p. 66).

Although many landlords followed the intent of the legislation, an unprecedented eviction of sharecroppers and tenants had begun. Some were temporarily hired as laborers during crop harvesting. The remainder were dispossessed and migrated to urban areas. Certainly, this was not the intent of the farm legislation⁵ (it was to reduce production and raise prices), but with the local AAA boards dominated by landlords and an essentially indifferent USDA, there was little recourse for exploited tenants and sharecroppers (Kirby, 1987 and Daniel, 1981).

Equally as threatened as the sharecropper was the mule. Landowners were able to use the government payments to mechanize. Tractors and harvesters gradually replaced mules and human hands.⁶ Daniel (1984) indicates, “One case from Black Belt Georgia revealed that a planter who customarily ran ten tenant families and twelve mules bought a tractor and equipment and ‘displaced all 10 cropper families and sold 8 of his mules’” (p. 446). Additionally, with

⁵ This is a lesson from 1933 which could have been applied to the lump-sum payments under the 1996 farm bill. Landlords are perhaps as dominant today as they were in the 1930s.

⁶ It should, however, be clear that mechanization would have occurred regardless of the lucrative farm bill provisions. Attributing mechanization to farm policy would be a serious mistake.

landowners' incomes raised to near parity levels, they were able to consolidate and expand their land holdings. This began a trend of declining farm numbers which has continued to this day.

Government research funding in the 1940s led to the expanded development of agricultural chemicals. With herbicides, crops no longer had to be manually weeded. Chemical fertilizers and improved varieties of seeds improved yields. By the mid-1950s, the age of large-scale hired labor in the South was over (Kirby, 1987).

The production systems of the South were also being transformed. In 1930, half of the counties of the South were cotton dependent. Kirby (1987) indicates that "By 1959, there were only 11 counties in four southern states where cotton amounted to more than 50 percent of crops harvested" (p. 53). Besides cotton, rice and tobacco, southern farmers were planting peanuts, grain sorghum, corn, soybeans and wheat. Dairy and beef cattle operations were increasing. Southern agriculture was diversifying.

Policy in Transition

By having seniority in the Democratic party, the South rose to dominate many key political positions from 1932 to 1946. In the 1946 mid-term elections, Republicans gained control of both Houses of Congress. The South, with all of its bets placed with the Democratic party, found itself in the minority.

Through the Steagall Amendment of 1941, government support for agriculture remained at wartime levels until two years after hostilities officially ceased (December 31, 1946) to ensure agriculture a smoother transition into the post-war economy. Consequently, a new farm bill for the post-war period would be necessary in 1949. With this in mind, USDA, Congress and the land-grant university system each organized committees to study agricultural problems and policies (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976).

Throughout the New Deal era, agricultural policy had achieved a sense of bipartisanship. By 1948, two major viewpoints had emerged for future policy direction. Favoring a flexible price support approach were farm organizations, the Truman administration, and many Republican congressmen. Southern Democrats were generally opposed to this approach. They considered the problem to be one of excess capacity and favored high price supports with restrictions on output. As a compromise, the Agriculture Act of 1948 was passed. It continued the high price supports for one year, after which flexible price supports would be implemented (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976).

The Democrats regained the majority in the 81st Congress (1949-1951). The agricultural committee chairmen expressed their dissatisfaction with the flexible price support provisions of the 1948 Act (which were due to be enacted in 1950) by requesting a new program from USDA. The Brannan Plan, named after the then secretary of agriculture, emerged in 1949. It was an innovative proposal advocating market clearing prices with income-supporting supplemental payments to farmers. Ultimately, the Brannan Plan was not enacted. Congress passed the

Agriculture Act of 1949⁷ which modified the 1948 Act, but maintained the means of supporting prices (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976).

The Democrats maintained control in the 82nd Congress (1951-1953), but narrowly lost the majority to the Republicans in the 83rd (1953-1955). After the end of the Korean War, agricultural surpluses began to mount. The Republican-controlled Congress responded to the surplus problem on two fronts. First, the Food for Peace legislation, P.L.480, was passed in 1954. P.L.480 sought to reduce surplus production through concessional sales and donations to needy countries. Second was the passage of the Agriculture Act of 1954. Flexible price supports were enacted for the basic commodities. Secretary Benson was given the discretion to set the loan rate between 82.5 to 90 percent of parity in 1955 and 75 to 90 percent thereafter (Tweeten, 1977).

The 1954 Act is notable for two major reasons:

- The flexible price support debate on the degree of government intervention in agriculture had endured since World War II, when Congress had set price supports at fixed higher levels (90 percent or more of parity). The southern Democrats fought hard to prevent the enactment of flexible price supports (more market orientation and less government involvement) and lost.
- For the first time, all major program crops were treated together in a general program context. Previously, each commodity had its own program in which adjustments in one commodity would interfere with another (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh, 1997).

In cotton, individual legislation addressed the surplus problem. Harvested acreage in 1953 had increased to 24.3 million acres. Under the existing allotments and marketing quotas, the secretary of agriculture was required to announce a national allotment of 17 million acres in 1954. Through congressional action, the national allotment was increased from 70 to 80 percent of the 1952 production base. Interestingly, even though the southern Democrats were not in the majority, their presence was still felt. Most of the additional acreage had arisen in the western states and not in the traditional cotton belt. The allotment was allocated disproportionately among the states. While the allotments for Alabama and Mississippi were set at 87 percent of the 1952 production, California and Arizona allotments were set at 67 percent. The allotment for Texas was 74 percent. With only one westerner on the House committee and none on the Senate committee, the result was predictable (Field, 1968).

⁷ The 1949 Act, along with the 1938 Act, the CCC Charter Act of 1948 and the 1954 Act (P.L. 480) are all considered “permanent legislation.” Since subsequent farm bills have all had deadlines and merely amend provisions of previous legislation, if a new bill is not enacted before the expiration of the previous one, the permanent provisions come into effect. The antiquated provisions of the permanent legislation have compelled Congress to act before the deadline. The 1996 farm bill, up to the conference committee action, was to be made permanent legislation replacing the 1949 Act *et al.*

Assessment: 1947-1954

Political turnovers revealed both the strength and weakness of the solid South. During this period, the speakership of the House was traded between Joseph Martin (Rep.-Mass.) and Sam Rayburn (Dem.-Tex.). Likewise, the chair of the House Agriculture Committee was passed between Clifford Hope (Rep.-Kans.) and Harold Cooley (Dem.-N.C.). Southerners were subcommittee chairmen of seven of the nine subcommittees in the 81st Congress (1949-1951) and all six of the subcommittees in the 82nd Congress (1951-1953) (Table 1). During the 80th (1947-1949) and 83rd (1953-1955) Congresses, subcommittee chairs passed to Republican members from the Midwest.

In the Senate, Alben Barkley became Truman's vice president in 1949. Throughout the remainder of this period, a southerner would not be majority leader of the Senate. Chairmen of the Senate Agriculture Committee during this time were: Arthur Capper (Rep.-Kans.), 1947-1949; Elmer Thomas (Dem.-Okla.), 1949-1951; Allen Ellender (Dem.- La.), 1951-1953; and George Aiken (Rep.-Vt.), 1953-1955.

The years 1947-1954 were a transition era for agriculture, both politically and technologically. Agricultural policy, which had been envisioned as an emergency measure during the Depression and a strategic concern during World War II, was now seen as a routine function of government. Agriculture was in rapid transition as an institution, both technologically and socially. Most importantly, although they ultimately lost the battle on flexible price supports, southern Democrats emerged during this period as a political and directional force in agricultural legislation.

The Yellow Dog Dynasty: 1955-1974

From Flexible Price Supports to Market Orientation

In 1955, when the Democratic Party regained control of Congress, the leaders of the agricultural committees resumed the running battle over the level of price supports. In 1955 and 1956, the Congress passed legislation to reinstate high and fixed price supports favored by southern Democrats. Both measures were vetoed by Eisenhower (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976). The legislation which emerged from this session, the Agricultural Act of 1956, did not address the price support issue for program crops. It established the Soil Bank which reduced acreage to control production (Tweeten, 1977).

Debate on the direction of agricultural policy continued into the 1960s as surpluses continued to build. Willard Cochrane and Secretary Freeman convinced President Kennedy that the farm problem was one of chronic surpluses and with highly inelastic supply and demand schedules, the price and income problem could be solved with mandatory production controls. Kennedy outlined his farm policy goals in a special message to Congress in 1961 (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976).

After several failed attempts, an omnibus Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 was passed. It expanded domestic and international food aid and offered supply control measures for the most problematic commodities. However, referendums to implement controls in wheat and turkeys failed. The Cotton-Wheat Act, passed in 1964, created allotments and subsidies in an effort to reduce production in those two crops (Tweeten, 1977).

The Food and Agriculture Act of 1965 extended the wheat and grain programs to the end of the decade. Cotton surpluses continued to be a problem, so the 1965 Act established support for cotton at no more than 90 percent of the world price. Acreage diversion programs were also enacted (Tweeten, 1977).

The Agriculture Act of 1970 is described by Tweeten (1977) as “An act that no group advocated, no group supported, and no one greeted with enthusiasm. The act was opposed by all major farm organizations, although for widely different reasons. Neither Congress nor the secretary of agriculture had sufficient strength to enact a partisan bill, and the result was a compromise that ultimately became more widely accepted than any previous major program” (p. 37). The 1970 Act had the following new provisions:

- to qualify for price supports, a farmer had to set-aside a specific percentage of land to soil conserving practices. This contrasted with the previous allotment and marketing quota policies.
- payment limits were established at \$55,000 per crop for upland cotton, wheat and feed grains (Tweeten, 1977).

In the early 1970s, a convergence of natural and political events orientated U.S. agricultural policy toward the world market. Weather and disease drastically reduced U.S. feed grain production. Additional adverse weather occurred in other grain production areas of the world. In 1972, the U.S. began exporting grain to the Soviet Union. The Nixon Administration also adopted expansionary economic policies. As the world grain supply decreased, and the value of the dollar fell, U.S. agricultural exports increased. Crop prices in the United States skyrocketed (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh, 1997).

The 1970s were unique for another reason. It was the first time in the 20th Century, outside of the two war periods, that concern developed about the availability of an adequate supply of food. With high farm prices brought on by the scarcity conditions, USDA and Congress could change policy with relatively little scrutiny by farmers and their organizations. During the early 1970s, Secretary Earl Butz, a free market economist in the tradition of Secretary Benson, set out to lower price supports. He convinced Chairman Poage (Dem.-Tex.) to do this by instituting the target price program. He also began a strategy of selling government-owned storage facilities in the hope that it would keep USDA from getting back into the business of commodity acquisition. Butz considers these accomplishments as his greatest victories.

The 1973 Act, which Secretary Butz influenced, had the following new provisions:

- a target price program for the major grains and cotton with deficiency payments.
- a payment limit of \$20,000 per crop for deficiency payments.
- the loan rate for the major grains and cotton was reduced to at or below market price.
- authorization of disaster payments.
- establishment of the WIC program (Hallberg, 1992).

The early to mid-1970s became known for two other policy developments-- the instigation of the first export embargo and the related intervention of the Department of State in farm policy decisions. Most importantly, since the early 1970s, farm policy began to move from the control of farm interests (Paarlberg, 1975).

The Yellow Dog Democrat

Since the Civil War and Reconstruction, southerners primarily had identified themselves with the Democratic party. The relationship originated in history, tradition and superior local organization. The dominance of the Democrats in the South coined a popular phrase in the political lexicon: the yellow dog Democrat, who would vote for a yellow dog rather than vote for a Republican. Southern Democrats were generally more conservative and less progressive than the Democratic party as a whole. In the 1930s many southern Democrats joined with Republicans in voting against New Deal programs. During the 1950s and 1960s, many southern Democrats in Congress voted against the civil rights legislation sponsored by the liberal northern wing of the party.

From 1933 to 1974, with the exception of the Republican Congresses of the late-1940s and mid-1950s, southern Democrats dominated the leadership positions of the agricultural committees and many key leadership positions in the Congress. Their dominance was enabled through the seniority system.

Three men would control the Speaker's gavel during this period: Sam Rayburn (Dem.-Tex.), 1955-1961; John McCormack (Dem.-Mass.), 1962-1971; and Carl Albert (D.-Okla.), 1971-1973. Sam Rayburn is generally recognized as being the strongest Speaker since Joseph Cannon (Rep.-Ill., 1903-1910). He was a man of great integrity and was well respected by his colleagues. The South would lose the speakership during the McCormack era. Carl Albert's speakership was frustrated due to the Watergate scandal and the subsequent reform era in the House.

From 1955 to 1974, the House Agriculture Committee had dynastic characteristics. Two men were chairs during this period. Harold Cooley (Dem.-N.C.) was chair from the 84th Congress until the 89th Congress (1955-1966). Including his terms during the 81st and 82nd Congresses, he was chair for a total of 18 years. His successor and previously vice-chair, W.R. Poage (Dem.-Tex.), was chair from the 90th through the 93rd Congresses (1967-1974).

A survey of the opinions of House Agriculture Committee members in 1958 classified Cooley as not being "among the strong House committee chairmen," but being respected as "fair and honest." Poage, then vice-chair, was noted as being the only vice-chair in the House at that time. Poage was described as being "very forceful, knowledgeable and capable." Cooley willingly shared power with Poage (Jones 1961).

Southern Democrats controlled the committee and dominated the subcommittees. From 1955 to 1974, from 50 to 70 percent of the majority members of the committee were southern Democrats (Table 3). During this period, southern Democrats held at least two-thirds of all subcommittee chairs. Interestingly, the first vestiges of a new trend were also beginning to appear. Whereas from the 84th to the 89th Congress (1955-1967), there was only one non-majority member who was from the South; in the 90th Congress (1967-1969) there were four and in the 92nd Congress (1971-1973) there were five Republican southerners.

Table 3. House Agriculture Committee Composition, 1955-1974.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
84th	34	19	13	14	19	17
85th	34	19	13	14	18	17
86th	34	22	14	15	15	12
87th	35	21	14	15	14	9
88th	35	21	12	13	16	12
89th	35	24	13	14	15	10
90th	35	20	14	18	15	11
91st	34	19	13	17	10	8
92nd	36	22	12	17	10	8
93rd	36	20	10	15	14	10

Source: House Committee on Agriculture, *Legislative Calendar*, various editions.

Table 4. Senate Agriculture Committee Composition, 1955-1974.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
84th	15	8	6	6	5	5
85th	15	8	6	6	5	4
86th	17	11	6	6	5	4
87th	17	11	6	7	5	5
88th	17	11	8	9	5	5
89th	15	10	6	7	5	5
90th	15	10	7	7	5	5
91st	13	7	6	7	5	5
92nd	14	8	6	7	6	4
93rd	13	7	4	6	6	3

Sources: *Official Congressional Directory*, various editions and Senate Committee on Agriculture, *Legislative Calendar*, various editions.

In the Senate, Lyndon Johnson (Dem.-Tex.) was the majority leader from 1955 until he was chosen as Kennedy's running mate in 1960. Mike Mansfield (Dem.-Mont.) succeeded Johnson and was majority leader until the end of the period. Johnson would become President in 1963 when John Kennedy was assassinated. Arguably, the South was at its high water mark in the national political context with Rayburn as Speaker of the House and Johnson as majority leader of the Senate (84th-86th Congresses, 1955-1960). They were two of the most persuasive individuals ever to hold those positions, as well as being close friends and colleagues.

There was a southern dynasty in the Senate Agriculture Committee as well. Allen Ellender (Dem.-Okla.) was chair of the committee from the 84th to the 90th Congress (1955-1969). Counting his term during the 82nd Congress (1951-1953), he was chair for a total of 16 years. His successor was Herman Talmadge (Dem.-Ga.). Talmadge would serve throughout the remainder of the period.

From 1955 to 1974, the Senate Agriculture Committee reflected less dominance of southern Democrats than was shown in the House. While still impressive numbers, from only 30 to 47 percent of the majority members of the Senate committee were southern Democrats (Table 4). During this period, at their lowest point, southern Democrats controlled half of all subcommittee chairs. In the 84th (1955-1957) and 87th-91st Congresses (1961-1971), southern Democrats were chairs of all five subcommittees. As another example of a future trend, the first non-majority member who was from the South appeared in the 87th Congress (1961-1963). In the 93rd Congress (1973-1975), there were two Republican southerners.

Assessment: 1955-1974

Probably no region will ever dominate U.S. politics like the South did during this era. In agricultural policy, southerners dominated the leadership positions and the committees. Yet, on the South's own merits, little substantive agricultural policy was produced during this time. In the mid-1950s, the South fought to return U.S. policy to high and fixed price supports; a battle it lost. During the 1960s and early-1970s, the policy proposals originated with the various administrations. The ultimate legislation consisted of compromises and horse trades.

Looking back through history, this should be expected. From a policy innovation standpoint, the agriculture committees were the weakest node of the iron triangle consisting of the farm organizations, USDA and the agricultural committees. Perhaps this is because the congresspersons on the committees had limited technical training and few staff assets. They

lacked the resources and expertise of the USDA specialists⁸ and university professors⁹ who originated the policies and the farm organizations which advocated them.

It is still disappointing that from 1933 to 1974, the South left a legacy of power on the agriculture committees, but not greatness. Of the members of the House and Senate agricultural committees who served during this era and went on to achieve distinction in congressional leadership or ran as a presidential candidate (Carl Albert, Tom Foley, Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Walter Mondale and Bob Dole) or become secretary of agriculture (Bob Bergland and Edward Madagan) only one, Carl Albert, was from the South.

If there is a legacy for the southern Democrats, it is the agricultural transformation of the South from a three crop system to diversified agriculture. Government price and income supporting policies allowed farmers to increase the size of their operations and/or diversify. This occurred while the twin forces of mechanization and yield-increasing technologies allowed a sustained increase in agricultural output in the United States and the South.

The Turnover: 1975-1993

Empire Lost

This paper has supported the standard thesis that the South's political power was based on its ability to consistently elect congresspersons of one party who were then able to acquire power through the seniority system. It should be expected that if either the seniority system or the electoral system in the South were threatened, the South would correspondingly lose. We present the following evidence to support this assertion:

- **Voting Rights Reform.** Until reform was brought about by 1960s Supreme Court decisions upholding the “one-person-one-vote” principle, malapportionment was common in the South. Many rural conservative white areas were over represented (Rieselbach, 1995).
- **1970s Congressional Reforms.** Northern liberal and progressive Democrats were increasingly dissatisfied by the seniority system and its ability to allow the dominance

⁸ Cochrane and Ryan write in 1976, “Perhaps the agricultural committees of the Congress could build a staff with sufficient skill and experience to draft effect legislation in the complex area of farm price and income legislation. But they have not. And they could do so now only with considerable effort and at considerable expense. Thus, the work of developing new program ideas and incorporating those ideas into legislation has devolved upon the research, legal, and administrative staffs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The secretary provides the policy guidance in the form of program goals and objectives, and his technical staffs construct the program features which can achieve those goals, or perhaps even tell the secretary that his goals are unattainable, given certain constrains (e.g., a budget limit)” (page 107). It is interesting to note that post-1970s, Congress did develop the staff and the role of USDA was subsequently diminished.

⁹ Cochrane and Ryan (1976) credit the following individuals in academia as having direct influence on policy: John D. Black, 1930s and 1940s; Walter W. Wilcox, 1950s and 1960s; Willard Cochrane, late-1950s and early 1960s; George E. Brandow, D. Gale Johnson, and John A. Schnittker, 1960s-1973; John Kenneth Galbraith, 1940-1965 (p. 119).

of Congress by elderly, conservative southerners. This agitation was especially apparent during the civil rights legislation and Vietnam debates during the 1960s. In the early 1970s, reforms were enacted to discontinue the seniority system in the selection of committee chairpersons and to decentralize power in committees. Subcommittees and their chairmen were given much greater power. This reform movement became most visible when a whole cadre of reform-minded congresspersons were elected in the 1974 post-Watergate mid-term elections. The new wave precipitated the removal of the southern old guard. In 1975, three Committee chairmen were ousted and replaced by more junior members. One of those chairmen was W.R. Poage (Dem.-Tex.) of the House Agriculture Committee (Cohn, 1991).

- **Increase in the Number of Noncompetitive Seats in the North.** Wolfinger and Heifeitz investigated the southern control issue in 1965. They concluded that northern and southern safe-seat Democratic congresspersons had the same level of seniority, and there were no differences between the views of the electorate concerning congressional service. Southern dominance in the mid-1960s was a reflection of the 1946 congressional election in which many liberal northerners were defeated. Wolfinger and Heifeitz concluded that northern democrats would become much more influential [post-1965] as they were not any less likely to accrue seniority than southern Democrats. Furthermore, the number of noncompetitive seats in the north was increasing.
- **Rise of a Conservative Republican Party in the South.** As a general characteristic, the southern Democrat has been more conservative and less progressive and unlikely to identify with the liberal wing of the party. The first obvious crack in the one-party Democratic South was the 1964 election where Barry Goldwater won five southern states. In the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, twelve southern states chose a California Republican over a Georgia Democrat. Reagan's coat-tails permitted the election of many Republicans in the South. By 1985, half of the Senators and 43 of the 116 House members of the Old Confederacy were Republicans.

It would take twenty years for the southern Democrats to go from the highest peak of power on the Agriculture Committees to the lowest valley. The first defeat was the replacement of Chairman Poage (Dem.-Tex.) of the House Agriculture Committee with Tom Foley (Dem.-Wash.) in 1974. For 39 years during the period 1931-1974, a southern Democrat had control of the gavel, a control only relinquished during the two Republican Congresses in the late-1940s and mid-1950s.

The next stroke was the coat-tail effects of the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan. The 1980 elections in the House and the 1980 and 1982 elections in the Senate had an immense impact on southern Democrat representation on the Agriculture Committees (Tables 5 and 6). The number of southern Democrats on the Agricultural Committees declined by one-fourth in the House and by one-half in the Senate.

Table 5. House Agriculture Committee Composition, 1975-1997.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
94th	41	27	12	15	10	7
95th	46	31	15	18	10	7
96th	41	27	12	14	10	6
97th	43	22	9	11	8	3
98th	41	26	12	13	10	5
99th	43	26	14	16	11	7
100th	41	25	11	15	10	6
101st	43	27	14	18	9	6
102nd	45	27	12	15	8	6
103rd	50	29	13	22	7	4
104th	49	27	10	18	5	0
105th	50	27	12	23	5	2

Source: House Committee on Agriculture, *Legislative Calendar*, various editions.

Note: Republican-majority congresses are shaded.

Table 6. Senate Agriculture Committee Composition, 1975-1997.

Congress	Number of Members on the Committee	Number of Majority Members	Number of Majority Members from the South	Total Committee Members from the South	Number of Subcommittees	Number of Subcommittee Chairs from the South
94th	14	9	5	7	6	3
95th	18	11	6	8	7	3
96th	18	10	6	8	7	3
97th	17	9	3	7	8	2
98th	18	10	3	7	7	2
99th	17	9	4	7	6	2
100th	19	10	5	8	7	4
101st	19	10	4	7	7	4
102nd	17	10	4	7	7	4
103rd	18	10	4	7	6	3
104th	18	10	6	8	4	3
105th	18	10	5	6	4	2

Sources: *Official Congressional Directory*, various editions and Senate Committee on Agriculture, *Legislative Calendar*, various editions.

Note: Republican-majority congresses are shaded

When the Republicans gained control of the Senate in the 97th Congress (1981-1983), the gavel of the Senate committee passed from Herman Talmadge (Dem.-Ga.) to Jesse Helms (Rep.-N.C.). Talmadge had been chair for ten years. When the Democrats regained control of the Senate in the 100th Congress (1987-1989), the Agriculture Committee gavel passed to Patrick Leahy (Dem.-Vt.). Another era was over.

In the 97th Congress (1981-1983), the South regained the chair of the House Agriculture Committee when Tom Foley (Dem.-Wash.) became majority whip. Kika de la Garza (Dem.-Tex.) would be chair until the 1994 elections, when the Republicans would gain control of Congress. Many of those defeated were southern Democrats.

Regardless, the subsequent farm bills, particularly the 1981, 1985 and 1990 Acts, were written in a different political environment. With the dethroning of the southern chairmen and the political reforms of the 1970s, the agriculture committees, particularly the subcommittees, acquired more power, albeit decentralized. With more power, subcommittees acquired more staff and took an active interest in writing the actual provisions of the legislation.¹⁰ Arguably, some subcommittee chairmen during this era were more powerful than the chairmen of twenty and thirty years before. Congress in this era became the primary node in the iron triangle for policy formulation.

The final blow to the South would be the replacement of Jamie Whitten (Dem.-Miss.) as chair of the House Appropriations Committee. Congressman Whitten served for 53 years, longer than any other member of Congress in history. One of agriculture's best friends in Washington, he was often referred to as the "Permanent Secretary of Agriculture." In 1949, he became chair of the important Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee, a position he would hold for 44 years (H. Carl Andersen Rep.-Minn. was chair of the subcommittee during the Republican 83rd Congress). From the 96th through the 102nd Congresses (1979-1992), he was chair of the full Appropriations Committee. After suffering a small stroke in 1992, he was quietly replaced by the Democratic leadership. As a measure of his importance in the agricultural policy process, the Administration Building of USDA in Washington, D.C. was named in his honor in 1995.

Politicizing Policy

Throughout the 1980s, agricultural policy became increasingly politicized between Republican administrations and Democratic congresses. This was an outgrowth of a general debate in society on the proper role of government (Duffy, 1997).

The election of the free-market-oriented Reagan Administration occurred after most of the compromises leading to the 1981 Act had already been made. Consequently, a Republican-led USDA was charged with implementing generous subsidies in the 1981 Act, which also precipitated an unprecedented accumulation of commodity stocks. In the face of declining exports, storing and reducing those stocks through programs such as Payment-in-Kind, increased

¹⁰ One of the authors, Knutson, was a staff economist and later, agency administrator, in USDA during the early 1970s. He notes the realization by Secretary Butz (Nixon Administration) that if he sent a bill to the Hill, it would be picked apart by a Democratic Congress. The beginning of the policy transition from USDA to the agriculture committees can be traced to the early 1970s.

program costs to record levels. Agricultural policy was forced to the forefront of the federal budget debate (Cochrane and Runge, 1992).

Calls by the Reagan Administration for a complete phase-out of government subsidies were muted by the financial crisis in the agricultural sector of the mid-1980s. Regardless, the focus of the 1985 Act was on reducing supply and increasing export competitiveness. While retaining the traditional mechanism of the target price and loan rate, it reintroduced land retirement programs from the 1950s (albeit under different names), created export-enhancement programs, introduced the marketing loan and paid dairy producers to slaughter entire dairy herds (Cochrane and Runge, 1992).

While budgetary issues were front and center during its formative stages, traditional agricultural policy survived in the 1990 Act. The 1990 Act would be the swan song of the agricultural establishment.

Payments to Producers

It has sometimes been assumed that the South used its power and influence on the agricultural committees to benefit southern producers, while forsaking other areas of the country. During the 1930s, when there were only six program crops, it might be argued that this was the case. The early program crops were very southern and midwestern in orientation. One must consider that before the federal irrigation projects of the 1930s and the development of efficient groundwater irrigation technology, much of the Great Plains and the West were not viable production areas. Regardless, agricultural legislation has since been written to address virtually every crop.

It can be argued that through tweaking the programs, perhaps southern farmers “got more than their fair share.” Cochrane and Ryan (1976) note that due to southern seniority, “...the problems of cotton, tobacco, and peanuts have received solicitous attention” (p. 114). It is also noted that wheat, feedgrains, sugar and dairy products had their champions as well. In essence, the interests of all program commodities were looked after (Cochrane and Ryan, 1976).

Although payment data has been collected by USDA since the 1930s, a continuous series of payments to producers by state and by program could only be acquired for 1966 to 1996.¹¹ Out of this data set, the 13 southern states were aggregated. It is noted that the South received an average 30 percent of the government agricultural payments to producers during this period (Figure 1). However, there appears to be a declining trend for the South over the period. It is interesting to note the extremely high percentage, 62 percent, was in 1977; a period of relatively low payments to producers (Figure 2). Clearly, the spike in producer payments that occurred in 1993 benefitted the South, while the 1989 spike was fairly insignificant.

The makeup of agricultural payments to producers has changed over time (Figure 3). The majority of the payments have been in the form of producer subsidy payments from either deficiency payments, marketing loan benefits or storage payments. Over time, disaster and conservation payments to producers have become more significant. Focusing on the South, producer subsidy payments are the dominant payment to producers (Figure 4). The major

¹¹ Many interesting historical USDA data sets doubtlessly exist in storage or in out-of-print publications. As long-time staff members retire and the institutional memory is lost, so is part of our history.

Figure 1. Government Agricultural Payments to Producers, Payments to the South as a Percentage of the Total U.S. , 1966-1996

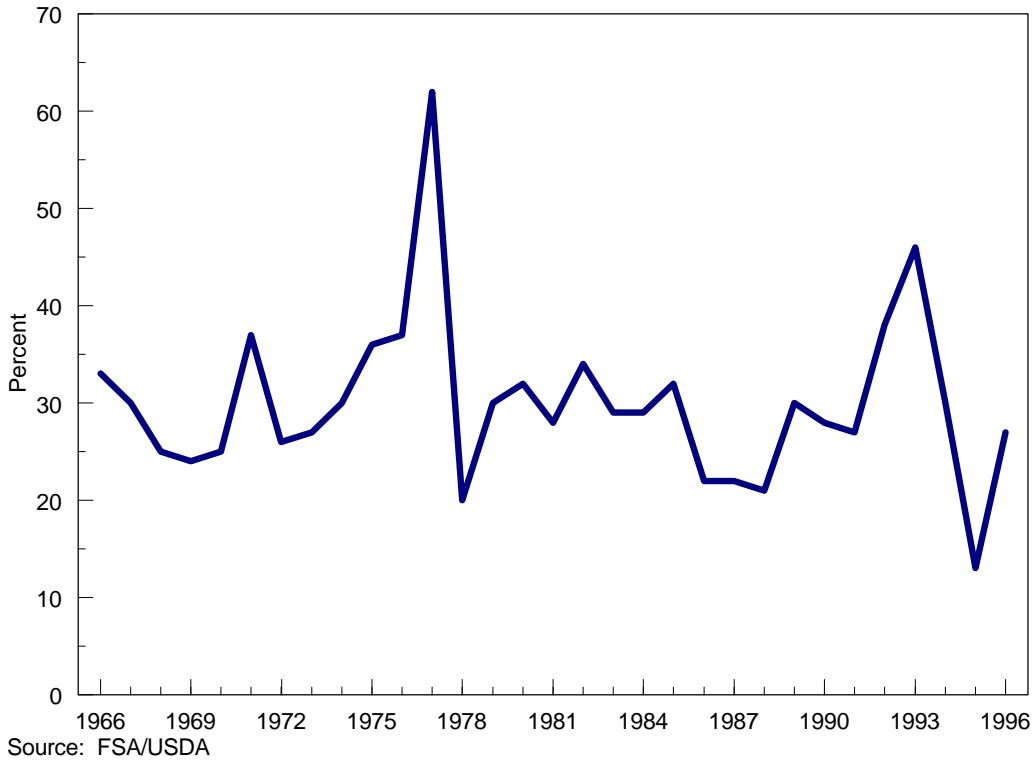


Figure 2. Government Agricultural Payments to Producers, Total U.S. and to the South, 1966-1996

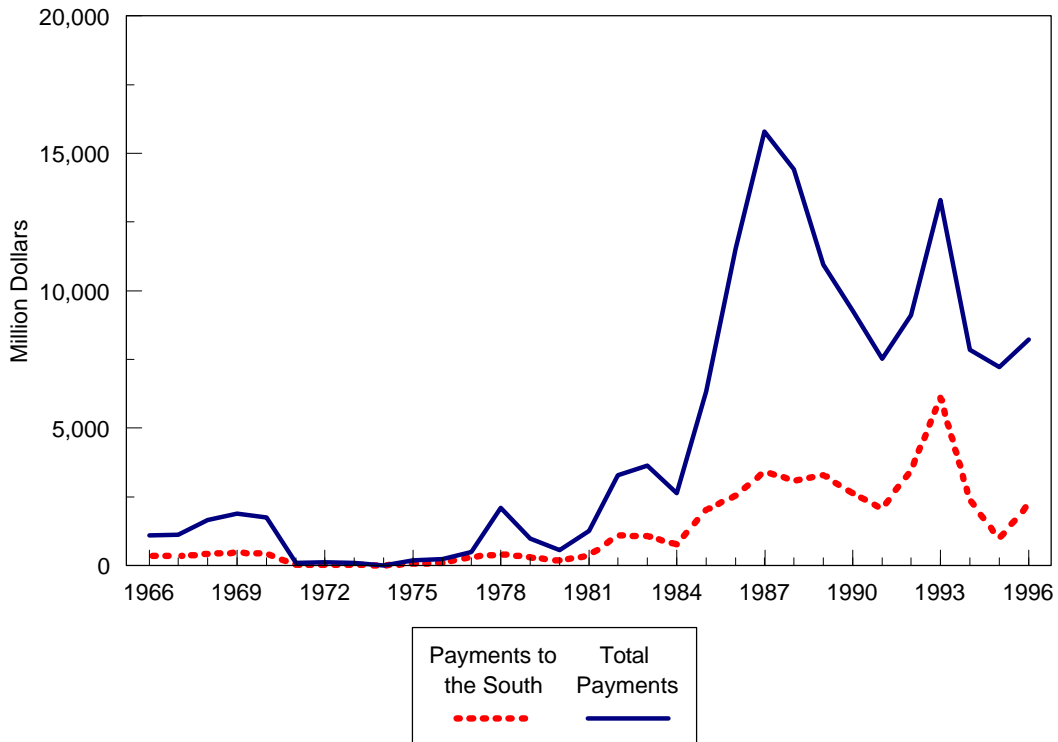
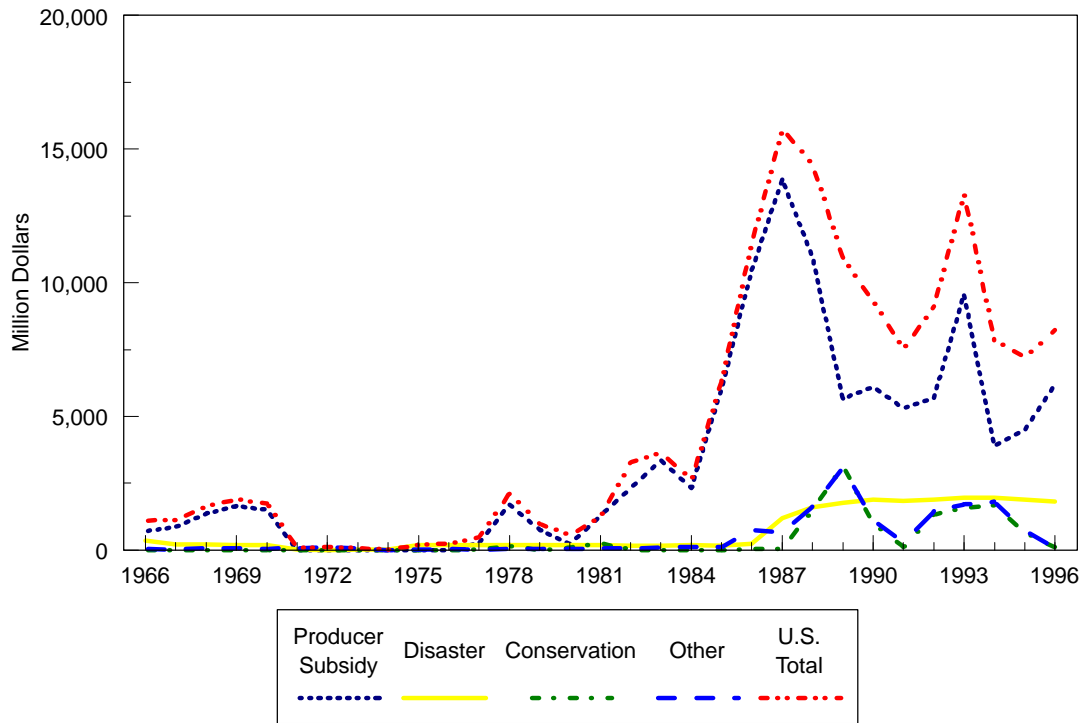
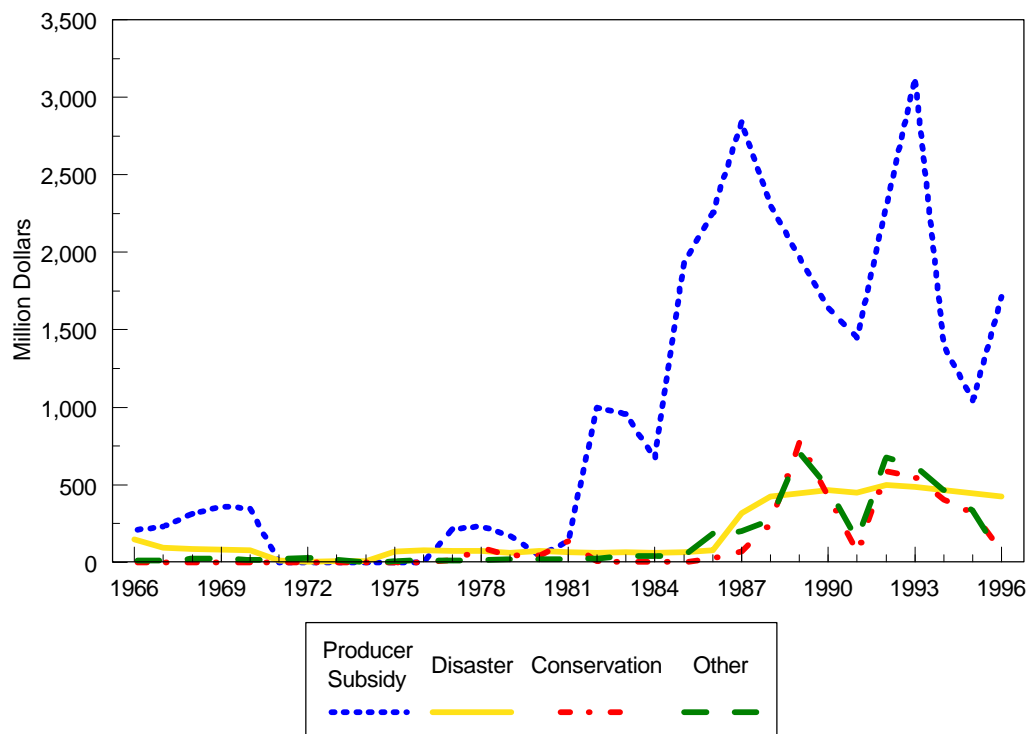


Figure 3. Government Agricultural Payments to Producers, by Category and Total U.S., 1966-1996



Source: FSA/USDA

Figure 4. Government Agricultural Payments to Producers, by Category to the South, 1966-1996



Source: FSA/USDA

programs have been cotton and rice. As with the nation as a whole, southern producers have received disaster payments over the last decade.

Perhaps southern control of the agriculture committees was akin to a “home team advantage,” something which can be surmised, but not fully measured. Producer payment data, which covers a significant period of southern dominance and increased government involvement in agriculture, indicates that the South did not use its political advantage to garner government payments while neglecting other areas of the country.

The New South: 1994-

In the mid-1980s, a small, but vocal corps of Republican congresspersons led by Newt Gingrich (Rep.-Ga.) began challenging the Democratic leadership. The Democratic party had been in majority in the House since 1955 and the Republican leadership in Congress had seen itself as an obliging minority. In this environment, Congressman Gingrich increasingly polarized politics between a conservative, mainly Republican wing, who advocated budgetary responsibility and a liberal, mainly Democratic wing who favored high levels of government intervention in the private sector.

In 1994, Newt Gingrich orchestrated a landslide electoral toppling of the Democratic majority in the House which carried over to the Senate. With the defeat of many old-line liberal Democrats and the interjection of a corps of freshmen Republicans who owed their victory to their leader, Newt Gingrich, conditions were ripe for change. Gingrich became one of the strongest Speakers in decades. Richard Arme (Rep.-Tex.), a vocal critic of agricultural subsidies, became majority leader. With the Republican majorities emphasis on reducing the federal budget and reorganizing House operations, the new agricultural legislation due in 1995 would not be business as usual.

Pat Roberts (Rep.-Kans.) assumed the chair of the House committee in the 104th Congress. He was able to avert an elimination of the House Agriculture Committee by agreeing to place agricultural programs on the fiscal chopping block. With higher than average commodity prices, the emphasis on budgetary reductions, and with many of the major players (Majority Leader Dole, Chairman Roberts, Secretary Glickman) from the same state, Kansas, an environment existed for the reform of agricultural policy. Richard Lugar (Rep.-Ind.), chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, began the process by suggesting it was time to eliminate commodity programs (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh, 1997).

The proposal by Chairman Roberts which ultimately emerged as the 1996 farm bill, Freedom to Farm, was a watershed change in policy. The target price program was eliminated and replaced with declining seven-year fixed transition payments. Virtual full planting flexibility replaced acreage reduction authority and commodity acreage bases were eliminated. The 1996 farm bill lacked virtually any resemblance to the 1990 Act (Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh, 1997).

Southern Control: Prospects for the Future

In certain regions of the South, distasteful bumper stickers can be found which say “the South will rise again.” In a political sense, in many ways the South has risen again. What is most surprising is that the South’s rise was facilitated through the Republican party. In the current

political climate, in a Democratic majority, the South would be far less represented in the leadership positions.

In the 105th Congress, with a Republican majority, southerners hold the top leadership positions. Newt Gingrich (Rep.-Ga.) is Speaker of the House. Richard Arney (Rep.-Tex.) is House majority leader. Tom Delay (Rep.-Tex.) is majority whip. The Democrats' leadership lies with the Midwest: Richard Gephardt (Dem.-Mo.), minority leader and David Bonior (Dem.-Mich.) minority whip. Interestingly, southern leadership with the Republicans does not have the breadth of the southern Democrats of twenty-five years before. Of the twenty full committees in the House, southerners are chairmen of only five.

Southerners likewise are dominant in the Republican Senate leadership: Strom Thurmond (Rep.-S.C.) is president pro tempore, Trent Lott (Rep.-Miss.) is majority leader, Don Nickles (Rep.-Okla.) is majority whip. The Democratic minority leader is Tom Daschle (Dem.-N.D.) and the minority whip is Wendell Ford (Dem.-Ky.). While southerners are well represented in the leadership positions, only five of the twenty full committee chairmen are southerners.

While the South has regained considerable political power in the leadership of the House and Senate, it holds the chair of neither the House nor Senate Agriculture Committees. Southerners do hold two of the five subcommittee chairs in the House and two of the four subcommittee chairs in the Senate (Tables 5 and 6). Not to be overlooked is Thad Cochran (Rep.-Miss.) who is chair of the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee and third-ranking member on the Senate Agriculture Committee. The team of Lott, Nickles and Cochran represent a formidable force to those who might desire to dismantle the cotton, rice, peanuts and sugar programs.

Presently, there are more southern Republicans than southern Democrats in both committees. In terms of total southerners as a percentage of total committee members, the South is in as strong a position today as it was thirty years ago (Figures 5 and 6). Figures 5 and 6 also chart the rise and fall of the southern Democrat. In terms of the percentage of total membership on the committees, the southern Democrat is an endangered species. With the increased polarization in the political parties, the southern conservative Democrat is even more of a rarity.

With a Republican or even a Democratic majority, the prospects for southerners returning to the same type of dominance as in the past are not very favorable. The rise of a two-party system and reapportionment in the South means that many more elections are contested today. The seniority system, which was the primary path to power for southerners, has been revised. Larry Combest (Rep.-Tex.) lost the chair of the House Agriculture Committee for voting against the freedom to farm provisions of the 1996 farm bill. There is also an increased degree of turnover in Congress as members choose not to run for reelection or are defeated.¹²

¹² In Knutson, Penn and Flinchbaugh (1997) it is noted that "Since the 1992 elections, a trend can be noted of increased dissatisfaction by members with the institution of Congress (members not seeking reelection) and increased accountability at the polls (incumbents being defeated). In the 1992 elections, 110 house seats and 11 senate seats changed hands. In the 1994 elections, 87 house seats and 9 senate seats changed hands. In the 1996 elections, 74 house seats and 15 senate seats changed hands. Consequently, in 1997, 16 of the 50 members of the House Agriculture Committee were freshmen and 38 had begun their service since 1992. Only 5 members were present when the previous farm bill was debated and passed in 1989. Only two members of the minority and not a single member of the majority were present when President Carter imposed the most recent embargo on agricultural exports in 1980" (p. 46).

Figure 5. Percentage Total Members of the House Agriculture Committee from the South, 1927-1997

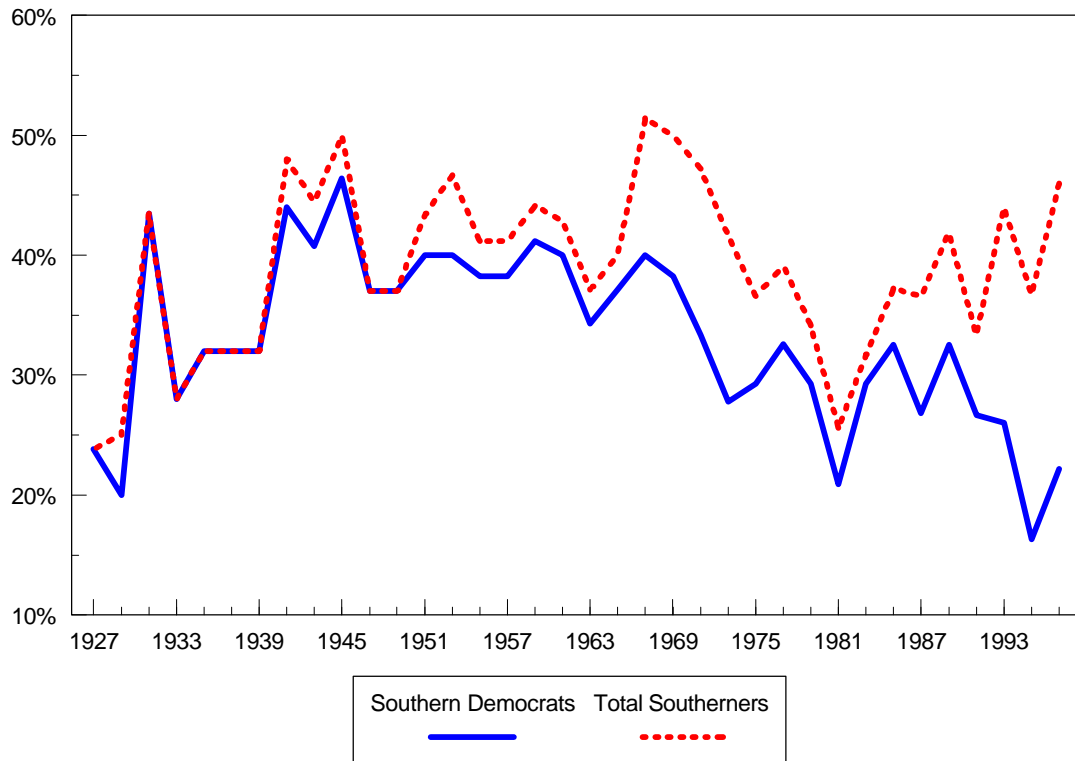
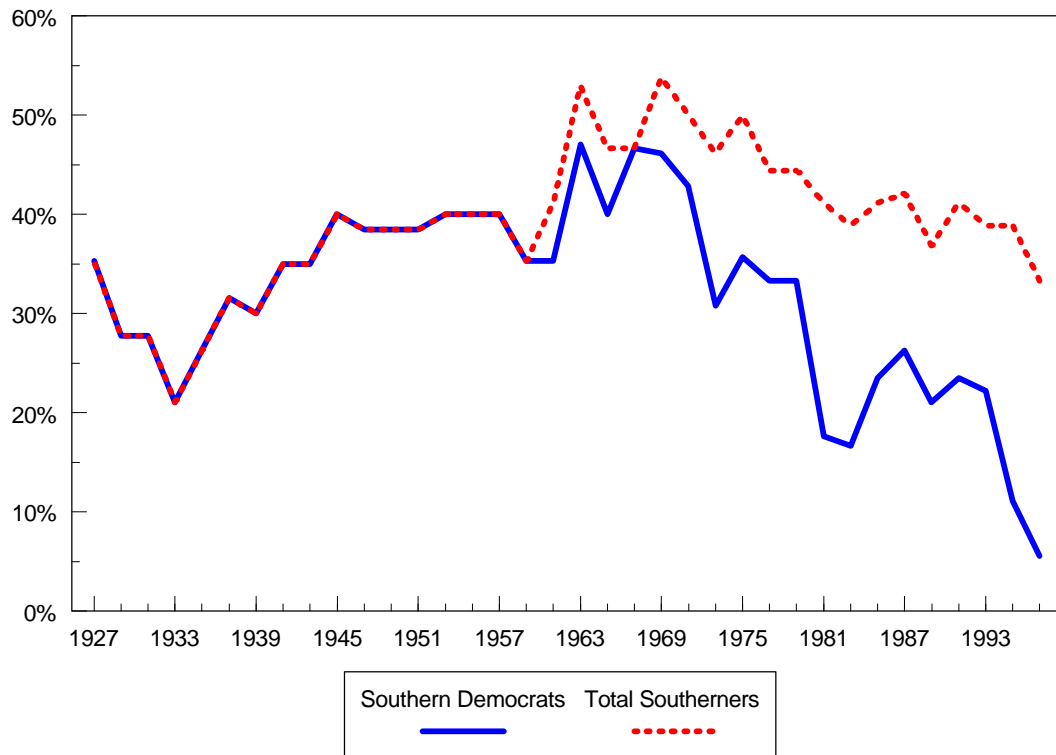


Figure 6. Percentage Total Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee from the South, 1927-1997



Additionally, while the South still has large rural areas, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define the South as an agrarian region. With each new census, rural votes are being diminished by urbanization. There are fewer and fewer truly agricultural districts in the South. In 1986, using late-1970s data, Green and Carlin identified 46 farming-orientated congressional districts in the United States. They defined a farming-orientated district as where a third or more of its counties are farming-dependent (one-fifth or more of its earned income). Only sixteen of the 46 districts were in the southern states defined by our study.

Membership of the now defunct House Rural Caucus was once a measure of which districts had a strong rural/agricultural interest. In the last membership list from the 104th Congress, of the 52 members, 16 were from the South. Presently, there are 137 congressional districts in the 13 southern states defined by this study. It follows then, that, perhaps less than 12 percent of the congressional districts in the South are truly agricultural.

The South has risen again, but Marvin Jones and Ellison Smith would not recognize it. The mule has been replaced by 360 horsepower tractors using satellites to precision farm the land. Sharecropping is no longer practiced. Cotton has moved west and cropping has diversified. Republican southerners outnumber Democrats on the agriculture committees. The survival of the agriculture committees themselves is not a certainty. The empire which they started has ended. Perhaps a new empire is beginning.

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