

Who Influences National Rural Policy?

Identification and Description of Rural Interest Groups

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Interest groups play an important role nationally in agenda setting, policy formulation, and policy implementation (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Grossman, 2012; Grossman and Dominguez, 2009; Weible et al., 2009). While research on interest groups and advocacy coalitions has been active, the issue prioritization and agenda-setting aspects have received less attention, especially in the rural policy arena. Understanding the sources of change in policy dialog can help analysts and policy makers more effectively respond to shifting issues. To explore how policy is formulated in a broad policy realm such as rural policy, it is first necessary to identify the groups involved in the process. The purpose of this document is to help the reader become familiar with the various groups operating in rural policy and understand the policy arenas in which they operate.

Background

Rural America is affected by a wide range of policy domains including those that affect all Americans, whether urban or rural, such as tax and macroeconomic policy. Some domains are more explicitly rural, including agriculture and development of rural economies and communities. Within these policy areas a range of private interests are involved in debates, some representing economic sectors and businesses and others based on membership or representing broad constituencies. Interest groups play a major role in the framing and prioritization of issues, particularly those closest to policy makers. Given the ease of communication through the Internet and social media, groups are able to quickly issue statements on a wide range of policies (Obar et al., 2012). The increasing speed of advocacy and changes to policy dialogues requires those interested in participating in policy discussions to have a clear picture of the structure of the interest group community. It is particularly important to identify the most influential players in those policy arenas and how interest group structures in different policy arenas vary.

Substantial research attention in recent decades focused on the role of public institutions and interest groups in the policy process (Heinz et al., 1993; Laumann and Heinz, 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Weible et al., 2009). In rural policy, the agricultural policy domain received the most attention in previous research (Grossmann, 2012; Heinz et al., 1993). Increasingly complex models replaced the traditional iron triangle model (Fig. 1) applied to the agricultural policy domain, where agricultural interests, government agencies, and legislatures form a stable network influencing policy (Jenkins-Smith, 1991). Groups active in agricultural policy include general farm organizations, commodity-based organizations, environmental groups, food and consumer organizations, and professional associations (Grossmann, 2012; Laumann and Heinz, 1991). Despite the widening net of groups believed to influence agricultural policy, Grossmann (2012) found that relatively few interest groups have the capacity to directly influence Congress. In his analysis of interest groups, Grossmann found the primary determinant of interest group influence was Washington, D.C.-based legislative staff. The number of groups active in federal agricultural policy was relatively small, compared with other sectors such as health care or education.

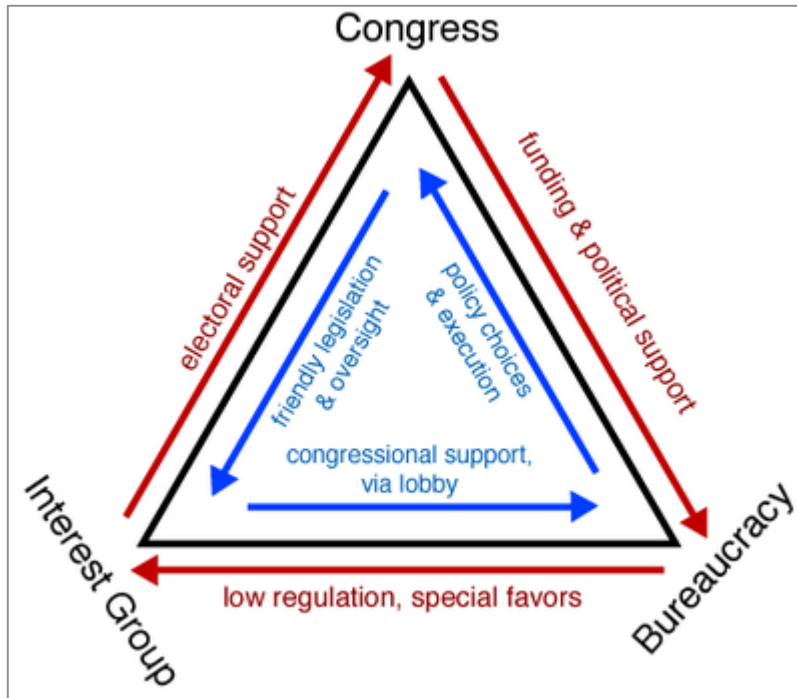


Figure 1. Iron Triangles (source: Wikipedia).

There have been no attempts to classify the broader network of rural policy interests, despite natural connections between rural issues. The primary legislative action in the rural arena is legislation informally known as “the Farm Bill” (though it bears a different official name, such as the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008), typically passed every five years. Despite its moniker, this bill funds a wide range of rural programs, including farm payments and crop insurance, conservation programs, rural development and housing loan programs, nutrition programs (including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps), and energy programs. The Farm Bill has grown to encompass a wide range of programs in part because of engagement in food, agricultural, and development policy by a variety of interest groups (Schertz and Doering, 1999). Formulation of this omnibus legislation provides an opportunity for these wide-ranging groups to influence policy directly affecting rural America. It also provides an opportunity for researchers and policy makers to better understand the relationships between groups and issues.

This research identifies interest groups involved in national rural policy across a variety of specific domains, including agriculture, rural development, environment, and food. Through multiple methods, I attempted to identify the most influential groups in each policy domain, as well as to describe the range of groups operating in each domain. These policy areas have different characteristics that help define the interest groups involved. For example, agriculture is a single economic sector with many sub-industries, each with its own (sometimes competing) interests. I classify groups into categories based on the interests they represent and the issue areas in which they are involved. By documenting the influential groups involved in rural policy debates, and better understanding the issues areas they

address, researchers, analysts, and policy makers may be better prepared to understand issues as they change.

Approach

The Internet and web-based social media are changing the way organizations distribute information, motivate action, and attempt to frame policy debates. Organizations still attempt to influence debates through traditional mechanisms, including direct lobbying, citizen letter-writing campaigns, and testifying before Congress (Grossmann, 2012), yet increasingly groups are distributing messages via the Internet (Bimber, 1998; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Obar et al. 2012; Suarez, 2009). Others have argued that the effects of the Internet on politics and the policy process are overstated (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010; Hindman, 2008; Karpf, 2010). Regardless, the Internet offers organizations a way to distribute policy messages in a variety of ways to a large number of people. In turn, this format of policy messaging offers researchers easy access to the range of issues and policy beliefs in a given domain.

The research presented here used multiple techniques for identifying rural interest groups. Previous research on interest groups has typically relied on archival sources for group identification, including *Washington Representatives*, a directory of registered lobbyists, and Congressional Quarterly's *Federal PACs Directory* (Grossman and Dominguez, 2009; Grossman, 2012). While archival sources are useful for identifying groups that officials engage in policy discussions, either through direct lobbying or campaign contributions, they potentially exclude groups more indirectly involved in the policy process. This includes organizations that serve an information or public advocacy role, or organizations that engage primarily with administrative agencies. Moreover, reliance on one archival source does not reveal much information on which issues are important to different groups.

I identified interest groups engaged in national rural policy, in a variety of traditional policy domains, including agriculture, natural resources and environment, rural economic and community development, and food. I utilized a triangulation technique used by Laumann and Heinz (1991), which relied on three methods. Each individual source of information on interest groups has different biases, so by using multiple methods I was able to find the largest number of organizations attempting to influence the policy process. To identify groups, I used three basic methods: 1) telephone interviews with key informants on rural policy; 2) mentions or quotes in news articles; and 3) analysis of congressional testimony. Both the interview and social media methods relied on a snowball technique for expanding the pool of interest groups. For example, interview participants were asked for names of other people who might be knowledgeable about rural policy. Organizations were added to the pool of interest groups if they were mentioned by at least two interview participants, or appeared in multiple news or social media articles about rural policy. I excluded representatives of government agencies or universities, including university-based research centers such as the Rural Policy Research Institute based at the University of Missouri. A total of 24 individuals from 22 organizations were interviewed, including university faculty not employed by policy centers, state extension professionals, federal agency personnel, and advocacy group staff. News sources included traditional news sources (e.g., *The New York Times*), online news sources, especially related to agriculture or rural issues (e.g., *The Daily*

Yonder and *DTN/The Progressive Farmer*), and rural/agricultural news aggregators (e.g., A Gree NewsFeed). Articles published between September 2012 and January 2013 were the primary source of information, although Internet searches using Google News identified articles published prior to September in some instances. News articles specifically discussing emerging or future rural policy issues were included.

The third method, congressional testimony, was used to identify groups that directly participated in policy development, rather than indirectly through agenda setting and public outreach. Congressional testimony between July 2011 and September 2012 (when Congress adjourned before the national election in November) was included. I used LexisNexis to search CQ Congressional Testimony using the terms *agriculture*, *rural*, *farm*, *environment*, and *food*. Most of the testimony pertained to the Farm Bill, which was being drafted throughout 2012. Other testimony topics included farm labor, agricultural trade, rural health, federal lands management, and food marketing.

Collectively, groups identified by these three methods represent entities involved in the agenda setting and policy formulation aspects of the policy process. It is possible that other groups participate in later stages of the process, including through agency rulemaking and court actions, and these may not be identified by the methods outlined. These groups however are not likely to be proactively involved in emerging issues, but rather reacting to policies after they have been legislatively enacted. For the purpose of my research, to identify issues emerging in 2013, the methods I used were sufficient for identifying groups involved in agenda setting through media activity and networking, as well as directly involved in policy formulation by formally interacting with Congress.

Rural Interest Groups

A total of 123 organizations emerged, representing a range of types of organizations active in a number of specific policy domains. Groups include traditional advocacy organizations, trade and commodity groups, professional societies, and civic and membership organizations. Most of the groups identified were active in the legislative process, with 110 testifying before Congress in the study period, and 63 were identified only from congressional testimony and not by media or interview sources. A total of 32 groups were identified through interviews, every one of which was also found through news and testimony analysis. The news analysis identified 57 groups. Twenty five organizations were identified by all three methods. Compared with the agriculture, food, and environment organizations, energy and non-agricultural trade groups were more often identified through congressional testimony than through interviews or news sources.

Table 1. Identification of Groups by Each Source.

Source	Domain				Total
	Agriculture (N=41)	Environment (N=32)	Rural Development (N=41)	Food (N=4)	
News	27	19	10	1	57
Interviews	12	11	9	0	32
Testimony	40	29	37	4	110

Most groups (99 of the 123) had policy content posted on-line within the last year, although the amount of information varied among groups. Somewhat surprisingly nearly one fifth of the advocacy groups identified in this research did not have policy materials available online. In some cases the online information had not been updated for several years. In a few cases little or no information of any kind was available online. Despite the prevalence of web-based communications, a portion of the active policy advocacy community, including organizations that have testified before Congress within the last year, does not maintain a significant Internet presence.

Table 2. Categorization of Rural Interest Groups.

Policy Domain	Type of Organization	Issue Areas	Example Organizations	# of Orgs.
Agriculture	Farmer Organizations	Farm programs, conservation, economic policy, rural development	<i>American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union</i>	6
	Commodity/Trade Associations	Farm programs	<i>National Corn Growers Association, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association</i>	26
	Issue-oriented Organizations	Farm programs, conservation, trade	<i>National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition</i>	9
Environment	General Environmental Organizations	Various (pollution policy, climate change, wildlife)	<i>Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund</i>	12
	Single Issue Organizations	Various	<i>American Rivers</i>	8
	Governmental Associations	Federal lands policy, conservation programs	<i>National Association of Conservation Districts</i>	5
	Sportsmen’s Groups	Hunting/fishing policy, wildlife	<i>Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever</i>	7
Rural Development	Issue-oriented Organizations/ Trade Groups	Rural services, infrastructure, economic interests	<i>National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, National Rural Water Association, National Mining Coalition</i>	32
	Government Associations	Government services, infrastructure	<i>National Association of Counties, National Association of Development Organizations</i>	5
	Broad Rural Organizations	Rural community development, economic development	<i>League of Rural Voters, Center for Rural Affairs</i>	4
Food	Consumer Advocacy	Food labeling, food safety, food taxes/regulation	<i>Center for Science in the Public Interest</i>	4
Other	Think Tanks, National Advocacy Groups	Food, environmental regulation, infrastructure	<i>U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Center for American Progress</i>	5

While I did not evaluate the political influence of organizations in this pool, several groups clearly carried substantial influence, both in terms of frequency with which they were referenced in interviews and media, as well as the variety of sources that identified them as important. These organizations tend to operate across the traditional policy domains, attempting to influence policy simultaneously on agriculture, environment, rural development, and food. These organizations, however, tend to carry the most influence in their primary arena, and are featured in news articles pertaining to those areas.

Agriculture

As outlined above, this sector is also the best researched and understood. The agricultural policy domain is the largest and most active in terms of federal rural policy, especially given the active debate in 2012 about the next Farm Bill. While most Farm Bill funding goes to nutrition programs, the legislation represents the primary federal action on agricultural policy. During the research timeframe, a number of farm and agricultural organizations testified before Congress on Farm Bill legislation and were featured in news articles about the Farm Bill. A few organizations tended to dominate these sources however. The **American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF)** and **National Farmers Union (NFU)** are membership-based farmer organizations that were commonly featured in news articles about agricultural policy. AFBF in particular was very active in Congressional interaction, testifying 11 times between July 2011 and September 2012 (including testimony by state chapters of the Farm Bureau), more than any other organization. Both farm organizations publish broad and extensive policy documents, promoting policies on not only agriculture, but also tax, environment, energy, and food policy. The two organizations share a number of policy positions, although they differ in a variety of notable ways.

In addition to the farmer organizations, farm commodity groups also were active. Nearly all farm commodities have a representative organization, and influence appears to follow the relative economic size of the commodity market. These groups tended to be featured in news articles pertaining directly to their commodity, though the largest organizations were also featured in articles about farm policy in general. The largest commodity groups include the **National Corn Growers Association (NCGA)**, **American Soybean Association**, **National Wheat Growers Association**, **National Cotton Council**, **National Cattlemen's Beef Association**, and the **Dairy Farmers of America**. Commodity groups produce policy statements on farm policy that directly impacts their sector. The largest of the groups, for example NCGA, produce more comprehensive policy platforms that have positions on conservation, rural development, and general economic policy as well.

Issue-oriented farm groups are another influential type of farm organization and include the **National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC)** and **Family Farm Alliance**, which is focused on western irrigated agriculture. Unlike farmer membership organizations, the NSAC is not a direct membership organization. Rather, the group represents a number of smaller organizations that are focused primarily on alternative agricultural systems. The NSAC operates a blog, updated multiple times per week, which includes statements on a range of policy areas, including environment, farm programs, local and regional food systems, rural development, and beginning farmer programs. The NSAC was also mentioned frequently by interview subjects as knowledgeable about agricultural issues. Despite their

prevalence in news articles and in interviews, the NSAC did not appear in congressional testimony during this period. Last, groups representing farm labor are also important actors on farm labor issues, including the **United Farm Workers of America**.

Environment

The environmental sector is characterized by a large number of groups, which fall into four main types: general environmental groups, focused (“single-issue” groups), governmental associations, and sportsmen’s groups. General environmental groups are typically national in scope and active in a wide range of areas within the environmental policy field. Major groups include the **Sierra Club**, **the Nature Conservancy**, **Environmental Defense Fund**, and **Environmental Working Group**. While these types of organizations produce policy materials on a range of environmental topics, each focuses on certain policy areas. The Nature Conservancy for instance is focused primarily on conservation on private lands. The Environmental Defense Fund and Environmental Working Group have the most cross-over with agricultural policy, as both produced a number of statements on federal agri-environmental policy. Some of these groups, such as Sierra Club, have an international scope and produce policy positions that do not specifically concern U.S. rural policy. Other environmental organizations are focused primarily on single issues. These groups, including **American Rivers** and the **Animal Welfare Institute**, are necessarily limited in the range of policy issues they address. While groups such as American Rivers are highly active in their issue area, they do not appear in as many news articles and no single-issue group was mentioned in interviews.

Governmental associations constitute a major contributor on environmental policy, especially in terms of federal lands management. Organizations include the **National Association of State Foresters (NASF)** and the **National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)**, each of which represent state or local government agencies. These groups are particularly oriented on policy issues within the areas they are active in at the state or local level. The NASF for example is most active on management of federal forest lands, wildland fire management, and federal programs that contribute to private forest management. The NACD represents local government conservation districts that typically work in partnership with federal agencies including USDA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The NACD comments most often on the structure and funding of federal programs.

Sportsmen’s groups are another component of the environmental advocacy community. These groups are often structured around a single game species or type of hunting or fishing. While some of these groups are relatively narrow in focus, several have expanded their purview to cover a wider range of environmental issues. The most notable of these organizations are **Ducks Unlimited**, which is an important voice on wetland issues nationally, **Trout Unlimited**, a major fishing organization, and **Pheasants Forever**, which contributes on grasslands issues. Other organizations that might be categorized as a sportsman’s group are trade organizations representing hunting or angling businesses. The most notable organization of this kind is the **National Association of Charterboat Operators**, which participates in policy debates around ocean and inland fisheries nationally.

Rural Development

The rural economic and community development policy arena is less cohesive than the agriculture and environment sectors, with few organizations that straddle the overarching policy arena. This is unsurprising given much of the research on interest groups; nationally, since the 1960s there has been a trend away from broad coalition-based organizations that address issues such as poverty and community development toward more specific interests that represent economic or specific social groups (Grossmann 2012). The rural development policy area is characterized more by issue-based organizations, often representing government associations or economic sectors. For example, there are rural (or national) health organizations, rural utilities organizations, and energy organizations, which tend to have limited policy portfolios outside of their immediate interest areas. The **National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA)** and the **National Telecommunications Cooperative Association** are prime examples of associations representing utilities. These groups have narrow foci. NRECA was mentioned in a number of interviews as the go-to group on rural electricity issues, but the organization does not produce policy-related documents on any other issues. Groups representing private interests, including the **American Forest and Paper Association** and the **National Mining Association** are similar in that they have narrow issue foci. Energy in particular is an economic sector featuring a number of interest groups. The shift in government policy in the past decade toward biofuels and renewable energy has spurred growth in interest groups representing energy producers, including the **Renewable Fuels Association** and the **Independent Petroleum Association of America**.

In this arena, the most commonly referenced groups in interviews were the governmental associations the **National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)** and the **National Association of Counties (NACo)**. These two organizations have perhaps the broadest portfolios of issues among the groups investigated, including policy statements on rural health, economic development, expansion of broadband, and environment. Members of other organizations interviewed consider these two organizations to be leaders in the rural development arena. Even so, they are primarily focused on the interests of the government entities that they represent, including counties and regional development organizations.

Several notable organizations focus on broad rural issues. These include the **League of Rural Voters**, **National Rural Assembly**, and **Center for Rural Strategies**. There has also been some attempt to broaden the policy debate on rural communities. Several coalitions of organizations, most notably the **Campaign for a Renewed Rural Development** which is a coalition of 37 development and governmental associations, focused on promoting rural development. Despite the broad goals of these groups and coalitions, they tend to be limited in the materials they produce. Several have websites that have not been updated recently. While these organizations might be politically active in other ways, they do not appear to be actively using the Internet. The exception to this is the **Center for Rural Affairs**, an organization based in Nebraska that has a national policy scope. This organization was mentioned in a number of interviews and appeared in a number of news articles, and produces more policy-related documents.

Food

The food policy arena is the least centralized, with few national organizations brought up in interviews or testifying before Congress. This policy arena has the most apparent overlap with agriculture, with agricultural groups more often testifying before Congress on food issues. The AFBF, NSAC, and agricultural commodity groups are active in food policy, including food labeling, food safety, and local and regional food systems. Issues of food and agriculture are inextricably linked, but most of the interest groups active in this arena nationally approach issues from the producer side rather than the consumer perspective.

The consumer-oriented food arena bears hallmarks of a relatively new social movement, with a large number of civic actors operating outside of organized interest groups (Burstein and Linton, 2002; Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003). Individuals considered national leaders on food issues, including Mark Bittman at the New York Times, Michael Pollan at the University of California-Berkeley, and Marion Nestle at New York University, do not represent specific organization but were featured in numerous news articles on food issues, as well as referenced in a few interviews. A wide range of Internet sites provide commentary on food policy, including blogs, local farm and food organizations, and news sites. One of the few active food advocacy groups is the **Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)**, which has broad policy interests beyond food as well. CSPI is particularly active in the areas of food labeling (especially pertaining to sugar, fat, and salt content in foods), taxes on sugar-heavy foods such as soft drinks, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). A number of environmental organizations are active on the GMO issue as well.

National Organizations and Think Tanks

A range of national policy advocacy organizations and think tanks are active in areas with rural impacts, while not explicitly representing rural interests. These include the **Center for American Progress**, which produced policy statements and testified before Congress on the issue of food marketing to children. The **U.S. Chamber of Commerce** represents business interests, including rural industries, and has testified on infrastructure development and environmental regulation. None of these groups were mentioned in interviews, likely due to the broad interests of these organizations. Interview participants were prompted to discuss groups representing rural interests, which likely did not bring national think tanks or advocacy groups to mind. Despite this, national organizations do participate in the policy dialogue through Congressional testimony, and likely play a role in issue framing, though not through a rural policy frame. This research only identified five such organizations and only through analysis of congressional testimony (with the exception of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which was mentioned in three interviews). Other national think tanks (such as The Brookings Institution) also participate in some capacity in the rural policy realm but were not identified through the methods in this research.

Summary and Conclusions

The rural policy arena is represented by diverse interests, with a wide range of issue areas and breadth of focus. The methods used to identify these groups resulted in some overlap in groups, though over

half of the groups were identified through only one method, congressional testimony. Key informant interviews and news reports identified a large number of groups, though nearly all of these were identified by congressional testimony as well. Thus, when comparing methods, each has advantages and disadvantages. Congressional testimony was a reliable source for identifying nearly all groups found in this research. The main exception to this was groups representing broad rural constituencies, including the Center for Rural Affairs and National Rural Assembly. Congressional testimony text was readily available, making this method the best for simply identifying interest groups. News articles and key informant interviews identified smaller numbers of groups but were both good sources for identifying the largest and perhaps most influential groups. Organizations identified by these sources tended to testify more often than groups identified solely by their congressional testimony. Interviews and news articles also provided richer information about the source than congressional testimony alone. Interview participants explained the interest areas of groups and added insights about the larger structure of policy networks. Much of this information was not presented in this research but could potentially be a source for future research. Interviews and news article analysis are more time consuming than congressional testimony research, another potential disadvantage of using these sources.

Interest groups play a role in the U.S. policy process (Grossman, 2012; Weible et al., 2009). While previous research has focused on determining the ways in which advocacy groups form coalitions on a range of issues and how those coalitions influence policy development, less attention has been directed to identifying the range of groups that participate in the rural policy arena. The method outlined in this paper represents a qualitative approach to identifying rural interest groups. I utilized key informant interviews, analysis of news articles, and congressional testimony to identify organizations advocating for agricultural, rural development, environmental, and food policies. There was notable overlap in the groups identified through each method. Congressional testimony identified the largest number of organizations, some of which were not identified through other methods. Of the 123 groups identified in total, 57 were identified by at least two methods and 25 groups were identified by all three sources.

Some domains within rural policy had a large number of groups, with the agricultural and rural development arenas each having at least 40 groups. The food policy domain was much less coordinated, with a small number of groups and more influence coming from individual actors commenting on food policy. There was also overlap between issue areas. Agricultural interest groups, while being focused primarily on food production, commented actively on aspects of food policy, including labeling and nutrition. Different types of groups were identified within each policy domain (except the food policy domain), with differing scopes of policy interests and the types of policies in which they were active.

There are a number of issue areas where crossovers exist, including agriculture and food, agriculture and environment, rural communities and transportation infrastructure, etc. The broad policy domains that comprise rural policy, which were identified *a priori* for this analysis, represent rough categorizations of policy areas that overlap in practice. A number of groups were active in a wide range of areas that do not fit neatly within the four policy domain framework. This fits with the literature on interest groups, which has pointed to networks or coalitions of groups. These coalitions form over specific policy issues based on shared values (Grossmann, 2012; Weible et al., 2009). Organizations with

broad constituencies, such as rural community organizations and farmer membership organizations, tended to show wider interests than organizations or associations representing a single industry. A few government associations, notably the National Association of Counties, also had wide policy interests, reflecting the broad and varying concerns of local governments across the country.

Interest group activity in rural policy covers a range of issues, from agriculture to natural resources to energy. As with previous research in this area, agriculture tends to dominate policy discussions due to the focused nature of agricultural interest groups. Large organizations with broad interests, including AFBF and NACo, continue to enjoy influence within rural policy, as indicated by key informants. Other organizations, particularly national environmental groups, are focused on specific issue areas and do not distinguish in particular between rural and non-rural issues. New perspectives may be emerging, however, in rural development and food issues as new organizations form. Consumer-based food groups in particular appear to be increasing in influence, bringing additional attention to nutrition, food access, local and regional food systems, and food safety and labeling. Changes to rural interest groups will likely lead to shifts in which issues are emphasized in policy debates.

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