

US farm bills and the ‘national interest’: an  
historical research paper

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Nadine Lehrer

Food Studies, Chatham University Eden Hall Campus, 6035 Ridge Rd., Gibsonia, PA 15044, USA

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**Author for correspondence:** Nadine Lehrer,  
E-mail: [nlehrer@chatham.edu](mailto:nlehrer@chatham.edu)

**Abstract**

This paper is an historical analysis of how global pressures and aspirations have affected US farm bill debates over time, from the first farm bill in 1933 to the current debates over a 2018 farm bill. It focuses in particular on how nationalist and patriotic arguments have been used to support the USA’s desired place in global agricultural markets over time. For example, debates over the 2008 farm bill reflected strong international concerns around both trade and energy, with early discussion focusing on keeping the USA ‘competitive’ as an agricultural exporter alongside emerging agricultural powerhouses, and later debates focusing on increasing domestic bioenergy production to ‘protect’ the USA from what were seen as risky energy imports. In other words, debates over trade and energy in 2008 provide insight into how stakeholders positioned the USA with respect to the rest of the world and how that positioning changed over the course of debates. But such questions about the USA’s global aspirations—whether to maximize US production for export or protect US agriculture from global rivals—have been part of the farm bill since its earliest days. This analysis will examine how concerns over such national agricultural prominence in a globalizing context have played into and influenced the contours of domestic farm policy over time, with implications for the 2018 farm bill debates.

**Introduction**

President Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ agenda drew both strong support and strong opposition during his campaign and the first year in office (Karabell, 2017; Williams and Fabian, 2017). He spoke frequently of bringing manufacturing back to small town America, and of protecting Americans from what he viewed as unfair trade agreements (Burak *et al.*, 2017; Sevastopulo *et al.*, 2017; Soergel, 2017). While his sharp, frequent and seemingly unrestrained rhetoric has been largely viewed as an outlier in the office of the presidency, most of President Trump’s policies as of mid-2018 have not diverged very far from contemporary Republican agendas, and include priorities like tax reform and scaling back of government regulations (Golshan, 2016; Karabell, 2017; Skinner, 2017). The notable exception, however, seems to be in the President’s global outlook, where his ‘America First’ protectionism diverges from more typically free-market-oriented Republicans (Bierman, 2016). This is interesting because it puts his administration at odds with not just his own party line, but with some of the constituencies that voted for him. In particular, American farmers, namely those in large-scale commodity agriculture, typically vote Republican and also support trade agreements (Donnan, 2017; NPPC 2017; Soergel, 2017). Unlike manufacturing, which lost domestic jobs in past decades (Johnston, 2012; Muro 2016), mainstream US agriculture has increased exports and benefited from liberalizing trade (Baylis, 2016; Ahsan, 2017; Beckman *et al.*, 2017; Burak *et al.*, 2017; USDA ERS 2017). Achieving such increases to agricultural exports has in fact long been a goal of farm policy (Hedley and Peacock, 1970; McMinimy, 2016).

The primary piece of agricultural legislation in the USA, colloquially known as the farm bill, has always straddled tensions between domestic and international farm policy goals. The commodity title of the farm bill has long tried to ensure sufficient income for American farmers, in part by providing subsidies, while also keeping prices low enough to sell commodities competitively on the world market. Even farm bills from as early as 1938 spoke about providing ‘adequate and balanced flow of agricultural commodities in interstate and foreign commerce’ (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, p. 31). This interest in balancing domestic and foreign markets is best seen in the slow historical transition across farm bills from supply management—having farmers plant less to offset low prices—to demand-focused mechanisms like eliminating price floors for commodities and encouraging exports (Orden *et al.*, 1999; Winders, 2009; Lehrer, 2010). Since then, protecting American farmers through subsidies and promoting American farmers through increasing exports have remained twin pillars of commodity and trade titles of the farm bill.

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Over time, however, larger American farmers in particular have moved to focus more on the latter of these two goals, seeing exports and free trade as their key to success (although neither have they walked away from domestic supports) (Good, 2018). The President, on the other hand, seems to prioritize protecting American producers from imports (Fernández Campbell, 2017). While his specific views on commodity policy are not yet clear [his comments about the farm bill have mostly revolved around work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)] (Coppess *et al.*, 2016; Peterson and Radnofsky, 2018), the President's skepticism around trade agreements has been well documented. Sevastopulo *et al.* (2017) note that on 'his first working day in office... President Donald Trump signaled he will put trade protectionism at the heart of his economic policy;' in early 2018 he established new tariffs on imported steel and aluminum (USCBP, 2018). Similarly, Trump has vowed to build a wall at the USA–Mexico border, purportedly to protect American jobs from unauthorized Mexican immigration. But interestingly, this border policy again puts the President at odds with politically right-leaning farmers who nevertheless want their largely immigrant workforce to stay in the USA and work (Barrett, 2017; Dickerson and Medina, 2017; Kitroeff and Mohan, 2017). So what do these divergences on key issues between the President and his farmer constituents mean for a farm bill set to be debated in 2018? While the farm bill has not typically dealt with immigration, its commodity, trade and energy titles are key interfaces between the USA and the rest of the world, and they are areas where the philosophical outlooks of agriculture and of the President now seem to diverge.

That said, given that the congressional agriculture committees who traditionally write the farm bill are similar in composition to those who wrote the 2014 farm bill (U.S. House, 2014, 2018; U.S. Senate, 2014, 2018), and that farm bill issues tend to be influenced more by regional than partisan divides (Winders, 2009), it is certainly possible that very little about the Trump presidency will have a significant effect on the 2018 farm bill—that it will pass, relatively easily, with minimal change from previous bills, and without significant notice. On the other hand, the clash between what have become mainstream farm interests and some of the President's signature agendas raises questions about how debates will play out. Early farm bill activity in 2018 seemed to signal, at the least, significant inter- and intra-party clashes in Congress over the bill's development. A farm bill was defeated in the House of Representatives in May 2018 because Democrats would not vote for stricter work requirements for SNAP recipients and conservative Freedom Caucus members would not vote for a farm bill without a concurrent vote on immigration. Similarly partisan debates over SNAP and dairy policy in the House in 2012–2013 delayed passage of the 2014 farm bill for two years (Halper, 2018).

This paper thus examines the interface between domestic and international drivers of farm policy, taking an historical look at how global pressures and aspirations have affected US farm bill debates over time. I examine the ways in which nationalist and patriotic arguments have surfaced in farm bills from 1933 to 2014 as a way to analyze the USA's place (or desired place) in global agricultural markets. By looking at the ways in which these kinds of goals and frames—maximizing US production for export, and shoring up US agriculture through protective measures—have been part of the farm bill throughout its history, I provide insight in particular into how the notion of national interest has played

into collisions between protectionism and globalism relevant for the 2018 farm bill debates.

## Literature review

### 'National interest' in policy debates

While one could argue that all policies are about pursuing national interests, the ways in which national interest is defined through policy, explicitly or implicitly, has changed not only by place but also over time. Writing in the early 1950s, Arnold Wolfers outlined a shift in how the concept of national interest was used in American policy. Prior to the Great Depression, Wolfers argued, national interest referred to the 'narrow and special economic interests of parts of the nation;' after the Depression, the term was used 'to focus... attention on the more inclusive interests of the whole,' (i.e., *all Americans*); and by the 1940s and 1950s, it was defined more globally, as prioritizing US interests relative to the broader interests of the world (Wolfers, 1952, p. 482). This post-World War II conception, seemingly similar to the current Trumpian interpretation of national interest, prioritizes American policies that put domestic needs solidly before those of any global whole. Wolfers also traced the evolution of the term national interest from a focus on economic security during the Depression to one of protection from international aggression during the Cold War (Wolfers, 1952).

In its incarnation as national security, Fordham (1998) notes that the post-World War II idea of national interest is typically framed as 'an effort to protect consensual "core values" from international threats' (p. 3). But despite this emphasis on consensus and shared values, policies developed in the national interest are not always easily agreed upon; rather, such policies can be highly controversial, as 'advocates of sharply differing policy positions may justify their arguments with appeals to the same ideas and values.' In other words, the idea of a national interest may be as much about justifying policymakers' preferred measures as it is about any actual shared notion of what is in the national interest (Fordham, 1998, p. 4).

Dana Frank (1999) asks why these kinds of nationalistic frameworks (national interest, national security) have been particularly resonant, and used so widely, over time. She focuses on economic nationalism, in particular campaigns to encourage Americans to purchase American-made products as a form of patriotism. Looking historically at a variety of 'Buy American' campaigns, she argues that this kind of nationalism plays into anxieties, that it surfaces during inward-looking moments in a nation's history, arising from instability or perceived vulnerability in the world (Frank, 1999). This is similar to a contention by Wolfers (1952) that national security rhetoric seems to be most salient for countries that feel vulnerable—that have experienced recent aggressions or, alternately, have emerged from a period of recent security into what are perceived as new threats.

The effectiveness of appealing to broad and ambiguous values like national interest to curate a policymaking consensus has certainly been seen in past agricultural policymaking as well. Lehrer (2010) argues that in the mid-2000s, appeals to a notion of energy security smoothed over differences in opinion about the benefits and drawbacks of biofuels development, enough to get somewhat controversial provisions for ethanol and biodiesel incorporated into the 2008 farm bill. As such, an attention to the concept of national interest as it has been used previously might be useful in analyzing historical tensions between domestic and

international farm policy goals, and might provide insight into upcoming debates in 2018.

### *International concerns in agricultural policy*

Tensions between globally-oriented and domestically-focused concerns have long marked agricultural policy debates in the USA. Looking historically, McCalla (1969) notes that mercantilism severely restricted imports until the 1850s, when the expansion of transportation networks produced an increase in trade among nations. By the 1880s, however, many countries saw price drops in agricultural commodities that they attributed to freer trade, and established tariffs designed to once again protect their agricultural producers. This approach reigned until the post-World War I boom again created incentives for global trade, which crashed again in the 1930s. The first farm bill, written in 1933 in an America that once again felt vulnerable, in essence codified the Great-Depression-inspired protectionism of its time into the crop subsidies that form the basis of what has been US farm policy ever since. According to McCalla, this was a significant departure from previous US agricultural policies which had all revolved around tariffs.

After World War II, when policymakers were looking again to promote greater international trade, they were unable to steer agricultural policy away from its nationalistic, protectionist roots (McCalla, 1969). Debates over the 1948, 1954 and 1996 farm bills all witnessed an almost-majority-consensus to reduce or eliminate crop subsidies, which were viewed as obstructing markets and free trade. But these attempts to reform subsidies were stemmed in 1949, 1956 and 2002 by (effective) opposition from groups who benefited from the domestic commodity programs (Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, 1992; Orden *et al.*, 1999; Dean, 2006). Such struggles have helped create contradictions within farm policy over time, as policymakers have been able to tweak and add in provisions to the farm bill to promote freer trade but have never fully eliminated the more protectionist subsidies at its roots (Hedley and Peacock, 1970; McMinimy, 2016).

In other words, US agricultural policy has long been subject to this tension between wanting to protect American farmers from the vagaries of an international commodity market, and also providing them access to foreign markets to increase their sales and exports. This evolution of global fears and aspirations in the farm bill seems especially relevant given the resurgence of this as a point of contention between a seemingly protectionist President Trump and his more globally-oriented farm sector. This analysis will thus examine how concerns over such national agricultural prominence in a globalizing context have played into and influenced the contours of domestic farm policy over time, in an attempt to find some leverage for understanding potential directions for the 2018 farm bill debates.

### **Methods**

In order to understand how 'national interests' of a given time play into agricultural policy development, this paper conducts a discursive analysis of how the concept has been used in farm bills from 1933 to 2014. The idea is to look at the ways in which national values or priorities have been invoked publically, within the text of legislation, to justify or provide a rationale for particular policy matters. There is a long tradition of analyzing the language of written materials to help clarify the intentions of authors, including in policy arenas (Hajer and Wagenaar,

2003). Policymakers, among others, frame their proposals in ways that tap into resonant cultural beliefs and provide insight into issues salient at the time; in the US patriotic discourses founded in deeply held values like national security, democracy, global responsibility, self-reliance, individual rights and progress tend to resonate particularly well (Gamson, 1992; Moore, 1993).

Although not a particularly common method of policy analysis, discourse analysis does have an established record of use in the policy sphere [see Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) on deliberative policy analysis], and in agriculture and trade policy in particular. Gottweis (1998) uses discourse to analyze biotechnology policies, Skonieschny (2001) to understand the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Dixon and Hapke (2003) for examining shifts in commodity policy during the 1996 farm bill debates and Lehrer (2010) for assessing the 2008 farm bill energy title. As Brasier (2002), using a framework from Thompson (1990), shows, discourses can often function to 'rationalize,' 'universalize,' 'standardize,' 'symbolize,' 'differentiate,' 'naturalize,' or otherwise 'legitimate' or 'reify' certain positions over others, making them particularly powerful tools for justifying and explaining policy decisions (p. 241).

This paper looks at legislative provisions within the text of each farm bill to identify those that are framed with an appeal to the national interest in some way. This was done by searching the full text of each of the 17 farm bills passed between 1933 and 2014, as housed on the website of the National Agricultural Law Center (<http://nationalaglawcenter.org/farmbills/>), for the words *national* and *nation* (which also turn up appearances of the word *international*). Of the many appearances of these words in the text, I cataloged any that referred implicitly or explicitly to the US's interface with the rest of the world, as guided by the literature above and my focus on trade and nationalism. Thus, sections of text that referred to concepts like *national public interest*, *national security* and *national welfare* that were set in opposition to the interests of foreign nations and/or designed to give a sense of rationale or meaning, were included. On the other hand, instances of the word *national* that were simply description of national programs ('national farm loan association,' 'national acreage allotment,' 'national marketing quota,' 'national soil resources,' or the many others that described federal programs) were not. Again this is because I was looking for discursive meaning—what policymakers reveal about their view of the national interest through an analysis of the policies described by such terms. To ensure that I did not miss relevant issues by limiting my search to the words *national* and *nation*, I experimented with a number of other search terms both before and after my primary data collection sessions, and also scanned the texts for other phrases that could be relevant. Finding little else with these broader searches, I was persuaded that my search adequately captured what I was looking for; nevertheless, such shortcomings are certainly a possibility.

In addition, in light of the current disjuncture between a presidential focus on protectionism and a farm sector focused on global trade, I compared each farm bill to the presidential signing statements (or veto statements) that accompanied it. Pulling these statements from Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley's American Presidency Project archives of presidential documents (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>), I looked both for instances where presidents invoked the national interest and also at splits or convergences between a president's view of the farm bill and what was passed by Congress. The goal was to look for historical precedent that might shed light on the 2018 farm bill debates.

It is important to note that aside from these signing (or veto) statements comparing executive branch positions to legislative outcomes, I used only actual farm bill texts for my discourse analysis. While there is certainly an argument to be made for looking more broadly at congressional hearings and debates, public comments, records of committee proceedings and the press, and while I did look at some of these sources in compiling my analysis, I decided to focus my data here primarily on the text of the farm bill itself—looking at what language made it into the bills themselves, rather than focusing on the broader context and debates. There are certainly downsides to this choice—as a legislative document, the farm bill is heavier on descriptions of policies than on explanations of their rationale, and therefore it is possible (and likely) that there were discussions that influenced these pieces of legislation that were simply not recorded in the wording of the bills. On the other hand, by focusing just on the text of the bills, I limited my analysis to the issues that played a salient enough role in farm bill debates at the time of their passage to have been included in the text. To confirm the viability of this hunch, I first searched the text of the 2008 farm bill for the terms *nation* and *national*, and compared my findings to those of Lehrer (2010), which analyzed discourses using a much broader range of sources from multiple stakeholders during the farm bill debates from 2005 to 2008. I found that the term national security appeared in the 2008 farm bill energy title but not in the trade or commodity titles, providing some evidence that salient debates occurring in the year or two prior to passage of a farm bill (on energy as national interest) were reflected in the language of the bill itself while earlier discussions that had already faded away (on trade competition as national interest) were not.

It remains to be seen whether and how the farm bill debates of 2018 might tap into language around national interest, but given the centrality of language and rhetorical positioning to the President's first year in office (Golshan, 2016; Goldhill, 2017), attention to the use of such concepts may prove informative in analyzing upcoming debates. In asserting this, however, it is also important to note that the president does not write the farm bill; Congress does. As such, presidential priorities or pronouncements may or may not directly influence legislation (Vig, 2016). That said, the positions of this President, especially in an era where he has been particularly vocal about the laws he wants Congress to pass (Graham, 2017), are clearly and certainly an important part of the situational context within which policy is developed, and as such can have a powerful influence over policymaking (Kingdon, 2003).

## Results

Despite the farm bill's tendency to describe programs more than justify their rationale, the concept of *national interest* did surface in almost all 17 farm bills, and the topics referred to in this way changed over time. While early farm bills did speak about facilitating interstate and foreign commerce, most of the substantive policies embedded in farm bills before the 1950s were domestic—primarily income support for US farmers. Accordingly, the term *national public interest* was used in the 1933 farm bill to describe a 'disparity between the prices of agricultural and other commodities... which have burdened and obstructed the normal currents of commerce in such commodities' (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, p. 31). And in 1938, this *national public interest* 'require[d] that the burdens on interstate and foreign commerce above described be removed' by using grain reserves

to absorb excess supplies and support producer prices (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, p. 49; Orden *et al.*, 1999). In 1938, the same term was also used to argue for 'rebuilding farm and ranch land resources,' and *national welfare* was employed to talk about alleviating 'economic distress,' increasing purchasing power for farmers and grain for consumers (Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, p. 31, 72). President Roosevelt's signing statements, as might be expected during the Great Depression under a Democratic president and legislature, echoed the concerns of Congress, highlighting the bill's efforts to manage waste, surplus and prices (Roosevelt 1938). In other words, in the 1930s, nationalistic discourses were mobilized mostly in service of provisions designed to improve the domestic farm economy.

In 1948 and 1949, terms like *national security*, *national welfare* and *national economy* were used to allow for greater flexibility in price supports in an increasingly international context (Agricultural Act of 1948, 1949). '[P]rice support operations at levels in excess of the maximum level of price support... may be undertaken... in order to increase or maintain the production of any agricultural commodity *in the interest of national security*' (Agricultural Act of 1948, p. 1054). Again, we see the economic rationale of 1930s nationalism, but with an added implication that commodity production helps keep the nation secure. This connection is understandable in the context of the 1940s' early Cold War concern with protecting democracy from communist ideologies (Hogan, 1998). But President Truman, a Democrat who faced a Republican Congress when he signed the 1948 farm bill, expressed misgivings about missed opportunities to work on other domestic issues including housing, health and diet, soil conservation and education (Truman, 1948). In other words, tensions between domestic and internationally-oriented concerns in the farm bill were already evident by the 1940s.

In the 1950s, as Congress began to look more to international markets to absorb excess commodity production, the farm bill began to include more explicitly international provisions—from providing food aid to increasing agricultural trade and market development (Orden *et al.*, 1999). Discursively, the use of terms such as national security became more specific. 'Sanitary dairy equipment [was]... important to the *national defense*,' and Congress was to promote the production of wool 'as a measure of *national security*' (for soldiers' uniforms) (Agricultural Act of 1954, p. 899, 910). The Secretary of Agriculture was given authority to adjust acreage allotments (to cap commodity production) in case of a '*national emergency*,' and while language invoking the national interest was sparse in the 1956 farm bill, Congress did note that the production of excess commodities 'adversely affected the *national welfare*' and that it was '*in the interest of the general welfare* that the soil and water resources of the Nation be not wasted and depleted in the production of such burdensome surpluses' (Agricultural Act of 1956, p. 904, 188). Thus, the concept of national interest in the 1950s was applied to specific provisions like dairy and wool production, and to broader ideas such as managing overproduction of commodities and protecting natural resources. While President Eisenhower's signing statement for the 1954 bill was relatively supportive, in 1956 he expressed concern that the bill's focus was too domestically protectionist, and vetoed the first version of the bill to come to his desk—in part for its return to rigid price supports and its inattention to the impacts of these supports for domestic farmers and trade with other nations (Eisenhower, 1954, 1956a, 1956b). This dynamic encapsulates a tension between a more globally-engaged Republican president and a more domestically-focused Democratic Congress.

Consistent with an increasingly international outlook, the text of farm bills starting in 1965 contained many more explicit references to trade, international obligations, export programs and trade agreements than did the early farm bills. But fewer sections of the text in the 1965, 1970 and 1973 farm bills invoked explicit rhetorical calls to protect the *nation's interests* (Food and Agricultural Act of 1965; Agricultural Act of 1970; Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973). In 1970, the only explicit reference to *national interest* or *national security* was to note that policy needed to ensure an 'adequate reserve' of cotton 'for purposes of *national security*,' presumably again for uniforms (Agricultural Act of 1970, p. 1372). And in 1965 and 1973, there were essentially no mentions of national interest or national security with respect to the USA's role in international markets. This is interesting in that the 1973 farm bill reformed commodity policy to help increase production for global markets, yet this seems not to have been framed, at least in the farm bill text, as a matter of national interest or security (Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973). If we are to be guided by Frank (1999) and Wolfers (1952), the implication is that a nation that feels relatively secure in its global position, as seemed to be the case in the 1960s and 1970s, would be less likely to invoke explicit nationalism in support of its trade policies. Interestingly, President Johnson, a Democrat facing a Democratic Congress in 1965, and President Nixon, a Republican facing a Democratic Congress in 1970, both expressed relative satisfaction with these farm bills. By 1973, however, Nixon characterized the new bill more as a tolerable compromise—having good elements but stopping short of allowing farmers to fully respond to market signals (Johnson, 1965; Nixon, 1970, 1973).

By the 1977 and 1981 farm bills, in the early years of what has been called the 1980s farm crisis that put many small farmers out of business, terms such as *national interest* and *national security* re-emerged. In 1977, production of wool was once again noted to be important to *national security* and an 'efficient use of the *Nation's resources*,' the Secretary of Agriculture was given permission to increase set-asides of cropland as long as sufficient stocks were maintained to 'meet a *national emergency*,' the farm bill looked to fund research in line with '*national priorities*,' and Congress 'recognized that it [wa]s in the *national interest* to have a regular, adequate, and high quality wheat supply' (Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, p. 921, 942, 990, 1031). Another use of the term *national interest* also emerged at this time, that 'Congress firmly believes that the maintenance of the family farm system of agriculture is essential to the *social well-being of the Nation*... [and] that any significant expansion of nonfamily owned large-scale corporate farming enterprises will be *detrimental to the national welfare*.' (Food and Agriculture Act of 1977, p. 918). President Carter, a Democrat responding to a Democratic Congress, expressed relative satisfaction with this farm bill—one that saw national interest as tied to research, crop stores and the survival of family farms (Carter, 1977).

The call to protect family farms was repeated in the 1981 farm bill (Agriculture and Food Act of 1981), which also used national interest terms to argue that 'other *national interests* do not override the importance of the protection of farmland' (except, it says later, for '*national defense purposes*') (Agriculture and Food Act of 1981, p. 1341, 1344). In 1981, Congress also highlighted agricultural productivity, noting that 'improved productivity in food and agricultural processing and marketing sectors is a critical need in the *national effort to achieve a strong economy*,' and that if agricultural exports were to be suspended for any 'reasons

of *national security*,' the Secretary of Agriculture should compensate affected producers (also known as trade compensation assistance) (Agriculture and Food Act of 1981, p. 1295, 1276). President Reagan was generally supportive of this farm bill, where the focus was again mostly domestic, focused on the well-being of US farmers and farmland (Reagan, 1981).

In 1985, an international emphasis, more oriented towards trade, grew. While the bill reaffirmed trade compensation assistance for farmers, it focused the relevant text more on explaining why trade compensation assistance should not be necessary—declaring more forcefully that exports should *not* be restricted except for reasons of '*national emergency*' (Food Security Act of 1985, p. 1489). The 1985 farm bill also added that '[t]he Commodity Credit Corporation, the General Services Administration, and the Department of Agriculture have authority to barter or exchange agricultural commodities for strategic and critical materials for the *national defense stockpile*' (Food Security Act of 1985, p. 1502). This heavier emphasis on issues of national defense and national security might be attributed to the heightening of the Cold War; in other words, a more vulnerable global position for the USA (Fischer, 2008). Accordingly, Reagan's (1985) signing statement was more global in outlook—in this case, pleased with adjustments to commodity programs that allowed farmers to respond to international market signals but also critical that Congress had not gone far enough in attending to trade and free market concerns. Speaking of an in-kind export promotion program, Reagan suggested that it 'threatens to precipitate an agricultural commodity trade war with our allies. Moreover, it may well be impossible to fulfill... without subsidizing exports in a manner which will be *contrary to the national security interests* of the United States' (Reagan, 1985). Reagan, thus, was in a position of wanting a less protectionist farm bill than what Congress passed.

In 1990, national interests were used to frame new areas of policy. A forestry title was added to the farm bill, and largely justified in terms of the *national interest*. Other conservation initiatives were also positioned this way—as the '*national objective* of nondegradation of the soil resources' and the '*national objectives* of wetlands preservation, wildlife and waterfowl habitat improvement, and water quality improvement' (Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, p. 3603). Talk of trade obligations continued, and again the Secretary of Agriculture was to provide trade compensation assistance if exports were curtailed for reasons of *national security*, although again the president was only supposed to curtail exports in cases of '*national emergency* or for which the Congress has declared war' (p. 3689). In addition, Congress declared in the 1990 farm bill that 'the economic well-being of rural America is vital to our *national growth and prosperity*' (p. 4046). As such, while trade and defense did factor in, *national interest* was used more again now to talk about domestic issues like conservation and rural development. Republican President Bush's signing statement (facing a Democratic Congress) noted, however, that he was 'most pleased with those aspects of the 1990 farm bill that continue the market-oriented shift begun in the 1985 legislation' (Bush, 1990).

In the 1996 farm bill, Congress declared that '[i]t is in the *national public interest* and vital to the welfare of the agricultural economy of the United States to maintain and expand existing markets and develop new markets and uses for agricultural commodities' (Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act of 1996, p. 1030). This goal of expanded sales as crucial for agriculture was in sync with the more market-oriented nature of the

1996 farm bill, which was designed to phase out crop subsidies and allow farmers greater flexibility to plant based on global demand (Orden *et al.*, 1999). Accordingly, when signing the bill, President Clinton, a Democrat responding to a Republican Congress, expressed some reservations about the lack of stronger protections for domestic farmers in the bill (Clinton, 1996).

In 2002, even as domestic crop subsidies were once again strengthened (Winders, 2009), national security discourses continued to be mobilized around international issues. This time, however, the terms were more focused on food aid than on commodity provisions. 'It is the sense of Congress that... United States foreign assistance programs should play an increased role in the global fight against terrorism to complement the *national security objectives* of the United States' (Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, p. 303). One might attribute this to the then-recent attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent heightened USA concerns with international terrorism.

And in 2008, as mentioned previously, national security discourses were mobilized in the energy title 'to enhance *national energy security* through the development, distribution, and implementation of biobased energy technologies' (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, p. 2035). Few changes were made to commodity policy, and President Bush, a Republican responding to a Democratic Congress, initially vetoed the bill in part dissatisfied with what he saw as its protectionism and slower approach to trade promotion (Bush, 2008). In 2014, to the contrary, the terms *national interest* and *national priority* were only used to talk about how to prioritize research initiatives, a use of the term which had been present in most farm bills since the late 1970s, and President Obama's signing statement was largely supportive of the bill (Agricultural Act of 2014; Obama, 2014). The larger changes made to commodity programs, including the phasing out of direct payments and transition to more crop-insurance style commodity payment mechanisms, did not seem to pull on national interest language (Agricultural Act of 2014).

In looking at how the concept of *national interest* was invoked in farm bills from 1933 to 2014, we can see three trends. First is a shift over time from talking about the national interest in largely domestic terms to summoning it more for internationally-oriented concerns. Early farm bill authors used terms of national interest to advocate parity for farmers or manage oversupply of commodities, while later farm bills used the term for promoting stances on international trade, fighting terrorism or achieving energy security. This trend mirrors Wolfers' (1952) contention that Depression-era uses of national interest were about inclusive support for the welfare of domestic stakeholders while Cold War-era uses of national interest were about protection from international threats.

The second trend, within this larger shift in meaning, is an oscillating level of concern from farm bill to farm bill about domestic as compared to international issues, depending on key events and contexts of the time. Even though later farm bills tended to define the national interest with regards to international concerns more than early farm bills did, this was not universally true. On the contrary, even as farm bills have grappled more with issues of global agricultural trade over time, there have always been moments where national interest was used to invoke primarily domestic needs (conservation, rural development, etc.) as these issues came to the fore of policy debates.

Third, while presidential and congressional perspectives on the farm bill have frequently lined up with one another, in those farm bills where the President expressed some level of dissatisfaction

over the farm bill in his signing or veto statement, international trade issues were often one of the contentious issues at play. Those areas of disagreement also tended to reflect more partisan debates, where Republican presidents expressed concern over a Democratic Congress' perceived lack of attention to trade or freer markets (Eisenhower 1956a, 1956b; Nixon, 1973; Reagan, 1985; Bush, 2008) and Democratic presidents expressed concern over a Republican Congress' perceived lack of attention to domestic issues (Truman, 1948; Clinton, 1996).

## Discussion

The presence of these trends raises two questions. First is how the conceptions of national interest seen in *post-Cold War* farm bills sit with respect to Wolfers' (1952) distinction between Depression era and Cold War era sensibilities of national interest. Clearly Wolfers, writing in 1952, was not able to speak to *post-Cold War* use of the concept of national interest. But does the sense of national interest that he wrote about during the Cold War as one of opposition to global interests still hold in farm bills that were written since the end of the Cold War? Looking at the farm bills written after Wolfers' time, those from the 1960s and 1970s, during the Cold War *détente*, did not really invoke national interests in relation to international threats, while the 1985 farm bill, written during heightened tensions between the USA and USSR, did. Similarly, the 1990 and 1996 farm bills used the national interest to talk about conservation and domestic benefits from trade, while the 2002 and 2008 farm bills returned to security concerns in a *post-9/11* era. In other words, it seems that when America perceives itself to be highly involved in or threatened by international instabilities, farm bills are more likely to be framed within these global security concerns, whereas at times of relative international calm, Congress focuses its policymaking language more domestically. This would fit with the common wisdom that policy is highly influenced by the situational context of its time (Gamson, 1992; Kingdon, 2003). It also suggests that we can effectively use national interest as a signpost in the evolution of Congress' farm policy interests—for example, from parity and price stabilization in the 1930s and 1940s to family farming in the 1980s and bioenergy in the mid-2000s.

This in turn raises a second question, namely does this kind of understanding of how the term national interest has been mobilized historically in farm bill texts, again an indicator of what Congress sees as priority concerns, provide any leverage for understanding how 2018 farm bill debates might unfold? While, as of this writing, we do not yet have a farm bill text to analyze for 2018, we do see nationalist rhetoric, at least on trade, not only from President Trump painting NAFTA, for instance, as a 'bad deal' for the USA, but also on the flip side from Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and agricultural state senators asking the President to preserve the benefits of NAFTA for American agriculture (Good, 2018). This year (2018) is an interesting one in that while global tensions have arguably declined in real terms over the previous decade, presidential rhetoric seems to imply that they are increasing (Cohen, 2017). Viewed in this light, tensions between free trade and protectionism might be interpreted as a difference in worldview regarding the current stature and strength of the nation.

Thus, 2018 may provide a test case as to whether an arguably presidentially-inflated sense of global instability inclines lawmakers to fall back on the concept of national interest in justifying policies or not. This is interesting because historically, presidential

signing statements have been relatively supportive of the farm bill in question when Congress has been led by members of the president's same party. In this case, with Congress and the presidency both led by Republicans, but with the President painting a picture of a vulnerable America that needs to be protected and repositioned domestically and internationally, does Congress diverge from this framing to focus on questions other than trade vulnerability? In other words, will the 2018 farm bill text reflect the President's vulnerable America, with appeals for farm policy to protect the national interest against foreign competitors, or will it reflect a more internationally-open agenda that contrasts with President Trump's recent rhetoric on trade and immigration?

Beyond the rhetoric, whether or not these tensions will bleed into substantive farm bill policies is also open for debate. One can imagine, for instance, commodity policies being tweaked amidst decreased presidential concern about any trade distorting impacts of US subsidies, or, on the flip side, congressional agriculture committees incorporating new language around trade and agriculture into the bill to defend export-oriented agricultural interests from more protectionist presidential ones. Alternately, it is also possible that President Trump's language on trade issues will soften as the farm bill rolls through, in the interest of keeping farmers as part of his constituent base, and as might be suggested by his somewhat conciliatory January 2018 speech to the American Farm Bureau Federation (Good, 2018). Or even more simply, given the difficulties of passing a farm bill in an election year, the 2018 farm bill might be postponed until after the mid-term elections, or pushed through quickly before them, with little change, regardless of the President's views or rhetoric (Coppess *et al.*, 2016; Good, 2017; AgWeb, 2018). As of this writing, the 2018 (House) farm bill stalled not over trade outlooks, but rather where the farm bill interfaces with more partisan debates around immigration law and the nature of anti-poverty programs such as SNAP (Snell and Naylor, 2018).

## Conclusion

Domestic and international concerns have long influenced US farm bills. With programs designed to enhance exports of US commodities and others designed to protect US farmers from (among other things) lower-cost imports, these goals have at times pushed against one another. This paper examined the ways in which Congress' approach to domestic and international concerns evolved over the course of farm bill history, by looking at how the concept of *national interest* was invoked to justify or explain farm bill provisions over time. Looking at this discursive history, we see variations in what policies were held up by Congress as 'good for our country' over time, and in how Congress positioned the USA in terms of its aspirations and role as a global actor (or not), depending on situational context. We also see variations in how presidents responded to these positionings of the USA within a global agricultural context. This paper then asked what this understanding might mean for today's climate of heightened nationalist and protectionist rhetoric, and specifically how a 2018 farm bill might play out where President Trump's agenda seems to diverge from that of agriculture.

Future research opportunities in this realm include more specific questions about how a discursive construct like national interest as used in the farm bill is reflected (or not) in other records of farm bill debates, including hearings, stakeholder

position papers and the press. And future research also begs larger questions of how our nation balances the related goals of supporting a strong domestic agriculture, promoting trade without disadvantaging farmers in other nations, and prioritizing food security alongside agricultural production both domestically and internationally.

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