

## Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981

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*Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981*, by John Mark Hansen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. xiv, 265 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY ELLIS W. HAWLEY, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

*Gaining Access* is primarily a work of political science concerned with testing a theory of interest group access in the United States Congress. Empirically, it reconstructs the story of the farm lobby and its relations with Congress from 1919 to 1981. But it is less interested in contributing to historical knowledge than in using the story to validate an explanatory theory of how access—defined as “a close working relationship between members of Congress and privileged outsiders” (23)—is gained, used, and lost. It joins a debate among political scientists over the nature, source, and degree of interest group influence rather than debates among historians about the development of agricultural policy.

Hansen’s central argument is that access results from the efforts of lawmakers to deal with electoral uncertainty, that it is given to interest groups (rather than parties or local elites) when they are seen as having a persisting competitive advantage in providing electoral information, and that it is withdrawn when changes in the situation discredit the assumptions upon which it was given. In the case of the farm lobby, he assumes, the presence of access can be inferred from the interaction taking place in congressional hearings. By focusing on these hearings and on the judgments expressed in newspapers and periodicals, he makes a persuasive case that farm lobby access can be explained by the theory propounded.

Part one of the book shows that access came only after agricultural lobbying groups, especially the American Farm Bureau Federation, convinced legislators that they could provide superior electoral intelligence on a continuing basis. For midwestern congressmen this was the case by 1926, for southerners by 1931, and for both groups the New Deal programs institutionalized and perpetuated the access previously granted. Part two then shows how increasing urbanization, divisions among farm interests, and electoral outcomes running counter to the lobby’s intelligence undermined the kind of access enjoyed in the 1930s and 1940s and brought changes that narrowed its ability to shape policy. Those changes made specialized commodity groups more important players than the Farm Bureau. In addition, Hansen shows that his theory can explain the failures of the consumer lobby in the 1970s, that it fits well the known successes and failures of various other lobbying groups, and

that it identifies turning points better than any alternative explanation.

Along with the theory building, the book also contains material substantially altering and supplementing conventional accounts of U.S. agricultural policy. Hansen argues persuasively, for example, that the importance of the Farm Bloc of the early 1920s has been exaggerated and that it was not until later that a reconstituted farm bloc allowed the farm lobby to become the nation's most influential lobbying group. It sheds new light on how the policy initiatives of Charles Brannan, Ezra Taft Benson, and Orville Freeman affected relations between rural congressmen and farm lobbyists. And it traces in detail how "deal-cutting" between rural congressmen and supporters of food stamps for the urban poor helped to perpetuate farm programs running counter to consumer interests. In these and other ways, the book makes important historical contributions that deserve serious attention from anyone interested in how American farm policy came to be what it is.

Those interested in the history of Iowa will also find the book rewarding. Iowa, after all, was at the center of much that Hansen describes and analyzes. It was a stronghold of the Farm Bureau in its heyday, a provider of leadership for both the initial and reconstituted farm blocs, an arena of contestation in the battles over the Brannan, Benson, and Freeman initiatives, and a state whose congressmen were major participants in the hearings and judgments that the book reconstructs. Those who would understand Iowa's part in the making of national farm policy can find much of value in Hansen's story.

From the historian's standpoint, however, the book has several weaknesses. One is its narrow focus on congressmen and lobbyists deliberating over agricultural price support policy, generally without much effort to relate this to what was taking place on the administrative side of the triangle or in those agricultural policy areas not directly related to price supports. Another is its cursory treatment of the years from 1933 through 1947, ignoring in particular the battles between the Farm Bureau and the New Deal in the late 1930s. A third weakness is a tendency toward an excessive and sometimes tiring repetition of the theoretical model. In addition, the assumption that congressmen are single-minded seekers of reelection seems likely to trouble historians who believe that legislative behavior is at least partially driven by efforts to implement ideologies and value systems.

On balance, though, this is a well-researched, cogently argued, readably written, and intellectually significant book. It deserves a wide reading by historians as well as political scientists.

*Gateways to Commerce: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 9-Foot Channel Project on the Upper Mississippi River*, by William Patrick O'Brien, Mary Yeater Rathbun, and Patrick O'Bannon; edited by Christine Whitacre. Denver: National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Region, 1992. 238 pages. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Paper.

REVIEWED BY PHILIP V. SCARPINO, INDIANA UNIVERSITY/PURDUE UNIVERSITY, INDIANAPOLIS

This nicely illustrated volume had its genesis in three separate contract history projects for the National Park Service's Rocky Mountain Region. In 1986 the Rocky Mountain Region contracted with the St. Paul District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to produce documentation of the locks and dams in the St. Paul district for the Historic American Engineering Record. Two additional contracts with the Rock Island and St. Louis districts finished documenting the twenty-six locks and dams that make up the nine-foot channel project on the upper Mississippi. The completion of the documentation of all twenty-six locks and dams provided an important body of source material about one of the most significant engineering accomplishments in the history of inland navigation in the first half of the twentieth century. These materials are now a part of the collections of the Historic American Engineering Record in the Library of Congress.

Apparently in an effort to make a summary of the results of these three contracts available to a larger public, the Rocky Mountain Region elected to have Christine Whitacre edit the work of William Patrick O'Brien, Mary Yeater Rathbun, and Patrick O'Bannon into *Gateways to Commerce*. In twenty-seven pages, including notes and pictures, the first four chapters provide background on navigation on the upper Mississippi from the early 1800s to the late 1920s, and on the beginning of the construction of the nine-foot channel. Chapters five and six examine the nine-foot channel project from 1929 to 1933 and set the stage for the heart of the volume, found in chapters seven and eight: "From Rollers to Tainters: The Changing Technology of the 9-Foot Channel" and "Case Study: The Construction of Lock and Dam No. 26." Chapter nine briefly examines the story of the nine-foot channel after World

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