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U.S. International Agricultural Trade Policy: Interests, Institutions and Information in the Corn Supply Chain*

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the U.S. international agricultural trade policy by focusing on instruments and institutional arrangements. Policy decision-making is analyzed by means of three variables: 1) how interests are mobilized; 2) how information is disseminated; and 3) how spaces are occupied in deliberation arenas. The study refers to the corn sector and observes how the National Corn Growers Association operated to ensure subsidies and incentives for this supply chain along the elaboration of the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills, as well as from other laws pertaining to agricultural and energy incentives. This paper provides evidences in favor of four arguments: first, empirical studies on the formulation and implementation of foreign trade policy, especially when it comes to agricultural issues, would greatly benefit with a greater attention on understanding the role domestic actors play in the decision-making processes; second, interest groups play a key role in this decision-making process; third, they provide the rationale for the formulation and implementation of the U.S. international agricultural trade policy; and, fourth, when the economic sector coordinates complex and relevant supply chains in the U.S. economy, it is hardly possible to revert the U.S. protectionist position in the Legislative branch.

Keywords: United States; international trade policy; agricultural lobby; corn; ethanol.

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On January 11, 1980, President Jimmy Carter signaled the need for the U.S. to seek alternative energy sources coordinated with the agricultural sector for national security purposes. According to him: "We will create new markets for our farmers. We will no longer have to throw away waste materials which can be turned into profitable essential fuels" (THE CLEAN FUELS DEVELOPMENT COALITION, 2010).

The farmers to which Carter referred to relied on a solid background of support received as farm subsidies. Protection to the agricultural sector was boosted during the Great Depression from 1929-1932, as a strategy to recover the economy growth and foster social well-being (VIGEVANI et al., 2007). Keeping the income in the agricultural sector, aiming at productivity gains without food overproduction, also contributed to consolidate the agricultural protectionist model (VEIGA, 1994).

During the 2002, 2008 and 2012 electoral campaigns, because they were interested in the votes of delegates from Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Nebraska Electoral College, all candidates were convinced ethanol was the panacea to ensure cheap energy, and the end of the dependence from oil sheiks in the Middle East would revert global warming. Therefore, following their rationale, it was worth it for American tax payers to pay subsidies (STOSSEL, 2007).

Since then, as an illustration, we could mention subsidies and incentives that resulted from the Farm Bill. The 2002 Farm Bill was the first one to include energy titles, which were renewed in 2008. Another way to foster production occurred in 2004, when the U.S. prohibited methyl tert-butyl ether (MTBE) to be used as a gasoline additive, and replaced it with ethanol. Laws such as the Energy Policy Act of 2005, and the Energy Independence and Security Act (EISA) of 2007, respectively, created and extended the Renewable Fuels Standards (RFS). RFS establishes mandatory volumes of renewable fuel in transport, meaning it ensures ethanol demand and has a consumption goal of 36 billion gallons of ethanol by 2022. According to many experts, RFS was interpreted as a 'gift' from the government to corn and ethanol producers.

As we all know, the fact that the agricultural policy is subsidized in the U.S. is no big news. But understanding what strategies support those policies may enlighten many new aspects, particularly when it comes to corn producers, who gained more importance in the context of ethanol production in the U.S. and worldwide.

As a result, some important questions can be raised: What are the drivers and the key assumptions to keep subsidies for corn and ethanol supply chain, in spite of all

the consequences in the international scenario? How do ethanol interest groups act and how powerful are they to keep subsidies, through the Farm Bill and energy bills in the U.S., aiming at developing renewable fuels such as ethanol?

The answer to those questions will come, firstly, from the theoretical discussion about the agricultural policy decision-making process in the United States. Then, we will show how the rationale for the operation of institutional and political instruments used by the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) concerning the U.S. international agricultural trade policy ensure extraordinary conditions to produce and trade corn and ethanol, both for domestic and international demand. We will also show that the key for that project to be successful is the ability of interest groups to mobilize information in order to convince politicians and the society to support their specific demands as general strategic interests for the United States.

U.S. domestic policy formulation

The main purpose of this paper is to understand the role and the strategies used by domestic political and economic actors in the processes adopted to formulate and implement the U.S. international trade policy, focused on the agricultural sector, particularly on corn and ethanol producers.

Putnam (1993) contributed to the agenda of studies on foreign policy by proposing the Two-Level Game (TLG) model. According to Putnam (1993), interest groups at the national level, tend to meet their goals by placing pressure on the government in such a way that policymakers elaborate policies that benefit them. At the international level, Putnam (1993) argues that governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of external development.

If a certain agreement matches the expectations of those groups, it will be ratified faster. However, "those who stand to lose should try to block or try to alter any international agreement, whereas those who may profit from it should push for its ratification" (MILNER, 1997, p. 63). One of the reasons why it happens is the defensive ability of small interest groups with organizational expertise to advocate for their demands on electoral bases with political relevance (ROGOWSKI, 1990).

Additionally, those groups may signal with a green or red light to internationally legitimize a domestic public policy. Manipulation of institutions and information by

interest groups in that matter is critical for ratifying or vetoing international agreements.

Channeling sector interests from the civil society into the international negotiators depends on the State domestic institutions. According to Risse-Kappen (1991), "domestic structures determine how political systems respond to societal demands" (RISSE-KAPPEN, 1991, p. 484). In this sense, according to Milner (1997), domestic institutions are critical for dialoguing and providing information to interest groups.

Consequently, mastering the operating rationale of institutional mechanisms for the formulation of international trade policy is as important as being good at mobilizing the public opinion, which would have significant influence on policy decisions and the interests they affect in an international negotiation.

This means that what makes interest groups work as influencers is, mainly, their ability to have access to information and their expertise to connect with institutions directly linked to their interests in the international trade arena. Oftentimes, this requires demonstrating that the sector interests of those groups are strategic for domestic interests. Therefore, their success in advocating for sector interests relies on their ability to mobilize institutions and information and properly channel them into the international negotiators (MILNER, 1997), camouflaging their specific interest as a general structural interest. Independence and energy security, environmental protection and agricultural preservation are impacting national appeals to convince society and politicians in the United States to support ethanol incentives. This specificity of our topic partially explains the bipartisan support strategy organized by the corn and ethanol supply chain for U.S. political representatives, national institutions and the public opinion.

For mobilization of the corn supply chain, the agroindustrial complex is diffuse, which makes farmers a fundamental link in a supply chain consisting of different actors, among them,

(...) suppliers of machinery, chemical and biological products, processors, transformers, storers, and distributors. Besides, there are other links in the chain, such as banks and financing agents, marketing firms and research institutions, as well as the government. And there is still the scenario where all those interactions occur, the (domestic and international) market, the cultural

and institutional environments, formed mainly by the government (HOLLINGSWORTH and STREECK, 1994, p. 284).

Even though the sector is diffuse and has no identical specific interests throughout its supply chain, it is possible to determine and seek common interests. In this sense, interest groups associated with ethanol in the U.S. advocate that an increase in the use of ethanol would benefit corn producers, as well as researchers, mill owners, gas station owners, flex-fuel vehicle manufacturers and consumers. For example, constant estimates of local creation of jobs is something those groups often include in their speeches.

When articulation occurs on that scale, the economic sector may be considered structural by the Union, in such a way that "paying for its preservation is not necessarily against the general interest of a country, even though it involves a suboptimal allocation of resources and benefits producers" (HOLLINGSWORTH and STREECK, 1994, p. 284).

Following this rationale, Almond et al. (2006) suggest those groups may act in different ways: prevent voting, participate in the elections, form an informal group, organize a social movement, contact influencers, organize demonstrations, etc. According to Beçak (2007), "the duty to represent and the common goal convert interest groups into pressure groups with ability to influence public policy decision-making, acting directly on the Executive and Legislative branches" (BEÇAK, 2007, p. 42).

According to McNitt (2000), about 20 to 25% of the lobbyists in Washington represent interest groups and are somehow involved with the food production industry agenda: "Processors, agribusiness, intermediaries, middlemen, suppliers, and, more recently, agriculturally oriented public interest groups, constitute the vast majority of all groups" (McNITT, 2000, p. 224). Those agroindustrial interest groups can be sorted into two groups: groups with general propositions, and groups associated with commodities. The groups with general propositions are older. Their flagships are the American Farm Bureau Federation and National Farmers Union. NCGA is a specific group created to ensure the interests of corn at the national level.

Ethanol and corn production is concentrated in the Corn Belt, located in the Midwest of the country, which makes the geographic aspect more relevant than the ideological aspect, since grassroot strategies, i.e.; mobilization of support, particularly from family farmers who visit offices, call, send letters or post on social media, has a very significant effect on policymakers.

The lobbyists' power to enforce their interests is attributed to their ability to raise financial resources and have privileged access to government members. Corporations donate money to candidate campaigns and to party committees, and finance lobbyists to put pressure on congresspeople to approve or oppose to bills according to their interests (KIM, 2008).

The volume of financial resources assigned to lobbying in the U.S. Congress is much higher than the volume donated to candidates via Political Action Committee (MILYO et. al., 2000 *apud* KIM, 2008). Values spent on electoral campaign and lobbying are considered an indicator of the interest of economic groups in a certain topic. Nevertheless, this does not mean bills are bought following a commercial rationale, in which campaign contributions are exchanged for congresspeople's votes. As Rep. Thomas Downey (D-New York) said: "Money doesn't buy a position. But it will definitely buy you some access so you can make your case" (*apud* KIM, 2008, p. 13-14).

This happens because, simultaneously, interest groups also participate in the political process working as advisory bodies for government and parliamentarians, informing them about the desired path for public policies of their interest. In this task, those groups seek to mobilize information on governmental policies and their changes, as well as to familiarize with established policies management. This way of acting works as they convince government public servants that their propositions are aimed at generating reciprocal benefits, such as cooperation in management of existing policies, information about what is going on in their industry, assessment of the consequences of policies and, lastly, assistance to implement new policies.

Thus, from elections to government routine practices, information is critical. On one hand, it is important for politicians to know how to identify the demands of their constituents to ensure their election, reelection and the election of their successors. On the other hand, it is fundamental that constituents and interest groups are informed whether the behavior of the politician they elected complies with their demands and interests. This means that having expertise to monitor and change public policies is key to succeed in the submission of demands and interests in any democratic country.

Basically, interest groups act in two spheres: the electoral and the legislative spheres. In the electoral sphere, economic groups may influence election results by financing campaigns of candidates with whom they are politically aligned. This means that, even before election, candidates rely on the funds raised to finance their

campaigns, so they are more likely to incorporate propositions made by their financiers into their platform (THOMAZ, 2012).

Usually, both in the electoral and in the congressional spheres, partisanship and ideology play a role when it comes to satisfying the demands of economic groups. As many studies prove, interest groups focus on strengthening bonds with those with whom they have political affinity (AUSTEN-SMITH *apud* FORDHAM and McKEOWN, 2003, p. 523).

But, as previously mentioned, the ethanol case is interesting because it counts with bipartisan support. For instance, constituents from certain agricultural districts tend to elect candidates from the Republican Party, who, on their turn, have their campaigns financed by the Political Action Committee from large corporations, thanks to the political affinity between the financiers agenda and a more conservative party program. However, when ethanol emerges as an option to be supported, those groups count with the support of the Democratic Party, which historically supports environmentally-friendly policies. So, that's why they can state ethanol counts with bipartisan support. This means this topic is seen as a State matter in the U.S., standing above party differences.

Aware of such a scenario, corn and ethanol interest groups seek to adjust their media framing strategies in real-time, creating messages geared towards different ideological groups and political parties. They also hold meetings and briefings to educate the audiences about the need to keep their support of the American energy cause.

According to Friman (1993), this is required to "combine emotional appeals to patriotic duty and self-sacrifice with arguments that incorporate widely held beliefs on the nature of basic challenges to those core values" (FRIMAN, 1993, p. 392). They then build mechanisms to drive a powerful public opinion current with the main mission to establish mental codes which are socially shared and favor specific interests demanded during critical situations. Their goal is to ensure specific gains for segments adopting a national strategic perspective, i.e.; a State cause.

This is how technical-scientific knowledge and access to information play important roles in the perceptions and opinions of decision-makers. The way how interest groups interpret those propositions and later inform policymakers about their consequences is decisive to determine the position of the latter concerning legislative propositions to keep or alter policies. Thus, interest groups work as 'perceptual filters'.

Corn lobby in the U.S.: mobilizing interests and manipulating information

Corn production in the U.S. is concentrated in the 'Corn Belt', an area that includes the States of Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Ohio, as well as parts of South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Kentucky. According to Fordham and McKeown (2003), the advantage of a geographic concentration is the cohesion and coordination of economic group strategies, whereas the disadvantage lays on the resistance of members of the Executive and Legislative branches to meet the demand of a minority with spatial concentration as opposed to the preference of most constituents.

However, NCGA represents the sector nationwide. Its mission is to create and increase opportunities for profitability and use of the corn culture. Therefore NCGA along with different U.S. government spheres in charge of making decisions that affect agriculture and energy production in the United States became the voice of corn growers.

For this reason, according to their website, NCGA has interests divided into key sectors, such as: Biotechnology, Production Conservation, Transportation, Rural Development Programs, Animal Feed, Resource Management, Fertilizers and Pesticides, Insurance for Lost Crops, Research and Development, Ethanol Production and Trade. Such thematic diversity around corn and ethanol production indicates NCGA coordinates a national supply chain of significant economic relevance. In this sense, the appeal to seek new energy matrixes makes the ethanol issue critical for specific interests of the sector to be consensually seen as a U.S. national strategic interest. As we have seen, economic sectors with this characteristic can drive the State to act according to their specific interests.

Aware of this specificity, NCGA (2009) seeks to build consensus around the idea that it is better for U.S. consumers if their country relies on a comprehensive National Energy Plan that includes renewable fuels such as ethanol. According to the association, renewable fuels will enable a cleaner environment, contributing to decreased dependency upon foreign oil, especially from the Middle East and from Venezuela. Additionally, communities that depend on the corn supply chain will benefit with job creation, through the development of the renewable fuels industry. Those arguments are

aligned with speeches made by relevant politicians in the U.S., thus molding ideas with epistemic character, with potential to acquire the status of a State policy.

The National Energy Plan, envisioned by NCGA (2009), aims to extend the use of renewable fuels through tax incentives. In order to meet this target, members of the association from different states are motivated to pressure on subnational government levels so they approve laws to encourage flex-fuel vehicles production and use in their territories. At the same time, the association demands the elaboration of federal norms establishing mixtures of up to 85% ethanol in fuels¹. In addition, NCGA (2009) supported tax credit on the volume of ethanol gallons, the Volumetric Ethanol Excise Tax Credit (VEETC)². Thus, NCGA aims at providing consumers and the government with information on the economic, environmental and energy security benefits, also promoting the E-diesel (ethanol-diesel blends), biodiesel, ethanol as an aviation fuel, etc.

NCGA has tried to identify and encourage production of vehicles that can be operated using renewable fuels. In order to support that measure, the association managed to convince the government to assign funds generated due to non-compliance with CAFE³ by automakers to extend production and use of E-85. To make this happen, NCGA talked both to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM).

NCGA also tries to keep competitive balance, assessing those program options to anticipate what might harm the expansion of the ethanol industry. That's why it gathers information about cellulosic technology to produce biofuels. Ethanol derived from other materials such as cellulose can complement corn ethanol. Additionally, they encourage research and financing to increase food production both for the population as a whole and for animal feed. Thus, U.S. corn and ethanol producers would be working to promote biofuels, showing their commitment, environmental and socioeconomic responsibility.

¹ It is worth noting that are inherent benefits in the mixture process, such as enriching octane rating. This means that using ethanol mixed with gasoline increases octane rating and reduces carbon monoxide emissions to the atmosphere.

² In October 2004, President Bush signed bill HR 4520, the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004 (JOBS Bill), which created the Volumetric Ethanol Excise Tax Credit (VEETC). It was not renewed by the Congress in 2011(RFA).

³ Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) Standards are regulations about the weighted average of fuel efficiency, expressed as miles per gallon (mpg), meaning fuel savings are defined as the average mileage achieved by a vehicle per gasoline gallon (or the equivalent amount of other fuels) consumed, measured according to the test and assessment found in the protocol established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Such commitment is associated with the search for technological innovation. In the past 25 years, according to NCGA, the amount of land needed to produce a corn bushel (56 pounds/25.4 kg) dropped to 37% of the land used previously. Energy used to produce a corn bushel has decreased 37% since 1987; therefore, the greenhouse effect per bushel dropped 30%. In the past 30 years, farmers have significantly reduced the amount of fertilizers needed to cultivate corn. Producing a corn bushel currently requires almost 40% less nitrogen than back in 1980 (NCGA, 2009). Beth Elliot, Director of Public Policy at NCGA, pointed out how corn and ethanol growers can prepare very good defense at Congress hearings that question whether ethanol is a sustainable fuel:

Generally speaking, I think that our farmers are very well spoken. They work on the field; they know what they are doing. [...] When they go and represent us in these boards, I mean, how can you deny that it is not true? For example we had this guy from Nebraska. Actually he testified in the Committee for us. [...] And basically they were trying to insinuate that the farmers were disrupting the environment and ethanol is harming the environment and John again said: It hurts me for you to think that because this is my livelihood, I consider myself a great student of the environment, we are using half of the water we were used to (ELLIOT, 2014).

As for ethanol production, NCGA argues that use of ethanol to replace conventional gasoline contributes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Production of 09 billion ethanol gallons in 2008 is the equivalent to eliminating 10 months of oil imports from Venezuela. Having such scientific information in hand, NCGA persuades institutions and the society and receives more support for its interests. This is reinforced in its campaigns, among them: "In today's energy debate, let's focus on real solutions. Support home-grown biofuels and jobs for American families" (NCGA, 2009).

In order to meet the desired results and keep advancing in the defense of sector interests, NCGA performance concerning ethanol, as described in its Policy and Position (website), is based on the development of the work with Congress and other regulating agencies in order to ensure the success and formulation of laws aligned with its interests for the benefit of its members, such as the Renewable Fuel Standard Energy Bill (RFS).

The association seeks to have as many partners as it can in the ethanol industry to create a unified strategy, like an 'umbrella coalition', to expand ethanol use and production from corn culture. Therefore, NCGA aligns its interests with the American Coalition for Ethanol, Biotechnology Industry Organization, Growth Energy, Ethanol Facts, Ethanol Promotion and Information Council, Renewable Fuels Association,

Growth Energy, American Coalition for Ethanol, National Ethanol Vehicle Coalition, Americans for Abundant Food and Energy.

NCGA also has partnership with other sectors that are opposed to ethanol, such as food producers. Elliot (2014) pointed out that

GMA [Grocery Manufacturers Association] is not friendly to ethanol but they are in our side when it comes to things like Biotech. When it is about Biotech they work together, we are at the same coalition. So it certainly depends on the issue. Turkey is another example where Turkey doesn't like ethanol but at the same time we are Ag [agriculture]. At the end of the day we still want to succeed whether or not our partners are different (ELLIOT, 2014).

Besides partners diversification, another strategy adopted that allows for expanding its interaction with society in general and, especially with its members, is its information media center, which contains news, videos, images, links with useful information for corn farmers, publications, columns about their staff, and even a social media channel, through social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

NCGA interacts with its members and policymakers linked to agricultural issues in its Policies centers, through its Legislative Action Center, which presents new governmental resolutions, encouraging that channel as a way to connect information and demands from the association and the policymakers they support. This facilitates grassroots actions. Thus, the demands from those farmers can also be exposed and incorporate the guidelines of their strategic plan into more general interests from the population.

After formulating its interests and explaining them to associate members and to the society in general, NCGA, through its Council, seeks to develop its activities according to the interests it represents. The next step is to identify the effective locus of the political power and the processes from which the power can be exercised for the benefit of corn supply chain and ethanol production.

Under this perspective, NCGA focuses on congresspeople it gives electoral support to, putting pressure on them to play their essential role of converting its demands into public policies. Congresspeople are the connecting links between the interests represented by NCGA and political institutions.

Electoral support and legislative strength of the corn supply chain

The corn and ethanol supply chain has not made great donations to candidates running for President in the United States between 2002 and 2008. In spite of being highly relevant in the presidential elections because the Corn Belt states are considered key in the Electoral College, the sector focused on legislative elections. The reason for this strategy is that the Legislative branch is elected by small geographic bases in direct elections held with higher frequency (every two years).

The American Constitution ensures the presence of at least one delegate from each State in the House of Representatives, in order to ensure proportionality in the representation (OLIVEIRA, 2012). However, Beth Elliot (2014) highlighted in her interview that often NCGA prioritizes the work with Senators, pointing out that their advisors, because they are experts and have been longer in the administration, are more likely to understand agricultural issues better.

In short, the electoral process for the American Legislative branch ensures a more direct identification between interest groups and electorates with their representatives. This is particularly true for delegates who are elected in small counties (THOMAZ, 2010).

According to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), Crop Production & Basic Processing, an industrial group to which NCGA belongs, contributed with US\$ 17,607,954.00 to 2008 election campaigns (52% to Democrats, and 48% to Republicans). For the Congress, Crop Production & Basic Processing comes in 30th in the contribution rank, with US\$ 11,814,161.00 in the 2007-2008 cycle (50% to Democrats, and 50% to Republicans). NCGA financed US\$ 132,518.00, out of which 70% were to Democrats, and 30% to Republicans, standing in the 14th position in the rank of this group⁴.

In 2009, the number of delegates who benefitted from NCGA resources totaled 34. Out of those, only 03 were not part of the House of Representatives in 2008. As for senators, out of 17 who received financial support, only 02 candidates were not elected. After a careful analysis about the presence and performance of 31 delegates and 15 senators elected with the support of NCGA in the American Congress, we verified that each of those members of the Parliament participated in key committees to advocate for the interests of corn and ethanol supply chain during the period analyzed. The speeches

⁴ Sugar and cotton producers are ranked at the top of the list.

made by those members of the Parliament and their attitude leave no margin for doubt that they openly advocated for NCGA demands, particularly in favor of agriculture and renewable energy sources between 2008 and 2010.

Let's take, for instance, delegate Jo Ann Emerson (R-Missouri), who advocated for the interests of cotton, corn, rice, grape, etc producers. According to her,

In the United States, we are blessed with abundant natural resources including oil reserves. Unfortunately, this oil remains in the ground and our dependency on foreign oil continues because environmental regulations prevent exploration of these natural resources. We must also support and utilize the renewable energy sources that are available to us. These renewable technologies include wind, solar, clean coal and ethanol. We need an energy policy that increases all forms of American energy, enhances conservation, and invests in future fuels at the same time. I have supported the development of these innovative resources. Renewable energy alternatives offer us domestic energy sources that are helpful to the environment and to America's family farmers. I look forward to supporting the continued development and utilization of these technologies. They will play an important role in the future of our energy independence. Reducing our dependence on foreign oil is as vital as supporting the development and utilization of alternative energy sources (EMERSON, 2009).

According to delegate David Loebsack (D-Iowa), who defended the 2008 Farm Bill,

This legislation is important for family farmers and all Iowans, it will begin to reform our nation's farm payment system, make a substantial commitment to land conservation, expand Iowa's renewable energy industry, and will ease the strain of rising food prices for millions of families [...] Our nation has long relied on Iowa to feed the nation, and I am committed to supporting family farmers to further ensure stability and growth in rural Iowa (LOEBSACK, 2009).

Congressman Frank Lucas (R-Oklahoma) states:

I advocated for renewable energy provisions to be included in the Farm Bill which would allow rural areas to play a larger role in making the U.S. less dependent on foreign sources of energy. I am proud that the 2008 Farm Bill devotes a funding stream to renewable energy research, development, and production(LUCAS, 2009).

Lucas also criticized Obama's administration for having reduced agricultural subsidies. According to him:

I have real concerns about this administration's position on eliminating direct payments to our producers, which would be detrimental to

their livelihoods. Our farmers and ranchers are some of the hardest working people in the U.S. and they are struggling to make a living in a difficult economy. Yet, it's clear that both Secretary Vilsack and President Obama don't understand the problems facing our agriculture community. And, they absolutely don't understand how important rural communities are to our economy (LUCAS, 2009).

That speech expresses the strength of parochialism in American politics, particularly when representatives advocate for demands from counties that play a leading role, with potential to decide a presidential election or a legislative majority in Congress.

Congresspeople may feel the pressure when they are working in committees or when they vote in the plenaries in legislative chambers. Members of the committee determine whether the project is relevant; whether it is necessary to consult government departments and agencies; whether it is desirable to promote public consultation through hearings; whether it is recommended to submit the project to specialized subcommittees.

In other words, it is of great importance to have congresspeople as allies in the committees, as in the case of Senator Blanche Lincoln (D-Arkansas), Chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee. She advocated for Arkansas strongly, speaking up about important issues for rural communities. Lincoln was a constant presence in the mediation of the agreement that led to the 2008 Farm Bill approval. At the time, she pointed out that the agricultural bill would keep a security network for family farmers that produce traditional commodities cultures, so they can compete in the global market. Lincoln also worked on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. With those platforms, Lincoln headed a wide range of issues, including agricultural policies, nutrition, forestry, social security, health, tax policy, foreign trade, energy policy, etc.

Senator Christopher Bond (R-Montana), without mincing words, from the Agriculture Committee and the Defense Committee, stated that

...biotechnology also offers an environmentally-friendly and domestically-produced solution to meeting this nation's energy needs. At a time when Middle East politics continue to be unstable, the United States needs to reduce foreign oil consumption and biotech research will help us grow enough corn and soybeans and other crops to make the ethanol and biodiesel that is needed for fuel(BOND, 2009).

According to Bond (2009), the United States should invest in corn, ethanol, biodiesel, and biotechnology in order not to be vulnerable to instabilities in the Middle East related to oil supply. Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), on his turn, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, promoted broader actions to manage farmers' risks, advances in researches, increase in opportunities for export, and higher net agricultural income. At that time, Senator Lugar started a biofuel research program to help reduce dependency from foreign oil. He also headed initiatives to boost USDA. In a speech given at the Indiana Renewable Energy Forum at IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis), he stated:

In the absence of revolutionary changes in energy policy, we will be risking multiple hazards for our country that could constrain living standards, undermine our foreign policy goals, and leave us highly vulnerable to economic and political disasters with an almost existential impact [...] A credible energy security agenda demands that we break free from partisan divisions. This will require tremendous leadership from the President, who must speak plainly to the American people and special interests (BOND, 2009).

In a speech at the Senate, Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) stated that:

As President of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, I was very pleased when my committee colleagues and I approved the Senate's version of the new Farm Bill without one negative vote last month. Our bill – titled The Food and Energy Security Act – is a forward-looking, fiscally responsible measure that continues strong farm income protection while providing critical new investments in agricultural conservation, renewable energy, nutrition assistance and rural development initiatives. In my view, a key focus of this new legislation must be promoting new economic and income opportunities for farm families and others in rural communities. [...] We must continue to fight to get this strong, bipartisan Farm Bill through the Senate and enacted into law. Our fight will continue today, tomorrow and as long as it takes to get the job done (HARKIN,2009).

It is also worth pointing out that on May 25, 2007, Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Barack Obama (D-IL), Christopher Bond (R-MO), George Voinovich (R-OH) and Dick Durbin (D-IL) introduced a law to extend consumers' access to a fuel consisting of 85% ethanol, the E-85. The Ethanol Education and Expansion Act of 2007 sought to reduce E-85 prices at the gas station for consumers, providing subsidies through USDA for ethanol producer projects to install additional E-85 blender pumps at gas stations, as well as the necessary equipment to sell E-85 directly to gas stations. Senator Sherrod

Brown (Missouri – Democrat) was co-author of The Ethanol Education and Expansion Act of 2007. Other co-authors in that law were Senators Ben Nelson (D-NE), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Hilary Clinton (D-NY), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and John Kerry (D-MA).

Lastly, in most of the arguments listed above, the approach used to address agriculture and energy issues goes beyond partisan divisions, which shows a bipartisan consensus around specific demands in the ethanol sector in the Legislative branch.

NCGA in the U.S. international trade institutions

In order to extend action effectiveness and ensure its demands are met, after mobilizing interests, organizing information and convincing politicians in the Legislative branch, NCGA monitors the implementation of the measures that benefit the sector in the institutions in charge of the U.S. international trade policy. Among them, NCGA core targets are: United States Department of Agriculture (USTR) and United States Trade Representative (USDA).

USTR is an agency of the Executive branch, in charge of international trade negotiations and of the management of trade defense instruments. It is also subordinate to Congress and counts with formal participation of business representatives, business associations, unions, environmentalist groups and congresspeople in its international trade policy formulation process. Selection and incorporation of those actors aim at conveying national representativeness to the process, in a rationale of expansion of the political space, as well as increasing technical ability in decisions and negotiations relying on the participation of social groups. USTR institutional design favors the interaction among the Executive branch, the Legislative branch and interest groups in the international trade policy formulation process (OLIVEIRA, 2012).

As you can see, USTR plays a major role in formulating the international trade policy. Policymakers, bureaucrats from other agencies and departments, and other social actors involved in the process have at least three relevant participation levels. First, they provide information about commercial topics from their own perspective, and from a technical and political point of view. Second, they are informed by USTR about the submittal of topics related to the interest of actors integrated into the process. Third, they discuss the decisions that will be made and the course of the commercial politics in such a way to legitimize them from the democratic and technical perspectives.

In addition to Executive-Legislative relationships, inter-bureaucratic disputes are important, as well as the relations with the private sector through USTR private advisory system (COHEN, 2000; DESTLER, 2005; DRYDEN, 1995). Concerning inter-bureaucratic disputes, there are regular clashes within the Executive branch due to different positioning, perspectives and interests in departments and agencies. As for members of the USTR private advisory system, they are asked to vote for acceptance or rejection of the trade agreements before Congress proceeds and ratifies the agreement. So, congresspeople only vote after private advisors' opinions are officially communicated.

Aware of the U.S. institutional rationale, corn and ethanol sectors in the U.S. occupied important spaces in the USTR institutional structure: as members of the Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee were Audrae Erickson, from Corn Refiners Association, Ron Litterer, from NCGA, and Hunt Shipman, from Cornerstone Government Affairs, among other members indirectly linked to corn growers' interests; in the Agricultural Technical Advisory Committee, NCGA representative was Jefferson Jon Doggett, who was also Vice-President of public policy in the association.

This ensures NCGA a privileged position in the dialogue with USTR, particularly in international trade issues addressed in the WTO. On that negotiation board, NCGA is positioned against measures that limit international trade of grains, alleging technical barriers adopted are often used to limit access to competitive markets, such as developing countries. Therefore, it adopts an international approach that fosters free trade, using WTO dispute settlement actions through a constructive dialogue. However, at the same time, at the domestic level, NCGA acts to keep its agricultural subsidies, mostly based on information about the role ethanol plays in fighting global warming and ensuring energy security in the U.S., besides the social effects resulting from an increase in the number of jobs for families of farmers in the country.

Simply put, NCGA has a contradictory position in USTR. On one hand, it demands opening international markets to its corn and ethanol production, even contributing to create future scenarios where there will be trade liberalization in the biofuels sector. But, on the other hand, NCGA, demands subsidies at the domestic level.

USDA has internal agencies to assist farmers. Historically, it was created to formulate and implement an agricultural policy in the United States. Its main goal is to meet U.S. demands in the agricultural sector, fostering domestic and international

production and trade. In parallel, USDA works to protect natural resources and ensure food safety in the U.S. and abroad. Thus, USDA plays a critical role on topics concerning the corn and ethanol sector in the U.S and worldwide.

For this purpose, NCGA follows the debates, reports and research is made in its internal agencies aiming at influencing them according to its interests. Besides traditional influence channels on USDA, such as external pressure, submission of letters, and demand on policymakers that dialogue with that department within their committees, NCGA has representatives in positions inside the USDA. Among many examples, we have the case of Thomas C. Dorr. He worked at USDA Rural Development Secretary. In 2009, Dorr was transferred to be the Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Grains Council. At this new post, he is the head for organizing the export market for barley, corn and other grains. He has directly worked at NCGA for 29 years (DEERING et al. 2009). He is a former officer and member of NCGA, in a key position to formulate agricultural policies in the country.

The USDA Office of Energy Policy and New Uses also has interfaces that work along with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), more specifically with the Bioenergy Technologies Office. There are many scheduled events, conferences, webinars and meetings that encourage interaction and exchange of information among government employees and representatives of the agroenergy sector.

Other examples that illustrate that association relationship are listed by Elliot (2014):

We have a very good relationship with USDA. Our previously president was from Iowa Pam Johnson and Pam was actually very close to Tom Vilsack. Which is great. So he has been working with agriculture his whole life, he wants to make sure that the role America is protected. [...] We have a good relationship whit the Department of Energy. EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] very much respects us. I think, generally speaking, our organization has good relationship with everyone, which is nice. We are free to go and ask for meetings and get in the door (ELLIOT, 2014).

NCGA sends letters to government employees, and even to the President and other Ministers. To defend ethanol, it also interacts with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has a critical role in regulating RFS ethanol mandates⁵.

⁵ Samples of letters that were sent and NCGA testimonials can be accessed at: <<http://www.ncga.com/public-policy/letters-and-testimony>>.

Those institutional positions, combined with assistance in electoral campaigns and, therefore, support in the Congress for its demands, ensured NCGA a privileged position to influence formulation and implementation of policies according to its interests in the agricultural sector.

Consolidation of NCGA agricultural lobby in the 2002 and 2008 farm bills

The 2002 Farm Bill was called HR 2646 and was introduced in the House of Representatives by delegate Larry Combest (R-TX) and by co-author Charles Stenholm (D-TX), on July 26, 2001. After it was submitted to the corresponding committees, the reports proposed 42 amendments, which were analyzed and voted in the House of Representatives on October 05, 2001, and it passed with 291 votes in favor, 120 against and 19 abstentions. In the Senate, voting occurred on February 13, 2002, with the following results: 58 votes in favor, 40 votes against and 02 abstentions to vote the project. Divergences between both Houses concerning the project were solved on May 02, 2002, and another vote occurred.

On the same day, the jointly reformulated project was approved in the House of Representatives with 280 votes in favor, 141 against and 13 abstentions. In the Senate, voting occurred on May 08, 2002, with 64 votes in favor, 35 against and 01 abstention. President Bush signed the bill and it came into force on May 13, 2002, effective until 2007, when the new 2008 Farm Bill was formulated. This was a very important bill for biofuels, because it was the first one to have a specific title on Energy, as Randy Schnepf (2013), Congressional Research Service expert, states:

The 2002 farm bill (P.L. 107-171) included several biofuels programs spread across three separate titles — Title II: Conservation, Title VI: Rural Development, and Title IX: Energy (the first-ever energy title in a farm bill). Each title contained programs that encouraged the research, production, and use of renewable fuels such as ethanol, biodiesel, anaerobic digesters, and wind energy systems. In addition, Section 9010 of Title IX codified and extended the Bioenergy Program and its funding by providing that \$150 million would be available annually through the CCC for FY2003-FY2006 (SCHNEPF, 2013, p. 09).

The 2008 Farm Bill, derived from the 2002 bill, was identified as H.R.2419, having been introduced in the Legislative branch on May 22, 2007, by congressman

Collin Petterson (D-MN)⁶, from Minnesota, who was the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. It was submitted to the corresponding committees.

The NCGA's President at that time, McCauley sent recommendations to the subcommittee on Agriculture to the House Commodities and Risk Management Committee. Another recommendation was sent to the Senate to the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee. In both recommendations, the NCGA former President lists specific points the association supports or requires to be changed in the new Farm Bill, particularly in the following programs: Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Security Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and Conservation Reserve Program.

Considering those demands, reports were released on July 19, 2007. Based on their content, 352 amendments were proposed, which were approved by the House of Representatives on July 27, 2007. Later on, they were approved in the Senate on December 14, 2007. Divergences between both Houses regarding the project were solved on May 14, 2007. Thus, the bill was voted on once again in the House of Representatives, getting 318 votes in favor, and 106 votes against. In the Senate, the bill got 81 votes in favor, and 15 votes against.

However, different from what happened in 2002, President Bush vetoed the bill on May 21, 2008, alleging it "continues subsidies for the wealthy and increases farm bill spending by more than \$20 billion, while using budget gimmicks to hide much of the increase" (Walsh, 2008). Bush also declared those measures would harm the efforts to improve U.S. farmers' access to foreign markets (WALSH, 2008). The President declared to be against expansion of agricultural subsidies present in the 2008 Farm Bill approved by the Congress with massive support from the sector, including from NCGA.

At the Center for Responsive Politics website, 176 organizations recorded their lobby for this bill. Out of those, four were directly linked to corn producers: NCGA, the American Corn Growers Association, the Minnesota Corn Growers Association, and the South Dakota Corn Growers. The House Agriculture Committee also highlighted a letter sent on May 21, 2008, signed by over a thousand associations and groups, insisting delegates should approve the bill, nulling the President's veto.

⁶ For more information about donators to Collin C Petterson's campaign, please refer to: CRP. Available at: <<https://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/summary.php?cycle=2010&cid=N00004558&type=C>>.

Because of some much pressure, HR 2419 was replaced with HR 6124, called the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008⁷. It was reintroduced in the House of Representatives on May 22, 2008, and was validated by the Agriculture and Foreign Affairs Committee. On the same day, the bill was enacted in the House of Representatives by nominal voting. Voting occurred with suspension of the rules so as to shorten the debate and approve the project, and it needed a two-thirds majority. This usually happens when bills have no controversy in the Congress. The result was: 306 votes in favor, 110 against and 19 abstentions. On June 05, 2008, the bill was approved in the Senate by nominal voting, with 77 votes in favor, 15 against and 08 abstentions. Thus, on June 18, 2008, the President's veto was overrode by nominal voting, with 317 in favor, 109 against, and 08 abstentions in the House of Representatives, whereas in Senate there were 80 votes in favor, 14 against and 06 abstentions. Congress' preference for keeping farm subsidies in the U.S. prevailed over the President's desire to eliminate it, especially in times of domestic and international crisis.

Congress' reasoning to produce such a result was mostly based on the consensus that the 2008 Farm Bill would be a way to ensure independence in the food and fuel sectors and would contribute to produce ethanol, thus reducing dependency on imported oil and, consequently, reducing commercial deficit in the country, improving life quality for farmers by including programs to encourage a healthy diet, biofuels and assistance to disasters. That episode reinforces Browne's (1995) point that "Farm bills are not designed to fail" (BROWNE, 1995, p. 27).

Other than speeches, the decisive factor that overturned the veto was the pressure made by interest groups and electoral bases. A significant portion of the Republican government base in the Congress did not support the presidential veto due to such embarrassment. Representative Tom Davis (R-VA) stated: "If I was a farm-belt guy, I would be all over my district now, saying, 'I stood with you, not the party of the president'" (WEISMAN and MORGAN, 2008).

Regarding the 34 Representatives and 17 Senators that received NCGA contribution to campaign budgets, only eight of them did not vote in favor of the 2002 Farm Bill: Richard Lugar (R-IN), Robert Bennett (R-UT), George Voinovich (R-OH), Pat Roberts (R-KS), Mitch McConnell (R-KY), Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Tom Latham (R-IA), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH). Out of those eight, five changed their minds and voted in favor

⁷ HR 6124 does not have Titles XIV and XV, which were present in HR 2419.

of the 2008 Farm Bill. Lugar, Bennett, and Voinovich remained against the 2008 Farm Bill. This happened, largely, because those three politicians are highly associated with movements for the use of green energy, but oppose to subsidies or to taxation of Brazilian ethanol. There are other reasons, among them is the fact that they consider the Farm Bill subsidy program too expensive for the U.S. government. In other words, their interest groups and electoral bases demanded that kind of positioning.

In the 2008 Farm Bill⁸, many interests were at stake, and some specific initiatives were approved in the bill such as increases in Food Stamp benefits, the budget for the pest control research, disease control and other agricultural issues. Thus, incentives for biofuel production were ensured, such as greater support for the production of cellulosic ethanol⁹. Schnepf (2013) points out that:

The 2008 farm bill (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008; P.L. 110-246) extended and expanded many existing biofuels programs. In particular, Title XV ("Trade and Tax Provisions") extended the biofuels tax incentives and the tariff on ethanol imports, although the tax credit for corn-starch ethanol was reduced to \$0.45 per gallon. [...] In addition, it established a new tax credit of \$1.01 per gallon for cellulosic biofuel. Like the 2002 farm bill, it contained a distinct energy title (Title IX) that covers a wide range of energy and agricultural topics with extensive attention to biofuels, including corn starch-based ethanol, cellulosic ethanol, and biodiesel. Energy grants and loans are provided through initiatives such as the Bioenergy Program for Advanced Biofuels to promote the development of cellulosic biorefinery capacity (SCHNEPF, 2013, p. 14).

According to the Environmental Working Group (EWG), between 1995 and 2009, subsidies for corn summed up US\$73.8 billion, in direct payments, insurances for harvests, loans, counter-cyclical payments, etc. The most significant programs were: Production Flexibility (US\$16.3 billion), Loan Deficiency (US\$13.5 billion), Direct Payments (US\$12.9 billion), Crop Insurance Premium Subsidies (US\$11.6 billion), Market Loss Assistance (US\$8.5 billion) and Counter Cyclical Payment CCC (US\$5.4 billion). Corn sector is the most benefited from CCC.

⁸ For more information on the 2008 Farm Bill, please refer to: < <http://www.ag.senate.gov/issues/2008-farm-bill> >.

⁹ It was challenging to develop cellulosic ethanol in the U.S. after the 2008 crisis, even though it counted with such incentives. Currently, there are four commercial plants, namely Quad County Corn Processors (QCCP), Poet-DSM, Dupont, and Abengoa Bioenergy Biomass of Kansas (ABBK). They are all expected to be fully operating in large scale by October 2015. They can be complementary to first-generation corn plants, since some of them are using corn stover and cob as raw material.

Therefore, NCGA contributions and pressures were relevant variables to have the 2008 Farm Bill approved, consolidating sector benefits in the U.S. international agricultural trade policy.

Conclusions

Our article aims at contributing to the study of foreign policy by providing evidences in favor of four arguments.

First, empirical studies on the formulation and implementation of foreign trade policy, especially when it comes to agricultural issues, would greatly benefit with a greater attention on understanding the role domestic actors play in the decision-making processes.

Second, interest groups play a key role in this decision-making process. In this article, NCGA practices revealed to act as representative of interest groups in the corn sector. NCGA gathered information to convince the U.S. public opinion and politicians that its demands are strategic for the society as a whole. Afterwards, NCGA used the country institutions (Congress, USTR, and USDA) as drivers of its interests, both in the process of formulating the U.S. Farm Bill, and standing up for the sector in international trade negotiations aimed at eliminating subsidies in the agricultural sector.

Third, this study enabled us to explain the rationale in the formulation and implementation of the U.S. international agricultural trade policy operated by USTR. NCGA and its associates, supported by the U.S. government, became experts in ethanol production, protecting the internalization of technologies that are essential to the product competitiveness while simultaneously managing to prevent the access of Brazilian producers to the U.S. market.

Fourth, when the economic sector coordinates complex and relevant supply chains in the U.S. economy, it is hardly possible to revert the U.S. protectionist position in the Legislative branch. Even though the Executive branch disagrees with that position, there is not much it can do, and it diplomatically seeks to avoid embarrassment with its partners in the international agricultural trade, especially in the wake of successful disputes in the WTO against practices adopted by the country. Therefore, having practical results in the international agricultural trade with the United States is more a matter of good bilateral relations.

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