

Organisational Competition and the Neo-Corporatist Fallacy in French Agriculture

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This article challenges the neo-corporatist paradigm's explanation of agricultural interest group politics in France. It offers an alternative model that can better comprehend the relevant attributes of this interest group system, a system based on the muffled competition among groups with different policy preferences, all of which participate in a collaborative arrangement with the state. Empirical verification is drawn from the experiences of the 1980s, when the system came under stress after the election of a government of the Left and the reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy.

French agricultural politics during the Fifth Republic has been notable for the collusiveness of its institutions of interest intermediation. Through this system, a set of organisations has enjoyed a prominent, statutorily mandated role in the web of institutions that implement French agricultural policy, and a well-entrenched, informal consultative privilege with state officials at the national and local levels. This collusive arrangement contrasts sharply with the interest group politics of other sectors, in which France has seemed less congenial than most of its continental neighbours to neo-corporatist analysis.¹ The high density, hierarchically-ordered and functionally-defined interest group on which neo-corporatist analysis relies is utterly at odds with the reality of the French labour movement, and even the more well organised *patronat* has not become enmeshed in the sort of formal social partnership with the state that could be construed as corporatist concertation. Only in agriculture, with the involvement of the *Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles* (FNSEA) in a host of public bodies, is there prima facie evidence for the existence of a neo-corporatist system.

John Keeler has seized on this case to argue that 'a neocorporatist theoretical perspective is useful and to some extent indispensable in explaining the dynamics of interest groups and group-state relations in contemporary France'; specifically with reference to the relationship between the FNSEA and the state.² Building on an incentive structure that aptly characterises the rewards that could motivate both the

FNSEA and the state to engage in 'corporatist' collaboration, Keeler attempts to show that the changes in French agricultural policy at the beginning of the Fifth Republic established a neo-corporatist system. This system formally included the FNSEA in public bodies which help the government to implement its agricultural policy at both the national and local levels. He argues that the power the FNSEA had acquired through this arrangement allowed it to frustrate the new government's efforts at 'decorporatisation' after the election of President François Mitterrand in 1981. Indicative of this power was the ability of the FNSEA to generate social unrest, and the government's inability to replace the FNSEA with one of the leftist agricultural unions as its neo-corporatist client.

Yet Keeler's model is inconsistent with several developments in French agricultural politics in the 1980s. The FNSEA leadership's strident opposition to the reform of the European Community's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was criticised by its frequent ally, the *Assemblée permanente des chambres d'agriculture* (APCA), which argued that the agricultural organisations needed to shape the inevitable process of reform, rather than to reject automatically all reforms that would limit production. Similarly, once Community agriculture ministers had agreed to introduce the milk quotas in 1984, the FNSEA's continued opposition to the measure minimised its own role in implementing the quotas, a role therefore assumed by other organisations within the sector. During 1986–88 key reforms proposed by Jacques Chirac's Agriculture Minister (and former FNSEA president) François Guillaume engendered divisions among the FNSEA, the APCA, and the FNSEA's autonomous product associations that hampered his ability to govern the sector effectively. These groups, which Keeler's model reduces merely to agents of FNSEA dominance of agricultural intermediation and administration, have acted independently, and often contrary to the stated policies of the FNSEA leadership.

This article contends that Keeler's exclusive focus on the *unions* of the agricultural sector fundamentally misapprehends the real interest group politics of French agriculture, which revolves around a competitive relationship among organisations with different interests. The first section introduces Keeler's theoretical framework. The second section examines the way in which Keeler's model accounts for the adoption, at the beginning of the Fifth Republic, of a new agricultural policy. The third section proposes an alternative model that explains more accurately the dynamic of group competition, within a collaborative system, that animates French agricultural interest politics. The fourth section adduces evidence from the period of President Mitterrand's first *septen-*

nat, and compares the explanatory power of Keeler's neo-corporatism with that of the alternative model. The concluding section summarises the argument, and indicates the problems of applying the alternative model to broader questions of interest group theory.

KEELER'S NEO-CORPORATIST MODEL

Keeler's analytic framework builds on the assumption that systems of interest intermediation lie on a continuum that extends between poles of strong pluralism and strong corporatism. The position of a system on the continuum depends on four characteristics: the role of the state, the nature of group-state interaction in the policy-making process, the nature of internal group relations, and the character of inter-group competition.³ Within countries, systems can vary across sectors (thus Keeler characterises the system of French labour relations as essentially pluralist, whereas he labels relations in agriculture 'strong corporatism'). He defines corporatism as,

. . . a system of interest intermediation in which a limited number of groups within a sector are formally incorporated into the public policy-making process (*i.e.*, granted seats on public committees, commissions, or councils) and provided by the state with certain benefits in exchange for their cooperation and their restraint in the articulation of demands . . . [*G*]iven the political difficulties involved in developing or sustaining an intensely cooperative relationship between the state and a number of rival groups, it is assumed that the more fully developed types of corporatism will feature a single client.⁴

Having presented the neo-corporatist form, Keeler demonstrates the individual incentives that motivate organisational actors to prefer this type of interest intermediation. He rehearses the familiar collective action dilemma, in which groups need to provide their members with selective incentives to overcome free-riding, but suggests that groups will offer a mix of material and purposive incentives to overcome this problem. This analysis of membership goals implies two incentives for the group to engage in corporatist collaboration. First, the group acquires 'biased influence' with policy-makers, satisfying the purposive incentive of individual members by increasing the likelihood of successful group influence on legislative or administrative outcomes. Second, the privileged group accrues substantial material advantages from its client status, advantages it can convert to selective incentives for its members. In comparison with other, non-client groups, the corporatist

client will therefore have a 'competitive advantage' in attracting and retaining members, and in insulating the leadership from membership discontent.⁵ As for the state, its incentives to participate in the neo-corporatist arrangement are clear: to minimize socially destabilising conflict and to ease the administration of complex economic intervention programmes.

The particularities of agriculture amplify the state's incentives to establish a neo-corporatist system. The peculiar economic aspects of agriculture – the long lag time in shifting supply to meet new demand, the inelasticity of consumer demand for food products, and the existence of multiple, small units of production which make co-ordination daunting – all tend to promote extensive state intervention in agriculture. In addition, the imperative of food security and the political over-representation of farming interests common to most advanced industrial democracies – and which apply *a fortiori* in France – compel politicians to support the farming sector. The political economy of agriculture thus enhances the state's incentives to establish a neo-corporatist system: the potential for social destabilisation increases with the political sensitivity of the sector, and the existence of dispersed units of production increases the difficulty of complex intervention schemes.

Keeler contends that the compelling arguments for state intervention coincide with two factors that increase the organisational capacity of agricultural groups. First, farmers' unions may be able to promote unity against the outside world more effectively than can groups in other sectors, since they can argue that 'sectoral "unity" is a necessity for a declining sector in an industrial society increasingly dominated by urban interests'.⁶ Second, farmers' unions may be especially able to provide selective incentives, because 'the multifarious activities of the farmer . . . create a range of service needs equal to that of most businessmen . . . [but] the typical farmer is less equipped to cope with such needs in the absence of organizational assistance'.⁷ These two factors induce Keeler to maintain that agricultural peak organisations are particularly enticing neo-corporatist clients for the state, since they will possess a greater capacity than other sectoral groups to restrain membership demands.

FITTING THE MODEL TO THE FIFTH REPUBLIC

Keeler posits that the FNSEA has served as a paradigmatic neo-corporatist client since the early 1960s. The *lois d'orientation* of 1960 and 1962 marked a clear break with the agricultural policy of the Fourth Republic. The previous *politique agricole* had consisted essentially of

price policy, which operated on the assumption that sufficiently high commodity prices, combined with a protected internal market, could assure the livelihood of France's farmers. The leadership of the FNSEA, dominated during the 1950s by the wheat and sugar beet interests that had benefited most from price policy, staunchly defended its continuation.⁸

A group of young, predominantly livestock farmers within the FNSEA had pressed for a change in French agricultural policy in the late 1950s, acting through the union's young farmers' affiliate, the *Centre national des jeunes agriculteurs* (CNJA). The CNJA farmers proposed a new, activist agricultural policy that would allow many of the smaller French family farms to increase in size⁹ and to improve their technological methods of cultivation, thereby increasing the productivity of potentially viable farms (while facilitating the exodus of the least competitive farmers). It was an explicit tenet of these reforms that the family farm was to remain the predominant productive unit of French agriculture. The new Gaullist government, intent on modernising the sector, officially recognised the CNJA, thus elevating it to equal status with the FNSEA. It then consulted extensively with the young farmers in the drafting of the *lois d'orientation*, which incorporated many of the reformers' demands. The leaders of the CNJA gradually moved into the key positions of power in the FNSEA, and by 1964 had acquired a majority on the FNSEA's national council. At about this time, the CNJA moved back into the orbit of the FNSEA, and (Keeler argues), the parent union assumed the prerogatives of neo-corporatist clientelism.

The new agricultural policy created two types of state intervention – structural policy and *développement* – to meet the demand of the young reformers that a greater proportion of family farms be enabled to increase their productivity. These two policies entailed the establishment of a multitude of public bodies, at both the national and sub-national levels, that were charged with devising and implementing the new measures. The role of the FNSEA in these bodies is central to Keeler's argument that the group became a neo-corporatist client: 'the power to administer many important aspects of modernization policy was devolved to a network of institutions staffed by representatives of 'the profession' and, in most cases dominated by the FNSEA'.¹⁰ These institutions gave the FNSEA (and its departmental affiliates, or FDSEAs) biased influence both through a formal advisory role and through a network of informal ties to state officials. In addition, they contributed to the FNSEA's competitive advantage over other unions by channelling substantial subsidies into its coffers.

Since their inception, the key institutions for structural policy have been dominated largely by the FNSEA and the CNJA. The most important of these are the *Sociétés d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement rural* (SAFERs), 31 (metropolitan) organisations that are authorised to pre-empt other buyers in purchasing farmland for resale to eligible family farmers. In addition to the organisation of the market for land, the praxis of structural policy also included disbursements from various incentive funds that, for example, promoted the early retirement of older farmers.¹¹ The government unified these functions in 1966, establishing departmental units called the *Associations départementales pour l'aménagement des structures agricoles* (ADASEAs) to oversee the expenditure of these funds. As Keeler notes, departmental affiliates of the FNSEA and the CNJA typically control nine of the sixteen seats on an ADASEA administrative council.¹² The role of the FNSEA in these sub-national structural institutions satisfies the formal incorporation into the policy-making process proposed by Keeler as a characteristic of a neo-corporatist client relationship. However, the FNSEA acquired its dominance over departmental structural policy only by sacrificing control over the new institutions of *développement* to the local Chambers of Agriculture in 1966.

Développement was the rubric under which the state funded efforts to disseminate the technical information which was to complement structural reform in increasing the productivity of the family farm. In 1966, after conflict between the FNSEA and the APCA over which group was more representative of French agriculture, the APCA acquired control over the newly created institutions of *développement*: the *Association nationale pour le développement agricole* (ANDA) at the national level, and the *Services d'utilité agricole et de développement* (SUADs) at the departmental level. The SUADs were to be established within, and controlled by, the local Chambers of Agriculture. Each SUAD was to be managed by a *conseil de direction*, half of which was to come from the local Chamber, with the other half to be appointed by the other professional organisations; the president of the local Chamber would preside over the SUAD.¹³ The FNSEA and CNJA in 1972 succeeded in removing some of the financial discretion of the SUADs as a way of wresting control of *développement* from the local Chambers of Agriculture.¹⁴ Yet this sort of organisational competition *within* collaborative institutions is discordant with Keeler's model, which holds that a neo-corporatist client trades its restraint of membership demands for the competitive advantage conferred by its *uniquely* privileged status.

Just as Keeler's theory does not explain group competition within the structures of corporatist collaboration, his factual account excludes any

mention of competition among the collaborative groups. The Chambers are popularly elected by the agricultural population (including labourers and landowners as well as farmers), and FNSEA slates of candidates have won the vast majority of Chamber seats during the Fifth Republic. Yet the FNSEA exerts no hierarchical control over the Chambers, nor over the national APCA. In fact, the latter has often disagreed with the FNSEA leadership over policy preferences and strategies.¹⁵ Keeler is quite right that, at the departmental level, the close relationship between the union and the Chamber very frequently confers advantages on an FDSEA in its competition with minority union movements. However, the reduction of this nuanced relationship into 'the FNSEA's control of the chambers'¹⁶ is invalid, and leads him to discount the very real competition between the APCA and the FNSEA (which is discussed in the fourth section).

Similarly, Keeler focuses on the monetary subsidies from the *développement* institutions solely as aids to FNSEA and CNJA neo-corporatist dominance. It is true that both groups have derived significant bounty from this source: in fiscal 1981–82, ANDA disbursed FF 2.5 million to the FNSEA and FF 7.5 million to the CNJA.¹⁷ Yet in 1983, the technical institute linked to the wheat growers' specialised association received FF 67.5 million, a substantial subsidy by any measure.¹⁸ This money is not a subsidy for the FNSEA; the wheat growers' specialised association disposes of this money as it sees fit. The specialised associations of the FNSEA are strictly autonomous, both in their collection of dues and in their choice of leaderships, and so pursue their own policies. Thus throughout the 1970s the *Fédération nationale porcine* (FNP) espoused the ideas of the leftist unions that opposed the FNSEA, yet the FNSEA leadership was unable to quash this dissent. Once again, the FNSEA has had to share the bounty of collaboration with the government with other groups not under its control. As the next section will demonstrate, these discrepancies are not mere modifications of Keeler's neo-corporatist model; they actually indicate a markedly different dynamic of collaboration.

AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK: COMPETITIVE POLICY COLLABORATION

Keeler's application of neo-corporatism to French agriculture forces the fit of the hierarchical, functionally-defined peak association on to the FNSEA, ignoring the independent role of other important groups in the sector. The model developed in this section aims to improve on the explanatory power of Keeler's model, but does so in terms specific to

French agricultural politics. Therefore the potential implications of this model for wider interest group theoretical questions are explored only in the concluding section. This section firstly describes the key features of the alternative model, competitive policy collaboration. It then discusses the state's motives for collaboration, and points to the structural characteristics of agriculture that weaken the ability of the organisational actors to extract concessions from the state. The organisational incentives facing different groups in the system are then examined systematically. The final part of the section underlines the key differences between this model and Keeler's neo-corporatism.

Competitive policy collaboration posits that the central dynamic underlying French agricultural politics is a muted competition among multiple, independent groups, all of which are enmeshed in a collaborative system that grants them some authority over policy implementation. Taken together, the groups comprise a privileged *policy community*. The degree of discretion conferred on the groups in policy implementation may be substantial, particularly at the sub-national level, because technical expertise is one of the reasons for which the state incorporates them into the process. Yet the role of the groups is unlikely to exceed an advisory capacity at the level of policy formulation: the state includes the groups in the policy-making process, but does not abdicate its prerogatives. Nevertheless, the groups' advisory role may be an important point of leverage over the final shape of sectoral policy.

However, the ambit of group policy-making competence is limited, and the importance of the national consultative institutions is erratic. The FNSEA's preferred policy tool during the Fourth Republic was the setting of high prices, prices which were protected behind agricultural tariffs. In the early 1960s France delegated its control of both price-setting and external agricultural trade policy to Brussels through the CAP. Thus although it is true that the professional groups in France acquired in the 1960s a significant role in the implementation of structural policy and *développement*, the most important and expensive policies for French agriculture were removed from direct state control.¹⁹ Even within the restricted range of policy choices that are decided in Paris, the state has not ceded its decision-making authority. The groups have recourse to formal consultative privileges, but the importance of these institutions has varied widely in response to the priorities of different governments or ministers. Jacques Chirac, when Agriculture (and then Prime) Minister during 1972-76, gave the annual conferences between the agricultural groups and key ministers far more weight than did President Giscard d'Estaing and Raymond Barre after him. Only in

the area of sub-national policy is the institutional entrenchment of privilege secure, and then only over a delimited national agricultural policy.

The state will engage in the collaborative arrangement for a combination of technical and political reasons. As noted by Keeler, agriculture is complex and its units of production are widely dispersed, thereby increasing the incentive for the state to rely on the expertise of private groups. The move to a more activist policy after the reform of 1962 therefore encouraged the state to rely on the management skills of professional organisations. As Pierre Muller has commented, this informational dependence was exacerbated by Edgard Pisani's reform of the Ministry of Agriculture's bureaucracy in the early 1960s. When the state increased its intervention in the sector, this reform had created 'a veritable administrative void, since no one [in the bureaucracy] seemed to be in a position to take charge of the new policy of modernisation

...²⁰

Technical need is accompanied by two purely political considerations: avoiding social instability and (especially among rightist politicians) electoral competition. The capacity of French farmers to take to the streets in protest is well known. Yet among groups involved in the collaborative arrangement, only the FNSEA has demonstrated the ability to bring the farmers into the streets of Paris in massive numbers, displays of unrest that can make life difficult for any government. The mobilising capacity of the FNSEA constitutes one of its greatest advantages in competing with the other collaborative groups; neither the public APCA, nor any of the specialised associations, can effect this type of public protest. Whilst this social instability affects governments of any colour, the electoral calculation mainly concerns politicians of the Right, since farmers in the Fifth Republic have been notable for 'the extreme durability of their orientation towards the Right'.²¹ Christian Democracy is the shared ideology of the majority of professional leaders, but the neo-Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac has cultivated the farming electorate assiduously and with some success. So the competing parties of the Right have supported the collaborative system in an effort to increase their portion of the farming vote. During 1986-88, for example, Chirac wooed this electorate by renewing the trappings of close consultation, with an eye to the 1988 presidential election in which Centrist Raymond Barre had secured the endorsement of former FNSEA president Michel Debatisse.

The organisations have differing motives for taking part in the collaborative system, as discussed below, but all share a structural weakness specific to agricultural groups: their inability to block economic growth.

Because there are too many farmers anyway, and because they account for an increasingly marginal percentage of GDP, their only route to economic security is through the acquisition of political power.²² The political influence wielded by the groups through the competitive collaboration arrangement provides them with easy access to state officials in order to defend their particular interests within agriculture. In addition, a group's important role in implementation commissions may enable it to modify policy at the local level in accordance with its specific preferences. This latter consideration was evident in the attempt of the FNSEA and CNJA reformers in the 1960s to gain local control of structural policy through the SAFERs, as structural reform was central to their programme of modernisation. Lacking a credible threat to economic output, this sort of influence is the only way that groups can acquire power over policy-making.

The incentive structure that Keeler attributes to individual members is valid: in the absence of compulsory membership, some combination of material and purposive (shared goal-based) incentives is necessary to entice members to join groups. However, the reaction of different organisational leaderships to individual members' incentives will vary across organisational type. Thus the APCA is quite likely to be insulated from competition for members because it is publicly funded, and so compulsory: individual farmers have no choice but to join. The leaderships of the producer specialised associations will have a more narrowly economic focus than will that of the broadly-based FNSEA. These strictly economic groups lack the emotively charged 'peasant unity' which gives the FNSEA a unique mobilizing capacity. However, they may be better able than the general organisation to offer selective incentives (by having more expertise than a general organisation about the specific needs of producers), and are more likely to channel any biased influence directly to the benefit of their specific producers (rather than having to balance the interests of many different types of production).

The motives for a group's collaboration with the state vary as a result of these assumptions about leadership preferences. A publicly supported group like the APCA is not concerned about competitive advantages to insulate it from membership discontent since members have no option to 'exit' the group. The main goal of its elites, therefore, is to advance their policy preferences. Producer specialised associations also seek 'biased influence' in collaborative institutions that directly affect their product(s). They have to compete for members, in theory, but there are only a few producers of a given product (in comparison with the whole farming population), and econ-

omic interests diverge less dramatically within one type of production than across production types.²³ It follows that the principal competitors of the producer specialised associations will be the other producer specialised associations, each of which tries to maximise its share of the agricultural budget.

This variation of group type complicates the simplified incentives which Keeler ascribes to the FNSEA, biased influence and competitive advantage. Certainly, the latter remains important to a group like the FNSEA, which does face competitors in its own representational space. Thus a general group may trade restraint of its demands for material gain that allows it to restrict the ability of challengers to share this representational space. Yet in order to maximise its policy influence, it also has to compete with the types of groups discussed above, which do not compete directly for members with the FNSEA. This establishes two additional incentives for the leaders of the general union. First, they will want to maximise the general identification of members (as 'peasants' or 'farmers') rather than the strictly economic identification ('wheat growers'). If farmers lose their effective identity as 'farmers,' their economic interest will push them towards producer-specific orientation; the FNSEA would then be superfluous. Second, the FNSEA leadership does not enjoy the same autonomy from membership demands as does the 'compulsory' APCA, so its policy preferences are more likely to be influenced by discontent from below. Similarly, it lacks the homogeneity of economic interests of the specialised associations, so its preferences will be to maximise the income of a variety of production types. Clearly then, the collaborative organisations will have divergent policy preferences as a result of the different incentives facing their leaderships.

Yet there are at least two incentives common to the leaderships of every collaborative group: to maintain the privileged relationship, and to minimise the number of competitors in the policy community. The first incentive merely restates the imperative of agricultural organisations to acquire political power in the absence of economic blocking power. Having acquired institutional policy influence, they will want to maintain that advantage. Second, since groups do not have identical preferences, individual leaders will want to minimise the number of different policy positions pursued by leaders of other collaborative organisations; the quantity of spoils going to each member group declines as the number of member groups (with whom spoils must be shared) increases. Thus organisational leaders have an incentive to work together to maintain the collaborative system, and to prevent the expansion of the policy community. In particular, the maintenance of organi-

sational complementariness will be an important principle for groups that compete for members; that is, an individual group will be especially hostile to the admission of groups to the policy community that *compete within its representational space*. For this reason, the FNSEA reacted with particular fervour when Mitterrand's first Agriculture Minister, Edith Cresson, conferred officially representative status on the minority unions that contest the FNSEA's claim to represent all farmers.

The competitive interest group system thus favours the state in two ways: agricultural organisations need to participate in order to exercise effective political power, and the existence of multiple groups complicates the negotiating position of any single group. The groups' need to participate reduces the credibility of a threat to leave the system. In addition, the existence of multiple viable agricultural partners weakens further the threat of a single group's departure from the system. If there are several groups with the technical expertise and the legitimacy among the farmers to work within the collaborative arrangement, the value to the state of any one group's participation is reduced: the state can always rely on other organisations willing to co-operate.

This characteristic of competitive policy collaboration underlines the importance of unity among the competing groups. The groups do not have identical policy preferences for agriculture, yet they can exercise maximum influence in the system when they present a united front to the state. This suggests that the efficacy of the institutions for co-ordinating policies and arbitrating differences among the groups within the policy community will affect the degree to which the community can influence state policy. Consequently, for a group to acquire a dominant position in relation to its competitors, it must assume the co-ordinating role: limiting dissension within the community and agreeing a policy agenda based on the lowest common policy denominator among competing groups. The FNSEA approximated to this *primus inter pares* role during part of the 1970s, but never eliminated the competition that is the basic dynamic of the system. And as the following section will show, the events of 1981–88 reduced the FNSEA's ability to serve as the policy community's locus of co-ordination.

Before moving to the next section, it is important to differentiate the model proposed here from Keeler's neo-corporatism. Keeler argues that it is 'theoretically' possible to have a multi-group neo-corporatist system: is competitive policy collaboration just another name for multi-group neo-corporatism? It is hard to conceptualise a multi-group neo-corporatism, because the corporatist idea is fundamentally anti-competitive: a high density group co-operates with the state in return for the exclusion of other groups from the consultation and/or implemen-

tation process. The state takes part in the neo-corporatist arrangement in order to restrain the group's demands, a restraint for which it is willing to pay by granting the group monopoly representation privileges. Symmetrically, a dominant group trades off its freedom in making demands for the restriction of competition in a sector. By contrast, every assumption about competitive policy collaboration is based on the competitive nature of the system. The state participates because it can receive technical help, and actively manipulates the group competition to achieve its own goals. If the system is by definition competitive, then groups do not join primarily to restrict competition; the competition is a given, so their participation is primarily undertaken as a way to achieve their policy preferences.

The difference between the two approaches can be clarified, and empirically tested, by examining what happens when a central group (the neo-corporatist client) refuses to implement a policy. The neo-corporatist model predicts that interest intermediation between state and society will return to being essentially conflictual. As the system is bipolar (based only on the state and the single client group), the client group's refusal to participate in the system disables the collaborative arrangement (the group returns to proposing and protesting, the state to disposing). Competitive policy collaboration suggests that the state will rely on other groups in the system if one group refuses to implement a policy. The arrangement breaks down only if *all* the collaborative groups refuse to implement the policy.

COMPETITION IN THE 1980S

As noted previously, the reformers who gained control of the FNSEA in the mid-1960s were mainly livestock farmers. The staunchest opponents of these reformers were the specialised associations representing wheat and sugar beets (respectively, the *Association générale des producteurs de blé* [AGPB] and the *Confédération générale des planteurs de betteraves* [CGB]). The cleavage between livestock and these *grande culture* producers is the defining economic difference within French agriculture. Although the AGPB and the CGB have always been indispensable to the FNSEA for their large financial contributions, the livestock farmers outnumber the *grande culture* farmers, and they used this voting power to increasing effect during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus the FNSEA elevated the pursuit of high prices for animal products above that for cereals in 1969, and the early 1970s saw the establishment of funds supported by taxes on cereals that were aimed at helping livestock farmers.²⁴ The cereal farmers, who benefited from generous and com-

prehensive price support from Brussels,²⁵ could afford to contribute to livestock as long as their European bounty continued. This bounty underwrote a truce between livestock and *grande culture* farmers within the FNSEA, allowing the latter to play a co-ordinating role among the competing specialised associations.

The AGPB, outnumbered in the livestock-centric FNSEA in the 1970s and 1980s, has pursued administrative influence independent of the parent union. Former AGPB president Philippe Neeser claims that,

. . . the specialized associations, or in any case the AGPB and the AGPM [the corn growers' association], have a lot more contact than do the general organizations with the decision makers. . . . At Foreign Affairs, in . . . Foreign Trade . . . we have a range of relatively important contacts, which the general organizations do not have, through which we have dealt with several very specific subjects.²⁶

In 1985 the government would negotiate directly with the AGPB rather than with the FNSEA to draft a proposal for the reduction of European cereal prices.²⁷ Thus although the FNSEA has tried to provide an arena for co-ordination of policies among the specialised associations through its economic and co-ordinating commissions, the most important associations have maintained independent policy strategies and contacts with the administration. And once the unlimited CAP subsidies that supported co-operation between livestock and *grande culture* came under pressure for reform, the FNSEA role as arbiter became less tenable.

The election of François Mitterrand in May 1981 jolted the agricultural interest-group system. Developed by FNSEA dissidents, the Socialist Party's (PS) pre-election platform had promised to introduce 'union pluralism' by recognising the minority unions that competed with the FNSEA, directly challenging the union's claim to incarnate peasant unity. A major institutional innovation advocated by the PS was the project of the *office par produits*, originally conceived as instruments for the *planification* of agriculture that would bring together representatives of an entire type of production (farmers, co-operatives, and consumers of, say, wine). The justification of the *offices par produits* was the argument that different types of agricultural producers have different needs, which was a further institutional denial that any one union could represent all farmers.

The tenure of Edith Cresson, Mitterrand's first Agriculture Minister, was marked by her unwillingness to work within the collaborative system, a system she frequently attacked. In response to the direct challenge to his group's monopoly of its representational space, FNSEA

president François Guillaume orchestrated demonstrations across the country, including a Paris demonstration in March 1982 of between 60,000 and 100,000 farmers. These demonstrations put pressure on Mitterrand and the government, thereby weakening their support for the proposed reforms of PS agricultural activists. Yet it was more significant that the sweeping reforms of the party programme were not supported by any group within the policy community. The APCA, for instance, rejected the programme because parts of it were incompatible with the CAP. Because Cresson's initial proposals were so ideologically charged, and because her conflict with Guillaume polarised the community, she was unable to deliver the radical prescriptions of the PS programme.

However, even under Cresson the collaborative system never broke down completely, and she was able to engineer a significant institutional change. Although the initial plans for a radical redesign of the collaborative institutions in agriculture foundered, the *offices par produits* (much weakened from the grand design of the original PS blueprint) were finally created in March 1983. Their two basic functions were to disburse CAP payments to the farmers and to implement national measures within their specific types of production. The board of each group was weighted so as to give the representatives of the profession – drawn from the specialised associations – the largest single bloc of votes. The breakdown of the managed market into specified sectors of production bolstered the authority of the specialised associations *vis-à-vis* the FNSEA, formally recognising the different needs of different types of production. Whilst the management of the *offices* is largely a technical matter, it is precisely on technical matters that the agricultural organisations have acquired their discretion over policy implementation during the Fifth Republic.

One important policy initiative of the Cresson team that did work within the system was the convening of the *Etats Généraux d'Agriculture* in 1982–83. The goal was to elucidate an alternative agricultural model, one not based solely on the link between productivity and profits (like the FNSEA model). One of the planners of the *Etats Généraux* described the strategy: 'It was necessary to find a way to circumvent the FNSEA. . . . it could have taken place only by making an appeal to the base. It was at root an appeal to the base against the [FNSEA] hierarchy'.²⁸ Appealing to the base involved conducting meetings at the village and regional levels from May to December 1982, in order to aggregate opinions that were to be considered at a national session in March 1983. The FNSEA originally supported the idea, but then dropped out in February 1983 on the

grounds that it was not given enough time to speak. The APCA supported the project, and the presence of its top two officers at the national finale, prompted a *Le Monde* reporter to speculate that Guillaume's '*jusqu'au boutiste* opposition to the Government of the Left seems in the future likely to be little appreciated by the other agricultural *notables*.'²⁹

Certainly the achievement of the *Etats Généraux* should not be overstated: although successfully held, its recommendations remained a dead letter. The importance of the event is the way in which Cresson managed it, with the help of the collaborative organisations. When the FNSEA refused to continue, she was able to rely on the APCA. Agreeing to work within the collaborative system, rather than rejecting it outright, allowed her to minimise the impact of FNSEA opposition to her policy goals. Cresson's tenure was unsuccessful by most measures, and certainly by its own objectives laid out in the party programme. Yet that failure was not due to the blocking power of the FNSEA, but to the initial attempt to circumvent the entire collaborative system.

Cresson's successor, Michel Rocard, was appointed to appease the farmers and the FNSEA's leadership. This he did by reversing some of the privileges extended to the minority unions, and by recognising the FNSEA's pre-eminent role among agricultural unions at the national level. Yet the key policy decision of Rocard's tenure concerned the CAP: on 31 March 1984 the European Council of Agriculture Ministers agreed to limit CAP support for milk production by imposing quotas on each Community country. This decision represented the end of unlimited production possibilities for French farmers, who had previously been able to sell all their milk for a guaranteed price through the CAP.

The correct policy response to the structural over-production of the CAP had been a point of contention between the APCA and the FNSEA since 1980, when the APCA had publicly supported limitations of production as the only way to maintain a European agricultural policy. The FNSEA continued to reject any reform that would entail 'limiting the volume of production'.³⁰ When FNSEA president Guillaume refused to assist in the implementation of the milk quotas, therefore, the government turned to the APCA to advise it on questions of implementation.³¹ The milk producers' association (FNPL), initially shared the FNSEA's opposition to the quotas, but by adjusting to the group's demands that the most efficient producers be given special consideration, the government convinced the FNPL to assume a key role in the implementation of the quotas.³² The institutional conduit for this role at the national level was the newly created *office par produit* for milk (ONILAIT), and at the local level the dairy sections of the

departmental *commissions mixtes*. The FNPL was able to substitute for a recalcitrant FNSEA at both the national and local levels, due in part to the sectoralisation of market management through the *offices par produits*.³³

The example of the milk quotas contradicts the neo-corporatist hypothesis that refusal of a key client group to participate will return the system to one of conflictual interest intermediation. The multi-polar system posited by competitive policy collaboration reflects the reality much more accurately: the state relies on other groups in the face of refusal by a key group to co-operate. The leadership incentives discussed in the previous section are also evident in this case. Constrained by its need to retain members, the FNSEA was unlikely to be able to lead the unpopular transformation of the CAP system. The APCA, which has no need to respond to membership discontent, has more flexibility in adopting its policy positions. A factor for which neither model can account, however, is the intense opposition of François Guillaume to all co-operation with the government. Particularly after Rocard's recognition of the FNSEA's status as foremost union of French agriculture, the unwillingness of Guillaume to be more compliant is surprising, from the standpoint of organisational interest considerations.

The root of Guillaume's opposition was his dislike of the government of the Left. He espoused a rejection of the enlargement of the Community long after it was a *fait accompli*. He led the FNSEA to oppose a reform of agricultural education that had wide support among the agricultural education organisations, charging that these reforms were products of 'an ideology that in matters of education proclaims the necessity of creating "a unified and secular national education system"'.³⁴ As a *Libération* reporter commented, 'his "no to the quotas" has been transformed into an ultra-hard position against "the administrative management" of the system by "the Socialists"'.³⁵ This partisan opposition probably reduced Guillaume's capacity to restore the coordinating role of the FNSEA in the policy community.

Guillaume's two-year stint as Chirac's Agriculture Minister bore witness to the differences among the agricultural organisations. His attempt to eliminate the *offices par produits* ran into the opposition of producer groups. His proposed law on modernisation, which would have modified the assumptions of the *lois d'orientation* of 1960 and 1962, divided the APCA (which advocated the pursuit of a two-speed agriculture) and the FNSEA (which clung to the family farm as the central productive unit of French agriculture).³⁶ The period was particularly demoralising for the FNSEA, as its former leader proved unable to

implement the demands he had made as union leader, and both Guillaume and current FNSEA president Luc Guyau have expressed frustration with the quality of dialogue between the Minister and his former union colleagues.³⁷

By the end of Mitterrand's first *septennat*, the central role of the FNSEA among agricultural organisations had been weakened. The sectoralization of market management through the *offices par produits* had increased the policy role of the specialised associations. The limitations of European agricultural production further threatened the unity which had depended on the willingness of the cereal farmers to support poorer livestock farmers. The dogmatic, anti-Socialist leadership of François Guillaume weakened the ability of the FNSEA to co-ordinate the policy positions of different groups in a pragmatic, management-orientated policy community. Although the FNSEA remained the only group in the policy community capable of organising large-scale public protests, its ability to serve as a *primus inter pares* of the policy community was severely hampered by these factors.

CONCLUSION

This article has challenged the applicability of the neo-corporatist paradigm to French agricultural interest groups. It has put forward instead an alternative model, competitive policy collaboration, which approximates more closely to the reality of agricultural politics in France. The special place of the FNSEA in this system is not denied, but its classification as a neo-corporatist client is rejected. All groups within a competitive community have an interest in limiting the state's ability to manipulate the competition among them, so institutions for policy co-ordination may exist, but they will be unstable because the competitive dynamic remains. The FNSEA's co-ordinating commission for the specialised associations and the *Conseil de l'agriculture française* (CAF)³⁸ offered a forum for group co-ordination during the 1970s, but the need to reform the CAP and the sectoralisation of market management in the 1980s reduced the capability of such bodies to restrain group competition. The FNSEA, the former *primus inter pares* of the agricultural organisations, suffered the greatest relative loss of influence, since it had led the co-ordination of policies in the 1970s.

Whilst the model offers a clear improvement over neo-corporatism for explaining French agricultural politics, its broader analytical applicability is questionable. Competitive policy collaboration depends on a constellation of interest group factors that is highly unusual, if not unique. The abundance of viable representative agricultural groups is a

product of French history that most other countries do not share; several officials interviewed during my research commented on the comparative 'embarrassment of riches' that France possesses in the domain of agricultural interest groups. It is this multiplicity of viable social partners that has enabled the state to collaborate closely with agricultural groups without becoming dependent on any single group. The structural power position of the state in this arrangement may apply to other declining or marginal sectors of the economy, but the combination of political and technical factors that drives politicians to protect (or to be seen to protect) their countries' farmers is probably unique to agriculture.

Although the model may be specific to French agriculture, this analysis can contribute to the development of theories of interest group politics in the advanced industrial democracies. Certainly, this study provides no succour to the battered pluralist paradigm, as the 'state-as-neutral-arbiter' assumption does not hold: the state is an active, partisan player in competitive policy collaboration. The more important point is that interest group involvement in the policy process does not necessarily equal neo-corporatism. Neo-corporatism comprises a set of assumptions about organisational characteristics and motives, assumptions which are not all present in every client-state relationship. The attempt to finesse this fact by establishing a continuum extending between neo-corporatism and pluralism blurs the analytical issues. Having neither neo-corporatism nor pluralism does not mean that state-society relations must fall somewhere in the middle. Instead, the elements of interest group politics may require further disaggregation: interest group politics is multi-dimensional, and discerning analysis should reflect this.

NOTES

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1. For example, Frank Wilson, *Interest Group Politics in France* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987); Andrew Cox and Jack Hayward, 'The Inapplicability of the Corporatist Model in Britain and France: The Case of Labor', *International Political Science Review* 4/2 (Summer 1983), pp.217-40.
2. John T.S. Keeler, *The Politics of Neocorporatism in France* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p.8; emphasis in original.
3. *Ibid*, p.11.
4. *Ibid*, p.9; emphasis added.
5. *Ibid*, pp.13-15.

6. Ibid, p.259; emphasis in original.
7. Ibid, p.261.
8. Pierre Coulomb and Henri Nallet, 'Les organisations syndicales à l'épreuve de l'unité', in Yves Tavernier *et al* (eds), *L'Univers politique des paysans dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1972), p.405.
9. In 1955, *e.g.*, more than half of French farms were smaller than ten hectares and more than a third were smaller than five hectares; Pierre Barral, *Les Agrariens Français de Méline à Pisani* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1968), p.303.
10. Keeler (note 2), p.113.
11. Pierre Muller, *Le Technocrate et le Paysan* (Paris: Les Editions Ouvrières, 1984), pp.123-4.
12. Keeler (note 2), p.114.
13. Christiane Mora, 'Les Chambres d'agriculture et l'unité paysanne', in Tavernier *et al* (note 8), pp.524-7.
14. François Colson and Jacques Rémy, 'Le développement: un enjeu de pouvoir', in Pierre Coulomb *et al.* (eds.), *Les Agriculteurs et la Politique* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1990), p.199.
15. The relationship between leaders of the APCA and of the FNSEA can be quite co-operative. Most of the APCA leadership is affiliated with the FNSEA, and the organisations even shared the same building in Paris until 1982. Not much work has been done on the sociological differences between the elites of the two organisations; the one available study found that APCA elites are more likely to own large farms, be older, and to be local *notables* than are their FNSEA counterparts. Sylvain Maresca, *Les dirigeants paysans* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), pp.238-42.
16. Keeler (note 2), p.118.
17. 'Le financement public du CNJA et de la FNSEA et le nombre réel de leurs adhérents', *Nouvelles Campagnes* (Nov. 1982), p.26.
18. Cour des Comptes, 'Le développement agricole', *Rapport au Président de la République* (1985), p.20.
19. This is not to say that there is not an effort to influence policy at the European level. In 1959 the *Comité des organisations professionnelles agricoles* (COPA) was formed to bring together European agricultural groups to lobby the European Commission. The FNSEA, the CNJA, and the APCA are all members of the COPA. The COPA has thus far been hampered by the disagreements among member organisations from different countries. Cf. Jacob A. Buksti, 'Bread-and-Butter Agreement and High Politics Disagreement', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 6 (1983), pp.261-80.
20. Pierre Muller, 'La politique agricole entre corporatisme et management', *Pour* 102 (Sept.-Oct. 1985), p.35.
21. Daniel Boy and Elisabeth Dupoirier, 'La stabilité du vote de droite des agriculteurs: facteurs d'explication', in Coulomb *et al.* (note 14), p.578.
22. Claus Offe, 'The Attribution of Public Status to Interest Groups: Observations on the West German Case', in Suzanne Berger (ed.), *Organizing Interests in Western Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), p.146.
23. Of course, small wheat producers may have different preference orderings than large wheat producers. Yet both have an interest in high relative cereal prices, which unites them against milk producers.
By 'representational space' I mean the area of nominal interest which a group claims to represent. Thus the FNSEA claims to represent 'peasant unity,' but espouses policies (*e.g.*, its position on structural policy) that have generated dissident movements on both the Left and the Right. Although conceivable, it is hard to imagine the wheat growers' policies generating the dissenting critical mass among wheat growers (on the Left, say) to create an alternative movement.
24. François Clerc, 'FNSEA-CNJA: les conflits de l'unité', in Coulomb *et al.* (note 14), p.340.
25. Thus in 1967-68, money from the CAP support budget accounted for 17-19 per cent of the final value of wheat and sugar beet production (and 55 per cent of oilseed

production) in the Community, whereas it accounted for only 1 per cent of the final value of pork, and 7 per cent of the value of milk production (the latter figure later increased). Even at the beginning of the 1980s price supports still accounted for almost two-thirds of the revenue of cereal farmers, but for only 20 per cent of the revenue of beef farmers. This economic disparity was one of the causes of the leftist union movements that broke away from the FNSEA in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These groups never supported the collaborative system, and only after Mitterrand's election was there an attempt by the government to bring them into the system. These groups are largely excluded from this account, since they are not central to the argument. Cf. Bernard Lambert, *Les paysans dans la lutte des classes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970) and Rose-Marie Lagrave, 'Les gauches syndicales (MODEF, CNSTP, FNSP)' in Coulomb *et al.* (note 14), pp.355-69; Pierre Coulomb and Hélène Delorme, 'Une politique agricole peu commune', *L'Etat de la France* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1985), pp.328-9.

26. Interview, 23 April 1992.
27. Coulomb and Delorme (note 25), pp.328-9.
28. Interview, 27 Dec. 1991.
29. 'La FNSEA a boycotté les états généraux du développement agricole', *Le Monde* (11 Feb. 1983).
30. Marcel Marloie, 'Débat Nord-Sud et régulation de l'offre', in Coulomb *et al.*, (note 14) p. 120.
31. Interview with two senior APCA officials, 22 April 1992.
32. Interview with Rocard's *conseiller technique* for the supervision of the milk quotas, 9 April 1992.
33. The organisation of dairy co-operatives (FNCL), also played an important role in the implementation of the quotas. Cf. Denis Hairy and Daniel Perraud, 'Crise laitière et quotas', *Cahiers d'Economie et Sociologie Rurales* 7 (2nd trimester, 1988).
34. *L'Information Agricole* 554 (Feb. 1984), p.8.
35. D. Pourquéry, 'Ne dites pas à François Guillaume qu'il fait de la politique, il est syndicaliste', *Libération* (28 March 1985).
36. Claude Servolin, *L'Agriculture Moderne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989), p.272.
37. Guillaume interview, 22 April 1992; Guyau interview, 15 April 1992.
38. The CAF provides a monthly forum for the co-ordination of policies among the *quatre grandes* organisations of French agriculture: the FNSEA, the CNJA, and the confederation of the agricultural economic services (the CNMCCA); the APCA's public status prevents its formal membership of the CAF, but it is represented unofficially at most functions.