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Review of *The Failure of National Rural Policy:
Institutions and Interests* by William P. Browne

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The Failure of National Rural Policy: Institutions and Interests. William P. Browne. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001. xv+202 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$54.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

William Browne argues that there is a distinct bias in US policy, one that privileges farmers and results in the neglect of nonagricultural rural problems. He locates the source of this pro-farm bias in the influential political power block created when farm interests mobilized and successfully pushed for the creation of the Department of Agriculture and other institutions that collectively form the Agricultural Establishment. The farm paradigm for rural development came to dominate policy talk so completely that competing rural policy paradigms were quickly dismissed. Declining rural communities and the growth of rural poverty were dealt with indirectly and ineffectively through attempts to bolster the farm economy. The problems of nonfarm rural residents and rural communities with significantly

declining employment opportunities in farming were left without policy attention.

Although Browne does not single out the Great Plains for specific attention, his concerns are clearly relevant to the region's rural communities. Great Plains states have suffered from a decline in rural population resulting, at least in part, from the extensive mechanization of grain production. The substitution of capital for labor significantly reduced employment opportunities in farming, which in turn meant fewer customers for the small businesses in rural communities. When these began to fail, the economic health of many rural communities took a nosedive.

Browne argues, correctly in my view, that the government's attempt to deal with the faltering economies of rural communities almost exclusively through farm policy is seriously misguided. Changing technology has irreversibly reduced employment opportunities in agriculture. Less than 10 percent of rural residents now live on farms and ranches. Furthermore, an economy heavily dependent on agriculture is vulnerable to the recurrent farm crises that plague American agriculture. In the Great Plains region, continued emphasis on grain production and the associated dependence on export markets make local economies highly vulnerable to wild swings in grain commodity prices. What is needed is more sustainable, stable economic development. Agriculture can certainly play a role in that development, but it cannot be the only role. Rural communities must build a more diversified employment base.

The book's strength lies in the persuasive documentation and explanation of the pro-farm policy bias Browne critiques. As a political scientist, he provides an excellent account of the emergence, development, and maintenance of this policy bias and moves on to discuss what is needed to gain passage of a bill that truly addresses the developmental needs of rural America (chapter 12).

But a few caveats are necessary. First, Browne's conversational style may annoy some readers. For example, when he refers to the tendency of administrators and politicians to talk endlessly of problems rather than act on them, he writes "Blah, blah, blah," noting later that some groups see the Agricultural Establishment as a "collective pain in the ass." Second, there are several harsh judgmental statements about farmers that lack much in the way of documentation. He writes, for instance, that farmers who settled in the frontier were "long on aspirations and short on specific and useful talents," claiming that "hopes, not introspective insight into their skills, drove them." He speaks of these early farmers' "inherited and often earned

resourcelessness” and refers to them as “inexperienced amateurs” and “social misfits.” In short, he seems to place much of the blame for the agricultural crises that have plagued the nation periodically since the 1800s on the incompetence of farmers, which smacks of blaming the victim. Ample evidence indicates that agricultural crises have been rooted in overproduction rather than in farmers’ low productivity or incompetence.

Caveats aside, for readers interested in the decline of rural America and the government’s inaction, Browne’s book is a worthwhile read. **Donna Barnes**, *Department of Sociology, University of Wyoming*.