

THE ORIGIN OF THE FEDERAL FARM LOAN ACT: AGENDA-  
SETTING IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA PRINT PRESS

by

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A DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines and documents the origin of the Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916 (FFLA). Two related hypotheses are explored. The first hypothesis (H1) concerns the proximate origin of the FFLA. H1 suggests that rural credit reform emerged in 1912 as a viable public policy issue only after the business and farm press favorably presented the idea of looking to European models of privately financed, cooperative rural credit. The second hypothesis (H2) concerns the rising importance of agenda-setting by the press as a defining characteristic of the survey period. H2 suggests that between 1907 and 1916 the print press became the preeminent tool for the cultivation of public opinion on matters of national public policy.

The methodology blends the study of institutional change over time, a centerpiece of American political development (Political Science and History), with the study of press

agenda change over time, which is central to agenda-setting (Journalism). This interdisciplinary approach yields a new methodology described in the dissertation as historical agenda-setting. A systematic approach to a key variable, the press, provides the basis for a new periodization. The data sources include primary and secondary historical texts, as well as three multiyear surveys of the business, farm, and farm-organization press during the period between 1907 and 1916.

The findings are supportive of the two major hypotheses. Given the validity of H1, which is supported by evidence in each of the empirical chapters, H2 is the most compelling explanation of the origin of the FFLA. The press was a powerful, though blunt, factor in the formulation of Progressive Era agrarian policy options. Rural credit reform emerged in the press as part of a wider mobilization of urban reformers with a newly acquired interest in agriculture. For these agenda-setting actors, farm credit rarely stood alone. Rather, it was an integral part of broader-ranging concerns about the future of the American economy and food supply.

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