



Can Dems unlock rural votes?

DEMOCRATS NEED a political lifeline in rural America—and President Biden may have thrown them one by promising to fix a range of problems in the agricultural markets via his executive order on competition.

The order aims to fight the consolidation of agribusiness that farmers and ranchers complain raises the costs of seed, equipment, feed, and fertilizer, and reduces the number of firms in the market for their products. The White House noted that four companies dominate the seed industry and four meatpackers control 80 percent of the beef market.

If the administration succeeds, Democrats might see a big political payoff in 2022 and 2024—which they need. The Pew Center reported that President Trump’s rural vote rose from 59 percent in 2016 to 65 percent in 2020, and the share of white rural voters who supported Trump rose from 62 percent to 71 percent in that time. Democrats also lost several rural House seats.

Biden’s order directs the Agriculture Department to write rules for the circa-1921 Packers and Stockyards Act to make it easier for farmers to bring and win claims against meat companies they say engage in unfair competition. It also aims to prevent chicken processors from exploiting and underpaying chicken farmers.

The order further directs USDA to reconsider rules allowing beef from many countries to be labeled “Product of USA” as long as it was processed in the U.S., and to develop a plan to increase opportunities for farmers to access markets and receive a fair return. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced Friday that USDA would spend \$500 million to expand meat- and poultry-processing capacity. And the White House included tractors and other farm equipment in a directive to the Federal Trade Commission limiting manufacturers’ use of proprietary repair tools, software, and diagnostics, which restrict people’s ability to fix items or use independent repair shops.

Farm groups long critical of U.S. agricultural policy were quick to praise Biden’s executive order. They included the Democratic-leaning National Farmers Union; Farm Aid, the group founded by Willie Nelson and other musicians; R-CALF USA and the United States Cattlemen’s Association, which have long favored strict country-of-origin labels for red meat; and the Organization for Competitive Markets, a producer-rights group.

“Not since Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt has a president taken on corporate power to this extent. This will likely be Biden’s legacy as it was theirs,” said Joe Maxwell, the president of Family Farm Action Alliance.

In a sign that the issues resonate with conservatives, the Republican-leaning American Farm Bureau and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association praised the order. Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall said that “it’s time to get to the bottom” of low cattle prices while grocery prices rise, and limiting who can repair robotic milkers and high-tech combines “drives up costs and increases downtime.”

But Julie Anna Potts, CEO of the North American Meat Institute, which represents processors, said, “These proposed changes will open the floodgates for litigation that will ultimately limit livestock producers’ ability to market their livestock as they choose. These proposals have been considered and rejected before and they are counter to the precedent set in eight federal appellate circuits.”

The National Pork Producers Council, which represents producers and processors, said it “opposes any regulations that interfere with pork-producer rights to freely enter contractual business relationships.”

To see both sides of the argument, look no further than the poultry industry.

Steve Etko, who represents contract chicken growers, said the order “shows that the interest in addressing the harms suffered by the nation’s livestock and poultry farmers goes all the way to the top,

to the president himself. This gives Secretary Vilsack the clear green light to perfect and finalize the work he started on these issues during the Obama administration.” But National Chicken Council President Mike Brown called it “a solution in search of a problem” and added that it was “surprising” given Biden’s longtime support of Delaware’s chicken industry.

The questions now are whether the administration will back up its competition promises and if any new rules can withstand legal challenges. The Obama administration rewrote Packers and Stockyards regulations, but finished the project so late that the Trump administration stepped in with a rule that Etko said provided “legal safe harbors for meatpackers, swine contractors, and poultry companies to continue using unfair and abusive practices with impunity.”

Now that voters in nearly every rural district support Trump’s populist strain of GOP politics, rural Democrats have nowhere to go but up. They hope that Biden’s efforts on competitiveness can give them an initial lift. □



A Biden order would make fixing farm equipment easier.

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