

Abstract

The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is one of the most important and also one of the most controversial of the European Union's (EU) policies. It has seen quite a few incremental reforms. However, none of these or previous reforms have brought radical improvements to the EU's agricultural policy. What is puzzling about this absence of radical reform is that (a) in all these instances of incremental reform "usual suspects" and most obvious beneficiaries from status quo—farmers and their lobbying organizations—have not had a decisive influence on the outcome of these reforms (Cunha and Swinbank 2009), (b) the EU's decision-making procedures have changed considerably—consensus requirement being replaced by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)—greatly reducing the number and strength of veto players who and (c) public opinion survives show well citizens are nearly all oblivious about the EU's agricultural policy which would make it difficult to argue that absence of radical reform is due to the will of the people (The Commission 2010). As some observers have noticed, '[i]t would therefore be logical to expect much more significant policy adjustments than were observed' (Swinnen 2014, 138). Hence the question why is the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) so resistant to radical reform? This paper theorises why this might be the case and tries to determine which of the three institutions (the European Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament) is the most pro-reform and which most status quo minded. Empirical evidence from the most recent 2013 reform of the CAP was used to determine that the European Parliament—and especially its agricultural committee (COMAGRI)—is the most status quo minded and sympathetic to the farm lobby's concerns. The Council of the EU comes next on the "conservativeness" scale. The European Commission itself turned out to be most reformist, at least in terms of its incremental reform proposal details. These results contribute to the new political economy field's understanding on how 'institutions evolve through time and why institutions that produce poor economic (and political) performance can persist' (North 1994, 12).