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# Exploring domains of contemporary Australian agrarianism

Journal of Sociology

2023, Vol. 59(2) 385–402

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DOI: 10.1177/14407833211044772

journals.sagepub.com/home/jos



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## Abstract

The idealisation of rural work, people, and communities is remarkably persistent in Western countries. With the diminishing role of agriculture in national economies and changing values, this agrarian sentiment could be expected to lose currency. Yet, agrarian tropes and narratives remain evident in popular culture, political discourse, and public policy. Flinn and Johnson, in the 1970s, pioneered empirical studies of agrarianism based on a regionally specific and relatively small sample from which they identified five tenets of agrarianism. We sought to develop a survey instrument to explore whether changes in societal values, and in the structures and practices of agriculture, mean these tenets no longer hold. We find that, overall, many of the key elements identified by Flinn and Johnson are still evident. In addition, we have identified three domains of agrarianism: foundationalism, ruralism, and stewardship, that represent some of the historical diversity of agrarian themes and some accommodation with environmentalism.

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**Keywords**

agrarianism, agriculture, countrymindedness, rural sociology, rural values

Across Western culture, agricultural producers and rural communities hold a special status. Since at least as early as Aristotle, farmers have been considered to embody particular virtuous characteristics, and this sentiment has continued into the present. It is manifest not only in favourable representations in art, literature, and popular culture, but also in special treatment in policy terms that recognises agriculture's exceptional status as an economic activity. The idealisation of agrarian life is sufficiently fluid and amorphous that it has been appropriated by a diverse range of ideologies and value sets, from support for colonial settlement (Appleby, 1982), through to slavery (Thompson, 2018: 60), populist political movements (McMath, 1995), and criticisms of industrialism and modernity (Berry, 1977, 2001). Its sentiments have been attached both to radical reform movements and to movements that are clearly socially conservative, if not reactionary, and espoused by classes from the landed gentry to the French peasantry.

Reflecting this fluidity, agrarianism has been described as a 'multifarious concept that defies simple definition' and involves 'imprecise' value judgement (Beus and Dunlap, 1994: 463), but a number of empirical studies have proposed and found identifiable elements which suggest that agrarianism has some core features that provide it with the characteristics of a 'cultural truism' (Berry et al., 2016; Beus and Dunlap, 1994; Buttel and Flinn, 1975, 1977; Cockfield and Botterill, 2012b; Coughenour and Swanson, 2002; Craig and Phillips, 1983; Dalecki and Coughenour, 1992; Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Maio and Olson, 1998). These elements are invariably about the special roles of agriculture in economies, societies, and cultures, and encompass the veneration of agricultural work and life, with a particular focus on small-scale family farmers. In sum, agrarianism is a set of broadly held values and beliefs that attributes to agriculture, farmers and their communities a particular set of virtues and characteristics that distinguish them, in a normatively desirable way, from urban people, communities and occupations.

In recent decades, however, there has been considerable policy movement to reduce government intervention in the agricultural and rural sectors, over a period that has been categorised as post-exceptionalist (Daugbjerg and Feindt, 2017; Greer, 2017; Sheingate et al., 2017; Tosun, 2017; Trebilcock and Pue, 2015). That is, the period of exceptionalism, roughly from the 1950s to the 1980s, in which the forms and amounts of assistance to agricultural industries were extensive, has been partly superseded. There are still many support programs, especially in the European Union and the United States, but total support on a per farm basis has declined since the mid-1980s and there is an increased use of indirect (non-commodity) support mechanisms (from an analysis of data for selected developed countries at OECD, 2020). This is driven by trade agreements and domestic budget pressures, perhaps along with the diminishing role of agriculture in the economy, which is providing very little direct employment and less and less of total export value for industrialised countries.

Along with this, farm numbers are declining and rural areas are generally depopulating (review of 65 years of data for selected developed countries, United Nations Population Division, 2018).

In light of the trend to larger-scale and industrial agriculture, the ‘normalisation’ rhetoric needed to justify policy retrenchments (that agriculture should be treated similarly to other sectors), and the dominance of urban populations, it might be expected that agrarianism would lose its influence as a value set. However, this does not seem to be the case. Work from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s provides evidence of the persistence of agrarian sentiment (Beus and Dunlap, 1994; Buttel and Flinn, 1975, 1977; Craig and Phillips, 1983; Dalecki and Coughenour, 1992; Danbom, 1991; Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Molnar and Wu, 1989). More recent surveys from Australia (Berry *et al.*, 2016; Cockfield and Botterill, 2012b) found that agrarian sentiment was not only evident, but widespread and strong. This was despite Australia having undergone relatively rapid and extensive policy normalisation (*i.e.* not exceptional) (Cockfield and Botterill, 2012a). Some of this work sought to identify the impact of structural change and ideological influences, such as environmentalism, on agrarianism (Berry *et al.*, 2016; Beus and Dunlap, 1994) but there is much room for further investigation.

This article reports on research undertaken in Australia to identify the features of agrarianism in the 21st century. Our objectives were: to review conceptions and measurements of agrarianism; to improve quantitative empirical research on agrarianism; and to test the validity of the original and revised elements of agrarianism in contemporary Australia. The survey instrument we developed and the techniques for deriving an agrarian ‘index’ are, we believe, transferable to other settings, with appropriate adaptations, to allow for comparison over time and between countries.

Our study builds on a series of surveys in Australia since 2009 (Cockfield and Botterill, 2012b; McAllister, 2009), that were in turn derived and adapted from Flinn and Johnson (1974), the Kellogg Foundation (2001) and European research (European Commission, 2008). We undertook some preliminary testing of items addressing possible post-materialist concerns about natural resources protection and animal welfare. This was followed by a small survey of attitudes to rural land use that allowed for further testing of the agrarian values questions subsequently incorporated into Wave 1 (2013) of the Regional Wellbeing Survey (RWS), a survey of health, wellbeing and life in regional, rural and remote Australia (Schirmer and Berry, 2014). The results of this latter project showed that agrarianism is a clear, definable, scientifically quantifiable concept that is broadly accepted across Australian society (Berry *et al.*, 2016). We now extend this work through a deeper examination of the core domains of agrarianism, in a new dataset using a refined sampling approach and measurement instrument.

In the present study, we further defined and quantified modern Australian agrarianism generally, and also identified three empirically and conceptually distinct domains of agrarianism. The first domain we term ‘foundationalism’, in that the items relate to agriculture being at the base of the economy (production) and society (the family farm and the contribution of agriculture to society), including an emphasis on food security and quality. The second factor, which we term ‘ruralism’, relates to the perceived beneficial

lifestyle aspects of agriculture. The third domain, 'stewardship', is about the perceived care that farmers take of natural resources and livestock.

## **The elements of agrarianism**

The elements or themes of agrarianism have deep roots in Western civilisation (Montmarquet, 1989). Thompson (2018: 59) proposes three base elements. First, there is the special role of food in survival and culture. Second is the idea from Classical Rome and especially Greece, of an association of farm households with loyalty and citizenship (Thompson, 2018). This is also evident in Jeffersonian thought, in which the very real attachment to land engendered a desire to support civil society and the norms of democracy (Griswold, 1946). Third is the Physiocratic notion that wealth creation was based on agriculture (Charbit and Virmani, 2002). The social and political role of the farm household develops into the idea of the family farm as the centrepiece of agrarianism (a theme investigated by Molnar and Wu, 1989). Another common element is anti-urbanism, with objections to the physical aspects of cities (Azadi et al., 2012), their association with modernity (Berry, 1977), or their supposed dominance of political power (Aitkin, 1985).

While elements of classical romanticism and anti-urbanism are evident in the narratives of many Western countries, colonial settlement histories may also contribute to the formation of national variants of agrarianism. The United States and Australia, for example, developed from settler capitalism, based on vast expanses of what would have been considered 'unused' land waiting to be cultivated by European farmers (Craig and Phillips, 1983: 411). We do note, however, that this excludes consideration of land use by the indigenous populations of the United States, Australia and other countries and does not mean to minimise the contribution agricultural interests, capitalist or otherwise, have made to the dispossession of indigenous people throughout history (Butler and Ben, 2020; Mayes, 2018; Nash, 2019).

Thus, agrarian narratives were strongly associated with the economic, social, and even political development of nations. In Australia, agrarianism has been further embedded in the nation's identity through its entanglement with its other nation-building, military myth of the ANZACs (Botterill, 2006).

Jefferson assumed that contemporary 18th-century agriculture was 'derived from the Romans' and that the study of classical literature could provide considerable insight into how the agricultural realm should be approached (Wilson, 1981: 347). The works of Virgil and his poem, the *Georgics*, may have been influential (Wilson, 1981). The *Georgics*' hero, *Agricola* (which means 'farmer'), is an 'honest, happy, industrious, virtuous, and independent farmer' (Wilson, 1981: 348–9), who epitomises the virtues associated with modern and ancient agrarianism alike. *Agricola* is:

neither the slave of subsistence nor the animal that survives by struggling instinctively. Voluntarily, and with a genuine Roman glory, he blazes the trail to abundance, confident that his efforts will enable himself and his fellow men to live well and to live on. (Bowie, cited in Wilson, 1981: 349)

This, Wilson argues, is the ‘essence of Jefferson’s agrarianism’, but his philosophy was also informed by his experiences of the first Industrial Revolution (1750–1850) (Deane, 1979: vii), with which his life (1743–1826) was roughly contemporaneous. He was opposed to industrialisation in America (Wilson, 1981: 339), and encouraged farmers to ignore both it and urbanism (Flinn and Johnson, 1974: 188). This disdain for the ‘modern’ continues to be a defining feature of contemporary agrarianism, which tends to regard urban life as, at best, ‘inferior’ (Craig and Phillips, 1983: 410).

The Australian variant of agrarianism, ‘countrymindedness’, shares many of the characteristics of its counterparts elsewhere. In his summary, derived from interpretations of political, cultural and media texts, rather than survey work, Aitkin (1985) captured similar sentiments to those found in Flinn and Johnson’s work, including the juxtaposition of the virtuous rural against the corrupt and decadent urban, the wholesomeness of agricultural activity, and the importance of agriculture as the foundation of Australian society. Countrymindedness in the political sphere is strongly associated with the existence of the rural National (previously Country) Party, which uses agrarian imagery rhetorically to distinguish itself from the city-based parties (see Botterill, 2006 for examples).

By the 1870s, deficiencies in the idea that a society based on a network of small farms was economically feasible were starting to become evident. Contemporary politicians were, however, reluctant to acknowledge the changing economics of agriculture and the frequent lack of success by many of the settlers. A number of ‘closer settlement’ (including ‘soldier settlement’) schemes were pursued through the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries that made land and credit available so that people could establish themselves as farmers, with the ultimate goal of ‘[populating] the land with yeomen and producers of food’ (Lake, 1987: 16).

The desire for a countryside populated by yeomen had a strong moral element to it. Donald Mackinnon, a Victorian state politician, was quoted in 1904 as saying that ‘the history of all countries shows that the occupying peasantry or yeomanry are the very salt of the community, and should be encouraged in every possible way’; and there was an additional pseudo-scientific and racial element to these arguments, which argued that the (white) Australian ‘race’ would not survive if it were concentrated in the ‘cancerous’ cities of Sydney and Melbourne, which were accused of ‘slackening’ and ‘destroying’ the national fibre (Lake, 1987: 18–19).

During the 20th century, Australian governments gradually changed their approach to, though not necessarily their rhetoric about, agricultural policy, recognising that an industry based on small holdings was unlikely to succeed, and that much of Australia had a physical environment ill-suited to small, intensive (as opposed to large, extensive) farms. Later policy reflected this, particularly from the 1970s onwards as farming started to lose its protected status and farms began to be treated more like businesses (Pritchard, 2005). However, the ‘virtuousness’ associated with the yeoman farmer lived on in popular culture, and farmers continue to command a great deal of respect from mainstream Australian society.

In contemporary political discourse, agrarian sentiment is invoked in a range of ways. Politicians continue to present farmers as morally virtuous and economically productive (Bettles, 2015), but a third narrative theme has emerged, possibly as a reaction to farmers being criticised by some groups for the environmental impact of farming. This relates to

the way farmers manage their land and is typically invoked by praising farmers for being 'environmental stewards'. The prominence of this idea is evidenced by the 2014 Agricultural Competitiveness Green Paper, which unequivocally states that 'family farms are the best stewards of the land because they've been on it for generations and care about maintaining it for future generations' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014: xi).

## **Accessing agrarianism**

Probably the best-known attempt at identifying the components of modern agrarianism appears in the work of Flinn and Johnson (1974). They undertook an analysis of the editorials in US farm journals published between 1850 and 1969, developing an 'agrarian' scale that informed a survey of Wisconsin residents. From this work, and a review of earlier literature, they described the following five 'Tenets of agrarianism' (Flinn and Johnson, 1974: 189–94):

1. 'farming is the basic occupation on which all other economic pursuits depend for raw materials and food';
2. 'agricultural life is the natural life for man [sic]; therefore, being natural, it is good, while city life is artificial and evil';
3. farming delivers 'complete economic independence of the farmer';
4. 'the farmer should work hard to demonstrate his [sic] virtue, which is only possible through an orderly society'; and
5. 'family farms have become indissolubly connected with American democracy'.

Inferences that can be drawn from Flinn and Johnson's work are somewhat constrained by methodological limitations. The development and analysis of the survey items were not robust by modern standards; the sample is limited geographically; and those surveyed were all farm operators, so it is not entirely surprising that they saw their occupation in such a positive light, both as a personal undertaking and as a contribution to the economy and society. Nevertheless, Flinn and Johnson's contribution has been described as 'an influential article' (Beus and Dunlap, 1994) and has been the basis for further work by one of the original authors with a colleague (Buttel and Flinn, 1977) and others, including in an Australian setting (for example, Craig and Phillips, 1983).

Even if Flinn and Johnson's tenets of agrarianism were valid in the early 1970s, it is plausible that they are not the same now, or not as strongly held now given the rise and influence of post-materialist concerns such as environmentalism and animal rights. It is therefore a question for empirical investigation whether the agrarianism described by Flinn and Johnson (1974) has survived into the 21st century, or whether its component values have shifted over time to incorporate or respond to other important value sets. Such shifts may have significant policy implications. For example, if broad public support for farmers has declined relative to that for environmental or animal welfare outcomes, farmers may be subject to additional regulation.

The present research seeks to build on and update Flinn and Johnson's methods and tenets of agrarianism in three ways. First, we aim for more robust sampling and more sophisticated measurement approaches and statistical analysis. Second, we consider a

wider range of possible factors and ideological influences, particularly post-materialist concerns about the environmental impacts of agricultural production and animal welfare on farms. Buttel and Flinn (1977) extended Flinn and Johnson's agrarianism survey work to include consideration of amenity and environmentalism, identifying a more bucolic and middle-class idealisation of the country which they termed ruralism. In this study, they found that ruralism overlapped to a small degree with environmentalism among middle-class social groupings in their sample. We explicitly sought evidence of whether these post-materialist values may be related to the strength of agrarian sentiment. We also discuss if and how our survey instrument, findings, and definition may be transferable to other settings.

## Measures of agrarianism

Participants in the present survey reported their level of agreement with 13 (initially 15) 'agrarian' items. These items were extensively pre-tested in a general community sample before final refinement for the present study. Responses to each item were recorded on a 7-point Likert-type response format from '*Strongly disagree*' to '*Strongly agree*'. Each item and the mean level of agreement is shown in Table 1.

Items 1 to 4 are about the role of agriculture in providing the essentials of life and items 5 to 6 are derived from the Physiocratic idea of agriculture as the base of the economy. These items form the conceptual domain of 'foundationalism'.

Items 7 to 10, invoking ruralism, resemble one-half of Flinn and Johnson's second tenet of agrarianism that 'agricultural life is the natural life for man [sic]; therefore, being natural, it is good, while city life is artificial and evil', and Aitkin's characterisation of 'countrymindedness' that 'Farming and grazing, and rural pursuits generally, are virtuous, ennobling and cooperative; they bring out the best in people' (Botterill, 2009b: 62).

Items 11 to 13, stewardship, reflect environmental and welfare concerns not captured in earlier definitions of agrarianism. They explore the way farmers are perceived to have, or not, incorporated post-materialist concerns about agriculture into their production practices.

Items 14 and 15 did not fit any particular conceptual domain.

Each of the three proposed domains captures a distinct aspect of Australian agrarianism. As we have noted above, the features of agrarianism identified in the existing literature suggest that it is held across Western cultures in a very similar form. The first of the identified domains, foundationalism, has, as mentioned, developed in part from Physiocratic ideals. That agriculture is the foundation on which the Australian economy was built is an idea with considerable currency among the population. This can be seen in the phrase 'riding on the sheep's back', which refers to Australia's past economic dependence on wool exports to generate income. This phrase was not originally intended to be complimentary but has since been used to express praise for the farmers who enabled Australia to become a wealthy country (Beilin, 2015).

The second domain, ruralism, refers to the intrinsic moral benefits agriculture provides to both farmers and, by extension, those who support farmers. It proposes a vision of rural life where 'humankind can commune with one's innermost aspirations and escape the stress and turmoil of urban living' (Wadley and Falk, 1993: 338).

**Table 1.** Survey items collected and participants' mean level of agreement grouped by agrarianism domain

Agrarianism item	Mean	Std Dev.
<i>Foundationalism</i>		
1. Australians depend on farmers to produce safe and clean food	6.06	1.10
2. Australian farmers make an important contribution to feeding the world	5.98	1.13
3. Australians depend on farmers to produce the food we need	5.88	1.20
4. The family farm is the backbone of rural Australia	5.74	1.21
5. Australians depend on farmers to produce the fibre we need	5.68	1.22
6. The development of agriculture in Australia has helped shape the nation	5.83	1.13
<i>Ruralism</i>		
7. Farming is a natural, wholesome occupation	5.59	1.21
8. A farmer's lifestyle is something money can't buy	5.21	1.33
9. Working in agriculture brings out the best in people	4.99	1.24
10. Almost all other occupations depend on agriculture	5.00	1.42
<i>Stewardship</i>		
11. Australian farmers look after their animals well	5.47	1.20
12. Australian farmers take care of the environment	5.22	1.27
13. Australian farmers use mostly sustainable farming practices	5.13	1.33
<i>Items which did not fit any domain</i>		
14. Farming is a healthy occupation	5.37	1.31
15. Agriculture is the most basic occupation in our society	4.46	1.73

The third domain, stewardship, refers to an appreciation of the environmental and animal welfare benefits farmers provide through farming. There is a moral element to stewardship, and it is not the same concept as that to which more technical terms such as 'natural resource management' refer. The agrarian stewards, by caring for their land and livestock, ennoble not only themselves but also others who participate in the food system (Thompson, 2010: 82), and this may well include consumers. Consumers may, by engaging with agrarian stewards, be able to 'produce virtue [for themselves] in a vicarious manner' (Thompson, 2010: 82). However, for consumers to be able to appreciate this value, they must be convinced of the benevolence of farmers. Narratives that emphasise the dispassionate and industrial nature of modern farming run directly counter to the notion of stewardship (Mayes, 2014: 271).

## Methods

Data for the present study were taken from the Australian Rural Values dataset collected in 2015 as part of a larger survey of rural values and views about farming, farmers, and their place in modern Australian society. Respondents were 1,450 adults aged 18 years and over who consented to complete an anonymous online survey. Rural and

remote-dwelling Australians were sampled to comprise two-thirds of respondents and, to provide an adequate comparison group, the remaining one-third of respondents was drawn from Australia's major metropolitan centres.

Survey respondents were asked to provide some basic demographic data. The median age range of respondents was 40–44 years, somewhat older than the national median. The median annual household income band was AU\$ 50,000–75,000 (US\$ 40,000–60,000), compared to the Australian national median in 2016 of about AU\$74,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This was expected, as rural incomes are typically lower than those in urban areas. The sample had higher levels of educational attainment than Australian norms. Just 3.9% of participants had completed year 9 schooling or below (indicating that they had not completed junior high school), while 34% had completed years 10–12 (junior to senior high school), 29% a post-school certificate or diploma, and 33% a tertiary or higher degree. This bias was expected: though rural populations in Australia tend to have lower average education levels than do city-dwellers, survey respondents tend to be more highly educated generally, and online recruitment of panels (as used in this study) can also result in the recruitment of a sample that skews to the more highly educated (Craig et al., 2013).

To assess any relationship between agrarianism and political orientation, participants were also asked: 'Which party would you vote for if a Federal [national] election were to be held in the coming week?' The sample included a higher proportion of 'other' and a lower proportion of coalition party voters compared to first preferences observed at the 2016 election (Australian Electoral Commission, 2016). While electoral voting may not provide a comprehensive understanding of respondents' political views, it provides an accessible, and we believe useful, means of identifying high-level differences between survey respondents. It also allows us to determine whether agrarian sentiment is 'owned' by any particular party, which has implications for policy debate (see for example Nelson and Garst, 2005) and the potential for constraint on policy options available to both sides of politics (Botterill, 2016).

There are four reasons for testing this relationship. First, in Australia rural voters generally strongly favour parties to the right of the political centre, of which the main two at the national level are the Liberal Party and National Party which work in an almost permanent coalition (Botterill, 2009a). Nevertheless, their supporters are distinct, with the National Party representing agrarian views, while the Liberal Party is a mix of economic libertarians and social conservatives. Second, the National Party is that rare thing, a rural party in a developed country democracy, and it has particularly promoted and championed country-mindedness (Aitkin, 1985). Third, the Australian Labor Party, though it has its origins in the rural working class, now tends to be the most urban of the major parties and has a stronger association with sectors other than agriculture. Fourth, the Greens, a relatively minor but enduring party that describe themselves as 'neither right nor left but out in front', is a party that is generally regarded as left of the Labor Party (Manning and Rootes, 2004) and is most strongly associated with concerns about the environment and animal welfare, and therefore often seen as antithetical to farming practices.

Some have argued that the centrality of agrarianism to the National Party in Australia may be waning, particularly in some regions and with regard to support for extractive industries (Cockfield, 2020, 2021; Cockfield and Curtin, 2018). This is an important

ideological shift but detailed discussion of it is outside the scope of this article, which is primarily concerned with specifying discrete domains of agrarianism.

## Analytic approach

All statistical analyses were performed in Stata v13.1 (64-bit). We first conducted an initial examination of the 13 agrarianism items (i.e. excluding the two items that did not fit any of the conceptual domains) via an exploratory factor analysis using the *factor* command in Stata and the *principal factor* option. Because there were some small cross-loadings in the solution, we applied an orthogonal (varimax) rotation to maximise the variance between factors, making any domains of agrarianism more distinct. This produced an indicative three-factor structure which we tested using one-factor congeneric modelling, a component of structural equations modelling that provides a confirmatory and rigorous test of the factor structure of the items (Berry and Shipley, 2009). We used the asymptotic distribution free method because our data were non-normally distributed and skewed to the right of the distribution; other structural modelling methods assume normality of distribution.

Having fitted the one-factor congeneric models, we used the accurate factor weightings derived from the models to predict estimated factor scores for each model (i.e. a unique score for each respondent for each of the three identified domains of agrarianism). To make the presentation of results clearer the estimated (predicted) factor scores were normalised to range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater support for the relevant domain. We compared the mean scores for domains of agrarianism by voting intention, attitudes to farmers and farming, ownership of farmland, gender, rural or urban location of residence and age group using a one-way ANOVA and Bonferroni multiple-comparison tests.

## Results

Factor loadings for variables used in the exploratory factor analysis indicated three domains of agrarianism. For each factor, the variables loading on that factor were used to create the input (unfitted) models for the one-factor congeneric modelling.

The first factor we term Foundationalism, in that the items relate to agriculture being at the base of the economy (production) and society (the family farm and the contribution of agriculture to society), including an emphasis on food security and quality. The second factor, which we term Ruralism, relates to the lifestyle aspects of agriculture. The third domain, Stewardship, is about the perceived care that farmers take of natural resources and livestock.

The one-factor congeneric model for Foundationalism fitted the data without modification (modelling details available from the corresponding author) and reflected the existing notion that farmers and farming make an important contribution to Australia and other countries. Each of the six items loaded approximately equally on the factor indicating that no single item (i.e. no particular aspect of Foundationalism) dominated the definition of

Foundational agrarianism. Because the unfitted models for Ruralism and Stewardship were 'saturated', they did not have enough degrees of freedom to estimate simultaneous equations. We therefore fixed the smallest error term in each model, creating an extra degree of freedom so that the models could be fitted. In the Ruralism model, the error term for the 'working in agriculture brings out the best in people' item was constrained at .42. In the Stewardship model, the error term for the 'Australian farmers take care of the environment' variable was constrained at 0.23. In the final fitted models for Ruralism and Stewardship, all items loaded strongly on their domain factors. In each case, there was one item loading more strongly than the others and, thus, most strongly reflecting the core meaning of the domain. For Ruralism, it was the notion that working in agriculture brings out the best in people; for Stewardship, it was that Australian farmers take care of the environment.

There was widespread support among respondents for all three domains of agrarianism (Table 2). Foundationalism was the most widely endorsed domain, followed by Stewardship and, with least widespread endorsement, Ruralism. There were small gender differences in the degree of endorsement of the foundational, ruralism and stewardship domains of agrarianism. People living in rural and remote locations more strongly endorsed all domains. Those intending to vote for political parties considered more to the right of Australia's political spectrum more strongly endorsed the Ruralism and Stewardship domains of agrarianism, though there were smaller differences in relation

**Table 2.** Normalised mean predicted agrarianism domain scores and standard errors by gender, voting intention and location of residence.

	n (%)	Foundationalism		Ruralism		Stewardship	
		Mean	Std Err.	Mean	Std Err.	Mean	Std Err.
<b>Gender</b>							
Female	710 (49)	0.80	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.71	0.01
Male	740 (51)	0.81	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.71	0.01
<b>Voting intention</b>							
Liberal National Party	78 (5)	0.87	0.01	0.76	0.02	0.76	0.02
Liberal Party	307 (21)	0.83	0.01	0.69	0.01	0.75	0.01
National Party	68 (5)	0.80	0.02	0.72	0.02	0.73	0.03
Country Liberal Party	37 (3)	0.74	0.02	0.71	0.02	0.70	0.03
Total: Coalition parties	490 (34)	0.83	0.01	0.71	0.01	0.74	0.01
Katter's Australia Party	23 (2)	0.88	0.02	0.78	0.03	0.78	0.03
Labor Party	454 (31)	0.80	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.70	0.01
Greens	137 (9)	0.78	0.01	0.62	0.02	0.63	0.02
Other	346 (24)	0.80	0.01	0.68	0.01	0.70	0.01
Total: Non-Coalition parties	960 (66)	0.80	0.01	0.67	0.01	0.69	0.01
<b>Location</b>							
Rural	961 (66)	0.82	0.00	0.69	0.01	0.72	0.01
Urban	489 (34)	0.79	0.01	0.67	0.01	0.69	0.01

to Foundationalism. Those intending to vote for the Greens also endorsed all domains of agrarianism but were significantly less likely than those with any other voting intention to agree with the Ruralism and Stewardship domains.

Unsurprisingly, people living in rural and remote locations held to agrarian sentiments significantly more strongly than did their urban peers, but the differences were minor. Also, as expected, those who intended to vote for the right-leaning parties also tended to have significantly but, again, only slightly higher scores than did those intending to vote for the Labor Party and, especially, the Greens.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

There was generally high support for agrarianism across the political spectrum and differences between groups based on voting intention and attitudes to farmers were small. This study thus provides additional evidence that agrarianism is alive and well in modern Australia. Our detailed analysis extends previous work to indicate the existence of three distinct sub-domains within the overarching concept of agrarianism which we have labelled Foundationalism, Ruralism and Stewardship. Foundationalism reflects the historical core nature of agrarianism, capturing the tangibles of agriculture: the idea that farming has historical importance and delivers the basic necessities of life, combined with attachment to the family farm as the backbone of rural Australia. It is about what agriculture produces and, by extension, its role in sustaining rural communities, the latter being achieved by the family farm in a way that corporate agriculture would not. Foundationalism is the most strongly supported of the three domains and this may be context-specific, reflecting the history of agricultural activity in Australia since European settlement. It certainly is more aligned with prevailing economic structures than with the anti-industrialism of the New Agrarians (see for example Berry, 1977, 2001).

The Ruralism domain focuses on the intangible benefits of agriculture: the moral and socially desirable aspects of farming, as reflected in the existing literature, along with farmers' special connection to nature. This notion has also had a long history of political and cultural reinforcement. The use of romanticised agrarian imagery in Australian culture illustrates the ongoing resonance of this domain in the Australian community and may help explain its appeal across the political spectrum. Television programs, advertising, and political rhetoric all tap into these sentiments and perpetuate the myth – particularly the focus on rural life as more desirable than urban pursuits.

The Stewardship domain is newer, reflecting, perhaps in unexpected ways, post-materialist concerns about land management and the humane treatment of production animals. We had anticipated that growing environmental awareness would be reflected in a greater level of rejection of the relevant survey items. But, other than among those with Green (pro-environment) voting intentions, we found no evidence to suggest that Australians believe that farmers cannot be trusted with managing land sustainably, a position closely associated with farmers' own discourse around their stewardship role. Our Stewardship domain is similar to the European sentiment towards the

environmental benefits of farming, although not as strongly endorsed. A Eurobarometer survey found that ‘a large majority of EU citizens agree[s] that agriculture [...] helps to preserve and protect rural areas (89%), and is beneficial for the environment (81%)’ (European Commission, 2012: 4). This suggests that agrarianism in Europe, as in Australia, has not changed radically in response to the rise of post-materialist values relating to the environment.

Through this study, we have enriched the understanding of agrarianism in Australia and its associations with important and relevant political attitudes and our findings have implications for other nations. For example, jurisdictions which have also made a transition to greater concern about land management and animal welfare may extract from our work insights about the acceptability of proposed changes to agricultural policies with respect to various local sub-populations.

Importantly, we have also developed and tested a comprehensive, statistically valid and reliable measure of three distinct domains of agrarianism, together with validated items testing relevant political attitudes, that can be used in future research in Australia and perhaps elsewhere. Of particular benefit, our measure is brief so that it can be included in survey research that includes other measures of interest (such as economic attitudes, health and wellbeing, or social values).

We conclude that there exists in modern Australia a value set that can be identified as ‘agrarian’ and that it contains subtle but importantly distinct domains. The practical usefulness of these will need to be tested in future studies; using our survey items and approach in other settings could provide a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which agrarianism is context-specific and how it matters.

Agrarian values and beliefs are rarely explicitly articulated in general or political debate, but they colour many aspects of social life, from formal public discourse to popular culture and politics. The influence of agrarianism on policy making is particularly visible when Australia is experiencing drought, when Australian governments almost invariably make special funds available to affected farmers (Department of Agriculture, 2015), and non-government organisations spontaneously appear to offer help (Clausen, 2013). For example, in 2019, the federal government announced the establishment of a Future Drought Fund with an initial investment of AU\$ 3.9 billion to grow to \$5 billion over the subsequent decade. Notably this announcement was ‘on top of the Government’s \$2 billion in additional drought initiatives [...] already previously announced’ (Morrison, 2019).

The existence of agrarian sentiment across voting intentions and party allegiances highlights the fact that agrarianism is a form of ‘cultural truism’, that is, a belief that is ‘widely shared and rarely questioned’ (Maio and Olson, 1998: 294). The values that citizens hold inform their voting choices and are at the basis of ideologies. These then are translated by political parties into policy positions that prioritise some societal values over others (Botterill and Fenna, 2019). A cultural truism such as agrarian sentiment transcends political divisions because it is so widely held and, consequently, results in the social construction of particular groups as worthy of differential support and respect. This then constrains the options available to policy makers and results in largely bipartisan policy responses, an outcome that is evident in Australian rural policy (Botterill, 2016). Put crudely, no political party is going to

be mean to farmers while its supporters hold positive sentiments towards them and their communities.

Agrarian beliefs are held broadly across demographic groupings, rural and urban locations and political ideologies – essentially, everyone is pro-farmers and farming. From an agricultural policy and general fiscal perspective, agrarianism can result in criticism of inequitably generous assistance for farmers being stymied (Botterill, 2006), irrationally favourable attitudes towards increasing assistance to farmers (McAllister, 2009) and incremental, bipartisan pro-farmer policy making which reflects the widespread nature of support for farmers across the community (Botterill, 2016). Despite Australia being an early and relatively enthusiastic deregulator of agriculture, leading to some of the lowest rates of financial support to farming in the OECD (OECD, 2020), enduring public endorsement of agrarianism ensures that governments will continue to implement policies that provide disproportionately generous support to farmers and their communities, particularly in the face of events that are framed as ‘exceptional’ to the sector, such as drought.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

This research was supported under the Australian Research Council’s Discovery Projects funding scheme (Project Number DP140100311).

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