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The JAE's Positioning Within Agricultural Economics: A Text-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

On the occasion of the centenary of the Agricultural Economics Society, this study investigates the positioning of the *Journal of Agricultural Economics* (JAE) within the broader landscape of the main agricultural economics journals. We employ a quantitative text analysis approach, estimating a Structural Topic Model (STM) on a unique corpus of 13,140 abstracts from the JAE and six leading peer journals covering the period 1970–2024. Our results suggest that the JAE shares common trends with its peers, such as an increasing segmentation and specialisation of the topics addressed, and a commensurate growth in the use of specialised techniques, such as causal identification and experimental economics. At the same time, features differentiating the JAE from the other journals emerge as well. These include a strong focus on production issues and agricultural policy, as well as on the environmental and natural resource implications of production decisions. This contrasts with the relatively lower attention devoted to food and nutrition aspects, despite greater focus on consumption dynamics, in line with a general trend in the discipline. Overall, this analysis highlights that the JAE maintains a strong connection with core aspects of the discipline, while differentiating itself in specific areas of investigation.

1 | Introduction

The agricultural economics discipline has undergone profound changes over the last half-century, mirroring broader shifts in the global economy, human societies and the agricultural sector itself. Tracking and studying these changes has always attracted the interest of scholars, as understanding the history of a discipline can reveal insights not only about its past, but can also inform present and future perspectives. If that is true for a discipline, it may well be so for a journal.

On the occasion of the centenary anniversary of the Agricultural Economics Society (AES), the present contribution aims to provide a picture of how the journal of the *Agricultural Economics Society* is positioned within the agricultural economics discipline. To reach our purpose, we adopt a dual perspective, trying

to analyse the content of the journal both on its own merit and relative to other major journals in the agricultural economics field.

On the one hand, we hope to shed light on how the ‘segmentation’ of British agricultural economics, which, according to Giles (1987), took its first steps in the 1970s, is proceeding. On the other hand, in a world where agricultural economics issues have assumed an increasingly global dimension and the scientific community is increasingly interconnected (Abdulai and Mishra 2020; Lybbert et al. 2018), our analyses might help identify the distinctive traits of the JAE in addressing the discipline's main themes.

In doing so, we follow a similar approach to the one adopted by Lybbert et al. (2018) in their contribution for the 100th volume of

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the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, where they prioritised the presentation of the observed quantitative evidence and trends over their interpretation.

In line with our overall purpose, we structure the contribution around three objectives. First, we analyse the agricultural economics topics discussed in JAE and their evolution over time. Second, we compare the trends observed in the JAE with those prevalent in other journals of the discipline. Finally, we investigate the evolution of methodological approaches used in the study of agricultural economics in the JAE and in the other sectoral journals.

2 | Strategies to Investigate Topical Coverage

There are multiple ways to delve into the content of a discipline and analyse its evolution over time. The most traditional one is probably to delegate this task to distinguished senior scholars, who, leveraging their knowledge and expertise, can provide an overview characterised by what Giles (1987) defined as an ‘architectural flavour’. These contributions can span over the whole agricultural economics sector, as in Zilberman (2019), or focus on the role played by specific associations or journals, as done by McCalla et al. (2010)—who focused their attention on the activity of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association—and by Harvey (2024)—who bases his thoughts and classification on his role as editor of the JAE. In any case, according to this approach, direct (and usually long-term) experience is often the necessary ingredient for providing complete and insightful evidence and reflections.

Some strategies, however, have emerged that try to systematise the investigation of the topical coverage of the discipline. One such strategy is the study of selected and relevant documents that are believed to capture the evolution of the discipline's interests over time. Such an approach was used, for example, by Blandford (2026), who tried to piece together the most prominent aspects of agricultural economics through the analysis of the presidential addresses to the AES. In a similar vein, Di Falco et al. (2023), for the 50th anniversary of the *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, investigated the content of the five top-cited articles in each of the last five decades.

Another common tool for investigating the topical content of a journal is the use of classification codes, such as the *Journal of Economic Literature* (JEL) codes. These codes provide a pre-specified classification that conveniently allows monitoring the number of published research documents pertaining to different categories, thus tracing the evolution of the importance of different agricultural economics aspects over time. This approach was used by Lybbert et al. (2018) in analysing the topical content of the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* on the occasion of its 100th volume. Abdulai and Mishra (2020) adopted the same strategy for retrieving the topical coverage in the 50th volume of *Agricultural Economics*.

The use of JEL codes introduces a quantitative approach into the mapping of scientific disciplines. Such an approach is further advanced by the use of machine learning techniques for the analysis of text and, among these, by the estimation

of topic models, which, compared to JEL codes, allow greater flexibility, as they do not rely on a pre-specified set of categories. Polyakov et al. (2016), for example, used a topic model to provide a quantitative assessment of long-term trends of research published in the *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*. In a previous work (Ceï et al. 2022), we used a topic model to map the development of agricultural economics based on the content of the discipline's most relevant journals. In the present contribution, we follow a similar strategy and, building on our previous work, we focus specifically on the JAE.

Given the availability of different methodological paths, it is important to be aware of the implications of choosing one over the others. Among the strategies illustrated here, the use of JEL codes, for example, might be problematic for long-term analyses—these codes were created in 1990 and some journals started to use them even later—unless some methods are devised to classify previous articles (as in Lybbert et al. 2018). The study of a selected set of documents provides results that are inherently dependent on the choice of selection criteria (Di Falco et al. 2023). Traditional analyses from leading scholars might depend on specific individual experience and might become less precise when the time frame is overly extended into the past or to aspects that are more distant from the scholar's field of expertise. Topic models, while potentially solving these issues, might not be able to capture finer and more subtle trends and aspects that can be appreciated by a more qualitative type of investigation.

Overall, therefore, we tend to agree with Harvey (2024) that the outcomes of systematic analyses are not necessarily more insightful than traditional, experience-based discipline mapping. However, in our view, these methods can act as a complement to architectural perspectives and act as a stimulus for potential debates around the resulting evidence and trends.

3 | Methodological Approach

3.1 | Bibliographic Data

Our analysis is based on 13,140 article abstracts from the leading journals in the agricultural economics field. The selection of the journals replicates the one in Ceï et al. (2022) and includes, in addition to the JAE, *Agricultural Economics* (AE), the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (AJAE), the *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* (AJARE), the *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics* (CJAE), the *European Review of Agricultural Economics* (ERA), and *Food Policy* (FP). The abstracts, retrieved from Scopus, span over the period 1970–2024, as no abstracts were available before 1970 (Table 1).

3.2 | Agricultural Economics Topics

For the identification of the topics addressed in our corpus of documents, a Structural Topic Model (STM) was estimated,¹ which allowed us to cover the first objective—to analyse the agricultural economics topics discussed in the JAE and their

TABLE 1 | Number of abstracts per journal per decade.

Decade	JAE	AE	AJAE	AJARE	CJAE	ERAE	FP	Total
1970s	221	0	370	0	122	0	127	840
1980s	277	70	607	0	149	69	350	1522
1990s	294	386	900	77	249	212	389	2507
2000s	264	450	954	249	267	168	393	2745
2010s	384	672	647	327	263	231	976	3500
2020s	223	292	376	197	134	225	579	2026
Total	1663	1870	3854	850	1184	905	2814	13,140

evolution over time—and the second one—to compare the trends observed in the JAE with those prevalent in other journals of the discipline—of our contribution.

In text analysis, a topic is defined as ‘the constellation of words that tend to come up in a discussion [...] whenever that (unobserved and latent) topic is discussed’ (Mohr and Bogdanov 2013). In practice, topics are operationalised as collections of words that frequently co-occur in a set of documents.

STM, as illustrated by Roberts et al. (2014), assumes a generative process that, starting from a pre-defined distribution of topics and pre-defined topic-specific distributions of words, builds each document in the corpus. Walking back this process through an Expectation–Maximisation algorithm allows retrieving, starting from the documents, the original topics and word-topic distributions.

Compared to previous topic models such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (Blei et al. 2003) or Correlated Topic Model (Blei and Lafferty 2007), STM offers convenient features to exploit additional document information. Specifically, it is possible to model both the topical prevalence—the proportion of the different topics in the corpus—and the topical content—the frequency of specific words within the topics’ words distribution—using relevant document characteristics. In this study, we used the year of publication of the documents as a covariate in modelling topical prevalence, while the publication decade was used to model topical content.² This choice allows us to observe possible shifts in research interest (topical prevalence) depending on short-term circumstances, whereas capturing shifts in vocabulary and discourse (topical content) requires, from a methodological perspective, broader temporal aggregations.

The STM algorithm returns, for each identified topic, a frequency distribution of words that are used by the researcher to name each topic. In addition, it provides estimates of document-level topic proportions, as each document is considered to contain multiple topics. By aggregating the document-level topic proportions, we obtained the overall prevalence of each topic in all seven considered journals.

The comparison between journals was performed in two stages. First, a cluster analysis was conducted, using the journal-specific topical prevalences. For this analysis, a clustering algorithm combining hierarchical clustering and k-means clustering

was used. In the second stage, the average prevalence of each topic in the JAE was compared to the average prevalence in the identified clusters.

3.3 | Methodological Approaches

To address the third objective—to investigate the evolution of methodological approaches used in the study of agricultural economics in the JAE and in the other sectoral journal—an analysis of the articles’ keywords was performed.

Methodological keywords, namely keywords directly referring to methodological aspects and tools, were initially identified manually from the whole set of keywords. These keywords were then classified into 12 non-mutually exclusive categories, identified a priori and representing broad classes of methodological approaches. Specifically, the following methodological approaches were considered: *Bayesian methods*, *Causality*, *Demand systems*, *Deterministic model techniques*, *Endogeneity*, *Experiments*, *Heterogeneity*, *Production functions and frontiers*, *Spatial econometric techniques*, *Time series models*.

Documents in the corpus were thus assigned to the methodological categories based on their keywords. The importance of each category was measured yearly as the share of documents pertaining to that category over the total number of documents.

4 | Results

4.1 | Agricultural Economics Topics in the JAE

Once the model structure is defined, the first step of the topic modelling analysis is the selection of the optimal number of topics. This selection was performed following the approach suggested by Roberts et al. (2014), which consists of a first evaluation of different models based on quantitative metrics followed by an inspection of the researchers. In line with this approach, we built STM models with 7–30 topics, obtained the relative exclusivity and semantic coherence values, and estimated the exclusivity-coherence frontier using a second order polynomial function.³ This procedure led to the exclusion of 15 models that laid below the frontier. The remaining 9 models were inspected based on the most frequent and most exclusive words, leading to the selection of the model with 22 topics.⁴

To name the topics, we analysed the most frequent terms of each topic to get a preliminary understanding of their content. To refine the naming, we ordered the documents for each topic by estimated topical prevalence, and we read the titles and abstracts of the first 30 documents.⁵

Table 2 lists the identified topics and their average prevalence in the JAE in the period of analysis, along with a brief description, the most frequent words, and a small list of representative JAE articles for each topic. The trends in topical prevalence are illustrated in Figure A1 in the Appendix.

The three most prevalent topics in the JAE are *Agri-food governance and institutions*, *Methodological aspects* and *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections*. Two of these topics are actually quite broad in their scope, and are often based on what Di Falco et al. (2023) define as ‘observational empiricism’. The topic *Agri-food governance and institutions* contains a multifaceted combination of both formal and informal regulatory frameworks and informal or organisational arrangements. On the one hand, it encompasses ‘hard’ institutional dimensions, such as international trade agreements, legislative harmonisation, and property rights. On the other hand, it features ‘soft’ and meso-level institutions governing supply chains and agricultural markets, including cooperatives, strategic alliances, and agricultural extension or advisory networks. *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections*, instead, contains critical analyses reporting on the growth of the agricultural sector, mainly at a macro-scale, as well as reflections on the role and development of agricultural economics as a discipline. These topics, while sometimes heterogeneous in their content, seem to be characterised by a broad approach to issues facing the discipline. Not surprisingly, both these topics were prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, but progressively declined in importance over time.

Conversely, the prevalence of *Methodological aspects* remained almost constant during the last 50 years, albeit with some decline in more recent years. This topic is mostly related to studies investigating advancements in the methods of analysis used by agricultural economists and, in general, to the practice of giving due attention to methodological issues. Its long-lasting importance seems to validate the observation of Harvey (2024), who presents the JAE as a publishing venue traditionally emphasising scientific rigour and methods.

Another prominent field of research is production economics, which, in the estimated classification, is divided into *Farmers’ decision-making*, *Production efficiency* and *Production factors*. Considered together, these topics account for 18.5% of the content of the JAE corpus, highlighting the traditional focus of the journal on production aspects. This attention appears to have survived the changes in the discipline. In fact, a gradual increase in the attention devoted to the drivers and the effects of farmers’ choices in multiple aspects of their professional life is observed, from the adoption of specific production techniques and production processes—here including those aimed at environmental and natural resource preservation—to the selection of different farm structures, and decisions concerning the management of farm human capital.

On the other hand, the importance of demand studies has been historically limited. Together, *Demand analysis* and *Consumer preferences* account for roughly 6% of JAE content. However, in line with the general trend in the discipline (Ceï et al. 2022), this importance has progressively increased over time, especially as a consequence of the steep growth of *Consumer preferences*, whose prevalence more than doubled during the last 20 years (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). Now, the study of demand and consumer preferences is comparable in prevalence to other core topics of agricultural economics, such as *Trade*, *Price dynamics* and *Market and supply chain*, which were historically given more importance in the JAE. However, the gap with production analyses remains considerable.

Looking at other topics gaining importance over time, it is worth mentioning *Trade*, *Public programmes* and *Household income*. The evidence on *Trade* seems to contrast the observation of Harvey (2024), who highlighted a decline in the importance of this topic between 2004 and 2022. However, recent events on the international stage (including the COVID pandemic in 2019, the war in Ukraine in 2022, and the recent increased level of protectionism) may well have spurred a renewed interest in the topic. *Public programmes*, which evaluate the effects of several (mostly public) interventions on the agricultural sector, seem to pick up the evaluation of agricultural and environmental policies (*Agricultural policy*), a topic particularly prominent after the major Common Agricultural Policy reforms of the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, the growing importance of *Household income* highlights the increased study in the JAE of income conditions in less developed countries, which mirrors the evolution of this topic in the agricultural economics journals most similar to the JAE (see the next section).

Interestingly, inquiring into the content of this latter topic, a strong geographical and development dimension emerges, deriving from the focus on less developed countries. Such a development dimension is present in multiple topics, including *Farmers’ decision-making*, *Property rights market instruments and the environment*, and *Agri-food governance and institutions*. This pattern suggests that the discussion of agricultural development follows two approaches. On the one hand, especially in the past, wide development paradigms are illustrated, analysed and discussed—as in some contributions within the topic *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections*. On the other hand, more recently, development is addressed with reference to specific issues, factors and policies that might be conducive to it.

To conclude the overview of the JAE’s content, it is worth noting the relatively low prevalence of *Natural resources and ecosystem services*, the topic with the highest environmental connotation. Throughout the period of analysis, this topic always represented less than 5% of the JAE corpus, falling below 2.5% in more recent years. This relatively low importance of issues connected to the environment was already noted by Harvey (2024), albeit with specific reference to climate change. However, inferring a general disregard from the JAE of the aspects connected with the environment and natural resources would be misleading. The identified topic mainly groups articles where the evaluation and assessment of natural resources and ecosystem services are the central focus of the study. In

TABLE 2 | Description of the identified topics and their average prevalence in the JAE (1970–2024).

Topic	Most frequent words	Brief description of topic focus	Prevalence in JAE (%)	Representative JAE articles
Agri-food governance and institutions	Paper, polici, develop, issu, discuss, econom, institut, system, manag, research	Human beings, their rights and their knowledge development, as well as on human institutions, including research activity, cooperation issues and agreements	9.4	Hine et al. (1989), Lowe and Philipson (2006) and Waterton et al. (2006)
Methodological aspects	Model, estim, use, choic, data, method, result, approach, valu, differ	Investigation and advances of methodological aspects	8.9	Hynes and Greene (2016) Scarpa (2000) and Yi et al. (2023)
Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections	Agriculture, develop, countri, economi, growth, sector, product, polici, research, economi	Broad-scope analyses of the economic aspects of the agricultural sector, including the relation of agriculture with growth and economic development, sectoral reforms, and the study of agricultural economics	7.9	Cai et al. (2020), Pockney (1994) and Valdés (1994)
Farmers' decision-making	farm, farmer, use, size, product, increas, land, crop, profit, signific	Farm management choices, including farm objectives and structure, farming techniques and land tenure	7.4	Hennessy and Rehman (2007), Hill and Gasson (1985) and Katengeza et al. (2019)
Production efficiency	Effici, product, function, use, estim, input, technic, data, measur, yield	Efficiency, productivity and profitability of agricultural production	6.7	Heshmati and Kumbhakar (1997), Lansink and Carpentier (2001) and Skevas et al. (2018)
Trade	Trade, export, import, countri, product, domest, world, effect, market, increas	Flows of agricultural products and impacts of trade measures	6.2	Beghin et al. (2017), Elobeid and Beghin (2006) and Raimondi et al. (2019)
Price dynamics	Price, market, model, result, commod, use, cattle, period, futur, test	Farm inputs and outputs price dynamics in agricultural markets	5.6	Dawson and Sanjuán (2006), Gilbert and Pfuderer (2014) and Sanjuán-López and Dawson (2017)
Risk	Risk, insur, farmer, crop, use, decis, optim, contract, control, pesticid	Risks connected to agricultural production and markets, including risk-mitigating tools	5.3	Finger et al. (2023), Hyde and Vercammen (1997) and Moffitt (1986)
Agricultural policy	Polici, chang, effect, environment, subsidi, impact, region, support, tax, reduc	Agricultural and environmental policy measures, both in terms of their impacts and their rationale	4.8	Brady et al. (2009), Gohin (2006) and Himics et al. (2020)
Market and supply chain	Market, water, cost, competit, produc, suppli, price, qualiti, product, irrig	Structures and the dynamics of markets and supply chains	4.5	Etumnu (2022), Sckokai et al. (2013) and Tennbakk (1995)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Topic	Most frequent words	Brief description of topic focus	Prevalence in JAE (%)	Representative JAE articles
Production factors	Product, change, growth, increas, output, input, labor, factor, capit, suppli	Factors and inputs of agricultural production, including their effects on productivity, their demand, and the relations between them	4.4	Fawcett et al. (1978), Mergos and Karagiannis (1997) and Vink (1983)
Public programmes	Farmer, research, benefit, program, particip, invest, payment, effect, crop, public	Effects of research programmes, extension services and public incentives on the agricultural sector	4.1	Alston and Mullen (1992), Kolady and Lesser (2009) and L��pple and Hennessy (2015)
Demand analysis	Demand, consum, elast, estim, meat, use, system, consumpt, expenditur, prefer	Characteristics of consumers' demand curves and estimations of demand systems	4.0	Burton and Young (1991), Fousekis and Revell (2003) and Tiffin and Tiffin (1999)
Natural resources and ecosystem services	Land, rate, use, valu, conserve, cost, water, soil, benefit, manag	Relations between natural resources (e.g., water, land, forests, wetlands) and agriculture and of natural resources management strategies	3.2	Nguyen et al. (2024), Price (1991) and Vieth et al. (2001)
Household income	Income, household, rural, program, effect, land, poverti, dairi, milk, use	Income conditions of households, especially in less developed countries, concerning income levels, income diversification, and savings patterns	2.8	��chevin (2014) and Rajkhowa and Qaim (2022)
Modelling and forecasting	Adopt, technolog, innov, model, new, farmer, decis, use, practic, develop	Programming and forecasting models related to multiple aspects of agricultural economics (e.g., general equilibrium models, production models, technology adoption models)	2.6	Huber et al. (2022) and Shang et al. (2024)
Food policy	Food, polici, system, safeti, indistri, govern, public, product, health, standard	Public and private food policy interventions and measures	2.5	Tracy (1980) and Traill (2000)
Food and health	Food, nutrit, consumpt, aid, secur, consum, increas, health, use, household	Nutritional and health aspects connected to food, including malnutrition	2.4	Lund and Derry (1985) and Ogutu et al. (2023)
Employment issues	Rural, area, employ, work, urban, labor, migrat, wage, women, worker	Labour and education dynamics, including employment levels, migration issues and educational quality	2.1	Dickens et al. (1995) and Pierson (1978)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Topic	Most frequent words	Brief description of topic focus	Prevalence in JAE (%)	Representative JAE articles
Consumer preferences	Inform, pay, new, household, experi, willing, wtp, consum, survey, product	Consumer preferences and willingness to pay for food product attributes	2.0	Shi et al. (2013) and Zossou et al. (2022)
Property rights market instruments and the environment	Label, genet, may, cost, fish, modifi, properti, regul, tax, auction	Management of public and private goods and related policies	2.0	Latacz-Lohmann and van der Hamsvoort (1998)
Futures prices	Futur, product, commod, produc, market, use, impact, price, welfar, cost	Connected to futures prices and markets	1.0	Santos (2002)

the JAE, however, these aspects seem to be addressed using a more agricultural perspective. Investigating the content of the titles and documents more in-depth, it is apparent that these issues were addressed in several JAE contributions dealing with production (especially within the topic *Farmers' decision-making*) and with policy and research interventions (as in the topics *Agricultural policy* and *Public programmes*). This evidence suggests that the JAE has not refrained from investigating environmental aspects; rather, it has done so mostly through the lens of agricultural production.

4.2 | The JAE and the Other Agricultural Economics Journals

Through the cluster analysis conducted on the average journal topical prevalence we identified three clusters. Two of them are single-journal clusters, containing AJAE and FP. The other journals, including JAE, are grouped together in the third cluster. In Table A1 in the Appendix, we report the average prevalence of the topics in each of the identified clusters, while Figure 1 illustrates the differences in topical prevalence between the JAE and each cluster.

The graphs clearly illustrate that the differences in topical prevalence decrease as we move from FP, the most different journal, to the journals in the same cluster as the JAE. The differences with FP were largely expected both in their magnitude and in their directions. FP is an inter-disciplinary journal that is more concerned with food issues (*Food policy* and *Food and health*)—topics that are only marginally covered by the JAE and the other agricultural economics journals. Conversely, the JAE addresses more classical agricultural economics aspects, including production, prices, risk, and methodological advancements.

The comparison with the AJAE is possibly more interesting, as the two journals are more similar in scope. In this respect, the JAE seems to allocate more space to the broad sectoral analyses contained in *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections* and in *Agri-food governance and institutions*, as well as to *Farmers' decision-making*, *Trade*, *Agricultural policy* and *Public programmes*. The observed differences in average prevalence, however, stem from different temporal patterns (not reported here for brevity, but available from the authors upon request). In the case of *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections* and in *Agri-food governance and institutions*, the difference stems from the high relevance that these two topics held in the past in the JAE, while now their relative importance is about the same in the two journals. The opposite occurs for *Trade*, *Farmers' decision-making* and *Public programmes*, whose prevalence was similar in the JAE and the AJAE at the beginning of the period of analysis, but the space allocated to these topics in the JAE progressively increased more than in the AJAE. These differences possibly stem also from the different geographical coverage that characterises the two journals. While the coverage of “non-native” continents is similar for the two, the AJAE is well focused on the US context, which accounts for approximately 30% of the studies. In contrast, around 36% of the studies published in the JAE are conducted in Europe, although

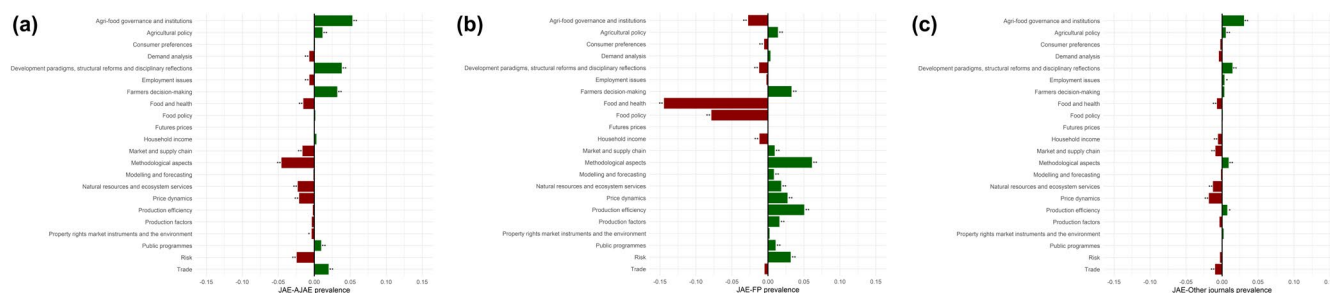


FIGURE 1 | Differences in average topical prevalence between the JAE and the other journals in the three clusters: AJAE (pane A), FP (pane B) and journals other than JAE in cluster 3 (pane C). Dark green bars: Prevalence in JAE higher than prevalence in the comparison set; dark red bars: Prevalence in JAE lower than prevalence in the comparison set. In the charts, asterisks (*) and double asterisks (**) close to a bar indicate statistical significance of the difference depicted by the bar. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

only a relatively minor share focuses specifically on the UK (Table A3 in the Appendix). The European focus of the JAE seems reflected in the distinctive trend of *Agricultural policy*. While, in general, the prevalence of this topic is quite similar in the two journals, the gap widened in the 1990s and 2000s, most likely driven by the major CAP reforms (e.g., decoupled payments, Agenda 2000) that stimulated debate in the JAE.

Similarly, heterogeneous trends can be observed for topics whose prevalence is higher in the AJAE than in the JAE. For some of them (*Price dynamics*, *Market and supply chains* and *Demand analysis*) the average difference reflects a consistently higher attention devoted to these aspects in the AJAE. For *Food and health* and for *Natural resources and ecosystem services*, the difference derives from the faster pace at which the AJAE introduced these topics into its corpus. This is particularly evident for *Natural resources and ecosystem services*, which now accounts for around 10% of the AJAE corpus, but whose importance is slightly declining in the JAE, largely due to this topic being captured indirectly through the analysis of production decisions. In the case of *Risk*,⁶ the average difference is exclusively due to differences in the past, as a convergence process between the two journals is observed. Finally, the different prevalence of *Methodological aspects* should be attributed to a particular interest in this topic in the AJAE from the 1980s to the 2000s, as its prevalence in JAE remained roughly constant.

The differences between the JAE and the other journals in the same cluster (AE, AJARE, CJAE and ERAE) are relatively small, as expected. As in the comparison with the AJAE, the high relevance of *Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections* and *Agri-food governance and institutions* in older publications explains the comparatively higher proportion of these topics in the JAE. *Agricultural policy* and *Methodological aspects* are also slightly more prevalent in the JAE, but no clear temporal differences emerge. A similar picture emerges for *Household income*, *Market and supply chains*, and *Price analysis*, which are slightly less addressed in the JAE than in its counterparts. Interestingly, as in the JAE-AJAE comparison, a growing gap between other journals and the JAE in the prevalence of *Food and nutrition* and *Natural resources and ecosystem services* is detected. For the former topic, its prevalence in the JAE is growing more slowly than in other publishing venues. For the latter, even if its prevalence in other journals is not

increasing (it is slightly higher than 5% of the corpus), the slight decrease in the JAE is widening the gap.

4.3 | Methodological Approaches

The results of the investigation of the methodological keywords are reported in Figure 2. For each methodological category, we report some exemplary keywords (the full list is available in [Supporting Information](#)), and two graphs depicting the share of documents using the keywords in the category along time. The left-hand graph, which refers to documents from all the agricultural economics journals, covers a longer time span (1982–2024) than the right-hand graph, which distinguishes the JAE from the other journals, as in the JAE, keywords were not present before 2005.

The most apparent trend, in the whole set of agricultural economics journals, is the increase in the importance of some methodological approaches, namely *Causality*, *Endogeneity*, *Experiments* and *Heterogeneity*. The first two classes are closely connected and display a similar temporal pattern, marked by a constant increase from the 2000s. In this respect, the JAE seems not only to align well with the general trend observed in the discipline as a whole, but also to somewhat precede its peers.

The increased attention to causal inference has been noted in agricultural economics (Di Falco et al. 2023) and in the wider discipline of applied economics (Zilberman 2019). More generally, this is likely a reflection of the turn of the broader economics discipline to quasi-experimental methods that have been described by Angrist and Pischke (2010) as the ‘credibility revolution’, which has also received criticisms for the difficulty in capturing long-term effects and changes (Deaton et al. 2024).

In general economics, quasi-experimental methods have been viewed as a substitute for structural research and the use of theory-driven models, which have therefore lost some interest over time (Panhans and Singleton 2017). This pattern seems to be present also in our analysis, where the two classes most closely connected to structural research are *Demand systems*—which deal with the estimation of demand structural parameters—and *Deterministic model techniques*—which include theory-based modelling and optimisation techniques. While the estimated relevance of these approaches appears constant

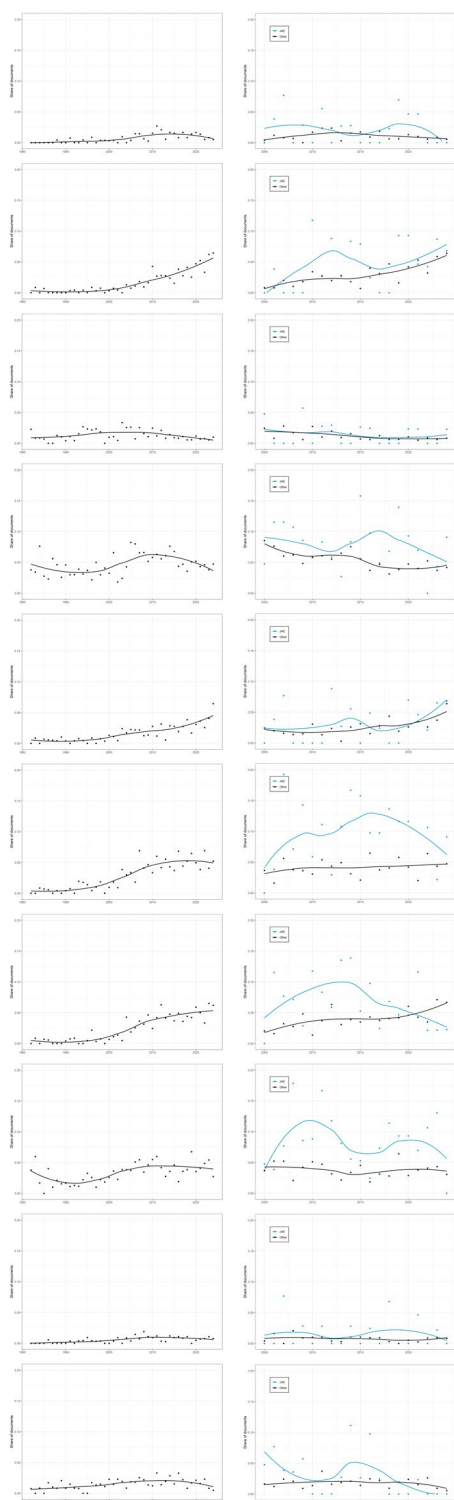


FIGURE 2 | Time trends of the share of documents using keywords associated with specific methodological categories in all the considered agricultural economics journals (left) and comparing the JAE with the other journals (right). The continuous trend lines are obtained by the `loess` smoothing function embedded in the R `ggplot2` package. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1477-9552.12503)]

(or slightly increasing) up to the early 2000s, in the last 20 years they exhibit a moderate decline. As in the case of causal inference, the JAE appears to follow the general trend, even if some amount of variability is evident.

Experiments, mostly connected to consumer studies and non-market valuations, also experienced notable growth, which was mostly concentrated in the first decade of the 2000s. In this respect, some notable differences appear between the JAE and the other journals. The JAE seems to have devoted more space to the experimental approach, although a convergence is noticeable starting from the mid-2010s. A similar, while less accentuated pattern is evident for *Heterogeneity*, which broadly refers to methods that try to capture differences between the units of observation. The importance of these two methodological approaches in the JAE was also highlighted by Harvey (2024) in his editorial reflections.

Concerning the remaining methodological aspects that we investigated, *Production functions and frontiers* is the only one with considerable importance that has tended to remain stable over time (with the exception of a small fall in the 1990s). The considerable devotion of space in the JAE to this strand is in line with the importance that the production-related topics have in the JAE (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2).

Finally, *Bayesian methods*, *Spatial econometric techniques* and *Time series models*, whose definition is narrower—and thus their relevance lower—than other aspects, appear to have undergone a similar trend, characterised by an increase up to the 2010s followed by stagnation or a slight decline. While the JAE does not exhibit clear differences from the other journals with respect to the first two aspects, the coverage devoted to time series analyses seems to have shrunk over time.

5 | Concluding Remarks

The overall rationale of this contribution was to try to bring into focus the contribution of the JAE to the landscape of agricultural economics. Our analysis, studying the content of the articles published by JAE and by its peers in agricultural economics publishing, aims to describe how the research interest of JAE evolved over time, both in absolute terms and in relation to other leading agricultural economics journals.

Not surprisingly, we found that, in several respects, the JAE displays similar trends to the other agricultural economics journals—after all, JAE reflects the sea in which it navigates—but some distinguishing features emerge as well. As with the discipline as a whole, the topics addressed by the journal continue to become increasingly fragmented and specialised over time. In a sense, this corresponds to what Giles (1987) referred to as the ‘segmentation’ of the agricultural economics discipline. However, this process has been particularly evident in JAE, where the 1970s and 1980s were characterised by a marked prevalence of broad-scope analyses of the agricultural sector that subsequently declined significantly.

This segmentation process might have multiple interwoven causes. Historically, agricultural economics is a field that gathers individuals from multiple and diverse disciplines (Giles 1987), and thus brings heterogeneous interests to the debate. This interdisciplinarity is increasingly valued and stimulated by the growth and proliferation of interdisciplinary journals, which might also steer the most traditional agricultural economics

journals towards a diversification of their research interests. Methodological developments and innovations, often required by interdisciplinary journals, might play a role as well, as testing and applying such innovations could be more attainable in the investigation of narrow aspects of the discipline. Finally, the discipline segmentation might be related to changes in agricultural policies, which have been implemented mainly through a layering approach, where specific policy concerns have been gradually added to the overall policy structure, rather than through broad sectoral reforms (Daughjerg and Swinbank 2016).

While segmentation is a key feature of the discipline's evolution, it is important to note that the JAE, as with most of the other journals, retains a core focus on production aspects, with farm-level investigations still attracting the most coverage. At the same time, the discipline's increasing interest in the study of demand and—more recently—of consumers has been internalised by the JAE as well, although this strong growth is still quite far from bringing these topics close to the level of importance of production-side analyses.

Demand-side analyses have however reached the importance of other classical topics of agricultural economics investigations, such as trade, prices or markets. The latter two areas, in fact, seem to have received slightly less coverage in the JAE than in other journals, although the differences are relatively small. Instead, a larger divide emerges when it comes to the investigation of nutritional and dietary aspects as well as the economics of environmental and natural resources, independent of their consideration via farm production decisions.

The focus on demand is relatively new in agricultural economics, but has exhibited a significant increase in the last decades. While an increase is observed also in the JAE, its growth rate here has been lower than in other publishing venues. In interdisciplinary journals, aspects closely connected to nutrition may find a suitable place to enter a broader discourse that extends beyond agricultural systems. However, when the connection with the agricultural sector is weaker or the economic aspects do not constitute a primary focus, it might be more difficult for these contributions to find space in more specialised agricultural economics journals, like the JAE.

Resource and environmental economics, on the other hand, has been a pillar of agricultural economics since the 1960s–1970s (Runge 2008) and its prevalence has consistently been comparable to other aspects of the discipline. In the JAE, the prevalence of this field began to decrease in the 2000s. However, this trend suggests a different approach used by JAE authors in addressing this topic, rather than a lack of interest in it. Indeed, instead of having a substantial strand of dedicated research, the JAE tends to integrate environmental and resource issues within the frameworks of agricultural production and agricultural policy.

Conversely, JAE devotes greater importance to the study of agricultural policies and other public interventions than its counterparts. This trend started in the 1990s—stimulated by the reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy—but was consolidated and expanded in recent decades, even if the main focus seems to have shifted from the analysis of pure policy interventions to more general research programmes.

The observed segmentation and specialisation that characterised both JAE and the discipline as a whole are also indicators of a change in the approach to the study of agricultural economics that has been recognised by several authors (Deaton et al. 2024; Di Falco et al. 2023; Harvey 2024). On the one hand, wide-scope analyses that used to adopt more descriptive and narrative approaches or to focus on macro-aspects of the agricultural sector have given way to narrower investigations, often richer in methodological language. On the other hand, specific methodological approaches have gained momentum, as is the case for the techniques aimed at identifying causal relationships or for experimental economics. In this respect, the JAE appears to be aligned with the methodological evolutions that characterise agricultural economics, a discipline that has been traditionally involved in the creation and advancement of methods to solve real-world problems (McCalla et al. 2010; Runge 2008) and that continuously integrates methodological innovations developed in the specialised disciplines (Henningsen et al. 2026).

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Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ All the analyses were performed in R. For the STM analysis, the `stm` package was used.

² We also considered, in the modelling of topical prevalence, including a categorical variable identifying the journal where each article was published. However, since abstracts from some journals are not available until the late 80s and 90s (Table 1), such a model would discard relevant information, dropping either two decades of bibliographic material or relevant journals (namely, AE, ERAE and AJARE). We therefore decided to model the topical prevalence excluding the publishing venue from the covariates.

³ *Exclusivity* measures the degree to which words that have high frequency in topic *i* have low frequency in other topics. *Semantic coherence* measures the probability that the top topic words co-occur in the documents. Both metrics are computed by the `stm` package in R.

⁴ Models with fewer topics (i.e., 8, 10, 12) estimated topics that we considered, for our purposes, too heterogeneous in their content, while we deemed models with more topics (i.e., 26, 27, 30) dissected too much the content of the corpus. Models with 16 and 21 topics could be considered valid alternatives to our choice.

⁵For most topics, the prevalence of the main topic in the first 30 documents is always above 50%, a condition which assures the content of these documents to be representative of the core content of the topic. When this condition is not met, we consider, for the purpose of naming the topics, only the first n documents where the main topic has an estimated prevalence of at least 60%. This is the case for just one topic, namely *Future prices*, where we considered only five documents. Table A2 in the Appendix illustrates the number of documents where the prevalence of the main topic is higher than specific thresholds.

⁶Interestingly, within the *Risk* topic, the concept of resilience gained momentum in recent years, as the within-topic frequencies of resilience-associated stems (e.g., ‘resili’, ‘weather-resili’, ‘climate resili’) have grown in the last decades.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Methodological keywords.

Appendix A

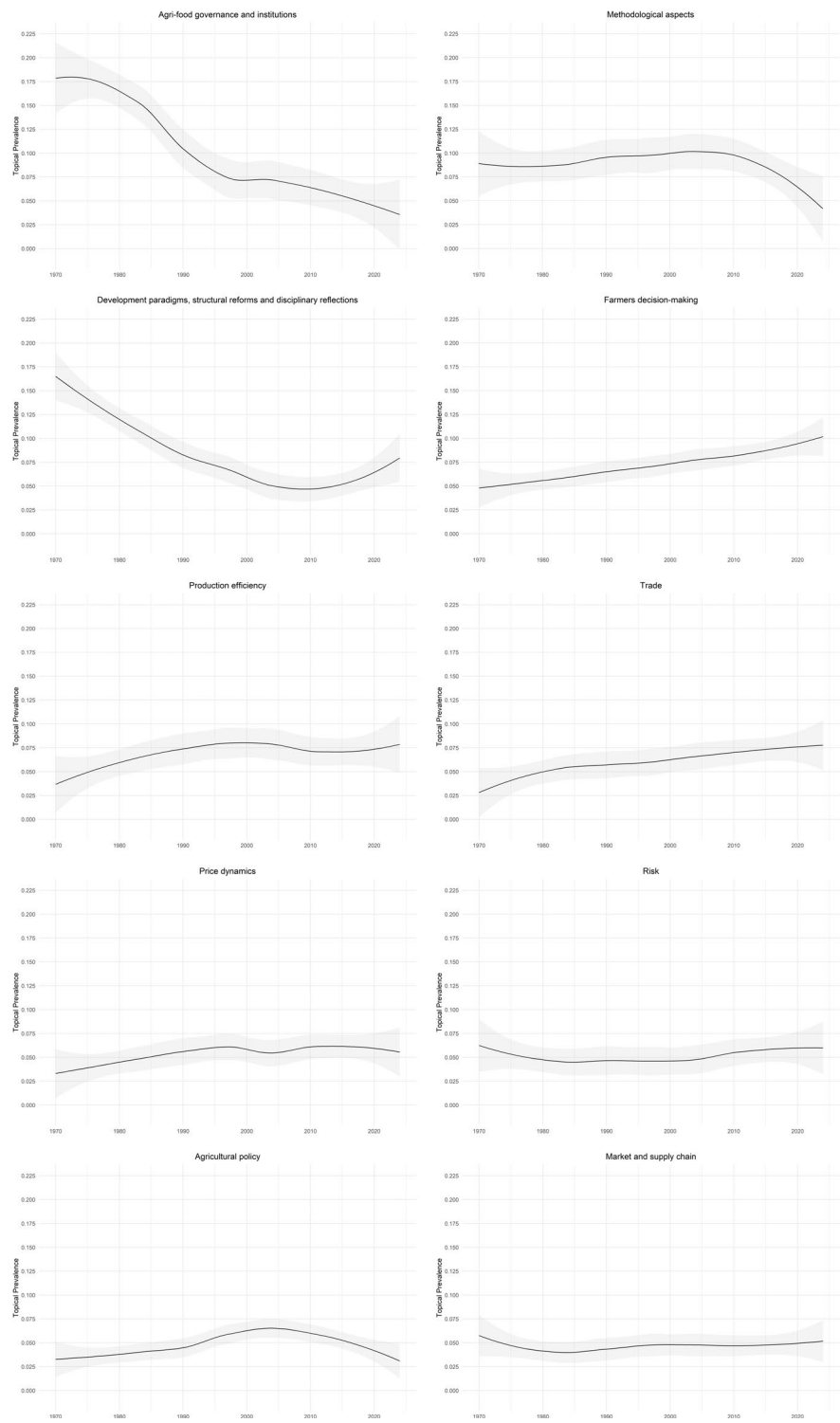


FIGURE A1 | Topical prevalence time trends in JAE.

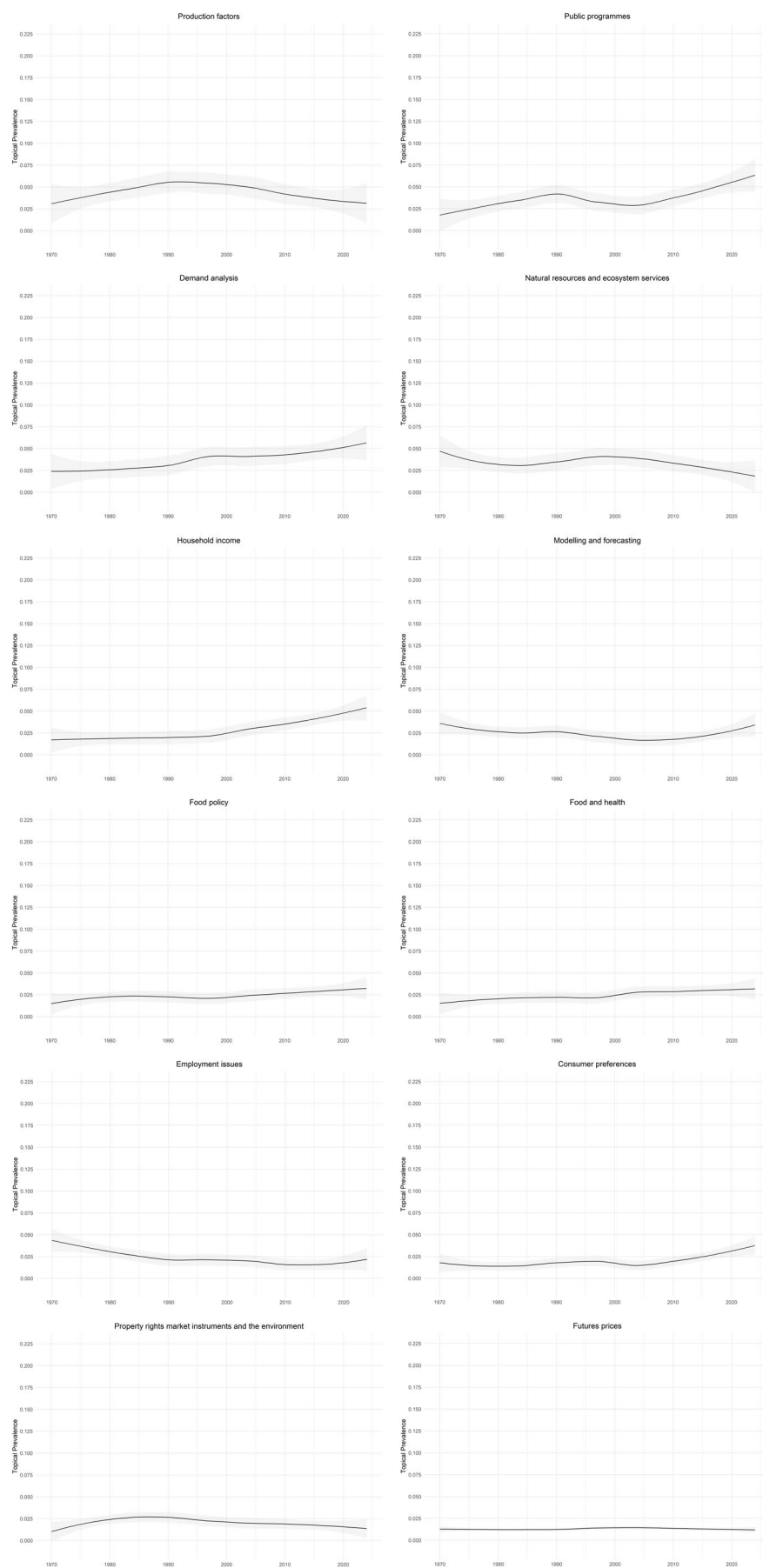


FIGURE A1 | (Continued)

TABLE A1 | Average topical prevalence in the identified journal clusters.

Topic	Cluster 1 (AJAE)	Cluster 2 (FP)	Cluster 3 (others)
Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections	4.1	9.1	6.4
Natural resources and ecosystem services	5.5	1.4	4.5
Demand analysis	4.7	3.6	4.4
Agri-food governance and institutions	4.1	12.1	6.3
Price dynamics	7.7	2.9	7.4
Property rights market instruments and the environment	2.4	1.8	1.8
Consumer preferences	1.9	2.6	2.3
Farmers' decision-making	4.3	4.2	7.1
Food policy	2.3	10.3	2.4
Agricultural policy	3.6	3.4	4.2
Production factors	4.7	2.8	4.7
Market and supply chain	6.1	3.6	5.4
Employment issues	2.8	2.3	1.8
Methodological aspects	13.5	2.8	8.0
Household income	2.5	3.9	3.3
Production efficiency	7.2	1.9	6.3
Food and health	3.9	16.8	3.1
Public programmes	3.1	3.0	4.0
Trade	4.2	6.7	7.2
Risk	7.7	2.1	5.6
Modelling and forecasting	2.7	1.7	2.7
Future prices	1.0	0.9	1.0

TABLE A2 | Number of documents with at least a minimum prevalence (columns) of their main topic (rows).

Topic	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%
Development paradigms, sectoral reforms and disciplinary reflections	270	140	67	23	1
Natural resources and ecosystem services	223	141	90	46	6
Demand analysis	206	130	64	27	4
Agri-food governance and institutions	381	211	108	45	9
Price dynamics	469	337	212	95	17
Property rights market instruments and the environment	72	41	24	9	2
Consumer preferences	62	32	17	8	2
Farmers' decision-making	253	131	64	18	4
Food policy	218	141	94	49	22
Agricultural policy	82	45	21	2	2
Production factors	147	91	41	16	5
Market and supply chain	204	102	42	16	3
Employment issues	91	59	34	20	4
Methodological aspects	513	344	219	107	28
Household income	73	28	11	2	1
Production efficiency	325	218	132	54	11
Food and health	482	305	174	78	24
Public programmes	93	39	17	9	0
Trade	415	242	137	74	21
Risk	333	195	96	39	10
Modelling and forecasting	5	3	1	0	0
Future prices	5	3	1	0	0

TABLE A3 | Share of documents by journal containing studies performed in the different world areas.

Journal	Africa	Asia	Europe	Latin America	North America	Oceania
AE	38.9%	34.2%	10.9%	10.5%	8.9%	2.3%
AJAE	20.1%	29.7%	7.8%	12.0%	33.1%	2.7%
AJARE	3.8%	34.9%	5.4%	5.0%	3.5%	53.7%
CJAE	2.6%	16.5%	6.7%	6.9%	75.2%	4.0%
ERAЕ	16.7%	10.9%	61.1%	5.5%	5.1%	1.4%
FP	34.4%	33.2%	14.7%	11.3%	8.3%	3.2%
JAЕ	25.6%	25.1%	36.2%	7.6%	6.1%	4.5%

Note: The shares are computed on the total number of articles for which it was possible to identify the study area. The row sums exceed 100% as some documents have multiple study areas in different world areas.