

On Keeping It Well: The Farm Bill and the Fourth

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Happy 237th Fourth of July, America!

The 1787 Constitutional Convention had dragged through the hot, muggy, and insect-infested Philadelphia summer, but Independence Hall deliberations remained closed, and in strictest secrecy. Crowds gathered outside as the proceedings ended, and as the doors opened, a Mrs. Powel approached Benjamin Franklin, “Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?” Franklin, pausing, responded, “A Republic, if you can keep it!”

This challenge remains ours today. And so, let’s consider how we’re doing.

John Adams, our nation’s first Vice President and second President, suggested how we should celebrate the birth date of our independence, in a letter to his beloved wife Abigail: “The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival... It ought to be solemnized by pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forevermore.”

Judging from our neighborhood yesterday, we are doing quite well on the celebratory scale. Mr. Adams would be rightfully proud of our small town Heartland parades, street festivals in our nation’s cities, or even septuagenarian Neil Diamond trying to sing on the steps of the Capitol! However, a more sober assessment of our Republic’s current governing is in order. As Congress returns from the July 4th recess, public opinion polls consistently show less than 20% of the American people have considerable confidence in our federal government. While this is but one metric, it is a sobering one. Our fellow citizens increasingly view the two major political parties as more concerned with defeating the other than building the more perfect union our leaders are elected to seek. And for those of us concerned with agriculture and rural policy, this moment is particularly troubling. The Farm Bill debacle, however, does offer a microcosm for gauging the broader governing of our Republic, and the commitments and values of those we elect to steward it, on our behalf. So, four observations, in this regard:

Secretary Vilsack was absolutely correct. Last December, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack offered the Capstone Keynote to the Farm Journal Forum in Washington, DC. His comments caused quite a brouhaha, and he was generally castigated by the Ag community and press. Among his comments were these: “It’s time for us to have an adult conversation with folks in rural America. ... Why is it that we don’t have a Farm Bill? It isn’t just the differences of policy. It’s the fact that rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country, and we had better recognize that and we better begin to reverse it.”¹ Despite much hand-wringing, posturing, and wishful thinking over the past couple weeks, six months later, the Secretary’s comments seem amazingly prescient. For the first time in our nation’s history, a Farm Bill vote in the United States House of Representatives was defeated. The maps below show part of the problem, a continuing erosion of rural representation in Congressional dis-

tricts from 2007–2009 until this year. *The New York Times* this week ran a story with the heading “Farm Bill Defeat Shows Agriculture’s Waning Power.”ⁱⁱ It’s deeper than that. Rural citizens are losing representational heft. (See maps on following pages.)

House Ag Committee Chairman Lucas was absolutely correct. Following the failure of the Farm Bill House vote, members returned to their districts last week, and pointed dialogue and truth-telling followed. House Ag Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, who worked with both Ranking Member Colin Peterson and the House Republican Caucus in a tireless effort to find the middle ground necessary for passage, finally had enough last Monday. *The Tulsa World* reported the Chairman, already being threatened by the Heritage Foundation, the Tea Party, and other conservative groups, unloaded at a town hall meeting: “I’m under attack by those people, they’re coming after me. They are all special interest groups that exist to sell subscriptions, to collect seminar fees, and to perpetuate their goals. You’ve got to understand: they don’t necessarily want a Republican president or a Republican Congress: they made more money when Democrat Nancy Pelosi was speaker... It’s a business.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We all have our own assessment of the forces which resulted in the defeat of the House Farm Bill. Further analysis yields little. However, this candid and courageous assessment by a committed public servant should profoundly cause us pause. And lest the Democratic Party be given a pass, Ranking Member Peterson was equally castigated by his Democratic base for moving beyond ideological bounds with SNAP reductions. We are perilously close to the business of politics overwhelming the processes of governing. Our economic system may be destroying our political system. John Adams was particularly strident on this risk:

“There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and converting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.”^{iv}

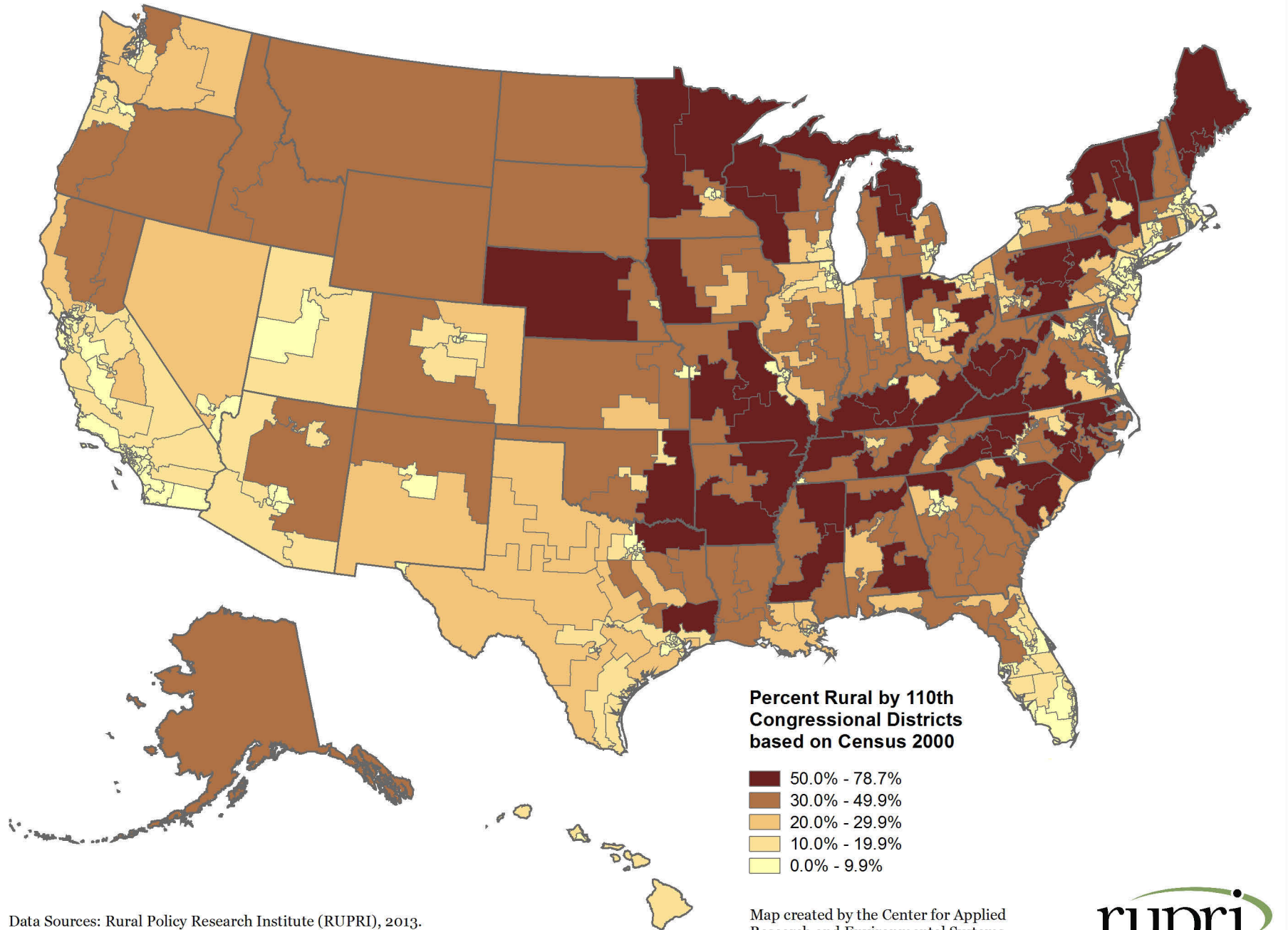
This is our real challenge today. One wonders how our founders would view this current circumstance, and the current Americans gathered in continuance of their handiwork. I feel certain they would first of all recommend we turn off Fox News and MSNBC. Then they would probably urge Members to care a great deal less about their next book, speaking engagement, or funding robo-call, and quite a bit more with the overall governing of our nation. On that score, if you really don’t care about government, why do you run to serve it, and if you really cherish it, how can you blindly vote to bankrupt it? Both are equally discordant, and the American people know this. If you hate government, Egypt is without one now, and I hear Afghanistan is lovely this time of year. For those of you who don’t believe we need fiscal restraint today, check the history books for every great empire that extended beyond its means. Our Republic can survive neither view!

If both the Secretary and the Chairman are correct, Farm Bill division should not occur.

“We murder to dissect.” —Wordsworth

Take a look at the maps above, and explain the political advantage of separating the Farm Bill and the SNAP program. If your goal is to ensure both succeed as public sector programs, there is none. It would destroy the rural/urban genius which assured passage of most of our modern Farm Bills. I quite concede

Percent Rural, 110th Congressional Districts



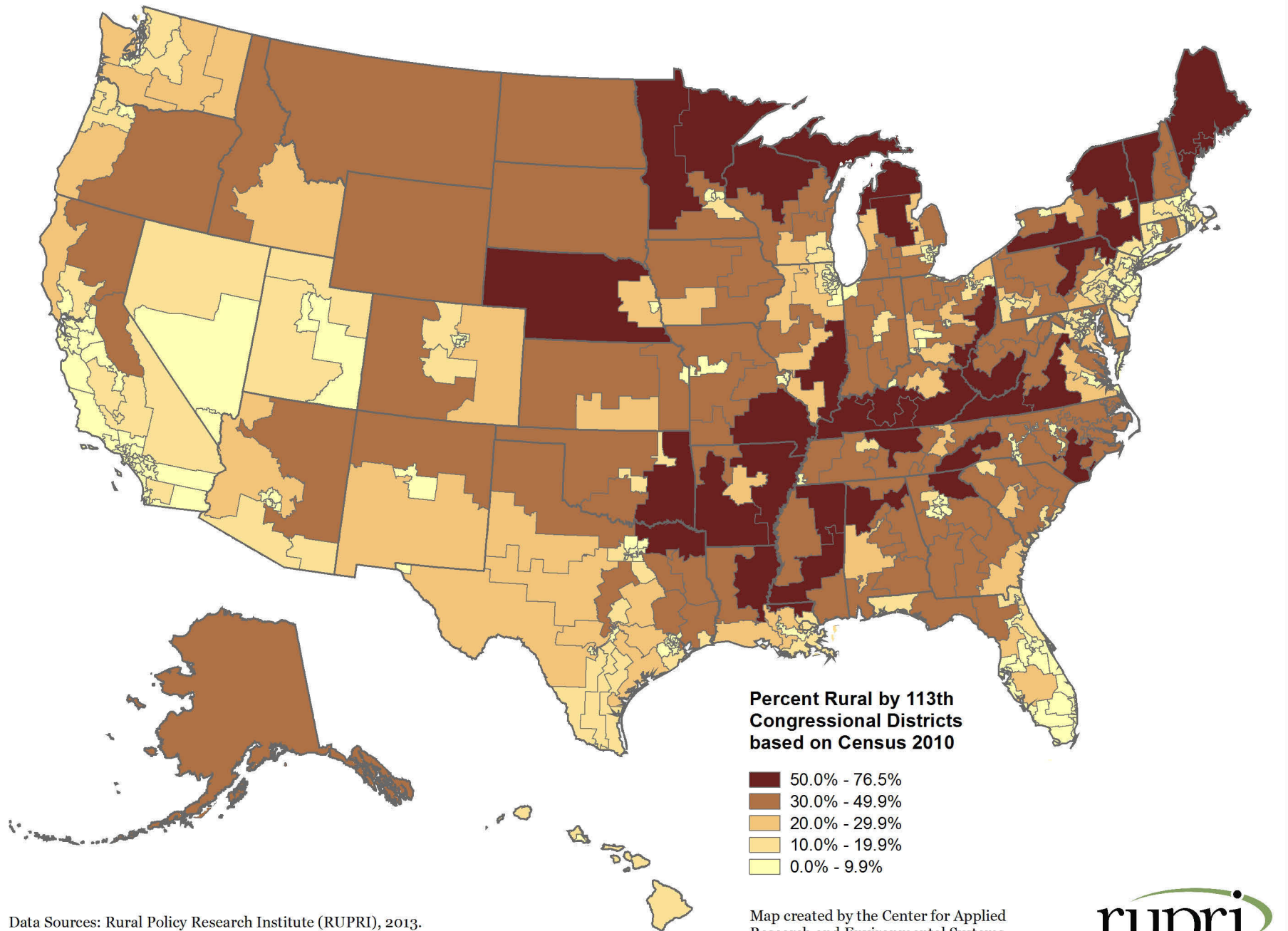
Data Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), 2013.

Note: Alaska and Hawaii not shown to scale

Map created by the Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems, June 2013.



Percent Rural, 113th Congressional Districts



Data Sources: Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), 2013.

Note: Alaska and Hawaii not shown to scale

Percent Rural by 113th Congressional Districts based on Census 2010

- 50.0% - 76.5%
- 30.0% - 49.9%
- 20.0% - 29.9%
- 10.0% - 19.9%
- 0.0% - 9.9%

Map created by the Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems, June 2013.



that decision-makers of good will may see the wisdom in such a legislative approach, and they could, indeed, be correct—if your goal is getting a Farm Bill out of the House. Longer-term, this will further divide political parties, our rural and urban interests, and *e pluribus unum*. We move forward in this manner at our peril.

Who is keeping this Republic well?

Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places, concerning this question. We are Pirates fans, and they are doing well this year. On the Fourth, we watched their game online, and throughout the afternoon, Root Sports did a fantastic job of connecting local men and women serving in the Armed Forces overseas with their loved ones, back in the greater Pittsburgh area.

The final conversation in this series was between a young wife who heads a local charity in the area, created to purchase personal items for active duty Armed Forces members which our government does not provide, with her husband, serving in Kuwait. Although injured in a Humvee explosion a year and a half ago, he has recovered and is serving his fifth tour of duty. He was talking with his wife on his two-year-old son's birthday.

The patriots who created our nation, and served as our founding political establishment, did so at great peril to their life and treasure, and were well aware of these risks.

Perhaps they have more in common with the current young men and women serving in the Armed Forces than those fighting the ideological wars between our political parties. As this Congress returns to DC, one would hope the founders' spirit might more deeply infuse their actions, and that only the adults show up. The difference would be obvious!

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ⁱ Jalonick, Mary Clare. "Vilsack warns rural America of waning political relevance." *The Washington Post*, Dec 10 2012.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/03/us/politics/farm-bill-defeat-shows-agricultures-waning-power.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Krehbiel, Randy. "GOP's Lucas says conservative activist groups are 'coming after' him." *McClatchy-Tribune Business News/Tulsa World*, Jul 02 2013.

^{iv} As quoted in "Getting the Republicans Back on Track," *The New York Times*, Jan 31 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/31/opinion/getting-the-republicans-back-on-track.html>