NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN
Why the Road to Agricultural Policy Reform Has a Long Way to Go

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After leading the House Agriculture Committee through a tumultuous farm bill debate, Pat Roberts said it best in explaining the outcome: "I think all the stars had to be right in the policy heavens." As Roberts knows well, however, the political stars will realign themselves again and again, and yesterday's policy reforms will become tomorrow's policy problems demanding congressional attention. And a Congress dominated by unstable, ad hoc coalitions will always reserve its right to revisit agricultural policy and revise past policy reforms to address new problems. In such a world, the 1996 farm bill can only be considered one of many steps along a tentative course toward lasting policy reform.

The importance of the policy changes written into the 1996 farm bill cannot be overstated. The Freedom to Farm concept was adopted for the major program crops, continuing the pattern of market-oriented policy changes in the two preceding farm bills. Payments to farmers are now decoupled from commodity production decisions, and participants may plant anything except fruits and vegetables—from nothing at all to fencerow-to-fencerow production—and still receive program payments. Marketing loans will be available if prices fall but will provide only a minimal safety net for producers. Dairy price supports, at least direct price supports, are suspended. Decoupling and flexibility are indeed fundamental changes in U.S. agricultural policy.

Reformers of agricultural policy should pause, however, to consider how Congress, as the principal architect of agricultural policy, functions in the 1990s. The prevailing wisdom is to view the changes of 1996 as a golden parachute— "severance pay for ending farm programs"—according to journalists and lobbyists—as producers exit the cloisters of protective public policy for the unprotected world of the market (Ingersoll; Looker; Orden, Paarlberg, and Roe). Some reformers envision a grand strategy, ultimately leading to a withdrawal of government from the farm sector. But that strategy may soon be, for reasons we examine here, subject to substantial modification. Despite the many changes contained in the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996, the underpinnings of farm policy remained in place when the new Congress was sworn in: the permanent farm legislation of 1949, Congress's tendency to address different crop problems with special programs, and, most of all, the well-cultivated congressional habit of listening and responding to farmers' problems. No one has written into any bill a mandatory route to the free market that will be binding on future congressional decisions.

Our contention is that Congress is perfectly organized to fool outsiders, to frustrate the implementation of long-term plans and strategies, and to emphasize the short-term by continually tinkering with the extensive base of existing agricultural policy. In Congress, as Pat Roberts's metaphor implies, the stars are always realigning, producing different policy solutions as economic conditions change and political coalitions are reassembled around a new set of issues. Too often, policy debates are seen as simple dichotomies—Republicans against Democrats, farmers against environmentalists, the agriculture committees against the rest of the Congress—or as a simple matter of leadership, leading some to ask, "Who is in charge and what does that person or group want?" As a result, many observers place too little emphasis on the dynamic context within which the modern Congress operates and on the constraints that congressional processes impose on proposals for reform.

Our comments are intended both to inform and to forewarn. These observations come from frequent discussions with members of Congress and their staffs as part of an extensive research project on Congress (Browne). From those discussions, we have formulated four guidelines that explain why the political alignment of Congress is forever in flux on agricultural issues. These rules—and what they say about the alignment of the political stars upon which congressional decision making de-
pends—explain why all progress toward agricultural policy reform must be considered a tentative step down a remarkably long road.

**Rule 1: Congress is always reactive**

I had a job in college. It was cleaning plates from the dining room. My job in Congress is a lot like that—shovel, rinse, and get on with the next one. I'm the only one who can decide how to select and handle what needs to be done, along with my staff, of course.

—A junior member of Congress discussing the frequency and diversity of issues important to him and the many sources of demands on those issues.

Everyone, it seems—lobbyists, administration officials, other members, and certainly constituents—is trying to get the attention of congressional members. Members work in Washington from Tuesday through Thursday, and most spend the rest of the week in their home district. Normal work days (all seven of them) are ten, twelve, and more hours long, with few breaks, even for meals. And virtually every minute is spent with someone who is trying to bring their problem to that member's attention.

Given the demands for their attention, congressional members have neither the time nor the reason to be reflective or to conjure up creative new policy prescriptions. Put yourself in the position of a member of Congress: When dozens of people are foisting their ideas at you, why come up with your own? And, how can anyone find a truly novel idea that someone hasn't proposed before? Despite public perceptions to the contrary, there are very few original policy ideas left to discover. Popularize, yes, but discover, no. Decoupling of farm program payments did not appear to Roberts as divine revelation in 1995. Decoupling had been much discussed in the 1985 farm bill debate and was well known to every actor in the policy process well before the new Congress arrived in 1995.

So members of Congress are necessarily reactive, culling through the ideas and demands of others, developing an agenda based on problems brought to them by constituents, lobbyists, and other members. And these legislators, of necessity, must deal with one problem and then move on to the next item on their agenda, which is always another person’s immediate problem. That pressing matter of time is why everyone is shouting so loudly at members of Congress and why members must react to constituents’ immediate demands before that noise erodes the public’s confidence in them. When Congress operates in such a reactive manner, the demands of key constituents, including farmers, will always get a receptive hearing from members, and every policy decision must be considered a tentative reaction to existing economic and political conditions.

**Rule 2: Nobody—and everybody—is in charge in Congress, and that’s especially true of the committees**

I like to think that modern congressional committees are new, not that they’re fresh and virtuous or anything. But the old stories are of heavy-handed rule by an autocratic chair. Today’s committees take into account the needs and problems of nearly each member. The chairman is reduced to equal parts boss, guidance counselor, and servant.

—A veteran of both the House and Senate, thinking aloud about changes in the Congress.

Roberts was certainly an effective committee chair in 1995 and 1996. He did not, however, personally pull each star into the political alignment that created the 1996 farm bill. Instead, he was flexible, working with all the diverse members and groups whose ideas and complaints blocked the path to a quick and easy farm bill. Groups and members concerned about the budget deficit, environmental issues, agribusiness interests, or the ten scores of other parties claiming to have a stake in the outcome of the farm bill debate all combined to turn the process into a two-year farm bill marathon.

The iron triangle metaphor that Campbell (1962) used to describe the agricultural policy-making process during the 1940s and 1950s (comprised of the House and Senate agriculture committees, the secretary of agriculture, and farm interest groups) has given way to a many-faceted model of transactional politics. The rise, recognition, and frequent prominence of environmental, animal rights, consumer, agribusiness, and international interests demonstrate that point. Farm bills of recent years incorporate far more than just the ideas of farm groups. Former Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan was fond of noting that this explosion of policy ideas and demands was why his first farm bill in 1973 was 29 pages long while his last farm bill as a public official, in 1990, was 713 pages long.

While the rising number of interest groups is an important factor in explaining the increasing number of demands made on legislators, other changes in the political system have contributed to the lack of centralized control within Congress. Congress is not at all like it was in the old days, when the chairs of the agriculture committees ruled the writing of farm bills with a heavy hand. The institu-
tional rules of Congress have changed radically, beginning in the reform years of the 1970s. These changes have taken two decades to be fully understood and mastered by all the legislative players, but are now easily exploited by even the most junior member of Congress to force a recognition of each member’s interests.

Of course, the agriculture committees of both houses still matter. Expertise and the ability to draft bills are still important in the legislative process. While bills are still written by committees and subcommittees, the reforms of the 1970s have given other members considerable clout over legislative decisions. The leadership of each party caucus can now easily intervene in the legislative process by influencing committee member appointments and by reassigning legislative tasks from one committee to another.

At the same time, individual members of Congress now matter more than ever in the legislative process. Legislative and policy ideas are discussed more in open party caucuses, and individual members have greater freedom than ever in working on behalf of favored interests back home and in Washington. If their issues are not included in the legislative process, members have virtually unlimited ability to withhold their floor votes and demand that their issues be addressed in pending legislation. The consequence of these reforms is that Congress has, paradoxically, become both more democratic and more hierarchical. Individual members have unprecedented freedom to pursue their own agenda, while party leadership must, of necessity, be more active in resolving the conflicting demands of individual members.

This paradox was obvious during the 1996 farm bill debate. In 1995 and 1996, the Republican leadership intervened to influence both farm bill funding and content. On the one hand, the House leadership protected agriculture from budget cuts proposed by the Budget Committee (Maraniss and Weisskopf, pp. 38–52). Later, seeing little prospect that the agriculture committees could deliver a satisfactory farm bill, they had the budget committees write Freedom to Farm legislation into law as part of the omnibus budget legislation. Only a presidential veto of the budget bill—not the agriculture committees—blocked that strategy.

One example of members’ freedom to pursue their own legislative agenda was Florida Senator Bob Graham’s winning crop insurance coverage for ornamental fish producers in the 1996 farm bill. That a member of the Senate would demand and gain the inclusion of such a seemingly obscure provision is evidence that individual members have wide latitude in pursuing their agendas within the broad base of agricultural legislation. Similarly, House Republican freshmen who saw their districts as deserving attention on agricultural issues broke ranks with their fellow budget-conscious freshmen, insisting that a “farmer friendly” farm bill was the
key to maintaining GOP control of the House (Hagstrom). To these members, budget-cutting was important to the Republican revolution—but not at the expense of agricultural programs critical to their re-election. House Republicans on the agriculture committee gave the Republican revolution one of its earliest blows when they refused to convert the food stamp program into a system of block grants to the states as had been promised in the Contract with America. Despite intense pressure from the House leadership, these members did not want to give away the political currency provided by the food stamp program that has been so useful in congressional politics. Multiplied again and again across the members of both houses of Congress, these demands define the transactional politics that dominate in Congress and explain why agricultural policy is so complex and time-consuming to write.

The stark reality is that nobody is in charge in Congress because everybody claims to have a legitimate issue that requires immediate attention and the power to force action on that issue. The agriculture committees and their chairs, subcommittees and their chairs, other committees and their chairs, ad hoc legislative task forces, the leadership, and all sorts of rank-and-file members can dig in their heels and force their issues to be recognized. In such an atmosphere, every policy decision—including the reforms contained in the 1996 farm bill—must be considered tentative, lasting only as long as economic conditions and political demands remain unchanged. The universal truth of this rule in every area of congressional politics was acknowledged by a key opponent of the Clinton health plan, who explained the outcome of that debate in terms remarkably similar to those used by Pat Roberts, crediting the defeat of the health care bill to a “lineup of the stars you don’t get in politics very often” (Johnson and Broder, p. 500). Given the fragmented power, individual autonomy, and conflicting demands that prevail in the modern Congress, it is little wonder that participants attribute the outcome of many policy debates, at least in part, to heavenly intervention.

**Rule 3: Constituents matter more to Congress than policy analysts, or anyone else**

_You’re making this too complicated. If it’s good for [our state], we’re for it. If it’s not good for [our state] we’re against it. It’s that simple._

—A senior member of Congress, giving direction to his newly arrived, doctorate-clad staff analyst preparing for the 1990 farm bill debate.

The most important and first-recognized policy ideas and demands come from back home, usually from key constituents. There are numerous reasons why this must be so. First, a popularly elected Congress is organized to represent, through its members, the different parts of the country, not the entire nation. Second, members of Congress are motivated by their own re-election, or the success of fellow partisans they hope will succeed them, or campaign fundraising, or the prosperity of their constituents. All are powerful incentives for members to address unique district or state needs rather than the national interest.

Third, it’s easy for members of Congress to listen to constituents. Unhappy constituents love to complain. In a very practical way, constituents understand their own problems and express them in easily understood terms. Moreover, they talk among themselves as well as to their political representatives, potentially disrupting congressional lives from the grassroots. Too many complaints at home create risky circumstances for members of Congress, especially when the complainants are local public opinion leaders.

Fourth, congressional offices today are well organized to listen to constituents, even before many complaints develop. Well-staffed offices (seventeen or more employees for House members and thirty-five or more for Senators), in-district meetings, focus groups, and rapid, readily accessible communications technology allow congressional offices to monitor the concerns of constituents. In short, members of Congress and their staffs understand full well whom they need to keep happy and how they can do it.

Roberts is an excellent example of this rule. His switch from active support of commodity programs to decoupling came when his constituents pointed out that they would fare better without the planting restrictions in the wheat program and that the target price program had the perverse effect of reducing payments in years when crop conditions were poor (and financial assistance to producers was needed most). Similarly, southern members, who originally opposed the decoupling elements of Roberts’s Freedom to Farm proposal, reversed direction when their constituents realized that, given projected cotton prices, the guaranteed payments offered by the Roberts plan would exceed anything they might receive under the old program.

Constituent complaints are recognized first for other reasons, ones that undermine the political credibility of others who peddle policy ideas. Interest groups, as they aggregate citizens nationally, tend to minimize regional differences and address national issues. Too many local constituents are left out in that homogenization process, even though
they might continue to be members of the local Farm Bureau or Sierra Club. As a result, members of Congress frequently ask those back home if they agree with the expressed views of Washington lobbyists and act accordingly. For example, if local dairy producers in a member’s district don’t agree with the National Milk Producers Federation, it is nearly impossible for those in a congressional office to follow a dairy lobbyist’s lead.

Policy analysts find it even more difficult to compete with constituents. The most worrisome problem for policy analysts is that members of Congress are skeptical, even distrustful, of much policy analysis. Among the complaints leveled by congressional members, the following are common: reports are overly esoteric and hard to decipher; researchers pay too little attention to the effects of policies on constituent groups; analysts neglect political reality in favor of sweeping, elegant plans; and results are based on questionable assumptions, producing skewed, unreliable results. The first three complaints reflect the vastly different worlds and cultures of congressional members and policy analysts, with the former needing to satisfy constituents by solving current, pressing problems, and the latter needing to address all sides of a problem with a solution that can withstand rigorous peer review.

The fourth complaint is more serious. If members of Congress believe that policy analysts are using questionable assumptions and cloaking biased results in professional rigor, they will assume that the analysts are being manipulative or pursuing their own agenda. A new phrase has been coined as a reason to reject policy analysis: policy hacking. Like everyone else that members of Congress deal with, policy hackers are seen as following a highly political agenda, rather than standards of neutrality and objectivity. No wonder, when such perceptions abound, members of Congress consider constituent demands to be more forthright, more understandable, more reliable—and hence, more deserving of attention—than policy analysis.

**Rule 4: Congress cares more about the noise from farmers than about the number of farmers**

Farmers are important because they’re always underfoot, and they’re intelligent stakeholders in public policy. That’s not true of most people.

—A southern member of the House interested in agricultural policy reform.

Our experiences found surprising support in congressional offices for rewarding farmers with policy favors. While farm bills include many other new agenda items to broaden their legislative appeal, farmers still come first as the legitimate beneficiaries of agricultural policy. That is the reason why policy makers still call the recurring omnibus legislation a “farm bill,” and why congressional appropriations in the 1996 farm bill provided farm payments that were so generous, equaling nearly 100 percent of those paid during the past seven years.

Why is there such a preoccupation with farmers when they constitute such a small percentage of any district or state constituency? Have members of Congress not learned that farm numbers continue to shrink, that a very small percentage of farmers produce most U.S. food and fiber, and that farming does not dominate most rural economies (Penn)? Of course they have. But neither the number of farmers nor their financial need are crucial factors in determining congressional support for agricultural programs. It is the risk of neglecting a vocal and politically respected constituency that matters to congressional members.

Other things matter as well. We have been quite surprised by congressional explanations of why farmers, despite these changes in the farm sector, come first in agricultural politics. Members and their staffs give us four reasons for the continuing political power of farmers. First, though analysts may claim the farm sector does not need federal dollars, those funds are still seen by both Congress and farmers as useful in stabilizing U.S. agriculture. Second, the health of the sector is still seen as the public’s, and thus the government’s, business. From a congressional perspective, a sufficient reason exists for government intervention in agriculture, regardless of whether that reason meets the welfare criteria of policy analysts.

Third, farmers are especially well organized and vocal in keeping messages of policy and sector support alive. They join groups and solicit personal relationships with congressional members at home. And they integrate into other district and state activities in their communities, in churches, or on policy task forces. As constituents, farmers are strategically positioned to act as district opinion leaders who, when angry, can do much to undermine nonfarm opinions about specific members of Congress.

Finally, members of Congress note that it is relatively easy to do something to address farmers’ complaints. There are many federal programs for legislators to modify in addressing the complaints registered by constituents. Members of Congress are willing to trade support with other members on behalf of their constituents, producers of favored commodities, or interest groups concerned with welfare and environmental issues. Moreover, the public at large generally does not get aroused over agricultural expenditures, providing members with a politically cost-free decision—an opportunity to
quiet the complaints coming from farm constituents and generate very few countervailing complaints from the wider public. Agriculture, then, remains a politically benign sector for many members of Congress. In a constituency-driven world, farmers are well positioned, despite their shrinking numbers, to maintain a central role in congressional politics and to effectively express their political demands in the future.

The road ahead

The other canard is what would happen if we have $4 billion to $5 billion sitting in the pot [in 2002]... Many think this is the end of farm programs. But it's not the end. If farmland values decline, if the good Lord is not willing and the creeks do rise, we're not going to abdicate our responsibility... What happens if the bottom drops out of the market? I think we would get a budget waiver, and we would address it.

—Former Congressman Pat Roberts, on whether the reforms contained in the 1996 farm bill would be permanent.

Taken as a whole, our four rules may be a bitter pill for policy reformers. Analysts place a high value on consistent and comprehensive analysis of all aspects of policy, especially emphasizing efficiency measures that favor the welfare of the many over the wants of the few. This value, however, is not part of the congressional culture. Congress is dominated by fragile political coalitions comprised of intensely self-interested claimants demanding that their issues be included somewhere on the agricultural policy agenda. If one combines Pat Roberts's two comments in the context of our analysis, the tentative state of farm policy reform becomes obvious: all the political stars must come into alignment if agricultural policy is to be reformed, but even then the resulting policy decisions will last only so long as the stars stay in alignment. And these changing alignments will require that majority coalitions be rebuilt again and again as issues emerge and constituent demands change.

This point becomes especially important in considering what will likely happen the next time a farm bill comes up in 1998, or 2002, or any time in between. No long-term plans or strategies will govern future policy making. The circumstances of the moment will prevail in the short-term world of Congress. To paraphrase John Maynard Keynes, members of Congress know full well that in the long run each of them will be out of office. Someone else will be there, forced to address their own immediate problems. So members will deal rationally with the here and now, mostly serving the interests of the constituents in their district.

Despite much congratulatory rhetoric heralding the end of farm programs, there is reason to believe that reports of the death of U.S. farm programs are greatly exaggerated. The political incentives that lead to the creation and maintenance of farm programs still exist. While some producer interests were committed to the Freedom to Farm reforms from the outset, others supported the Roberts plan only when market conditions suggested that program payments would be more generous under the new farm program. Such support was a rational, opportunistic, economic calculation, not a change in deeply held philosophic orientation that would prevent future attempts to resurrect farm programs in some form when economic conditions are reversed. Moreover, the structure of Congress will continue to encourage members to tinker with the extensive base of agricultural programs in an effort to satisfy the demands of self-interested constituents.

For more information


