

CONTENTS

- Acknowledgments, *vii*
- 1 What's Going on in Kansas?, *1*
 - 2 The Food System: Or, Why Governments Don't Leave Agriculture to the Marketplace, *14*
 - 3 History Is Not Bunk: How Farm Bills Past Shape Farm Bills Present, *27*
 - 4 Whatever It Takes: Farmers, Food Stamps, and Coalitions of Convenience, *47*
 - 5 "Stop the Spending": Budget Politics and the "Secret" Farm Bill, *67*
 - 6 Building a Pathway to Sixty: The Senate Moves First, *82*
 - 7 We're on the Road to Nowhere, *98*
 - 8 SNAP, *114*
 - 9 In Conference, *134*
 - 10 What Just Happened Here? Finding Meaning in the Politics of the Farm Bill, *155*
- Notes, *169*
- Index, *195*





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1

What's Going on in Kansas?

The First Kansas is one of the nation's most rural House districts. In its current form, the "Big First" takes up more than half the state, stretching from the outer suburbs of Topeka in the northeast over 300 miles westward along the Nebraska border to Colorado and then curling south another 200 miles around the Fourth District to the Oklahoma state line. At 57,000 square miles—equal to the entire state of Illinois—it is also one of the nation's largest House districts. To put it in perspective, the Thirteenth New York, the nation's smallest House district, starts at 100th Street in Manhattan and heads north all of eight miles through Harlem along the Hudson River to Van Cortland Park. Both districts have around 720,000 residents, as per the House apportionment rules based on the 2010 census. There the similarities end. Where the Thirteenth New York is urban (70,000 people per square mile), ethnically and racially diverse, younger, poorer, and Democratic, the First Kansas is rural (11 people per square mile), 90 percent white, older, more affluent, and Republican. The Thirteenth New York is Harlem, Columbia University, and the Bronx. The First Kansas is Fort Hays, Kansas State University (in Manhattan, Kansas), and Dodge City.

More to the point of our story, the First Kansas is agriculture: vast stretches of wheat and grain sorghum (used as cattle feed)—an average farm size of 1,000 acres (or 1.5 square miles)—interspersed with "concentrated feeding operations" where thousands of head of beef cattle are fattened for slaughterhouses operated by Cargill and National Beef using largely Hispanic immigrant labor.¹ While

manufacturing and the service sectors are now greater overall drivers of the state's economy, agriculture remains important, and the Big First is Kansas agriculture's epicenter.

Not surprisingly, those representing the First Kansas in Congress, including Representative (later Senator) Robert Dole and Representative (later Senator) Patrick Roberts, were devoted to and left indelible fingerprints on agricultural policy, and they made sure that Kansas got its fair share of federal funds to support farming. Dole, as we will later see, also played a key role in expanding federal nutrition programs serving low-income Americans, while Roberts made his mark by promoting reforms in federal farm programs. In historical terms, then, representatives from the Big First have played pivotal roles in developing the nation's farm and food programs.

In January 2011 the First got a new representative, Tim Huelskamp, who filled a seat left empty when incumbent and fellow Republican Jerry Moran ran successfully for the Senate seat vacated when another Republican, Sam Brownback, became governor. (Note the pattern: whoever represents the Big First in the US House, a safe Republican seat, invariably becomes a top contender when one of the state's US Senate seats becomes available.) Huelskamp, a state senator, won the seat after beating five other Republicans in a hotly contested primary, after which he achieved an easy victory in the general election.

Huelskamp grew up on a family farm in Fowler, Kansas (2010 population, 590), and like many future members of Congress, he developed an early fascination with politics and public policy. In 1995 he returned to his southwestern Kansas hometown after finishing his doctorate in political science—not the normal law school path taken by most members of Congress—and immediately jumped into politics. A year later he was elected to the state senate—one of the youngest state senators in decades. He would be reelected three times with ease, based largely on his core conservative values on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as his deeply held view that government had become too big and too expensive. Perhaps reflecting his early training in a Catholic seminary, or maybe just because he is contrarian by nature, Huelskamp also displayed a willingness to criticize his Republican colleagues if he felt they weren't doing enough to pursue conservative goals. In fact, in 2003 he was removed from the state senate's key Ways and Means Committee for clashing once too often with party leaders. His repu-

tation with voters for being uncompromising in defense of his—and their—values, aided by financial support from national conservative advocacy groups, enabled Huelskamp to claim the Big First's open seat in 2010 as part of the Tea Party wave that put Republicans back in control of the House of Representatives.²

Befitting his district's agrarian status, Huelskamp promptly claimed the Big First's "traditional" seat on the House Agriculture Committee, maintaining a lineage established by Dole and Roberts in particular. However, anyone who thought that Huelskamp had gone to Washington just to promote Kansas agriculture was soon disabused of that notion. To the surprise of no one who had paid attention to his state senate career, Huelskamp fast became a vocal thorn in the side of House Speaker John Boehner and other Republican leaders who, in his opinion, weren't carrying out voters' wishes. He also refused to compromise on cutting federal spending, even when the all-important Farm Bill was up for reauthorization. In fact, despite pleas from his state's leading agricultural industries and farm groups to support its passage, Huelskamp and a cadre of fellow conservative House Republicans blocked action on the Farm Bill throughout the 112th Congress (2011–2012). In December 2012 Speaker Boehner, furious at Huelskamp's refusal to fall in line with party leaders on key votes, booted him from the important Budget Committee and, to ensure that the lesson hit closer to home, the Agriculture Committee.³ The Big First now had no seat on House Agriculture for the first time in recorded history. If Huelskamp was shaken by his punishment, he didn't show it. "The Kansans who sent me to Washington did so to change the way things are done," he declared, "not to provide cover for establishment Republicans who only give lip service to conservative principles."⁴

What Is This Farm Bill about Which You Speak?

This book was inspired by a roll-call vote. On January 29, 2014, after three years of sharp ideological and partisan conflict, the US House of Representatives approved the House-Senate conference committee report on the Agricultural Act of 2014 (H.R. 2642), known colloquially as the Farm Bill (as are all versions of this legislation).⁵ The final vote (table 1.1) was telling in itself, suggesting significant lingering unhappiness with the final package.

Of interest was the vote's breakdown. The bundle of programs that make

Table 1.1 Final House Vote on H.R. 2642 (January 29, 2014)

	Yea	Nay	Not Voting
Republicans	162	63	6
Democrats	89	103	8
Totals	251	166	14

up any version of the Farm Bill is the foundation of the nation's food production system, and the law typically comes up for renewal every five years. Whatever happens in the course of any single Farm Bill's journey through the legislative process, final passage is practically assured because, as congressional scholar David Mayhew surmises, the compromise package satisfies most legislators' policy, constituency, and, of course, reelection needs.⁶ Indeed, the previous edition of the Farm Bill was enacted in 2008 by overwhelming bipartisan majorities—*twice* over vetoes by President George W. Bush.

Not so in 2014: House Democrats split almost evenly on the bill's final passage, forcing Republicans in the majority to overcome defections by one-third of their members. What piqued my curiosity was that two-thirds of the Republicans voting against passage had not been in the House in 2008. Most were so-called Tea Party conservatives hailing from largely suburban and rural districts in the Midwest, South, and Southwest and who, since the 2010 midterm elections, had reshaped the House Republican majority and the party overall.⁷ For their part, Democrats who voted against the bill were largely from liberal, urban districts on the East and West Coasts. What was it about the Farm Bill this time around that provoked such clear ideological, partisan, and even intraparty splits?

Another compelling fact was this: while most midwestern farm-state Republicans voted for the final package, which renewed key agricultural support programs through fiscal year 2018 (or September 30, 2018), notable in their adamant opposition were all four House members from *Kansas*—America's breadbasket, a place so synonymous with farming that a sheaf of wheat adorns the official state seal. How is it possible, I wondered, that all four House members from Kansas could be so hostile to the Farm Bill—the *Farm Bill!*—to vote no, even though a yes vote would have been an easy gesture to the folks back home who wanted them to support it? With all due respect to Mayhew, weren't the four of them acting against their own electoral

self-interests? Others noticed too: reporters for the *New York Times* observed that it was the first time in recorded history that the entire Kansas House delegation had voted against the final version of a Farm Bill, despite public pleas by the state's agricultural leaders to support passage.⁸

As you may already surmise, one of these four Kansans stood out. Tim Huelskamp's ouster from the Agriculture Committee and his consistent opposition to the Agricultural Act should have hurt his reelection prospects, an outcome that John Boehner likely would have welcomed in the hope that voters in the Big First would elect a more agreeable Republican. But they didn't: Huelskamp would survive a primary challenge and go on to win easy reelection in November 2014. So did his three compatriots—who together made up the nation's most conservative House delegation⁹—no doubt because they adhered to the set of values that got them elected to Congress in the first place.¹⁰

An intriguing (to me, at least) side note: Huelskamp's story is more interesting, perhaps ironic, to anyone who studies Congress because in 1995 he earned a doctorate in political science and wrote his dissertation on changes in the composition, structure, and institutional roles of the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s.¹¹ That two decades later he got kicked off the House Agriculture Committee for insufficient loyalty to party leaders is the stuff of (not very good) fiction.

To recap: all four House members from Kansas voted against the Farm Bill, despite pleas from their state's agricultural establishment to support it. All four were reelected anyway. What is going on here?

As is often the case, the central story of the Agricultural Act of 2014 turned out to be about something other than farming. It was about *food stamps* or, to be precise, about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's primary tool to help low-income Americans buy food. Spending on SNAP had risen sharply since 2008, in large part because of the Great Recession, but also because Congress had expanded program eligibility during the previous decade, so that it now accounted for nearly 80 percent of the Farm Bill's annual costs (figure 1.1).

H.R. 2642 as enacted contained \$8 billion in cuts—or savings, depending on one's viewpoint—in SNAP through 2024, most in the form of tighter eligibility requirements. Although the reductions came to less than 1 percent of annual SNAP outlays, they prompted opposition from almost half the House

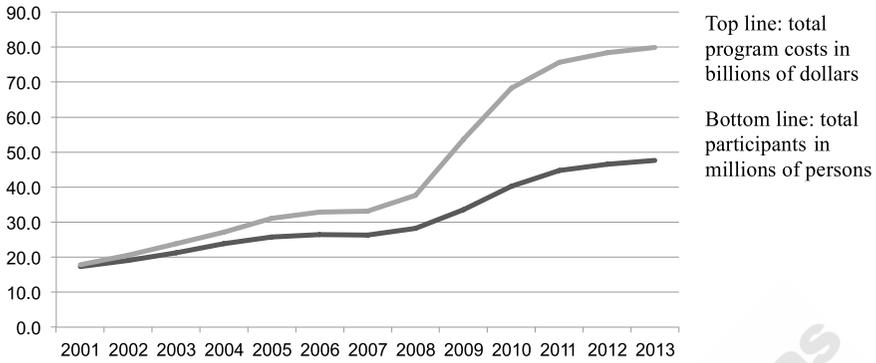


Figure 1.1 SNAP Costs and Enrollment Growth, Fiscal Years 2001–2013

Source: Food and Nutrition Services, US Department of Agriculture, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs,” <http://fns.usda.gov/pd/SNAPsummary.htm>.

Democrats and a third of House Republicans—for opposite reasons. As Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat from Connecticut, railed that the final version was “nothing more than Reverse Robin Hood legislation that steals food from the poor in favor of crop subsidies for the rich,” Marlin Stutzman, a Republican from Indiana, lamented that its passage only perpetuated “the unholy alliance between food stamps and farm programs.”¹² In short, liberals like DeLauro voted no to protest cuts in SNAP spending, while conservatives like Stutzman voted no to protest the insufficiency of those same cuts in a program they thought should not be part of the Farm Bill anyway.

Wait, you might be thinking: why are food stamps included in the Farm Bill? That’s a story in itself, and it’s the central irony of the fight over the Agricultural Act of 2014. Here’s the short version: For decades, going back to the early 1970s, food stamps and other nutrition programs (such as providing surplus commodities to food pantries) were included in a series of federal Farm Bills *precisely* to build coalitions of support. Urban liberals who might not care about or might even oppose federal subsidies for a comparatively small group of farmers would support the Farm Bill in return for votes from rural conservatives who might otherwise oppose the politically unpopular food stamp program. In fact, Huelskamp’s Big First predecessor, Robert Dole, was instrumental in expanding food stamp coverage while serving in the Senate, in part to cement that urban-rural partnership. However, that

cross-ideological, bipartisan coalition, born out of pure political necessity, had frayed by 2011 when Congress took up Farm Bill reauthorization, and by 2014, SNAP was a point of division, not cohesion. How that became the case after decades in which the “farm programs + food stamps” deal had provided mutual benefits, and why House members from Kansas could oppose the Farm Bill and not suffer for their purported sins, is the focus of this book.

Why Follow the Farm Bill?

The path taken by the Agricultural Act of 2014 tells us a lot about the politics of food, and possibly a great deal more about contemporary American politics. Not that we lack for good general-audience books on the politics of food, a topic of interest to many more of us every day. Indeed, any short list includes Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, Marion Nestle's *Food Politics*, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and Daniel Imhoff's *Food Fight*, to name a few.¹³ Most of these works are by journalists, nutritionists, and food advocates, and all express strong points of view about changes needed in the food system. There is nothing wrong with that, of course. Some of the most compelling insights into our politics come from advocates seeking to change it. Think about Upton Sinclair's semifictionalized exposé of the mistreatment of workers in Chicago slaughterhouses in *The Jungle* (1906). While Sinclair hoped (in vain) that his book would inspire readers to overthrow capitalism, public uproar about conditions in the slaughterhouses did spur President Theodore Roosevelt and Congress to enact the first federal Meat Inspection Act and the first Pure Food and Drug Act. Or, as Sinclair later famously mused, “I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”¹⁴

Curiously absent from any list of recent authors addressing this topic are political scientists, whom one would expect to pay particular attention to the politics of food production and consumption. Indeed, go back a few decades, and you would have no trouble finding political scientists who used agriculture as a lens to examine the broader dynamics of the vote-gathering role of political parties, interest-group organization and political power, bureaucratic culture and routines, and the impacts (good and otherwise) of federal farm policy. Notable among them were Schattschneider, *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff* (1935); Freeman, *The Political Process* (1955); Bauer,

Poole, and Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy* (1963); McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (1966); Redford, *Democracy in the Administrative State* (1969); and, more recently, Berry, *Feeding Hungry People* (1984); Browne, *Private Interests, Public Policy, and American Agriculture* (1988); and Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby* (1991).¹⁵

Today, with a few exceptions, agriculture seems to be overlooked in political science.¹⁶ One reason may be that it is no longer a key economic sector. In the late 1940s agriculture by itself (versus food processing, retail, and restaurants) accounted for more than 20 percent of the nation's economic output and employed more than 20 percent of its workforce. Today, the sector accounts for less than 5 percent of the nation's output and employs less than 10 percent of its workers.¹⁷ So while agriculture remains essential in some areas of the country, its relative centrality to the nation's economy has waned. It might make more sense to focus on health care or online commerce if one wants to study politics and policymaking.

A second reason is that few members of Congress today hail from or depend on the votes of farming areas. This is particularly true for the House of Representatives, whose structure of representation reflects where Americans live. Even in the late 1950s, more than 200 of the 435 House districts were classified as "rural," and many members came from and depended on the votes of farming communities. This created an identifiable cross-party "farm bloc" that had leverage in Congress and in national politics overall.¹⁸ Farmers and the many organized groups representing agriculture mattered, and as such, they were duly studied by scholars. Today, less than 2 percent of Americans are farmers, and only 34 House districts are considered rural.¹⁹ The congressional farm bloc simply shrank as the nation's center of demographic and political gravity shifted to the suburbs and, most recently, to the exurban stretches of home developments, service industries, and chain retail and dining establishments, particularly in the booming Sun Belt.²⁰ Where people—and political power—go, so goes the attention of scholars.

Finally, agriculture once seemed to represent "normal" American politics. That is, agricultural policymaking typically was organized around specific crops and products, and as such, it reflected the local biases inherent in an institutional structure in which legislators give priority to their respective geographic constituencies over any directives from congressional leaders or the president.²¹ If you were a representative from the Big First, you repre-

sented wheat. Agriculture also reflected the vote-gathering role of regionally based political parties, which prospered not because of any overarching philosophy about government but because of their ability to pull together winning coalitions in every presidential election. Just as James Madison envisioned when he warned about the “mischiefs of faction” in *Federalist 10*, but political scientist Robert Dahl almost two centuries later depicted as “normal” pluralist politics,²² agriculture typified the clout of active and intense organized interests—again, think Kansas wheat growers—over an inattentive and unorganized public, whether depicted as voters or consumers. Agriculture was synonymous with mainstream political science conceptions of a client-centered “distributive” politics, with members of Congress ensuring their reelection by being responsive to narrow, geographically specific, organized commodity interests—southern cotton, midwestern corn, western beef—each of which received its respective piece of the Farm Bill pie within the legislative context of formal and informal vote trading. Each Farm Bill was an exercise in distributing just enough benefits to enough distinct constituencies to ensure its passage, including, when their votes were needed, members representing urban food stamp recipients.²³ In the end, almost everyone, save those most concerned about the federal budget or “good” public policy, left happy—or at least not unhappy—with the results.

But on the surface, at least, something had changed. What else could explain how four House members from Kansas could vote against the Farm Bill and survive? Why were there such sharp ideological and partisan divisions over legislation that, on the surface at least, traditionally seemed to sidestep them? Didn't “distributive” politics work anymore? Clearly, our conventional understanding of how the world works needed some updating. In my mind, at least, it was time to revisit the politics of the Agricultural Act of 2014, both because its saga tells us something about current American politics in general and because it is a good story in its own right.

What do such stories tell us? The usual answers come to mind: the “text-book” model of how a bill becomes a law doesn't suffice (if it ever did) to capture the fluidity and complexity of congressional action; following an actual piece of legislation tells us a lot about larger social and political trends and the issues at play; and it is just plain fun, at least for us policy and politics wonks. Equally important, compared with many policy areas, the president is a comparative bystander in Farm Bill politics. That's worth pondering at

a time when images of presidential power, or at least centrality, have been (again) overmagnified during post-9/11 and Great Recession—era crisis politics. The Agricultural Act of 2014 wasn't the 2002 Patriot Act. It wasn't even the 2010 Affordable Care Act. But it *was* highly partisan and ideological, reflecting larger political battles that, in the end, made final enactment less certain than at any time in decades.

The Farm Bill is also about more than agriculture. According to Michael Pollan, trenchant critic of the dominant food system, we should call it the “Food Bill,” since its many provisions shape food production and, subsequently, how we eat. For example, why have commodity crops such as corn, wheat, and soybeans historically received generous federal government support, while most vegetables and fruits have not? What is and isn't considered “organic”? Why are many agricultural activities exempt from federal environmental laws? Why are food stamps part of the Farm Bill? And who decides all this?²⁴

The Farm Bill is also, in the end, about nutrition. As noted, nearly 80 percent of the annual spending under Farm Bills passed in 2002 and 2008 was for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. How did this come to be? That's a long story examined in more detail in chapter 4, but suffice it to say that decisions made more than forty years ago to put the food stamp program into the Farm Bill, and under the formal jurisdiction of House and Senate Committees on Agriculture, reflected rational calculations by representatives of a fast-shrinking farm bloc. They needed to recruit votes from their urban colleagues for crop-support programs assisting an ever smaller slice of the population. As such, food stamps became the glue that held the Farm Bill together through thick and thin, with rural representatives supporting the program's expansion as their own numbers continued to shrink. They did whatever it took to get enough votes to pass the bill.

Today, most of the Farm Bill's spending goes toward what many Americans see (and not sympathetically) as a handout to people “not like themselves.” This makes the battle as much about class, race, immigration, the “deserving poor,” individual moral responsibility, and the proper role of government as about growing or eating food. This is why the Farm Bill is about more than agriculture—and why we should pay attention to it.

The Story to Come

This book looks back at the Farm Bill's most recent reauthorization to gain deeper insights into the politics of food and American politics more broadly. Like any narrative in which the legislative process is the central thread, the story follows a generally chronological path. Having said this, it is not a day-by-day, blow-by-blow description of how a bill became a law. Instead, the meandering trail taken by the Agricultural Act of 2014 is used as an organizing device to frame an examination of larger themes in American politics.

Along the way, two stories take center stage. First, we'll follow two Kansans, Senator Patrick Roberts and Representative Tim Huelskamp, previous and current representatives of the Big First, to observe the contrast (and frequent clash) between the former's more traditional approach to balancing competing interests and the latter's arguably more absolutist perspective in defending core ideological values. The focus on Roberts and Huelskamp also highlights the larger changes and struggles within the Republican Party, perhaps *the* defining political story of the current era.²⁵

The second story is about food stamps—for decades, the glue that held together that tenuous coalition of rural and urban interests each time the Farm Bill came up for reauthorization. As we will see, the fight over SNAP would be the defining battle of the Agricultural Act of 2014, and it threatened to disrupt long-standing cross-party partnerships and established ways of doing business. The SNAP controversy also shed light on deeper partisan and, especially, ideological disagreements over the scope and direction of federal spending. As such, the debate over the Farm Bill was not simply about farm and food programs but about the role of government itself. That's why the Farm Bill matters to all of us, not just to farmers and food policy advocates.

Chapter 2 reviews the food system and why government policy is so critical to it. The food system did not just create itself; it is shaped by government policy, and for good reason. Chapter 3 looks back as the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture took up the task of reauthorizing the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, whose core provisions would lapse unless formally reauthorized by September 30, 2012. This journey back into history helps us understand the origins of US agricultural policy and why, when Congress took up the Farm Bill in early 2011, so many considerations reflected decisions made years, even decades, earlier. We also meet Senator

Patrick Roberts of Kansas, whose career in Congress reflected and contributed to many of the policies being revisited.

Chapter 4 looks at the range of organized interests positioning themselves as Congress prepared to move on reauthorization. Once, these interests would have been limited to farmers' organizations like the American Farm Bureau Federation or commodity groups like the National Corn Growers Association. Today, they include a diverse array of farming, agribusiness, nutrition, environmental, international aid, trade, and consumer interests—each aligned in loose coalitions of support for the issues or programs under consideration, and each brought into the Farm Bill “tent” to guarantee its passage. A major part of that effort was the deliberate decision by rural legislators, typified by Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, to bring food stamps and other nutrition programs under that tent, in no small part to maintain the support of urban America for a shrinking farming population.

In chapter 5 we find the House and Senate Agriculture Committees compelled to adapt to a dramatically changed political dynamic as the Republicans, energized by the conservative Tea Party surge of 2010, gain a majority in the House and set out to slash federal spending. To do so, House leaders shifted power to the chamber's Budget Committee, which ordered major and immediate cuts in agriculture and nutrition programs and imposed limits on the Agriculture Committee's spending. Perhaps more important, broader partisan and ideological conflicts over the budget, including threats to shut down the federal government, caused concern that key farm programs would not be renewed by the deadline. In the middle of this fight, largely among House Republicans, were Tim Huelskamp and other newly elected conservatives determined to rein in the size and power of the federal government, including, if need be, farm programs that were important to the folks back home.

Of particular importance in this regard was the long-standing linkage between commodity and nutrition programs. As detailed in chapter 6, this link endured in the Democratic-controlled Senate, despite efforts by conservative Republicans to narrow program eligibility and rein in costs. Indeed, the Senate acted relatively quickly in mid-2012, precisely because senators from farming states were able to pull together a bipartisan coalition sufficient to overcome opposition by their most conservative colleagues. By contrast, as explored in chapter 7, leaders of the House Committee on Agriculture strug-

gled to get their version of the Farm Bill to the chamber floor, largely because of resistance by Republicans like Huelskamp and because legislators from farming districts had become a distinct minority in the lower chamber. The 2008 Farm Bill formally lapsed on October 1, 2012, only to be extended until September 30, 2013, as part of a late-year deal between Republican leaders and President Obama.

Chapter 8 finds us in mid-2013: Obama won reelection, Republicans maintained control of the House, and Huelskamp, having crossed swords once too often with Speaker Boehner, lost his seat on the Agriculture Committee, prompting talk of a primary challenge in 2014 out of concerns that their feud would hurt Kansas agriculture. The Senate, still controlled by Democrats, again approved a “standard” Farm Bill, including commodity and nutrition programs, but the House remained locked in a fight over SNAP. The House Agriculture Committee succeeded in getting its bill to the floor, only to see it defeated in a shocking final vote as both liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans bailed out, for opposite reasons. How did this happen? House leaders, desperate to show progress, eventually overrode the Agriculture Committee and put the farm and nutrition programs into separate bills, both of which passed in partisan floor votes. Having disconnected the traditional “farm programs + food stamps” linkage, the question was whether either could survive on its own.

Chapter 9 brings us to the House-Senate conference committee in late 2013. The task was now to align the various bills into a single version that both chambers could support. Meanwhile, Congress and President Obama were locked in yet another deadlock over the budget, resulting in a two-week shutdown of the federal government. Here we follow the role of key senators in defending “traditional” agricultural needs, even if doing so required support for nutrition programs that were unpopular back home. We also review the impacts of institutional arrangements such as the conference committee, which allowed defenders of the longtime “farm programs + food stamps” arrangement to regain the advantage and shape the final bill.

We end our story at Michigan State University, where President Obama formally signed the Agricultural Act into law on February 7, 2014.²⁶ Notable by their absence, despite being invited, were *any* Republican members of Congress. Even at the moment of its signing, passage of the Farm Bill said volumes about the current state of American politics.