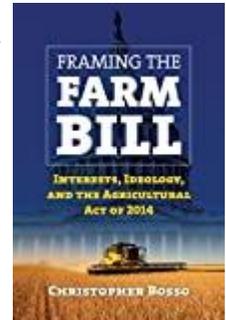


Christopher Bosso. *Framing the Farm Bill: Interests, Ideology, and Agricultural Act of 2014.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. Illustrations. 208 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-2420-1.



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Agricultural history often reveals the complex intersections of politics, policies, and policy-makers that make even the most mundane legislation key to understanding larger conflicts in local communities and the larger nation. The federal agricultural acts more commonly known as “Farm Bills” carry just this sort of significance—pieces of legislation that underscore longer, more complicated relationships that blur the lines between economy, politics, environment, and region. And in the more recent past, this legislation has become ground zero to some of the most intractable and vitriolic ideological divides that undermine even basic political dialogue. On the surface, these bills seem to just be part of an expanding ocean of federal legislation. But to get at this legislation’s longer history and its relevance for those living day to day in rural and urban communities, scholars must look at these deceptively mundane kinds of lawmaking as they reveal the complicated tapestry of interests, ideologies, and policies that seem to increasingly drive political gridlock and disfunction as much as stable outcomes.

Christopher Bosso offers a succinct account of the Agricultural Act of 2014. As in his previous works, such as *Environment, Inc.: From Grassroots to Beltway* (2005) and *Pesticides and Politics: The Life Cycle of a Public Issue* (1987), Bosso’s dynamic prose underscores the importance of taking a public policy-based view in understanding an interconnected sociopolitical, environmental, and agricultural past. Indeed, one of *Framing the Farm Bill*’s central arguments includes the fundamental role agriculture has played in the nation’s politics and, as that role is made and remade, the way the larger political discourse follows along a regional and local exchange: “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 instructional structure in which legislators give priority to their respective geographic constituencies over any directives from congressional leaders or the president.... Agriculture also reflected the vote-gathering 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” (pp. 8-9).

In one of the most engaging surveys of federal agricultural policy to date, Bosso begins by tracing the central place of the Great Plains and Midwest in early postwar discussions around federal farm subsidies and general agricultural policies. The “farm bloc,” as representatives from these states came to be known, once carried tremendous political clout but their influence has significantly diminished in recent years: “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 indefinable cross-party ‘farm bloc’ that had leverage in Congress and in national politics overall.... Today, less than 2 percent of Americans are farmers, and only 34 House districts are considered rural” (p. 8).

In addition to the farm bloc shrinking as demographic and political influence moved away from the fields to the suburbs where new political influence emerged around “home developments, service industries, and chain retail and dining establishments, particularly in the booming Sun Belt,” a new polarized Republican politics overtook the more pragmatic Republican wing of the past with problematic consequences (p. 8). Thus, Bosso starts with one of the starkest examples of this transformation: Kansas Republican House Representative Tim Huelskamp’s removal from both the Budget Committee and Agriculture Committee that had long been held by prominent policymakers, such as Bob Dole (originally from Russell, Kansas).

Although Huelskamp was elected to the Sunflower State’s “Big First” District (a district that

takes up more than half of the state, which includes Manhattan, Kansas, where Kansas State University is located), he fell out of favor almost immediately when he “refused to compromise on cutting federal spending, even when the all-important Farm Bill was up for reauthorization” (p. 3). As Bosso insists, even as most Kansas farm groups and agricultural industries in the state pleaded with Huelskamp to support the Agricultural Act throughout 2011 and 2012, Huelskamp remained recalcitrant, refusing to vote to support the bill, which certainly frustrated federal policymakers but worried local farmers throughout the “Big First” too (I was living in Manhattan, Kansas, when Huelskamp was removed and heard first-hand farmers’ consternation in the rural coffee shops at the time). Bosso uses this vignette to interweave how the bundle of programs and economic support structures that became known as the “Farm Bill” to guide the nation’s food system became hijacked by political hostility, brinkmanship, and self-interests that frequently competed against the economic self-interests of those same rural residents.

Bosso continues to explore the Farm Bill in this context throughout the early chapters to survey the longer legacy of agricultural policies that emerged from the Great Depression and New Deal era through the farm crisis era of the 1980s—all to help better understand the increasingly polarized agricultural politics of the 1990s and early 2000s. For Bosso, these federal-to-state trajectories reveal ongoing partisan divides that increasingly fail to represent the actual needs of rural and urban communities. Instead, this legislation that at once is so vital to the scope and breadth of the nation’s food supply often gets mired in intra-Republican Party debates about evermore extreme stances against federalism and polarized inter-party debates against Democrats and their role in adding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or “food stamps,” which became the primary way to assist low-income Americans, to the larger Agricultural Act. Equally important is

Bosso's efforts to trace how an ever-increasing political polarization that shaped the Farm Bill in these more expected ways also had equal potency in unexpected ways. For example, the ongoing arguments about prioritizing subsidies for certain crops over others is a familiar tension, but many readers will also find stifling partisanship infecting even the most granular parts of the bill, including how to title the legislation.

Subsequent chapters continue to offer an excellent balance between quantitative data and qualitative analysis as well as historical scope to show how past farm bills influence the debate around the current bill's passage. Bosso follows the money, power, and policy to show that field, town, and city are all interconnected to agricultural legislation with an increasingly polarized edge and an exponentially sharper cut. Of course, there are areas of agreement, and Bosso insists that the

political center (at least in 2014) remained strong enough to carry some semblance of bipartisanship for future farm legislation. But every renewal carries a risk that the functional center will fail to hold up against significant shifts in local production conditions, national political winds, and global commodity changes.

In many ways, *Framing the Farm Bill* is a prologue to the hyper-partisanship of American politics and life that have saturated two decades of the twenty-first century. This book is a fundamental primer on the history of agricultural policymaking, and an updated version would certainly find expanded relevance as it could address farm and food legislation under the Trump and Biden administrations. Students and scholars alike will glean much from Bosso's ability to trace the complicated relationships of contemporary food politics and our conflicted food future.

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