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## Digging into the Demographics:

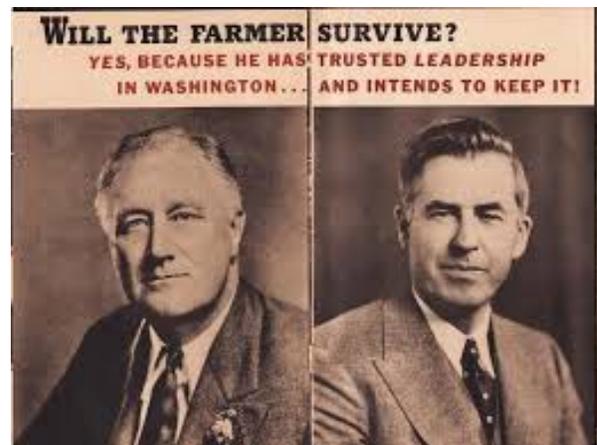
### Will fewer farmers still be able to deliver political punch?

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 7, 2014 - If farmers' political influence was measured strictly by the number of farm operators, 1935 would have been a very good year. Peaking at 6.8 million out of a total U.S. population of 127 million, farmers represented slightly more than 5 percent of U.S. citizens.

Certainly, it was a period of time – coming on the heels of the Great Depression – when both the Congress and the White House were focused on addressing the economic plight of farmers suffering from shrinking international markets and dramatic overproduction. Just two years earlier, cotton was trading at 6 cents a pound, wheat at 35 cents a bushel, corn at 15 cents and some farmers were selling hogs at 3 cents a pound.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a New York Democrat, appointed Henry A. Wallace, then a registered Iowa Republican, as his Secretary of Agriculture. Wallace believed that, to have a strong national economy, you had to have a strong agricultural economy and he went to work on crafting New Deal agricultural legislation to tackle problems down on the farm. The result, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, laid the groundwork for many policies that are still foundationally in place today.



In a speech delivered to farmers in 1935, Roosevelt boasted about the important relationship that farmers enjoyed with their city “cousins.”

**“If the farm population of the United States suffers and loses its purchasing power, the people in the cities in every part of the country suffer of necessity with it. One of the greatest lessons that the city dwellers have come to understand in these past two years is this: Empty pocketbooks on the farm do not turn factory wheels in the city.”**

Both Roosevelt and Wallace talked passionately about the economic interdependence between farmers and consumers, but it also served them well politically. They put together the “New Deal Coalition,” an alliance of voters representing urban Jews, Catholics and blacks, along with farmers and labor unions, in a fashion that powered the Democratic party for decades later.

## Fast forward to 2014

The economic, demographic, and political landscapes are all dramatically different in 2014, **making it more challenging than ever before for farmers to connect with the consumers who live in cities and the politicians who represent them.**

Over time, modern farming practices like hybridization and mechanization made it possible for farmers to escape some of the back-breaking tasks that characterized on-farm production in the 1930s and later years, enabling them to produce more food with less labor. But this trend also accelerated a “disconnect” between those who make a living from the land and those who benefit from their hard work – a gap that appears to have widened in recent years.

“In the old days – if you remember the movie *Field of Dreams*, it was – ‘If we build it they will come’ – and that was true in agriculture..... ‘If we grow it they will buy it.’ But those days are not around anymore,” Dan Glickman, a former secretary of agriculture, told *Agri-Pulse*.

“Now the line is more complex: If you grow it and they want it and they want to know what’s in it, they will buy it. That means you have a consumer that’s more investigative. They want to know what’s in their food,” adds Glickman, who also serves as one of four co-chairs of Agree, a group focused on the transformation of food and agricultural policy systems.

“That means production agriculture has to be more consumer focused. But that’s OK,” Glickman says. “Because the demand is there, too. The innovative producer will meet that demand.”

### **So what does that mean in terms of political power?**

Some argue that the growing demand for food on a globe where the population is expected to exceed 9 billion by 2050 (it’s presently at 7.2 billion), puts agriculture in the driver’s seat, regardless of the on-farm numbers.

**“When you’re keeping people fed, I’d say you are pretty darn relevant,”** emphasized American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman in a convention speech to his delegates last year.

**“While there may be fewer of us in rural America than in other places, we will work harder. We will work longer. We will always stand up for the values that are the bedrock of our nation.”**

Yet, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack was one of the first to suggest that the declining number of farmers could translate into declining political clout. Two years ago, while Congress was wrangling over farm legislation, he publicly challenged farmers and ranchers to rethink their rural strategies and try to rebuild the population base in rural America.

**“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,”** Vilsack said during a presentation at the Farm Journal Forum in December 2012.

At the time, Vilsack seemed to be underscoring the political polarization that had become painfully obvious within GOP circles.

The GOP majority in the House of Representatives repeatedly struggled to find a path forward on a new farm bill. Their caucus – including a group of about 60 fiscally conservative Tea Party-aligned members who were focused on reducing federal spending above other priorities – seemed unable to reach agreement on how much deficit reduction they could accept in the legislation. On June 20, 2013, the House defeated a comprehensive farm bill in a 234-195 vote, sending shock waves through the traditionally supportive farm community.

Just five years earlier, Democrats who were guided by former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and former House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson of Minnesota had skillfully managed to craft together a new farm bill and also override President George W. Bush's veto.

But by 2014, some Democrats were still dealing with painful changes in their own party. After Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, Republicans picked up a net total of 63 seats in the 2010 midterm elections and regained control of a chamber they had lost in 2006. Although the sitting U.S. president's party usually loses seats in a midterm election, the 2010 balloting resulted in the worst losses for such a party in a House midterm election since 1938.

Most noticeably missing after 2010 – at least for many in the agricultural community – were the so-called Blue Dog Democrats. These members represented many agricultural and rural districts and served as swing votes on fiscally conservative issues – often siding with their GOP counterparts and against the more liberal members of their own party. During President Bill Clinton's two terms in office, many of the Blue Dogs supported the Republicans' Contract with America, complained that the Clinton White House was too liberal and called for a balanced federal budget.

But as a result of redistricting, which placed several conservative Democrats like Charlie Stenholm of Texas and Dennis Cardoza of California in hard-to-win, largely GOP districts, the number of Blue Dogs shrunk from 54 members in the 100<sup>th</sup> Congress to only 19 in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Ultimately, the House managed to pass both parts of a “split” farm bill by dividing the nutrition title from the remaining 11 titles and then merging the two versions back together in a conference committee with the Senate.

Rather than the traditional White House bill event, President Barack Obama signed the “Agriculture Act of 2014” on Feb. 7 at Michigan State University, the alma mater of Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich. It was a monumental occasion designed to showcase not only the comprehensive nature of the farm bill but celebrate Michigan State's history as one of the nation's premier land grant universities.

However, even the signing ceremony was not without controversy. Stabenow invited her other three principal negotiators: the Senate Agriculture Committee's ranking member Thad Cochran, R-Miss., as well as House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., and Ranking Member Collin Peterson, D-Minn., but none of them showed.

Clearly, some of the controversy over the farm bill still lingered, as did the questions about future political effectiveness.

“When you have three-quarters of 1 percent of the population involved in food production – if you just look at it from that perspective – the influence of agriculture has really waned,” says

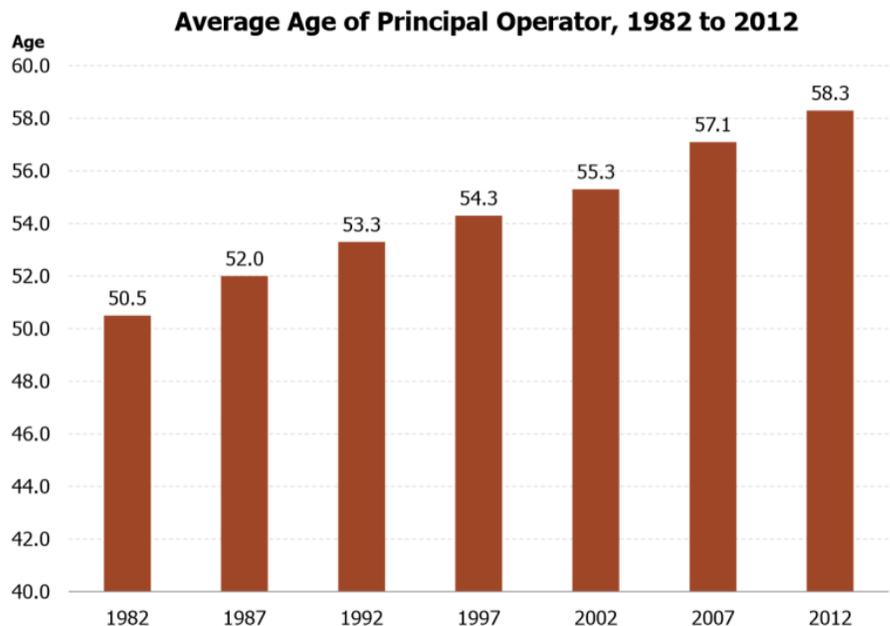
former Congressman Cardoza, who now serves as co-chair of the public affairs practice of Foley & Lardner LLP in Washington, D.C. “But it’s also a problem of the industry not advocating forcefully enough and not making their presence known.”

## Numbers tell part of the story

The U.S. population has more than doubled since 1935 when Roosevelt was building his “New Deal” coalition, topping over 318 million on July 1. Meanwhile, the U.S. farm population continues to be a shrinking slice of that larger national pie.

The number of principal farm operators dropped about 4 percent from the last U.S. Ag Census in 2007, from 2.2 million to 2.1 million. Farmers now represent less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, based on USDA’s fairly generous definition of a “farmer.” According to USDA, the official definition of a farm for census purposes is “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold or normally would have been sold” during the census year.

The American farm population is also growing older, with the average farmer’s age increasing from 57.1 in 2007 to 58.3 in the 2012 Ag Census. **That trend is not surprising, but the number of new farmers – a talent pool which could eventually replace those nearing retirement age – does not appear to be keeping pace.**

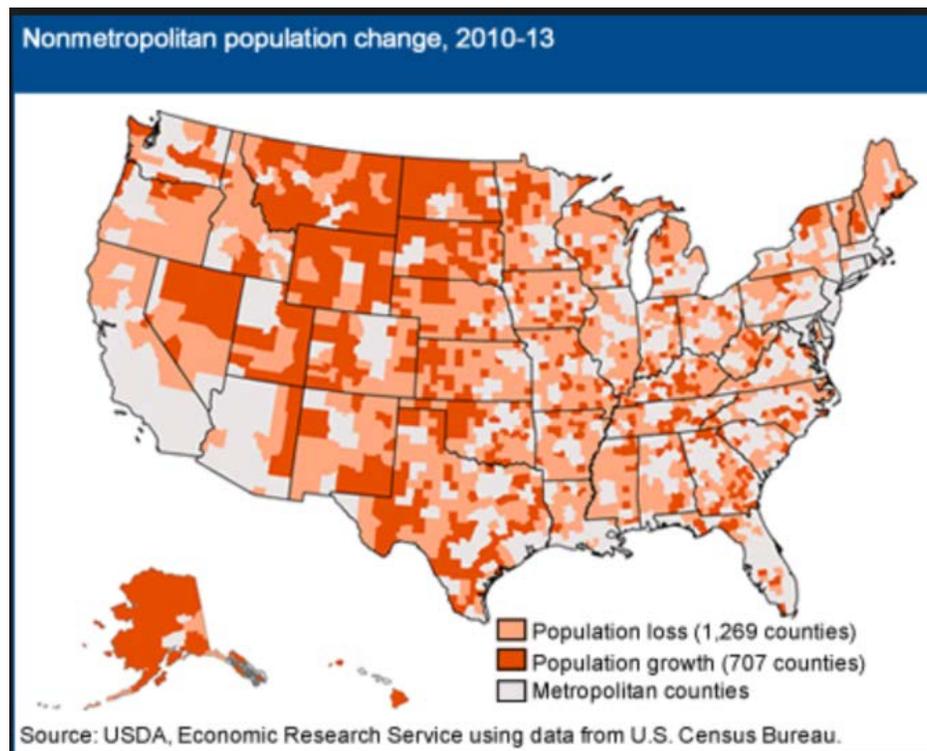


The number of new, beginning farmers shrunk by 23.3 percent since the last Census was released in 2007, however, those farmers who started farming 10 years ago (between 2003 and 2007) fared slightly better – their numbers only decreased by 19.6 percent.

## Rural counties are also on the decline

In addition to the declining number of farmers, many rural counties are also losing residents. Non-farmer rural residents may not understand agriculture, but they often feel the pain whenever economic problems surface in the agricultural economy. Conversely, rural businesses may also benefit when farmers and ranchers are making money and buying more goods and services locally.

The number of people living in non-metropolitan (non-metro) counties stood at 46.2 million in 2013 — that represented nearly 15 percent of U.S. residents spread across 72 percent of the nation's land area. That's not an insignificant share, however, those non-metro counties are also showing some disturbing trends.



Population growth rates in non-metro areas have been lower than those in metro areas since the mid-1990s, and the gap widened considerably in recent years, notes John Cromartie, a geographer with USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). However, while non-metro areas in some parts of the country have experienced population loss for decades, non-metro counties as a whole gained population every year – until the 2010-2012 time.

Although the non-metro population loss during that period is quite small – an estimated 44,000 – it was the first time there was an estimated population loss for non-metro America as a whole.

Even if this trend is only temporary, Cromartie writes in the ERS magazine *Amber Waves*, it **“highlights a growing demographic challenge facing many regions across rural and small-town America, as population growth from natural change is no longer large enough to counter cyclical net migration losses.”**

Population change within counties comes from three sources: natural change (defined as total births minus total deaths), domestic migration (people moving from one county to another), and international migration (people moving to and from other countries), explains Kenneth Johnson, a University of New Hampshire sociologist and senior demographer for the Carsey Institute. He told *Agri-Pulse* that, in many counties, the amount of “natural change” is at a historic low.

Deaths exceeded births in 1,135 out of 3,007 U.S. counties in 2012, the most number of counties in U.S. history. As recently as 2009, that same natural decrease occurred in just 880 counties, Johnson wrote in a [special report](#) for the Carsey Institute.

Last year, 46 percent of all non-metro counties experienced this natural decrease compared to only 17 percent of urban counties. For the first time in U.S. history, deaths exceeded births in two entire states: Maine and West Virginia.

One factor that has helped reverse this trend and increase population numbers in some parts of rural America? The growth of minority populations, especially Hispanics.

“The Census Bureau recently released new data which showed, for the second year in a row, that in the white, non-Hispanic population as a whole, more people are dying than being born. **Since rural America is much more non-Hispanic white, that would impact rural America quite dramatically,**” Johnson explains. **“Hispanics are one of the few groups that are causing population increases in some parts of rural America.**”

“It’s not uncommon in some rural high schools to lose half of the graduating class (to domestic migration) within a year after graduation,” Johnson explains. “Then another generation comes along and instead of 100 kids graduating from high school there are only 50 and then if half of them leave, there’s not going to be many young people left to produce the next generation of children.

“In the meantime, that older population that never left has aged in place and now within two generations it is getting up to the age where they are starting to experience significant mortality. So with few young people left to produce the next generation, and a larger older generation that’s going to begin to die off, that’s when natural decrease begins to happen.”

Reversing that trend has been difficult in many parts of the country. As one economic development expert who asked not to be identified told *Agri-Pulse*: **“Some of these older farmers want their small town to last only one day longer than they do.”**

Johnson says that “not all natural-decrease areas face a bleak future. Economic development, an influx of minorities, high levels of civic engagement, and community cohesion have broken the downward spiral of natural decrease in some areas, but many remain at risk.”

**“Demography is not destiny, but one ignores it at their peril,” he adds.**

### **How does this translate politically?**

Regardless of the population, each state gets two votes in the U.S. Senate, which often provides farm and rural interests substantially more political punch per voter than those in urban areas. When you compare a state like Wyoming, with a population on only 582,565 in 2013, to a more populous state like Florida, with a population of about 19.5 million, it’s easy to see how farmers and ranchers can still carry considerable Senate clout in less densely populated states.

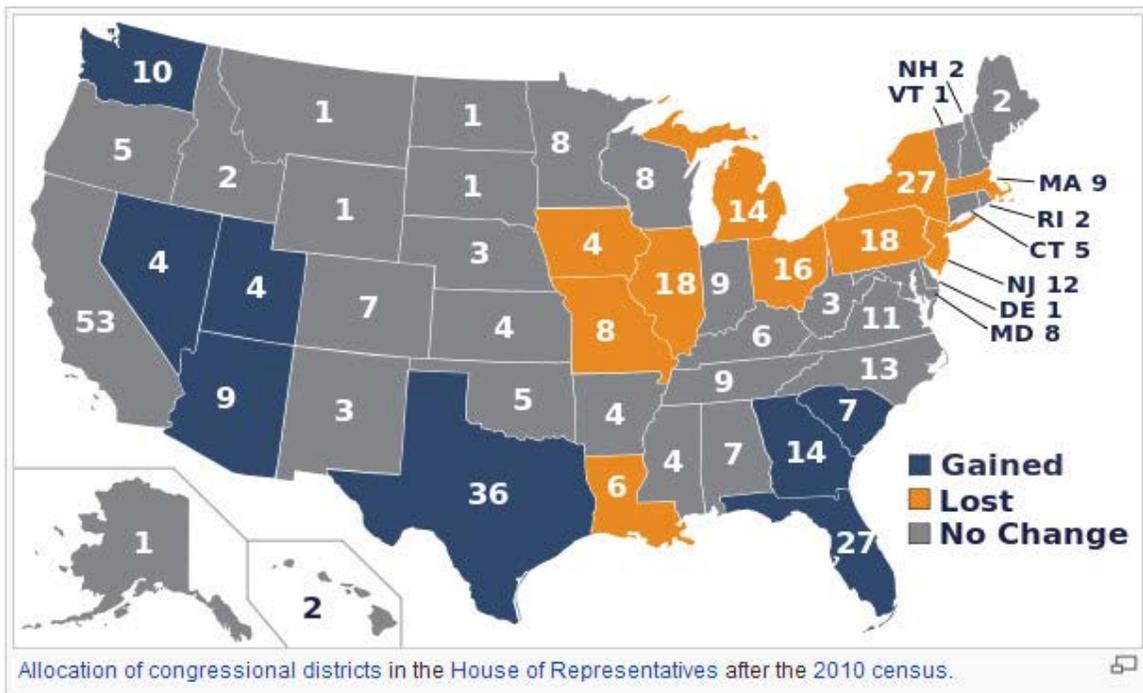
But in the U.S. House, where the number of voting representatives is currently set at 435, these population trends can make a huge difference. Each state is guaranteed at least one congressional seat, but the total number of seats corresponds to the share of the aggregate U.S. population that resides in each state.

In a state where the population has been growing, like Texas, the number of representatives increased from 21 in 1930 to 36 today. The state of Florida, which had five representatives in 1930, now has 27.

In a state like Nebraska, which is still largely rural, the number of representatives has declined from five to three during that same time frame. In Iowa, the number of federal representatives was set at nine in 1930. As a result of the most recent reapportionment, there are now only four congressional districts in the state.

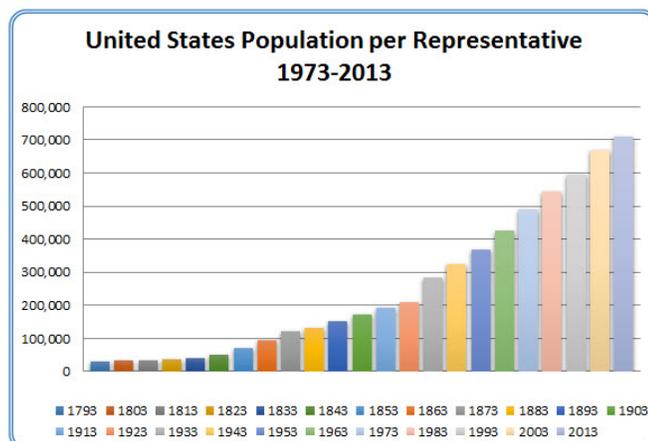
Congressional seats are redistributed following the release of the U.S. Census every 10 years, and in 34 states, it's up to the state legislature to decide – subject to the governor's approval – where those congressional district lines are drawn. Other states use independent bodies, sometimes subject to approval of their state legislatures, to redistribute seats. In seven states where the population is low – Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming – there is only a single representative for the entire state.

The map below indicates how the number of congressional seats in each state changed as a result of the most recent reapportionment in 2012, based on the 2010 Census. Several states in the Upper Plains only have one representative and many others like Iowa, Illinois and Missouri continue to lose representatives. **The biggest “gainers” in the pack?** Texas, which gained four seats and Florida, which gained two.

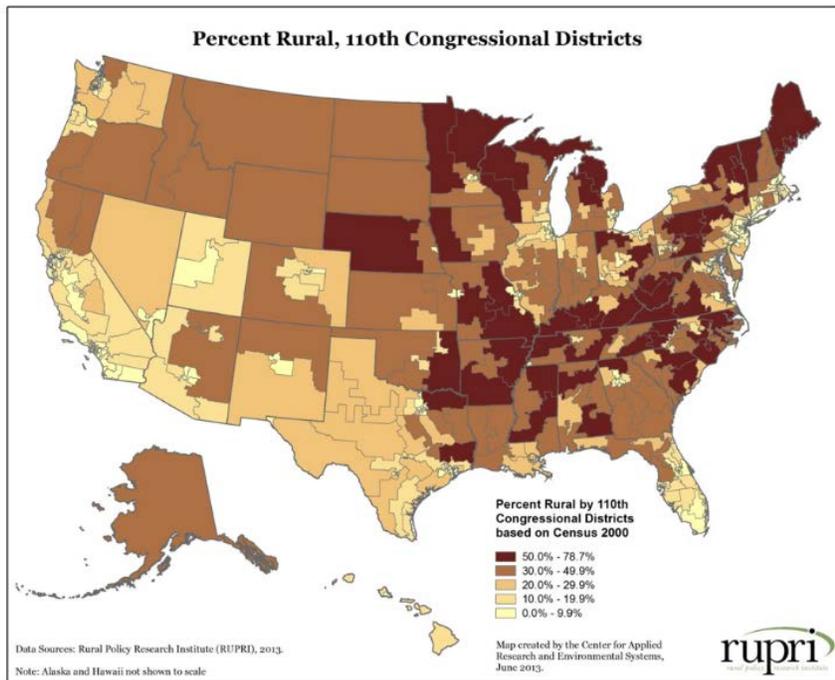


Source: Wikipedia

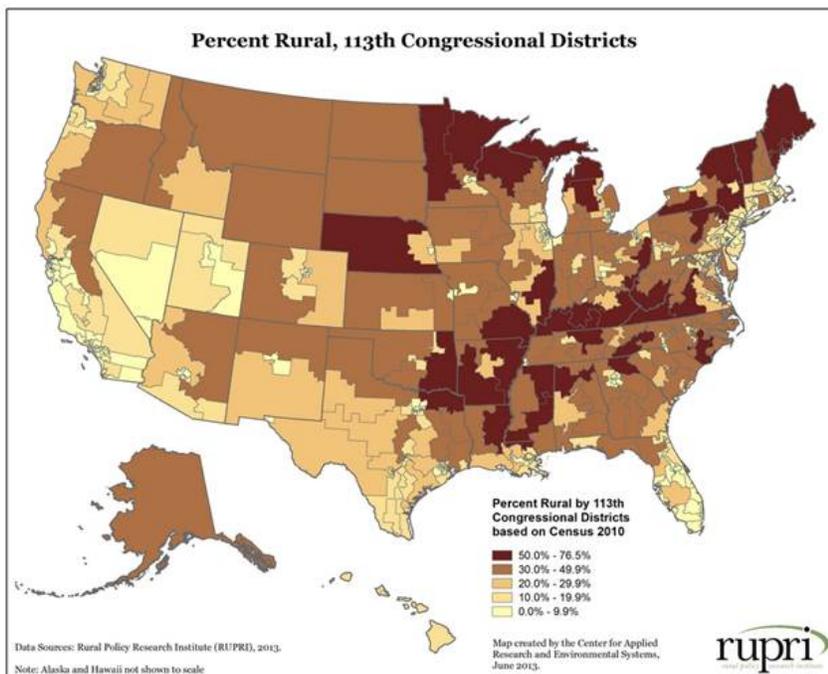
As the U.S. population has grown, so has the average number of constituents represented by each member. For example, in the 1930's, each House member represented an average of just under 300,000 constituents. Now that number has grown to over 700,000.



The maps below, developed by the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), also show how the congressional boundaries changed in each state as a result of redistricting. The first map shows the percentage of rural population in each district, based on the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, which served from Jan. 3, 2007, to Jan. 3, 2009. These districts were established after the 2000 Census numbers were released.



The lower map show congressional maps based on the 2010 Census, where there are only about 34 primarily rural districts left remaining in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, which started on Jan. 3, 2013.



Over time, there's no doubt that demographic changes can have an impact on redistricting and, depending on how the new congressional districts are drawn, influence the politics within a district. But it is often difficult to make simple predictions based on the demographics of rural versus urban.

Take the case of former Congressman Charlie Stenholm, a cotton farmer and conservative Texas Democrat who was first elected to the House in 1978 from a largely rural district. A member of the Blue Dog Coalition, he was the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee for six years and worked closely with Republican Larry Combest to win approval of the 2002 farm bill.

From 1980 to 1990, Stenholm was reelected without major-party opposition, even running unopposed in 1980 and from 1984 to 1990. But a decade later, he became a target of a fellow Texan -- then GOP Majority Leader Tom Delay, and his effort to redraw congressional districts in favor of Republicans.

Stenholm's district was split into four other districts, with most of his former territory thrown into the heavily Republican 19th District, represented by Rep. Randy Neugebauer. Facing an uphill battle, Stenholm lost by 18 percentage points in the November 2004 election.

In general, "the redistricting process has not helped agriculture," says Glickman, a Democrat who represented the Fourth Congressional District in Kansas for 18 years before being named Secretary of Agriculture in President Bill Clinton's administration.

"Where there are pure agricultural districts, they tend to not be bipartisan at all.....They tend to be very heavily Republican," Glickman explains. "Whereas, I represented a district that was mixed and blended, which means I had to build bridges that crossed party lines.....Now that more districts are homogenous, you either have all urban districts or all rural districts and there are just not enough rural districts to have a majority."



Dan Glickman, former Congressman & Secretary of Agriculture

In the case of House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, redistricting after the 2010 Census left his heavily Republican district in Oklahoma largely intact.

When the Oklahoma Republican first ran for the Sixth Congressional District seat in 1994, it was one of the largest congressional districts in the state and one of the largest – in terms of land mass – in the entire nation.



For Lucas, political challenges surfaced – not as a result of any rural/urban split – but within his own party as a result of conservative opposition to farm bill spending. Last year, Tea Party aligned groups like Heritage Action started running radio ads in Oklahoma, “to help educate everyone on the reality behind the ‘trillion dollar farm bill.’”

**“The farm bill is no such thing. Eighty percent of the money goes to food stamps, and spending a trillion dollars isn’t fiscally responsible, by any reasonable definition,” the ad claimed, with pigs squealing in the background.**

Still, Lucas had no problem defeating his Tea Party challengers in the June primary, winning over 80 percent of the vote.

That’s why some political insiders suggest that demographics may be part of the future political puzzle for agriculture, but certainly can’t entirely be used to frame the discussion.

“I think a bigger problem was the Tea Party Republicans who were elected in what were traditionally farm districts,” Ranking Member Collin Peterson told *Agri-Pulse*. “You could always count on the southerners coming up here...they were for cotton, rice and peanuts and they were solid. But when these people were elected in 2010 and 2012, a lot of them had no ties to agriculture. Some of them came around and some didn’t. So you didn’t have the support for traditional commodity agriculture coming out of the South that you used to have.”



Ranking Member Collin Peterson

For his part, Chairman Lucas says such a wide variety of factors were



House Agriculture  
Committee Chairman  
Frank Lucas

in play as the 2014 farm bill was being developed that it is difficult to pinpoint any single one.

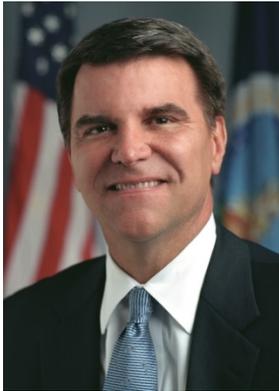
As he looked at the whip count for the first farm bill vote in 2013, Lucas said almost half the House had not been here for the previous farm bill of 2008.

“They had not been there for the debate, the discussion on the amendments, and the challenging process of implementing any farm bill. They just simply were babes in the woods. They were naïve. So the re-education or education process was incredible there, too,” Lucas said in an interview.

“I just simply say this. The declining population - yes it hurts. The fact that it causes members of both stripes - Rs and Ds alike - perhaps not to be as sensitive to rural America as they should be is a huge problem. But with this particular two sessions of Congress with divided control, dramatic differences in philosophical perspective, huge deficit, huge turnover in membership .....there’s dramatically less institutional memory in the body....all those things together made it (farm bill passage) really hard.”

## Tactics, not demographics?

“Some would probably suggest that agriculture needs to change the way we handle politics, given the change in demographics and that sort of thing, and I don’t necessarily buy into that,” says Chuck Conner, president and CEO of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives.



Chuck Conner, CEO  
National Council of  
Farmer Coops

“I generally think that food production in this country, and those that are engaged directly in that, carry as much political clout and as much support out there at the grassroots, even among the non-farming interests, as we probably ever have. I don’t think that’s necessarily waned dramatically.”

“But where the change has to happen, though, is that, among those of us involved in the food production system, we’ve got to make our views known and get active,” adds Conner, who previously served as deputy secretary of agriculture under President George W. Bush.

“What has changed is that there has always been some of that indifference out there among farmers who say, ‘I’m busy. I’m growing crops. I’m raising livestock. Somebody else has got to handle the political advocacy.’”

But Conner says that won’t work in today’s world, where technology can provide “micro-groups” with “really big voices.”

“You can’t just have a system where someone else is sort of doing your advocacy. They’ve got to get engaged, every one of them, at the grassroots level and participate in order to counter that sort of micro-advocacy that’s going on out there.”

Conner argues that there is no need for farmers and ranchers to change the message or create new organizations.

“Generally speaking, if you went down some of the streets of New York City and started surveying people, I think there’s generally pretty high regard for farmers for food production. It’s a strong message, and farmers are viewed very, very highly in that process -- but they’ve still got to make their views known.”

Another problem that surfaced during the farm bill debate was the divisiveness within the agricultural community “with corn arguing one way, beans another, rice a completely opposite third,” Conner adds.

“That’s where our smallness really shows, when we’re speaking with different voices.”

On the other hand, Conner says agriculture can continue to deliver powerful political punches if diverse interests can unite.

“If we’ve got a common goal in mind and people really believe -- not only at the grassroots level but at the political level -- that this is what farmers really need... I think we can battle with the best of them.”

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Next week: How some farm organizations are sharpening their political strategies.