

Dancin' With The One That Brung Ya

Republicans politicians like to present themselves as common folk, and by doing so they seem to appeal to voters in the south and the Midwest, the vast rural and agricultural section of the nation often called the heartland. Take a look at the Red State—Blue State post election map, and one thing you will notice is how rural, how agricultural, most red states are.

From looking at that map you would think that the Republicans are the farmer friendly political party. So it's surprising that the Republicans just repealed a bill requiring food to be labeled with the country of origin.

Farmers loved the idea because they believe that consumers want to know where their food comes from. Farm groups actively lobbied Congress to enact the bill, and they suggested a number of benefits to telling consumers where their food comes from. First, farmers thought that many people believe that food from American farms is cleaner, safer, and possibly healthier, than food from foreign farms. Closely related is the concern about tainted food as a weapon of terrorism, and the hope that food from U.S. farms will be safe. Finally, farmers thought that many consumers would want to support American farmers out of a sense of loyalty, pride, and patriotism. Farmers thought it was a great idea, an idea that no one could possibly oppose.

But then some food processors and meat packers said that it would cost them money to add a couple of words to a food label. And food processors and meat packers are big campaign contributors, so they called their friends in Congress, and the bill was repealed.

The caricature of Republicans is that they are the party of big business, willing to do the bidding of industry, and hoping to skew society for the rich and well connected. So it's surprising that one of the first things they do after winning re-election is to roll over for big business. You'd think they would be a bit more subtle.

One of the ‘must read’ political book this year was “What’s The Matter With Kansas,” by Thomas Frank. The basic premise of the book is that while the Republicans appeal to ‘middle America’ with talk about values they actually support government policies that favor big business at the expense of Middle America. In other words the Republicans claim to be the party of family values, but then they support government policies to keep down the minimum wage (thus ensuring that many working men and women do not earn enough to support a family), they support tax breaks that allow companies to write off the expense of sending jobs overseas (thus allowing companies to outsource high paying jobs to low wage countries) and they oppose any form of legislation to control medical costs (thus allowing forty five million Americans, mostly children, to go without health insurance).

Government is a big amorphous entity, and public policy is complicated and confusing, so it’s difficult to specifically pin down Republicans on their pro-family rhetoric and anti-family policies, which allows the Republicans to get away with their duplicity. But every once in a while the Republicans go and do something blatant, like repealing a farmer friendly bill to appease their friends at Archer Daniel Midland (the worlds largest agri-business and a major Republican donor.)

The repeal of the country of origin labeling law clearly puts the lie to the Republicans’ claims to represent the American heartland, and clearly proves the truth of Frank’s book. Wear a cowboy hat (like Bush does), talk about “tradition,” “values,” “patriotism” and the heartland will vote for you. But once you’re in office, say hello to your contributors, and to hell with your voters.

There’s an old folksy phrase that former Republican Senator Phil Gramm of Texas was fond of saying. He said that politicians should “dance with the one who brung ya.” Looking at

the post election map you would think that Republicans would know that it was farmers and rural America that “brung ‘em.” The red state votes may come from farmers and rural communities, but the money to win elections comes from big business, including huge agri-businesses like meat packers and food processors. Republicans talk the talk to get the farmer’s votes, but they don’t really care much about farmers.

Gramm’s phrase brings to mind a scene right out of “Oklahoma” with rural Americans riding to a ho-down in a surrey. But the Republicans are leaving the dance with the highest bidder and climbing into bed with them. This brings an entirely different image to mind, but one clearly more in line with the real Republican Party.