

First, let me wish you a Happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving is a time for rest and reflection and family, and I hope you have a wonderful holiday.

Having experienced a particularly long national election season, Americans can take time this Thanksgiving week to reflect on our many blessings. Perhaps most importantly, our republic, divided as it at times may seem, remains attached to the democratic ideals enshrined by our nation's founders. America's promise still holds, but each generation has the obligation to protect it – to remain free to enjoy the wonders of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We choose our leaders in the ballot box, not through bloodshed or coercion.

While I think many of us regret the commingling of important national holidays and excessive commercialization, I wanted to let you know that this Saturday is known as "Small Business Saturday." As a nation attempting to regain our economic footing (and put our government's fiscal house in order), it is important to note the reason we still have the largest, most diverse, and dynamic economy in the world: the American small business entrepreneur. Half of all Americans work in small businesses, and small business is responsible for 65 percent of new job growth in the U.S.

Underscoring this fact, this Saturday, one of the largest retail shopping days in the year, has been designated Small Business Saturday. This effort to focus consumers' purchases at local small businesses was initiated by American Express three years ago. It took off immediately. Impressed by the idea upon hearing of it, I called American Express's CEO last year to learn more. He told me that the idea came from a young employee, and it's showing positive results. Last year retail sales at smaller, independent stores the Saturday after Thanksgiving increased nearly 30 percent over the same day the year before. More than 100 million people shopped at small, independent businesses on Small Business Saturday in 2011.

Small business is particularly important in Nebraska. According to the most recent data, the number of small businesses in Nebraska exceeds 158,000, representing nearly 97 percent of all local employers. Small businesses employ nearly 400,000 Nebraskans. In Lincoln, nearly 80 percent of private sector employees work in businesses with 25 or fewer employees. These numbers illustrate why Nebraska has maintained a stronger economic outlook than the country as a whole. Established small business networks strengthen communities' economic resiliency, helping insulate them from the effects of corporate layoffs and national downturns.

I am continually impressed by the drive and innovation of Nebraska small businesses. From the restaurant in Lincoln's Haymarket using foods from local farmers, the generations-old book bindery business in Utica, and the family-owned textile rental company in Norfolk, Nebraskans are taking the risks and earning the rewards of entrepreneurship. In the process, they are strengthening local economies, creating jobs, and growing our communities.

As we celebrate with friends and family this Thanksgiving weekend, we can be mindful of our great blessings as Americans and as Nebraskans. Among them is the freedom to pursue economic security through entrepreneurship and a vibrant local marketplace. As you celebrate - and perhaps do some holiday shopping – again I wish you all a healthy and Happy Thanksgiving!