

# THE EVOLUTION OF FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Through an examination of public policy, legislative discussions, and statistical analysis of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamps program), this paper concludes that agricultural and business interests have frequently taken precedent over hunger relief in American social policy formation. Agricultural and business interests first asserted strong control over the program in the 1930s and this uneven power dynamic has been continuously reinforced through various policy reforms over the decades. The auxiliary importance of hunger to social welfare programs in the United States is especially apparent through the written policy goals of the program, which place agricultural and business interests first and hunger relief second, but can also be seen through the structure of the program, the political rhetoric used to describe hunger relief, and the vulnerability of SNAP in times of economic distress. In order to undo the stronghold of exterior interests on hunger relief, Nation concludes that the United States should shift from an agricultural- and business-based approach to hunger to a rights-based approach to hunger.

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## Introduction

While the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) may initially seem like an altruistic assistance program, its existence has been strongly linked to agricultural, political, and business interests since its beginnings in the 1930s. In 2013, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives attempted to decouple nutrition and agricultural interests and reduce the program by removing SNAP from the Farm Bill. Although the Senate refused to pass the legislation, anti-hunger groups reacted with shock and outrage, accusing House Republicans of trying to end food assistance in the United States. For example, Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger said, “Today’s vote is the latest smoking gun that the House majority isn’t truly interested in deficit reduction. They’re interested in supporting special interest groups over hungry Americans.”<sup>1</sup> While focused on the 2013 incident, Berg’s statement reflects the unstable history of food assistance in America and its dependence on other interest groups. Recently, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has indicated a desire to shift SNAP from entitlement funding to block funding, a move that would end the program’s ability to expand in times of economic hardship.<sup>2</sup> Historically, both SNAP’s link to agricultural and business interests, as well as its status as an entitlement program, have been integral to its ability to meet the needs of America’s hungry. One method of ending America’s compromised behavior towards food assistance would be shifting the justification for the program towards a rights based approach to food.

### **Rights Based Approach to Food Assistance**

The right to food, as outlined in the UN

Declaration of Human Rights, is the “right to have regular, permanent, and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases to...adequate and sufficient food corresponding with cultural traditions of the people.”<sup>3</sup> Currently, the United States and Australia are the only countries in the United Nations that have not adopted a formal right to food.<sup>4</sup> In 1996, the UN hosted the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, where all the countries in the United Nations, except Australia and the United States, “agreed to

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adopt the notion that food is a basic human right and pledged to make efforts to cut world hunger in half by 2015.”<sup>5</sup> The United States has repeatedly asserted that the right to food is not an enforceable obligation for countries, but countries should pursue the right to food as a means of promoting stability and quality of life. According to Ellen Messer, a professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, “The U.S. Department of State has always insisted the economic, social, and cultural rights – including the right to food – are not recognized or protected under the U.S. Constitution.”<sup>6</sup> Food assistance is not a right expressly laid out in the Constitution, nor in


other sections of U.S. law, but the federal government has taken on food assistance efforts through an entitlement program. While entitlement programs guarantee an expansion of funding as the number of eligible participants grows, it does not protect food assistance from a switch to block funding, reduction in program eligibility, or a host of other legislative reductions without replacement. The formal right to food would protect food assistance programs and reduce the threat of potential reduction or elimination of the program, as well as give hunger advocates a rights claim. The right to food would increase government sustainability, public participation, and connections between policy and health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> According to Mariana Chilton, Head of the Center for Hunger-Free at Drexel University, and Donald Rose, Head of the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, “The right to food means the right to expect reasonable opportunities to provide food and good nutrition for oneself.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than work as a pure distribution program, the establishment of the right to food guarantees that the government will create opportunities for individuals to help themselves through access to a sufficient living wage and nutrition. If individuals were unable to access adequate nutrition, a right to food would ensure that the government would step in and provide assistance.<sup>9</sup> Overall, the formal adoption of the right to food in the United States would mandate that the federal government intervene in instances of a lack of nutrition, but would also guarantee a living wage and food access.

There have been some American historical instances of debate in favor of the adoption of a right to food. In 1944, during one of his fa-


mous fireside chats, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed an economic Bill of Rights, in accordance with the idea that “true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.”<sup>10</sup> The proposal included the right to a useful job, right to a family home, and “right to earn enough to provide adequate food.”<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt’s economic Bill of Rights would have guaranteed economic security for American citizens, including food security, to individuals via the federal government. Additionally, both houses of Congress passed a nonbinding Right to Food Resolution in 1976, but little occurred as a result.<sup>12</sup> Although there have been some trends toward a formal adoption of the right to food in the United States, instances such as wars, terrorism, and globalization have distracted from the efforts of hunger lobbyists. Historically, the United States has typically ignored the right to food and instead justified food assistance programs through a lens of promoting agricultural, business, or governmental interests.

### **1935-1939: Surplus Distribution Program**

Federal assistance with food access began in the 1930s with massive agricultural surpluses juxtaposed by widespread hunger during the Great Depression. At the beginning of the 1930s, the US Department of Agriculture ordered farmers across the country to massacre piglets and under-plow fields in order to eliminate the agricultural surplus and maintain stable food prices.<sup>13</sup> This order was met by a public call for the transfer of the surplus to the needy instead. As a result, the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC) was established in 1935 and an amendment to the Agricultural Adjustment Act was passed, allowing



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the federal government to purchase surplus agricultural products for distribution to the hungry.<sup>14</sup> Distribution took several forms including school lunch programs, direct sale to local stores, and plain distribution out of federal offices.<sup>15</sup> For the first time, food assistance for the poor was conducted by the federal government, but only when large agricultural surpluses required a change in the distribution system. Before the establishment of the FSRC, agricultural and hunger interests were at odds, as the agricultural industry took measures to sustain high prices outside of the reach of the hungry, at the cost of wasting food.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, the agriculture industry's interests were prioritized over the needs of the hungry. The program put priority on supporting agricultural prices by distributing surplus, rather than addressing the nutritional needs or respecting the individual liberty of recipients. The focus on simply distributing surplus rather than meeting the needs of individuals meant "the plan provided commodities such as grapefruits and powdered milk to people unfamiliar with these foodstuffs and did so without concern for the recipients' nutritional needs and tastes."<sup>17</sup> Individuals were given multiple of a single item in surplus rather than given a choice between food items, leading to dubious nutritional impact and a complete disregard for individual preference. Further, the program's cost-minimizing distribution methods created long-lines, fostering a stigma of laziness against the individuals who waited in line for food rather than work.<sup>18</sup> While the surplus distribution program provided some relief, it did not holistically address nutritional concerns, offer meaningful support to the hungry, or respect the dignity of the food insecure.

Several politicians, retailers, and social workers were critical of the surplus distribution program for different reasons. Retailers, particularly grocers and other food sellers, were angered by the federal government's decision to operate outside of the typical trade channels.<sup>19</sup> Grocers worried that the surplus distribution program would remove valuable food customers from their stores during a time of great economic hardship. Many politicians feared that support of the program was leading the United States towards Communism. The socialist-style distribution of food caused discomfort in the lead up to World War II.<sup>20</sup> Social workers worried that the surplus distribution did not address the nutritional needs of the poor and would not do enough to combat starvation.<sup>21</sup> During the Great Depression, hunger was a widespread issue and well-documented, no longer confined to the outskirts of society. While the federal surplus distribution program assisted in combatting hunger, many groups opposed the methods of distribution or criticized the program for not combating hunger in a meaningful way. In response to the widespread criticism, Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace introduced the Two-Price Plan in 1938. This plan would move food relief to grocery stores and other food retailers. Businesses would provide two different prices on food with a lower price for recipients of welfare relief.<sup>22</sup> Relief recipients could pick among different types of food priced at a discount, increasing the amount of individual choice and nutritional options. This addressed business' desire for relief recipients to obtain food through normal channels, but many feared it would exacerbate class conflict if non-relief recip-

ients thought the prices they paid would be inflated to subsidize food for welfare recipients.<sup>23</sup> Secretary Wallace’s plan would have done little to de-stigmatize food assistance, but would have moved the program to traditional channels and offered more nutrition options. The Two-Price Plan did not gain traction politically due to widespread criticism.

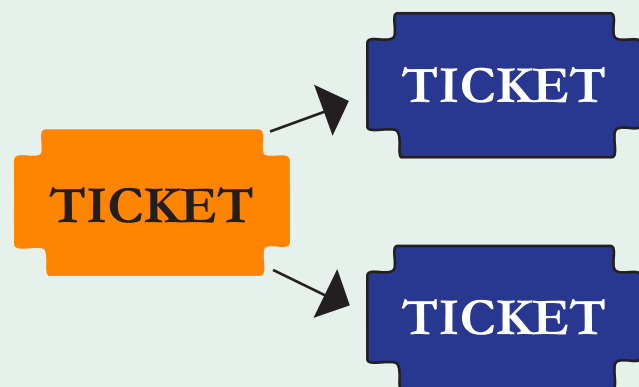
### 1939-1943: First Food Stamp Program

In 1939, Congress passed the Food Stamp Plan, a modified version of the Two Price Plan. In the Food Stamp Plan, relief recipients were required to purchase orange tickets for food and would then receive free blue tickets that expanded their purchasing power.<sup>24</sup> For every one orange ticket, recipients would receive two blue tickets.<sup>25</sup> The stamps could not be used to purchase alcohol, tobacco, or imported items and relief recipients were only allowed to buy as many stamps as would constitute the price of the average food budget in order to restrict abuse of the program.<sup>26</sup> The ban on the purchase of imported items further promoted domestic agricultural interests. Integral to the plan, wholesalers were allowed to buy surplus directly from farmers.<sup>27</sup> Individual counties could decide to implement the Food Stamps program or opt to continue plain distribution of goods. Overall, the Food Stamp Plan provided food relief, but only while promoting business, political, and agricultural interests as well.

The stated goal of the 1939 Food Stamp Plan was “to move welfare recipients into the marketplace, stimulate the economy, and decrease the stigma of relief, while simultaneously restricting and monitoring consumer behavior.”<sup>28</sup> The 1939 Food Stamp Plan was one of the first social assistance programs that

approached welfare recipients as consumers, rather than as the recipients of goods, marking the transition between viewing the recipients of food aid as “people on relief” to “people buying products.”<sup>29</sup> This shift also changed the perception of agricultural surplus from a problem of agricultural overproduction to an issue of societal under-consumption of agricultural goods.<sup>30</sup> At its peak, the 1939 Food Stamp Plan served 4 million people and cost the federal government \$261 million per year.<sup>31</sup> By December 1942, a year before the program ended, food stamps were available in 1,354 counties and available to 61.5% of America’s poor.<sup>32</sup>

While politicians, welfare officials, agricultural interests, and business interest were generally satisfied with the 1939 Food Stamp Plan and its implementation, recipients of relief found issue with the strict budgets and limitations on participants. Although the only eligibility factor was a low income, the strict buy-in requirements excluded certain individuals and required families to buy a certain amount of food.<sup>33</sup> As a result, hunger was blamed on families themselves who did not spend their limited funds according to the scientific budgets outlined by economists. The budgets did not take into account expenses such as cloth-



ing, medication, emergency expenses, etc., preventing poor families from the strict adherence necessary to make it work.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the Food Stamp Plan put specific limitation on participation, such as the mandatory buy-in, and many relief recipients found the rules too inconvenient and confusing to function effectively as a social assistance program.<sup>35</sup>

The Two Stamp Plan was officially ended on March 1943, due to World War II, but this structure of food relief was not forgot-

### **1939-1943: First Food Stamp Program**

**No alcohol**

**No tobacco**

**No imported items**

ten. What the program lacked in scale, it made up for in subsequent influence on the structure of food relief in the United States.<sup>36</sup> The shift from relief recipient to consumer would continue to influence the methods of food assistance following World War II.

### **1950s: Domestic vs. Foreign Hunger**

After the war, food surpluses were sent abroad to assist with restoration efforts prompting legislators to begin advocating for the surplus to be used for hunger efforts domestically. At first, plain distribution of agricultural surplus was re-implemented in the United States, but the familiar objections surrounding nutritional value, the importance of choice, and the business lobby re-emerged. Senator George Aiken proposed seven separate bills to re-establish the food stamp

program and Representative Leonor Sullivan pushed for domestic use of agricultural surplus by emphasizing the contradiction between the agricultural surplus and widespread hunger in the United States.<sup>37,38</sup> Representative Sullivan's plan only proposed the use of foods in surplus for food stamps, a move favoring agricultural interests and ignoring the nutritional needs of the hungry. Some agricultural interests opposed the reintroduction of the food stamps program, noting that the 1939-1943 program was not as effective at reducing the surplus as many anticipated.<sup>39</sup>

Placed under public pressure and in response to Aiken's and Sullivan's efforts, the 1956 Agricultural Act required Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Benson to analyze Senator Aiken's food stamp proposal and create a report detailing its benefits and detriments.<sup>40</sup> Benson's report was largely hostile to the program and ignored the potential nutritional benefits for the poor. Benson called the expense of the program too great and stated that food stamps would be less efficient than direct distribution.<sup>41,42</sup> Despite Benson's unfavorable report, in 1958 a two-year pilot food stamp program was authorized by Congress with a \$250 million per year budget. President Eisenhower vetoed the move believing it too great an expansion of the role of the federal government.<sup>43</sup> Thus, political interests and concerns over cost derailed the potential nutritional benefits posed by the reinstatement of the Food Stamps Program. Without the support of the agricultural lobby due to past failure of the food stamps to substantially reduce surplus, a new Food Stamps Program was not established, despite public support and Congressional advocates, during the 1950s.

## 1960s: Food Distribution Framed by the Civil Rights Era

During the 1960s, the issue of hunger emerged in public discussion and, following the trend of the era, became the responsibility of the federal government to correct. During this era, “hunger was portrayed as a failure of the federal government to protect the rights of citizens to due process and equal access.”<sup>44</sup> There was a grand push to expand eligibility and access to food programs, upgrade benefits, and secure the right to food, but all of these goals could not be accomplished without concessions to business or agricultural interests. While there was a major push for the right to food on a federal level, the hunger lobby was not strong enough to implement this right. As a result, compromises were made at the cost of the hungry in order to appease business, political, and agricultural interests.

In 1961, President John Kennedy instituted eight food stamp projects in the Appalachian region as his first executive order in office. Hunger advocates found hope in President Kennedy’s attention to domestic issues and the positive results of the pilot projects, “one-third to almost one-half of the families had diets that supplied the family with 100 percent or more of the allowances for eight nutrients recommended...among comparable nonparticipating families, only 28 percent had good diets.”<sup>45</sup> Like past Food Stamp Programs, the food assistance pilot program had eligibility based on income only, without concern for age, employment status, family structure, or health, making it unique among American welfare programs.<sup>46</sup> The program increased retail sales by 8% in pilot retailers, appealing to grocery and wholesale retailer interests.<sup>47</sup>

President Kennedy saw the food stamps programs as a trade off between urban interests, which would be more likely to support agricultural programs in return for hunger assistance programs, and agricultural interests, which would only support the program with incentive.<sup>48</sup> The agricultural interests in the United States had lost their total power over hunger programs and “by the 1960s, a shrinking farm bloc needed allies in urban America to maintain its leverage on agricultural policy, and it found them through...food stamps.”<sup>49</sup> In 1964, the Food Stamp Act passed, officially nationalizing the food stamps program, but the language of the legislation and the method of vote acquisition clearly reveal the damaging compromises made by hunger advocates in order to appeal to the agricultural, political, and business interests necessary to its passage. According to the first paragraph of the act, “food assistance [is] to be operated through normal channels of trade,” reflecting the primacy of business interests.<sup>50</sup> The program’s stated goals were “(1) the utilization of the nation’s food; and (2) the promotion of the nutritional well-being of low-income persons,” reflecting the prioritization of surplus usage over hunger alleviation.<sup>51</sup> The passage of the Food Stamp Act was dependent on its connection with business and agricultural interests, with compromises made to ensure those interests were met. The Food Stamp Act maintained a buy-in option equal to “the amount the household was already spending on food” determined by the USDA, a long-term barrier for entry for the poorest families.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, food stamp programs and surplus commodity distribution could not occur in the same county, leaving it up to the states and locals

to decide which to implement, a downside for the hunger interests concerned with the nutritional integrity of distribution of surplus, but a positive for states rights advocates, a political interest.<sup>53</sup> Eligibility was determined by the state, another victory for political interests at the cost of the well-being of the poor. Overall, counties transitioning from surplus food distribution to food stamps saw an average of 40% decrease in participation.<sup>54</sup> The Act's integration with agricultural incentives was essential to its passage through vote trading within Congress.<sup>55</sup> The Food Stamps Act was a method of ensuring that the agricultural surplus would be purchased and used, with alleviation of hunger in low-income households compromised to achieve that end.<sup>56</sup> While the Food Stamp Act nationalized the food stamp program, improving the situation of many low-income people across the United States, clear language within the bill and regulations that were unpopular with hunger advocates in the first food stamps program, indicate the importance of governmental, agricultural, and business interest to its passage. By March 1964, 392,400 people were participating in the food stamp program at a federal cost of \$29 million.<sup>57</sup> In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson encouraged the formal unity of hunger and agricultural interests in the Farm Bill following an initial blockage of the reauthorization of the Food Stamps Act by agricultural interests.<sup>58</sup> President Johnson assured agricultural advocates that he would not pass the Farm Bill without a compromise between nutrition and agriculture. This began the official logrolling of programs between agricultural interests and hunger interests, uniting them in their

**1/3-1/2**  
of the families [in the food stamp projects] had diets that supplied the family with **100%** or more of the allowances for **8** nutrients recommended...among comparable nonparticipating families, only **28%** had good diets.

support of the Farm Bill. Agricultural interests in Congress faced waning support with the increased urbanization of the country, and were willing to create a coalition with the hunger lobby in order to protect their own interests. According to one House Agricultural Committee member from that time, "It was a carefully calculated thing which has done a long time ago to try and unite urban interests with agricultural interests, in common support of the bills, that had been fighting with each other."<sup>59</sup> In 1967, the Senate designated the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty the official oversight committee for the food stamp program. The subcommittee recommended several edits to the Food Stamps Program, including free stamps for the unemployed, lower purchasing requirements, investigations of the overcharging of stamps by local officials, and the distribution of ag-



agricultural surplus through local organizations for free, in addition to the existing Food Stamps Program.<sup>60</sup> The Office of Economic Opportunity determined that it could not legally authorize these recommendations without a formal amendment to the Food Stamp Act.<sup>61</sup> Due to increasing public awareness of hunger and the building hunger lobby, the Senate established a Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Need in the same year in order to assess further needs of the program.

In 1968, a formal hunger lobby emerged in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement. The main organizations within the lobby were the Field Foundation and the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty, both of which brought hunger to national attention, investigated the magnitude of hunger, and brought hunger "outside the confines of the agricultural committees" for the first time.<sup>62</sup> The release of the film *Hunger U.S.A.* by the Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States is the most notable example of the importance of the hunger lobby. The CBS special identified 256 counties as places of chronic hunger and malnutrition, and revealed how current distribution programs and President Kennedy's food stamp programs were not as effective as the public thought.<sup>63</sup> They found that neither distribution programs nor food stamps were operating in 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the nation's poorest counties and deference to state and local communities for administration had created the use of food commodities as a political weapon, withheld in times of strife like voting registration and labor movements.<sup>64</sup> *Hunger U.S.A.* brought the issue of hunger into the public sphere and pressured Congress into adopting measures to address the inadequacies in

their current program including eliminating the buy-in requirements, expanding school lunch program, and undertaking emergency action in the identified 'hunger counties.'<sup>65</sup>

### **1969-1979: Negotiation and Reform**

In 1969, national pressure to reform food assistance was mounting, but food stamps were still only available at the discretion of the county and with a mandatory buy-in. In May, President Richard Nixon committed to substantial action on the hunger issue by expanding "the National Nutrition Survey to provide us with our first detailed description of the extent of hunger and malnutrition in this country" and to hold a White House Conference on Nutrition.<sup>66</sup> The conference was intended to emphasize solutions through education, rather than increased spending.<sup>67</sup> Attended by individuals from across the country, including many leading voices from the hunger lobby, eight special committees were formed to review the work of panels drafting hunger legislation. Four of those committees called for an emergency hunger declaration, agreed that cash assistance should take the place of food stamps, and that the current food assistance programs must be expanded.<sup>68</sup> As a result, Nixon declared a hunger emergency and partially extended the food stamp program both geographically and in terms of increased benefits.<sup>69</sup> For example, legislation reduced the purchase requirements to \$0.50 per person in Mississippi.<sup>70</sup> Many attendees believed that Nixon's expansion was not enough to adequately address the hunger problem and left the conference dissatisfied with the limited action.<sup>71</sup> After more pressure from the public, in 1971, amendments to the Food Stamp Act of 1964

were adopted, improving the food assistance to many recipients, but still compromising nutrition to appease political interests. The amendments set a uniform national eligibility standard, increased the federal share of administrative costs to 50%, and on average, doubled the amount of recipient benefits.<sup>72</sup> But, concerns for political economic interests prevented the full realization of hunger needs in the amendments. For example, Massachusetts Senator George McGovern proposed that individuals making \$80 or less in monthly income be eligible for free food stamps.<sup>73</sup> The Nixon administration instead opted to eliminate purchasing requirements only for individuals making \$30 or less a month, saving \$384 million by “weighing benefits to the poor against program costs. The economizers won at the cost of assistance for 3.5 million Americans.<sup>74</sup> In another example, the federal government did not make school lunch programs mandatory for local communities to implement, affecting the ability of low-income children to receive adequate nutrition.<sup>75</sup> These two concessions illustrate how compromises to receive essential support from political interests sacrificed the quality of support given to the hungry through the Food Stamps Program.

In 1973, the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act, a Farm Bill, passed, making food stamps a nationwide program and doubling the benefits for existing participants.<sup>76</sup> Following its passage, all counties were required to discontinue their surplus distribution programs and offer food stamps to constituents instead.<sup>77</sup> The passage of this act is widely attributed to the failure of Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan (FAP) that would have discontinued most welfare plans, including food stamps

in favor of a guaranteed national income.<sup>78</sup> While FAP gained support among some poverty advocates, the hunger lobby determined the benefits would not be enough to outweigh the costs of losing food stamps, and congresspeople devoted to hunger interests decided to support the expansions of the existing, but flawed food stamp program, instead of FAP.<sup>79</sup> FAP was also opposed by agricultural interests that would have lost the economic benefits of food stamps.<sup>80</sup> Rather than a program advocated as the best possible option for hunger interests, the expansion of the Food Stamps Program was seen as a shrewd political move on the part of agricultural and political interest.

At the conclusion of the 1970s, a series of federal orders corrected some of the deficiencies brought up by the hunger lobby. In 1975, new federal outreach regulations required that states take “effective action, including the uses of services provided by other federally funded agencies and organizations, to inform low-income households concerning the availability and benefits of the food stamps program,” following a series of court cases by food assistance advocates.<sup>81</sup> Later, President Carter signed the Food Stamp Act of 1977, which eliminated the purchasing requirements in addition to expanding eligibility and increasing asset caps.<sup>82</sup> The Act came among greater demands by the hunger lobby and required a coalition with agricultural interests to pass. By the end of the 1970s, the modern framework for the food stamps or SNAP program had been established with its nationwide reach, national standards for edibility, and lack of purchasing requirement.<sup>83</sup> This basic framework is largely the same in 2017.

## A Shift in Priorities?

From the 1930s to the end of the 1970s, food assistance legislation in the United States clearly made concessions to business and agricultural lobbies in order to gain passage. In 1982, Barbara A. Claffey and Thomas A. Stucker argued that the expansion of the Food Stamps Program in the 1970s indicated a shift of priorities within the program, away from agricultural interests and towards a priority on hunger interests.<sup>84</sup> Among others conclusions, they assert that: “political and social institutions provide universally distributed rights and privileges that proclaim the quality of all citizens...economic institutions rely on market-determined incomes that generate substantial disparities among citizens in living standards and material welfare...a food assistance program is seen as a cost that society is willing to pay in order to maintain the dichotomy between its sociopolitical institutions and its economic institutions...”<sup>85</sup>

Their claim that legislative priorities shifted towards hunger interests beginning in the 1970s is invalid because of concessions to business and agriculture made from the 1980s to today. While expansion of the program has continued relatively steadily, the Reagan years, restrictions on the Food Stamps Program surrounding the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996, branding of SNAP during the Great Recession of 2008-2009, and the attempt to decouple SNAP from the Farm Bill in 2013 illustrates the primacy of exterior parties such as agricultural, business, political and economic interests in the continued support for meeting hunger needs. If Claffey and Stucker’s conclusion were cor-

rect, the Food Stamps Program (SNAP beginning in 2008) would not have endured the restrictions on eligibility and paternalistic impositions that compromise the program’s ability to address hunger following 1982.

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan made deep cuts across all social assistance programs, including the Food Stamps Program, in order to limit the size of government and appease business interests, while still assisting agricultural interests. Between 1981-1985, food stamps were restricted to individuals over 130% of the poverty line and direct food distribution programs were reintroduced because of agricultural surpluses and taxpayer’s paternalistic interests.<sup>86</sup> The Congressional Budget Office estimated that between 1982-1985, these policies resulted in “\$12.2 billion less was available for aid than would have been true had the laws remained unchanged.”<sup>87</sup> The cutbacks created an emergency food situation, shifting food assistance responsibilities to private charities and individuals. However, the federal government offered large donations from the agricultural surplus to these charities in order to create a private

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system of distribution.<sup>88</sup> While hunger advocates had decried the surplus distribution as harmful to nutrition efforts, the Reagan administration continued agricultural subsidies and surplus distribution in order to address hunger. In 1988, 1990, and 1993 legislation was passed to expand eligibility to its original levels and increase benefits for recipients.<sup>89</sup>

In 1996, the Food Stamps Program faced cuts in eligibility as part of the general welfare reform. In a stand alone bill, Congress limited individuals without dependents to three months of SNAP over any thirty-six month period if they were not employed or in a 20 hour per week training program.<sup>90</sup> States have the ability to waive this provision during periods of economic hardship. While President Clinton openly opposed this provision, this limitation on SNAP reflected a paternalistic imposition on recipients, a political interest at the time, and connected eligibility benefits to work, rather than hunger. This limitation's incorporation in a stand-alone bill, rather than part of the Farm Bill, weakened the hunger lobby's ability to counter it significantly. Hunger advocates had "far less leverage once food stamps were placed in a welfare bill whose beneficiaries tended to have little social and political standing," re-affirming the need to tie the interests together for hunger advocates.<sup>91</sup> This restriction of the program, stemming from the political interests of Congress at the time, placed hunger as a secondary concern. From 2000-2008, the SNAP expanded eligibility to include certain groups of legal immigrants, but otherwise remained relatively unchanged.<sup>92</sup>

During the Great Recession from 2009-2010, SNAP was framed as an economic stimulus rather than as part of assisting hunger.

1:1.70

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According to Moody's Analytics, for every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits, \$1.70 of economic activity is generated.<sup>93</sup> The rebranding of SNAP as a method of economic stimulus "undermined the idea that hunger prevention should be a concern of the American state."<sup>94</sup> As a form of economic stimulus, hunger interests would be advocated for in times of economic crisis, like the Great Recession, but will then be scaled back in times of economic prosperity. This shift signifies that hunger interests and right to food access are still not the top priority within SNAP. In 2016, 500,000 SNAP recipients that were unemployed and did not have dependents lost benefits after the states' time waivers ended.<sup>95</sup> This reveals the issue; that viewing hunger assistance as a form of economic stimulus, rather than a basic human right presents.

In 2014, Republicans in Congress advocated for a switch in SNAP funding to a block grant and the addition of work and drug testing requirements to the program.<sup>96</sup> A block grant would restrict the ability of the Food Stamps Program to expand in times of economic hardship, terminating its status as an entitlement

program. While entitlement programs, “guarantee that funds are made available sufficient to satisfy the claims of all eligible and enrolled persons to the extent established by the prevailing statute,” ensuring the government will pay for all eligible, enrolled recipients, a block grant would place a cap on the amount of funding for the program, even in times when enrollment may expand.<sup>97</sup> In order to meet these goals, Republicans advocated for cuts to SNAP funding to create larger subsidies for farmers, which was only accomplishable through removing food assistance from the Farm Bill. At the time, there was widespread concern among Republicans that the “spending bill is too big and would have passed welfare policy on the backs of farmers” without making the proper concessions to agricultural and business interests.<sup>98</sup> On July 11, 2014, the House passed the Federal Agriculture Reform and Risk Management Act of 2013, the first Farm Bill without the Food Stamps Program or any other form of nutrition assistance in forty years.<sup>99</sup> On September 19, the Nutrition Reform and Work Opportunity Act of 2013 passed the House, creating \$39 billion in SNAP savings over ten years.<sup>100</sup> While the Democratic-controlled

Senate and President Obama both vowed to block the decoupling attempt and agricultural interests and food stamps were once again linked in the Farm Bill for that year, Paul Ryan and other Congressional Republicans have renewed the call for block grants and cuts to funding under the Trump Administration as part of a larger plan to reduce welfare.<sup>101</sup>

### Conclusion

A rights-based approach to hunger, rather than an agricultural, business, or economic stimulus-based approach to hunger, will protect SNAP from losing funding under the current administration. Hunger interests have been routinely subjugated in favor of exterior interests in order to gain enough Congressional support. In the past, SNAP has addressed only a fraction of hunger in the United States and has largely evolved with business and agricultural interests as its primary focus. As demonstrated, this concern goes past compromise and creates a lack of funding for SNAP, leaves many recipients lacking proper nutrition, and reduces eligibility rates to exclude many hungry individuals. The program has both low error rates, less than 1%, and high participation rates, 85% in 2013.<sup>102</sup> In 2012, a study by the Harvard School of Public Health found that 77% of U.S. adults across political parties and demographic groups supported the same level or increased spending for SNAP.<sup>103</sup> With this type of success within the program, widespread public support, and an international precedent, the United States should move to protect food assistance as an unconditional right, rather than something to be compromised to business, political, agricultural, or economic interests.

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## ENDNOTES

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