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Commentary: SNAP's Bipartisan Legacy Can Serve as a Model

By Robert Greenstein

Forty years ago this Friday, President Carter signed into law the landmark 1977 Food Stamp Act, setting the framework for the modern Food Stamp Program — or, as it's now known, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). I was serving then as Agriculture Secretary Bob Bergland's chief staffer on food assistance issues and was the Administration's point person for dealing with Congress on this legislation. The measure that became law was the product of a bipartisan effort between the Administration and Congress, and between both parties on Capitol Hill, reflecting the broad bipartisan support that food stamps has had for much of its history. It's a legacy that can serve as a powerful example of what policymakers can accomplish when members of both parties rise above partisanship to tackle national problems.

The 1977 law and its bipartisan roots both were years in the making. Food stamps began as a pilot program in 1961 and was converted to permanent status in 1964, but back then, it wasn't a nationwide program and wasn't doing enough to address hunger. In the late 1960s, leaders of both parties came to learn that hunger — and in some areas, severe child malnutrition akin to that of developing countries — was a serious problem in America. In response to the 1968 CBS News special "Hunger in America," Senator George McGovern worked to create the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. The bipartisan committee studied the problem of hunger and helped build momentum for a federal response. Senator Bob Dole, a Kansas Republican who served on the panel, said that due to its work and the field hearings it conducted, he could see that the problem was real and demanded a response.¹

By 1974, the program had gone nationwide, with all counties participating. When President Ford sought in 1975 to cut food stamp benefits sharply by regulation, Congress passed legislation to block the measure by bipartisan, veto-proof margins.

The program's bipartisan support continued under President Carter, who assumed office in early 1977. That year, he modeled his food stamp proposal on a bill that Dole and McGovern had introduced the previous year. The Food Stamp Act that Carter signed that fall, which passed

¹ "Let's Remember What SNAP Is For," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 18, 2013, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/lets-remember-what-snap-is-for>.

Congress with bipartisan support, included the most far-reaching improvements to the program in its history. The Act eliminated the “purchase requirement” — that recipients must pay cash to purchase their food stamps (for example, having to pay \$90 to receive \$200 in food stamps rather than just receiving the \$110 difference). Until then, only about half of those eligible for benefits were receiving them, in large part because many potential beneficiaries could not come up with the lump sums of cash needed to buy food stamps every month. The new law also took important steps to simplify the program, reduce administrative costs, and combat fraud.

That food stamps has had a marked impact on hunger and malnutrition across America is beyond dispute. In the late 1960s, medical researchers went to the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia’s coal fields, and coastal South Carolina and found “large numbers of stunted, apathetic children with swollen stomachs and the dull eyes and poorly healing wounds characteristic of malnutrition,” with child malnutrition and related diseases at rates more commonly associated with some developing nations. Back then, each state largely decided who was eligible for food stamps, and some states denied benefits to families with incomes as low as half the poverty line. In response to the researchers’ findings, President Nixon and Congress acted on a bipartisan basis in 1971 to set national eligibility standards based on household income and other financial resources and to ease barriers to enrollment that many of the poorest Americans faced. Congress took the program nationwide in 1974, mandating that every county participate, and then enacted the 1977 reforms. When the researchers returned to the same areas in the late 1970s, they found dramatic improvement, especially among children. “[N]o program,” they concluded, “does more to lengthen and strengthen the lives of our people than the Food Stamp Program.”

In ensuing decades, policymakers continued to improve the program, and as a result, the nation has made further progress in combatting hunger. Along with Dole and McGovern, other key lawmakers who led efforts to strengthen food stamps and defend the program from attack included, in the House, Democrats Tom Foley (whose role was pivotal) and Leon Panetta and Republicans such as Margaret Heckler, and in the Senate, Democrats such as Pat Leahy and Tom Harkin, and Republicans Dick Lugar, Thad Cochran, Pat Roberts, Rudy Boschwitz, and Saxby Chambliss. The commitment and cooperation of these and other lawmakers on SNAP issues reflect what brought Dole and McGovern together in the 1970s — a strong, shared desire to tackle hunger and an understanding that SNAP, along with the other federal food programs like WIC and school meals, provide a highly effective response.

Today, SNAP provides a basic nutrition benefit to more than 40 million low-income Americans, including children, the working poor, and those who are elderly or have serious disabilities and can’t afford an adequate diet. The benefits are rather modest, averaging about \$1.40 per person per meal, but the impacts are impressive. In the short term, SNAP lifts 8 million people, including 4 million children, out of poverty each year and lifts another 26 million people closer to the poverty line. Longer term, impressive academic research indicates that it improves the educational, health, and other outcomes of children as they grow up.² When researchers compared poor children who grew up in the early 1970s in counties with food stamps to comparable children in counties that lacked them, the researchers found those with access to food stamps had an 18 percentage-point higher

² “Testimony of Robert Greenstein, President, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Before the House Committee on Agriculture,” February 25, 2015, <https://www.cbpp.org/testimony-of-robert-greenstein-president-center-on-budget-and-policy-priorities-before-the-house>.

high school completion rate, better health as adults, and, among girls, greater “self-sufficiency” as adults (based on a combination of earnings, education, and employment and less reliance on public assistance).

SNAP’s impact extends across society. When the economy falls into recession and poverty rises, SNAP expands automatically, providing benefits to people who lose their jobs, fall on hard times, become eligible for the program, and apply.³ This enables more people to keep buying food in local stores, which helps keep the people in those stores employed and, in turn, helps the economy recover. When the economy then recovers enough to reach people at the bottom, SNAP enrollment recedes. After expanding greatly during the Great Recession and ensuing slow recovery, SNAP caseloads have now fallen for more than four years, and the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projects that by 2019, SNAP costs will fall all of the way back to their mid-1990s levels, measured as a share of the economy.⁴

Notwithstanding SNAP’s impressive record, Congress should maintain its program oversight, and policymakers should aim for still-better outcomes. Such efforts in the past fueled program improvements like electronic payments via debit cards, greater payment accuracy, more program access for underserved groups such as the working poor, and innovative pilots to provide evidence about what works best. Over the last year, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Michael Conaway has focused admirably on program oversight, conducting 20 hearings to examine SNAP’s effectiveness. The committee produced a report summarizing experts’ views on SNAP’s strengths and identifying possible areas for improvement — such as reaching more eligible seniors, strengthening the basic benefit, and helping workers find jobs with higher wages and stable hours.⁵ With such knowledge, the committee should be well positioned to reauthorize the program in next year’s farm bill.

For much of the period since its birth more than a half-century ago, SNAP has enjoyed bipartisan support, with Presidents and lawmakers of both parties recognizing that it significantly reduces hunger, assists families when they need it, and helps the economy weather recessions. The program is a timely reminder that people of good will on both sides of the aisle can come together to make sound policy that improves the lives of tens of millions of their fellow Americans — a useful lesson in today’s highly fractured political environment.

³ “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated March 24, 2016, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

⁴ Dottie Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings, “SNAP Caseload and Spending Declines Accelerated in 2016,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, updated January 27, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-caseload-and-spending-declines-accelerated-in-2016>; Brynne Keith-Jennings, “SNAP Caseloads, and Costs, Still Falling,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 23, 2017, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/snap-caseloads-and-costs-still-falling>.

⁵ “Past, Present, & Future of SNAP,” House Committee on Agriculture, December 7, 2016, https://agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/snap_report_2016.pdf/.