



## *'Food Stamp President' – What's the Basis of Gingrich's Claim*

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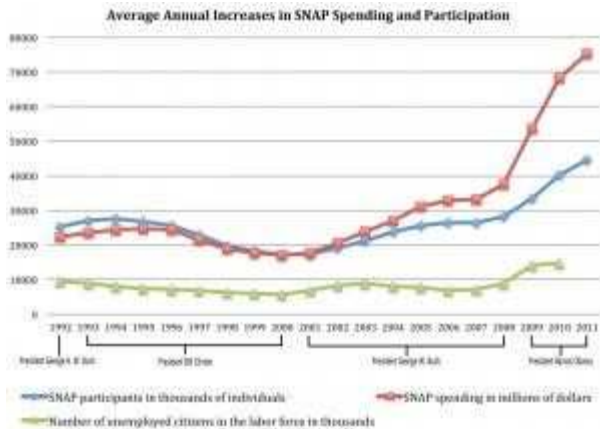
It's hardly a secret that the candidates vying for the GOP presidential nomination strongly disagree with President Barack Obama's stances on national economics – especially those relating to social issues.

Washington, D.C. - infoZine - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - One issue of particular import at the moment comes from former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Though the original remark surfaced in early 2011, Gingrich has again brought up his catchy refrain on Obama, calling him the “food stamp president.”

The food stamp program was renamed SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, in 2008.

Without having to dissect the statement too much, you can understand why this might be considered irreverent and racially charged when aimed at the first black president in American history.

“In combination with Mr. Gingrich's remarks that African Americans should prefer jobs to food stamps, Mr. Gingrich's refrain clearly contains a coded racial message and implies that SNAP benefits flow primarily to person of color in the U.S.,” Michael Reisch, the Daniel Thursz Distinguished Professor of Social Justice at the University of Maryland, said.



This breakdown of the interactions between SNAP spending, participation and unemployment shows all three trend in the same directions. Source: USDA and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Graphic by Jessica Sabbah. [larger chart link](#)  
 A 2010 Agriculture Department report found that 35.7 percent of SNAP households were white, 22 percent were black and 10 percent were Hispanic. Race was unknown for nearly 19 percent.

However, by looking purely at the numbers, Gingrich has not overstepped his bounds. He accurately repeated that there were an average of 44.7 million SNAP participants each month last year. This is the highest number of participants ever. Furthermore, he was hardly off the mark by pointing out that this comes at a whopping \$75 billion annual cost to the federal budget – otherwise known as the taxpayers’ wallet.

Compare this to the nearly \$21 billion (or \$26.26 billion in 2011 dollars) spent in 2002 – two years after the dot-com bubble crash of March 2000. Or match those costs with the \$33 billion (or \$36.82 billion in 2011 dollars) of pre-recession SNAP spending in 2006. Either way, both numbers come as no less than half of the current budget.

These are some impressive numbers, but where do they come from?

In an effort to grasp the enormity (and verity) of the speaker’s exhortation, taking a stroll down memory lane seemed important. To do so, a mixture of historically relative questions came to mind – the who, what, when, where and how.

So, from the beginning.

Over the 70-plus years of its on-again-off-again existence, SNAP has donned two names and grown to become 10 times larger than its nascent participation of 20 million people over four years, 1939 to 1943. Though these first years only broadly resemble the current system, they nonetheless started to resolve the issue of hunger in the United States.

Following the 1943 termination of the original FSP, it wasn’t until the Food Stamp Act of 1964 that the program became permanent. It took another 13 years before participation did not hinge upon one’s ability to buy stamps. Participants originally paid \$1 for \$1.50

worth of stamps. Beginning with the Food Stamp Act of 1977, all participants began receiving stamps paid for entirely by the federal government.

While the years since 1977 have seen a wide assortment of reforms, ranging from expanding eligibility requirements to budgetary additions or cutbacks, the core purpose of SNAP remains the same. This, however, is hardly enough to explain the record levels of both spending and participation seen under Obama.

“Over the past quarter century, enrollment in SNAP has closely tracked trends in the poverty rate, which are often, but not always connected to the unemployment rate,” Reisch said.

He also said many other factors have contributed to the increase since President Bill Clinton’s tenure in office. They include declining wages and lowered eligibility requirements under President George W. Bush and Obama. Fewer families were enrolled in welfare programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (meaning they received less income a month, possibly meaning they needed more help with groceries) and a push by states to enroll more families or individuals who meet the eligibility requirements.

Particularly under Obama, Reisch said that “the 2009 Recovery Act (the ‘stimulus package’ approved by Congress) temporarily increased SNAP benefits by 13.6 percent for all eligible households.” For those who have forgotten, the Recovery Act owes its creation to the Obama administration’s hopes of sparking economic growth and finding a way out of the recession that began in 2007.

To Reisch, even this brief history lesson on the expansion of SNAP refutes Gingrich’s claims. Perhaps Obama (don’t forget the president has no absolute control over policy – Congress needs to agree) has played a part in the recent growth, but to center the blame wholly on one man seems a bit farfetched.

“A president is not responsible for the increase in human misery that generates greater need for programs like SNAP,” Reisch said.

Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst for the libertarian CATO Institute and Rachel Sheffield, a research assistant for the conservative think tank, Heritage Foundation, could agree to this much. Both Republicans and Democrats have an equal part in increased budgetary spending and higher enrollment in SNAP.

Where DeHaven and Sheffield differ from Reisch, though, focuses on whether the program solves any problems. Though fiscal responsibility of course remains a concern, DeHaven said the question that needs to be asked must be, “What is the best way to help those in need?” Basically, does SNAP represent the paramount solution to hunger in the United States?

Not really, DeHaven said.

The money flowing from the federal government to state governments and advocacy groups creates a lot of overhead costs and is inefficient, he said. This is not too dissimilar from some of Gingrich's rhetoric. In the Jan. 16 Myrtle Beach, S.C., debate, Gingrich argued that overhead costs could be cut by consolidating all low-income assistance programs into one block grant to states.

In 2010, overhead made up 5.28 percent of SNAP spending.

As USDA spokeswoman Jean Daniel said, "We are talking about a nutrition program here for the very poor, the very needy."

Benefits are allotted based on household income, whether it's earned or through welfare. A family's income goes through two measurements – the gross income (a maximum 130 percent of poverty) and net income (100 percent of poverty) after deductions.

The maximum monthly benefit for a family of four is \$668 – about \$167 per person.