



Once bipartisan, food stamps divide politicians

By: Julie Siple- July 19, 2013

Supporters of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program -- food stamps -- worry that a heated debate underway in Washington could end with big cuts to the program.

The U.S. House of Representatives shocked many observers last week when it passed a farm bill that included farm subsidies -- but said nothing about food stamps. House leaders have said they would take up food stamps at a later date, but have not said exactly when.

Food stamps are traditionally part of the farm bill, but the House split the bill into two pieces in order to get more conservative support. The move came after disagreement over food stamp cuts sunk an earlier version of the bill in the House.

In the early days of food stamps, the program was famous for its bipartisan support. Republican U.S. Senator Bob Dole and Democratic U.S. Senator George McGovern teamed up in the late 60's to shape the modern food stamp program.

"You can debate some of the content and the eligibility and things like that, but it's always passed with bipartisan votes," said former Minnesota Republican Senator Dave Durenberger. "There's just something hard about voting against enabling people of low income to get the wherewithal to purchase food."

But that does not mean the program has evaded controversy.

Food stamps have swung between periods of wide support and conservative attack. Some of the fiercest criticism came during the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, and during the welfare reform of the mid-1990s under President Bill Clinton. The program is under scrutiny again and this time, the House has been unable to pass a bipartisan bill with food stamps in it.

The debate in Congress has been rancorous -- with Democrats accusing Republicans of targeting the most vulnerable, and with Republicans arguing that the program has grown too big and needs to be reformed.

"I think a new level of controversy now is induced by the fact that food stamps has grown so much, and costs so much," said Ron Haskins, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Haskins says Congress is under pressure to curb spending in light of the federal budget deficit, and food stamps have a swelling price tag. Over the past decade, spending on the program has more than tripled to nearly \$80 billion per year. That's primarily because the recession left more people in need, but looser eligibility requirements also contributed.

"Now that the recession is over and conditions are better, the public is still concerned about nutrition of the elderly and kids and so forth," said Haskins. "But when Republicans say we went too far, the program has increased too much, we need to save money, I think a fair number of people realize that that's a rational argument."

Haskins adds that some Republicans swept into power with the tea party movement will take strong measures to reduce the size of government.

The debate hasn't surprised Joe Soss, a professor at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He saw it coming during the presidential campaign, when Newt Gingrich called Barack Obama the food stamp president.

"I think that what's happened is a kind of 'welfare-ization' of food stamps," Soss said. "Food stamps in recent years has really been targeted to take on the same kind of symbolic meaning that cash welfare has in the past."

Soss sees a change from previous debates. In the past, the concern was exclusively about hunger. Now, there's also a discussion about obesity, and whether people are eating the right food. That concern comes not just from the right, but increasingly from public health experts who support food stamps. The criticism echoes old storylines about people using government benefits improperly, said Soss.

But Michael Tanner of the conservative CATO Institute says the debate isn't just about politics.

"Why is it politics to reduce spending on a program, and not politics to increase spending on a program?" he said. "Let us remember we have 126 separate anti-poverty programs. Food stamps is just one of those programs. Why is it suddenly political to talk about reducing any of those programs?"

The U.S. Senate passed its own version of the farm bill last month, which does include food stamp funding. A House-Senate conference committee will need to reconcile the two bills, but so far no conference committee has agreed to meet. Senate Democrats have said the final bill must include funding for food stamps.