

Congress should cut Food Stamps

By Debra Saunders

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When House Republicans voted to cut the food stamp program by \$39 billion over the next decade, Democrats charged GOP cruelty. Strategist Donna Brazile wrote that the move was a “heartless act,” not “an example of government tightening its belt or making tough choices.”

In fact, the proposed cut presents a classic example of government belt tightening. Enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has grown by 70 percent since 2008; 48 million Americans were enrolled in the program in December. With the economy improving and unemployment shrinking, program participation should be falling, but it remains at an all-time high. The Congressional Budget Office expects food stamp enrollment to continue to rise through 2014.

That’s how big government keeps getting bigger; welfare usage increases when the economy is bad, and then it increases when the economy improves.

Program boosters contend that the growth in food stamp participation is simply a function of the 2008 recession and a weak recovery. True, but also Congress loosened standards for eligibility so that able-bodied adults without children were able to skirt work requirements, and others qualified simply because they qualified for other welfare benefits.

Economists Peter Ganong and Jeffrey B. Liebman studied SNAP and found that two-thirds of the increase in enrollment was a function of unemployment, while SNAP spending is 6 percent higher because of eligibility changes instituted in 2008.

The result: hipsters who shop with their EBT cards at Whole Foods and — in some states, including California — fast-food joints. Clearly, these folks aren’t truly needy; otherwise, they’d be shopping where their dollars — well, other people’s dollars — go furthest.

Then there’s Washington’s commitment to “outreach.” Months ago, Portland State University professor Garrison Greenwood alerted me to college websites that encourage students to enroll in SNAP. “College is stressful and expensive,” one community college tells students. “Don’t let food be another financial worry.”

“I’m curious,” Greenwood wrote. “How many people are aware full-time college students may qualify for food stamps?”

You get the feeling that Washington invites college students to apply for food stamps in an attempt to normalize usage so that even people who don’t really need welfare sign up anyway.

Thus, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor is right to assert that it is wrong to make working people pay for food stamps for able-bodied adults who don’t really need them. Cantor supports a “safety net,” he told Fox News, but it’s not fair to ask working Americans to subsidize the rising tide of welfare “dependency.”

The GOP calls for a return to work requirements, wrote the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute’s Michael D. Tanner, because “work is the key to getting out of poverty.”

Even with these “heartless” cuts, Tanner computed, annual SNAP spending would “be almost \$73.5 billion, which is more than \$5 billion more than outlays were in 2010.” From that, I deduce that either President Barack Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress were heartless in 2010 or House Republicans are not heartless today.