



Trump 2018 Budget Reignites Welfare Reform Battle

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With his 2018 budget proposal, President Trump is reigniting the decades-long ideological war over welfare reform. Is it true, as the White House is arguing, that anti-poverty programs like food stamps and disability insurance are being abused by able-bodied adults who should be working? Or, as progressives accuse, is this just a smokescreen for another Republican attempt to slash programs for the poor? It's yet another round in a debate that goes back to the 1980s-era tales of "welfare queens" and a bipartisan 1996 law that promised to "break the cycle of dependency."

Even people in Trump's own administration acknowledge the president's budget, as outlined in a document unveiled Tuesday, is not going to become law. But the overarching debate about the future of America's social safety net is poised to shadow Republicans' major policy proposals under Trump, from the health care overhaul to a tax code rewrite. On that front, this budget is a fierce warning shot.

In the president's message to Congress introducing his budget proposal, Trump includes welfare among "eight pillars of reform" he claims will help spur faster economic growth. "We must reform our welfare system so that it does not discourage able-bodied adults from working, which takes away scarce resources from those in real need," Trump writes. "Work must be the center of our social policy."

The president's budget director, Mick Mulvaney, also suggested in a briefing with reporters Tuesday afternoon that many people receiving welfare benefits are capable of working—a long-standing conservative talking point. To achieve the budget's 3 percent economic growth target (which most economists say is a long shot, at best): "We need people to go to work," Mulvaney said. "If you're on food stamps and you're able-bodied, we need you to go to work. If you're on disability insurance and you're not supposed to be—if you're not truly disabled, we need you to go back to work."

In particular, the White House has latched onto the fact that the number of people in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as food stamps), rocketed upward after the 2008 financial crisis, but hasn't dropped back to pre-recession levels

since. “Isn't it reasonable for you to at least ask the question, are there people on that program who shouldn't be on there?” Mulvaney asked Wednesday at the White House. But Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, noted that a spike in unemployment during the recession isn't the only reason more people began receiving food assistance. “The Obama administration and the Bush administration before that have also made a concerted effort to sign more people up,” Tanner tells Newsweek . “And I'm talking very concerted,” he added, an effort that included sending government employees into Appalachia to sign up poor families and running ads on Spanish-language television.

Indeed, when one actually looks at the data from some of these safety net programs, it becomes clear that so-called able-bodied adults are a minority of the participants. For example, 64 percent of those receiving food assistance in 2012 were children, people with disabilities or the elderly, according to the Congressional Research Service. And 53 percent of those receiving public housing benefits had either elderly or disabled heads of households.

In other words, says Tanner, “You're not talking about huge numbers of people and you're not talking about long-term recipients, either.” So while he doesn't disagree with work requirements, in theory, Tanner doesn't think the reforms the Trump administration is looking at are “going to have a huge impact” on reining in the costs or scope of these programs.

Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney holds a briefing on President Trump's FY2018 proposed budget in the press briefing room at the White House in Washington, May 23.

Progressives agree, and that's why they're worried. The White House is “setting up a straw man that there are countless people getting SNAP and not working,” says Sharon Parrott, senior fellow at the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. “They're making massive cuts and they're hiding behind a vision of the program that's a total misperception.”

Among Parrott's biggest concerns is that the Trump administration has proposed cutting spending for food assistance by nearly \$200 billion over 10 years, while attempting to shift more of the costs for the program to the states. Many states, she predicts, are not going to be able to make up the difference, leading to deep cuts in benefits. As a result, “we get increasing disparity across states among low-income people that are struggling.” And that will inevitably affect people who genuinely need and rely on these programs, not just so-called welfare cheats or those who could support themselves, but choose not to.

Even congressional Republicans are criticizing the domestic spending cuts in the president's budget as “draconian” and downplaying their overall significance. At the same time, however, GOP lawmakers are weighing doing something very similar to Medicaid, the government-funded health insurance program for low-income, elderly and disabled Americans, as what the president is proposing for food assistance. The American Health Care Act that Republicans pushed through the House on May 4 would roll back Medicaid's expansion under Obamacare, which allowed working-age men and childless women to participate for the first time. Republicans want

to return the limits to women with children. The House legislation also would slash federal Medicaid spending by an estimated \$880 billion and put the onus on states to cover the rest. Trump embraced that approach in his budget, adding another \$600 billion-plus in Medicaid cuts on top of it.

Some Senate Republicans, however, are squeamish about those Medicaid proposals, for the very same reasons that progressives criticize them and other parts of the Trump budget. They worry a rollback in funding and eligibility will hurt their most vulnerable constituents, particularly in states that chose to expand the program under Obamacare. And they want to see a very different version of health care legislation come out of the Senate.

Fundamentally, it's all part of the same debate about how welfare ought to work and what role government should play in maintaining a social safety net. And it doesn't look like the parties are any closer to settling it than they were 30-some years ago.