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# Liberal | Rise in food stamp use indicates government's failure to create jobs

By Harmen Rockler

To the left, to the left

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As the U.S. economy continues to stumble, more Americans have turned to the government for assistance to pay for food. Since 2007, use of food stamps has increased by 74 percent. Approximately 46 million Americans depend on food stamps — roughly 15 percent of the population. The increased dependence signals the lack of high-paid jobs and need for more action to improve the economy.



The food stamp program was originally crafted in 1939 to distribute surplus food to Americans who were in need. Participants would pay to receive stamps. The program gradually evolved to become the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program. In 2009, SNAP cost \$56 billion, according to the Cato Institute.

The program has long received criticism, especially from conservatives, because of the potential for abuse. Former President Ronald Reagan cut spending on the food stamp program, along with other programs long seen as contributing to the "welfare state." Reagan brought public attention to the idea of a "welfare queen" in the 1976 election:

"She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veterans' benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands," he described. "And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over \$150,000."

Yet, a 2005 report by the Government Accountability Office suggests that fraud in the food stamp program is not nearly as widespread as conservatives imagine. In fact, instances of fraud and errors continue to decrease.

The welfare queen provides an image to back up the idea that less government is better government. Many major Republican presidential candidates have perpetuated this idea. Newt Gingrich, in his 2010 memo to Republican congressional candidates, said, "It is an unassailable fact that in June 2010 more food stamps were distributed by the government than ever before in American history. (It turns out that Barack Obama's idea of spreading the wealth around was spreading more food stamps around.)"

To solve the issue of dependence on food stamps, some argue that the minimum wage must be increased. This way, people would be able to afford necessities without government assistance. However, states like New Hampshire and presidential candidates like Michelle Bachmann are considering decreasing the minimum wage. This might push even more people to rely on food stamps.

Although food stamp program requires further reform, lawmakers must look to reforms in other areas of the government to promote growth of well-paid jobs. More Americans using food stamps is not a symptom of a welfare state or overdependence on the government. Instead, the increased use reveals that people can't afford basic necessities. This information, along with data showing greater rates of poverty and child hunger, tells the story of a country in decline.

Republicans in Congress who have complained about overreliance on the government have squandered their opportunity to take measures to fix the problem. Instead, the summer has been spent using the debt ceiling to advance a political agenda — not to solve any tangible problems immediately affecting the country. Simply cutting funding to the program will fail to solve a much greater issue.

Perhaps conservatives should have followed Newt Gingrich's advice in his memo: "You should use this vivid contrast between the tax raising, job killing agenda of the Democrats and the low tax, job creating agenda of the Republicans as a way to reinforce the choice for voters this fall."

Harmen Rockler is a political science and newspaper journalism major and his column appears weekly. He can be reached at horockle@syr.edu.