

Entitled to eat

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On November 1, Americans eligible for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—also known as food stamps—saw their benefits go down. Further SNAP cuts loom: negotiations in Congress over the farm bill hinge largely on a disagreement over SNAP funding. Both chambers aim to narrow eligibility for food stamps; the question is how much.

Why is SNAP on the hook? The November 1 cut resulted from the expiration of a temporary increase, which was part of the 2009 stimulus bill. But total spending on food stamps has been going up since 2007—which alarms those who believe government spending has run amok.

This upward trend in SNAP spending was not actively caused by Congress. While some social spending is determined by legislators simply assigning a number, SNAP is an entitlement program. This means that no one who qualifies for benefits can be turned away. Congress still controls the purse, but only by way of adjusting the eligibility standards or the benefits. If more people qualify for the program and Congress does not change the rules, spending naturally goes up.

When the recession hit in late 2007, many people lost their jobs—and some of them became newly eligible for food stamps. So SNAP spending went up automatically. Then the 2009 stimulus bill increased benefits, operating under the same logic as the entitlement program itself: when the economy is bad, people need more help. And helping them not only keeps food on their tables but also helps the economy

recover, because food stamps are terrific fiscal stimulus.

While technically the recession has been over for four years, SNAP spending has continued to rise. That's because the economic recovery has been tentative and largely jobless, so people continue to qualify for benefits. The weak recovery also means the economy still needs stimulus. If anything, Congress should be expanding SNAP access and benefits, not cutting them.

Unfortunately, official Washington seems to have all but given up on the idea that spending can stimulate the economy and create jobs. Instead, the goal is simply to reduce deficits, mostly via spending cuts. Since President Obama took office, federal spending has gone down as a share of the overall economy, and deficits are shrinking. This might be good news in a robust economy with low unemployment, but that's not where we are.

The conversation in Congress is animated by ideology: Should the government play a role in providing for the people's social welfare or not? The right wing says no, and the right wing is winning the argument. It has become conventional wisdom that social spending is at best a necessary evil. With the goalposts for acceptable policy often placed entirely to the right of center, the question is now framed as: Should we cut SNAP a lot, or just a little?

Meanwhile, the economy is hungry for more stimulus. And people are just plain hungry.