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House Republicans Pass Deep Cuts in Food Stamps



By [RON NIXON](#)



WASHINGTON — House Republicans narrowly pushed through a bill on Thursday that slashes billions of dollars from the food stamp program, over the objections of Democrats and a veto threat from President Obama.

The vote set up what promised to be a major clash with the Senate and dashed hopes for passage this year of a new five-year farm bill.

The vote was 217 to 210, largely along party lines.

Republican leaders, under pressure from Tea Party-backed conservatives, said the bill was needed because the food stamp program, which costs nearly \$80 billion a year, had grown out of control. They said the program had expanded even as jobless rates had declined with the easing recession.



“This bill eliminates loopholes, ensures work requirements, and puts us on a fiscally responsible path,” said Representative Marlin Stutzman, Republican of Indiana, who led efforts to split the food stamps program from the overall farm bill. “In the real world, we measure success by results. It’s time for Washington to measure success by how many families are lifted out of poverty and helped back on their feet, not by how much Washington bureaucrats spend year after year.”

But even with the cuts, the food stamp program would cost more than \$700 billion over the next 10 years.

Republicans invoked former President Bill Clinton in their defense of the bill, saying that the changes were in the spirit of those that he signed into law in 1996 that set work requirements for those who receive welfare.

But Democrats, many of whom held up pictures of people they said would lose their benefits, called the cuts draconian and said they would plunge millions into poverty.



“It’s a sad day in the people’s House when the leadership brings to the floor one of the most heartless bills I have ever seen,” said Representative James McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts. “It’s terrible policy trapped in a terrible process.”

The measure has little chance of advancing in the Senate, and Senator Debbie Stabenow, Democrat of Michigan and the chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, called it “a monumental waste of time.”



The bill, written under the direction of the House majority leader, Eric Cantor, Republican of Virginia, would cut \$40 billion from the food stamp program over the next 10 years. It would also require adults between 18 and 50 without minor children to find a job or to enroll in a work-training program in order to receive benefits.

It would also limit the time those recipients could get benefits to three months. Currently, states can extend food stamp benefits past three months for able-bodied people who are working or preparing for work as part of a job-training program.



“This bill makes getting Americans back to work a priority again for our nation’s welfare programs,” House Speaker John A. Boehner said.

The bill would also restrict people enrolled in other social welfare programs from automatically becoming eligible for food stamps.

In addition, the legislation would allow states to require food stamp recipients to be tested for drugs and to stop lottery winners from getting benefits. The Senate farm bill also contains a restriction on lottery winners.

Critics of the measure said the cuts would fall disproportionately on children. 



“Yes, the federal government has budget problems, but children didn’t cause them, and cutting anti-hunger investments is the wrong way to solve them,” said Bruce Lesley, president of [First Focus Campaign for Children](#), a child advocacy group.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, nearly four million people would be removed from the food stamp program under the House bill starting next year. The budget office said after that, about three million a year would be cut off from the program.

The budget office said that, left unchanged, the number of food stamp recipients would decline by about 14 million people — or 30 percent — over the next 10 years as the economy improves. A Census Bureau report released on Tuesday found that the program had kept about four million people above the poverty level and had prevented millions more from sinking further into poverty. The census data also showed nearly 47 million people living in poverty — close to the highest level in two decades.

Historically, the food stamp program has been part of the farm bill, a huge piece of legislation that had routinely been passed every five years, authorizing financing for the nation’s farm and nutrition programs. But in July, House leaders split the bill’s farm and nutrition sections into separate measures, passing the farm legislation over Democrats’ objections.

The move came after the House rejected a proposed farm bill that would have cut \$20 billion from the food stamp program. Conservative lawmakers helped kill the bill, saying the program needed deeper cuts.

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Another Insult to the Poor

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#)

In what can be seen only as an act of supreme indifference, House Republicans passed a [bill](#) on Thursday that would drastically cut federal food stamps and throw 3.8 million Americans out of the program in 2014.

The vote came two weeks after the [Agriculture Department](#) reported that 17.6 million households did not have enough to eat at some point in 2012 because they lacked the resources to put food on the table. It came two days after the [Census Bureau](#) reported that 15 percent of Americans, or 46.5 million people, live in poverty.

These numbers were basically unchanged from 2011, but in a growing economy steady rates of hunger and poverty amount, in effect, to backsliding. Cutting food stamps would accelerate the slide. Food stamps kept four million people out of poverty last year and kept millions more from falling deeper into poverty. Under the House Republican bill, many of these people would be impoverished.

The struggling middle class is also faring poorly. Though the unemployment rate dropped to a low of 7.8 percent last year from a high of 9.1 percent in 2011, median household income was virtually unchanged, at \$51,017. In a healthy economy, income would rise when unemployment falls. But in today's weak economy, much of the decline in the jobless rate is not due to new hiring, but to a shrinking work force — the very definition of a feeble labor market in which employed people work for years without raises and unemployed job seekers routinely end up in new jobs that pay less than their previous ones.

Even so, congressional Republicans have shown no inclination to end the automatic budget cuts that, if left in place, will lead to an estimated loss of 900,000 jobs in the coming year, keeping poverty high and incomes stagnant. In addition, there seems to be little Republican appetite for renewing federal unemployment benefits — a lifeline for millions of unemployed Americans — when they expire at the end of 2013.

It is nothing new that poor people are stuck and those in the middle class are struggling. The poverty rate, though steady last year, has worsened or failed to improve in 11 of the last 12 years. The latest numbers would have been worse but for “doubling up.” There are currently 10.1 million adults age 25 to 34 who are not in school and who live with parents or others who are not spouses of cohabitating partners. If they were on their own, 43 percent of them would fall below the poverty line, which last year was \$11,945 for someone under age 65.

Similarly, while median household income held steady last year, it was still lower by 8.3 percent, or \$4,600, (measured in 2012 dollars) than in 2007, before the recession. And the longer the

historical perspective, the more dire the situation. From 2000 to 2012, median income for working-age households headed by someone under age 65 (again in 2012 dollars) fell almost \$7,500, from nearly \$65,000 to just under \$57,500, a decline of 11.6 percent.

Against that backdrop, there is no justification for savaging the safety net and decimating the budget.

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