



# Three Things To Know About SNAP Ahead Of The 2018 Farm Bill

## Things To Know:

1. States with the highest SNAP participation rates have shifted to include more right-leaning states.
2. Increases in SNAP participation are more concentrated in the Southeast.
3. The SNAP participation rate remains elevated despite improvement in the unemployment rate.

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*The views expressed in this document represent those of the authors alone.*

**POLICYMAKERS** have begun to outline the 2018 Farm Bill, the omnibus package touching everything from farm production and conservation to regulatory programs and inspection services. The largest share of discussion will likely center around the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Debates recur around whether or not this is the year for the program to separate from the bill and live on its own, as then-House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.) suggested in 2013, or if reform to the expansive program might improve the benefits available to SNAP participants without breaking the budget.

Here are three things policymakers should keep in mind about SNAP as the 2018 Farm Bill is drafted:

- States with the highest

SNAP participation rates have shifted red in presidential elections.

- Increases in SNAP participation are more concentrated in the Southeast, and participants are in both rural and urban communities.
- The SNAP participation rate remains elevated despite improvement in the unemployment rate since the recession.

### Political Shift

While welfare programs are generally associated with the political left, a closer look at SNAP beneficiaries tells a more nuanced story. Over the past two decades, the states with the highest participation rates in SNAP have shifted to include right-leaning states or have become more right-leaning. Exhibit 1 displays the ten states with the highest SNAP

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participation rates in election years from 1992 to 2016 and how each state voted in that year's presidential election.

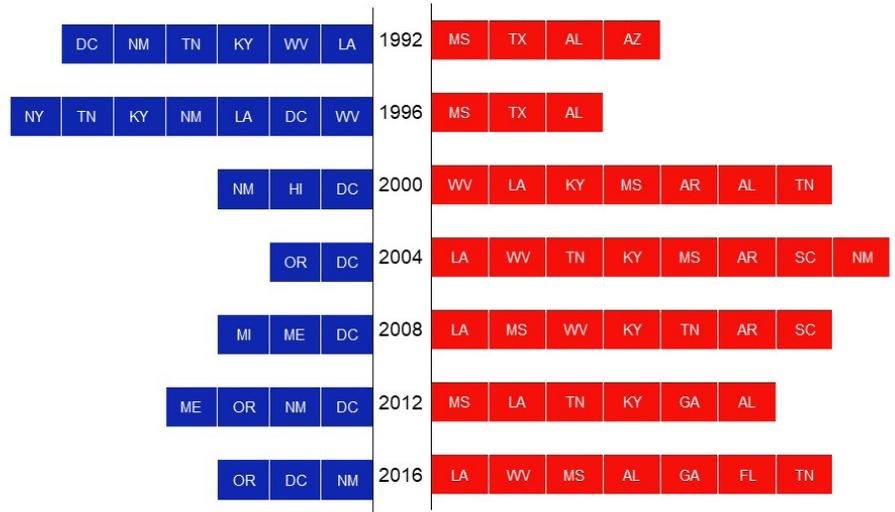
The overall shift of SNAP participation from Democratic-voting to Republican-voting states is due to a couple of factors. First, the 1996 Farm Bill and its ensuing "Welfare Reform" largely reduced the scope of SNAP. This means the top SNAP-participating states thereafter were the ones with populations most in need and who still qualified under the more restrictive eligibility requirements. Second, many of the states that voted for the Democrat-

ic presidential candidate later voted for the Republican candidate in subsequent elections. These include Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Louisiana.

The fact that the states with the highest SNAP participation rates have mostly shifted to be politically conservative is surprising, given that the Republican political ideology does not traditionally support welfare programs.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a large portion of SNAP beneficiaries do not widely support the welfare program, part of the larger phenomenon described in Thomas Frank's book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, in which politically conservative

EXHIBIT 1

## The Top 10 SNAP States Have Shifted From Voting For The Democratic Candidate To The Republican Since '92



Sources: Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), [Personal Income Summary](#); U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program FY69 to FY17](#)

**States with the highest SNAP participation rates have mostly shifted to be politically conservative.**

Americans often vote against their own economic interests.<sup>2</sup>

### Regional Intensity

Americans living in the Southeast have always had a particular interest in the Farm Bill. With their agriculture-based economies, they look to Congress to support the agricultural industry through the bill. This region, however, also has a vested interest in the food security provided by SNAP.

While SNAP participation has been on the rise across the country, the increases have been particularly concentrated in the Southeast. In 1990, only Louisiana and Mississippi had more than 15 percent of their populations

reliant on SNAP, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By 2015 – and as shown in Exhibit 2 – over 15 percent of the population in every southeastern state were SNAP beneficiaries.<sup>3</sup>

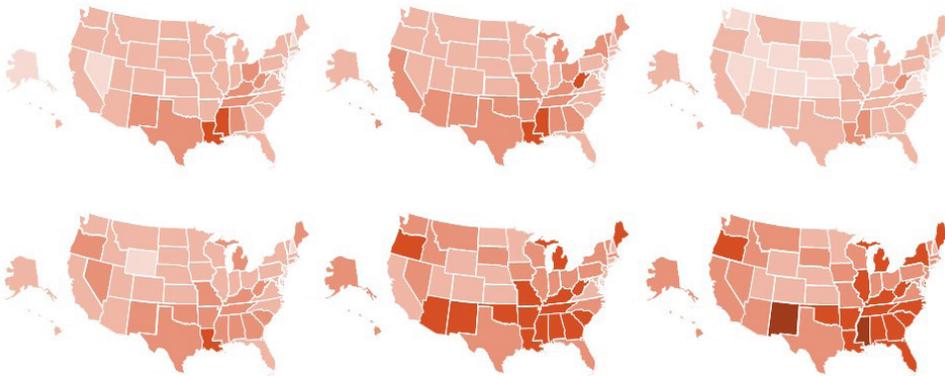
Oregon remains an outlier of the national trend. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows nearly 20 percent of Oregon's residents were enrolled in SNAP in 2015—a significant contrast to neighbors California and Idaho, whose SNAP participation rates rested at 11.3 percent and 11.9 percent respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Oregon's eligibility requirements are more generous than those in the Southeast, however. A qualifying participant in Oregon wouldn't qualify if they resided in Mississippi. Catlin Nchako and Lexin Cai's 2017 research shows 25 percent of Oregon's

## By 2015, 14 States In The South Had Over 15 Percent Of Its Population Reliant On SNAP

SNAP Participation Rate By State, 1990-2015

0% - 5%    5% - 10%    10% - 15%    15% - 20%    Above 20%



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program FY69 to FY17](#)

SNAP participants receive an income 100 percent above the poverty line, while only 9 percent of Mississippi’s SNAP beneficiaries meet the same standard.<sup>5</sup>

### Elevated Participation

After nationwide SNAP participation as a percentage of population slowed from 13 percent in 1992 to 9 percent in 2002, the 2002 Farm Bill expanded eligibility to the program to be more wide-reaching than past iterations.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the participation rate’s trajectory reversed.

SNAP participation rates have historically maintained a similarly-paced rise and fall to the unemployment rate. As unemployment began to decline post-Great Recession, SNAP participation remained uniquely elevated (as seen in Exhibit 3).

The SNAP participation rate reached a high of 19 percent in 2011, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics pegging unemployment around 8.9 percent. SNAP participation decreased only slightly to 17 percent in 2017 while the unemployment rate fell to 4.41 percent.

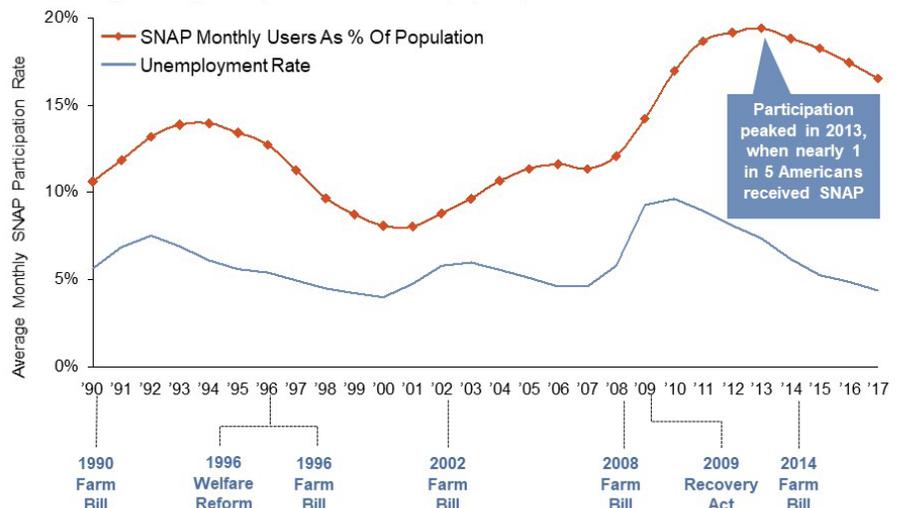
There are a myriad of takes on why SNAP participation has remained elevated despite unemployment’s recovery. As Robert Shapiro observed for the Brookings Institution, most job opportunities post-Recession were for degree-holders, with recovery skewed toward a subset of Americans potentially less likely to participate in SNAP.<sup>7</sup> Or perhaps, as the Urban Institute’s Sheila Zedlewski, Elaine Waxman, and Craig Gundersen have posited, SNAP has transformed into a stabilizer for families that do not qualify for other assistance programs and fills in where other temporary assistance programs fall short.<sup>8</sup>

When the Farm Bill was last debated, one in five Americans was receiving food assistance. While the rate has declined since 2014, pol-

EXHIBIT 3

## While Unemployment Has Returned To Its Pre-Crisis Levels, SNAP Participation Remains Elevated

SNAP Average Monthly Participation Rate and Unemployment, 1990-2017



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program FY69 to FY17](#)

icymakers will still be deciding on the future of a program whose benefits remain far-reaching across the U.S.

## Conclusion

As discussion around the 2018 Farm Bill picks up, it is important for policymakers know who exactly will be affected

by any changes. SNAP is a critical component of the bill and merits an especially deep understanding. Whether Congress decides to increase or decrease funding, tighten or roll back eligibility requirements, or completely divorce SNAP legislation from the larger Farm Bill, Americans in every state and of every political party will be affected.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Republican Platform: Great American Families, Education, Healthcare, and Criminal Justice,” Republican National Committee, accessed 2/9/18. <<https://www.gop.com/platform/renewing-american-values/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Frank, *What’s The Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” United States Department Of Agriculture: Food And Nutrition Service, accessed 1/30/16. <<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Lexin Cai and Catlin Nchako, “A Closer Look at Who Benefits from SNAP: State-by-State Fact Sheets,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2/16/17.

<<https://www.cbpp.org/research/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” United

States Department Of Agriculture: Food And Nutrition Service, accessed 1/30/16.

<<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap>>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Shapiro, “The New Economics Of Jobs Is Bad News For Working-Class Americans - And Maybe For Trump,” Brookings Institution, 1/16/18.

<<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/01/16/the-new-economics-of-jobs-is-bad-news-for-working-class-americans-and-maybe-for-trump/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila Zedlewski, Elaine Waxman, and Craig Gundersen, “SNAP’s Role In The Great Recession And Beyond,” Urban Institute and Feeding America, July 2012.

<<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25626/412613-SNAP-s-Role-in-the-Great-Recession-and-Beyond.PDF>>.