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Big Government Conservatism, Expanding and Reframing Food Stamps: George W. Bush,
Welfare Reform and the 2002 Farm Bill

Abstract: George W. Bush was elected to the presidency in 2000 with a vision of compassionate conservatism. Attention has been devoted to his supply side fiscal policy and his expansionist foreign policy. However, less attention has been devoted to his social policy, particularly his expansion of the food stamp program. The 2002 Farm Bill, espoused and advocated by George W. Bush, expanded access to food stamps and restored eligibility to immigrants. In this chapter, I argue the food stamp expansion allowed George W. Bush to express his compassionate conservatism by examining the way he framed support of the program around traditional conservative themes such as the deserving poor and the need to reduce government waste and regulation.

Introduction

George W. Bush was elected to the presidency in 2000 on a platform of compassionate conservatism.. Attention has been devoted to his supply side fiscal policy and his expansionist foreign policy. However, less attention has been devoted to his social policy, particularly his expansion of the food stamp program (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) in 2002 and his other efforts to support the program. Following the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, enrollment in welfare programs declined and non-citizens were severely restricted from accessing social benefits. The 2002 Farm Bill, espoused and advocated by George W. Bush, expanded access to food stamps and restored eligibility to immigrants. What led George W. Bush to advocate these changes? With attempts in the 1990's by conservatives to curtail the welfare system and during

the Obama administration to curtail the SNAP program, what circumstances led George W. Bush to advocate expansion of this particular social benefit? In this chapter, I argue the food stamp expansion allowed George W. Bush to express his compassionate conservatism by examining the way he framed his support of the program around concepts of the deserving poor, promoting work and family and reducing governmental inefficiency and regulations. While the No Child Left Behind Act and his faith-based efforts have gained more attention, proposals for food stamps and the passage of the Farm Bill of 2002 represents an area where Bush was able to put his compassionate conservatism, included within his overall policy agenda, into practice.

Bush has been characterized as both a “big government conservative”¹ and a “compassionate conservative,” a phrase popularized by Martin Olasky during the 1990’s that became a theme of Bush’s 2009 presidential campaign.² Bush discussed compassionate conservatism in his June 2009 speech announcing his candidacy for the presidency. Presidential initiatives such as the Faith Based Initiative were part of this policy agenda. The focus on food stamps examines a small scale policy success and how the Bush administration framed its support for proposed and implemented changes.

As will be shown in his food stamp policies and politics, Bush’s compassionate conservatism moved away from a full scale rejection of the federal welfare state to a focus on decentralized approaches. Bush also sought to reach out to communities of color traditionally not courted by Republicans. As Milkis and Nelson note, “Bush’s compassionate conservatism

¹ See Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson. *The American Presidency: Origins and Development 1776-2011*. (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2011) for a discussion of Bush and big government conservatism. See also Brian J. Glenn and Steven M. Teles, eds. *Conservatives and American Political Development*. (2009) In addition, see *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment*. Fred J. Greenstein, ed. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003) for a discussion of Bush administration strategy and policy early in his term.

² See Martin Olasky. *Compassionate Conservatism: What it is, What it Does, and How it Can Transform America*. (New York: Free Press Books, 2000). For an additional discussion of compassionate conservatism see Kevin M. Kruse. “Compassionate Conservatism: Religion in the Age of George W. Bush.” in Julian Zelizer, ed. *The Presidency of George W. Bush: A First Historical Assessment*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). 227-251.

promised to transcend the longstanding contest in American politics between rights-based claims to entitlement programs and the virtues of individual responsibility.”³

Compassionate conservatism animated Bush’s rhetoric and policy early in his first term. Exploring these policy initiatives provides insight into what his presidency would have looked like absent the War on Terror, with an emphasis on compassionate conservatism and domestic policy. Fortier and Ornstein note that “on the presidential campaign trail Bush defined himself as a compassionate conservative...he emphasized that conservatism was not harsh or uncaring, but that it was compassionate in a different way than the traditional welfare state model.”⁴ Bush’s compassionate conservatism would mold the welfare state to more conservative themes and frame assistance in a way less hostile to conservatism. “In particular, compassionate conservatism emphasized character and individual responsibility. Government might be called upon to alleviate suffering, but part of the the solution was to hold institutions responsible for improvement and to help foster better character and self-reliance in the individuals that government would help.”⁵ The way Bush approached Food Stamps exhibits these factors; he calls for maintaining and expanding a program often notorious for accusations of abuse in a way that affirmed both his compassionate and conservative principles.

Since the 1970’s, Food Stamps have been included in the Farm Bill, historically a boon for agribusiness, which authorizes agricultural subsidies and the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program that assists young families. Partially as a result, Food Stamps has historically had a lower political profile than welfare programs (despite a tradition of public outcry) that helped to insulate it from the drastic reforms of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity

³ Milkis and Nelson, 444

⁴ John C. Fortier and Norman J. Ornstein. “President Bush: Legislative Strategist.” in *The George W. Bush Presidency: An Early Assessment*. Fred J. Greenstein, ed. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press): 138-172. 146.

⁵ Fortier and Ornstein, 146.

Reconciliation Act of 1996 . In this case, Bush was able to advocate for enhanced reforms and enhanced work requirements for welfare recipients particularly Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) while calling for expansion of the Food Stamp program.

While TANF and its predecessors have varied tremendously by states, the Food Stamp program is far more uniform. As Christopher Howard describes the program, “the national government provides almost all the funding, sets eligibility criteria, and establishes a uniform benefit. States can choose whether to pay for individuals who are ineligible under the national guidelines, whether to spend money to boost public awareness of and participation in the program, and whether to modify a few other administrative details. By and large, the Food Stamps program operates remarkably similarly around the country.”⁶ As a result, Food Stamp policy is set at the federal level through the President and Congress’s negotiation of the Farm Bill. Food Stamps is considered one of the programs most responsive to economic downturns. As a Center for Budget and Policy Priorities overview notes, “after unemployment insurance, SNAP is the most responsive federal program providing additional assistance during economic downturns.”⁷

Table 1 Food Stamp Recipients and Spending During the Bush Administration 2001-2008

| Year | Food Stamp Recipients (in thousands of people) | Spending on Food Stamps (in thousands of dollars) |
|------|--|---|
|------|--|---|

⁶ Christopher Howard. *The Welfare State Nobody Knows: Debunking Myths About U.S. Social Policy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 35.

⁷ “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).” (Washington DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.” March 28, 2013). Available at: <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=2226>.

| | | |
|------|--------|--------|
| 2001 | 17,318 | 17,789 |
| 2002 | 19,096 | 20,637 |
| 2003 | 21,250 | 23,816 |
| 2004 | 23,811 | 27,099 |
| 2005 | 25,628 | 31,072 |
| 2006 | 26,549 | 32,903 |
| 2007 | 26,316 | 33,174 |
| 2008 | 28,223 | 37,642 |

Source: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/SNAPsummary.htm>

In 2000, the year before Bush took office, 17,194,000 people received Food Stamp benefits. As seen in Table 1, the number of Food Stamp recipients increased as did spending on the program. While Food Stamps have traditionally been responsive to economic conditions,⁸ the recovery from the 2001 recession did not result in a decline in spending or number of people receiving food stamps. Table 1 outlines the increase during the Bush administration, showing a 63% increase in recipients and a 111% increase in spending.

History of Food Stamps, Conservatives and the Welfare State

After several pilot programs as early as the 1930's and expansion during the Kennedy administration, the Food Stamp Act of 1964 established the program in its present form. The

⁸ See Super, 2004

Food Stamp program⁹ experienced controversy throughout its history, with large expansions in caseloads during the 1970's. Food Stamps also has an interesting trajectory in terms of supporters of the program, with Senator Bob Dole supporting expansion of the program. At various points, spending caps and other reforms were passed by Congress in an effort to restrict access to the program but a major large-scale overhaul was not undertaken.

During debates over the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, some Republicans called for converting Food Stamps to a block grant program. While the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 changed welfare from the AFDC entitlement to the heavily supervised and more modest TANF program, Food Stamps was largely spared from large scale changes. During debates over the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Republicans such as Richard Lugar of Indiana defended the program and it was seen by Lugar and other moderates as a safety net of last resort. Many Republican governors agreed with this prescription. Addressing food stamps, the program would be “consolidated with a number of other programs into a block grant to the states, “funded in the first year at 95 percent of the aggregate amount of the individual programs.”¹⁰ King notes that In the House version of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 passed by the new Republican majority in March 1995, AFDC, child and foster care, school meals, and special nutrition aid for pregnant women and young children would all be transferred into block grants to the states funded at approximately current levels. Yet the block grant option intentionally was rejected for the food stamp program, which would be retained as a federal entitlement program with its expenditures capped.”¹¹ In the end, King writes that “the food stamp program ultimately retained its standing as a full welfare

⁹ See King, 2000 for further discussion.

¹⁰ See King, 1999

¹¹ King, 1999, 359

entitlement.”¹²

Food stamps play a unique role in that many Republicans have expressed support for the program. Bob Dole supported expansion of the program during his long tenure in the Senate, Senator Richard Lugar defended the program during welfare reform debates and food stamps were even expanded during the later years of the Reagan administration.¹³ This tradition was in part followed in the efforts and rhetoric of President George W. Bush. Indeed, calls for SNAP reform often note that the large increase began under George W. Bush. Since Republicans have often worked to create distance from Bush since he left office, SNAP reform is a clear area where they can make their disagreement known.

George W. Bush and Food Stamps: Combining Compassion with Conservatism

George W. Bush focused attention on Food Stamps after the program had successfully survived welfare reform. As Super notes, “As a result, in the six years from 1996 to 2002, the Food Stamp Program shed its skin, transforming from a political pariah to the beneficiary of a multi-billion dollar benefit expansion proposed by George W. Bush (at the same time he was attacking a host of other means-tested programs).”¹⁴ As Bush was moving to decrease parts of the social safety net, he was supporting doing more for those on Food Stamps and expanding access to legal immigrants. Bush had an opportunity to fulfill his compassionate conservatism without changing his overall policy direction.

Bush’s compassionate and big-government conservatism is clearly on display in his attitude and actions toward food stamps in 2002. As Milkis and Nelson write, “Bush-style big government conservatism extended to domestic policy as well. Rather than try to curtail New Deal and Great Society entitlement programs, as President Reagan and the Gingrich-led 104th

¹² King, 1999,360

¹³ See King, 1999 and Super, 2004 for more detailed discussions.

¹⁴ Super, 2004, 1273

Congress had tried to do, Bush sought to recast these programs in conservative form.”¹⁵ Milkis and Nelson cited the more familiar examples of No Child Left Behind, faith based support and the expansion of Medicare. However, food stamp expansion is another example of Bush’s attempts to refashion the safety net in a more conservative light.

The Bush administration’s efforts regarding food stamps were part of two larger efforts: work to revise the social safety net six years after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and the 2002 Farm Bill that authorized funding for food stamps, WIC and agricultural subsidy programs. As a result within programs Bush expressed his big government conservatism through generous subsidies for agribusiness and efforts to encourage work and increase marriage in social policy, marrying corporate support and an attempt to change the social safety net. An analysis of proposed changes created by the Bush administration in 2002 will be followed by speeches he gave in early 2002 allowing for an exploration of the policy steps and the way they were supported by presidential rhetoric.

During early 2002, a policy brief titled “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform”¹⁶ was prepared after a great deal of consultation. Drafts were initially titled “Self-Reliance Through Work and Marriage.”¹⁷ While largely dealing with changes to the TANF program, a section on Food Stamps described the program as different than TANF in that “the Food Stamp program serves as an important support to ease the transition from welfare to work.”¹⁸ Food Stamps were characterized as a way to move people into work

¹⁵ Milkis and Nelson, 451

¹⁶ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum).

¹⁷ “Promoting Self-Reliance Through Work and Marriage.” Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum).

¹⁸ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 31

but “the details of program operation at the local level should facilitate participation by families that work.”¹⁹

The Food Stamp program was characterized as providing a supplement to working families. However, the report went on to say “it has become increasingly clear that the program is failing to live up to this challenge”²⁰ and that “many single mothers struggling to earn \$10,000 per year would certainly welcome the additional \$2,000 in benefits that food stamps would provide.”²¹ While seeking to get more working people involved, the way the program was administered and regulated was also explored. As the report noted, “working families often have circumstances that make complying with the program’s procedural requirements difficult. It can be hard, for example, for working people to take time off to appear at certification interviews during working hours. But another part of the problem is that the quality control system may result in states inadvertently discouraging food stamp use by working families.”²² The Bush administration was not trying to dismantle the welfare state, instead they were attempting to make it more responsive to working families. People working and as a result taking personal responsibility were to be rewarded under this approach. Indeed, the document notes that “in general, the reforms proposed by the Administration will make it easier for states to fashion a

¹⁹ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 31

²⁰ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 31

²¹ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 31

²² “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 31-32

food stamp program that is friendlier to working families.”²³ The Food Stamp program and the welfare state would be adjusted rather than obliterated.

Several ideas were raised in order to better assist working families. Proposals included efforts to improve efficiency, a reduction in penalties to errors and two methods to expand access. One would “enable working families to own reliable transportation,”²⁴ “allowing low income individuals to own a reliable car for getting to work without losing food stamp benefits.”²⁵ There was also a clause to “Phase-in a Higher Standard Deduction for Large Households.”²⁶

Food stamps were characterized as a way to support families and to promote work. Improving access to food stamps for legal immigrants was also proposed. Each of these expansions promoted conservative goals of work and marriage promoted within earlier drafts of the report. The report is quite critical of many aspects of TANF but encourages greater use and expansion of the Food Stamp program, particularly for families that were working.

When George W. Bush called for support of food stamp programs, he personalized the story and delivered his remarks in a way that clearly illustrated his compassionate conservatism. Three primary documents are utilized to explore his support for Food Stamp expansion: his remarks made on February 26, 2002 regarding welfare reform, a speech delivered at St. Stephens Church in Ohio on May 10, 2002 and the May 2002 signing ceremony for the Farm Bill. Each

²³ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 32

²⁴ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 33

²⁵ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 33

²⁶ “Working Towards Independence: The President’s Plan to Strengthen Welfare Reform” February 2001. Box 2, Folder 9. White House Office of Records Management Subject Files-WE (Welfare) (George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum): 33

instance included a discussion of Food Stamp expansion in the context of a larger policy discussion, piece of legislation or policy oriented speech. As a result, his calls for Food Stamp expansion should be considered as part of a larger policy effort. What makes the speeches particularly interesting is how he frames compassion while also supporting business, opposing red tape and federal authority and substantially expanding welfare reform efforts. As a result, his compassionate conservatism is not separate from his other domestic policy initiatives.

Days before the Farm Bill was signed, Bush visited the state of Ohio. In a speech at St. Stephen's Church, he personalized the issue of Food Stamps. Interestingly, he brought up the topic in the context of intense federal regulations.

I'll give you an example of some of the roadblocks that Federal regulations create, all the rules, all the fine print, Mr. Mayor, all the thick layers of booklets. The Governor's explained to me this case, and it's interesting. There's a single mom with two daughters here in Ohio. One of the daughters is disabled, and the other daughter is working at—she's 17 years old—to help the family. She's working part time. Because she was 17 years old, her income didn't count in the formula to decide whether or not the family was eligible for food stamps. Guess what happened on her 18th birthday? All of a sudden, her income, because of a rule or regulation, starts to count. Even though the income level of the family didn't increase, they lost their food stamps.²⁷

It is difficult to imagine Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich or Paul Ryan making this statement. George W. Bush was decrying a formula that made it more difficult for a family to access a social benefit. He framed it in the context of federal regulation, however. A lack of flexibility and rigid federal regulations were hurting the ability of the family to access food stamps.

While at first glance, the above passage seems to contradict a conservative view of the welfare state, there are several factors that align it with a conservative position. The daughter whose income is counted is working; she is part of the deserving working poor rather than the

²⁷ Remarks at St. Stephen's Community House in Columbus, Ohio, May 10, 2002. *Public Papers of the President*, 2002: 768-773. 771.

mythical welfare queen so often brought up by Ronald Reagan. Bush goes on to specifically outline his vision of compassionate conservatism and of a compassionate but conservative America:

Now, that's not what a compassionate America is all about. When people need help, we need to help them. Now, it's conservative to trust local people, but it's compassionate to provide flexibility so that rules and regulations don't prevent people from getting the help we want them to get. What ought to happen is, the State of Ohio should have the flexibility necessary to allow that young girl and her family to receive food stamps as a transition period to full-time employment. In other words, it ought to be a part of the transition from welfare to work, but that's not the way the food stamp program works.²⁸ Bush clearly outlines compassionate conservatism, traditional conservative ideals representing devolving authority to states, trusting people to run their own lives and avoiding excessive rules and regulations. Bush avoids that harsh rhetoric often used when Republicans and conservatives discuss public assistance. However, he also focuses on avoiding waste and excessive regulation:

And I'll tell you what else happens with a system that is too bureaucratic and too focused on rules and regulations. The administrative costs of these programs end up putting money not in the pockets of people we're trying to help, but in—as a result of the bean counters, you know, how do you keep track of what's going on? The more complicated the rules and regulations out of Washington, the more money States have to spend to account for the money. And I'll give you an example. On the food stamp program here, the State of Ohio spent \$192 million administering the program. The program provides \$573 million of benefits. That is a high cost per dollar delivered. It's about 25 percent overhead cost. Now, I'll tell you, a lot of that money—with fewer rules and regulations, a lot of that money would end up going to benefit people. And that's important for the American people to understand. The more regulations there are out of Washington, the more complex the Washington, DC, regulations are, the more likely it is money is not going to end up helping people.²⁹

Bush avoided calling for block granting food stamps as Republicans before and after him did but he did criticize the overhead cost. He also criticized Washington. Despite these factors, he still favored expanding food stamps to a group excluded in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and

²⁸ Remarks at St. Stephen's Community House in Columbus, Ohio, May 10, 2002. *Public Papers of the President*, 2002: 768-773. 771.

²⁹ Remarks at St. Stephen's Community House in Columbus, Ohio, May 10, 2002. *Public Papers of the President*, 2002: 768-773. 771

Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996: legal immigrants.

Bush, Immigration and Food Stamps

As Governor of Texas, George W. Bush sought Latino voters in the 1994 and 1998 elections and supported the idea of comprehensive immigration reform, following a tradition of Texas Republicans being supportive of recent immigrants.³⁰ The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, passed during the same period when the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 was adopted, was a strong piece of immigration restriction and enforcement legislation, and was passed during a period of strong animosity towards undocumented immigrants in the United States Congress.³¹ Just as Bush was attempting to differentiate himself from the antigovernment rhetoric of the 104th Congress, he was also following up on his previous work of building a stronger relationship with Mexico and appealing to Latino voters.

The Bush administration proposed the expansion in January 2002. Bush had several motivations. As the *New York Times* notes, “amid a recession that is hurting many immigrants, and with the government waging a war on terrorism that has targeted some immigrants, Mr. Bush is eager to show his commitment to them. He is also eager to address domestic problems -- a transition his father failed to make effectively a decade ago after the Persian Gulf War.”³² Bush could show commitment to immigrants, gain support with Latinos and also not let the War on Terror vanquish the compassionate conservatism he had run for office on.

While Bush was in favor of increasing enhanced work requirements for TANF recipients, on the issue of food stamps he outlined an area where assistance could be expanded:

³⁰ See Benjamin Marquez. *Democratizing Texas Politics: Race, Identity and Mexican American Empowerment, 1945-2002*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014).

³¹ See Lina Newton. *Illegal, Alien & Immigrant*. (New York: NYU Press, 2008)

³² Robert Pear. “Bush Plan Seeks to Restore Food Stamps for Noncitizens.” *New York Times*. January 10, 2002.

And there's one area that we need to improve help on: We need to restore nutrition benefits for legal immigrants. The 1996 reforms imposed a 5-year ban on most welfare benefits for new legal immigrants, including a permanent ban on food stamps, unless immigrants have worked here for 10 years or have become citizens. We've proposed changing this law so that legal immigrants receive food stamps after 5 years, so that those who are eligible, those who need help, like an elderly immigrant farmworker, somebody who has worked hard all his life and cannot help himself, ought to get food stamps. Or a legal immigrant who has been working here for 5 years and raising a family and all a sudden gets laid off and needs a helping hand, ought to get food stamps.³³

Bush frames the issue in terms of nutrition, noting a re-framing of the issue used during his administration to encourage eligible people and families to apply for food stamps. He specifically frames it in terms of the deserving poor. An elderly farmworker, here in the country legally perhaps as a result of the legalization process included in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act signed by President Reagan, is in need of assistance. Or a hardworking family is suddenly in need. Neither of these examples suggested a culture of dependency. All of the examples are hardworking people in need of nutritional assistance. When discussing both the need for further welfare reform and the Farm Bill that benefited farmers and agribusiness interests, Bush brought up this particular example.

George W. Bush specifically mentioned immigrants and the Food Stamp expansion when signing the Farm bill. He personalized the bill by highlighting a specific potential situation virtually identical to that raised: "This bill is also a compassionate bill. This law means that legal immigrants can now receive help and food stamps after being here for 5 years. It means that you can have an elderly farm worker; somebody here legally in America who's worked hard to make a living and who falls on hard times—that person can receive help from a compassionate Government. It means that you can have a head of a family who's been working hard, been here for 5 years, been a part of our economy, been legally working, and that person falls on hard

³³ Remarks on the Welfare Reform Agenda. February 26, 2002. *Public Papers of the President*, 2002: 288-293. 292.

times—our Government should help them with food stamps, and this bill allows that to happen.³⁴ Bush did not mince words; he once again used the phrase compassionate to denote this particular section of the Farm Bill. The remainder of the speech dealt with issues such as free trade and did not mention the Food Stamp program in detail beyond the expansion of benefits to an additional group of legal immigrants.

There was both support and criticism of Bush's steps from his fellow Republicans. When the change was introduced, one of the leaders in favor of cutting social benefits praised the change in the *New York Times*. "In an interview today, Newt Gingrich, the House speaker in 1996, said: 'I strongly support the president's initiative. In a law that has reduced welfare by more than 50 percent, this is one of the provisions that went too far. In retrospect, it was wrong. President Bush's instincts are exactly right.'"³⁵ The changes of the era are clear in the statements of Gingrich. The Newt Gingrich of 1995 or 2012 may not have had the same point of view; however, Bush's compassionate conservatism and perhaps the power gained in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 helped to shift the views of at least Gingrich.

In January 2002, the conservative newsletter *Human Events* included a discussion of the Bush administration proposal. "the Bush administration has decided to seek the restoration of food stamps for legal immigrants,"³⁶ the newsletter aired public criticism of the policy from Tom Tancredo just four months after the attacks on September 11, 2001. The newsletter appears to affirm the idea that Bush could use compassionate initiatives to distance himself from the perception of his party. In a short brief entitled "Welfare for Foreigners," it was noted that "the Bush administration has decided to seek the restoration of food stamps for legal immigrants,

³⁴ Remarks on Signing the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002. May 13, 2002. *Public Papers of the President, 2002: 780-783.* 782.

³⁵ Pear, January 10, 2002

³⁶ "Capitol Briefs." *Human Events*. January 14, 2002.

thus, critics say, establishing yet another reason for foreigners to come to the United States. Food stamps for aliens were repealed by the 1996 welfare reform bill.”³⁷ Rather than compassionate conservatism, here Republicans and conservatives were arguing that access to public services would encourage further immigration. It is a bit difficult to think of a rationale where someone goes through the legal immigration process in order to in five years gain access to a relatively modest social benefit but the rhetoric is typical of that which was used by Republicans in the mid-1990’s and was used again when Bush in his second term sought to secure comprehensive immigration reform.

Tom Tancredo, who would emerge as one of the leaders of the immigration restriction movement, was already making his mark in criticizing this Bush administration policy.” “‘It’s plain to see the president has chosen to steal a page from the Democratic playbook,’ said Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), chairman of the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus. ‘His attempt to expand our base through surrendering to the Hispanic vote is usually the Democrat’s job. Votes can’t be bought with welfare. Enticing immigrants to the United States with federal benefits only discourages them to work or develop skills to sustain their own livelihood.’ The proposal would put 363,000 foreign nationals on the dole.”³⁸

Each of the claims made by Tancredo and *Human Events* is worth further exploration. First, you can see that Bush’s attempts to gain Latino voters are roundly criticized. Another claim shows a view towards social benefits more typical of Republicans since the Reagan era. The food stamps expansion is seen as buying votes. The 363,000 comes from the Bush administration’s estimates of those eligible. However, what is obvious is that the compassionate view of Bush did not reach all in the Republican Party. Indeed, *Human Events* in a sense can be

³⁷ “Capitol Briefs.” *Human Events*. January 14, 2002.

³⁸ “Capitol Briefs.” *Human Events*. January 14, 2002.

perceived as doing Bush a favor, since they portray him as pursuing Democratic goals when in actuality this relatively modest change is attached to perhaps the largest form of corporate welfare outside of the tax system, the Farm Bill.

In recent years, conservatives and Republicans have followed the lead of Tancredo rather than George W. Bush. Trends have emerged that suggest a move away from compassionate conservatism on food stamps but not the end of the idea of social policy with a human face. One is states such as Missouri passing laws that restrict the type of food that can be purchased with food stamps and the increase in proposals to drug test welfare and food stamp recipients.

The second trend is the rise of reform conservatism that has led many to consider the possibility of a revival of compassionate conservatism. As Peter Beinart noted: “Rand Paul is arguing for shorter prison sentences. Republican Governors John Kasich and Mike Pence are [expanding](#) Medicaid. Marco Rubio recently said it was time for Republicans to stop trying to balance “the budget by saving money on safety-net programs.” Even budget cutter extraordinaire, Paul Ryan, [wants](#) to “remove it [the fight against poverty] from the old-fashioned budget fight.” These ideas and insights differ from Bush but do show Republicans attempting to formulate compassionate social policy. In an age of drug testing and limits on steak, it is interesting to see Republicans pursuing compassionate type policies in other areas.

Conclusion

President Bush’s early acts of compassion conservatism including the No Child Left Behind Act, support for Faith Based organization and expansion of Food Stamps did not endure as part of his domestic political agenda. The 2003 expansion of Medicare to include prescription

drug coverage and the failed 2005 attempt to reform Social Security both dealt with senior citizens, who have always been considered as part of the “deserving poor.” His themes of the “ownership society”³⁹ dealt mainly with building assets. In addition, in 2005 he pushed for budget cuts in many social programs. His attempts through 2006 to secure comprehensive immigration reform do show an enduring commitment. As a result, there were few initiatives that fit into his compassionate conservative framework. As his presidency developed, his priorities shifted and in his second term he was hampered by increasing unpopularity and focused on his foreign policy goals and the emerging financial crisis of 2008.

While many Republicans have distanced themselves from the Bush presidency, the early years of his presidency remain a model of including compassionate ideas within a conservative policy agenda. Unlike the symbolic moves toward compassion taken by other officials and candidates, this instance represents a specific policy initiative that had a long term impact. A Bush presidency without the strong focus on the War on Terror may have included more of these reforms as he attempted to govern and lead a closely divided nation. How successful these reforms and how consistent the message would have been can only be speculated about but as the 2016 election campaign approaches and political figures including his brother former Florida Governor Jeb Bush consider campaigns, it is intriguing to consider how they will craft their social policy and the discourse supporting their claims. Early evidence indicates a possible revisiting of the themes of compassionate conservatism, suggesting that future Republican presidencies may be influenced by the discourse and policies of Bush. The Food Stamp program is a tangible representation of compassionate conservatism and future programs could well address the same immigration and social policies supported by George W. Bush. Without abandoning their core ideals, discourse and policies could potentially be created.

³⁹ <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040809-9.html>

Compassionate conservatism did not endure in the Bush presidency, as attention continued to be paid to the War in Iraq and, shortly before the end of his presidency, the global financial crisis of 2008. In addition, criticisms of Food Stamps and SNAP re-emerged with renewed fervor in conservative circles. However, the 2002 Farm Bill and the welfare proposals considered by the Bush administration represent a conservative attempt to construct social policy that has failed to receive a great deal of attention. Bush was following earlier Republicans such as Bob Dole just as his more conservative detractors were following earlier efforts by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms and California Senator S.I. Hayakawa. Within this moment, you see a key possibility for conservative social policy that preserves Food Stamps and SNAP. The 2002 Farm Bill has been rightfully criticized for the large amount of agribusiness subsidies that make the story less rosy but it still represents a possibility for social programs. However, despite the compassionate rhetoric and actions of George W. Bush in 2002, there would be renewed attacks on Food Stamps and SNAP that continues to the present day. As *The Washington Post* recently noted, “Sixteen years ago, George W. Bush presented to America his vision of “compassionate conservatism,” and in response he received an absolute torrent of glowing articles in the media calling him a “different kind of Republican” — conservative, to be sure, but not so mean about it. Well those days are long past. In the 2016 GOP primaries, it’s compassionless conservatism that’s in fashion.”ⁱ

ⁱ Paul Waldman. “Scott Walker wants to drug test food stamp recipients. That shows why he’ll never be president.” (www.washingtonpost.com) July 16, 2015.