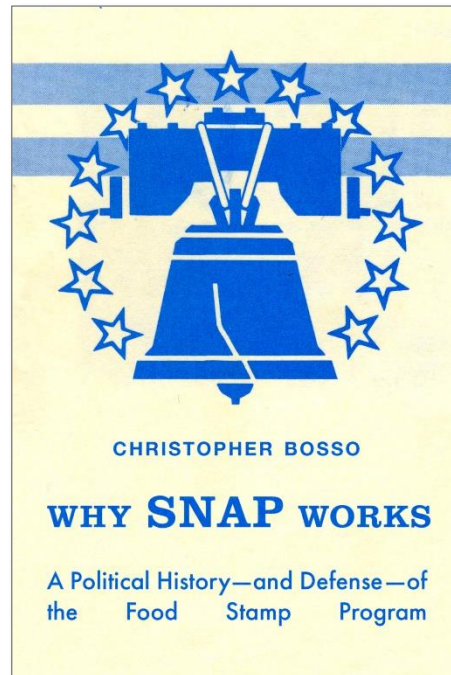


SNAP’s “unhappy marriage” to the farm bill

Book review by
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Review of *Why SNAP Works: A Political History—and Defense—of the Food Stamp Program*, by Christopher Bosso. (2023). Published by University of California Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook; 280 pages. Publisher’s website:

<https://www.ucpress.edu/books/why-snap-works/>



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The U.S. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) once again finds itself in the political hot seat. With cuts enacted under the Trump Administration in the summer of 2025 compounded by the government shutdown just months later—leaving millions of Americans without benefits for weeks—conversations about SNAP are widespread. But how did the program get here?

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In *Why SNAP Works: A Political History—and Defense—of the Food Stamp Program*, Christopher Bosso offers exactly that: a chronological account of SNAP’s legislative past. He structures his argument around SNAP’s longstanding political resilience—rooted in its ties to the farm bill—and ultimately concludes that the program’s greatest strength lies in its administrative practicality.

SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) is neither direct food assistance nor direct cash assistance. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), eligibility requirements are based on monthly reported income. Eligible individuals receive benefits on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) debit card that can only be spent on designated food items at participating retailers. Bosso argues that the rules are often contradictory,

noting, for example, that SNAP dollars can be spent on a box of frozen chicken tenders but not on a Costco rotisserie chicken (p. 178).

As the title suggests, the book is first and foremost a political history. Bosso, a professor of political science and public policy, impressively reviews nearly a century's worth of congressional bills, key legislators, and shifting cultural contexts to trace how SNAP's rules and regulations evolved under successive farm bills.

Drawing on his public policy background, Bosso organizes the first five chapters according to political eras, spanning the presidencies from Eisenhower (1953–1961) to Trump's first term (2017–2021). Only in the concluding chapter does he formally articulate his "defense" of SNAP. He first explains the program's longevity as a function of its political practicality, showing through historical examples how proposals to cut or alter SNAP often sparked political backlash. He further describes SNAP as an "accidental anti-poverty program" (p. 159). Compared to other federally administered welfare assistance, SNAP's lenient eligibility requirements make it a catch-all for vulnerable Americans on the cusp of extreme poverty.

A central theme of Bosso's text is the paradoxical problem of "want amidst plenty" (pp. 25–30). He demonstrates that "plenty"—or the price-deflating surpluses of commodity crops—was the driving concern of SNAP's founding legislators. In Congress, the focus was on helping farmers plagued by low prices, not the millions of hungry Americans that food stamps "accidentally" ended up helping. Bosso suggests, "without the surplus, food stamps never would have existed" (p. 47). This explains why SNAP landed in the purview of the USDA and is funded through the farm bill rather than the Department of Health and Human Services.

Ironically, this mismatch between intent and impact sets the stage for Bosso's foremost argument in defense of food stamps: its political armor. Citing the program's longevity as evidence of its success, he argues that SNAP's inextricable ties to the farm bill have protected it. Although he displays dissatisfaction with elements of the program, dryly noting, "nobody apparently consulted with

those the new program was intended to help" (p. 33), he nonetheless presents SNAP's agricultural origins as the reluctant hero of the story.

He attributes the program's durability to its "unhappy marriage" (pp. 110–111) with the farm bill—a bipartisan set of legislation reauthorized roughly every five years—which has historically carried SNAP along with it. Throughout the book, Bosso shows that political debates have largely targeted the program's rules, not its existence. He notes with malaise this resulted in SNAP's treatment as "just another commodity" (p. 103) akin to legislators' use of corn, cotton, dairy, and wheat as bargaining chips in cross-party vote exchanges. But still, he uses these historical anecdotes to bolster his primary argument in support of SNAP's political practicality.

If a political history lesson is what the reader wants, this book delivers with aplomb. But if, like me, the reader is drawn in by the promise of a "defense" of the program, this book will leave one wanting more. I had hoped for stronger evidence that SNAP is truly working, or for deeper exploration of alternatives that policymakers have contemplated over time. Bosso briefly touches on options such as direct cash assistance, direct food aid, or state-level block grants (removing federal oversight), but he swiftly refutes each. His emphasis is on political pragmatism rather than creativity. The book does not misadvertise itself, and perhaps my mild dissatisfaction stems from a harder truth: in just the three years since its publication, his central argument has become more vulnerable.

The government shutdown may have ended before the start of the new year, but the farm bill was not reenacted. Although it was up for renewal this fall, Congress opted for *another* one-year extension. Meanwhile, major changes in eligibility requirements from the omnibus One Big Beautiful Bill Act remain. Bosso's claim of SNAP's impenetrable political armor appears increasingly vulnerable. We now face an administration questioning not just SNAP's rules but its very existence. If federal funding continues to be unreliable, states will have to decide whether to fill the fiscal gap left in its wake.

In states that do choose to step in, can we envision a more effective way to spend the billions

of dollars that previously accounted for two-thirds of all federal nutrition funding? Would housing the program in an agency more directly focused on improving access to healthy, nutritious food better serve those it aims to assist? And what might that look like? Bosso rightly notes that direct food assistance is not the way forward, but what about direct cash assistance? Or further investment in produce-dollar matching programs, such as Double Up Food Bucks, which he points out have demonstrated nutritional benefits (pp. 158–159)?

Bosso defends SNAP on the grounds of its political armor, but now that armor appears compromised. Policy-makers and advocates would benefit from reading this book to deepen their understanding of SNAP's political legacy. They could then use that knowledge to look beyond SNAP's (former) viability as the status quo and critically reexamine its agricultural roots and the precedent they have set for politicians' treatment of food assistance as "just another commodity." 