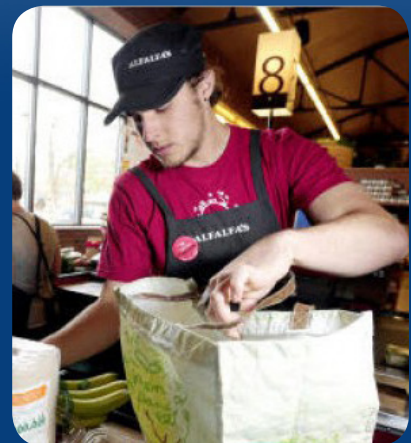


# AMERICANS ON SNAP BENEFITS



**A survey of voters nationwide,  
and in California, Florida, Maryland, New York,  
North Carolina, Ohio, Texas and Virginia**

Primary Investigator: Steven Kull  
Research Staff: Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis and Antje Williams

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial federal poverty programs has been the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or SNAP. This program was previously popularly known as ‘food stamps;’ however, food stamps are no longer in use.

Currently, there is legislation calling for increases in SNAP benefits (H.R.1276) and for providing incentives to encourage SNAP beneficiaries to eat more fruits and vegetables (H.R. 5423).

An issue that has generated a tremendous amount of controversy is whether SNAP benefits should be permitted to be used for foods that are low in nutritional values or even unhealthy such as sweetened sodas, candy, cake, doughnuts, chips and snack crackers. Various states have requested permission to restrict their applications and legislation has been put forward to impose the same restrictions on SNAP benefits as there has been for the Women and Infant Children (WIC) program (HR 3073).

Another issue centers on the question of how much savings low-income individuals may have to still qualify for SNAP benefits. Currently, for people to be eligible for SNAP, their household savings should be under \$2,250. Some have argued that this is too restrictive and discourages saving.

To explore these issues, a survey was conducted by the Program for Public Consultation of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. Because these issues are somewhat complex, respondents went through a process called a ‘policymaking simulation’ in which they were given a short briefing on the issue, evaluated pro and con arguments for key options, and only then made their policy recommendations.

## METHODOLOGY

The policymaking simulation was fielded online as a survey with a probability-based representative sample of registered voters. 7,128 participants were provided by Nielsen Scarborough from Nielsen Scarborough’s sample of respondents, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households. Additional recruiting of 317 respondents in Maryland, Oklahoma, and Virginia was conducted by telephone and mail by Communications for Research, Inc.

**Total Sample:** 7,445

**National Sample:** 7,128; Margin of Error: +/- 1.2%

### State Samples:

Texas (TX): 398

Margin of Error: +/- 4.9%

North Carolina (NC): 402

Margin of Error: +/- 4.9%

Florida (FL): 423

Margin of Error: +/- 4.8%

Ohio (OH): 509

Margin of Error: +/- 4.3%

Virginia (VA): 463

Margin of Error: +/- 4.6%

California (CA): 682

Margin of Error: +/- 3.8%

Maryland (MD): 486

Margin of Error: +/- 4.4%

New York (NY): 401

Margin of Error: +/- 4.9%

**Field Dates:**

Fielded by Nielsen-Scarborough: November 11, 2016 – December 10, 2016

Fielded by Communications for Research, Inc. (CFR): December 13, 2016 – January 18, 2017

**Weighting:** The sample was subsequently weighted by age, income, gender, education, race, and in the case of the national sample by geographic region. Benchmarks for weights were obtained from the Census' 2014 Current Populations Survey of Registered Voters. Some state samples were also weighted by Party identification, where available, using the States' political affiliation statistics from their department of elections for registered voters.

**SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS*****SNAP Benefit Levels***

When presented typical levels of SNAP benefits, eight in ten favored raising them, including two thirds of Republicans. Overall, majorities made increases in benefits ranging from 19 to 43% depending on the case.

***Restricting SNAP Eligible Food Items***

When respondents considered a proposal for limiting items eligible for use with SNAP benefits, there was substantial variation depending on the item. Large bipartisan majorities favored disallowing sweetened sodas and candy. A majority overall, but not a majority of Democrats, favored disallowing cookies, cakes and doughnuts. A majority opposed disallowing chips and snack crackers and ice cream.

***Discounts for Fruit and Vegetables***

An overwhelming nine in ten, including eight in ten Republicans, favored providing discounts on fruit and vegetables bought with SNAP benefits.

***Permitted Levels of Savings for SNAP Beneficiaries***

When told that the amount of savings a household can have and still receive SNAP benefits is \$2,250, a slight majority overall favored keeping the requirement as it is, but a majority of Democrats favored raising the permitted level.



### **SNAP Benefit Levels**

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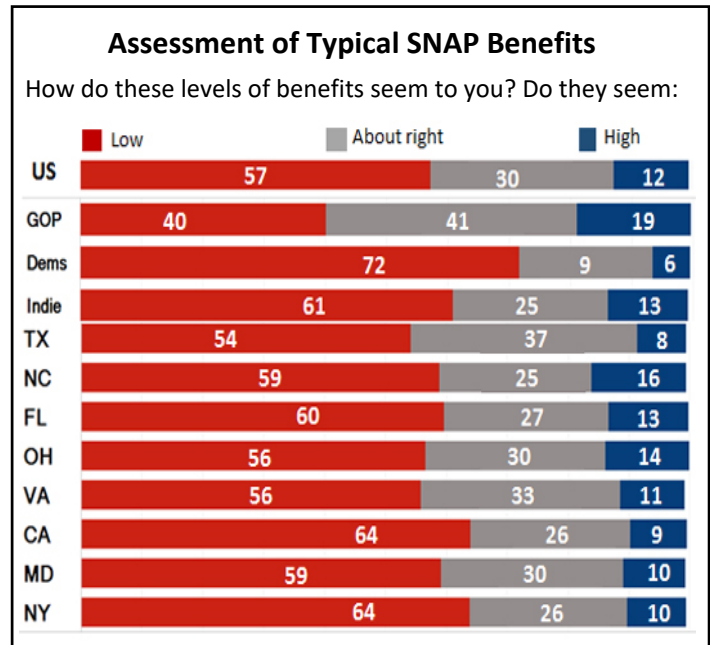
Respondents were given a background briefing on the SNAP program including that “In 2015, the program cost \$74 billion, with 23 million households receiving benefits, including about 26 million adults and 20 million children.” They were told that the Federal guidelines for SNAP eligibility were:

- Total household income: Must be no more than a bit above the federal poverty line.
- Total household savings: Must be less than \$2,250. In fact, the average recipient has \$400 in savings.
- Work requirements: Able-bodied adults must register with a state employment office, actively seek work and/or job training, and accept a job, if offered.

Respondents were told “Benefits vary on a sliding scale depending on household income. As income goes up, benefits go down, and then stop entirely when income is a bit above the poverty line.” They were then given two examples of average SNAP benefits as follows.

- About half of all SNAP recipients are living alone. Their average monthly income is \$542. Their SNAP benefit is, on average, about \$140 a month.
- Another major group of SNAP recipients are single mothers with one child. Their average income is approximately \$760 a month. Their SNAP benefit is, on average, \$253 a month.

They were then asked whether these levels seemed low, about right, or high. Majorities nationally (57%) and in all states said they found these benefit levels low, with states ranging from 54% in Texas to 64% in California. More than seven in ten Democrats found them low. Less than half of Republicans (41%) found them low, but only one in five found them high.



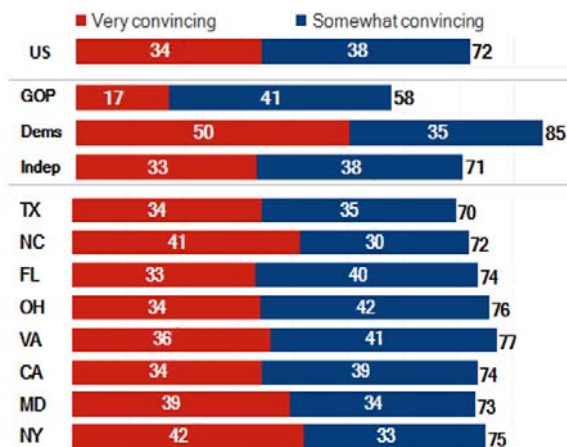
Respondents then evaluated arguments for and against raising benefits. The argument in favor of raising benefits did very well with more than seven in ten finding it convincing nationally and majorities in all states. Republicans were lower, but still nearly six in ten found the argument convincing.





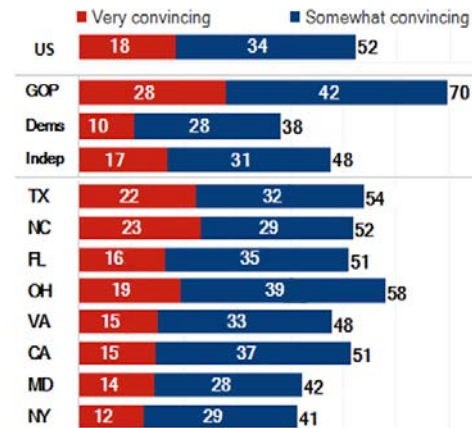
### Argument in Favor: Raising SNAP Benefits

The average person who receives food stamps makes only \$542 a month. For them to get \$140 a month for food stamps is simply not enough—this is less than \$5 a day. Many want to earn more, but can't find a job or a better paying job. Food is a basic human need and it is simply wrong to keep people on the edge of hunger with benefits so low.



### Argument Against: Raising SNAP Benefits

The amount we spend on SNAP is a lot of money--\$74 billion dollars. We should not increase it. The economy is better now and there are more jobs out there. We need to encourage people to get out there and try harder in this improving labor market. We shouldn't make it easier for them not to make the effort.



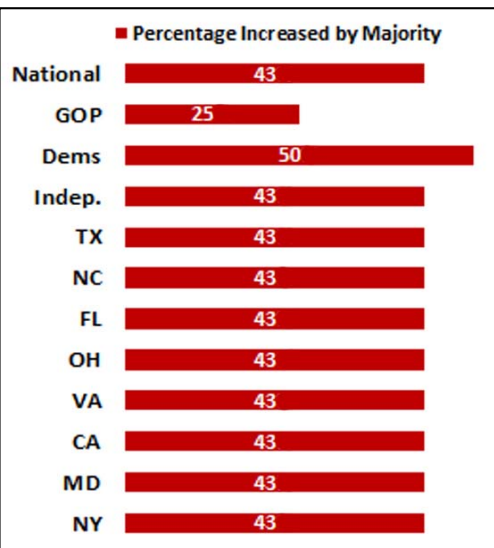
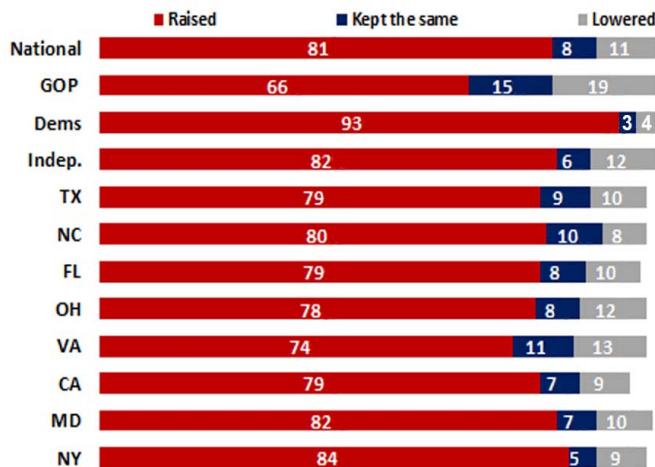
The argument against raising benefits was much less convincing. A bare majority found it convincing nationally and in most states. Among Republicans, though, seven in ten found it convincing.





### Benefit Changes for SNAP:

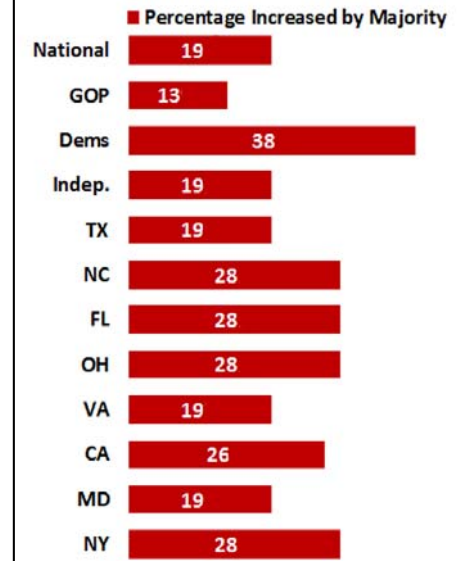
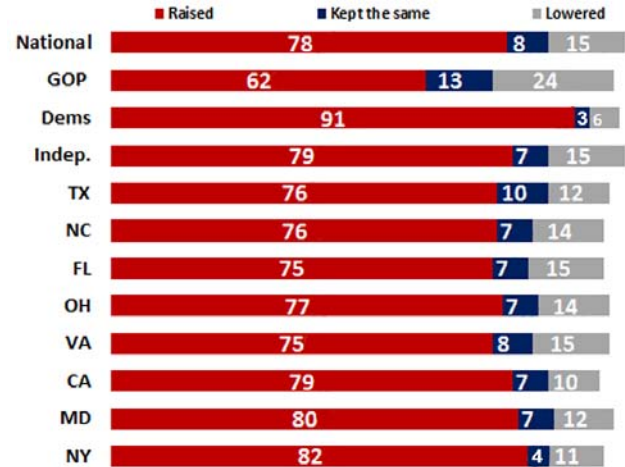
Recipients living alone and earning on average \$542 per month with current SNAP benefits of about \$140



Coming back to the two specific cases of benefit levels, respondents were asked to be specific about what they thought the level should be and were able to give any number. For both cases, bipartisan majorities, nationally and in every state, substantially raised benefits from the current level.

### Benefit Changes for SNAP:

Single mother with one child earning on average \$760 per month with current SNAP benefits of about \$253



For the case of “recipients living alone and earning on average \$542 a month” with current SNAP benefits of about \$140, eight in ten raised the benefits, with an overall majority raising the benefit 43% or more from \$140 to \$200 and up.

For the case of “a single mother with one child and earning on average \$760 a month” with current SNAP benefits about \$253, once again approximately eight in ten increased benefits. In this case, though the amount of the increase was less, with the overall majority increasing it 19% or more or from \$253 to \$300.



### Restricting SNAP Eligible Food Items

When respondents considered a proposal for limiting items eligible for use with SNAP benefits, there was substantial variation depending on the item. Large bipartisan majorities favored disallowing sweetened sodas and candy. A majority overall, but not a majority of Democrats, favored disallowing cookies, cakes and doughnuts. A majority opposed disallowing chips and snack crackers and ice cream.

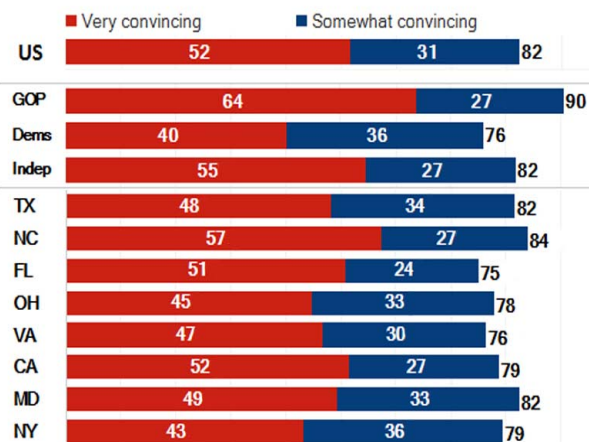
Respondents were told that, “Recently, there has been a debate over whether some kinds of food people can buy with SNAP benefits should be restricted. Currently, SNAP cannot be used for alcoholic beverages, and usually not for hot ready-to-eat food. One proposal is to extend these limits to other food items with little nutritional value, such as sweetened sodas, candy, cookies, cakes, and ice cream.”

They were then presented an argument in favor of restricting SNAP eligible foods. It was found convincing by an overwhelming majority.

#### Argument in favor:

##### Restricting SNAP eligible foods

Helping needy people meet their nutritional needs is one thing, but taxpayer dollars should not go to purchase junk food with no nutritional value. We should not encourage people to waste money on food that can damage their health. The rise in obesity and diabetes from eating fatty and sugary foods is a serious strain on America’s healthcare system.

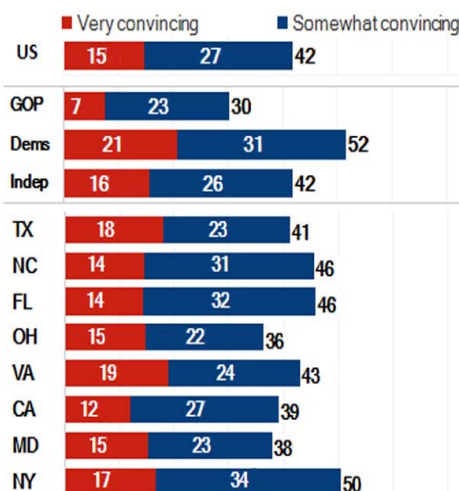


The argument against such restrictions did much more poorly.

#### Argument against:

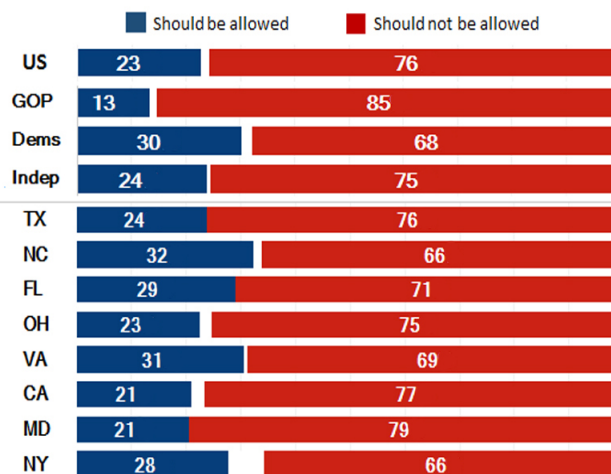
##### Restricting SNAP eligible foods

Just because people are poor does not mean the federal government should tell them what to eat. Individuals can make their own decisions about nutrition. Furthermore, administering such rules could be expensive. And, Congress would have to fend off armies of food-industry lobbyists, trying to protect certain foods from being excluded.



When asked to specify whether specific food items should be disallowed there was substantial variation depending on the item. The largest bipartisan majorities favored disallowing candy, followed closely by sweetened sodas.

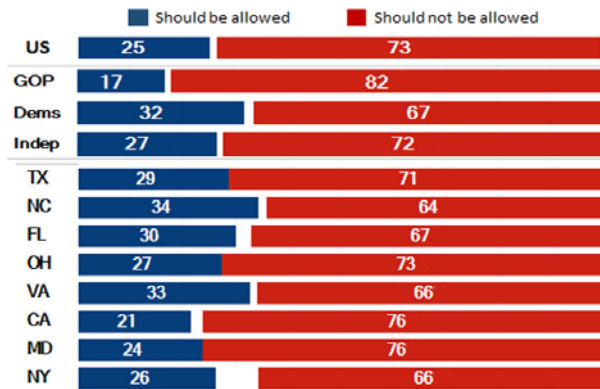
#### Purchasing candy with SNAP benefits





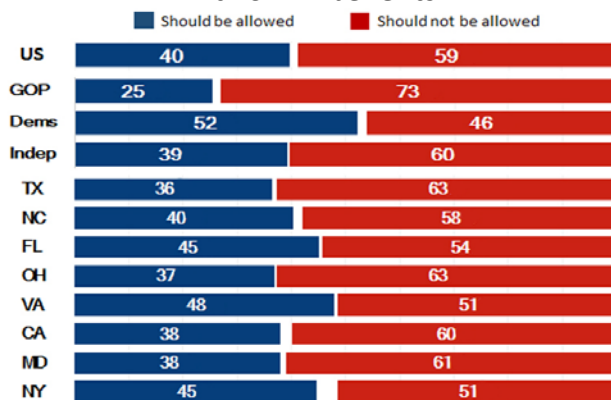


### Purchasing sweetened soda with SNAP benefits



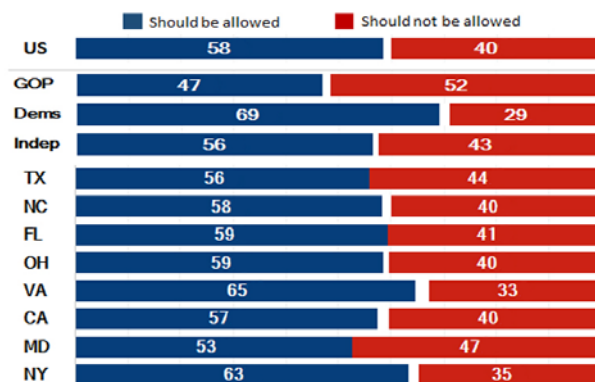
Purchasing cookies cakes and doughnuts with SNAP benefits was disallowed by 6 in 10 overall, and by majorities in all states, though a slight majority of Democrats said it should be allowed.

### Purchasing cookies, cakes, and doughnuts with SNAP benefits

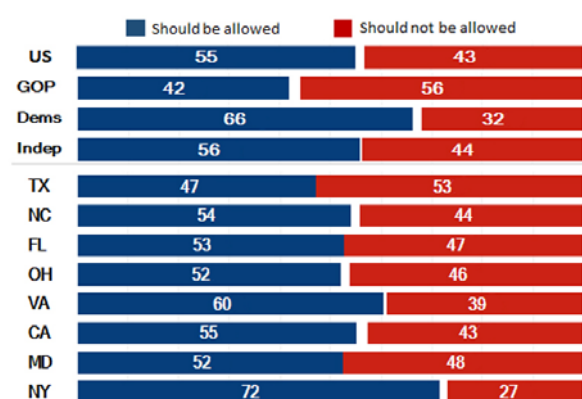


Majorities said that chips and snack crackers, and ice cream should be allowed, though a slight majority of GOP said it should not be allowed.

### Purchasing chips and snack crackers with SNAP benefits



### Purchasing ice cream with SNAP benefits



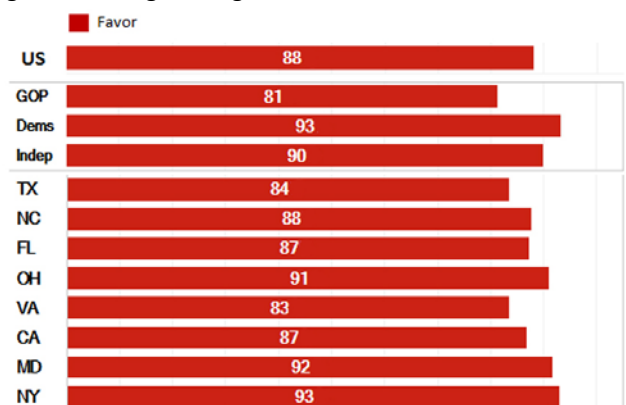
### Discounts for Fruit and Vegetables

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### Offering discounts for fruits and vegetable bought with SNAP benefits

Do you favor or oppose offering discounts on fruit and vegetables bought using SNAP credits?



### Permitted Levels of Savings for SNAP Beneficiaries

When told that the amount of savings a household can have and still receive SNAP benefits is \$2,250, a slight majority overall favored keeping the requirement as it is, but a majority of Democrats favored raising the permitted level.



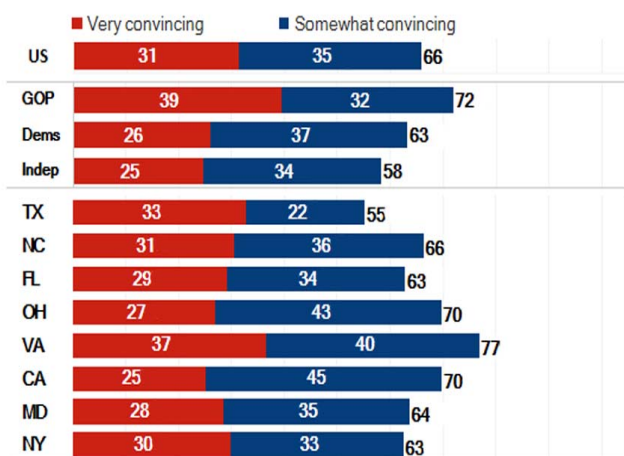


Currently there is a controversy over what level of savings low-income individuals may have and still qualify for SNAP benefits. Respondents were told that “Currently for people to be eligible for SNAP, their household savings should be under \$2,250.” There is debate about whether this limit should remain \$2,250, be raised to a higher level, or eliminated.

Arguments both for preserving and raising the asset limit were found convincing by about two thirds, with Republicans more likely to be persuaded by the argument in favor of preserving the limit and Democrats more likely to be persuaded by the argument to raise the limit.

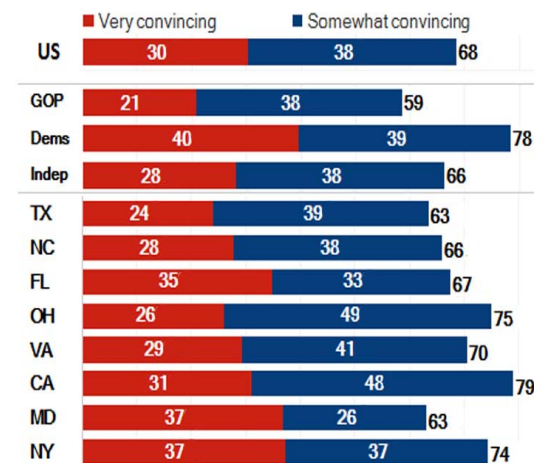
### Argument in favor: Preserving the current asset limit for SNAP beneficiaries

We should ensure that people receiving government assistance are truly in need. Taxpayer dollars should only help people who have exhausted all other means. If someone loses their job but has substantial money in the bank, they should not qualify for SNAP. They should be expected to use those savings until they are below \$2,250. It is not the government’s responsibility to ensure that people can maintain their bank accounts. Many working people don’t have \$2,250 in the bank.



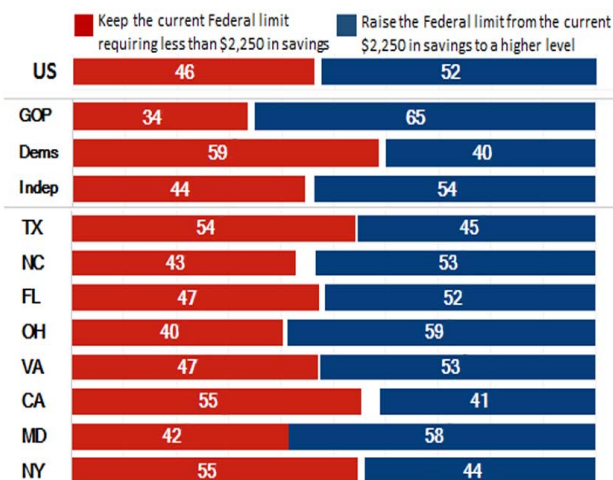
### Argument in favor: Raising the current asset limit for SNAP beneficiaries

There should be a limit on how much savings a SNAP recipient can have, but it should be above \$2,250. To say a parent with children who has a little more than \$2,250 must spend down these savings before getting food stamps is really unfair. If they face an unexpected cost, they could end up broke and maybe homeless. Even poor people deserve to have a month or two’s security.



Asked for their final recommendation, slight majority favored keeping the current limit nationally, but views differed sharply between Republicans and Democrats. The states varied sharply as well, but did not cluster along partisan lines.

### What do you think the government should do about the amount of savings a household can have and still receive SNAP benefits?





**Voice Of the People** is a non-partisan organization that seeks to re-anchor our democracy in its founding principles by giving ‘We the People’ a greater role in government. VOP furthers the use of innovative methods and technology to give the American people a more effective voice in the policymaking process.

VOP is working to urge Congress to take these new methods to scale so that Members of Congress have a large, scientifically-selected, representative sample of their constituents—called a Citizen Cabinet—to be consulted on current issues and providing a voice that accurately reflects the values and priorities of their district or state.



## PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

The **Program for Public Consultation** seeks to improve democratic governance by consulting the citizenry on key public policy issues governments face. It has developed innovative survey methods that simulate the process that policymakers go through—getting a briefing, hearing arguments, dealing with tradeoffs—before coming to their conclusion. It also uses surveys to help find common ground between conflicting parties. The Program for Public Consultation is part of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Richard Parsons, VOP’s Executive Director, and Rich Robinson, VOP’s Director of Communications, managed communications with U.S. Congressional offices and the press, and contributed to the writing of the report.

Allison Stettler managed the design and production of the report with assistance from Richard Wyche.