

Will our 15 percent poor country get a jobs bill?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

September 13, 2011

The new poverty numbers came out today, and they aren't pretty. The Census Bureau [reports](#) that more than 15 percent of Americans are living in poverty--a number that's gone up for three consecutive years and is the highest it's been since 1959. ([Here's](#) how the Census Bureau defines poverty.)

We need more jobs, and we need more support for the poor (unemployed and employed alike). One effective tool on both fronts would be increased funding for food stamps, the [best single form of economic stimulus there is](#). But the wisdom of disinterested economists is no match politically for the [scorn of Glenn Beck and Gretchen Carlson](#), so we won't be getting more food stamps money any time soon.

The president has, however, [called for](#) the second best kind of stimulus--expanded unemployment benefits--along with payroll tax breaks, infrastructure spending and other stimulus measures. The White House is of course avoiding the word "stimulus," which has been a dirty word ever since that time in 2009 when the country enacted less stimulus than we needed and then blamed it for having less of an effect than we'd hoped. But a jobs bill is a stimulus bill.

Not so long ago, this wasn't a controversial suggestion. The debate between liberals and conservatives used to be less about whether stimulating a bad economy was a good idea and more about how to go about doing it. Obama's plan emphasizes the kinds of stimulus--tax breaks, highways--that conservatives used to like. So while his jobs [bill](#) (pdf) and [speech](#) certainly show a more spirited and combative Obama than we've seen in a while, the ideas he's offering are hardly liberal red meat. They only seem that way because the bars have been moved so far: Democrats don't do much standing up for the poor and the unemployed anymore; they're too busy trying to defend the notion that the government can ever do anything useful at all.

Where Obama does focus on red meat, however, is in his [proposal](#) for how to pay for the bill: cap tax breaks and loopholes on rich people (as he's proposed before). It's a

sound policy idea--hedge-fund managers aren't going to spark massive layoffs because they finally have to report their income like the rest of us do--but it's a political nonstarter. Maybe Obama's just trying to call congressional Republicans out with an aggressive opening bid, but I worry that the White House's endgame is mostly an election-season talking point about why we didn't get much of a jobs bill: the other guys cared more about hedge-fund managers than the unemployed!

It's a fair point, and maybe it will work for him on the campaign trail. But if employment remains stagnant and poverty is still on the rise, he'll need all the help he can get.