

From Budgets to Bodies

Fatness as a Deservingness Heuristic in the Politics of
Food Assistance in the United States

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Abstract

This paper makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on the politics of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as The Food Stamp Program) by coining a new concept, “the fatness heuristic.” This is a particular type of deservingness heuristic I argue is newly operative in welfare politics in America. Deservingness heuristics feature heavily in the politics of public good provision: a social welfare program is more likely to be supported if its beneficiaries are deemed “deserving.” Within the framework I propose, to be fat is to be judged undeserving of aid or at least in need of radical intervention.

Race and gender have long been proxies used by the state to exclude groups from federal protections and provisions. Like race, gender, ability, and all the other vectors of identity, fatness has been rigorously demonstrated to be a basis for discrimination. However, its impact on welfare regime structure has not been explored.

The two parts of this essay (1) argue for the existence of the fatness heuristic and (2) provide a sociological explanation for how it emerged. The central issue around which this essay revolves is the increasing support for efforts to reform SNAP from an anti-poverty program to an anti-obesity program via the usage of restrictive behavioral requirements. I parallel the punitive impulse to restrict the agency of SNAP recipients to the history of welfare politics in America to impress my fundamental point: fatness, like race, is an identity-based characteristic that is being unfairly used to justify the denial of public services. If body weight is being used as a barometer of “deservingness” in distributive politics, academics, policymakers, and the general public should be paying attention.

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¹ These professors were Vesla Weaver (PLSC), Daniel HoSang (AMST), Kristin Reynolds (F&ES), Ian Shapiro (PLSC), and Frances Rosenbluth (PLSC).

“Weight stigma remains a socially acceptable form of bias...The current societal message is that both the cause and the solution for obesity reside within the individual. Thus, the pervasiveness of the ‘personal responsibility’ message plays a key role in stigmatization, and serves to justify stigma as an acceptable societal response.”²

—Rebecca M. Puhl, PhD and Chelsea A. Heuer, MPH

“[The] State...uses propaganda and various forms of coercion to establish norms of a ‘healthy lifestyle’ for all. Human activities are divided into approved and disapproved, healthy and unhealthy, prescribed and proscribed, responsible and irresponsible”³

—Peter Skrabanek

“Racism treats the inequitable distribution, generation, and transfer of resources as normal, natural, and fair. Thus, our definition of racism relies on whether people naturalize racialized hierarchies. In terms of our guiding metaphor [of racism as the miner’s canary], racism is a condition that unquestioningly pathologizes the canary... Racism locates the dominant explanation for the depressed socioeconomic, health, and educational condition of people of color...in the character of the people themselves, rather than in the structures of power that create the conditions of their lives.”⁴

—Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres

² Rebecca M. Puhl, PhD and Chelsea A. Heuer, MPH, "Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health," *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(6), (June 2010): doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.159491.

³ Peter Skrabanek, *The Death of Human Medicine and the Rise of Coercive Healthism* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 1994), 15.

⁴ Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 293.

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Introduction

On July 19, 2017 far-right firebrand Steve King (R-IA) told Tucker Carlson, of Fox News, that the United States should divert funds from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program (FSP),⁵ to fund Trump's border wall, because "40% of [SNAP beneficiaries] are obese." Too many people were using food stamps, he said, insinuating that the ones that were fat could not possibly be hungry. He stated that the original Food Stamp Program (FSP) had "been trying to solve the malnutrition problem," but that malnutrition had been "solved." Now the United States needed to deal with the "obesity epidemic." His solution? Putting SNAP on a diet.⁶

Setting aside, for the moment, that King's insinuation that SNAP causes obesity is wrong,⁷ this statement is remarkable. He (1) interprets fat bodies as evidence that federal funds are being mismanaged, (2) assumes that these bodies are fat *because of* the food assistance program, (3) that hungry people cannot also be malnourished, and (4) uses these two pieces of evidence to advocate for the contraction of a program that provides monthly income support to over forty million Americans. The logical reasoning on

⁵ Throughout this paper, I toggle between using "food stamps," the FSP, and SNAP to refer to the program. I do this both to correctly situate the program in the respective time periods I speak about, but also rhetorically: "food stamps" still engenders a particular political response, and is especially beloved as a term by the political Right.

⁶ "King: Pay for Wall with Planned Parenthood, Food Stamp Funds," in Tucker Carlson Tonight, Fox News Channel, July 19, 2017, http://video.foxnews.com/v/5761921616001/?#sp=show-clips_

⁷ Source: Craig Gundersen, "SNAP and Obesity," *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well Being* (2015): 161-185.

display here, flawed for reasons to be explained below, is the driving question of this paper: how is fatness changing the politics of food stamps?⁸

It's not just the far-right, though, that points to poor and fat bodies as evidence that SNAP needs reform. Across the political spectrum, observers and legislatures are taking the national increase in waistlines—and the complex relationship between race, income, gender, and weight—as an “epidemic” that must be addressed via America’s anti-hunger program. Correlation between SNAP participation and obesity is interpreted consciously and subconsciously as causation,⁹ and legislative attempts to interrupt the assumed causation are materializing. In 2004, Minnesota unsuccessfully asked for a waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to prevent the purchase of candy and soft drinks with SNAP benefits.¹⁰ In 2012, a Florida state senator introduced an unsuccessful bill to prohibit the purchase of “junk food” with food stamps.¹¹ In 2011, the USDA rejected a waiver from New York City seeking to “bar New York City’s food stamp users from buying soda and other sugary drinks with them.”¹² In 2013, fifty-four health organizations signed a letter asking the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to fund pilot programs that would experiment with restricting certain

⁸ Here and throughout this paper, I use the terminology preferred by the body positivity community of “fatness” and “fat” instead of “overweight.” The justification provided is that (1) the term “overweight” connotes some objective “ideal” weight, and (2) “fat” should not be a slur. That being said, I do at times use the term “obesity” to capture the way the medical community and now, public at large, has pathologized fatness.

⁹For data on the link between SNAP and obesity: Paul Linz, Michael Lee, and Loren Bell, Obesity, Poverty, and Participation in Nutrition Assistance Programs, 2005, <https://bit.ly/2vzN0dl>. For examples of causative speculation: (1) Olga Khazan, "The Messy Relationship Between Food Stamps and Health," *The Atlantic*, May 24, 2017, <https://theatlantic.com/2qjDqEo> and (2) Aaron E. Carroll, "How Restricting Food Stamp Choices Can Fight Obesity," *New York Times*, September 22, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2HVS8eJ>.

¹⁰ Kelly Blondin, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: A 21st Century Policy Debate," *Journal of Science Policy and Governance*, September 2014, <https://bit.ly/2Hl8goW>.

¹¹ Caroline Scott-Thomas, *Food Navigator*, February 1, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2JaHXSL>.

¹² Patrick McGeehan, "U.S. Rejects Mayor’s Plan to Ban Use of Food Stamps to Buy Soda," *New York Times*, August 19, 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2JcaDuH>.

foods from being purchased with SNAP benefits.¹³ The conservative governor of Maine has repeatedly threatened to end SNAP in his state if he could not disallow the purchase of junk food—in January 2018, the USDA once again denied his request.¹⁴ Legislators in Tennessee and Arkansas are trying to enact similar restrictions. In the words of a Tennessee representative to U.S. News: “We don't allow people to buy alcohol and cigarettes with welfare dollars, why should we allow people to buy junk food, [which] leads to just as many health problems?”¹⁵ On February 20th, 2018, Wisconsin’s Republican-dominated legislature passed a suite of bills to restructure the state’s anti-poverty programs, including a bill authorizing the creation of a five-year pilot program that would restrict SNAP purchases to “healthy foods.” The bill is pending the approval of the USDA, which administers SNAP and has jurisdiction over eligibility requirements.¹⁶ In April 2018, the Washington D.C. Metro stations featured advertisements that urged D.C. citizens to police SNAP recipients who might be using their benefits on non-approved foods. After a public outcry, they were taken down.¹⁷

The federal government is watching SNAP too. The Obama administration cracked down on stores that were selling cold pizza and then offering to heat it up for SNAP customers, as hot pizza would not have been eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits (SNAP recipients cannot use benefits to buy “hot foods or foods for immediate,

¹³ "USDA Urged to Allow Pilot Programs Aimed at Excluding Soda from SNAP Purchases Groups Want Shift Toward Healthier Foods and Beverages," August 1, 2013, <https://cspinet.org/new/201308011.html>.

¹⁴ Eric Russell, "Feds Tell Maine: You Can't Ban Food Stamp Recipients from Buying Sugary Drinks, Candy," *The Press Herald*, January 20, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HVT2YF>.

¹⁵ Darla Guillen, "New bill would ban food stamp recipients from buying junk food," *Houston Chronicle*, January 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HRsfg1>.

¹⁶ H. Claire Brown, "Wisconsin Just Made It Way Harder to Get Food Stamps," *New Food Economy*, January 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HKJ9z0>.

¹⁷ Thomas Phippen, "DC Abandons Ads Encouraging Public To Report Food Stamp Fraud," *Daily Caller*, April 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HRUQJY>.

in-store consumption”¹⁸).¹⁹ In 2012, Former Senators Tom Coburn (R-OK) and Tom Harkin (R-IA) jointly proposed an amendment to the Farm Bill to fund pilot programs to test the restriction of “junk foods.”²⁰ Now, SNAP is up for reauthorization in the Farm Bill, as it is every five years. Multiple congressional hearings have already been devoted to SNAP’s interaction with obesity. In March of 2017, the House Committee on Agriculture heard testimony from experts on the merits of banning the purchase of junk food—especially soda—with SNAP benefits.²¹ Members of the Senate committee have emphasized improving the program’s nutritional profile. Conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute,²² liberal academics like Marion Nestle (*Food Politics*),²³ Aaron Carroll of *The New York Times*,²⁴ and the general public²⁵ think some forms of SNAP food restrictions are a good idea.

Argument

This thesis takes these proposals for programmatic change as evidence for a new deservingness heuristic that takes fatness as the key diagnostic tool. I term this the “fatness heuristic.” Deservingness heuristics feature heavily in the politics of public

¹⁸ “What Can SNAP Buy?” Food and Nutrition Service, November 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2jLSLnD>.

¹⁹ Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, “Enhancing Retailer Standards in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” proposed rules, March 06, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HUuVJO>.

²⁰ “Coburn Amendment #421— To Amend the Reserve Fund in the Bill Relating to Assistance for Working Families to Prohibit SNAP Funding for Junk Food,” June 24, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2F43Y33>.

²¹ Helena Bottemiller Evich, “Morning Agriculture: House Ag Bites into SNAP Junk-food Debate,” *Politico*, February 16, 2017, <https://politi.co/2HRqcID>.

²² Angela Rachidi, “America’s food assistance programs and hunger,” November 21, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HJ7N39>.

²³ Marion Nestle, “Food stamps should not be valid for soda purchases,” *Food Politics*, May 1, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2qKgaSr>.

²⁴ Carroll, How Restricting Food Stamp Choices Can Fight Obesity

²⁵ Steven Kull, Americans on SNAP Benefits, Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland, April 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Hj7HzL>.

goods provision: a social welfare program is more likely to be supported if its beneficiaries are deemed *deserving*.²⁶ Within the heuristic I propose is newly operative in the politics of SNAP, *deservingness* of food aid is contingent upon conformity to a non-fat bodily appearance. To be fat undermined, in this heuristic, the right to government assistance in the purchase of food. The underlying logic is that people are fat because they eat too much food, so we shouldn't be making it easier for them to it.

This logical chain flies in the face of the actual (inter-) relationship between obesity and hunger. Obesity is inversely associated with income, which is why SNAP recipients are more likely to be obese than the general public: if you are receiving SNAP benefits, you are by definition low-income, and low-income people are more likely to be obese due to a complicated amalgamation of factors. Yet studies have shown that participating SNAP families, when compared to eligible non-participants, are actually less likely to be obese.²⁷

Rather than a good policy idea, the impulse to reframe SNAP as an anti-obesity program through the mandate to purchase “healthy foods” is a locus around which to examine the evolving relationship between the state and the bodies of its subjects. Race and gender have long been proxies used to exclude groups from federal protections and provisions. Fatness, this essay argues, is a new variable that is influencing public good provision. Like race, gender, ability, and other group characteristics, fatness has been

²⁶ Crucially for its political fate, food stamps were coded as with other “welfare” programs in the public imaginary. Although no program was ever formally called “welfare,” the term came to encompass any program that was a means-based entitlement perceived as discouraging work. Source: David A. Super, “The Quiet “Welfare” Revolution: Resurrecting the Food Stamp Program in the Wake of the 1996 Welfare Law,” *N.Y.U. Law Review* 79 (2004): <https://bit.ly/2qKgLDF>.

²⁷ Gunderson, “SNAP and Obesity.”

rigorously demonstrated to be a basis for discrimination.²⁸ Just as our understanding of racism has moved beyond discrete instances of bias to encompass structural-level iniquity, so must our understanding of anti-fat bias.

Fatness, and especially fatness among the poor, is intertwined with existent vectors of marginalization in America. Poverty (and welfare usage in particular) is popularly construed as a condition experienced predominantly by non-white people,²⁹ and representations of obesity that feature people of color are more likely to blame non-white subjects for being obese.³⁰ According to social construction theory, “the manner in which social problems are represented in society is politically significant,” because public policy will be altered depending on the “cultural characterizations and images associated with the target groups affected by public policies.”³¹ The social construction of race, poverty, *and* fatness creates target groups that evince particular political responses. I compare the mobilization of the “war against obesity” to the weaponization of the “welfare queen” stereotype and argue that the implementation of the fatness heuristic in food stamp political discourse is the result of the potent combination of ideological campaigns that jointly pathologize obesity and poverty. The racialized and gendered nature of American politics, combined with the dominant trends of paternalism,³²

²⁸ R. M. Puhl, T. Andreyeva, and K. D. Brownell, "Perceptions of Weight Discrimination: Prevalence and Comparison to Race and Gender Discrimination in America," *International Journal of Obesity* 32, no. 6 (2008), doi:10.1038/ijo.2008.22.

²⁹ For Gilens's classic study: Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For recent data from 2015-2016: Travis L. Dixon, A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, December 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qQTq2m>.

³⁰ Sarah E. Gollust, Ijeoma Eboh, and Colleen L. Barry, "Picturing Obesity: Analyzing the Social Epidemiology of Obesity Conveyed Through US News Media Images," *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 10 (2012), doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.01.021.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1545.

³² For a definition of paternalism in the field of public health and welfare, I borrow from David Buchanan: “Paternalism is the usurpation of decisionmaking power, by preventing people from doing what they have

neoliberalism, and personal responsibility politics predicts that the solutions to the problems of marginalized groups will be punitive and ineffective. An apt comparison would be the “war on drugs” and the attendant rise of the carceral state.³³

The main piece of evidence that supports my contrarian position—that SNAP “healthy food” restrictions are necessarily punitive and ineffective—is that only beneficiaries would be required to change their diets. Only the purchasing power of beneficiaries would be decreased. The hypocrisy of these proposals hints at the biases underlying the proposals of policy entrepreneurs hoping to improve the diets of others. These proposals are paternalistic impulse at the very least, and deleterious at the worst. Although discourses and public health programs of nutrition and “good food” do not seem questionable on their faces, invectives towards healthy, sustainable eating are ideological investments, unlikely to solve the obesity problem, and have contributed to the now-popular belief that obesity is the result of individual failure. These invectives are personal responsibility politics colored with a patina of health. The focus on the diets of beneficiaries is less about recipient well-being than social control, reminiscent of other behavioral requirements for welfare benefits that serve a political purpose, not a practical one.³⁴ Working motherhood is only demanded of low-income mothers instead of middle

decided, interfering in how they arrive at their decisions, or attempting to substitute one’s judgment for theirs, expressly for the purpose of promoting their welfare. The moral concern is that the presumption that one is right, and therefore justified in seeking to override other people’s judgment, constitutes treating them as less than moral equals. It denies people the right to choose their own ends of action, because it would not be necessary to supplant their decision if they shared the public health professionals’ goals.” Source: David R. Buchanan, “Autonomy, Paternalism, and Justice: Ethical Priorities in Public Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 98, no. 1 (2008), doi:10.2105/ajph.2007.110361.

³³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: New Press, 2010).

³⁴ Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

and upper-class housewives,³⁵ and drug testing is only implemented or suggested for low-income federal aid recipients instead of elderly people on Medicare or beneficiaries of tax deductions.³⁶ What these regulations do is alleviate anxiety about whether recipients of aid are “deserving” by making them expend extra time and energy to prove they’re worthy.

Analogously, there is no talk of banning junk food altogether for American consumers. Restrictions are only for people experiencing poverty who are receiving federal aid in the form of food stamps. There is scant reason to believe that restricting the diets of people who use food stamps will have a meaningful effect on the national obesity rate,³⁷ just as behavioral restrictions to other anti-poverty programs did not by themselves *cause* decreases in poverty rates or welfare participation.³⁸ Because SNAP is *supplemental*—not intended to cover all food costs—if soda or junk food bans are implemented, families will continue to purchase the same basket of goods but use SNAP dollars on other purchases. A ban on junk foods that only applies to SNAP dollars will increase the administrative complexity and costs of SNAP (and make cashiers the food police), as well as the stigma associated with the program, without any meaningful behavioral changes.³⁹ It would also open up the possibility for even more contractionary policy changes.

³⁵ Jane Pulkington, Sylvia Fuller, and Paul Kershaw, "Lone Motherhood, Welfare Reform and Active Citizen Subjectivity," *Critical Social Policy* 30, no. 2 (May 7, 2010): , doi:10.1177/0261018309358292.

³⁶ Harold Pollack, "States Want Drug Tests for Welfare Recipients. That’s a Terrible Idea.," *Washington Post*, June 5, 2013, <https://wapo.st/2HmcLzk>.

³⁷ Craig Gunderson, "SNAP and Obesity," University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research Discussion Paper Series, June 2013, <https://bit.ly/2HgNdaN>.

³⁸ Max Ehrenfreund, "How Welfare Reform Changed American Poverty, in 9 Charts," *Washington Post*, August 22, 2016, <https://wapo.st/2HFwD3S>.

³⁹ Pros and cons of restricting SNAP purchases (February 16, 2017) (testimony of Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach), <https://bit.ly/2qQJ0jW>.

Why do these proposals, and existent behavioral regulations, exist at all? A hallmark of the influence of deservingness heuristics in welfare politics is the imposition of behavioral requirements upon recipients, to prove that they are deserving of aid. Making SNAP recipients prove that they're trying to "eat healthy" by restricting the usage of SNAP dollars is an attempt to make them positively fit the deservingness criteria of the fatness heuristic. In the popular imagination, the only "good" fat person is a fat person that is trying to lose weight, a fat person that is thinking about a future as a thin person.⁴⁰ The only good food stamp recipient is a food stamp recipient that is using their aid to purchase "good" foods. This betrays an immense hypocrisy, given data that shows high-income and low-income families buy very similar baskets of goods.⁴¹ But of course, as with behavioral regulations in other welfare programs, programmatic restrictions aren't really about the well-being of recipients, but the anxieties of taxpayers and policymakers.

My insight—that fatness is being used as a deservingness heuristic—is a novel contribution to a somewhat paltry literature on the specific politics of the food stamp program, and has broader implications for understanding public good provision beyond the existent identity vectors of class, race, gender, and so on. It is also among the first to suggest an emergent influence of fatness on the broader public policy arena. It unites the fields of political science, fatness studies (which are generally regarded as under the wing of feminist and disability studies), and sociology. Public health and sociological studies have rigorously demonstrated the conflation of fatness and morality and the material

⁴⁰ Tracy Tidgwell, May Friedman, Jen Rinaldi, Crystal Kotow & Emily R.M. Lind "Introduction to the special issue: Fatness and temporality," *Fat Studies*, 7:2, 115-123, (2017), doi: [10.1080/21604851.2017.1375262](https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2017.1375262).

⁴¹ Steven Garasky et al., Foods Typically Purchased by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), November 2016, <https://bit.ly/2qPfCuA>.

indignities suffered by fat people in America; there is a growing literature on fatness that has proven the existence and consequences of fat discrimination. The role of implicit biases in public good provision, in turn, has been thoroughly demonstrated. I bring the two literatures together by suggesting that fatness is a new implicit *and* explicit variable⁴² affecting the politics of public good provision in the age of the “obesity epidemic” and individuated approaches to policy change popularized in the neoliberal era (1970’s—now⁴³).

Structure of the Essay

This essay unfolds in two Parts: the “what” and the “why.” In Chapter One, I introduce the reader to some basic facts about SNAP and its importance in the context of other federal safety net programs. In Chapter Two, I briefly evaluate the literature on social welfare in the United States and introduce the deservingness heuristic criteria. I then justify my theoretical contribution: the fatness heuristic. Lastly, I review the partisan dynamics of the Farm Bill and SNAP specifically, noting the ideological (as opposed to material) tenor of the debate over SNAP and health. In Chapter Three, I detail the legislative and political history of food stamps with special attention to the evolving food eligibility standards. I conclude the chapter by providing further evidence of the public and policymakers’ growing interest in reforming the anti-hunger program to an anti-obesity program.

⁴² Weight bias has been called “the last socially acceptable form of discrimination.” For a brief overview: Scott Kahan, MD, “The Perils of Obesity Prejudices,” *Huffington Post*, August 04, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HSKUrf>. Rebecca Puhl, an authority on the subject, calls it “a socially acceptable injustice.” Rebecca Puhl and Kelly D. Brownell, “Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity,” *Obesity Research* 9, no. 12 (2001), doi:10.1038/oby.2001.108.

⁴³ Nicola Smith, Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Neoliberalism,” <https://bit.ly/2oEVbgx>.

In Part Two, I turn to the historical political, economic, and social trends that explain the emergent policy responses described in Part One, and hypothesize about where the the fatness heuristic came from. I conclude that the focus on fatness in the context of SNAP stems from the particular way American culture now thinks about food, bodyweight, poverty, and race. In Chapter Four, I speculate on the connection between the alternative food movement and restrictive approaches to SNAP policy, in combination with the more obvious influence of the popularization of “healthy” individual lifestyle practices as a moral invective. In Chapter Five, I elaborate on the social construction of the “obesity epidemic” and problematize popular understandings of the causes and consequences of obesity. Like welfare, obesity has been coded as a race and class-dependent phenomenon. This has implications for the future of SNAP in a liberal democracy with a penchant for stigmatizing recipients of means-based social programs. The fate of welfare programs that were subject to increasingly restrictive eligibility requirements provides warning for policymakers interested in restricting SNAP.

Why does it *matter* that SNAP recipients might not be able to buy junk food? The response, which I will take up in my conclusion, is multifold. (1) Such a policy would be ineffective at meaningfully changing the trajectory of obesity in America, (2) SNAP recipients’ purchasing power would be decreased, and (3) further purchase restrictions would open up a slippery slope for other contractionary policy changes. Additionally, there are important political implications of the usage of body weight and food choice as diagnostic tools for policy priorities. If body weight is engendering contractionary and moralistic policy responses that are not data-driven but rather a product of racism,

sexism, and fatphobia, social scientists and policymakers should be more deeply considering the political implications of the “obesity epidemic.”

As I describe in my conclusion, punitive approaches to obesity that center the role of individual purchasing and eating habits are unlikely to be effective and likely harmful. 70.2% of American adults are overweight or obese: if popular discourse and policymakers are interpreting that data as evidence that social welfare programs need to be put on a diet, this is a significant and novel political dynamic. What does it mean for debates over welfare spending to migrate from budgets to bodies? This question has been evaluated for racialized and gendered bodies, but not yet for fat bodies. By naming and studying the emergence of the fatness heuristic, we can learn about the evolving foci of political and social control in 2018.

Part One

One: What is SNAP?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the primary means by which the United States fights food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), whose Food and Nutrition Services department (FNS) funds SNAP and administers it alongside states, defines households as food insecure if they experience periodic uncertainty or inability to acquire enough food to feed their families.⁴⁴ This includes altering the variety of one's diet to eat the most inexpensive foods, or drastically

⁴⁴ The USDA slots "food insecurity" into two tiers. "Low food security" households "obtained enough food to avoid substantially disrupting their eating patterns or reducing food intake by using a variety of coping strategies." In "very low food security" households, "normal eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced at times during the year because they had insufficient money or other resources for food." Source: Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Christian A. Gregory, and Matthew P. Rabbitt, "Food Security in the US: Key Statistics and Graphics," Economic Research Service, October 04, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2hwHITD>.

reducing food intake.⁴⁵ In 2016, about 12.3% of households experienced food insecurity, or 15.6 million people.⁴⁶ Certain groups are more prone to food insecurity which, in a country where very few households grow their own food, is a function of poverty.⁴⁷ One-third of households living under 185% of the federal poverty line were food insecure in 2016. 22.5% of Black households, 18.5% of Latino households, 16.5% of households with children, and 31.6% of households with single mothers were either unable to consistently attain enough food for their families, or were only able to do so thanks to the patchwork of federal food aid and emergency food sources like food pantries and soup kitchens, or by restricting the variety of foods in their diet. Only 9.3% of white households were food insecure.⁴⁸

Despite meager benefit amounts—about \$1.39 per person, per meal—SNAP reduces food insecurity by 5% to 10% for participating households, and for high-risk children by about 20%.⁴⁹ 59% of food-insecure households participate in SNAP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), or the National School Lunch Program.⁵⁰ Unlike other government assistance programs, eligibility for SNAP is not predicated on age, disability, or family structure. Most households need to meet only income (generally at or below 130% of the poverty line) and asset tests to qualify.⁵¹ Two-thirds of SNAP participants are disabled, elderly, or

⁴⁵ "Food Security in the U.S.: Definitions of Food Security," 2015, <https://bit.ly/2iXh3E8>.

⁴⁶ Coleman-Jensen et al, "Food Security in the US: Key Statistics and Graphics."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2016*, September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2w1FmIJ>.

⁴⁹ "SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table," Center on Budget and Priority Priorities, March 1, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qRoyP3>.

⁵⁰ Victor Oliveira, *The Food Assistance Landscape: FY 2017 Annual Report*, March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HW6Y4V>.

⁵¹ These are waived for the elderly and disabled, as well as households qualifying for Temporary

children, and 44% of participants live in a household with earnings.⁵² In one recent assessment of 2012 employment data from SNAP participants, 87% of households with children and non-disabled adults had at least one adult who worked. That is, in reality, at least two-thirds of SNAP participants are the politically sympathetic “deserving poor” as they’re typically construed in America.⁵³ Able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD’s) can only receive SNAP benefits for three months within a three year time period if they do not meet work requirements, a provision from the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* of 1996 (PRWORA).⁵⁴

SNAP, which was until 2008 known as the Food Stamp Program, is far more than an anti-hunger program. It is one of the few universal means-tested programs left standing after waves of welfare reform. It is counter-cyclical, expanding during economic downturns and the resultant increase in poverty, and contracting during periods of economic growth and low unemployment.⁵⁵ Households can apply for aid and begin receiving SNAP within thirty days, and benefits are commensurate with income. It is the fourth-largest entitlement program, after Medicaid (74.4 million in 2017, including the Children’s Health Insurance Program⁵⁶), Social Security (67.1 million in 2017, including

Assistance for Needy Families, Social Security, or State General Assistance. *Building a Healthy America: A Profile of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, April 2012, <https://bit.ly/2v3saBj>.

⁵² Farson Gray et al., *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2015*, November 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Ck6SiM>.

⁵³ Robert A. Moffitt, "The Deserving Poor, the Family, and the U.S. Welfare System," *Demography* 52, no. 3 (2015), doi:10.1007/s13524-015-0395-0.

⁵⁴ "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs)," SNAP FNS, February 26, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2qWIVNt>.

⁵⁵ Laura Tiehen, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Linkages with the General Economy," USDA ERS, April 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2kb08iP>.

⁵⁶ "January 2018 Medicaid and CHIP Enrollment Data Highlights," Medicaid.gov, <https://bit.ly/2ldEN9m>.

Supplemental Security Income⁵⁷), and Medicare (5 million beneficiaries in 2015, the most recent year available⁵⁸). Research has found that since welfare reform in 1996 and the severe contraction of other welfare programs due to conversion to a block grant, SNAP has assumed a primary role in federal anti-poverty programs.⁵⁹

SNAP increases the purchasing power of participating households by allowing households to spend their limited income on other necessities.⁶⁰ Recipients receive a set amount of money on a debit card, called an Electronic Benefit Transfer card (EBT), that can only be used on eligible foods at eligible retailers.⁶¹ In FY 2012, it lifted 10.3 million people out of poverty, and 8.4 million in FY 2014.⁶² In this way, it still reflects its characterization by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 as “a generalized income-transfer program” rather than a program that “[ensures] adequate nutrition for America's needy families.”⁶³ This is more or less true, depending on how you conceptualize cash grants with strings attached. Thus, on the spectrum from unconditional cash transfer to in-kind distributions, SNAP falls in the middle.⁶⁴

Although I will not be focusing on them in this paper, there are fifteen total domestic nutrition programs that also serve hungry families. The USDA spent \$98.6

⁵⁷ "Monthly Statistical Snapshot, March 2018," Research, Statistics, & Policy Analysis, April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2K56KsJ>.

⁵⁸ "Total Number of Medicare Beneficiaries," <https://kaiserf.am/2zcwb6a>.

⁵⁹ Marianne Bitler and Hilary Hoynes, "The State of the Safety Net in the Post-Welfare Reform Era," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* no. 2 (October 2010), doi:10.3386/w16504.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Wolkomir, "SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies," April 06, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2xVm3BX>.

⁶¹ Eligible foods include anything except alcohol and tobacco. Source: "What Can SNAP Buy?" Food and Nutrition Service, November 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HG74j2>.

⁶² "SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table," Center on Budget and Priority Priorities, March 1, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2A74tYr>.

⁶³ Steven V. Roberts, "Food Stamps Program: How it Grew and How Reagan Wants to Cut it Back," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1981, <https://nyti.ms/2HhvPTj>.

⁶⁴ Lester C Thurow, "Cash Versus In-Kind Transfers," *The American Economic Review* 64, no. 2 (1974): 190-95, <https://bit.ly/2F7Jzdn>.

billion on Nutrition Assistance Programs in 2017, with SNAP accounting for 69% of those funds. The other programs serve more targeted at-risk populations like pregnant or postpartum mothers, children, the elderly, victims of natural disasters.⁶⁵ WIC, as a targeted means-tested program that also operates through a voucher system, is most similar to SNAP in design. It served, on average, 7.3 million persons per month in 2017. WIC provides families with specific foods determined by the medical community to be healthful but lacking in the diets of mothers and young children. It also incorporates immunizations, prenatal check-ups, and other health services. WIC is less linked to the economy than SNAP, because of its more specific eligibility requirements and because it is not an entitlement, funded annually by appropriations.⁶⁶ Although it is an incredibly effective program for the populations it does serve, ensuring safer births, healthier babies, and improved childhood educational achievement, it is fundamentally limited in its reach because of its highly targeted nature and because there are so few foods that are eligible for purchase.⁶⁷ Policy entrepreneurs interested in restrictions often point to WIC as a model for SNAP—but WIC is costly to implement, and SNAP serves millions more people than WIC. There is also reliable science about the specific nutritional needs of mothers and children. The program isn't trying to solve the national "obesity epidemic."

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a federal tax credit for low and middle-income workers, is most comparable in scope and effect to SNAP. In FY 2016,

⁶⁵ Oliveira, *The Food Assistance Landscape: FY 2017 Annual Report*.

⁶⁶ "Policy Basics: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children," April 26, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2nqeGLy>.

⁶⁷ "WIC Food Packages - Regulatory Requirements for WIC-Eligible Food," Food and Nutrition Services, April 06, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HhFolr>.

over 27 million persons (including dependents) benefitted from EITC.⁶⁸ It's a cash transfer with no conditions attached to it, unlike SNAP, but it's only accessible if recipients work—and thereby prove they are deserving of aid. As a *yearly* grant delivered to families that *have* a tax liability, EITC doesn't ensure consistent financial support nor help for the poorest Americans, who have no taxable income at all, and has a yearly as opposed to consistent effect on the macroeconomy. In 2015, it brought 6.5 million people out from under the poverty line, a number that rises to 9.8 million with the inclusion of the closely-linked Child Tax Credit (CTC).⁶⁹ The other program expressly devoted to income support for poor families, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), previously Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), only served 2.7 million persons in FY 2016.⁷⁰ Benefit amounts are not sufficient to lift *any* family out of poverty, in any state.⁷¹ (Because of PRWORA, states have broad latitude to determine eligibility criteria and benefit amounts). TANF is the prime example of the mal-effects of “welfare reform:” its conversion from an entitlement to a block grant crippled the program's efficacy and necessitated the elimination of participants.⁷²

SNAP occupies a “sweet spot” between the two, which partially explains the program's cautious support among Republicans until the Obama administration.⁷³ It is a

⁶⁸ "EITC Fast Facts," August 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HiNVQW>.

⁶⁹ “Policy Basics: The Earned Income Tax Credit,” October 21, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2ELc1Xx>.

⁷⁰ "TANF: Total Number of Recipients FY 2016," advertisement, Administration for Children and Families, April 18, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Hj7vAP>.

⁷¹ Ife Floyd, "TANF Cash Benefits Have Fallen by More Than 20 Percent in Most States and Continue to Erode," Center on Budget and Priority Priorities, October 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qS4Y5z>.

⁷² Hanming Fang and Michael P. Keane, "Assessing the Impact of Welfare Reform on Single Mothers," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2004, no. 1 (2004), doi:10.1353/eca.2004.0015.

⁷³ Republicans have supported food stamps in the past—the program was expanded under the George W. Bush administration. Since the election of Obama, Tea Party conservatives have pushed the party significantly to the right. Source: Matthew Gritter, *The Policy and Politics of Food Stamps and SNAP* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 14.

partially disguised cash transfer, just like the EITC, but also reaches Americans in the deepest poverty, like TANF. As of April 2018, 42.8 million people are receiving SNAP benefits. As other anti-poverty programs have receded in scope thanks to spending cuts and eligibility restrictions, SNAP has remained an entitlement program, obliged to meet all demonstrated need. It has an exceedingly low error rate, at 2.27% of program cost, and is a particularly efficient federal program, with low administrative costs. SNAP is the closest thing the United States has to a generalized means-tested income transfer program, and an essential tool in the country's anti-poverty arsenal.

Two: Political Economy and the Fatness Heuristic

SNAP is a means-tested program in the exemplar liberal welfare state, the United States. As such, there is vast literature that predicts its political fate. In Section One, I briefly summarize the literature on welfare policy in the United States, then introduce the major theoretical framework for the paper, deservingness heuristics, in Section Two. In Section Three, I introduce and provide the justification for the fatness heuristic. In Section Four, I review the partisan dynamics of food stamp politics, highlighting the centrality of logrolling in the Farm-Bill and food industry lobbying in determining policy.

American Exceptionalism

The American welfare state is unique—uniquely paltry. Public spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) is 19.3%, less than the average for OECD countries.⁷⁴ Private spending on welfare, though, is among the highest: voluntary private

⁷⁴ "Social Spending: Public, % of GDP," OECD Social Expenditure Database, <https://bit.ly/25hMDPG>.

social spending comprises 11.1% of GDP, compared to an OECD average of 1.8%.⁷⁵ The state supports the private provision of public goods through tax expenditures (like the tax exemption on employer-sponsored health insurance) instead of through universal social programs; Americans are expected to rely on markets and voluntary aid to meet social welfare needs.⁷⁶ This “private” or “hidden” welfare state necessarily privileges those with the money to spend, and relieves beneficiaries of tax expenditures from the stigma of welfare recipients. As one might expect, politically privileged groups are often the recipients of these types of aid.⁷⁷

A vast literature attempts to puzzle out “American exceptionalism” in welfare spending. One explanation holds that American political culture prizes individualism, a Protestant work ethic, and anti-statism, which together lead to the belief that free markets are analogous to liberty, and that government is not well-equipped to solve social problems, an attitude that gained popularity in the neoliberal era.⁷⁸ Another explanation, institutionalism, points to the United States’ winner-takes-all majoritarian system as a predictor of welfare spending. Majoritarian governments, which make it difficult for labor to attain political power, are more likely to create a smaller, less-ambitious welfare

⁷⁵ "Social Expenditure - Aggregated Data," OECD Social Expenditure Database, April 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/1OwvGrZ>.

⁷⁶ (1) Jacob S. Hacker, *The Divided Welfare State: The Battle Over Public and Private Social Benefits in the United States* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008). (2) Theda Skocpol, Marshall Ganz, and Ziad Munson, "A Nation of Organizers: The Institutional Origins of Civic Voluntarism in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 03 (2000), doi:10.2307/2585829.

⁷⁷ (1) Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). (2) Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁷⁸ (1) Anthony King, "Ideas, Institutions and the Policies of Governments: A Comparative Analysis: Part III," *British Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 04 (1973), doi:10.1017/s000712340000795x. (2) Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, (WW Norton & Company, 1997).

state when compared to proportional representation systems.⁷⁹ Another institutionalist explanation is “path-dependence,” whereby historical contingencies set the American state up for a certain type of welfare spending, through the tax system, instead of another, through redistributive social programs.⁸⁰ Still others point to economic inequality and the resultant power of interest groups to overcome the collective action barrier to shape policy (which is arguably the result of the U.S.’s institutional structures). Swenson’s explanation relies on the periodic alliances of labor and capital to explain the paltry and piecemeal development of America’s welfare state.⁸¹ Lastly, Alesina, Glaeser, Sacerdote, and others point to America’s ethnic heterogeneity (and white supremacist legacy) as the reason its redistributive spending is so meager.⁸²

Rather than adjudicate this debate, I assume an integration of all of these factors with specific attention to the role of racial politics. It is no coincidence that Keynesian economics fell out of favor after racial minorities began to benefit from federal welfare programs, nor that Scandinavian social democracies with generous public spending are experiencing a decline in public support for welfare programs after a sharp increase in immigration.⁸³ Programs like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and minimum wage regulations were formulated to explicitly exclude Black people by exempting the

⁷⁹ (1) Torsten Persson et al., “Electoral Rules and Government Spending in Parliamentary Democracies,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, no. 2 (2007), doi:10.1561/100.00006019. (2) Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

⁸⁰ Paul Pierson, “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 02 (June 2000), doi:10.2307/2586011.

⁸¹ Peter Swenson, “Business Interests and the Healthcare State: Medicare and Obamacare in Historical and Comparative Perspective,” (2015).

⁸² Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote, “Why Doesn’t the US Have a European-Style Welfare System?” National Bureau of Economic Research, No. W8524 (2001), doi:10.3386/w8524.

⁸³ Maureen A. Eger, “Even in Sweden: the effect of immigration on support for welfare state spending,” *European Sociological Review* 26, no. 2 (2009): 203-217, <https://bit.ly/2HrWfV8>.

jobs typical of African-Americans from the laws. It was only after the integration of public welfare rolls that hostility to welfare programs became widespread.⁸⁴ In their seminal paper, Alesina et al. state that “enemies of welfare often used race to defeat attempts at redistribution in the post-bellum period,” from the campaigns of Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush.⁸⁵ This paper adopts their core conclusions: “that Americans redistribute less than Europeans because (1) the majority believes that redistribution favors racial minorities, (2) Americans believe that they live in an open and fair society and that if someone is poor it is their own fault, and (3) the political system is geared towards preventing redistribution.” The “political system” is likely a product of those first two beliefs.⁸⁶

Programs that are perceived as benefitting racial minorities (in the American context “undeserving poor” more broadly) will be on the lower tier of America’s two-tier welfare system: politically advantaged groups benefit from programs that are popularly supported, non-stigmatized, often financed through insurance schemes, and are universal. In contrast, programs designed for “undeserving poor” are highly targeted, means-tested, not entitlements, and require intrusive behavioral requirements.⁸⁷ These categories are more or less analogous to Howard’s “visible” and “invisible” social expenditure dichotomy. “Visible” expenditures are direct, often means-tested forms of social spending

⁸⁴ (1) Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006). (2) Gwendolyn Mink, "Welfare Reform in Historical Perspective," *Connecticut Law Review* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 879-900

⁸⁵ Alesina et al, "Why Doesn't the US Have a European-Style Welfare System?," 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁷ (1) Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States*. (2) Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996).

that can be easily visualized as cash or in-kind payments to beneficiaries. “Hidden” expenditures are promulgated through the tax code (i.e. a credit or deduction) such that households pay less than what their tax liability would be without the credit or deduction. Credits and deductions are usually highly regressive, rewarding wealthier Americans for behavior the government had deemed worthy, like buying a home, donating to charity. The visible/invisible dichotomy has implications for politics: beneficiaries of “visible” spending are maligned as dependent, whereas beneficiaries of the hidden welfare state do not think of themselves as welfare beneficiaries nor are stigmatized for taking government handouts.⁸⁸ As a means-tested program, SNAP undoubtedly falls into the lower tier; the waves of political pressures it has faced over its fifty-year history are testament to this fact.

Deservingness Heuristics

But the aforementioned welfare literature does not fully account for the unique bio-political⁸⁹ moralism that pervades SNAP politics. To understand the ways in which perceptions of fatness influence public support for SNAP, and public support for means-tested welfare programs generally, I incorporate Larsen’s deservingness heuristics hypothesis. Larsen posits that the institutional structure of America’s welfare programs evinces a negative evolutionary-psychology-derived response that allows the public to judge the poor (and especially recipients of means-tested aid) as “undeserving.”⁹⁰ If

⁸⁸ Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State Tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States*.

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, Arnold I. Davidson, and Graham Burchell, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (Springer, 2008).

⁹⁰ Christian Albrecht Larsen, "The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 2 (February 2008), doi:10.4324/9781315556727.

people living in poverty are construed as “undeserving,” welfare programs will continue to be weakly supported.

Heuristics are “decision rules that produce quick judgments based on limited information and, hence, allow for opinion formation even when substantive information is absent.”⁹¹ They are the imperfect means by which humans can move through a world that supersedes their information processing capacities, subconscious algorithms for choice. In politics, they are often used to describe voting behavior and political opinion more generally: heuristics is a strategy voters use to develop some way to make judgements about the information they receive. There are five generally recognized types of heuristics often employed in political choices and especially voting behavior: party affiliation, ideology, endorsements, polls, and candidate appearance.⁹² That is, voters choose one or some combination of those factors to cast their vote: “I will vote for Candidate X because she is a member of my political party;” “He seems like a leader;” “She was endorsed by my favorite celebrity.”

Despite their usefulness in decision-making given limited time and resources, heuristics are by no means necessarily rational, informed by reality and truth, or produce optimal outcomes.⁹³ Rather, they are informed by implicit biases and selective information aggregation. As mentioned above, one problematic heuristic of particular importance in the politics of social welfare provision is the deservingness heuristic,

⁹¹ Michael Bang Petersen et al., "Deservingness versus Values in Public Opinion on Welfare: The Automaticity of the Deservingness Heuristic," *European Journal of Political Research* 50, no. 1 (2010), doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01923.x, 26.

⁹² Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (2001), doi:10.2307/2669334.

⁹³ Ibid.

whereby subjects form their opinion about social policy upon whether the proposed recipients of aid are “deserving” or “undeserving.” Deservingness is most prominently determined by whether the subject thinks the object’s misfortune is of their own making. Someone ill with cancer would be classified as “deserving,” whereas someone who got injured while they were drunk driving would be markedly less “deserving.”⁹⁴ There is some research that supports the idea that implementing such a heuristic is essential to human psychology; our human ancestors apparently “engaged in the small-scale equivalent of social insurance as an essential tool of survival” and developed deservingness heuristics to “[defend] against opportunists inclined to take without contributing.”⁹⁵ One 2012 study that tested opinions in Denmark and the United States found that “(1) subjects’ perceptions of recipients’ effort to find work drive welfare opinions, (2) that the effects of perceptions of recipients’ effort on opinions about welfare are mediated by anger and compassion, independently of political ideology, and (3) that these emotions not only influence the content of welfare opinions but also how easily they are formed.”⁹⁶

Larsen suggests deservingness heuristics are an alternative institutionalist explanator for cross-national differences in welfare state regimes. He posits that the institutional arrangement of welfare regimes influences whether and how the target populations are seen as deserving. In liberal regimes—like America—most benefits are means-tested, which means that a population on the receiving end of social aid can be

⁹⁴ Larsen, “The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support.”

⁹⁵ Peterson et al., “Deservingness versus Values in Public Opinion on Welfare.”

⁹⁶ Michael Bang Petersen et al., “Who Deserves Help? Evolutionary Psychology, Social Emotions, and Public Opinion about Welfare,” *Political Psychology* 33, no. 3 (2012), doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00883.x., 395.

classified as an “out-group.” In social democracies, welfare programs are more likely to be universal, and thus it is more difficult for subjects to differentiate who is “receiving” from the state and who is contributing.⁹⁷

However, Larsen takes the institutional structure of welfare regimes as exogenous, which I and others would argue overlooks the role of factors like race in influencing deservingness heuristic judgements *and* the structure of welfare states. Larsen seeks specifically to discredit the ethnic heterogeneity thesis, and states that the “American studies that investigate the link between ethnic divides and public welfare attitudes (e.g., Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Gilens, 2000; see also Quadagno, 1994) do not explicitly relate to the deservingness literature.”⁹⁸ Instead of race, Larsen asserts that “regime-dependent labor market structures” determine the control criteria: if individuals are able to negotiate their own wages and private sector job growth is robust, as in liberal democracies, the public has “the impression that each individual has a decent chance.”⁹⁹

But I think Larsen’s reading of the ethnic heterogeneity is ungenerous. Quadagno, Gilens, and countless other political scientists and Critical Race Theorists have demonstrated that the judgement of *who is deserving* is deeply rooted in implicit biases about the types of people that might deserve aid—or the types of people that are thought to be lazy. Larsen’s data, from the International Social Survey Programme, shows that the more people cite “laziness and lack of willpower” as the reason that “some people live in need,” the lower the support for welfare policy. People in social democracies are 13.4% less likely to believe “laziness” is a determinant of need than in a

⁹⁷ Larsen, “The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support.”

⁹⁸ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 157-158.

liberal regime.¹⁰⁰ In social democracies, poverty is taken to be a systemic problem, not a personal one. But it is not just the programmatic structure of welfare regimes that *causes* these discrepancies; the key insight in *Why Americans Hate Welfare* and *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* was that whites hated welfare because, essentially, they held implicit biases that make them perceive that African Americans as a group were lazy and unwilling to work, a sentiment that was reinforced by misrepresentation and exaggeration of Black poverty and welfare usage in the media.

¹⁰¹ In Larsen's terms: in the popular imagination no African American was deserving of aid because they did not "prove" that they were trying to remedy their situations. This essay contends that, similarly, the newly operative heuristic in welfare politics is that no fat person can be deserving of anti-hunger aid—and perhaps eventually government aid at all. This emerges from a flawed understanding of the pathways to obesity and the tradition of forcing the recipients of aid to prove they're worthy.

Despite his discounting of the role of race and bias, Larsen's weaving of the deservingness heuristic literature with the literature on welfare regimes and American exceptionalism is notable. Welfare regimes do "influence the perception of the poor and unemployed"—but such perceptions are part of an ongoing cycle of biased deservingness heuristics that preceded the formation of the welfare state. The five criteria that subjects use to determine whether an object is "deserving" are:

- (1) Control: is it the object's own fault that they are needy?
- (2) Need: how badly does the object actually need aid?

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.160.

¹⁰¹ (1) Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*. (2) Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty*.

- (3) Identity: does the subject identify with the object?
- (4) Attitude: does the object seem grateful for the aid they receive?
- (5) Reciprocity: is the object actively trying to “pay it back” via job-seeking or educational programming?¹⁰²

My contention throughout this essay is that *who is deemed deserving* is a consequence of a host of social and political factors that go beyond the welfare regime structure: who is deemed deserving of food aid is heavily dependent on implicit biases around race and body type. Among other variables the third criterion, identity, plays an outsize role in the determination of the other four variables. Once again: in America, people are more likely to think both obesity and poverty are individual problems.¹⁰³ In truth, of course, these are trends that far eclipse the power of individual action. But, of course, “poverty” and obesity are incredibly complex issues to understand, and thus criteria other than control inform the deservingness judgement. Why do Americans think poverty is a problem of individual proportions? Because identity (criteria 3) informs the control judgement (criteria 1). Typically, children, the elderly, and the disabled are thought of as “deserving,” which helps explain the existence and support for Social Security, Medicare, and child-welfare programs.¹⁰⁴ The “undeserving poor” are slotted

¹⁰² Larsen, “The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support,” 149.

¹⁰³ (1) *New Insights into Americans' Perceptions and Misperceptions of Obesity Treatments*, report, October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2K8kJ10>. (2) Larsen, *The Institutional Logic of Welfare Attitudes: How Welfare Regimes Influence Public Support*, p.160.

¹⁰⁴ Moffitt, “The Deserving Poor, the Family, and the U.S. Welfare System.”

into lower-tier welfare programs, in which attitude and reciprocity requirements are political insurance that they will positively meet criteria (4) and (5).¹⁰⁵

As a targeted program with, at least for most of its history, the additional burden of having a visible marker (literal food stamps), SNAP has failed Larsen's deservingness criteria in the manner that all means-tested welfare programs do. Now, the specific ways that fatness is popularly construed adds an additional demerit to SNAP's deservingness diagnostic. The specific mode of political insurance policy entrepreneurs are suggesting to regulate SNAP's "undeserving poor" is diet monitoring. Like man-in-the-house rules for AFDC, this is a particular behavioral regulation, finely tuned to food assistance.

The Fatness Heuristic

To argue for the existence of a fatness heuristic in the politic of public good provisions, I unite multiple areas of study: the work documenting the existence of weight stigma and discrimination against fat people and the rich literature on how physical appearance and social identity affect public policy. The former can be classified as the burgeoning field of "fat studies." The field, which takes influence from feminist jurisprudence, social epidemiology, Critical Race Theory, Queer Legal Theory, and Disability Studies,¹⁰⁶ holds as its core principle that fat persons can be conceived as a target group.¹⁰⁷ When considering the terminology used to describe the manifestations of fatness in American (and indeed, global) culture, this seems obvious: "The War on

¹⁰⁵ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

¹⁰⁶ Yofi Tirosh, "The Right to Be Fat," *Yale Journal of Health Policy, Law, and Ethics*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , no. 2, (2012), <https://bit.ly/2HovDO4>.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 02 (1993), doi:10.2307/2939044., 334

Obesity” paints the obese as targets of attack. Groups that are positively constructed (the “deserving poor,” for example) evince positive reactions from policymakers, gaining access to generous public policies. Negatively constructed groups are subject to punitive policy interventions.

Fat people are one of those negatively constructed target groups. Firstly, fat people have been assigned a distinct social identity (i.e. “a fat person” as opposed to “someone who has a fat body”).¹⁰⁸ Secondly, as I detail in Chapter Five, “numerous studies have documented harmful weight-based stereotypes that overweight and obese individuals are lazy, weak-willed, unsuccessful, unintelligent, lack self-discipline, have poor willpower, and are noncompliant with weight-loss treatment.”¹⁰⁹ The media attention to the obesity epidemic, the harnessing of fatphobia in public health messaging campaigns, and especially the material ways in which fat people are penalized are evidence that fatness is already being used as a sort of cultural heuristic. There is a “fine on fatness:” fat people face worse employment prospects, increased health premiums and charges for normal goods and services, and psychological damage from discrimination (just like other marginalized groups are physically affected by discrimination).¹¹⁰ Interestingly, women are penalized for fatness much more than men are.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Desiree Abu-Odeh, “Fat Stigma and Public Health: A Theoretical Framework and Ethical Analysis,” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 24, no. 3 (2014): , doi:10.1353/ken.2014.0024.

¹⁰⁹ Puhl and Heuer, “Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health,” 1019.

¹¹⁰ (1) Tirosh, “The Right to be Fat,” 283. (2) Avi Dor, Christine Ferguson, Casey Langwith, and Ellen Tan. “A Heavy Burden: The Individual Costs of Being Overweight and Obese in the United States,” Department of Health Policy, School of Public Health and Health Services, The George Washington University, (2010).

¹¹¹ Sonia Oreffice and Climent Quintana-Domeque, “Beauty, Body Size and Wages: Evidence from a Unique Data Set,” *Economics & Human Biology* 22 (2016): , doi:10.1016/j.ehb.2016.01.003.

The influence of weight bias extends to policymaking as well. The nationwide “War on Obesity” involves the public and private sector and a vast number of non-governmental organizations are dedicated to “fighting obesity.” Here I’ll highlight a number of laws and policies that result from an ostensible public health goal but are notable for (1) the ways in which the State has taken the recommendations of the public health community at its word and understands fatness as a problem to be solved and (2) the policies outlined are exactly in line with what Schneider and Ingram predict policy outcomes will be that target a politically weak group. They include mandated school weigh-ins, case law that has established that very fat children can be removed from their parents’ custody for reasons of “parental neglect,” and a targeted or ban on foods or behaviors thought to cause fatness (i.e. soda taxes or proposed bans on soda for food stamp recipients). These initiatives are flawed for the reasons I cite throughout this essay: the direct targeting of fat people, like the targeting of any socially marginalized group, pathologizes fat people and insinuates that *they* should be held accountable for their failure to adhere to body norms and leaves out non-consumer-based, individual-level solutions.¹¹² Concurrently, the court system has provided limited protection to fat people in cases that contest that the anti-discrimination clauses in the *Americans with Disabilities Act*.¹¹³

¹¹² A non-problematic initiative would be the increased school lunch regulations passed as part of the 2010 “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act,” which do not explicitly target fat children or use a regressive tax but rather address the entire student population, or mandates for increased nutritional labeling. Source: Tirosh, “The Right to be Fat,” 275-276.

¹¹³ Jennifer L. Pomeranz, and Rebecca M. Puhl. “New developments in the law for obesity discrimination protection.” *Obesity*: 21, no. 3 (Harvard, 2013): 469-471.

As flawed as they are, the aforementioned policies and programs are explicitly targeted at obesity and are distinct from the general public goods argument that this paper argues is newly operative in SNAP politics. The increased premiums for fat people in health insurance policies, though, are a prime example of how fatness is being used as a deservingness heuristic in public goods provision. Their fatness is used as evidence that they do not *deserve* the same amount of insurance for the same price as thinner people. But weight is actually not a very mutable trait, and the determinants of weight are largely outside of individual control—just like the social construction of race, the social construction of fatness turns a bodily appearance into a political identity that subjects the holder of such an identity to punitive policy approaches. As stated above, because fatness is interpreted as an individual responsibility and a moral failure, the societal expectation is that anyone who is fat should be working to become thin. Thus the fatness heuristic emerges: from the cultural understanding that the only acceptable response to fatness is a dogged commitment to weight loss.

Political Economy of the Farm Bill

In order for restrictions to pass, they need to pass the high barrier of mustering coalitional support for policy changes in congress. SNAP has been politically insulated from the most contractionary impulses in welfare politics thanks to its home within the Farm Bill, a historical quirk that, thanks to path-dependence, persists to this day. The Farm Bill is a suite of mostly agricultural legislation that is reauthorized every five years. As I describe in Chapter Three, the program is reauthorized as part of the Farm Bill due

to its historic ties to domestic agriculture. It was initially marketed as dually supporting Americans farmers as well as hungry Americans, and contained some programmatic constraints (and later, incentives) that forced beneficiaries to purchase domestically produced food items.¹¹⁴ The *Food Stamp Act* was passed because liberals who wanted to establish a permanent Food Stamp Program (FSP) threatened to withhold their votes authorizing agricultural subsidies unless conservatives lent their support.¹¹⁵ Food stamps' reputation as a program protected by logrolling is well-established: political scientist John Ferejohn used the FSP as a case study on "Logrolling in an Institutional Context."¹¹⁶ The dynamics of urban-rural vote trading he observed in the first forty years of the program's existence remain, despite little contemporary direct linkages to American agriculture.

Now, SNAP takes up the lion's share of Farm Bill funding. In 2014, 67% of Farm Bill funding went towards the program, and another 13% went to other nutrition assistance programs. The remaining 20% of funds are distributed among eleven other categories, including trade, credit, commodities, research, and rural development.¹¹⁷ The bill's contents are primarily determined by House of Representatives and Senate agriculture committees that hold public hearings on different topics preceding the writing process. Additionally, influential representatives and senators, and the Secretary of Agriculture, hold listening tours and town halls. The agriculture committees have a monopoly on the agriculture and nutrition portfolio, and the party in control of the

¹¹⁴ *From Food Stamps to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Legislative Timeline*, <https://bit.ly/2qQ0H3k>.

¹¹⁵ Gritter, *The Policy and Politics of Food Stamps and SNAP*.

¹¹⁶ John A. Ferejohn, *Logrolling in an Institutional Context: A Case Study of Food Stamps Legislation* (Stanford, CA: Domestic Studies Program, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 1985).

¹¹⁷ "Projected Spending Under the 2014 Farm Bill," Economic Research Service, October 11, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HJSGqo>.

legislature decides which ideas and proposals are entertained. Even if a group of Freedom Party conservatives amassed support for the repeal of SNAP, without support of the agriculture committees such a proposal would not be entertained. In order to be included in a Farm Bill, provisions have to be tacitly approved by House Agriculture Committee Chairman Michael Conaway (R-TX) and the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Chairman Pat Roberts (R-KS). Non-committee senators or representatives have little influence on bill drafting.¹¹⁸

In order to pass the subsidies mentioned above, rural states (Republican, usually) need the support from states whose economies are less agriculture-based (Democratic, usually) and whose representatives support welfare spending. In return, Democrats need Republican support to fund SNAP, the sort of means-based entitlement the Republican Party is not likely to support. In 2018, bipartisan agreements will be necessary to pass the Farm Bill because Republicans do not have a supermajority. The House Agriculture Committee draft bill was recently passed out of committee, but has a very small chance of making it into law in its current form.¹¹⁹

Special interest groups direct their lobbying towards these committees and the representatives that serve on those committees. It is widely recognized that domestic (and indeed, international) agriculture policy “can plausibly be viewed as an equilibrium result of organized group lobbying.” the political economy of the Farm Bill as a whole can be summed up as a game between organized interests to advance their agendas.¹²⁰ To borrow

¹¹⁸ "Pro Farm Bill Watch," Agriculture, <https://politico.pro/2qhHur0>.

¹¹⁹ Caitlin Dewey, "The Republican Plan to Tighten Food Stamp Work Requirements Is Advancing — without a Single Democrat's Vote," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2qU4OdQ>.

¹²⁰ David Orden and Carl Zulauf, "Political Economy of the 2014 Farm Bill," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 97, no. 5 (2015): doi:10.1093/ajae/aav028.

from Pierson: the policy feedback effects of SNAP have created private coalitions that in return play an outside effect in the continued policymaking process.¹²¹ Importantly for SNAP, the power of food companies have increased relative to traditional agriculture-related lobbies, reflecting the bill’s overall shift from producers to consumers. In the 20th century, dairy, corn, soybean, and other commodity lobbies spent the most amount of money on Farm Bill legislation. For the most recent 2014 bill, the American Farm Bureau—the largest lobby representing farmers—only spent one million dollars, which pales in comparison to the funds spent by food companies.¹²²

Below, I briefly outline the major lobbying forces at play in the debate over food stamps. Table One summarizes the political groups interested in some form of SNAP contraction or major programmatic change. I classify increased eligibility requirements, budget cuts, conversion to a block grant, and food eligibility restrictions all as forms of “SNAP contraction.” The groups in favor of contraction are, notably, composed of ideological, as opposed to material, interests. Political conservatives want to contract SNAP because it confers with their anti-redistributive ideology, not because they’re going to accrue significant material gain from contraction. Similarly, the public health community and its sympathizers *believe* that food restrictions are a good policy idea (the genealogy of which I describe in Chapter Four).

Table One

Group	Justification
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¹²¹ Paul Pierson, “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change,” *World Politics*, 45, no.4, (1993): 595-628, doi:10.2307/2950710

¹²² Michelle Merlin, "Farm Bill Still Hanging: More Than 70 Groups Lobby on Food Stamps," *Open Secrets*, December 3, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2qRf4Uc>.

Republican Elected Officials	In general, Republican representatives and senators support some form of cuts; the recent House draft bill is testament to this. Their position is reflective of the GOP's longstanding antipathy towards welfare spending and belief in the (flawed) theory of trickle-down economics, which masks the racialized disdain for any means-tested program.
Conservative Think Tanks and Advocacy Organizations	Much like GOP congress-members, think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, and The Cato Institute are committed to reforming SNAP based on the belief that it promotes dependency and discourages work. ¹²³ Among their proposed amendments are: an increase in the already-existent work requirements for ABAWD's, the separation of SNAP from the Farm Bill (which would make SNAP easier to cut by removing it from the logrolling process), and preventing recipients from using SNAP benefits to buy sugary drinks.
Public Health Community and its Sympathizers	The public health community has expressed intense interest in limiting the purchase of SNAP to healthy foods, or at least restricting the purchase of sugary beverages. As stated in the introduction, dozens of states and localities have applied to the USDA for waivers to restrict SNAP on the basis of health, because the USDA has jurisdiction over food eligibility rules. The USDA has denied these waivers each time, and resisted calls to fund restrictions pilots. There is no healthy-food lobby that is funding public health advocates or policymakers to restrict SNAP to healthy foods, just a belief-based commitment.

Table Two summarizes political groups mobilizing to protect the program. A constellation of private companies and anti-hunger organizations are committed to maintaining and increasing SNAP funding. Although they peddle in pro-poor rhetoric (“cutting SNAP will starve American families”), private companies have strong material incentives to protect SNAP. Food retailers and manufacturers generate large incomes from SNAP, which pumps about \$70 billion per year into the food economy.¹²⁴ The substantial financial incentives derived from SNAP dollars are enough to make organizing around food stamps a priority for food companies. This is, counterintuitively, crucial for the continuation of SNAP because there is no large organized group of SNAP

¹²³ (1) Angela Rachidi, "America's food assistance programs and hunger," American Enterprise Institute, November 21, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HUthaM>. (2) Michael D. Tanner, "SNAP Failure: The Food Stamp Program Needs Reform," The Cato Institute, October 16, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2JgGR7U>. Angela K. Rachidi, "SNAP, Work, and Opportunity," The Heritage Foundation, July 20, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HnShq5>.

¹²⁴ CBPP, "SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies."

recipients, who are obviously poor and lacking in resources to overcome the transaction costs of organizing.¹²⁵

Anti-hunger organizations are categorically opposed to block-grant conversions and additional work requirements, and usually against restrictions of food on the basis of health, because such restrictions marginalize recipients as well as decrease their purchasing power. These organizations, in turn, are funded by some of the same firms that lobby individually against SNAP cuts. Snack food companies like PepsiCo and Kellogg, superstores like Wal-Mart, and lobbies representing food retailers are among food banks and hunger advocacy organizations' biggest funders.¹²⁶ So, while anti-hunger organizations are firstly values-driven, there are also material incentives for them to support the unrestricted and robust rights of SNAP recipients.

Table Two

Group	Justification
Food Manufacturers	SNAP recipients spend twenty cents per dollar on sugar-sweetened beverages, desserts, salty snacks, and candy. ¹²⁷ This amounts to about \$14.2 billion per year in sales of processed foods. Thus, a variety of lobbies protect the ability of SNAP recipients to use their EBT cards to purchase these “unhealthy” foods: the Grocery Manufacturing Association, Snack Food Association, National Confectioners Association, and American Beverage Association are among the largest. The Grocery Manufacturers Association, for example, spent \$12.7 million in the lead-up to the 2014 Farm Bill to pressure legislators to maintain SNAP funding, fight more mandatory food labeling, and protest limitations on food marketing to children. ¹²⁸ Additionally, larger corporations like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Mars, and Kraft-Heinz spend millions of dollars independently towards much of the same goals. Along with food retailers, it is these food companies that have spent heavily to defeat state-level bills to prevent SNAP recipients from purchasing soda and/or junk food.
Food Retailers	“Food retailers” refers to firms that are qualified to accept SNAP benefits. There are 260,115 such authorized retailers, and they are focused on making sure that retailer eligibility standards remain low. The largest lobbying groups that represent retailers are the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the National Grocers Association (NGA). As noted above, SNAP recipients pump \$70 billion into the food

¹²⁵ Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities*.

¹²⁶ Michele Simon, *Food Stamps: Follow the Money*, June 2012, <https://bit.ly/1um7xcT>.

¹²⁷ *Foods Typically Purchased by SNAP Households*, November 2016, <https://bit.ly/2F9fom6>

¹²⁸ Merlin, "Farm Bill Still Hanging: More Than 70 Groups Lobby on Food Stamps."

economy every year. 2016 data from the USDA illuminates the distribution of this funding. SNAP spending is concentrated among superstores like Wal-Mart and Costco (51.73% of SNAP dollars, while only representing 7.46% of eligible retailers), groceries and supermarkets (29.66%), and then convenience stores (which get 5.63% of SNAP dollars despite being 45.21% of retailers).¹²⁹ So: redemptions are concentrated among larger food retailers that have the capital to invest in lobbying by themselves, although they're also involved in organized lobbies. Retailers have a lot to lose if SNAP benefits are cut, or retailer eligibility is restricted. In 2014, SNAP dollars comprised 10% of all expenditures on food to be eaten at home.¹³⁰ In February of 2017, FMI testified before the House agriculture committee on the importance of funding SNAP—and to voice the lobby's disapproval of food restrictions.¹³¹ In 2014, Wal-Mart publicly supported increases in SNAP funding, and made explicit that SNAP cuts would hurt the retail giant's business.¹³²

Employers

The past five years have seen a smattering of research that excoriates large corporations for paying their employees extremely low wages such that the employees qualify for and rely on public benefits to make ends meet. The research refers to the public assistance employees receive as wage subsidies; the rationale is firms can pay their workers less because federal and state assistance will keep their employees above water.¹³³ In 2015, the U.C. Berkeley Labor Center evaluated federal spending on Medicaid, TANF, the EITC, and SNAP from 2009 to 2011,¹³⁴ and found that the federal government spent \$127 billion per year on public assistance for households with employed adults. 56% of combined federal and state public assistance spending goes towards working families.¹³⁵ As mentioned in Chapter One, most SNAP recipients work—but the jobs are often unstable or low-paying.¹³⁶ The animating idea behind these studies is that families with employed adults should not have to rely on the social safety net. Yet wage stagnation and the shift to the service-oriented post-Fordist economy have fundamentally disrupted the family wage model. Wage stagnation and depression, according to this research, is being enabled by the existence of federal and state income-support programs. Thus, we might also interpret firms like Wal-Mart's adamant support of SNAP as doubly self-serving: SNAP's subsidy of four dollars per-person per-day allows Wal-Mart to pay its workers four fewer dollars per day.¹³⁷

States

A common feature of welfare reform and proposed SNAP changes is a shift in cost to states from the federal government. Turning SNAP into a block grant would give states a set amount of money for the program each year regardless of economic conditions. Evidence after PRWORA in 1996 indicates that states will be unable or unwilling to raise taxes to adequately fund formerly-federally-funded entitlement programs to meet demonstrated need once they are turned into block grants. Currently, states do not fund SNAP directly, but share administrative costs with the federal government 50/50. Although some elected officials may support block-granting ideologically, the effect of block-granting would be a cost shift from

¹²⁹ "SNAP Retailer Management Year-End Summaries," December 15, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HR9GIJ>.

¹³⁰ CBPP, "SNAP Boosts Retailers and Local Economies."

¹³¹ "FMI CEO Testifies on Important Retail Role in SNAP," February 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2JgWXi0>.

¹³² Peter Van Buren, "Walmart Supports Raising Public Food Benefits — For Its Own Profit," *Huffington Post*, June 09, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2K7v2Cz>.

¹³³ *WalMart on Tax Day: How Taxpayers Subsidize America's Biggest Employer and Richest Family*, report, April 2014, <https://bit.ly/2fLSuL3>.

¹³⁴ Although their data is telling, it should be noted that these were the worst years of the Great Recession.

¹³⁵ Ken Jacobs, Ian Perry, and Jennifer MacGillvary, *The High Public Cost of Low Wages: Low Wages Cost U.S. Taxpayers \$152.8 Billion Each Year in Public Support for Working Families*, <https://bit.ly/1zaader>.

¹³⁶ Brynne Keith-Jennings and Raheem Chaudhry, "Most Working-Age SNAP Participants Work, But Often in Unstable Jobs," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2pjxFaO>.

¹³⁷ Wal-Mart was the subject of a 2014 report from Americans for Tax Fairness. According to the report, the firm receives \$7.8 billion in tax breaks and wage subsidies, \$6.8 billion of which is the public assistance its employees receive—including SNAP. Source: *WalMart on Tax Day: How Taxpayers Subsidize America's Biggest Employer and Richest Family*, April 2014, <https://bit.ly/2fLSuL3>.

federal to state governments. If we assume states want to keep their costs low and that they want to continue providing food stamps, they will have a material interest in maintaining SNAP as a federally-funded program. Here, “states” refers to elected officials that would need to raise taxes to fund a state-level SNAP program, or bear the electoral costs of decreasing benefits.

Anti-Hunger and Anti-Poverty Organizations

There are a number of powerful anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations that advocate for SNAP protection and expansion on the state and federal levels. These span from poverty-focused think tanks (like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities) to organizations with broader agendas (like the AARP and the Jewish Federation of North America) to the policy arms of food banks (Feeding America)¹³⁸ to explicit advocacy organizations (like the Congressional Hunger Center, Share our Strength, and the Food Research and Action Center). All of them vehemently oppose any changes to SNAP that would reduce the purchasing power of recipients or limit the stores recipients could purchase food from: no block grants, work requirements, or time limits.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

At the moment, political appointees in the USDA are more receptive to administrative and programmatic shrinkages.¹³⁹ However, receptivity to cuts does not echo across the Department, from crop insurance administrators to rural development specialists. Judging from language on the USDA’s website and FY 2018 enrollment numbers, the administrators in Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) seem to be generally protective of SNAP’s mission and are committed to boosting participation among eligible low-income Americans. SNAP is an effective anti-hunger, anti-poverty, and economic stimulus program when a higher percentage of eligible Americans are enrolled, and when funding is robust. Likewise, conversion to a block grant would fundamentally diminish the role of FNS, and as such administrators with an interest in keeping their jobs (and the quality of those jobs) will not support block-granting. Additional work requirements or food eligibility restrictions will create further administrative complexity and stigmatize SNAP recipients, which the agency has actively worked against since the introduction of EBT cards and the re-naming of the program. The USDA also has jurisdiction over food eligibility standards, and has continued to reject waivers from states seeking to ban the purchase of junk food with SNAP benefits through the first year of the Trump administration.¹⁴⁰ USDA administrators have recently indicated a willingness to allow more state “flexibility” in eligibility and food restrictions, though what they mean by flexibility remains to be seen.¹⁴¹

A simple summation of the groups interested in contracting or expanding/maintaining SNAP would suggest a program relatively insulated from major programmatic change.

However, the court of public opinion—and the power of fatphobia to increase the appeal

¹³⁸ After criticism that food banks were not interested in mitigating hunger because it would make them redundant (and because their funders and boards include large private interests), those organizations have increased their advocacy activities. Source: Andy Fisher, *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

¹³⁹ Jeff Daniels, "USDA bracing for 'significant' cuts to food stamps, crop insurance, rural programs," *CNBC*, May 23, 2017, <https://cnb.cx/2vzSQf0>.

¹⁴⁰ Russell, "Feds Tell Maine: You Can’t Ban Food Stamp Recipients from Buying Sugary Drinks, Candy."

¹⁴¹ Caitlin Dewey, "State Group: USDA Mulling Big Changes to Food Stamps, including Allowing States to Impose Soda Ban," *Washington Post*, November 08, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2JhFUfl>.

of public health interventions—should not be discounted. Indeed, the multitudes of bills that have been introduced since 2004, and the op-eds and policy briefs that support the restriction of certain foods, are testament to this idea’s influence. The ideological appeal of “welfare reform” has proved extremely powerful over time, and the general public’s appetite for reformulating SNAP as an anti-obesity program is increasing. There is a reason more and more elected officials are introducing bills to police the shopping carts of SNAP recipients.

Public opinion is an important variable in determining the level of public good provisions, shaping legislators’ priorities.¹⁴² Polling has been done to assess what the general public thinks about SNAP cuts and additional eligibility requirements. In 2017, one found that 80% of Americans were in favor of raising benefit levels, including two-thirds of Republicans. At the same time, 77% of Americans (85% of Republicans and 67% of Democrats) want to disallow the purchase of candy with food stamps, and 73% want to bar the purchase of soda. A slimmer majority (59%, and not a majority of Democrats) wanted to bar sugary baked goods, and a minority of people polled would disallow crackers, ice cream, and chips. 90% of those surveyed favored discounts on fresh produce.¹⁴³

This represents a major shift in prior public perceptions of SNAP. Before 2000 and the increasing coverage of the obesity epidemic in the media, concerns about SNAP

¹⁴² (1) Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (University of Chicago Press, 2000). (2) Caitlin Dewey, "State Group: USDA Mulling Big Changes to Food Stamps, including Allowing States to Impose Soda Ban," *Washington Post*, November 08, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2JhFUfl>.

¹⁴³ Steven Kull, *Americans on SNAP Benefits*, Program for Public Consultation, University of Maryland, April 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qShCRO>.

revolved around the *cost* of foods purchased, in line with broader concerns about welfare programs generally. The concern was about budgets, not bodies; the political groups above have converged to produce contractionary policy changes throughout SNAP's history. A new coalition is forming, united around the concurrent issues of obesity and poverty, that focuses on bodies in addition to budgets. The remainder of this essay attempts to account for that shift: why is the contractionary impulse in SNAP manifesting as a fatness heuristic?

Three: Legislative History of SNAP

This chapter narrates the history of SNAP with a focus on the evolving tenor of public criticism and resultant programmatic change. As a means-tested income-support program, food stamps have long been targeted as a cushy government handout. The program's survival into the 21st century against strong political winds was predicated on the protective blanket of Farm Bill logrolling, the alignment of corporate interests with the anti-hunger community, and the post-welfare-reform adoption of work requirements, audits, and other hallmarks of the neoliberal welfare regime that politically serve to root out "deserving" from "undeserving" poor.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Super, "The Quiet 'Welfare' Revolution: Resurrecting the Food Stamp Program in the Wake of the 1996 Welfare Law."

Post-2008, as unemployment soared and millions of Americans enrolled in SNAP, it has once again become a political target. A look at food stamps' long history reveals a predictive legislative cycle: whenever there is a sharp increase in beneficiaries, policymakers endeavor to restrict the program. This materializes not only in funding cuts and the cessation of benefits to some groups (like immigrants, college students, and non-disabled non-elderly adults), but programmatic changes intended to curtail the behavior of participants. These changes are often shrouded in language of “personal responsibility” and “fighting dependency.” The aim of behavior requirements and stricter eligibility standards is to draw ever-finer distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor—to make recipients of aid prove they're truly needy and thus positively meet Larsen's five criteria. The contemporary targeting of fatness is really targeting a set of *behaviors* that are popularly believed to cause fatness. People see fat bodies depicted in coverage of food aid and see a behavior to be corrected.

I include case studies of two food eligibility rules at the respective chronological moments in which they were instituted to illustrate that food and retailer eligibility restrictions are (1) in response to anxieties about swelling welfare rolls and (2) coincided with the beginnings of the “food movement” and emergence of the obesity epidemic, with their attendant anxieties about the quality of food beyond its caloric sufficiency. I go into deeper detail about the food movement in Chapter Four.

Origins: 1933 to 1964

The federal government's first foray into food assistance emerged in the wake of the Great Depression to address two different crises: "that of unmarketable food surpluses on the one hand, and large numbers of unemployed persons on the other."¹⁴⁵ The Roosevelt administration, though, fumbled its way to the eventual 1939 Food Stamps Plan. In the summer of 1933, the *Agricultural Adjustment Act* was passed as an omnibus farmer-relief bill, with a primary aim of decreasing commodity surpluses and thereby increasing prices. To do so, it pursued a strategy of "artificial scarcity," which entailed mass slaughter of livestock (about six million pigs) and destruction of crops. Unsurprisingly, this stoked outrage among a general public that had been simultaneously thrust into poverty and hunger. In October of the same year, the Agriculture Adjustment Administration created the Federal Surplus Relief Organization (FSRO), which directly purchased surplus commodities like apples, beans, flour, and meat to distribute to state and local hunger relief organizations.¹⁴⁶

Roosevelt's Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, formalized this distribution program in 1939 as the Food Stamps Plan (FSP). Under the FSP, poor families would purchase orange stamps for \$1.00 (known as the "purchase requirement"), which could be used on any household good except alcohol, tobacco, or prepared foods. Families would also receive an additional \$0.50 in blue stamps that could only be used to

¹⁴⁵ "Food Stamp Program Will Halt on March 1; Gave Help to 20,000, Wickard Says," *Associated Press*, December 31, 1942, <https://nyti.ms/2HTDx3g>.

¹⁴⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. "Agricultural Adjustment Administration," April 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2luLulT>.

purchase designated commodity surplus products like beans, flour, cornmeal, eggs, and vegetables.¹⁴⁷ Like its 1933 predecessor, the FSP sought to link the needs of agricultural producers with the needs of poor Americans, setting up a dynamic that would continue into the next century. Thus, eligible foods were chosen not on the basis of health, but according to political-economic forces: to strengthen the domestic farm sector and therefore the entire economy. There is, however, a notable exception that is interesting in light of contemporary efforts to tax sodas in select municipalities: “soft drinks, such as ginger ale, root beer, sarsaparilla, pop, and all artificial mineral water, whether carbonated or not” *were* excluded from the program (but not in any later iteration).¹⁴⁸

The FSP ultimately reached four million Americans, and ended in 1943 in the midst of wartime food shortages as well as an economic boom that somewhat decreased rates of hunger. However, some subsidized food for schools, day-care centers, the aging and disabled, and other vulnerable populations remained in place.¹⁴⁹ Advocates tried and failed for years after the cessation of the war to convince the federal government to restart and expand the program. In 1959, Congress authorized a two-year pilot, but the Eisenhower administration refused to administer the program because it was, to them, too akin to another welfare program rather than a outlet to which agricultural producers could sell surplus goods. This debate—whether SNAP is a “welfare” program and thus a government “handout”—would be the defining feature of debate over food assistance programs, as illustrated by Reagan’s quote at the beginning of this essay. Instead of the

¹⁴⁷ "The History of SNAP," SNAP to Health, <https://bit.ly/2HTzZy7>.

¹⁴⁸ "Granger, Food Stamp Director To Have Office In New York," *Herald Statesman*, August 08, 1941, <https://bit.ly/2vA9Z8h>.

¹⁴⁹ "Food Stamp Program Will Halt on March 1; Gave Help to 20,000, Wickard Says."

fully-fledged market-based food stamp program, Eisenhower instead provided meek support for a commodity distribution program that offered poor families monthly allotments of lard, rice, flour, butter, and cheese (which sounds eerily familiar to the Trump administration's February 2018 "Harvest Box" proposal.) The program was widely criticized for its inability to really mitigate hunger.¹⁵⁰

On John F. Kennedy's first day as president in 1961, he authorized a food stamps pilot program via executive order, which would operate in addition to the government's limited but existent direct distribution of food to the needy. He had been appalled by hunger he had seen while campaigning in West Virginia, and made a promise to take action.¹⁵¹ The 1961 Food Stamp Pilot was very similar to the 1939 Food Stamps Plan in format. Stamps, which eligible low-income beneficiaries still had to buy, could purchase "any foods for humans except coffee, tea, cocoa, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and clearly imported products."¹⁵² The Kennedy administration, in broadening the parameters of acceptable foods beyond domestic commodities, was responding to the fact that "the variety of foods currently made available [under Eisenhower's program were] limited and [their] nutritional content inadequate."¹⁵³

Although the contrast Kennedy was drawing was to Eisenhower's commodity distribution program, his administration also had little appetite for the administrative complexity of implementing a FSP that would modify food eligibility standards based on

¹⁵⁰ Glenn Thrush, "Trump's 'Harvest Box' Isn't Viable in SNAP Overhaul, Officials Say," *New York Times*, February 13, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2o5WupJ>.

¹⁵¹ "A Short History of SNAP," Food and Nutrition Services, November 28, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HLXc7s>.

¹⁵² *From Food Stamps to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Legislative Timeline*

¹⁵³ John F. Kennedy: "Executive Order 10914—Providing for an Expanded Program of Food Distribution to Needy Families," January 21, 1961, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://bit.ly/2HKsdsz>.

market prices. Eligible foods frequently changed depending on which crops needed a burst in demand. This version of the FSP contained no explicit mechanism through which to incentivize the purchase of surplus commodities, unlike the original FSP. Kennedy's executive order did mark "a strengthening of farm prices"¹⁵⁴ as a goal of expanded food assistance, but the FSP's only programmatic means to effectuate such a strengthening was in the exclusion of "clearly imported products" from the category of eligible foods. Thus the argument that the FSP was directly serving to strengthen the domestic agricultural sector was weakened. But, at least politically, the goals of the FSP were still aligned with the goals of American farmers and their political representatives.

Over the course of three years, the FSP expanded from eight counties in predominantly "long-depressed coal regions"¹⁵⁵ to forty-three different areas in twenty-two states.¹⁵⁶ Finally, in 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the *Food Stamp Act* (FSA), making the program national and permanent. The bill, which was part of the Johnson administration's larger "War on Poverty,"¹⁵⁷ passed because liberals who wanted to establish the FSP threatened to withhold their votes authorizing agricultural subsidies unless conservatives lent their support, a logrolling dynamic that would be replicated every time the program was up for reauthorization or debate.¹⁵⁸ As it does today, the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Richard E. Mooney, "Calls for Food Stamps in Five Areas," *New York Times*, February 02, 1961, <https://nyti.ms/2F70E7y>. It's unclear whether African Americans and other non-white populations were meaningfully included in the FSP, as they were excluded from other welfare programs at the time (however, those other programs had more specific requirements).

¹⁵⁶ Food and Nutrition Services, "A Short History of SNAP."

¹⁵⁷ Marjorie Hunter, "White House Gets Antipoverty Bill," *New York Times*, August 12, 1964, <https://nyti.ms/2HS1yHZ>.

¹⁵⁸ Ferejohn, *Logrolling in an Institutional Context: A Case Study of Food Stamps Legislation*.

federal government funds the aid that reaches recipients' pockets, while the states and the federal government split the costs of administration and implementation.

Interestingly, the House of Representatives' version of the bill disallowed "soft drinks, luxury foods, [and] luxury frozen foods," indicating anxieties about the poor using government aid to buy products that did not confer to a degree of thrift and judiciousness expected of beneficiaries. The provision would have ensured recipients met criteria (4) and (5) of the deservingness heuristic (attitude and reciprocity). These amendments were supported by Southern Democrats and other farm state representatives who wanted a more commodity-focused program.¹⁵⁹ The Senate rejected those provisions on the grounds that the definition of "luxury foods" was too indeterminate, and would create administrative headaches. The Senate report also noted that "at the same time cookies, cake, and candy would not be excluded." That is: the House's exclusion of soft drinks was not in the name of health but in the name of budgetary oversight.¹⁶⁰ Not wasted pounds, but wasted monies. The Senate recognized the frivolity of "cookies, cake, and candy," but did not focus on their health effects. The anxiety was about budgets, not bodies: the proposed deservingness heuristic was based on whether recipients were as frugal with their federal aid as possible. The Senate Report did not disagree with the House's fundamental complaint about the FSP, namely that it would allow families to purchase foods they thought were non-essential. The justification for rejecting food restriction proposals on the grounds of administrative complexity would continue—as

¹⁵⁹ Barry M. Popkin, "The Challenge in Improving the Diets of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Recipients: A Historical Commentary," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 52, no. 2 (2017), doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2016.08.018.

¹⁶⁰ Nicole Pepperl, "Putting the 'Food' in Food Stamps: Food Eligibility in the Food Stamps Program from 1939 to 2012," (Thesis, Harvard University), April 2, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2Hjrcs6>.

well as the epistemological challenge of classifying foods as “luxury” or “unhealthy.” Just as “luxury” is an indeterminate category, so is “unhealthy.” The nature of nutrition science is ever-changing, and what is “healthy” for one person is not “healthy” for another.¹⁶¹

Expansion and Backlash: 1964 to 1977

The 1964 FSA estimated four million beneficiaries. Although the program was expanding at a steady rate in the north, southern states dragged their feet to promote the program, among other Great Society initiatives. That is, states with legislators that fostered political antipathy towards welfare program made benefits harder to access, tactics that are still pursued today.¹⁶² Urban and liberal legislators in the Senate responded by commissioning reports on poverty alongside non-governmental organizations, and tried to keep hunger and poverty in the public eye.¹⁶³ These efforts were complemented by media attention devoted to hunger, culminating in 1968 with CBS’s “Hunger in America.” The documentary shocked Americans by revealing that thirty million persons “[lived] on an inadequate diet” and only two-thirds of those people received any federal

¹⁶¹ Patrick Clinton, "Searching for Nutrition Research on Gluten-free, Fat, or Sugar? It's All Wrong.," *New Food Economy*, February 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2sACkda>.

¹⁶² Thanks to later reforms, formal SNAP eligibility rules are under exclusively federal jurisdiction. Programs that were block-granted post-PRWORA are subject to state variation. Predictably, REpublican states tend to provide the most measly benefits, while states like New York and California are the most generous. For TANF (“welfare”): "State Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Programs Do Not Provide Adequate Safety Net for Poor Families," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <https://bit.ly/2HKCDIy>. SNAP varies far less; states with higher poverty levels have higher SNAP participation: Dottie Rosenbaum and Brynne Keith-Jennings, "Interactive Map: SNAP Rose In States to Meet Needs but Participation Has Fallen as Economy Recovered," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 19, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2HjQVN7>.

¹⁶³ In terms of policy victories, the purchase requirement was lowered to \$0.50 per month from \$2.00 per month. Source: Popkin, The Challenge in Improving the Diets of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Recipients.

food aid.¹⁶⁴ In response to the media spotlight, President Richard Nixon devoted a special presidential address to the issue of inadequate nutrition programming, recommending policies like the elimination of the purchase requirement for the poorest families, the creation of a department within USDA to administer nutrition programs (later, FNS), and the launch of a pilot program for mothers and children (later, WIC). Congress mostly complied with his requests in 1970 amendments.¹⁶⁵ (A parallel might be drawn here to the bevy of documentary films about obesity since the late 1990's and the resultant public interest in obesity). Also of note in 1970 was the founding of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the leading anti-hunger organization that has worked with the corporate interests, as well as through the court system, to protect and strengthen food stamps.¹⁶⁶ By 1970, five million Americans were enrolled in the FSP, and the 1971 recession increased participation to ten million.¹⁶⁷

In 1973, the FSP was expanded nationwide, thanks in part to the continued focus on hunger.¹⁶⁸ The increase in numbers was replicated across other anti-poverty programs, thanks in part to a relaxation of restrictive eligibility barriers that had, until then, made welfare rolls predominantly white. The rapid increase in Americans enrolled in FSP and other Great Society programs *and* the fact that non-whites were finally accessing the social safety net resulted in a racialized backlash to anti-poverty programs. Before the

¹⁶⁴ Jack Gould, "TV: Hunger Amid Plenty. 'C.B.S. Reports' Examines Recurring Picture of Starvation Across U.S.," *New York Times*, May 22, 1968, <https://nyti.ms/2K5ukpb>.

¹⁶⁵ Moffitt, "The Deserving Poor, the Family, and the U.S. Welfare System."

¹⁶⁶ "FRAC: Our History," Food Research Action Center, <https://bit.ly/2F8mKX4>. FRAC is also responsible for the Food Stamp Challenge, whereby non-recipient participants (often legislators and others) try to bring attention to the difficulty of fashioning an adequate diet with food stamps.

¹⁶⁷ FNS, "A Short History of SNAP."

¹⁶⁸ Ronald Frederick King, *Budgeting Entitlements: the Politics of Food Stamps* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

relaxation of eligibility barriers in the 1960's, welfare (AFDC) was 86% white. By 1967, 46% of recipients were non-white.¹⁶⁹ The disparagement of welfare followed soon after, which would figure strongly in the partisan upheaval that was unfolding in the 1960's and beyond. The political alignment of free-market conservatives (i.e. neoliberals) and racists that coalesced to create the modern Republican Party was precipitated by the belief that poor, black Americans were abusing taxpayer money. It was the backbone of the "Southern Strategy."¹⁷⁰

The epitome of the racially-coded reaction to the expansion of the social safety net was the emergence of the raced and gendered "welfare queen," a term later popularized by Ronald Reagan. According to politicians, pundits, and the media, she was the fat Black woman driving a Cadillac purchasing filet mignon with food stamps. She embodied how some whites regarded Black families who received welfare: greedy, lazy, lecherous.¹⁷¹ She was constructed to harness racism and sexism to evince public hostility towards anti-poverty programs; despite similar rates of white and Black participation in Aid to AFDC and the FSP, public opinion began to paint all welfare recipients as undeserving people of color, robbing white taxpayers of their hard-earned income.¹⁷² The social construction¹⁷³ of the welfare queen would reign for the next thirty years, shaping the public perception of food stamps and other means-based entitlement programs and,

¹⁶⁹ Mink, *Welfare Reform in Historical Perspective*, 129.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁷¹ There are countless accounts of this phenomenon. Here's one: Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

¹⁷² An importance note: no one program was ever formally entitled "welfare," but welfare came to encompass, in the American imaginary, any program that provided cash assistance, was means-tested (and thereby perceived as disincentivizing work), served a stigmatized population, entailed a public bureaucracy, and was liable to accusations of fraud. Source: Super, "The Quiet 'Welfare' Revolution."

¹⁷³ Schneider and Ingram, "The Social Construction of Target Populations."

ultimately, contributing to their demise.¹⁷⁴ If the white majority thought recipients of aid were mostly Black, and if that white majority was racist (or at least implicit-biased) and thought Black people were at fault for their experiences of poverty and hunger, the deservingness heuristic would lead them to (1) resent Black people for using welfare and (2) decrease support of welfare programs.

Fittingly, 1971 marked the first iteration of food stamp restrictions, which included provisions that would bar families from food stamps if the households had an able-bodied adult who was not employed or in a job training program, in addition to uniform national eligibility standards and other reforms.¹⁷⁵ The decline of the National Welfare Rights Organization in 1975, among other political challenges, meant that these restrictions were the first of many, both for the FSP and AFDC. No coalition fought back against USDA sensationalist investigations into fraud, media coverage of welfare abuse, and the blaming of poverty on individual actions of welfare mothers. Conservatives were able to push the notion of “welfare dependency” into the mainstream in order to advocate for program cuts that would end the “culture of poverty.”¹⁷⁶ In Larsen’s terms: racially-motivated public opinion shifts that began in the 1960’s and 1970’s led to a wholesale reassessment of welfare recipients based on the deservingness criteria. The racial identity of recipients shifted the “control” assessment in particular: the “welfare

¹⁷⁴ (1) Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform*. (2) Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, (3), Alesina et al., *Why Doesn't the United States Have a European-Style Welfare State?*.

¹⁷⁵ SNAP to Health, "The History of SNAP."

¹⁷⁶ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A genealogy of dependency: Tracing a keyword of the US welfare state," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 309-336, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494886>

queen,” to white America, was someone who *could* escape poverty if she wanted to but preferred to depend on the state.

The incipient focus on personal behavior as a determinant of poverty set the stage for the future of food stamps. As such, major programmatic change came in the 1977 *Food Stamp Act*, on the heels of dramatic increases in participation thanks to unemployment and a dismal economy.¹⁷⁷ Program spending caps were instituted for the first time, and the cessation of open budget authority transformed food stamps from an entitlement into discretionary spending (this would later be reversed).¹⁷⁸ All eligible persons were no longer guaranteed assistance. In order to raise the caps, congress needed to pass three separate bills each year (budget, appropriations, and authorizing legislation). Thus, the distribution of food stamp monies became politicized in a way they had never been before.¹⁷⁹ The 1977 amendments also eliminated categorical eligibility,¹⁸⁰ decreased the monthly allotment, lowered the income threshold, banned recipients who had committed fraud or turned down a job, and denied access to university students and aliens.¹⁸¹ The 1977 amendments did eliminate the purchase requirement, though, which was a major step in expanding the program’s accessibility and effectiveness in fighting hunger.¹⁸² At the time in Congress, the FSP enjoyed the support of a powerful bipartisan duo: Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) and Senator George McGovern (D-SD). They worked

¹⁷⁷ *A Concise History of the Food Stamp Program*, by Joe Richardson, 96th Cong., Cong. 79-224, November 16, 1979, <https://bit.ly/2F8aVQS>.

¹⁷⁸ King, *Budgeting Entitlements*.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ For example, families that were enrolled in AFDC or other programs would no longer be automatically enrolled in the FSP.

¹⁸¹ SNAP to Health, “History of SNAP.”

¹⁸² Families received stamps without having to spend any of their own money to purchase. This expands the reach of the program to the most poor—those who have no income at all.

together to partially insulate the program from major budget cuts in the 1970's and into the 1990's, a partnership that would be crucial during the Reagan Era.¹⁸³

It is also in 1977 that the first substantive food eligibility restrictions took effect—after an amendment to prohibit the purchase of “junk food” with food stamps was rejected by the House Agriculture Committee. Like the Senate in its rejection of the amendment to bar the purchase of luxury foods in 1964, the House also appealed to “administrative complexity” as the key barrier to banning “junk food.” Who determined what was “junk food? Would the retailers have to police EBT-users’ shopping carts? Instead, Congress opted for a less punitive but still dichotomizing set of food restrictions that represented the first substantial incursion of food deservingness standards in FSP policy. Notably, 1977 was around the time when obesity and overweight were emerging as national health concerns.¹⁸⁴

Case Study One: Hot Foods

The 1977 FSA disallowed FSP recipients from using stamps to buy “hot foods and foods for immediate consumption,” with exceptions for nonprofit meal delivery services (Meals on Wheels), communal dining facilities, and institutionalized persons. This regulation is the same today. Foods not intended for “home consumption” (i.e. prepared foods) were never expressly permitted by statute, but the definition of home consumption and the degree of enforcement was murky before 1977. The purpose of this amendment was multiplicitous. It was political insurance against the specter of the lazy

¹⁸³ Gritter, *The Policy and Politics of Food Stamps and SNAP*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH and Michael F. Jacobson, PhD, "Halting the Obesity Epidemic: A Public Health Policy Approach," *Public Health Reports* 115, no. 1 (2000), doi:10.1093/phr/115.1.12.

welfare queen who was not only purchasing expensive steak and lobster with taxpayer money, but indulging in the luxury of eating out and abnegating her maternal obligation to cook. It is a prime example of a regulation intended to ensure that recipients meet criteria (5), reciprocity: policymakers wanted to see recipients work (in this case, the work of cooking) to receive benefits.

The directive to cook engendered by the prohibition on hot and prepared foods is obviously gendered, and reinforces norms about domesticity. In a 2015 Bureau of Labor Statistics time use survey, women surveyed still spend twice as much time as men per day on food and drink preparation.¹⁸⁵ This was only more true in 1977. Accordingly, mothers bear the social responsibility of their children maintaining “healthy” normal weights, as children are not in total control of their own food choices, and mothers are still assumed to be the lead parent and certainly the parent involved in household food choices.¹⁸⁶ In this way, it is the indulgence of mothers specifically that is framed as the underlying cause of obesity, precipitating policy approaches that focus on parental and community education. While the concern of the 1977 amendment was not obesity per se, the directive to cook at home was a directive that women, who were entering the workforce in meaningful numbers, continue to fulfill a domestic ideal. This romanticization of cooking and the family meal—echoed in the alternative food movement—harkens to a “heteronormative conception of ideal eating.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵“American Time Use Survey,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2n7lQkC>.

¹⁸⁶ Janemaree Maher, Suzanne Fraser, and Jan Wright, “Framing the Mother: Childhood Obesity, Maternal Responsibility and Care,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): doi:10.1080/09589231003696037.

¹⁸⁷ Kim Q. Hall, “Toward a Queer Crip Feminist Politics of Food,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 4, no. 2 (2014): 181, doi:10.1353/phi.2014.0011.

Of course, non-white women—who were typically portrayed as the primary recipients of food stamps and welfare programs—had long been forced to satisfy racialized and gendered expectations of waged *and* home labor. They were expected to work outside the home and cook for their families. For much of American employment history, non-white and immigrant women were mostly only able to work in domestic service, in which they were (are) underpaid and denied benefits, thanks in no small part to federal policy. As such, cooking labor that was not done for free by a female member of the family was done for paltry wages by a woman of color, whose labor has always been undervalued for historical reasons outside of the scope of this paper.¹⁸⁸ The net result is a systematic underestimation of the time and energy required to produce meals for entire households; a 2011 study determined that “time is more constraining than money” in adhering to the guidelines of the Thrifty Food Plan, which the USDA uses to calculate the cost of a basic but cheap healthy diet and is known to underestimate the value of food costs (SNAP allotments are \$4.00 per day). In an economy with stagnant wages and irregular hours, all-you-can-eat deals, buffets, snack foods, and frozen foods are ways to cope.¹⁸⁹ This rule, overall, presumes a great deal in terms of poor families’ (really, poor mothers’) capacity to cook every day and night. Beyond the exemptions for the elderly and the homeless in two states that have applied for waivers, SNAP regulations provide no recourse for those who cannot cook. A host of barriers prevent Americans from

¹⁸⁸ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 1 (1992), doi:10.1086/494777.

¹⁸⁹ Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 174.

cooking, from disability to time poverty,¹⁹⁰ to a lack of a suitable kitchen, or simply a distaste for cooking. The rule also assumes a degree of comfort with handling and preparing raw and whole foods and ignores the existence of many Americans who simply lack physical and economic access *to* raw and whole foods.¹⁹¹

Lastly, the requirement that SNAP recipients cook further removes them from one of the hallmarks of civic life in the 21st century: the shift away from home cooking and towards fast-casual and on-the-go meals. In 2015, for the first time ever, Americans spent more money on restaurants than at grocery stores. American dining is changing, and by disallowing food assistance beneficiaries from using SNAP to participate in the modern food economy, the provision against hot food roots recipients in an outdated model of eating, making their eating habits even more non-normative.

All of the aforementioned reasons call into the question the motivations of the prohibition against cooked foods. I hypothesize, in Chapter Four, that it is no coincidence that these restrictions materialized at the dawn of the mainstream alternative food movement, which among other solutions promotes home cooking, from scratch, as a catchall solution to problems of health and social cohesion.¹⁹² To them, cooking is a revolt against the industrial food regime, with its fast food outlets and processed foods. Here, we might see the beginning of the unexpected alignment of leftist foodies and a conservative tendency to police the behavior of welfare recipients. “Everyone should eat

¹⁹⁰ Donald Rose, "Food Stamps, the Thrifty Food Plan, and Meal Preparation: The Importance of the Time Dimension for US Nutrition Policy," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 39, no. 4 (2007), doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2007.04.180.

¹⁹¹ Hall, "Toward a Queer Crip Feminist Politics of Food," 189.

¹⁹² Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, Alice Waters, and other mainstream, celebrity food activists are particularly prone to this.

this type of food to be happy/healthy/environmentally conscious” and “we need to make sure the poor behave exactly how we want them to” lead, in this case, to a very similar conclusion. In both cases, deservingness is communicated via eating practices—a precursor to more specific food restrictions.

Case Study Two: Staple vs Accessory Foods

The means by which the 1977 FSA outlined more nutrient-based dietary expectations for FSP recipients (beyond “home-cooked”) was more indirect. It set uniform standards that food retailers would have to meet in order to accept food stamps that revolved around the availability of “staple foods.” There are four categories of “staple foods,” which have remained consistent since 1977:

1. *Meat, poultry, or fish*
2. *Breads or cereal*
3. *Vegetables or fruits*
4. *Dairy products*¹⁹³

In order to accept food stamps, retailers had to either (1) offer for sale a variety of foods (now, three varieties) in each of the four categories of staple foods, including perishable foods in at least two of the categories, or (2) have eligible staple foods comprise over fifty percent of gross sales from the establishment. The first option is to accommodate grocery and department stores, and the second to accommodate butcheries, bread bakeries, other specialty stores, and convenience stores. In contrast to the staple foods listed above, “coffee, tea, cocoa, carbonated and uncarbonated drinks, candy,

¹⁹³ Is My Store Eligible?" Food and Nutrition Service, November 16, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2qQHGN6>.

condiments and spices” are characterized as “accessory foods.”¹⁹⁴ The work of these rules is twofold: it both limits what sorts of stores the government is willing to provide SNAP recipients access to and dictate what foods are worthy of subsidization. The goal is to incentivize retailers to stock “healthy” foods—but instead of addressing why retailers that cater to low-income clientele might not carry fresh produce (hint: affordability), these rules pursue a consumer-based solution with the wallets of low-income people.

The discursive impact—and the one that sets the precedent for further restrictions—is the dichotomizing of staple versus accessory foods: the state creation and enforcement of a deservingness heuristic for food. The positioning of some foods as staple and others as accessory makes some foods non-essential and thus frivolous: some are deserving, and others are undeserving. In turn, the people who eat such frivolous foods become irresponsible, accessory, undeserving. But America is a heterogeneous place. Dairy is not a staple product nor tolerable product for many Americans of varying ethnic backgrounds.¹⁹⁵ Categorizing “spices” as an accessory food ranks the backbone of many cultures’ cuisines as accessory and makes bland, spice-less continental cuisine as the norm. Along with the exclusion of “condiments,” the “accessory” category suggests a Puritanical approach to food consumption that de-emphasizes the role of taste and enjoyment. The poor, apparently, are not supposed to have flavorful food.

A brief aside: the insinuation that tasteful food is frivolous hearkens back to the progenitors of the American diet craze that painted flavorful food (and the desire for food) as excesses that would harm the body and soul. As *The Atlantic* wrote in 2014, “It

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ “Lactose Intolerance,” Genetics Home Reference, April 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/1UmBYvv>.

was [Alexander] Graham's particular notion that *Americans could shield themselves from debilitating stimulation and find salvation through clean living and healthy food*. The Graham Diet consisted of simply-prepared bland foods with lots of whole grains, mostly fruits and vegetables, and no spices, meat, alcohol or tobacco. Even pepper was banned.” (emphasis added).¹⁹⁶ This is eerily familiar to assessments of the alternative food movement that critique its belief in the universal goodness and power of “clean living and healthy food,” and the public health community’s belief that food is primarily about nutrition.

An important effect of the 1977 imposition of food retail guidelines is the 1980 court case that firmly established FNS’s authority to restrict certain foods from staple eligibility: to decide which foods were deserving and which were not. A store that sold mostly soda, a non-staple food, was prevented from accepting food stamps by the 1977 legislation and sued to challenge the new guidelines. The Third Circuit ruled against the store, writing that “the purposes of the program [are] to raise levels of nutrition and to eliminate hunger and malnutrition...the quality and character of the food sold in exchange for food stamp coupons is pertinent to the determination whether a participant furthers these ends.” The court thus established that (1) the FSP can make choices to determine what is healthy and unhealthy and (2) it can enact those choices through administration of the food stamp program and by extension through the regulation of poor people’s dietary choices.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Adee Braun, "Looking to Quell Sexual Urges? Consider the Graham Cracker," *Atlantic*, January 15, 2014, <https://theatlantic.com/2014/01/15/sexual-urgency-graham-cracker/>.

¹⁹⁷ Pepperl, “Putting the ‘Food’ in Food Stamps: Food Eligibility in the Food Stamps Program from 1939 to 2012,” 12.

These two food eligibility restrictions promulgated by Congress and finessed by FNS reflect political influences in combination with ostensible “public health” concerns, both of which reflect racial, gender, class, ability, and other biases. The rules enforce moral dichotomies that pathologize and penalize non-conforming SNAP users: if you purchase “non-staple” foods, you are wasting government resources and contributing to your own diet-related illnesses. The nature of these rules and the time period in which they were enacted clearly indicate that food stamp rulemaking has always been a fundamentally political endeavor. They were designed to police the behavior of welfare recipients in the midst of public backlash to Great Society programs. Through food regulations and strict eligibility requirements, the government mandated good behavior—with the bodies of program recipients as bargaining chips. The restrictions posits that food made by another, that is already assembled from constituent parts, is not worthy of government endorsement. It suggests that those who eat processed and prepared foods do not deserve aid. Lastly, these restrictions represent a fundamentally paternalistic approach to welfare programming, which was also indicative of the political climate at the time.¹⁹⁸ This also mirrors contemporary efforts from the public health and “foodie” community to “help” the poor eat the way they think they should.¹⁹⁹ In these rules, we see the emergence of a particular type of deservingness heuristic for SNAP predicated on the purchase, preparation, and consumption of the “right foods.”

¹⁹⁸ Lauren M. Rich, "The New Paternalism: Supervisory Approaches to Poverty," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 19, no. 3 (2000), doi:10.1002/1520-6688(200022)19:3.

¹⁹⁹ Julie Guthman, “If They Only Knew”: Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions," *Professional Geographer* 60, no. 3 (2008): doi:10.1080/00330120802013679

Food Stamps and Welfare Reform: 1977 to 1996

The next wave of FSP reform came during the Reagan administration and the continued rise of neoliberalism—an economic doctrine that favors privatization, free markets, deregulation, and tax cuts.²⁰⁰ During his campaign, Reagan fully realized the political power of the welfare queen symbol as a tool to promote his conservative agenda. In a 1976 speech, he told the story of a welfare recipient who “used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.”²⁰¹ The trend that began in the 1970’s continued into the 1980’s: Reagan and other conservatives weaponized poor women to scare the American public into a retreat from ambitious social policy. Sociologists like Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, and other neoconservatives advanced cultural theories of the “underclass” to argue that government programs, once regarded as vehicles for economic and social advancement, had become cesspools of waste, fraud, and abuse.²⁰² Food stamps appeared in the news only in exposés about black markets (one headline: “Trading in Fraud and Despair: Food stamps have become the currency of the street, fueling a vast illegal market in drugs, guns, and cash”²⁰³) or when particularly ostentatious purchases were made with them. In a 1982 TIME story subtitled “food stamps are the new funny money for criminal fat cats,” federal agents in Nevada reported

²⁰⁰ Thorsen, Dag Einar. "The Neoliberal Challenge-What is Neoliberalism." *Contemp. Readings L. & Soc. Just.* 2 (2010): 188, <https://bit.ly/2Jh9pOH>.

²⁰¹ Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan Campaign Speech, January 1976*, <https://bit.ly/2qQIzpM>.

²⁰² Gritten, The Policy and Politics of Food Stamps and SNAP, p.13.

²⁰³ Eric Harrison, "Trading in Fraud and Despair Food Stamps have Become the Currency of the Street, Fueling a Vast Illegal Market in Drugs, Guns and Cash," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 30, 1989, <https://bit.ly/2qRw24Q>.

purchasing “four guns, two diamond rings, a handsaw, cocaine, a macaw from Mexico, the proffered services (declined of course) of two prostitutes, even a three-room house on Tamalpias Avenue” with food stamps.²⁰⁴ Thousands of stories like this one reflected the root of political opposition to welfare: the specter of wasted money. Before the onset of the “obesity epidemic,” the only visible manifestation of food stamp misuse was in the price of purchases themselves—not the waistlines of beneficiaries. The determination of “need” and “reciprocity” was via food purchases, but not on the basis of healthfulness. In the public imagination, the correct behavior for a family using food stamps was a restrained food ethic devoted to a sensible and restrained usage of funds.

Upon assuming office, Reagan targeted the FSP, which was serving 20 million households in 1980 due to economic stagnation and recession; a 1% rise in unemployment led to about one million more households eligible for food stamps.²⁰⁵ By 1981, it had become the least popular Great Society program, perhaps because of its close link to AFDC.²⁰⁶ Its unpopularity was also likely due to its visibility: Americans could, at the time, physically see FSP beneficiaries using the blue and orange stamps in supermarkets. They could see Americans paying at the checkout counter, just like them, but on the taxpayer’s dime. Indeed, the *New York Times* quoted the special counsel to the House Agriculture Committee in 1981, who said “every time you see someone in the checkout line using food stamps, and you're not, you've been lobbied against the program. It's out in the open in every supermarket every day.”²⁰⁷ Others, like Reagan, were unhappy

²⁰⁴ “Definitely Not USDA Approved.” *TIME*, August 23, 1982, <https://ti.me/2qO1y3A>.

²⁰⁵ Steven V. Roberts, “Food Stamps Program: How it Grew and How Reagan Wants to Cut it Back,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1981, <https://nyti.ms/2F8nZFJ>.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

with the FSP's dual role as an anti-poverty program. Senator Jesse Helms described the program as "one of the most expensive, most abused, and badly managed programs in the federal budget." Helms convened hearings to expose the "parasites" that sucked up food stamp monies from American taxpayers. These hearings recycled stories about program abuse and fraud, and took place at a time when the most ardent defenders of the program in the Senate, like George McGovern, were gone. The debate boiled down to an attempt to differentiate between the "needy" and "truly needy."²⁰⁸ That is, they publicly used criteria (2) as the rationale for programmatic contraction: they wanted to make sure recipients met the deservingness criteria. Of course, this was to some extent political cover for the real issue at hand: race (criteria 3).

For many Americans, the race and ethnicity of recipients was enough to convince them recipients register the program as wasteful. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Gilens' analysis of media from the 1960's to the 1990's found that a vast majority of stories about poverty featured African Americans and that fewer African Americans on welfare were portrayed in a sympathetic light than whites on welfare. In turn the public overestimates the number of African-Americans in poverty. This holds true to this day: in a study of news stories in 2015 and 2016, 59% of the poor people featured were Black. 17% of the poor depicted were white—even though 66% of Americans living in poverty are white.²⁰⁹ Whites were less likely to support welfare programs if they thought non-whites would

²⁰⁸ Steven V. Roberts, "Debate Opens on Cuts in Food Stamps," *New York Times*, March 17, 1981, <https://nyti.ms/2HTIdGv>.

²⁰⁹ Dixon, *A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media*.

benefit. If the media portrayed food stamp recipients as non-white, a non-insignificant subset of Americans would develop ambivalence and animosity towards the program.²¹⁰

In the end, the FSP was cut by 16% as the country was entering a recession. Income tests were made more stringent, federal funds were prohibited from being used for outreach, Puerto Rico's program was converted to a block grant, and job searches were required for all food stamp applicants as well as participants.²¹¹ These cuts in funding were complemented by the funding of nutrition education programs: another programmatic manifestation of personal responsibility politics and paternalism in food policy. Just like work training classes and job contact quotas, education programs stemmed from the idea that the poor were uneducated and lazy. All they needed to do to break from the "cycle" or "culture" of poverty (the word used depended on the political party) was improve themselves through their own efforts. Education would solve their nutrition deficiencies. This was not coupled with any cash incentives—just as work requirements for AFDC mothers were not coupled with free childcare.²¹²

Reagan-era budget cuts, combined with economic crises, led to a hunger crisis by the end of the 1980s. Limited funding was restored in 1988 and 1990 (thanks in part to the expiration of spending caps), which coincided with efforts to make the entire food stamps program more efficient, such as the introduction of Electronic Benefit Transfer cards in some states.²¹³ However, the brief expansion of food stamps was short-lived, as

²¹⁰ Martin Gilens, "'Race Coding' and White Opposition to Welfare," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 03 (1996), doi:10.2307/2082611.

²¹¹ The amendments also prohibiting striking workers from receiving FSP benefits, which facilitated unions' eventual complete disinterest in FSP advocacy. Source: Super, "The Quiet 'Welfare' Revolution," 1285.

²¹² Hays, *Flat Broke with Children*.

²¹³ SNAP to Health, "The History of SNAP."

neoliberal economic policies realized their full potential in PRWORA, during Bill Clinton's administration. David Super described the success of punitive "welfare reform" as a "perfect storm that united fiscal conservatives, tax-cutters, social conservatives, libertarians, governors, and state legislators."²¹⁴ PRWORA sought to increase employment among public assistance beneficiaries who were perceived as overly dependent on public benefits—specifically women. What would mean in practice was updating and rules and budget requirements to throw millions of people off the rolls.²¹⁵

The welfare queen was a key figure in this battle. In popular and congressional debate, she was caught in the "trap" of welfare and unwilling to re-enter the American mainstream;²¹⁶ the welfare recipient in the American imagination scored poorly on Larsen's five criteria. And although AFDC—the program most strongly associated with the word "welfare"—was the primary target of conservative policymakers, the FSP did not escape admonition. According to Super's analysis of the FSP in the context of PRWORA, "The Food Stamp Program had been identified most closely with AFDC and reviled more widely than any other program. And the Food Stamp Program was second only to AFDC as a target of criticism by both conservatives and state officials, the two groups whose coalition formed the nucleus of the movement that won enactment of PRWORA."²¹⁷ During a hearing conducted by the House Agriculture Committee in 1995, for example, Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation said the FSP "is very much a part of the welfare system."²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Super, "The Quiet 'Welfare' Revolution," 1288

²¹⁵ Fang and Keane, "Assessing the Impact of Welfare Reform on Single Mothers."

²¹⁶ Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*.

²¹⁷ Super, "The Quiet 'Welfare' Revolution," 1284.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

PRWORA instituted a number of changes to the FSP, including the cessation of benefits to legal immigrants, strikers, and individuals convicted of drug offenses, the implementation of time limits for ABAWD's, and reduction in monthly maximum benefits. At the time, debate still revolved around the frugality and judiciousness of FSP enrollees, not the healthiness of their purchases. Congressman Bob Franks of New Jersey, for example, said the following in congressional debate: "Mr. Speaker, today I rise to invite my colleagues to join me in combating the latest scam being used to rip off the food stamp program. Recently, I learned that a Long Island couple went to a local supermarket and bought more than \$120 in caviar with food stamps."²¹⁹ The attacks lodged at food stamp recipients did not yet differ greatly in tenor than those lodged at other welfare recipients. Still budgets, not pounds.

Clinton, in his speech signing PRWORA after multiple vetoes (one of which was in response to egregious cuts to the FSP), mentioned specifically that "while the Act preserves the national nutritional safety net, its cuts to the Food Stamp program are too deep. Among other things, the Act reinstates a maximum on the amount that can be deducted for shelter costs when determining a household's eligibility for Food Stamps. This provision will disproportionately affect low-income families with children and high housing costs."²²⁰ Clinton was right.

²¹⁹ Representative Bob Franks (NJ): "Introduction of the Food Stamp Conversion and Profiteering Prohibition Act of 1996," *Congressional Record* 142:120, <https://bit.ly/2vAZ3Ht>.

²²⁰ William J. Clinton: "Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," August 22, 1996, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://bit.ly/2HEkHPR>.

The 21st Century and Nutrition: 1996 to 2018

Like welfare (previously AFDC, now TANF), FSP participation rates steeply declined post-PRWORA. Only 17.2 million persons used the program in 2000, down from 28 million in 1994—only 55.7% of eligible households.²²¹ The decline was above projections based on the economic boom and PRWORA eligibility changes; researchers have speculated that families no longer eligible for AFDC did not realize they could still receive FSP benefits. In 1999, four million children in eligible families were not receiving food stamps. Subsequent reforms focused on increasing outreach to make sure eligible persons were enrolled in the program. Before federal action, states and cities worked to clarify the distinction between eligibility requirements for TANF (now a block grant with greatly decreased funding) and the FSP.²²²

In 2002, the *Food Security and Rural Investment Act* reversed some of the restrictive aspects of PRWORA—such as the prohibition of legal immigrants from receiving benefits—and updated various administrative processes. Relaxed eligibility requirements and increased outreach efforts spurred a rapid increase in participation.²²³ In the context of a Republican president, George W. Bush, and a Republican congress, this expansion is notable. The re-extension of benefits to low-income immigrants who had lived here for more than five years, the same standards that Medicaid and TANF had already adopted post-PRWORA restriction, came at a time when Bush was looking to restore his image among immigrants, who were the subject of intense public scrutiny

²²¹ FNS, “A Short History of SNAP.”

²²² Ibid.

²²³ FNS, “A Short History of SNAP.”

after 9/11, as well as burnish his image as a “compassionate conservative.”²²⁴ It was also a play in the Republican party’s longstanding effort to woo Latino/a voters. Newt Gingrich—one of the progenitors of PRWORA—told *The New York Times* that “In a law that has reduced welfare by more than 50 percent, [the FSP restrictions were] one of the provisions that went too far. In retrospect, it was wrong.”²²⁵ The expansion of the FSP in the 2002 Farm Bill was also a function of the sharp decline in welfare program participation post-PRWORA, and thus a decline in conservative outcry over welfare spending. By August of 2008, 29 million people were enrolled in the FSP, thanks in part to increased outreach efforts, as only 53.7% of eligible households were receiving benefits in 2002.²²⁶

The last major legislative changes to food assistance were in the Farm Bill of 2008, passed over Bush’s veto. The *Food, Conservation, and Energy Act* of 2008 reshaped food assistance in a number of ways. The FSP was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to decrease the stigma associated with “food stamps,” and to signal the program’s increased emphasis on nutrition. EBT cards were mandated throughout the states, ending the years-long phase-in process. Other expansionary provisions included the deduction for dependent care expenses in eligibility and benefit calculations and the exclusion of education investment or retirement accounts from the asset test, which was also changed to be indexed to inflation. The minimum benefit amount for single people or couples without children was also increased. Hurdles to

²²⁴ Gritter, *The Policy and Politics of Food Stamps and SNAP*, 45.

²²⁵ “Bush Plan Seeks to Restore Food Stamps for Noncitizens,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2002, <https://nyti.ms/2HjmU3P>.

²²⁶ *Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2002*, March 2005, <https://bit.ly/2F8bQAJ>.

enrollment were also decreased, such as mandatory periodic reporting for non-working and migrant households. The bill pledged a \$10 billion increase in nutrition funding over the next ten years, with \$7.5 billion for SNAP. Programs to incentivize the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables with SNAP dollars were also implemented.²²⁷

In this essay, 2008 marks a major turning point in the stated goals of the food stamp program. While still programmatically an anti-hunger program, legislators and advocates succeeded in improvising anti-obesity, nutrition-focused initiatives around the edges. Until this point, other federal food assistance programs had more closely dictated what foods beneficiaries received: the National School Lunch Program has increasingly comprehensive guidelines; WIC beneficiaries have always had subsidized access to foods determined essential for natal and maternal health; Americans on Indian reservations were subject to commodity food distribution programs.²²⁸ The years leading up to the 2008 bill saw the swell of media coverage of the obesity epidemic, and increased public concern about its effects; in 1999 The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published its first annual report documenting obesity in America, which it has continued since.²²⁹ Chapter Five summarizes the efforts the federal government has taken since to address obesity, which have revolved around food labeling and nutrition education. 2008 was the time when obesity was clearly linked to SNAP in the public imagination, a connection this paper has demonstrated is spurious.

²²⁷ FNS, "A Short History of SNAP."

²²⁸ "Food Assistance Programs," Nutrition.gov, <https://bit.ly/2HH7Lsw>.

²²⁹ (1) Gollust et al., "Picturing Obesity: Analyzing the Social Epidemiology of Obesity Conveyed Through US News Media Images." (2) William H. Dietz, "The Response of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the Obesity Epidemic," *American Review of Public Health*, no. 36 (January 07, 2015), doi:10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122415.

The economic downturn in 2008 resulted in a five-year long spike in enrollment, peaking in 2013 with forty-seven million Americans enrolled at a yearly cost of \$80 billion.²³⁰ Because SNAP is counter-cyclical, it was able to automatically provide a form of macroeconomic stimulus via the influx of cash into poor Americans' wallets.²³¹ Because poor families spend whatever they have to meet basic needs, during a recession any extra cash distributed to poor families will go directly back into the economy. In a Moody's Analytics estimation, a \$1 increase in SNAP benefits translates to about \$1.70 in economic activity.²³² SNAP's role in the economic recovery was boosted by the 2009 *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*, which automatically granted states waivers to suspend time limits for ABAWD's, which they would normally have to apply for, and increased monthly benefit amounts. (Today, a majority of states retain statewide or county-specific waivers, which the Trump administration is trying to change.²³³) In total, funding increased by \$40 billion. This amounted to an economic stimulus via redistributive spending—and an unprecedented *decline* in food insecurity during the worst year of the recession.²³⁴ SNAP played a crucial if unrecognized income support role in the midst of an economic crisis. By 2013, forty-seven million Americans used the program,²³⁵ thanks partially to the fact that more eligible persons were participating: 85%

²³⁰ *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: National Level Annual Summary: Participation and Costs 1969 - 2016*, <https://bit.ly/2uK2Int>

²³¹ Tiehen, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Linkages with the General Economy."

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Status of State Able-Bodied Adult without Dependents (ABAWD) Time Limit Waivers - Fiscal Year 2018—2nd Quarter, report, January 08, 2018*, <https://bit.ly/2F8XvUG>.

²³⁴ Brynne Keith-Jennings and Dottie Rosenbaum, "SNAP Benefit Boost in 2009 Recovery Act Provided Economic Stimulus and Reduced Hardship," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 31, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2qPPn71>.

²³⁵ *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: National Level Annual Summary: Participation and Costs 1969 - 2016*, <https://bit.ly/2uK2Int>.

of eligible persons were enrolled in 2013 versus 69% of eligible persons in 2007.²³⁶ In 2010, Congress scheduled the funding increases from the ARRA to expire in November 2013. This early expiration was engineered to offset the costs of the 2010 *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, which funded child nutrition programs. As a result of the 2013 cuts, average household benefits fell by \$20 per month.²³⁷

The 2014 Farm Bill contained a number of changes to SNAP. It prohibited certain convicted felons from receiving benefits, along with lottery or gambling winners. It also, though, allowed states to apply for waivers that would allow certain restaurants to accept EBT to meet the needs of the homeless, elderly, and disabled (to date, California and Rhode Island have such waivers, although only one county in California has a restaurant meals program). Lastly, it increased the amount of staple and perishable foods retailers had to stock in order to accept food stamps—indicative of the post-2008 nutrition prioritization.²³⁸ Combined with the economic recovery and spending cuts in the 2014 bill, SNAP spending decreased from about \$70 billion in FY 2014 to \$63.7 billion in 2017.²³⁹ 42.8 million people currently benefit from the program; the Congressional Budget Office has predicted that SNAP caseloads will continue to fall as the economy expands, returning to 1995 caseload levels (26.2 million persons) by 2020.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ "SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table."

²³⁷ Keith-Jennings and Rosenbaum, "SNAP Benefit Boost in 2009 Recovery Act Provided Economic Stimulus and Reduced Hardship."

²³⁸ Laura Tiehen, "2014 Farm Act Maintains SNAP Eligibility Guidelines and Funds New Initiatives," USDA ERS, July 07, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2Hlhgyn>.

²³⁹ "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Data," April 06, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2qBGEoZ>.

²⁴⁰ Brynne Keith-Jennings and Dorothy Rosenbaum, "SNAP Costs and Caseloads Declining Trends Expected to Continue," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 08, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2qQtox3>.

Perspectives on the 2018 Farm Bill

2018 is a Farm Bill year, and accordingly SNAP has been a target of intense scrutiny. As noted in earlier chapters, exploratory hearings have been conducted to assess the potential for healthy food restrictions. In addition to these proposals, Republicans have been advocating for more run-of-the-mill conservative welfare goals: stricter work requirements, drug tests, and attendant budget cuts (to the tune of \$20 million over ten years).²⁴¹ The Trump Administration has produced a widely discredited proposal for a “Harvest Box,” which would not be passed by Congress,²⁴² but is also flouting the idea of drug-testing FSP recipients.²⁴³ Lobbyists, food companies, and public health organization are working the media to provide a platform to express their ideas. As mentioned on p.6 - p.8, the calls to restrict SNAP due to public health concerns have materialized into (failed) state-level bills and increasing public scrutiny over what foods “taxpayer dollars” are being used on. The public is being encouraged to interpret fat SNAP recipients as undeserving of aid. By drawing attention to their purchasing habits—habits that mirror those of high-income Americans—a new means by which to judge the success of SNAP has been implemented.

Just as sensationalist media portrayals of extravagant purchases made with food stamps dominated the media in the late 20th century, now abundant articles vilify SNAP

²⁴¹ Teaganne Flynn, "Fight Over Food Stamps Threatens Bipartisan Farm Bill Coalition," *Bloomberg Government*, April 10, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Hn61oX>.

²⁴² Members of the Republican Party (rightly) think it's a far more socialist, administratively complex, and costly way to distribute food. Thrush, *Trump's 'Harvest Box' Isn't Viable in SNAP Overhaul, Officials Say*.

²⁴³ Joe Fassler and Sam Bloch, "USDA Emails Suggest Trump Will Allow Drug Testing for Food Stamps Users," *New Food Economy*, April 11, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2qFaVDk>.

recipients' grocery choices on the basis of health. Instead of vilifying recipients for (allegedly) buying lobster, commentators target SNAP recipients for buying junk foods. In 2013, one author lamented the contents of one SNAP recipient's shopping cart: "Cheetos Puffs, a one-ounce handful of which contains 10 grams of fat; a box containing two dozen 12-ounce cans of Fanta Orange soda, each of which contains 44 grams of sugar; a carton of six-ounce Capri Sun drink pouches, each of which contains 16 grams of sugar."²⁴⁴ On April 9, 2018, an op-ed ran in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "Food Stamps Shouldn't Pay for Junk."²⁴⁵ With every day, the possibility of restrictions materializing gets more likely. Diet culture has remained a mainstay of American civic life. Americans are equally concerned about the health effects of obesity and cancer, ranking them the most dangerous threats to citizen health.²⁴⁶ As noted in Chapter Two, Americans broadly support increased restrictions on SNAP benefits. How did the general public come to associate obesity with incorrect food choices?

²⁴⁴ Charles Lane, "Why Should Food Stamps Pay for Junk Food?" *Washington Post*, March 18, 2013, <https://wapo.st/2HmvM4E>.

²⁴⁵ Moby, "Food Stamps Shouldn't Pay for Junk," *Wall Street Journal*, April 09, 2018, <https://on.wsj.com/2qkFtdF>.

²⁴⁶ *New Insights into Americans' Perceptions and Misperceptions of Obesity Treatments*.

Part Two

This Part describes the processes that made the emergence of the fatness heuristic possible. There are four interconnected trends that I hypothesize are aligning to produce a punitive politics of obesity that finds a material expression in SNAP politics via the fatness heuristic. (1) The alternative food movement, with its emphasis on (and anxiety around) food quality and provenance; (2) healthism, which refers to the obsession with “health” as a personal moral imperative for well-being and good citizenship; (3) the obesity epidemic and resultant public health hysteria; and (4) the long history of “welfare reform” as a (racialized) tool for the social control of people experiencing poverty. The uniting thread among these trends is an ideological investment that situates systemic

problems (like obesity and poverty) at the individual level—and prescribes individual behavior-modification solutions.

Academics, activists, and others have commented on the “missionary impulse” of the alternative food movement vis-a-vis the diets of poor “others.”²⁴⁷ Similarly, critical accounts of the “obesity epidemic” have problematized the received wisdom about the causes, consequences, and policy responses to fatness, positing that obesity interventions as a means for the State to control the bodies of its citizens.²⁴⁸ More research is necessary to draw a conclusive causal arrow from the alternative food movement and public health regime to the punitive politics of SNAP specifically. My hope is to call attention to the potentially deleterious effects of the valorization of certain foods on the material well-being of the poorest Americans.

Four: The Reconceptualization of Food and Health

The Alternative Food Movement

This section contributes a new idea to the emergent field of Critical Food Studies, arguing that the aforementioned “missionary impulse” of foodies and its inherent focus on correct consumption practices has trickled up to SNAP politics. The food movement has achieved a number of policy wins in the past few years. Its most prominent success is cultivating (their version of) common knowledge about what constitutes “good food” in

²⁴⁷ Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, 157.

²⁴⁸ (1) J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). (2) Jenny McMahon, “Biopolitics and the 'Obesity Epidemic'-Governing Bodies,” *Sport, Education and Society*, 16:4, 549-551, (2011), doi: 10.1080/13573322.2011.595168

the national psyche. But it has not yet devised a way to incorporate an anti-poverty agenda into its core mission. Instead, the food movement has adjusted its usual “expand the markets for sustainable foods” agenda to SNAP policy debates. This is problematic because SNAP recipients can’t participate in those markets, which are often prohibitively expensive. There are further deleterious effects to positioning some goods as inherently better than others, as the case studies in Chapter Three argued. Food is deeply moral (“you are what you eat”). I argue that the alternative food movement helped create the preconditions for the cultural understanding of food heuristics as they are used today.

The alternative food movement (AFM) is a catchall phrase that describes the amalgamation of farmers, producers, and eaters that work to establish alternative food systems in contrast to industrial agriculture and the often processed or “unreal” foods it produces. The modern alternative food (or sustainable agriculture) movement emerged in the second half of the 20th century under different banners in response to the shift away from small, diversified family farms that had been unfolding for years but was hastened by the “Green Revolution” (1940s—1960s). The Green Revolution, which aimed at increasing farmers’ yields domestically and abroad, played a large role in the shift towards the usage of more aggressive genetic selection, and widespread chemical fertilizers and pesticides that farmers had to purchase. One result of many unforeseen Green Revolution consequences was the 1980’s farm crisis, wherein farmers’ production levels were so high as to drive prices sharply downward. At the same time, the costly inputs that farmers had to purchase thanks to the Green Revolution pushed them further into debt. Oil prices and interest rates were high, further increasing costs. The solution

that some turned to was sustainable agriculture “to regain some control over production processes previously lost to companies providing farm inputs.”²⁴⁹ Authors like Wendell Berry (*The Unsettling of America*, 1978), Wes Jackson (*New Roots for Agriculture*, 1980), and Miguel Altieri (*Agroecology*, 1987) eloquently gave voice to those farmers. They responded to the ecological stressors of industrial agriculture by suggesting a new path forward. Sometimes called sustainable agriculture, agroecology, biodynamics: these authors gave voice to a growing movement of farmers and eaters that wanted to create alternatives.²⁵⁰

The alternative or “hippie” food movement was closely linked to sustainable agriculture, naturally; its founding literature included Frances Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet* and its ethos emphasized a conscious rejection of industrially processed food, ethically-driven food rules, and the consumption of organic food, often in anti-capitalist settings. But America is a capitalist state, and in order for the organic food movement to reach beyond communes—and to combine with the more gourmand strains of emergent American food culture—participation in the alternative food movement was necessarily predicated on market forces. The evolution of “organic” from a way of life that incorporated not only sustainable agriculture techniques but also “anti-materialism, anti-corporatism, a general distrust of large public and private organizations, and a preference for personal and political independence” to a USDA-sanctioned label that shoppers pay a premium for is the result, in short, of neoliberal capitalism. It’s hard to

²⁴⁹ Max J. Pfeffer, "Sustainable Agriculture in Historical Perspective," *Agriculture and Human Values* 9, no. 4 (1992), doi:10.1007/bf02217960, 8.

²⁵⁰ Fred Kirschenmann, "A Brief History of Sustainable Agriculture," *The Networker*, March 2004, <https://bit.ly/2Hkgt0n>.

grow as a movement in America whilst remaining “anti-material.”²⁵¹ So: locally-grown, organic food was positioned as the alternative to chemical-ridden corporate agriculture, and could be accessed by participating in the alternative food *economies* of farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and urban gardens.²⁵² Being a good eater entailed having financial access, though, to those markets, and the time and knowledge and desire to cook sustainable foods.

Today, there are many alternative food movements whose focuses range from farmworker rights to sustainable agriculture to more radical struggles for food sovereignty and food justice. While I recognize the existence of multiple and contradictory alternative food movements in America, the uniting feature among many is the insistence upon food hierarchies. The AFM I focus on is the mainstream one that has most markedly affected the public consciousness: the one that focuses on buying organic, local, whole, and sustainable foods. While many (many) food movements have sprung up to shift the focus away from the consumerist, ingredient-obsessed mainstream AFM, the “foodie” movement that has gained traction nationally is rooted in the pursuit of an “agrarian imaginary” that if implemented would lead the country back to a fabled past of small diversified farms, local food systems, and healthy bodies.²⁵³

Much of the activism that emanates from the AFM takes the supply chain of the modern food system as its central issue, emphasizing the “environmental degradation

²⁵¹ Garth Youngberg and Suzanne P. DeMuth, "Organic agriculture in the United States: A 30-year retrospective," *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 28, no. 4 (2013): 294-328, doi: [10.1017/S174217051300017](https://doi.org/10.1017/S174217051300017)

²⁵² Ryan E. Galt, "Alternative Food Movement," *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*, 2017, doi:10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg0427.

²⁵³ Janna Lafferty, "Troubling Place in Alternative Food Practices: Food Movements, Neoliberalism, and Place," *A Place-Based Perspective of Food in Society*, 2015, doi:10.1057/9781137408372_12.

associated with conventional agriculture” and the “health consequences of consuming industrial food.”²⁵⁴ Obesity rates are interpreted as indicators of a “broken food system.”²⁵⁵ The “local, sustainable, environmentally friendly foods”²⁵⁶ are not only better for the planet and local economies, but are inherently healthier and more delicious than the “edible food-like substances”²⁵⁷ produced by the industrial agriculture system.²⁵⁸ Food advocates point to fast food restaurants as oppressive forces in low-income communities, the cheapness of chips relative to fruits, and the decreased percentage of Americans who cook as symptomatic of the problems with the American way of eating. If everyone cooked instead of eating “junk” and bought locally and shopped at farmer’s markets and grew herbs in their window-sills—if only Americans were “empowered” to change their eating habits—the myriad problems with America’s food systems could be solved.

This message is extremely popular. The success of Michael Pollan, Mark Bittman, Marion Nestle, Eric Schlosser, and the myriad food-related television shows and media outlets are testament to the American public’s appetite for this sort of food politics.²⁵⁹ The economic expansion of the organic and local food sectors proves that Americans are willing to pay a premium for this brand of romanticized foods. Although it is a somewhat

²⁵⁴ Bradley and Herrera, "Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement."

²⁵⁵ See all of the Google search results: <https://bit.ly/2JgDEW8>

²⁵⁶ Katharine Bradley and Hank Herrera, "Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement," *Antipode* 48, no. 1 (2015): 5, doi:10.1111/anti.12165.

²⁵⁷ Michael Pollan’s catchphrase, in the context of his positing of “food rules” as the way to fix the “healthcare crisis.” Source: Michael Pollan, “‘Food Rules’: A Completely Different Way To Fix The Health Care Crisis,” *The Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, , <https://bit.ly/2qQJrtS>.

²⁵⁸ Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, eds., “Introduction” in *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*, MIT Press, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2F8IT8S>.

²⁵⁹ Michael Pollan, "The Food Movement, Rising," review of *The Taste for Civilization: Food, Politics, and Civil Society*; *Terra Madre: Forging a New Global Network of Sustainable Food Communities*; *Eating Animals*; *All You Can Eat: How Hungry Is America?*; *Everything I Want to Do Is Illegal: War Stories from the Local Food Front*; , *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010, <https://bit.ly/2Hp5Q8s>

clumsy indicator, the percentage of Americans who actively try to purchase organic and local food—a hallmark of the sustainable agriculture movement—hints at the reach of the AFM and the cultural rootedness of a food heuristic. In a 2016 study, 73% of Americans reported buying locally-grown food in the past thirty days, and 68% bought organic foods. Tellingly, many of those who bought such foods did so in the name of health, despite little to no evidence that organic or locally grown food are inherently better for weight control.²⁶⁰ The AFM has successfully conflated consumption of organic, local, fresh produce with health outcomes: it has convinced the general public that opting out of the industrial food system and spending their dollars on alternative food systems is not only a revolt against industrial agriculture, but a step towards a healthier diet. The deservingness heuristic for food was no longer just about “better for the planet,” but “better for the waistline.”

But many Americans cannot pay the premium on organics. Although the AFM generally recognizes that many cannot afford this food, their policy proposals in response to focuses on increasing federal support for small farmers to make their (healthy, sustainable) food cheaper—not to address the root sources of poverty that both prevent access to those foods and contribute to the “obesity epidemic.” AFM groups are not meaningfully involved in protecting SNAP, which mainly falls to anti-hunger groups, although they are interested increasing access among recipients to farmers’ markets.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Cary Funk and Brian Kennedy, "Americans' Views about and Consumption of Organic Foods," Pew Research Center: Internet & Technology, December 1, 2016, <https://pewrsr.ch/2hdoYc7>.

²⁶¹ "SNAP and Farmers Markets," December 15, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2kBODj4>.

Legislative priorities and successes have revolved around organic and ecologically sustainable agriculture, school gardens, soda taxes, and subsidies.²⁶²

In championing the fresh, the local, the whole, and the raw while disparaging the corporate, the industrial, and the processed, these food purity politics²⁶³ slot humans and the foods they eat into a dichotomy of worthy and unworthy, pure and impure, disabled and able, obese and non-obese. Deserving foods are fresh, local, whole, raw, sustainable, and healthy. Undeserving foods are frozen or canned, imported, “junk,” processed, and unhealthy. (For an example of this dichotomization, read Michael Pollan’s *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*, which features rules like “Buy your snacks at the farmers market” or “Avoid food products that have more than 5 ingredients”²⁶⁴). By reducing questions of health and social justice to questions of the right or wrong foods, the mainstream AFM marginalizes those who can’t feasibly eat those foods, crippled by the social position of its leaders, who are overwhelmingly white, wealthy, and thin.

The proposition—that consuming organic, whole, and fresh foods prepared at home will lead to slimmer waistlines—is flawed by the confounding variable of the identities of people who eat alternative food. Consumers that purchase or grow alternative food (sustainable, local, fruit, produce-oriented) are more likely to be wealthier and live in leptogenic environments. Leptogenic environments are places that “promote healthy food choices and encourage physical activity,” and other factors associated with thinness.

²⁶² (1) Kirschenmann, “A Brief History of Sustainable Agriculture.” (2) Guthman, *Weighing In*. (3) For an example of this type of thinking: Mark Bittman et al., “How a National Food Policy Could save Millions of American Lives,” *The Washington Post*, November 07, 2014, , <https://wapo.st/2HSr4wL>.

²⁶³ Hall, “Toward a Queer Crip Feminist Politics of Food.”

²⁶⁴ Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* (Penguin, 2009).

²⁶⁵ The conflation of alternative food with health probably has more to do with the racial and class privilege of people who eat alternative foods than with the actual foods themselves.²⁶⁶ Guthman suggests that AFM participants may, lastly, have “a personal stake in upholding market alternatives rather than addressing structural inequality, which might lead to their losing wealth or income;” instead of “paying higher taxes so that others may eat well through food assistance programs,” foodies advocate for increasing nutrition education in poor communities to retrain their taste-buds to enjoy broccoli and apricots.²⁶⁷

The ideology of worthy and unworthy foods, as Chapter Three demonstrated, has pervaded food assistance politics. Although the emphasis on quality alongside quantity is undoubtedly a valuable one, the AFM discourse of “good food” has, alongside the public health community’s reaction to the obesity epidemic, become a key vehicle through which a punitive and moralist approach to food assistance is lent paternalist legitimacy. In 2013, thirteen mostly Democrat mayors addressed a letter to Congress in advance of the 2014 Farm Bill urging legislators to “test and evaluate approaches limiting SNAP’s subsidization of products, such as sugar-sweetened beverages, that are contributing to obesity.”²⁶⁸ The fatness heuristic is employed: obesity is the signal that the anti-hunger, anti-poverty program needs to be changed. The proposed solution is the formalization of

²⁶⁵ Boyd Swinburn, Garry Egger, and Fezeela Raza, "Dissecting Obesogenic Environments: The Development and Application of a Framework for Identifying and Prioritizing Environmental Interventions for Obesity," *Preventive Medicine* 29, no. 6 (December 1999), doi:10.1006/pmed.1999.0585.

²⁶⁶ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 67.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 162.

²⁶⁸ *Mayors of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Louisville, Madison, Minneapolis, Newark, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland, Providence, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Seattle, and St. Louis Letter to Speaker Boehner and Minority Leader Pelosi*, press release, June 18, 2013, <https://on.nyc.gov/2qQUwLi>.

a deservingness heuristic for foods in the administration of SNAP. Mayors, here, are not calling on Congress to undertake a wholesale evaluation of the role of “sugar-sweetened beverages” and other unhealthful products in the American food supply. Just in the program that serves food-insecure Americans.

It must be emphasized that the AFM and its advocates are not intentional bad actors, or even trying to vilify the poor. The moralizing forces of the AFM²⁶⁹ emerged in opposition to real problems with the industrial food system. As mentioned above, many of the movement’s progenitors were distinctly anti-capitalist and members of the (albeit white) counterculture. Critique here is necessary because, as the AFM begins to realize its policy priorities must extend beyond “buy local,” its incursion into food assistance politics must embrace a more structural and evidence-based perspective. Critics have maligned the AFM for enabling a politics of “opting-out,” whereby only a select few are able to access the enlightened lifestyle. The consumer-based strategy of “vote with your fork” (i.e.: “if you buy sustainable whole foods, sustainable farmers will be supported and the world will be a better place” or “if you buy sustainable whole foods you’ll be thinner”) does not work when the recipients of that message make under 130% of the poverty line.

In 2015, some of the most powerful voices in the mainstream food movement included a single bullet point about SNAP in their viral “Memo to the Next President.” According to authors Mark Bittman and Michael Pollan, Director of the Food and Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists Ricardo Salvador, and

²⁶⁹ Katharine Bradley and Hank Herrera, "Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement."

then-United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier De Schutter, a “National Food Policy” must “Increase the SNAP program’s objectives and effectiveness by reforming the system so that its subsidies are directed toward the purchase and consumption of healthy foods, in harmony with recommendations from leading health authorities, thereby protecting against both hunger and obesity.”²⁷⁰ This essay maintains that such an effort asks too much of the SNAP program, with too many negative consequences for recipients and the fight against obesity.

This section has suggested a role for the immense popularity of food as a cultural signifier in the evolving politics of SNAP. The AFM has ignited a cultural consciousness about what “good” and “bad” foods are that is mirrored in the fatness heuristic’s policy implication: the restriction of food choice for obesity.

Healthism

The other essential ingredient in the creation of the fatness heuristic was the inception of the belief that health is a personal responsibility: that body weight is within your control and that you are morally obligated to pursue health. In terms of the deservingness criteria, the implication that fatness is within your control disqualifies you from aid or sympathy for your condition. The focus of the AFM, while undoubtedly concerned with the health of the body, is not primarily on weight maintenance except insofar as (1) its leaders and advocates tend to be slim and (2) it preaches a doctrine of overall good health as a side effect of eating alternative foods. Healthism and the AFM

²⁷⁰ Michael Pollan et al., “A National Food Policy for the 21st Century,” October 2015, <https://bit.ly/2HHMf6R>.

together, I suggest, have produced the now-widespread understanding of the relationship between food and fatness.

The dominant obsession with fatness, weight, and health in America is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning in the late 20th century as a result of a variety of cultural trends. Before then, nutrition advice was not a part of the common cultural conversation, but a discrete area of knowledge. Nutrition-oriented dietary advice in America that stretches back to the 19th century, when fatphobia first emerged, was closely tied with rising xenophobia. The vilification of fatness was closely linked to scientific explanations for inequality and was interpreted as a marker of barbarism.²⁷¹ Dietary advice has always been a moralizing tool of social reform and assimilation to established norms; the heuristic for food choice has always reflected subjective ideologies, not objective science. From domestic scientists teaching immigrants to cook American food in the Progressive era to the industry-influenced USDA-published Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs), nutrition wisdom has been doled out to Americans in an attempt to instill the correct ideas about diet and health.²⁷²

A paradigm shift occurred beginning in the 1970's with the popularization of jogging (and fitness activities more broadly), calorie counting and weight loss schemes, usage of dietary supplements, and holistic/alternative medicine practices more broadly. This trend led to the coinage of the term "healthism" in 1977 by Irving Zola, and refinement in 1980 by Robert Crawford. It is a critical descriptor for the aforementioned

²⁷¹ Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

²⁷² Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

set of lifestyle behaviors that together re-interpreted the relationships between human subjects and their bodies. It urges people to take their health into their own hands, and thus “situates the problem of health and disease at the level of the individual.”²⁷³ This mirrors neoliberalism’s key tenet of “personal responsibility,” and is crucial for understanding now-unquestioned beliefs about health. The dominance of healthism means that health conditions perceived to be related to lifestyle choices are then assumed to be under a subject’s control (criteria 1).

Healthism is a deeply moral and all-consuming ethos. Striving to achieve a healthy body is indicative of worth—of “deservingness.” Health is elevated to “a super-value” and the constant pursuit of optimal health is a moral choice in itself. Tending to the body and ensuring its optimal condition becomes a moral and social responsibility, both for one’s own longevity but also in the interest of reducing the demands on the state and society. By emphasizing the role of the individual in this struggle, “health reinforces the privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being.”²⁷⁴ Like the AFM, healthism is rooted in individual consumption practices (think of yoga classes, protein shakes, gym memberships, diet books, etc) and thus obviates the role of the state in ensuring health *beyond* encouraging the correct consumption practices. Meeting the challenge posed by the fatness heuristic requires a lot of time and energy.

Of course, like any ideology, healthism was rooted in the political, economic, and social forces of the time that it emerged. It has been called an offshoot of “medicalization,” a term popularized by Zola that others that refers to “the process by

²⁷³ Robert Crawford, “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life,” *International Journal of Health Services* 10, no. 3 (1980), doi:10.2190/3h2h-3xjn-3kay-g9ny.

²⁷⁴ Crawford, “Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life.”

which some aspects of human life come to be considered as medical problems, whereas before they were not considered pathological.”²⁷⁵ Material forces that have contributed to medicalization since include

“the very existence of health insurance (costs are only reimbursable when associated with a definable medical condition); death certificates (the need to give a name to what caused a person's death); research funding (funding is more likely for problems defined as diseases); drug trials and approval; and even a desire to wash one's hands of blame for one's condition (for instance, by considering obesity a disease that assails people rather than the result, at least in part, of one's own actions and lifestyle).”²⁷⁶ For example: impotence associated with aging becomes erectile dysfunction, halitosis instead of smelly breath, overweight instead of fatness.²⁷⁷ Deviant or non-normative behavior becomes a condition in need of medical intervention—and public policy attention. Healthism is thus both a derivative and alternative to medicalization: the pathologization of conditions exists, but the onus is on the individual to correct those conditions. “What emerges,” then, “is a new form of social Darwinism that legitimizes inequalities, no longer on the basis of racial superiority, but on biological and supposed health differences.” Therefore, “framing issues such as health issues to be solved technically rather than politically or socially ends up emphasizing individual responsibility, which in turn can strengthen the stigmatisation of the less healthy.”²⁷⁸ By centering the role of individual choice and personal responsibility in the discourse around health, healthism has thereby influenced the “control” judgement within the fatness

²⁷⁵ Antonio Maturo, “Medicalization: Current Concept and Future Directions in a Bionic Society,” *Mens Sana Monographs* 10, no. 1 (2012), doi:10.4103/0973-1229.91587.

²⁷⁶ “On the Medicalization of Our Culture,” *Harvard Magazine*, April 23, 2009, <https://bit.ly/2qSEWQj>.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Mauro Turrini, “A genealogy of ‘healthism,’” *Eä-Journal of Medical Humanities & Social Studies of Science and Technology* 7, no. 1 (2015): 11-27, <https://bit.ly/2qSF56j>, p.16.

heuristic.²⁷⁹ Fatness is popularly understood as an issue of personal responsibility, not structural distortions.²⁸⁰

Food, obviously, is central in the quest for optimal health. Healthism incorporates a nutritive food ethic into its central practice: foods are to be chosen on the basis of nutrient content. Not taste, culture, or convenience. Instead, “food as medicine.” This food ethic has pervaded dominant American culture to the point that it is unquestionably accepted: delicious food is a “treat,” calorie counting is normal. Part of the reason for the nutritive food ethic’s dominance is its reliance on fatphobia as a motivating factor: movies, news articles, television shows, and media of all forms harness a fear of fatness in the name of health to shock consumers into getting their life back together. The overt and more subtle messages from popular culture is that the enjoyment of food is a fast-track to obesity (remember the ideas of Alexander Graham and the early nutritionists).

Indeed, the necessary logical conclusion to a movement that places the onus of health and weight responsibility on the individual is a moralized focus on fatness, which has become a proxy for bad health and thus irresponsibility. If healthism dictates that one’s health is subject to individual control, then to be unhealthy means one is out-of-control or purposely sabotaging their health. The reason healthism is problematic is not because jogging, eating salad, and meditating are bad. It is because the emphasis on personal behaviors that happen to be predominantly practiced by wealthier people that

²⁷⁹ Although its negative implications are covered extensively here, in an industrialized Western context, the expansion of medical knowledge as such is of course neither good nor bad. It is the political implications of medicalization and healthism that are considered here, and that are potentially harmful.

²⁸⁰ *New Insights into Americans' Perceptions and Misperceptions of Obesity Treatments.*

have the time, money, and energy to pursue those behaviors “forecloses solutions” that don’t emphasize individual consumption, and further stigmatizes those that can’t participate in those behaviors.²⁸¹ Postulating that Americans experiencing poverty, food insecurity, chronic health conditions, and other ills should add a diet and fitness regimen to their daily lives will not alleviate the structural causes of ill health; the curse of healthism is that it encourages people to sink money and time and psychological energy into band-aid solutions. As feminist critic Carol-Ann Farkas writes, wellness culture (the 2018 pop-culture term for healthism) represents “a radical turning inward of agency toward the goal of transformation of one’s own body, in contrast to a turning outward to mobilize for collective action.”²⁸² Dealing with chronic illness in America requires universal health care, livable wage and viable job opportunities, and a radical re-thinking of our relationship to our environments.

Scholars essentially predicted healthism’s influence on food assistance politics, intuiting that a moralist approach to food would necessarily evolve into paternalism directed at politically weak groups. Crawford wrote that “the ‘healthy’ self is sustained in part through the creation of ‘unhealthy’ others, who are imagined as embodying all the properties falling outside this health-signified self.”²⁸³ The ‘others’ are those who fail to adhere to prescriptions for organic produce and whatever the nutrition wisdom of the day is, whose “non-compliance with nutritional advice [is] evidence of their immorality and

²⁸¹ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 187.

²⁸² Carol-Ann Farkas, “‘Tons of Useful Stuff’: Defining Wellness in Popular Magazines,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 33, no. 1 (2010): 113-32, <https://bit.ly/2HGCzKa>.

²⁸³ Robert Crawford, “The boundaries of the self and the unhealthy other: reflections on health, culture and AIDS,” *Social science & medicine* 38, no. 10 (1994): 1347-1365, <https://bit.ly/2FbAI04>, 1348.

thus justification for their denial of rights,”²⁸⁴ just as non-white families’ non-compliance with middle-class norms was taken as evidence of an unwillingness to participate in productive society; for example, the prevalence of single-parent households was interpreted as indicative of “culture” rather than a product of deindustrialization and mass incarceration. In parallel, the “unhealthy other” subject to the missionary forces of the AFM is often female, poor, or otherwise marginalized.²⁸⁵

All of the aforementioned moral forces manifest materially for SNAP recipients, whose deservingness is being questioned due to the notion that they are unable to make the “correct” food choices. Because of healthism, the public thinks SNAP recipients’ purchasing habits are why they are fat, as opposed to structural reasons discussed in Chapter Five. Thus, beginning in 1981, funding for SNAP nutrition education instead of increasing monetary benefits, a strategy which has been proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.²⁸⁶ The fact that most of the federal government’s approach to the obesity epidemic has centered on nutrition education instead of confronting the other barriers to a better diet speaks to the power of healthism—and the social construction of obesity, which became a national concern in the midst of healthism’s infiltration into the everyday lives of Americans.

²⁸⁴ Bradley and Herrera, "Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement," 6.

²⁸⁵ Guthman, "If Only They Knew."

²⁸⁶ "A \$30 increase in monthly SNAP benefits would increase participants’ consumption of nutritious foods such as vegetables and healthy proteins, while reducing food insecurity and consumption of fast food." Source: Patricia M. Anderson and Kristin F. Butcher, "The Relationships Among SNAP Benefits, Grocery Spending, Diet Quality, and the Adequacy of Low-Income Families’ Resources," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 14, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2qU9UGK>.

Five: The Social Construction of Obesity

The final ingredient that animates legislators' attempts to make SNAP an anti-obesity program is the alarm over the "obesity epidemic" and correlated chronic health issues. This chapter argues that obesity has been fundamentally misunderstood by the general public, a cause and consequence of the individuated conceptualization of health discussed in the previous chapters. The fatness heuristic, of course, would not exist if there weren't increasing numbers of fat people and if there was no popular understanding of a correlation between obesity and poverty (and thus SNAP participation).²⁸⁷ As the social construction and racial politics literature illustrates, bodily appearance, whether it be ethnic identity or gender, shapes how problems or conditions are interpreted, and what solutions are proposed.

The "obesity epidemic," like race, is a socially constructed phenomenon resulting from a host of social, political, and economic forces, not objective biological markers. It represents the pathologization of fatness, the categorization of a bodily appearance as a medical problem to be solved.²⁸⁸ The inherently flawed nature of nutrition science, which relies heavily on observational study and is plagued by confounding variables, lends itself to easy manipulation by other ideological forces. There are virtually no experimental double-blind nutrition studies, because they are basically impossible to do for extended periods of time. New studies that contradict each other seem to come out every week, many of which are industry-backed. The USDA's dietary guidelines are famously

²⁸⁷ "Relationship Between Poverty and Obesity," Food Research Action Center, <https://bit.ly/2BDRg9G>.

²⁸⁸ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 32.

influenced by material interests. Objective truth in nutrition science is hard to find.²⁸⁹

What is deemed “nutritious” is a political choice, reflecting the preferences and biases of those that are forming the guidelines.

Similarly, the categorization of obesity as an “epidemic” is a political choice, not a scientifically-mandated fact, a political choice to achieve political ends. “Epidemic” is usually used to refer to contagious illness. Obesity is not a vector-borne disease, but using the term “epidemic” does the rhetorical work of alarming the public and convincing people that obesity must be dealt with as a medical problem, as opposed to a social and economic one. By the “association of corpulence with death,” the term “obesity epidemic” cements in the public imagination (and policymakers’ priorities) a link between fatness and mortality that does not necessarily exist in the way we think.²⁹⁰

Relatedly, most articles about statements about obesity, academic and not, cite the health risks *and* health costs as reasons the public should care about obesity; there is often an emphasis on the social cost of obesity, which is used as justification for policy interventions.²⁹¹ As I show below, disaggregating the health effects of obesity, and thus the costs that taxpayers incur, is more complicated. What is certain is that by raising the specter of wasted taxpayer money on extra pounds—like wasted taxpayer money on lobsters at the supermarket—engenders a political impulse to restrict funds. Recipients that are perceived as wasting government dollars fail criteria (4) and (5): if they’re not

²⁸⁹ (1) Clinton, “Searching for nutrition research on gluten-free, fat, or sugar? It’s all wrong.” (2) Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

²⁹⁰ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 32.

²⁹¹ For example: Jamie F Chriqui, “Obesity prevention policies in US states and localities: lessons from the field,” *Current Obesity Reports* 2, no. 3 (2013): 200-210, doi: 10.1007/s13679-013-0063-x.

strictly monitoring the foods they eat on the basis of health, their attitude towards food is laissez faire, and they're not demonstrating initiative to improve.

The “epidemic” categorization is further questionable when examining the actual data on obesity. Much of the increase in mean weights in America since the increase is driven by people with slightly-high BMI's gaining a “modest amount of weight” and the shifting definition of what “obesity” is.²⁹² Furthermore, the aforementioned “association of corpulence with death” is actually a mostly unproven causal relationship. Firstly, “except at true statistical extremes, high body mass is a very weak predictor of mortality.” Secondly, most studies of obesity (and nutrition generally) have very weak controls for confounding variables like “fitness, exercise, diet quality, weight cycling, diet drug use, economic status, or family history.”²⁹³ Lastly, societal anti-fat stigma undoubtedly colors the science of obesity itself, and its public reception.

Disentangling the health effects of obesity is a complicated and vexed process. For example: the association of obesity with worse mental health probably has less to do with an intrinsic aspect of obesity but instead of the discrimination faced by fat people. Doctors and nurses treat obese patients less well, and less quickly—which makes puzzling out the actual health effects of obesity more difficult. Thus healthy obese people are less likely to seek out doctors because of this stigma, further warping the data. When it comes to diabetes, heart disease, and other life-threatening illnesses, “it is quite possible, and even likely, that higher than average body fat is merely an expression of

²⁹² In 1998, millions became technically “overweight” and “obese” when the US changed its definitions of those categories with respect to BMI. Sally Squires, “About Your BMI (Body Mass Index),” *Washington Post*, June 04, 1998, <https://wapo.st/IU4aoh>.

²⁹³ Paul Campos et al., “The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity: Public Health Crisis or Moral Panic?” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35, no. 1 (2005), doi:10.1093/ije/dyi254.

underlying metabolic processes that themselves may be the sources of the pathologies in question.”²⁹⁴ Poverty itself is associated with many of those same illnesses.²⁹⁵ What is undoubtedly true is that a \$66 billion diet industry, alongside insurance companies charging higher premiums and pharmaceutical companies developing weight-loss wonder-drugs, profits immensely from the societal fear of fat as well as from the belief that individual measures can reduce and maintain weight.²⁹⁶ So does the broader “wellness” industry and good food movement.²⁹⁷ This is all to say: the health effects of fatness might not be as serious as we think, but confronting the real problems associated with it will require a wholesale reevaluation of how our society treats fat people.

The causes of fatness itself is another contested area. The popular energy-balance model of obesity (calories in, calories out) is the popular explanation for American weight gain. The story goes that Americans eat more calories now, and more calories from processed food, than we did before 1980. The ubiquity of television and other indoor, inactive forms of entertainment have led to more couch potatoes. Low-income people are presumed to eat more calories than rich people, because, as the logic goes, they spend their money on cheap, unhealthy foods that then cause obesity. As much as this hypothesis sounds logical, there is a dearth of rigorous scientific data to prove it. There is no evidence that calorie consumption (as opposed to caloric availability, which is typically used as a proxy for consumption) has increased in Western countries over time,

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 57.

²⁹⁵ Claire Conway, "Poor Health: When Poverty Becomes Disease," January 16, 2016, <https://bit.ly/1Rci32k>.

²⁹⁶ Paul Campos, *The Diet Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight Is Hazardous to Your Health*, Gotham, 2005.

²⁹⁷ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 178-179.

or that movement has decreased. Despite obesity's negative association with income levels, people with higher incomes eat more than people with lower incomes, thereby undermining the energy balance model.²⁹⁸ And despite the fact that obesity is more prevalent among non-whites, whites eat more calories than non-whites.²⁹⁹

In contrast, there are many plausible and science-supported causal variables that contribute to obesity that don't emphasize the role of individual diets, such as the proliferation of obesogenic, endocrine-disrupting environmental toxins and food additives that, thanks to the deregulatory Reagan revolution, went unregulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Environmental Protection Administration (EPA). It is definitely true that the quality of American diets in the 21st century is lacking. Yet "despite decades of dietary guidance," neither American diets nor the American food supply changed meaningfully for the better.³⁰⁰

There has been a great deal of investment in the dietary-change approach both because powerful material interests would be affected by a real government effort to curb obesity at its source as well as because the energy balance hypothesis—which blames individual actors for overeating—fits in nicely into political rationality that has been

²⁹⁸ This is actually even more complicated: the inverse relationship between income and obesity is strongest for women and children, but weaker for men. "According to 2005–2008 national data, obesity rates tended to increase with decreased income among women, but this trend was only significant for White women (not Black or Mexican-American women) Among men, obesity rates were fairly similar across income groups or tended to be higher at higher levels of income. In fact, among Black and Mexican-American men, those with higher income were significantly more likely to be obese than those with low-income." Source: "Relationship Between Poverty and Obesity."

²⁹⁹ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 94.

³⁰⁰ (1) Susan M. Krebs-Smith, Jill Reedy, and Claire Bosire, "Healthfulness of the US Food Supply," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 38, no. 5 (2010): 472–477, doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2010.01.016. (2) For a summary of the inefficacy of nutrition guidelines: Duane Mellor and Kathy Knight-Agarwal, "Dietary Guidelines Don't Work. Here's How to Fix Them," *The Conversation*, February 1, 2017. <https://bit.ly/2HTf3XW>.

dominant in America for the past forty years: neoliberalism. Capitalism, and specifically neoliberal capitalism, is deeply if not primarily indicated in the mean increase in American BMI's in the past half-century. The comedian Stephen Colbert, quoted in Guthman, quipped in 2009 that "our bodies are the only growth industry America has left."³⁰¹ Food companies' necessity to make more profits drives development of addicting nutrient-poor foods. Employers' necessity to keep wages down means families have little choice but to work longer hours at more jobs and eat the cheapest, most calorie-dense food available. Cheap food, Guthman suggests, helps compensate for the lack of an adequate federal safety net. Capitalism necessitates the disinvestment in historically poor areas, thus creating the obesogenic environments devoid of adequate grocery stores and walkability.³⁰² The rise of the private welfare state under neoliberal capitalism had led to the privatization of health concerns; the weight loss industry, which exists in large part because of the obesity epidemic and fear of fatness, exists to make money.³⁰³

In sum: the pathologization of obesity has led to the focus on the role of diet and exercise in weight control among public health advocates, policymakers, and the news media. In turn, this has led to widespread belief among the public that obesity and being overweight are the result of poor individual behavior. Americans think obesity is a function of "a person's lifestyle choices, their eating and exercise habits" whereas the medical community, polled at large, recognizes "genetic, environmental, behavioral, and emotional factors" in determining weight.³⁰⁴ Thus blame among the public and among

³⁰¹ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 163.

³⁰² Guthman, *Weighing In*, 174-178.

³⁰³ Jeffery Sobal and Donna Maurer, *Weighty Issues: Fatness and Thinness as Social Problems* (New Brunswick (U.S.A.): Aldine Transaction, 2013).

³⁰⁴ *New Insights into Americans' Perceptions and Misperceptions of Obesity Treatments*.

policymakers is ultimately placed on people and their behaviors—on mothers who left the kitchen to go to work, on time-pressed workers who heat up frozen meals, and on SNAP recipients.

The Pathologization of Poverty and Obesity

Throughout this essay, comparisons have been drawn between the pathologization of poverty and obesity, the classification of certain behaviors as abnormal, individually-caused, and in need of intervention. This comparison illustrates the dominance personal responsibility politics in the modern conceptualization of social ills, but also highlights that SNAP politics is where the vexed politics of welfare and the vexed politics of fatness meet. In trying to understand why SNAP is the subject of intense public scrutiny, critics must understand the particular ways American political culture treats both. The fatness heuristic is most virulently operative when subjects are both fat and poor.

In “The Color of Fat: Racial Biopolitics of Obesity,” Rachel Sanders draws out the similarities and connections between obesity and race more explicitly. On a cursory level of analysis, the disproportionate rates of obesity among non-whites is indicative of a racialized exertion of power, an environmental injustice. A deeper analysis, though, does not take rates of obesity as cause for alarm but rather takes the alarm and resultant missionary impulse of public-health-minded people (at this point, an increasingly popular group) as a realm ripe for analysis. An eye to history sees the panic over obesity rates and the intense focus on racial disparities in obesity rates as a 21st century iteration of the

panic over welfare queens. Furthermore, women are overrepresented in media about obesity, and penalized for fatness more than men are³⁰⁵—just as the myth of the “welfare queen” popularized the image of the irresponsible Black female mother using welfare. Gendered expectations of beauty and motherhood are both used as justification for the denial of rights.³⁰⁶

Sanders concludes that the “repurposed stereotype of the insatiable, undisciplined, and freeloading fat Black woman serves as a receptacle for white anxiety over the vulnerability of white privilege as obesity rates rise among all racial groups and national anxiety over the ‘tribal stigma’ of fatness as it engulfs the country at large.”³⁰⁷ Fatness is popularly used as an indicator of moral worth, with an “overweight” body signifying a lack of willpower and an abundance of laziness and incompetence.³⁰⁸ These same stereotypes are at the basis of the “welfare queen” myth. In contrast to the obese and to the “welfare queen,” “the healthy body has come to signify the morally worthy citizen—one who exercises discipline over his or her own body, extends the reach of the state and shares the burden of governance.”³⁰⁹ The ideal subject of neoliberal capitalism is constantly self-improving—and does not get fat.

I further Sanders’s argument by positing that the same factors that make obesity a racial project make the solutions to obesity racialized as well. The most dramatic result of a politics of disgust was PRWORA and the swell of contractionary welfare reforms that

³⁰⁵ Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, “Beauty, Body Size and Wages: Evidence from a Unique Data Set,”

³⁰⁶ Rachel Sanders, “The Color of Fat: Racial Biopolitics of Obesity” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2014), February 24, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2Hljgqd>.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Kathleen LeBesco, “Neoliberalism, public health, and the moral perils of fatness,” *Critical Public Health* 21, no. 2 (2011): 153-164, doi:10.1080/09581596.2010.529422.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

began in the 1970's, reforms that were all united by an emphasis on individual choice. In parallel, "the media predominantly attribute overweight to bad individual choices" and because "poor and minorities are more likely to be heavy, such reporting reinforces social stereotypes of fat people, ethnic minorities, and the poor as out of control and lazy."³¹⁰ This misperception of socially mediated conditions as personal ones is mirrored in research that has demonstrated Americans are more "likely to attribute the cause of [Black female] poverty to individual failings, rather than to any public policy," but will attribute the cause of white poverty to systemic failures.³¹¹ This gets at the core paradox of Larsen's criteria: it is the identity judgement (3) that mediates the control judgment (1). As Larsen predicts, the policy answers tailored to a pathologized population are different than those tailored for politically privileged groups: this is also the central insight from the analysis of the two-tier welfare state.

One popular example is the (in)famous Moynihan report in which Black and other non-white families were portrayed as caught in a "tangle of pathology"—a sociological explanation for deep poverty that explicitly centered the perceived failures of Black mothers. Although Moynihan's intent was to call for a national anti-poverty effort, "in its bombastic language, its omission of policy recommendations, its implication that Black women were obstacles to Black men's assuming their proper station, and its unnecessarily covert handling, the Moynihan Report militated against its author's aims."³¹² His causal

³¹⁰ Abigail C. Saguy and Kjerstin Gruys, "Morality and Health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders," *Social Problems* 57, no. 2 (2010), doi:10.1525/sp.2010.57.2.231.

³¹¹ Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., "The 'Welfare Queen' Experiment: How Viewers React to Images of African-American Mothers on Welfare," in *Nieman Reports Summer 1999*, June 15, 1999, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/the-welfare-queen-experiment/>.

³¹² Ta-Nehesi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *Atlantic*, October 2015, <https://theatlantic.com/2muSVLE>.

story was used to mobilize state power to target marginalized populations for surveillance and containment. Instead of the Family Assistance Plan, America got mass incarceration. The point here being: the stories we tell about how problems inure in populations are central to the solutions proposed and often result in unintended consequences.

Existent Policy Responses to Obesity

As I have shown, obesity has undergone a similar politicization process as poverty, wherein public understandings of the problem are influenced by implicit biases and political ideologies. The policy solutions proposed reflect those biases. Here I discuss what the federal government has done to target obesity, emphasizing the lack of structural solutions proposed at the supply and environmental level in place of individual-choice models. There have also, notably, been no serious proposals for wholesale bans on the purchase of junk foods, which begs the question: if restricting the purchase of junk foods was really a good faith policy idea, why has it not been proposed for all Americans regardless of income?

Despite the skepticism on display in this essay, obesity does undoubtedly pose health challenges, and governments worldwide have implemented policy ideas to curb rates of obesity. Most approaches focus on behavioral change, such as encouraging target audiences to increase physical activity or eat less processed foods.³¹³ Implicit or explicit in these approaches is the harnessing of anti-fat stigma, which works counterproductively to encourage “psychological distress,” leading to over-eating, less physical movement,

³¹³ David A. Frederick, Abigail C. Saguy, and Kjerstin Gruys, "Culture, Health, and Bigotry: How Exposure to Cultural Accounts of Fatness Shape Attitudes about Health Risk, Health Policies, and Weight-based Prejudice," *Social Science & Medicine* 165 (2016): , doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.12.031.

and a more generalized risk for body dysmorphia and depression.³¹⁴ None of those effects will help obese people lose weight. Indeed, numerous studies have documented that it is near-impossible to lose a significant amount of weight and retain that weight loss.³¹⁵ As has been demonstrated, the focus on individual solutions like a weight-loss effort, despite little evidence that such methods are effective, are pursued as policy goals because of an American political ideology that prioritizes self-mastery (neoliberalism and more specifically healthism).³¹⁶

The federal government began paying attention to rising rates of obesity in 1974, when the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) began to track the increases in American BMI's. However, the White House and subsequent congresses did not prioritize obesity prevention as a policy goal. This inaction continued into the Clinton administration; the president and congress "did not respond during this time because of their view that obesity was not a national health threat, for several reasons, ranging from the absence of obesity's effects on the national security to the economy."³¹⁷ President George Bush, who was apparently obsessed with fitness, oversaw the first major pieces of legislation that targeted obesity, after the years in the early 2000's saw some state innovations (one particularly questionable innovation is the "weight report cards" instituted first in Arkansas in 2004, and now in half of the

³¹⁴ Puhl and Heuer, "Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health."

³¹⁵ Traci A. Mann, Janet Tomiyama, Erika Westling, Ann-Marie Lew, Barbra Samuels, and Jason Chatman, "Medicare's search for effective obesity treatments: diets are not the answer," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 3 (2007): 220, doi: [10.1037/0003-066X.62.3.220](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.3.220).

³¹⁶ Matthew Clair, Caitlin Daniel, and Michele Lamont. "Destigmatization and health: cultural constructions and the long-term reduction of stigma," *Social Science & Medicine* 165 (2016): 223-232, doi: [10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.021).

³¹⁷ Eduardo J. Gómez, "Understanding the United States and Brazil's Response to Obesity: Institutional Conversion, Policy Reform, and the Lessons Learned." *Globalization and Health* 11, no. 1 (2015): 24, doi: [10.1186/s12992-015-0107-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-015-0107-y).

states³¹⁸). From 2007 to 2009, President Bush signed the *Federal Obesity Prevention Act*, *Healthy Foods for Healthy Living Act*, and the *Menu Education and Labeling Act*. This suite of bills created an anti-obesity taskforce, “authorized the US Department of Agriculture to provide grants to the states to encourage the consumption of fruits and vegetables while requiring Medicare and Medicaid to cover services for obesity prevention/treatment,” and mandated calorie labeling for restaurant chains. The broad focus of these bills was the improvement of consumer education about healthy eating and begin to address the availability of certain types of foods.³¹⁹

Obesity reached the apex of federal attention during Barack Obama’s administration, thanks to the attention of First Lady Michelle Obama. The Obama administration, to whom Michael Pollan and others had directed pleas for a “National Food Policy,” planted the “White House Kitchen Garden”—a fitting illustration of the policy priorities of the mainstream AFM. Michelle Obama, in dedicating the garden, said she was excited to educate children about “healthful, locally grown fruit and vegetables at a time when obesity and diabetes have become a national concern.”³²⁰ This moment signifies the extent to which the AFM has convinced the highest echelons of policymakers that “locally grown fruits and vegetables” could have an impact on obesity levels. The garden was established in concert with Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move*, a public health initiative that aimed to reduce rates of childhood obesity. In 2010, almost one-third of children ages two to nineteen were overweight or obese. President Barack Obama

³¹⁸ Robert Preidt, "Parents Find Kids' Weight Report Cards Hard to Swallow," HealthDay, February 14, 2018, , <https://bit.ly/2F6qKsI>.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 187.

concurrently ordered the creation of the inaugural Task Force on Childhood Obesity, which would formulate a 124-page, seventy-recommendation report detailing a policy menu of options to “solve the problem of childhood obesity within a generation.”³²¹

Let's Move's policy focuses include improving consumer—and especially parental—knowledge about nutrition, raising the health standards for public school lunches, increasing physical access to healthier foods, and encouraging exercise.³²² As mentioned above, in December of that year, Congress passed the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, which increased funding and nutrition standards for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s child nutrition programs, especially the school lunch program.³²³ Other policy achievements of *Let's Move* include an updated nutrition facts label, the launch of “MyPlate,” more salad bars in schools, programs to increase children's physical activity, and a massive public education campaign (Obama's appearance on Sesame Street was a highlight).³²⁴ The *Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act* also formalized SNAP nutrition education as, “SNAP-Ed,” an education and grant program. The Act, crucially, called “for SNAP-Ed to include an emphasis on obesity prevention in addition to nutrition education.”³²⁵

The quantifiable impact of *Let's Move* and the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act* on obesity rates has been muted, though. Some states have seen declines in obesity among

³²¹ *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation*, May 2010, <https://bit.ly/2HFezad>.

³²² The White House, Office of the First Lady, “First Lady Michelle Obama Launches Let's Move: America's Move to Raise a Healthier Generation of Kids,” news release, February 09, 2010, Obama White House Archives, <https://bit.ly/2vEbOBf>.

³²³ “School Meals: The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, October 05, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2JhEpy3>.

³²⁴ Achievements,” Let's Move, <https://bit.ly/2qQ4mOr>.

³²⁵ *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) Facts* (USDA FNS, August 2012), <https://bit.ly/2Hju8Vz>.

toddlers,³²⁶ participation in school lunch programs has increased,³²⁷ and a few counties that have aggressively and holistically targeted obesity have seen drastic declines.³²⁸ However, national rates of obesity and overweight among children are more or less the same (31.3%).³²⁹ This failure should be interpreted as a red flag that points to the vexed politics of obesity. A Democratic administration's efforts to combat obesity were fundamentally rooted in ideas that stemmed from a flawed conceptualization of the causes of obesity rooted in a personal responsibility model.³³⁰

Conclusion

Ideology has consequences. Like work requirements and intrusive eligibility rules, purchase restrictions on SNAP would not meaningfully reduce overweight and obesity, just reduce benefits for the poor. Restrictions would by definition be regressive—only poor people would be affected, because only poor people qualify for SNAP. The stigma at the checkout counter that was reduced with the introduction of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards would return as clerks became the food police. To date, the USDA has resisted calls to restrict the use of SNAP benefits on the basis of (1) a lack of standards for what “healthy” means, (2) the resultant increase in program complexity and

³²⁶ Cynthia L. Ogden, Margaret D. Carroll, Brian K. Kit, Katherine M. Flegal. Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States, 2011-2012, *JAMA*, 2014;311(8):806–814. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.732

³²⁷ USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, "Fact Sheet: Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act School Meals Implementation," news release, June 01, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2vCRvnx>.

³²⁸ "The State of Childhood Obesity," <https://bit.ly/2HUYSJO>.

³²⁹ "Percentage of Children who are Overweight," <https://kaiserf.am/2qQ5xgP>.

³³⁰ For a summary of studies that dispute the role of exercise in weight loss: Julia Belluz and Javier Zarracina, "Why You Shouldn't Exercise to Lose Weight, Explained with 60 Studies," *Vox*, October 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2t1hVdE>.

cost, (3) the likely *ineffectiveness* of restrictions (because SNAP does not cover all of a family's food costs, beneficiaries would likely continue to buy the same bundle of goods and spend their own money on soda/sugar/etc), and (4) a lack of evidence that SNAP impacts obesity.³³¹ However, the new administration's policy priorities for the USDA are unpredictable and 2018 is a Farm Bill year with a GOP-controlled legislature; it is likely that Wisconsin's attempt to restrict food stamps will be blessed by the USDA, and that other states will follow suit. It is perhaps only a matter of time until a amendment advances at the national level.

Why has the fatness heuristic been employed? This essay has argued that it is because of the specific way SNAP is subject to the 21st century iteration of welfare reform in the era of the "obesity epidemic."³³² The push to restrict SNAP to healthy foods is an insidious iteration of a persistent punitive impulse in welfare politics. The reason restrictions have so much salience is because they are the contemporary, post-obesity crisis response to welfare reform, a way to police the behavior of means-based entitlement program beneficiaries.

The curious alignment of left-leaning public health advocates, policymakers, and the general public with conservative politicians is the result of an imperfect storm. Fiscal conservatives and taxpayers skeptical of government assistance link bad outcomes to individual choices. Flawed nutrition science has painted obesity as a consequence of diet and exercise rather than factors beyond individual human control, like the increasing

³³¹ *Implications of Restricting the Use of Food Stamps*, March 1, 2007, <https://bit.ly/2qVxcfs>.

³³² I also think the "whitening" of beneficiaries has played a role: Race is less dominant of a heuristic in SNAP politics now: fatness is the substitute. Source: Arthur Delaney and Alissa Scheller, "Who Gets Food Stamps? White People, Mostly," Huffington Post, December 06, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2CYJ0WL>.

prevalence of obesogens. Fat-phobia and healthism have engendered a “national eating disorder” wherein food consumption is conceptualized in terms of weight maintenance or loss over all else.³³³ Fears of the “undeserving poor” marry with anti-fat stigma, the pathologization of poverty, public health neuroses, behavioral economics dictates, traditional notions of domesticity, and the racial coding inherent to welfare politics to make the shopping carts of SNAP participants a pivotal site in the debate over the future of the program. The focus on poor people’s diets epitomizes the degree to which neoliberalism has infiltrated the food movement, the public health community, anti-hunger activists, and policymakers. The effort to police poor families’ diets while declining to enforce such standards for wealthier households speaks to America’s longstanding tradition of demonizing the poor and assuming different standards for the wealthy. And it won’t reduce Americans’ weight.

Food is not just about nutritional value. It’s about family, religion, ethnicity, ability, taste, preference, class and employment status, education, prices, environment, community, history, trauma, and all of the other vectors of identity. It’s a central component of the way we understand ourselves in relationship to our own minds and bodies and the minds and bodies of others. This paper doesn’t mean to discount the health risks associated with fatness, but to question the dominant narratives about how one gets a fat body, the biological versus social consequences of a fat body, and what the state should do with fat bodies. Academics and policymakers would do well to inspect the

³³³ Guthman, *Weighing In*, 57.

subtle and overt ways body size is influencing government policy. It is time for an examination of the political economy of fatness.