

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

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Title: Examining the Causes of Variation between States in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's Participation Rates: Empirical and Case Study Analysis

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Brent S. Steel

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federal nutrition assistance program in the US aiming at improving health and nutrition among low-income individuals and households. SNAP is a means tested program that provides monthly cash benefits to eligible households and individuals whose assets and net monthly incomes are below a certain threshold determined by the federal government. The benefits can be used to purchase eligible food items from participating grocery stores and farmers markets.

While the number of SNAP recipients has grown enormously since the program inception in 1961, many eligible households and individuals still do not enroll in the program. Participation rate, which is the percentage of eligible households who actually participate in the program, varies greatly among states. Some states achieved a 100% participation rate, meaning that all eligible households and individuals are enrolled in the program. Other states are lagging behind in terms of enrolling all those in need.

Although SNAP is federally funded, and the eligibility criteria are determined on the national level, state governments are responsible for the program administration. States also share the administrative costs with the federal government. In addition, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) - also known as welfare reform - gave states the latitude to implement several policies that affect SNAP outcomes. In particular, states

can affect SNAP outcomes through policies that impact the cost of enrolling in the program, the availability of information, and the stigma attached to participation.

This dissertation employs a mixed methodology to examine the key political, policy, demographic and administrative variables that led to variations between states in SNAP participation rates. An empirical examination shows that some SNAP policies are important factors in explaining SNAP participation rates. For example, simplified reporting, whereby SNAP recipients need not report changes in their incomes or assets once they take place contributed to increasing participation rates. Also, using a broad-based categorical eligibility and extending certification period have a positive effect on participation rates. Fingerprinting, on the other hand, played a significant role in reducing participation rates in states where this requirement was imposed. Other SNAP policies do not seem to be significant in affecting participation rates such as online applications, operating call centers, and using telephone interviews during application. The results of two qualitative case studies in California and Oregon suggest that political factors, state-specific policies and demographics, and governance structures also matter. Political variables, for example, play an important role in affecting public sentiments towards public assistance and welfare recipients, leading to either an encouraging or inhibiting environment for participating in SNAP. Additionally, state demographics, particularly related to Hispanic and African American proportions of the population, are another potential cause for variations in SNAP participation rates.

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Examining the Causes of Variation between States in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance  
Program's Participation Rates: Empirical and Case Study Analysis

by

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Mohamed Abdelsalam Elkaramany, Author

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## Introduction

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program (FSP), is the largest federal nutrition assistance program in the US. Its aim is to ensure an adequate level of consumption of nutritious food by low-income households (Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2016). SNAP assists these households in purchasing sufficient amounts of food when facing financial hardships (Tiehen et al., 2017). It provides a monthly cash benefit to participating households or individuals delivered through an Electronic Benefits Transfer system (EBT). The monthly cash benefit is transferred to an electronic card that can only be used at participating grocery stores and farmers markets to purchase eligible food products. SNAP benefits can be used to purchase almost all food items except alcoholic beverages, tobacco products and hot food prepared in stores. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets the eligibility criteria of enrollment. In order to be eligible, a person's gross income should typically not exceed 130% of the poverty threshold, and the net income should not exceed 100% of the poverty threshold. Monthly net income is calculated after a set of deductibles is applied that include, for example, housing costs, medical expenses for the elderly and disabled, child care and utilities costs. Benefits are calculated based on the difference between a household's net income and the cost of adequate food consumption.

As of August 2017, over 42 million Americans received more than \$63 billions in SNAP benefits with a monthly average of \$125 per person and \$245 per household (Cronquist & Lauffer, 2019). The number of participants and, consequently, the program's costs have increased significantly since its inception. In 1965, only half a million individuals received FSP benefits with a total cost of \$75 million (including benefit and administrative costs). However, the increase has been neither steady nor constant over time. Two remarkable periods when SNAP costs and participation soared were the early years of the program until 1976, and the twelve years following the universal application of the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) in 2002, which includes the five years following the Great Recession of 2008 and the subsequent stimulus package. Between these two periods, SNAP experienced moderate increases and decreases in

caseload and costs, depending on economic conditions and policy changes that will be discussed in detail throughout this dissertation.

SNAP has proved to be an effective program in reaching its goals. Evidence suggests that it played an important role in reducing poverty and food insecurity, as well as in improving health, nutrition and the wellbeing of its recipients (see for example: Lee et al., 2006; Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2009; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Mabli & Worthington, 2014). Given the importance of the program and its magnitude in terms of costs and number of beneficiaries, SNAP has received a great deal of attention in the literature. As will be discussed in the coming chapters, several dimensions of SNAP have been examined that can be generally grouped under two main themes. The first one focuses on SNAP enrollment and caseload size by examining macroeconomic changes such as unemployment, poverty, recession, etc. and changes in welfare and SNAP policies. This strand in the literature found that a rise in unemployment, inflation and poverty rates contributed to increasing enrollment. The other broad theme in the literature investigated the impact of SNAP on its recipients' well being and behavior examining issues such as poverty, food security, nutrition, eating choices, work incentives, etc.

However an important area that remains underexplored in the literature are participation rates. Participation rates refer to the percentage of those who enroll in the program compared to the overall eligible population. It is a concept distinct from caseload. The latter refers to the absolute number of individuals who enroll in the program, while the former indicates the percentage of eligible people who actually participate. Participation rate is an important indicator of the program effectiveness and success. The failure to enroll all eligible individuals not only means missing those who are in need of public assistance, but it is also a loss to states who forgo federal funding that benefits their local economies. Most importantly, given the positive impact of SNAP on its recipients in terms of reducing poverty and hunger, and improving health and well being, low participation rates adversely contributes to poverty and hunger.

Participation rates have been increasing over time. Nevertheless, the national rate is far from the optimal. In 2017, the participation rate was 84%: 38 million Americans received SNAP benefits out of 45 million eligible persons, indicating that 7 millions were eligible but did not

participate (Vigil, 2019). Furthermore, among working poor households, participation rates were even worse. In 2017, only 73% of eligible households enrolled in the program (Vigil, 2019). In addition, SNAP participation rates vary considerably between states. While some states have managed to reach a 100% participation rate, such as Washington and Oregon, meaning that every eligible individual participates in SNAP, others still lag behind. For example, Wyoming has the lowest participation rate in the nation with only 56% of eligible individuals actually enrolled in the program in 2016.

Although SNAP is federally funded and the USDA determines eligibility criteria, states are in charge of administering the program and share the administrative costs with the federal government. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), also known as the “welfare reform”, allowed states to have control over the program administration and to design their own policies and outreach activities to enhance the program’s implementation and outcomes. For example, states could determine the length of the certification period whereby SNAP recipients should report any changes in their income or assets that might affect their eligibility. Also, states may require fingerprinting applicants, impose a ban on enrollment of convicted drug felons, operate call centers to provide information on SNAP eligibility and application, offer SNAP online applications, among other policies.

Taking advantage of the variation in SNAP policies, and using a mixed methodology approach, this dissertation investigates the key policy variables as well as the demographic, political, administrative and governance structure differences among states to identify the main determinants of SNAP participation rates. In that regard, the dissertation is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 provides a background on SNAP and its historical development including the major changes that have been made and affected caseload and enrollment. In addition, this chapter also highlights the main features of SNAP that resemble the general characteristics of the US welfare system and public assistance programs. Furthermore, it discusses the positive impact of SNAP on its recipients in terms of reducing poverty and food insecurity, and improving health and nutrition.

Chapter 2 serves two purposes. First, it provides an historical perspective about the US welfare system and illuminates the ideological and normative values that have shaped the design of public assistance programs in the US. Second, it introduces the fundamental concepts that will be discussed throughout the dissertation and hence helps to contextualize the discussion and arguments presented thereafter.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature on barriers to enrollment in public assistance programs with a particular focus on SNAP. These barriers are classified to three main areas; information costs, transaction costs and welfare stigma. The second strand of literature that will be investigated is the impact of politics on the welfare state. This chapter also includes the research questions and methodology.

Chapter 4 presents an empirical examination of the factors that affect SNAP participation rates. Using panel data on the 50 states spanning from 1996 to 2016, it utilizes the variation among states in SNAP policies, politics, ethnic and racial composition to evaluate the impact of those variables on SNAP participation rates.

Chapter 5 and 6 dig deeper and closely profile two case studies with contrasting SNAP participation rates: California and Oregon. While both states have progressive leniencies, and have adopted somehow similar SNAP policies, they have very large variations in SNAP participation rates. The two case studies examine policy, political and administrative areas that are not covered in the empirical analysis. Finally, chapter 7 presents policy recommendations, and concludes.

## **Chapter 1. SNAP Background and Historical Development**

### **I. Early Years**

In January 1961, President Kennedy issued an Executive Order authorizing the implementation of the Food Stamp Program (FSP) pilot projects in eight counties in the United States. Due to the successful outcomes of these projects, additional areas were added to reach forty counties and three cities to extend benefits to 380,000 people. The FSP became a permanent program in the US safety net on August 31, 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Food Stamp Act (FSA) giving states the right to implement a federally funded Food Stamp Program. The number of states and counties adopting the program continued to grow so that in 1973 the FSA was amended to mandate that all states have a FSP by 1975<sup>1</sup>.

Throughout its history, SNAP (the renamed FSP as of 2008) has not been immune from changes that have altered its path. Those changes had varying effects on caseload size, either positively or negatively, depending on their nature: whether, for example, eligibility criteria were relaxed or tightened. The 1977 Food and Agriculture Act (also known as the 1977 Farm Bill) impacted different groups in different ways. It eliminated the purchase requirement that mandated recipients to purchase food vouchers at a lower price (the food voucher is worth more than what the beneficiaries pay, and the difference is the cash benefit). This led to an increase in caseload size. The Farm Bill also included other measures that helped increase enrollment. These measures included using mail, telephone, and home visits for certifying applicants; establishing a 30-day standard processing time for applications; hiring bilingual personnel; and using bilingual materials to help reach a diverse population. However, it also tightened eligibility criteria by excluding students and immigrants, imposing a work requirement on certain beneficiaries, and penalizing beneficiaries who voluntarily left their jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed history can be found at: [www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/timeline.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/timeline.pdf)

## **II. The 1996 Welfare Reform**

In 1996, Congress passed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) commonly known as the welfare reform. PRWORA was a major welfare reform legislative bill that dramatically changed the US social assistance system as a whole including the FSP. The biggest change was the termination of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was replaced with the more restrictive and less generous Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). With regard to FSP (which would not be renamed SNAP until the 2008 Farm Bill was passed), PRWORA banned the participation of legal immigrants, even those who had been in the United States before its passage. In addition, a time limit was imposed so that Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) could only participate for three months every three years if they did not work or engage in a work-related activity at least 20 hours each week. The work requirement is one of the oldest SNAP rules that is still in existence today. Not surprisingly, FSP participation of legal immigrants as well as ABAWDs fell dramatically after the welfare reform (Currie et al., 2001). On the other hand, PRWORA required all states to implement the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards by October 1, 2002. EBT replaced the food voucher system where every beneficiary was provided with an ATM-like card to which the monthly benefits are transferred. The card can be used in eligible grocery stores and farmers' markets. Aside from its administrative and efficiency merits (reducing fraud and creating electronic records), the EBT system arguably reduced the stigma associated with receiving benefits since it eliminated the usage of food vouchers in grocery stores that was an obvious sign of being a participant in the program (Kabbani & Wilde, 2003).

## **III. Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT)**

States implemented their statewide EBT systems at different times. However, there is no evidence in the literature suggesting that fast or late adoption of EBT by states is motivated by the desire to increase participation. One of the reasons for this variation could be states' different administrative and financial capacities in adopting an electronic system which involved complexities related to procuring contractor design services, administering the system and integrating it with the USDA and state SNAP offices (Stegman et al., 2003).

Although research suggests that replacing food vouchers with EBT cards is associated with higher caseload since it reduced welfare stigma, this was not the main intention of the government. Instead, the primary aim was to reduce fraud since some recipients exchanged their paper food vouchers for money. In addition, the transformation to the EBT system occurred as part of a general government movement towards a paperless system and government reinvention, as the government sought to cut administrative costs, and improve service delivery (Humphrey, 1996). The actual legislative proposal that included using EBT as a substitute to the food vouchers highlighted reducing costs as well as stopping abuses of the system by some recipients as the key reasons for proposing the shift to EBT (Congressional Record E 1148, 1996).

#### **IV. The 2002 Farm Bill, and the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act**

Noticeably, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 – commonly referred to as the 2002 Farm Bill – restored eligibility to formerly restricted groups and facilitated program access to encourage enrollment (Zedlewski & Rader, 2005). Children, as well as disabled immigrants, and legal immigrants who had been in the United States for five years retained eligibility to enroll in SNAP, leading to an increase in the participation of those groups (Capps et al., 2004). The 2002 Farm bill coincided with the nationwide application of EBT cards which reduced administrative costs, fraud and welfare stigma. As a result, caseload size witnessed a remarkable increase (Zedlewski & Rader, 2005; Klerman & Danielson, 2011). This trend was sustained until 2012, particularly after the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009 that came in response to the 2008 recession. The recession led to skyrocketing unemployment and rising poverty rates across the entire nation, causing more people to be in need of welfare assistance, especially those with less education and labor market skills. In addition, the Act increased SNAP benefits for existing recipients and relaxed eligibility criteria by, for example, allowing states to suspend the work requirement applied to ABAWDs (Zedlewski et al., 2012). Enrollment jumped from 28.2 million participants in 2008 to 33.5 in 2009, 40.3 million in 2010, and 44.7 in 2011. Program cost rose from \$37.6 billions in 2008 to \$53.6 billions in 2009, \$68.2 billions in 2010 and \$75.7 billions in 2011 ( U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

## V. SNAP Features and Rules

In order to gain a better understanding of SNAP features and rules, it is important to connect the program to the overall welfare state system in the United States. It is hard to comprehend the dynamics of the program apart from the full scope of US social policy, which is the product of ideology, values and beliefs. SNAP exhibits the same fundamental features of the US welfare system and reflects how poverty, its causes and solutions are conceptualized in US social policy. In his notable book, *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Andersen (1990) creates a typology of welfare state regimes in industrialized democracies. The United States is classified as a liberal welfare state model with unique characteristics that make its system and social programs distinct from other industrialized democracies. In such a model, the welfare state is dominated by social assistance programs that are not universal but rather means-tested, the eligibility criteria to participate are restrictive and usually include work conditions, the benefits are modest, and enrollment is associated with welfare stigma. SNAP could be seen as a prime example of this model in light of the following:

- 1- SNAP is a means tested program where only those who fall beneath a financial threshold are qualified to participate. Once an individual's income or assets become higher than the threshold, he/she is no longer eligible to benefit from SNAP. Federally mandated eligibility criteria stipulate that to be eligible, a household's gross monthly income must be less than 130% of the national poverty threshold (adjusted for the number of household members and including income from all other resources including benefits of other social assistance programs). A household's net monthly income must not exceed the national poverty line and the assets owned by a household must be less than a federally determined threshold (as of November 2019, liquefied assets must range from \$2,250 to \$3,250 and a vehicle with a fair market value of less than \$4,650). Net income is calculated after a set of deductible expenditures are applied including housing, medical, childcare, education and utility costs. Households participating in other programs such as TANF and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) may be deemed automatically eligible for SNAP under an administrative approach named as broad-based categorical eligibility, where achieving eligibility in one program automatically qualifies one for another

program. Nevertheless, this policy is not federally mandated and thus states may choose not to use it.

- 2- In addition to the qualifying financial criteria, SNAP rules require that all able bodied adults between the ages of 16 and 60 register for work, accept job offers and participate in job training activities. ABAWDs between the ages of 18 and 50 can only participate in SNAP for a maximum of three months every three years unless they work or perform job related activities for at least 20 hours every week.
- 3- The benefits are minimal: Notwithstanding the positive impact of SNAP on its recipients in terms of improved health and nutrition, benefit amounts are small. In fact, many SNAP recipient households are still food insecure, indicating that the benefits are not enough and do not correspond to the actual needs of the recipients (Carlson, 2019). The reason for the low benefit amount results from the outdated calculation of the poverty threshold, which determines who is eligible for participation, and the thrifty food plan upon which benefit amounts are calculated. The poverty threshold is calculated based on the assumption that a household spends a third of its income on food (Blank, 2008). For example, if the cost of adequate food consumption is \$500 monthly, the poverty threshold is triple that amount, which is \$1500. However, evidence shows that with changing lifestyles and the increases in medical, housing, child care and education costs, a typical household spends almost an eighth of its income on food consumption (Couch & Pirog, 2010, p. 217). Consequently, this means that in the example mentioned above, the poverty threshold should be eight times food expenditure or \$4000. On the other hand, every year USDA announces a Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which includes the minimum cost of purchasing an adequate food basket. The SNAP benefit amount is determined based on the difference between a person's disposable income and the cost of an adequate diet according to the TFP. Research shows that the TFP underestimates the actual cost of low cost meals. According to Waxman et al. (2018), the actual average cost per meal is 27% higher than the cost that the TFP suggests. Consequently, SNAP's cost per meal is not sufficient in 99% counties in the US.
- 4- SNAP recipients, like those who participate in other welfare programs, are often stigmatized. Welfare recipients in general are usually framed as unproductive, system

abusers and welfare dependents. Some states, such as California, have until recently fingerprinted SNAP applicants to combat the double utilization of benefits. In addition, states that impose bans on drug-related behavior might require applicants to submit a drug test prior to approving their applications. In other states, policy makers have proposed including a photo of the principal SNAP beneficiary on EBT cards. The next chapter will thoroughly examine the normative values that contributed to debasing welfare recipients.

- 5- Enrollment in SNAP is time limited: Unemployed ABAWDs can participate for a maximum of 3 months every 3 years. To remain enrolled beyond this limit, participants have to work or do work-related activities for 80 hours monthly, such as searching for jobs, participating in training or capacity-building activities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). Indeed SNAP is less restrictive than TANF, which, for example, places a five-year limit on participation for all participants regardless of work status (Farrell et al., 2008).
- 6- Sanctions: State agencies in charge of administering the program have the right to punish both applicants and recipients who fail to comply with the program requirements and suspend benefits for a period of time. For example, when recipients fail to comply with work requirements for the first time, they become disqualified for one month; three months if there is a second case of noncompliance; and six months for a third noncompliance or even permanent disqualification at the state's discretion (Hahn et al., 2017). On the other hand, many states impose a lifetime ban on convicted drug felons, depriving them of benefits even after they complete their sentences.

## **VI. States' Power over SNAP**

While the federal government controls the program through funding and setting the general eligibility criteria, states enjoy considerable authority over the administration of the program that can indeed affect program outcomes (Edwards et al., 2016). For example, while the federal government determines eligibility criteria, it is within the state's authority to determine the length of eligibility certification periods and to design outreach programs to inform and recruit eligible households (Dickert-Conlin et al., 2012). Similarly, state governments affect enrollment

and participation rates using the time limit for unemployed able-bodied adults (Bolen & Dean, 2018). States have the right to request from the USDA a temporary waiver of the employment condition for areas with insufficient job opportunities or where unemployment is substantially higher than the national unemployment rate. However, waivers are limited in scope and governed by federal criteria pertaining to the conditions that must exist for certain areas to be eligible for the waiver of time limit (Bolen & Dean, 2018). It is important to note that applying for waivers is optional and that states have discretionary power in that regard. As such, state governments can impact participation rates by simply exercising their power not to act regardless of whether eligible SNAP participants deserve waivers of the time limit rule. Evidence shows that not all states request waivers. According to the most recent published report by the Food and Nutrition Service for the third quarter of fiscal year 2018 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018), 17 states did not apply for waivers during this year.

States can also make administrative changes to facilitate the process of application and recertification designed to promote higher enrollment and participation rates. For example, New York state reduced barriers to participation by implementing an online application system, waiving the resource test through which financial resources are calculated in certain cases, and partnering with local NGOs to identify eligible households and provide assistance throughout the application process (Kaye et al., 2013). Edwards et al. (2016) compared the dynamics of caseload in Florida and Oregon, and found that while the former initiated electronic system earlier, the later managed to reach higher participation as a result of collaborating with community organizations, facilitating the application process, extending certification periods and raising the income eligibility limit.

Furthermore, while PRWORA prohibited the participation of drug felons in SNAP or TANF, it has permitted states to suspend this rule. States have varied in their application of this rule. As of 2017, Indiana, Mississippi, West Virginia, and South Carolina continue to apply the rule in a stringent fashion and ban those who were convicted of a drug felony from participating in SNAP. Other states such as Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin require drug tests for former drug felons (McCarty et al., 2016).

## VII. SNAP Importance and Impact

SNAP has an overall positive impact on its recipients, especially when comparing those who are eligible and participate in the program with those who are eligible and do not participate (Tiehen et al., 2017). Kim (2016) used a difference-in-differences strategy and found that increasing SNAP benefits increased consumption of food, housing, and education among participants compared to those who are eligible and do not participate. Hoynes and Schanzenbach (2009) used data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and found that the introduction of FSP (that is, SNAP) leads to increases in food stamp receipt, and that the FSP increases total food spending and decreases the propensity to eat out. The explanation is that a cash grant shifts the consumer's budget line upwards, where higher utility can be attained by consuming more food and non-food items (Beatty & Tuttle, 2014).

Importantly, SNAP was found to be effective in addressing food insecurity and food insufficiency among low-income groups. Nord and Coleman-Jensen (2010) and Nord (2012) found that SNAP “leavers” - those who were no longer participating in the program - were more likely to become food insecure than those who remained in the program. Leavers may be required to involuntarily withdraw from the program because their incomes slightly increased, making them financially ineligible to continue. They may also leave due to bureaucratic errors by agencies or by participants’ errors in providing needed information for re-certification to remain in the program. Ratcliffe et al. (2011) developed an Instrumental Variable (IV) model using nationally representative data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) between the late 1990s and 2005 to estimate the impact of receiving SNAP benefits on food hardships. The authors used SNAP participation rules as an IV that directly affects program participation but does not directly affect food security: that is, in the absence of the program, those rules have no relationship with food security. In particular, the instrumental variables used were the following: biometric technology (finger prints to reduce multiple participation fraud), outreach spending, full immigrant eligibility and partial immigrant eligibility. They found that SNAP receipt reduced the likelihood of being food insecure by 31.2%, and the likelihood of being very food insecure by 20.2%

In addition to contributing to reducing food insecurity among its recipients, studies also found a positive impact on improving the health and nutrition of Americans. While it does not mainly target children, SNAP has a positive impact on them. Mabli and Worthington (2014) surveyed a sample of children in 3,000 households who remained in the program for six months and found that SNAP participation was associated with an approximately one-third decrease in the odds of children being food insecure or severely food insecure. Several studies found that SNAP contributes to higher dietary quality (Basiotis et al., 1998), increasing children's intake of essential vitamins and supplements such as iron, zinc and vitamin A (Rose et al., 1998), and hence reducing their nutritional deficiencies (Lee et al., 2006) and chances of being hospitalized (Cook J. T., et al., 2006). Utilizing the variation in FSP introduction in US states, Almond, Hoynes, and Schanzenbach (2011) found that pregnant women who participated in the program during their pregnancies gave birth to higher weight babies, indicating that FSP improved birth outcomes and helps decrease neonatal mortality.

On the other hand, in the absence of studies that link SNAP and family stability, it can be plausibly argued that SNAP has a mitigating effect on family stress and contributes to family stability. According to the family stress model, poverty and economic hardships have a negative impact on parents, affecting their behavior and interpersonal relations, and consequently have an overall negative impact on children and the structure of the family (Kavanaugh et al., 2018). Parents who lack the financial resources to secure the material needs of their family suffer from emotional distress that leads to potential parental conflict, which has psychological and social implications on their children (Neppel et al., 2016). Children may suffer in various ways such as low school performance, absence from school, depression and substance abuse (Dean et al., 2010) that tend to perpetuate intergenerational poverty. SNAP's cash equivalence benefits are used for food expenditures, freeing up household resources to be spent on other items such as housing, transportation, clothing and entertainment. By raising the household's disposable income, SNAP helps to minimize economic hardships and family stress.

## Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework

This chapter aims to provide a broad overview of the welfare state and social assistance schemes in the US. It does not focus on SNAP per se, but seeks to elucidate the philosophical traditions that shape the US welfare state in its modern form. For conceptual clarity, I also introduce the key concepts that will be discussed throughout this dissertation. These are important undertakings in order to put SNAP as one of the major public assistance programs in the larger context of the US social policy.

Essentially, any serious discussion of public policy without duly examining the values, beliefs and norms that contributed to the policy formulation will result in misperceptions and only a partial understanding. Public policies are value-laden tools aiming to achieve certain goals, and therefore we cannot decide whether a policy is good or bad in isolation of the values and intentions of its creators. In fact, policies are evaluated against how successful they are in achieving the desired outcomes sought by policymakers. People often mistakenly conceive of public policies as merely objective means of changing the world. By doing so, they overlook the fact that policies are indeed the result of a dynamic and complex process involving multiple stakeholders with diverging interests, values, and powers. In this chapter, I will draw from the key ideas of two policy process frameworks: the Social Construction of Target Population Framework (SCF), and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). Both theoretical frameworks aim at understanding and explaining why, how and when a policy change or a development occurs.

The main assumption of SCF is that the world is socially constructed (Cairney & Heikkila, 2014, p. 369) and that policies are the result of how a group is socially constructed in the society. The social construction of a group “influences the policy agenda and the selection of policy tools, as well as the rationales that legitimate policy choices” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). Policies are not made rationally, problems are not well defined, and policy alternatives are not thoroughly examined. Instead, policies targeting groups in society either confer benefits or impose burdens based on how this group is socially constructed and how much political power it has (Schneider et al., 2014). In other words, the SCF treats social construction of a group as an

independent variable that affects the policies targeting this group. Groups are classified according to their deservedness and political power into four types (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 107). Advantaged groups, such as the middle class, are positively constructed as deserving benefits, and they also possess power. Contenders, such as business groups are negatively constructed. But since they too have power, they receive benefits. Dependents, such as poor children, are positively constructed as deserving but, because they lack power, benefits conferred to them are trivial. And finally, deviants, such as sex offenders and criminals, are negatively constructed and lack power, therefore, policies targeting them commonly impose burdens.

The NPF, on the other hand, is one of the “most established and utilized theories in the policy process” (Weible, 2014, p. 391) that attempts to examine how policy narratives are used in the policy making process to influence policy outcomes. NPF assumes that people are boundedly rational, and thus are not capable of making rational cost benefit calculations before making decisions. Instead, their actions are primarily affected by narratives and informed by their values and norms (Jones & Radaelli, 2015). People use informational shortcuts to make their decisions. They are engaged in confirmation or disconfirmation biases that influence how they understand and interpret the information they receive (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 232-233). Policy actors use narratives to shape policy images in an attempt to influence public opinion and promote their favorable policy option. Policy narratives determine the people’s position towards the policy in question. Therefore, successful policy actors can set the stage by defining the problem and its magnitude, identifying the characters and their role in the problem, and then providing the solution that serves as the moral of the story (Jones & McBeth, 2010).

## **I. The Ideological Roots of the US Welfare System**

The starting point in understanding social assistance programs in the US is to identify their philosophical and ideological roots. The US welfare system has been greatly influenced by the classical and neoclassical political economy that views the free market as the proper mechanism to maximize individual and the public interests. The free-market system with a minimal government intervention is assumed to guarantee the optimum and most efficient utilization of society’s resources. Labor is conceived as a good that a human being can sell in the marketplace.

It is a commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand. Consequently, the price of labor, i.e. wages, is determined by how much business owners are willing to pay for it (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). Consequently, survival in the market depends on the individual's ability to provide labor services that others need. Therefore, unemployment is an individual failure because the market as a whole cannot fail (Baumol, 1999). Importantly, hardship is inevitable as there will always be some individuals who cannot sell their labor services. This does not mean that the market is inherently deficient, but rather the individual's labor skills are not needed in the marketplace (business owners are not willing to pay for the skills the worker has). However, this hardship is believed to be temporary. It will only last until those individuals recognize that their skills and the products they produce have limited value in the market. Hence, they will adjust their behavior, skills and products to find buyers who are willing to pay an adequate price for what they are offering (Caporaso & Levine, 1992, p. 39). Inequality is not just inevitable, but also a natural occurrence in the process of progress, without which society will fail to advance and prosper. Hayek (1960) noted, "The rapid economic advance that we have come to expect seems in a large measure to be the result of this inequality and to be impossible without it" (p. 42). Given that, the idea of redistributive policies is undesirable as it impedes progress and "slowdowns the movement of the whole and in the long run holds back those in the rear" (Hayek, 1960, p. 48).

This economic philosophy resonated with and supported an individualistic culture, where individual problems are perceived as individual failure that can best be addressed by the individuals themselves, and not by the community or government (Elazar as cited in (Simon et al., 2011, p. 35). According to this view, poverty is perceived as an individual failure instead of a market deficiency, and measured by material deprivation instead of social exclusion and marginalization. Productivity, hard work, free market and efficiency have become the values that many policy makers in the US promote and strive to achieve through economic and social policies. The US welfare system has been devised to achieve those goals and to "send the message that poverty is the problem of the individual, the local community, "failed" families, and not the broader socioeconomic structure of society" (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 111). The byproduct is a system that minimizes decommmodification of labor (Andersen, 1990) where individuals have to rely on the market for their survival, in the absence of supportive government

agencies and programs. These ideas have prevailed in American society and formed a unique trademark in the US welfare system compared to other industrialized democracies. Importantly, these ideas represent a form of power exercised through socioeconomic institutions that define a good and bad citizen based on their connection and contribution in the market. Welfare programs such as SNAP and TANF provide minimum benefits to their beneficiaries and impose work requirements on their recipients to encourage work and reduce dependency on public assistance. They afford cash or near-cash assistance to increase the income of an individual or a household to help meet their basic needs. They provide a temporary cushion against market shocks, but they do not provide solutions for the problem of poverty itself. They do not intend to restructure the institutions that gave rise to poverty and inequality in the first place, largely because poverty is perceived as a personal and individual failure.

## **II. The Social Construction of Welfare Recipients**

Emanating from these ideas, the poor are often portrayed as irresponsible, immoral, and lacking self-discipline and rational decision making, all of which ultimately entrap them in poverty. The logic goes that therefore the government should not tax hard-working Americans to fund those who are responsible for their own poverty. As a result, welfare policies in the US, especially in the 1970s and afterwards embraced tendencies of both neoliberalism and paternalism (Soss et al., 2009). The views of paternalism and neoliberalism converge on multiple issues, particularly regarding the role of government and the private sector in the economy. Perhaps most notably, they share similar views regarding the supreme value of work. Since the poor cannot control their desires or act rationally, their behavior represents a threat not just to themselves, but also to the entire social order. Therefore, the government is required to intervene to adjust their lives and correct their behavior. Bringing discipline to their lives, and establishing responsible and rational individuals were the main themes that dominated poverty governance during that time. As a consequence, social assistance programs in the US were transformed from “an income redistribution scheme to a behavior modification regime” (Schram, 2000, p. 82). The contemporary American welfare system designed as such has established itself as an institution that perpetuates the negative social construction and powerlessness of welfare recipients.

The ability to socially construct groups in society is a strong and subtle form of power. It allows society and policy makers to make moral and normative judgments about other groups based on their professions, financial status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion (Schneider et al., 2014). It is the power to determine which norms, values, beliefs, practices, and behaviors are to be accepted and promoted in society, and whoever does not comply is signaled as deviant (Camou, 2005; Schneider et al., 2014). Importantly, these constructions are translated into public policies that either punish or reward groups based on their classification. It is evident that policy makers use these social constructions as a tool to pursue their agendas against interests of groups that are negatively socially constructed or lack political power. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) defined power as “when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A” (p.948). Policymakers deliberately and overtly invoke a group’s social construction to justify their policies and to help persuade and garner the support of their constituents before making policy changes (Ingram et al., 2007). They capitalize on the social construction of groups and use public policy as “the primary tool through which government acts to exploit, inscribe, entrench, institutionalize, perpetuate, or change social construction” (Ingram & Schneider, 2005, p. 5). Social constructions are very powerful to the extent that many groups which are subject to these constructions are convinced they are indeed true (Jarrett, 1996).

The history of social assistance programs in the US provides numerous examples of such an exercise of power. Of particular significance is Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), given that its history and development had been influenced by racial prejudices and the promotion of an ideal American family model (Chappell, 2009). AFDC started in 1935 when racial segregation was in place. Apparently, under a racial segregation system and a long history of racism, African Americans were powerless and negatively constructed, so they fit perfectly as a deviant group who should be sanctioned and punished. As a result, they were denied participation regardless of their financial status. Indeed, the program was meant to support male-headed white married families with children that faced temporary financial hardships. The real purpose of the program was to support, preserve and promote this ideal family model in the society (Chappell, 2009). African Americans were considered undeserving

since they were viewed as immoral and irresponsible. In addition, they lacked the instruments and tools of power, and hence they had to comply with such social construction and exclusion. Later on, and after being admitted into the program, they started to suffer further from negative social constructions. In a famous leaked internal US Department of Labor report- “In The Negro Family: The Case For National Action” (also known as Moynihan Report)- Moynihan (1965) provided a detailed description of the lives and problems suffered by Black communities living in urban “ghettos”. The report covered many real challenges facing Black communities at the time such as the high crime rate, delinquency, drug abuse, high unemployment among men, family break ups, and welfare dependence. While the report may have sincerely sought to identify the unique problems facing African Americans, it was, nevertheless, used to racialize poverty and welfare, blame Black communities for their problems, and frame them as irresponsible, immoral, and undeserving (Schram, 2005).

### **III. The Impact of Policy Narratives on Welfare Policies**

Policymakers use their informational advantage and influence to create policy narratives that formulate or reinforce certain social constructions. They promote welfare policies by using narratives to shape the beliefs of the public, and induce them to alter their perceptions, attitudes and behavior towards welfare recipients. Policy narratives are influential tools in reinforcing the social construction of a group by drawing certain images through a story that has characters, a plot and a moral (McBeth et al., 2014). Narratives are transmitted through figures, symbols, images and stories, and aim to influence how people conceive of the problem, its scale and magnitude, its consequences, and the best solutions to tackle it (Jones, 2014). Controlling policy narratives is a power exercised in the form of diverting the attention of the audience, affecting their feelings towards specific issues as well as reshaping and manipulating their minds. This is one of the strongest forms of power exercised that is covert, involves no conflict, and has an enduring effect. Lukes (2005) expressed this idea as follows: “is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?” (p. 27).

The examples of narratives used to socially construct welfare recipients, especially African American single mothers, demonstrate how successful policymakers were in establishing a strong belief among many Americans that this group was undeserving. In addition, they paved the way for the dramatic changes that took place in the 1996 welfare reform. The welfare state turned to “become explicitly defined around stereotypes of African-American women” (Benson-Smith, 2005, p. 243). President Reagan employed this social construction. During his presidential nomination, he told the following story “There's a woman in Chicago. ... She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards. ... She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000” (Blake, 2012). Regardless of the validity of this story, Reagan used it as a form of confirmatory bias to reinforce the image of the “welfare queen”. The welfare queen was the image drawn by welfare opponents to stigmatize recipients of AFDC and profile them as a group of system abusers. “The American taxpayers are fed up. ... They go to work every day...and struggle to make ends meet ... And when they see those precious tax dollars going to support welfare recipients who simply refuse to work... well, they have every right to be furious” said Minnesota Republican Senator Rod Grams during congressional debates of PRWORA (Toft, 2010, p. 576).

While the social construction of welfare recipients started during Reagan's era, it took two decades to produce concrete policy changes. PRWORA terminated AFDC and replaced it with the more restrictive time-limited TANF. With regard to SNAP, it excluded ABAWDs and legal immigrants signaling that both groups were considered as undeserving. Central in welfare reform was “work”, as President Clinton said, “We should require work and responsibility ... We should promote responsibility by requiring young mothers to live at home with their parents or in appropriate, supervised settings and to finish school. But we shouldn't put them and their children on the street” (Pear, 1995). Social constructions and policy narratives were consistently used to facilitate and justify such policy changes. In Senatorial debates during the preparation of PRWORA, Republican Representative John Kasich from Indiana told the following story: “I saw one of my American heroes this morning. ... He sells newspapers. He runs from one car to another car to another car. He is out there when it is raining, he is out there when it is snowing, he is out there when it is hot, he is out there when it is cold. He is wet. He

does his job” (Toft, 2010, p. 575). The purpose of this story was obviously to justify work restrictions incorporated in the welfare reform by praising hard working Americans, and to establish an image of a hero who works hard whatever the circumstances. Policy makers also tried to popularize the idea that ““hard working, law abiding Americans were being exploited by the lazy and criminal poor”” (Soss et al., 2009, p. 11). “It is grossly unfair to ask these same people [middle-class American families] to send their hard-earned tax dollars to support the reckless and irresponsible behavior of a woman who has a child out of wedlock” noted North Carolina Republican Senator Lauch Faircloth during senatorial debates of the PRWORA (Toft, 2010, p. 579).

Most recently, the Agriculture Improvement Act, or the 2018 Farm Bill, was controversial because of its SNAP provisions. In this regard, the original bill, rejected by the House of Representatives, included important amendments to SNAP by adding stricter work requirements for ABAWDs. In defending these proposed changes, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz said “expanding food stamps all too often traps millions of Americans in long term dependence...By strengthening work requirement, this amendment empowers Americans who are experiencing economic hardship, and equips them with the resources they need to rejoin the work force and climb the economic ladder” (Vote Smart, 2018). In this statement, Senator Cruz used false consciousness to reinforce the image of welfare dependency and idleness that trap people in poverty. It is an attempt to frame receiving SNAP benefits as a hindrance and barrier to self-development, career success and financial stability as recipients are induced to remain on the welfare rolls and choose not to join the labor force.

This story overlooks the fact that half of SNAP recipients in a typical month had worked that month, and almost three quarters of participants had a job during the past year (Keith-Jennings & Chaudhry, 2018, p. 2). These low-income households are eligible to participate in the program because they work part-time or in low-paid jobs. For this group of participants, at least, SNAP did not encourage them to quit the job market or remain unemployed. On the other hand, ABAWDs, who were the targeted group of the new proposed work requirement restrictions, are usually the less skilled and less educated, and thus they might not be able to comply with those rules and lose SNAP benefits while also

staying part-time employed. In a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priority (Bolen, et al., 2018), it was estimated that 2 million individuals were likely to lose benefits entirely or have them reduced significantly if those amendments were put in place. But the average voter does not fact check politicians' statements. If they resonate with their beliefs and match the stereotypes they have in mind, and if the policy supports the values they embrace, they will believe the story. Statements like this attempt to manipulate public attitudes by creating certain images in order to establish and confirm certain beliefs. This is indeed the strongest form of exercised power as Lukes (2005) described it in the following:

Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (p. 28)

Another recent example of how the construction of SNAP beneficiaries is reflected in policy is the proposal presented in July 2018 by Louisiana Republican Senator John Kennedy to amend the 2018 Farm Bill to reduce SNAP fraud by requiring all program beneficiaries to show valid photo identification along with their EBT cards. In defending his proposed amendment, he said, "The Food Stamp Program is rife with fraud and criminal activity. Every year more than \$1.2 million of SNAP benefits are stolen or misused by criminals. ... In Tennessee, for example, two men were found to have been selling their EBT cards to undercover cops in exchange for cash and heroin. ... That was only one act, and I could go on and on" (Congressional Record Volume 164, 2018). The photo identification requirement contributes to framing SNAP recipients as cheaters, system abusers, drug addicts and criminals, and thus their identities should be verified at checkout counters in grocery stores.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this chapter, it has been demonstrated that the U.S. welfare system is the byproduct of certain values and beliefs. The strong adherence to the free market system, as the main driver of the society and the economy, has produced individualistic culture whereby individual responsibility and reliance on the market for survival are the chief values the political system seeks to achieve.

Social assistance programs are designed to ensure that benefits are provided to the most needy people in the society, and only on a temporary basis. Social construction of welfare recipients, and using policy narratives to enforce and reinforce such constructions has contributed to popularizing certain subjective and normative images about those who receive public assistance. Policy narratives are influential tools in affecting public opinion and perceptions about public assistance programs and welfare recipients. Policy makers have invoked and capitalized on the social construction of welfare recipients to undertake major welfare policy changes as evident in the welfare reform of 1996. Even small-scale policy proposals, such as requiring SNAP beneficiaries to show their photo ID when using SNAP benefits, are also driven by the social construction of target groups.

As for this dissertation, it is essential to be cognizant of these conceptual and theoretical foundations to be able to grasp the underlying motivations and circumstances that affect participation in SNAP. This is particularly true for the two case studies of California and Oregon where it will be argued that the political environment significantly affected public sentiments towards participation in public assistance programs, including SNAP. In both states, policy makers' statements regarding SNAP and public assistance in general contributed to creating a supportive or an inhibiting environment for enrollment leading to the variation in SNAP participation rates.

### Chapter 3. Literature Review, Research Question, and Methodology

The literature on barriers to enrollment in public assistance programs identifies three key factors that prevent eligible households and individuals from participating in SNAP and other welfare programs. These factors include the lack of information and misperceptions about the program, transaction costs<sup>1</sup>, and welfare stigma associated with participating in the program.

#### I. Barriers to Enrollment in Public Assistance Programs

Dickert-Conlin et al. (2016) examined the impact of multiple SNAP policies on states' monthly caseload. The paper grouped policies under those that affect eligibility, transaction costs, and stigma, and found that SNAP policies were responsible for 40% of the decline in caseload between 1993-2000, mainly due to restricting the participation of non-citizens. In a similar vein, Klerman and Danielson (2011) examined the impact of SNAP policies, welfare policies, and the economy on SNAP per capita participation at the state level on a monthly basis and found that SNAP policies have an effect on the size of caseload. Importantly, the study highlighted that some SNAP policies had a significant impact on increasing and decreasing caseload size - for example, shorter certification periods reduce caseloads. However, other policies, such as the vehicle exemption from the applicant's asset test were found to be statistically insignificant and their effect very small.

**Information cost** is an important factor affecting participation in welfare programs. Many eligible households do not participate simply because they are not aware of their eligibility or have some misperceptions about how the program functions. A study by Finkelstein and Notowidigdo (2018) found that providing information and assistance to nonparticipating eligible households was crucial in increasing enrollment in SNAP. Using a randomized control trial experiment on a sample of 30,000 elderly eligible persons in Pennsylvania, the authors found that providing potential applicants with information increased enrollment by 11%. Providing both information and assistance in the application process resulted in an 18% increase in

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<sup>1</sup> Some studies do not make a clear distinction between transaction cost and information costs, treating acquiring information as a transaction cost.

enrollment (compared to only 6% increase among the control group). The study demonstrated how the absence of information or lack of assistance could significantly reduce enrollment. Information costs are of great importance in the U.S. welfare system given that in all programs enrollment is not automatic. Rather, eligible households have to apply and verify their eligibility. The only exception is Medicaid where social workers at hospitals may enroll eligible individuals when they are admitted to hospital facilities if they are uninsured (Cutler & Gruber, 1996). In the absence of correct information, eligible households might not be aware of their eligibility. According to a study by the USDA (Ponza et al., 1999), three quarters of a nationally representative sample of 450 SNAP-eligible but non-participant individuals said that they did not enroll in the program because they did not know they were eligible. In a survey by the Economic Research Service of the USDA (Bartlett et al., 2004), 50% of eligible non-recipients indicated that they were not aware of their eligibility.

Policies aiming to provide information to eligible households have been found to be influential in increasing enrollment in SNAP. Dickert-Conlin et al. (2012) found that six months after a federally funded nationwide radio advertisement campaign, caseload was 2 to 3 percent higher on the county level. Interestingly, they found no significant relationship between the advertisement campaign and new enrollments. The authors suggested that this contradiction could be explained by the fact that the campaign encouraged already participating households to stay in the program rather than encouraging new eligible households to participate.

**Transaction costs**, on the other hand, are an important factor affecting decision making in general, and participation in public assistance programs, in particular. Transaction costs include the time, effort and money an individual spends acquiring information about the program and household eligibility and gathering the necessary documents, filling out the enrolment application, accessing the state agency to apply, and reporting any financial or familial changes and recertification (Currie et al., 2001). Ponza et al. (1999) estimated that in 1999 the average application took about five hours to complete, including at least 2 visits to the welfare office and cost of about \$10.31 for the application and \$5.84 for recertification. In addition, SNAP application itself could be confusing as some applicants reported experiencing difficulties in understanding and answering some questions in it (Hahn et al., 2017). Gorman et al. (2013)

highlighted that determining eligibility criteria is cumbersome and that the amount of benefits is not always known in advance, which makes some eligible households reluctant to apply. Minimal benefits could be another reason why some eligible households might not participate. For example, in 2016, only 30% of those who were eligible to receive the minimum benefit (\$16) participated in the program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018) indicating that transaction costs associated with the enrolling offset the amount of benefits.

Furthermore, some SNAP-eligible individuals live in remote areas and if they do not own a car, commuting to the SNAP office is a challenge that prevents them from applying (Gabor et al., 2002). Even when applications are available online, some applicants prefer to visit the SNAP office because they need assistance in filling the application (Campbell, 2015). Other studies found that implementing policies that reduce transaction costs such as extending certification periods, using a simplified reporting system, and broad based categorical eligibility have a positive impact on SNAP caseload (Murphy, 2018). Successful outreach programs to advertise the program and provide accurate and easily accessible information to eligible households are crucial in overcoming the transaction costs that hamper enrollment and participation (Dickert-Conlin et al., 2012; Kaye et al., 2013).

**Welfare stigma** is the third barrier that negatively impacts enrollment in welfare and social assistance programs (Ranney & Kushman, 1987). As noted earlier, the U.S. welfare system is a residual system (Andersen, 1990) and one of its key features is the stigma associated with receiving public assistance. This fosters a series of negative images about low-income individuals originating from the normative assumptions about the causes of their poverty and their behavior in general (Soss et al., 2009; Schram, 2000). Welfare recipients are negatively constructed and portrayed as idle, lazy, unproductive and immoral system abusers and welfare dependents (Schram, 2000). Consequently, a household or an individual who is eligible to enroll in a program might be discouraged to do so to avoid being stigmatized (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006).

Stigma is a “social construction that involves at least two fundamental components: (1) the recognition of differences based on some distinguishing characteristic, or “mark”; and (2) a

consequent devaluation of the person” (Dovidio et al., 2000, p. 3). Stigma entails the feeling of being devalued based on specific attributes and characteristics that the stigmatized person possesses (Goodban, 1985). Eligible individuals may deliberately refuse to enroll in SNAP or other welfare programs because of the negative consequences that welfare stigma entails. Moffitt (1983) posited that an eligible individual is rational and able to weigh the benefits and costs associated with his or her actions. While enrollment increases the benefits, welfare stigma represents a cost for participation. A rational individual, who is a utility maximizer, would make this calculation and may choose not to enroll to avoid being stigmatized. Stigma does not stop at merely stereotyping recipients; importantly, it affects how welfare recipients are treated by social workers, their social circle (including neighbors), other family members, and by the public at large in situations when, for example, their *identity* as welfare recipients is revealed at checkout counters in grocery stores. In addition, stigma has psychological ramifications harming a stigmatized person’s self-esteem, self-respect and morale (Crocker & Quinn, 2000).

Two SNAP policies are particularly related to stigma: EBT and fingerprinting. Adopting an EBT system instead of using paper food vouchers in delivering SNAP benefits is believed to lower the stigma associated with SNAP receipt (Levedahl, 1998). Studies using qualitative methods have argued that EBT has led to higher participation in the program (Zekeri, 2003). Conversely, fingerprinting SNAP applicants is a policy that has reduced enrollment. Several studies have contended that when SNAP applicants are required to be fingerprinted, SNAP caseloads decrease (Ratcliffe et al., 2007; Dickert-Conlin et al., 2016; Stacy et al., 2018), as well as administrative cost per case increase significantly (Geller et al., 2018).

## **II. Politics and Party in Control of Government**

On another front, the political party in control of government has an important impact on policy outcomes. Political parties have different ideological orientations that include a set of beliefs, values, conceptions and views of the state of the world. They conceive policy problems differently, explain the causes differently, and diverge in their proposed solutions to the problems (Epp et al., 2014). However, political parties do not always adhere to their ideology, and in many instances, they choose to act strategically to maximize their chances of election or reelection (Skocpol, 1995).

Party control of government has been found to be significant in explaining change in social welfare policies, especially in the European context (for example, Huber et al., 1993; Garrett & Mitchell, 2001; Kittel & Obinger, 2002). But given America's unique two-party system and the nature of electoral competition, the literature on the impact of party control in American states on policy outcomes has provided mixed results.

For example, Dye (1966) argued that economic development in states has better explanatory power than party competition in determining policy outcomes. Erikson, Gerald and McIver (1989) argued that while party control of government in industrialized democracies generally matters in predicting different socioeconomic policies such as welfare spending and income equality distribution, there is little correlation between party control and policies in U.S. states. Instead, public opinion and state ideology is better at explaining policies pursued by the winning party. The authors argue that the bipartisan system motivates each of the two major parties to lean towards the center to attract the median voter, whereas party ideology is not uniform (party positions respond more to public opinion than ideology). When the Republican Party is in power in a liberal state, the legislature will tend to produce more liberal policies in order to be rewarded and vice versa. For example, the Democratic Party in a conservative state is more conservative than the Democratic Party in a liberal state or even than the Republican Party in a liberal state (Erikson et al., 1989, p. 731). Similarly, Beck (1982) argues that notwithstanding the ideological differences between the Democrats and Republicans, "parties represent differing combinations of groups at differing times" (p.93), and as a result, predicting a uniform policy position based on party control might lead to misleading conclusions.

Political parties might even take positions that contrast with their ideologies or beliefs. For example, conservatives prefer a limited role for the government in income redistribution as well as trust in market solutions presented in private insurance as more effective and efficient. However, conservative policymakers take a more pragmatic position towards social security spending in order not to lose the support of the middle class (Skocpol, 1995, p. 7). Neither of the two parties is likely to undertake substantial policy changes in order to "avoid blame" and punishment by the electorate (Pierson, 2000). Pierson (2000) has argued that social policy in the US is "path dependent" and cannot be easily changed, and major changes can only be achieved

through bipartisan agreements.

However, there is nothing that prevents political parties from embracing tacit strategies to impact policy outcomes that conform to the party's ideology (Hacker, 2004). In the context of welfare programs, for example, the party in control of the state government may exercise the second dimension of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963) by taking no actions regarding removing barriers of participation, and thus contribute to lowering caseload size or participation rates. Consequently, another strand in the literature supports the idea that partisanship has an important effect on welfare policies. Winters (1976) has emphasized the significant role of political parties in the U.S. as follows:

American politics is preeminently party politics. We define our candidates in party terms and our issues in party terms; in fact, we define ourselves politically in terms of the political party. Yet the consequences of these definitions have not systematically been appraised. Does it mean anything to have one political party control the government as opposed to another? (p. 629)

In a similar vein, Gerring (1998) has argued that parties in the U.S. are ideologically driven: "The major American parties have articulated views that were (and are) coherent, differentiated, and stable. American party history and, by extension, American political history at large have been irreducibly ideological" (p. 6). Ideology has shaped the political discourse and choices of each party. While Republicans have focused on free enterprise, individual liberty, less government intervention, less taxation, less regulation, Democrats have "acted as the spokespersons for greater equality in the distribution of wealth, and the Republicans who demurred" (Gerring, 1998, p. 138).

Dye (1984) has examined party policy linkages in the U.S. states from 1950-1980 to assess whether party control of state government can explain variations in welfare spending (change in per capita state welfare expenditures that reflect both the level of expenditures per recipient and the proportion of the population deemed eligible to receive such benefit). Dye used different partisanship variables (governorship, democratic governor or legislature, democratic full control of the legislature) and classified the states as competitive, non-competitive and mixed, based on interparty competition and voter participation. He found that in twenty states, Democratic control of governorship was associated with higher welfare spending, in three states

it was negatively associated and in the remaining there was no effect.

In an often-cited article, Hibbs (1977) contended that partisanship had a significant impact on socioeconomic policies. Specifically, Hibbs found that in the postwar era, leftist parties in the U.S. were associated with more inflation and less unemployment than right-wing parties; a choice that is favorable to low-income groups. He added “the Democratic Party has relatively close connections to organized labor and lower income and occupational status groups, while the Republican Party is viewed as being more responsive to the interests of capital or business and upper income and occupational status groups” (p. 1475).

Kelly and Witko (2012) applied a Power Resources Theory to examine how state governments have impacted inequality through redistributive policies. While the PRT is primarily used to examine comparative welfare state systems using class identities (labor versus capitalists), the authors argued that income-based power resources resemble class-based power resources (since class and income are highly correlated). In addition, while the PRT classifies political parties into left and right parties, this classification does not perfectly fit the U.S. partisanship context. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party is considered a left leaning party when compared to the Republicans and evidence suggests that low-income groups are more likely to be affiliated with the Democrats than the Republicans.

### **III. Research gaps**

As indicated in this chapter, SNAP literature has focused almost exclusively on caseload size by examining barriers to enrollment in the program. This literature provides insightful and useful explanations about what affects SNAP caseload growth and decline. However, it overlooks participation rates as an important indicator of the program’s effectiveness and outreach. Caseload size and participation rates are two related concepts, yet they are also distinct. Caseload size is the absolute number of those who enroll in the program, while the participation rate is the percentage of eligible households/individuals who actually enroll in the program. It is plausible to assume that both caseload size and participation rates have positive correlation. However, this is not necessarily true. In addition, even when both move in the same direction, the rate of growth or decline in enrollment might exceed that of participation rate and vice versa. For

example, caseload size may increase in response to higher unemployment, but at the same time the participation rate might decrease because more individuals become eligible for participation than those who become new enrollees. Similarly, a SNAP policy might significantly increase the caseload, but may not lead to a higher participation rate, because the caseload size may increase at a lower rate than the growth of eligible households.

On the other hand, even though politics and the party in control of government are important factors that affect social policy and welfare programs, no previous research has examined their impact on SNAP policies or outcomes on the state level. SNAP is a critical public assistance program that is likely to be affected by the political climate and ideology. This does not only apply to policy design, but also to policy implementation and program administration. Politics not only affects policies, but also affects public sentiments towards public assistance programs and welfare recipients. Thus, it contributes to creating a political and cultural environment that either supports or undermines public assistance.

Based on that, this dissertation aims to fill these two research gaps by examining the causes of variation in SNAP participation rates among states. It treats participation rates as a dependent variable that is affected by SNAP policies, administration, state demographics and political variables. Indeed a recent USDA study, Stacy, Tiehen, and Marquardt (2018) recommended conducting further research to examine the impact of SNAP policies on participation rates as well to investigate “State-level factors such as budget resources and political environment” (p.18).

- The state as the unit of analysis

The unit of analysis in this dissertation is the state. In explaining why they use the state as the unit of analysis in explaining the impact of interparty competition and economic variables on welfare policies, Dawson and Robinson (1963) described the states as “systems with written constitutions, with authority divided among legislative and judicial branches. They all have bicameral legislature ... Thus, by using the American states as units of analysis we can hold the basic system variables constant, concentrating attention on the relationship between process and policy” (p.268).

The literature suggests that even though the federal government funds many social assistance programs, states have the power to impact the outcomes of these programs through partial funding as well as controlling the administration of the programs' design (Meyers et al., 2001). States enjoy considerable power over issues such as identifying eligible recipients, certification, recertification, applying waivers, etc., all of which represent important choice architecture that influence program participation. For example, the existence of local offices and the quality of the interaction between staff and applicants are forms of administrative practices and bureaucratic structures that clearly affect participation (Meyers et al., 2001). States can also extend the time limit for unemployed ABAWDs by requesting waivers from the USDA (Bolen & Dean, 2018). States can also impact policy outcomes through small details that cannot be easily observed. Hacker (2004), for example, argued that welfare retrenchment took place in the U.S. during the seventies not through big policy changes but rather informal rules and practices such as stealth, obstruction and indirection.

#### **IV. Research Questions**

Based on what has been presented in this chapter, this dissertation examines the following research questions:

- 1- What are the causes of variation between states in SNAP participation rates?
- 2- What is the impact of SNAP policies, such as simplified reporting, broad-based categorical eligibility, and fingerprinting SNAP applicants on participation rates?
- 3- What is the impact of politics and party in control of government on SNAP participation rates?
- 4- What are the states-specific policies that affect participation rates?
- 5- What are the factors that affect SNAP participation rates other than SNAP policies and party in control of government, such as state demographics and SNAP administration?

#### **V. Research Methodology**

An important element in research is determining which research methodology to use: qualitative, quantitative or mixed methodology. This depends on the research question in hand which determines the type of data that we need in order to answer the question. In other words, what we

need to observe and how it can be observed (Lincoln, 1994). The goal of different methodologies is similar: drawing causal inference. Some research questions are better addressed through statistical techniques using large data sets to observe patterns of behavior or phenomenon, while others require more in-depth investigation of social and political phenomenon such as perceptions, ideas, feelings and emotions. While quantitative and qualitative research designs seem to be different, they represent two different styles and techniques of social inquiry and both use the same logic of inference (King et al., 1994).

Qualitative methods help unveil some important aspects of social phenomenon by examining it in its context, thus enabling researchers to understand the values and power structure that affect policymaking (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Qualitative methods, including case studies, participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups and content analysis, involve the interaction with individuals or groups as units of analysis in social science. This enables researchers to closely observe individual behavior in its natural settings and context. It allows figuring out what their deep beliefs are from the examples they give, the stories they tell and their remarkable life events (Yanow, 2007). In qualitative research, every observation a researcher faces is important: from how the respondents react to a question in an interview, to how they answer it, what examples they give, to their facial expressions and body language (Barbour, 2008).

This dissertation applies a mixed methodology to investigate the causes of variation between states in SNAP participation rates. An empirical examination is conducted through an econometric model using panel regression analysis to measure the impact of several SNAP policies, as well as demographic and political variables, on SNAP participation rates. Panel data is very useful in tracking changes and observing patterns of behavior over time. By involving time series and cross sectional dimensions, panel analysis provides more accurate inferences, and allows for better control of omitted variables (Hsiao, 2007). The empirical examination is complemented by a deeper investigation in two states with high and low SNAP participation rates: Oregon and California.

## **VI. Case Studies Selection**

The two case studies aim to provide a closer and thorough investigation of different variables affecting SNAP caseload and participation rates in two selected states with opposing SNAP outcomes. The focus in the two case studies will be on state specific policies, the political environment, demographics, governance and program administration. In fact, multiple case studies are more robust and therefore preferred than a single case study (Yin, 2018). Multiple case studies allow a better examination of SNAP policies, administration, politics and outcomes in different contexts. The case study approach will help in focusing the research lens on particular examples and hence enabling the development of a detailed and thorough understanding of the factors that affect participation rates.

As Yin (2018) has argued, case study selection does not follow the same sampling logic used in surveys, stating that “any application of this sampling logic to case study research would be misplaced” (p. 56) since the goal is to “expand and generalize theories (analytical generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations)” (p. 21). Therefore, I use the Most Similar Systems Design (MDS), where cases are selected based on the similarity in independent variables and variation in the dependent variable (Anckar, 2008). States cannot actually be identical in terms of their independent variables that impact the outcome of interest, but they should at least exhibit as many similarities to control for as many control variables as possible. When controlling for those similarities in the selection, I will be better able to identify the causes that led to the different outcomes.

States within the same region usually share many similarities. The geographical proximity makes it easier for mutual social and cultural influence. Policy innovations and ideas can diffuse easier and faster among states in the same region. Oregon and California have been known for their progressive political leaning and prioritizing social justice and inclusion. Over the past 20 to 25 years, the Democratic Party has largely controlled both states legislatures and governorships. In California, the Democratic Party had full control over the state legislature since 1997, and the governorship since 2011. Californians have voted for Democratic presidential candidates since 1992. In Oregon, the Democratic Party has control over the Senate since 2004 and the House since 2007 (except for brief periods where it was split). The state has

had a Democratic Governor since 1994, and Oregonians have voted for Democratic presidential candidates since 1988.

On the other hand and notwithstanding the differences in SNAP policies the two states apply, both have adopted policies that can generally be classified as encouraging more than inhibiting program enrollment (see Table 1). The two states have used broad-based categorical eligibility criteria whereby the recipients of other cash transfer programs, such as TANF, are categorically eligible for SNAP. In addition, application and recertification can be done online in both states. (Some states still do not have online application, including Washington DC, Georgia, Alaska, Hawaii, and Wyoming). Also, the average certification period in both states is very similar; 12.2 months in Oregon, and 12 months in California.

There are, however, a few differences in SNAP policies and demographics between California and Oregon. While Oregon has a central SNAP administration, California has used a decentralized approach whereby counties are responsible for administering the program under the supervision of the state government. More importantly, California is one of the few states nationwide that had implemented a fingerprinting policy for some years, but Oregon has never applied this policy. Oregon uses joint application and processing of both TANF and SNAP while California has restricted this policy to only a limited number of cases. In addition, Oregon was an early adopter of EBT (started in 1998), while California started in 2004, two years after the federally mandated start date. One important demographic variable that differs greatly between the two states is the racial and ethnic makeups of their populations. In 2016, almost 39% of Californians were Hispanic and 5.5% were Blacks. In Oregon, 12.7% were Hispanics and 1.8% were Blacks. Ten years earlier, in 2006, 10% and 1.6% of Oregon population were Hispanics and Blacks compared to 35.5% and 6% in California respectively.

With regard to SNAP participation rates (the dependent variable), there is a big difference between both states. Oregon is among the few states that achieved a 100% participation rate; but California, on the other hand, has one of the lowest participation rates in the nation (72% in 2016).

Table 1. Comparison between Oregon and California

	Oregon	California
SNAP participation rate in 2016	100%	72%
Caseload in 2016	734,864	4,340,042
Average monthly benefit per person 2016	\$121.68	\$138.97
Average monthly benefit per household 2016	\$213.01	\$288.09
Total administrative costs 2016	\$165,281,501	\$1,721,461,102
Simplified reporting	Yes	Yes
Online application	Yes	Yes
Broad based eligibility	Yes	Yes
Combined application project	Yes	Yes
Face recertification	Yes	Yes
Telephone interview	Yes	Yes
Fingerprinting	No	From 1996-2011
Poverty rate in 2017	10.2%	12.4%
Household median income 2017	\$64,610	\$69,759
Unemployment rate in 2017	4.11%	4.78%

## VII. Data collection

To collect the needed qualitative data, I reviewed all inaugural speeches and state of the state addresses given by the governors of California and Oregon governors, as well as statements by the speakers of the House and Senate in both states regarding SNAP policy changes. I also reviewed both states' SNAP legislative records (legislative summary reports, and bills), SNAP state agencies' reports and data. This review provided a wealth of information and insights about SNAP policies and administration, as well as the political and cultural sentiments towards public assistance and welfare recipients. The timeframe was restricted from 1990 to 2016 since this is the period in which data on SNAP policies on the state level is available. It is also a reasonable duration that helps track how political and welfare changes that occurred during that time affected participation rates.

To gain deeper knowledge and insights about SNAP, I conducted two interviews in California. The first interview was with Jessica Bartholow, a policy advocate at the Western

Center on Law and Poverty in California, who agreed to be cited in the research. The other interview was conducted with a senior SNAP administrator in California, who refused to be named in the research. The Institutional Review Board of Oregon State University approved conducting interviews for the purposes of this research. Both informants were provided with a research consent form in the recruitment email and they accepted that the interview be audiotaped. Three other SNAP officials in California were contacted twice to participate in the research, but did not respond. Similarly, four officials from the state government and nongovernmental organizations in Oregon were contacted two times to participate in the research: one apologized to be interviewed and the other three did not respond. Two coding processes were used to analyze the data collected from the interviews (Lofland, Snow, Andersen & Lofland, 2006). The first is open coding where major themes, concepts and categories were identified, which was followed by a focused coding process. While inter-coder reliability is important for transparency and validity in conducting qualitative research to ensure that the values the researcher assigns to the observations under investigation are the same if other researchers repeat the same process, given the very small number of informants and the nature of the questions raised in the interviews, a codebook was not developed.

## **Chapter 4. SNAP Policies, Party Control of Government and SNAP Participation Rates: Empirical Examination**

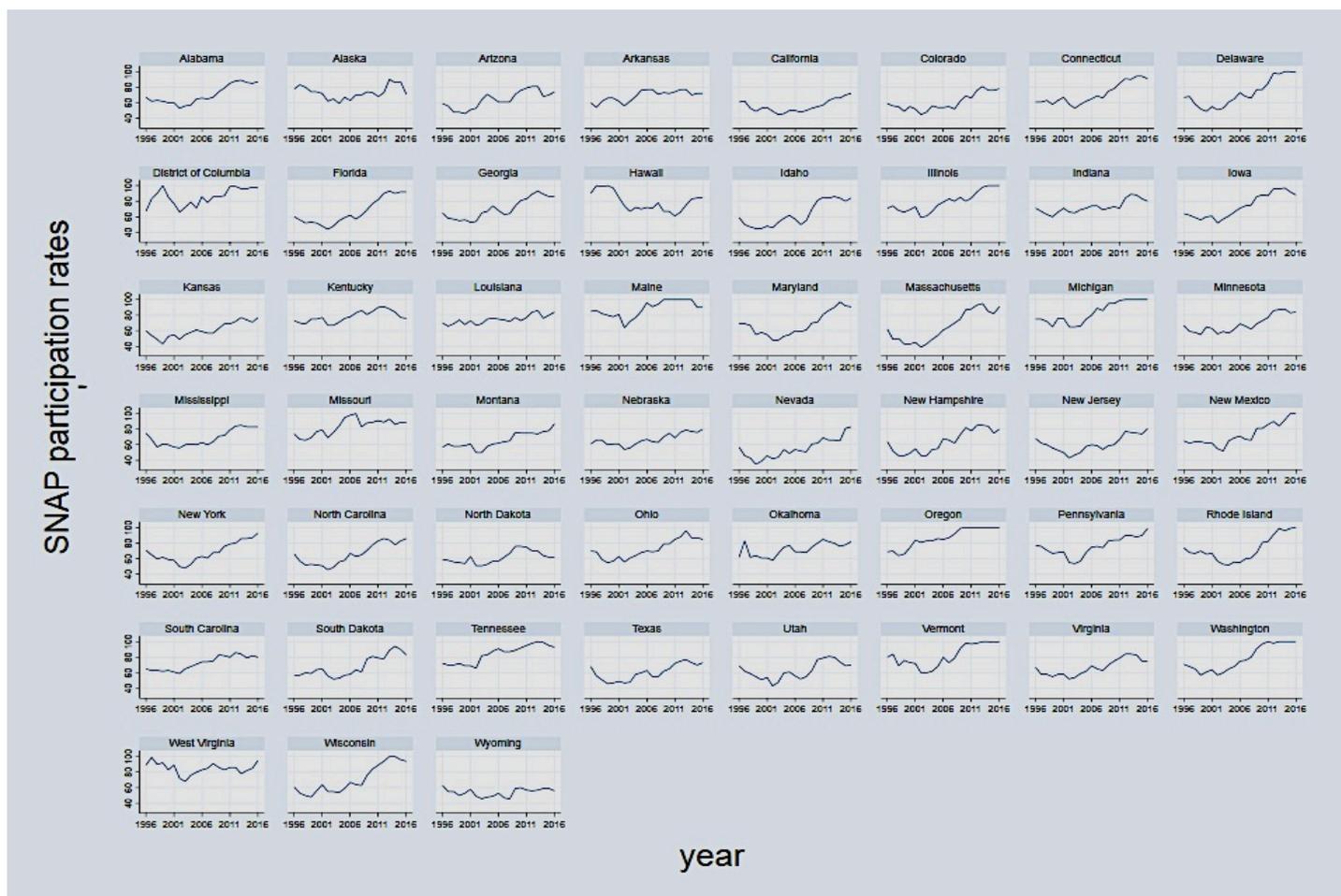
### **I. Introduction**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest and highest funded federal program in the U.S. food safety net. It targets low-income families and individuals who are vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger. The program started in 1965 and has expanded over time. In 2017, it reached 41 million Americans with a monthly average benefit of \$125 per person and \$250 per household (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2016, 15.6 million U.S. households were food insecure; in other words, one in every eight Americans did not have sufficient resources to buy enough food during that year. This represents a problem resulting from the inability of SNAP to reach all those who are in need of government assistance to achieve food security. Indeed, in 2016, the SNAP participation rate was 85%, which means that for every 100 eligible households, 15 did not participate in the program (USDA, 2018).

The participation rate has improved over time, but it varies considerably among states and also between different groups. For example, in 2017 while Oregon and Washington reached an almost 100% participation rate, Wyoming had a rate of only 56%, California 63%, and Nevada 66% (see Figure 1). Participation rates also vary among eligible households based on age, income, ethnicity or the presence of disability in one of a household member (Leftin et al., 2011). For example in 2016, only 45% of eligible elderly adults and 40% of those who earn just above the poverty line enrolled in the program (Cunyngham, 2018). It is important to make a clear conceptual distinction between enrollment or caseload size and participation rate. They are not the same thing. Enrollment or caseload size refers to the absolute number of those who join the program. It does not indicate how many eligible people did not participate. Participation rate, on the other hand, is the percentage of the actual SNAP participants from the general eligible population. It indicates how many people are left out, and reflects the program success in outreach and also serves as a key indicator of program effectiveness. Policies that contribute to increasing enrollment are not necessarily increasing participation rates. For example, policy

change might suddenly make a particular group eligible, hence increasing total caseload, but the participation rate of that or other groups could still remain low.

Figure 1. SNAP Participation Rates in all State (1996-2016)



Not surprisingly, SNAP has received a great deal of academic attention given its magnitude and importance. SNAP scholars have examined the program from multiple perspectives such as the impact of macroeconomic changes like unemployment and recession on enrollment (Figlio et al., 2000; Andrews & Smallwood, 2012; Edwards et al., 2016) and the program's impact on food security (Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Nord, 2012; Kim, 2016), poverty (Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2016) and health and nutrition improvement (Lee et al., 2006; Almond et al., 2011; Mabli & Worthington, 2014). In addition, other strands in the literature

have investigated barriers to enrollment that have identified transaction costs, information costs and welfare stigma as key variables affecting the participation of eligible households.

An area in SNAP research that remains underexplored is the variation in participation rates among states. It is important to question why and how some states have successfully enrolled all eligible households while others have not. Although the program is federally funded and general eligibility criteria are set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, states are powerful in impacting the program's operation and outcomes. This chapter attempts to thoroughly investigate the variation among states in terms of SNAP policies and other demographic and political factors in order to identify the leading causes of variation in participation rates. Benefiting from the variation among states in the timing of applying SNAP policies, as well as the differences in state demographics and political variables, this chapter aims to examine the impact of such variables on SNAP participation rates.

## **II. Hypotheses**

This chapter will test the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1: A Republican full control of the state's political institutions (both Houses and Governorship) leads to lower participation rates.**

**Hypothesis 2: SNAP policies affecting barriers to enrollment including welfare stigma, transaction and information costs have a significant impact on participation rates.**

**Hypothesis 3: SNAP policies including simplified reporting, using broad based categorical eligibility, lengthening certification periods, using combined application project, online application, and call centers help increase SNAP participation rates.**

## **III. Data Sources**

I used panel state-level data developed from multiple data sources that extends from 1996 to 2016 (as those are the years in which data on SNAP policies are available). Data on SNAP participation rates, which is the dependent variable, are obtained from the "Reaching Those in Need" annual report published by the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA. The data,

developed by Mathematica Policy Research, include estimated participation rates for every state on a yearly basis since 1996. Mathematica uses the estimates of annual participants in SNAP using administrative data from states (the numerator), and the estimates of eligible persons (the denominator) are obtained from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data. Individuals with an income or assets above the federal criteria for participation are not counted as eligible participants.

Data on SNAP policies (such as the average certification period, operating a call center in the state, requiring fingerprinting applications, applying simplified reporting, etc.) were obtained from the SNAP Policy Database (Economic Research Service, n.d.), which provides information on state-level SNAP policies related to eligibility criteria, recertification, reporting, availability of online application, and others. Data are provided for all 50 states and the District of Columbia for each month from January 1996 to December 2016. The database draws on policy information from a wide variety of sources, including surveys by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), national and state policy research organizations, state policy manuals, and news articles. In addition, data on the average monthly benefits per person are collected from the SNAP State Activity Report published every fiscal year by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Variables of party control of government were collected from Ballotpedia's "Who Runs the States, Partisanship Results, Partisanship Control of State Senates" public data published online<sup>1</sup>. Data on states' population growth, poverty rate, per capita income and household median income were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE). Data on state unemployment were collected from the Local Area Unemployment Statistics (seasonally adjusted unemployment rate). The percentages of Hispanic and Black populations were obtained from the American Community Survey.

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<sup>1</sup> The data set can be found here : [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Lxeot3i-sYXJo1mPg4Nbe-GFUujg0aEvUf\\_bgN8j7Q/edit#gid=1864331468](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Lxeot3i-sYXJo1mPg4Nbe-GFUujg0aEvUf_bgN8j7Q/edit#gid=1864331468)

#### **IV. Estimation strategy and variable definitions**

To estimate the impact of SNAP policies and political and demographic variables on SNAP participation rates, I used a panel regression model with year and state fixed effects to control for unobserved time and state effects, and standard errors clustered on the state level. Also a linear time trend was incorporated into the model to rectify non-stationarity. In addition, a distributed lag model was used to examine whether the independent variables have an effect on participation rates in subsequent time periods. Using a distributed lag model is useful because some SNAP eligible individuals might not be aware of policy changes taking place in the same year, and thus may exhibit inertia in the response to these changes. Also, state agencies and community organizations working on SNAP outreach may not immediately promote or act upon immediate policy changes. Furthermore, some policies were implemented in phases as they started in some states with a limited number of counties before being applied statewide (for example, operating call centers). Also, some policies started late in the year, making their impact limited in that year. Using lags also accounts for the fact that in some states applying and enrolling in the program takes some time, which makes the effect of one policy only observable in the next year.

Two-lag structures were used, since it is not expected that SNAP policies will have an effect on participation rates that endure more than two years. This is based on the assumption that once eligible individuals become aware of a new policy, they will decide whether or not to enroll in the program. If they decide not to enroll after they become aware of the policy, then the policy does not have an impact on the decision of participation. Eligible individuals, who enroll after two years from becoming aware of the policy change, are likely to be motivated by unobserved factors beyond the policy itself.

Some policies are also expected to have an impact on participation rates during the same year. SNAP policies are designed and seek to create an immediate effect on current and eligible recipients. For example, using online application or operating call centers intend to make applying for SNAP and receiving information on eligibility available to eligible individuals to participate in the program once they become eligible. Also, some policies might deter eligible individuals from applying once they are implemented such as the fingerprinting requirement. On the other hand, political variables, including the party in control of the House, Senate and

Governorship are also expected to have both an immediate and lagging effect on participation rates. Not only policy makers make changes in SNAP policy and administration that will affect participation rates in subsequent time periods, but also the control of a particular party over the state's political institutions sends certain messages to eligible individuals that either encourage or deter them from applying.

The two models are represented in the following two equations:

$$\text{Participation}_{st} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{SNAP policy}_{st} + \beta_2 \text{Political}_{st} + \beta_3 \text{Demographic}_{st} + \beta_4 t + \beta_5 \text{YEAR}_t + \beta_6 \text{STATE}_s + \varepsilon_{st}$$

$$\text{Participation}_{st} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{SNAP policy}_{st} + \beta_2 \text{SNAP policy}_{s,t-1} + \beta_3 \text{Political}_{st} + \beta_4 \text{Political}_{s,t-1} + \beta_5 \text{Demographic}_{st} + \beta_6 \text{Demographic}_{s,t-1} + \beta_7 t + \beta_8 \text{YEAR}_t + \beta_9 \text{STATE}_s + \varepsilon_{st}$$

Where  $\text{Participation}_{st}$  is SNAP participation rate in state  $s$  in year  $t$  (the dependent variable). It is the proportion of eligible individuals who actually participated in SNAP in a given year.  $\text{YEAR}_t$  is a year dummy to control for time effects and year specific shocks,  $\text{STATE}_s$  is a state dummy to control for state unobserved effects,  $t$  is a linear time trend to correct non stationarity, and  $\varepsilon_{st}$  is the error term.

$\text{SNAP policy}_{st}$  is a vector of SNAP policies that include the following variables:

- Benefit level is the average monthly dollar amount of benefits per person. Eligible households make cost/benefit calculations on whether to participate in a social assistance program. Among the major factors that affect a decision to participate is the amount of monthly benefits. It is expected that higher benefits will induce more eligible households to apply and, consequently, leads to higher participation rates.
- Simplified Reporting is a dummy variable indicating whether the state allows simplified reporting when income and/or assets of a participating person/household change. Using a simplified reporting system is expected to have a positive impact on participation. It targets

participants in the program and by extending certification period, it is likely to keep participants in the program for longer period. This translates to higher participation rates because it prevents eligible participants from leaving the program. Also, it is expected to have a positive effect on eligible non-participants by encouraging them to enroll since transaction costs are less.

- Average Certification Period is the average duration in months that SNAP recipients have to recertify their eligibility. As the duration of certification becomes longer, transaction costs are reduced since SNAP participants do not have to collect and file documents, make visits to SNAP office, etc. Those who participate in SNAP will find it more convenient and cost effective to continue their enrollment when certification periods are longer. Similarly, eligible nonparticipating households may be encouraged to enroll if transactions costs are less.
- Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) is a dummy variable indicating whether broad based eligibility criteria is used where households become categorically eligible for SNAP because they qualify for another public assistance programs such as TANF or state Maintenance of Effort (MOE) funded benefits. Applying BBCE is expected to improve participation rates given that it helps to reduce both transaction and information costs.
- Combined Application Project (CAP) is a dummy variable indicating whether Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients are automatically eligible to receive SNAP benefits. This policy specifically targets the elderly and people with disabilities who receive SSI benefits. While its impact might be positive on participation rates, the magnitude and significance might be low given that those who benefit from its application are a small group of eligible households.
- Telephone interview is a dummy variable indicating whether the state conducts telephone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews when first applying to SNAP. It is expected that using telephones to interview applicants reduces the cost of applying. Hence, this policy is expected to have a positive impact on participation rates. Also, using phone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews plausibly reduces stigma associated with applying in person and the pressure of being interviewed for enrollment in a public assistance program.

- Face recertification is a dummy variable indicating whether the state waives the in-person interviews to recertify recipients and substitutes it with telephone interviews. It is expected that when this waiver is in place, participation rates will be higher since it reduces transaction costs as well as the stigma associated with being under the stress of a personal interview of a social assistance program.
- Call center is a dummy variable indicating whether the state operates a call center system (state wide or partial) or does not operate a call center at all. Call centers provide information and raise awareness regarding SNAP eligibility and are expected to have a positive impact on participation.
- Fingerprinting is a dummy variable indicating whether the state requires SNAP applicants to be fingerprinted (either throughout the entire state or in some counties). Fingerprinting impedes participation as it imposes a transaction cost and signals welfare stigma. Consequently, it is expected to have a negative impact on participation rates. Indeed, those, who are deterred from applying if fingerprinting is required plausibly have undocumented status or a criminal record, and thus they are more likely to be financially, even if not legally, eligible to participate.
- Online Application is a dummy variable indicating whether the state uses an online application system. States started using online application to gain better control of the application system, develop databases to facilitate management and accessibility, and reduce administrative costs. An online application system makes it easier and more convenient for some people to apply. Nevertheless, many eligible SNAP recipients might not have access to or be familiar with using computers and online application system.

**Political<sub>st</sub>** is a vector including two dummy variables indicating whether the Republicans have full control over the government (controlling both Houses and governorship), or power is shared between both parties. The baseline category is Democrats having full control over the legislature and governorship. Under this model, it is expected that SNAP participation rates will be lower when the Republicans have full control over the government. This expectation is built on the assumption that when the Democrats are in power they will provide a politically enabling environment to state agencies to pursue more proactive policies towards increasing participation in SNAP. The Democratic Party is known for leaning towards social equality and adopting

policies entailing larger social welfare spending and benefits. In addition, given the Democrats' favorable agenda towards immigrants and people of color, their control of the state agencies may encourage eligible households from these groups to enroll in SNAP.

**Demographic<sub>st</sub>** is a vector of control variables in state  $s$  in year  $t$  and includes state unemployment rates, state poverty rates, and Hispanic and African American proportions in the state. Those variables are used as controls in the model given the large variation between states in terms of demographic variables.

- Unemployment is a variable that measures the percentage of unemployed individuals in the labor force for each state in a given year. Unemployment is associated with higher SNAP enrollment. Households, whose breadwinner lost his or her job, are more likely to have economic hardships, and thus are more likely to enroll in SNAP. Most studies suggest that unemployment is a significant variable in explaining the increase in enrollment in social assistance programs (Figlio et al., 2000). It is plausible to assume that the likelihood of household enrollment in one or more welfare programs increases if the household does not have a working member. Also, when the breadwinner of the household loses his/her job, the household will resort to social assistance programs to compensate for the job loss. For example, Kabbani and Wilde (2003) found that a 1% decrease in unemployment rate explained 27% of the decline in SNAP participation. Likewise, Currie et al. (2001) found that unemployment explained 20% of the decline in caseloads. Hanson and Gundersen (2002), using time series data from 1976-2010, found that a 1% increase in unemployment rate led to an additional enrollment of 1.5 million persons. Ganong and Liebman (2013) found that changes in local unemployment could explain at least two-thirds of the increase in enrollment from 2007 to 2011.

The majority of SNAP recipients are indeed low-income households, which suggests that a household member has a job. Evidence shows that many SNAP recipients join the program temporarily during times of unemployment (Andrews & Smallwood, 2012) or recession (Pilkauskas et al., 2012; Slack & Myers, 2014; Edwards et al., 2016).

While state unemployment rate is intuitively associated with higher caseload, the effect of unemployment on SNAP participation rate could be either positive or negative. A rise in unemployment plausibly leads more people to enroll. But, at the same time, higher

unemployment means a higher percentage of eligible people. In addition, we might predict that higher unemployment might lead to a lower participation rate, particularly among subgroups whose participation in SNAP is conditioned upon satisfying some work requirements. SNAP imposes a time limit on benefits as well as work restrictions on able-bodied adults without children. This group is arguably less educated and less skilled. As a result, during times of unemployment or recession, they are highly likely to lose jobs and thus become unable to fulfill SNAP's work requirements. A study by Cheng (2006) found that high unemployment in states with more restrictive TANF policies correlates with higher percentages of unemployed women leaving the program and living below the poverty line.

- Poverty rate is expected to play a similar role to unemployment in terms of the impact on caseload size. SNAP serves low income and poor groups. Therefore, increasing poverty leads to an increase in caseload. But the effect on participation rates is uncertain since increasing poverty also increases the number of eligible households and hence increases the denominator of the participation rate equation.
- Racial and ethnic composition The model includes two variables for the proportion of Hispanic and African American populations in the state. African Americans and people of Hispanic origin have higher poverty rates than the national average (Iceland, 2013). In addition, both groups suffer from higher food insecurity rates than the national average (Sano et al., 2011). Consequently, both groups are more likely to participate in public assistance programs, including SNAP. Therefore, a state with more Hispanic and African Americans is expected to have higher number of eligible households. However, there is an argument that an increase in the number of minorities prompt governments to become more repressive and for policies to become more exclusionary to deter immigrants and racial minorities from participation or moving to the state (Reese et al., 2013 ). Importantly, state welfare policies towards immigrants are commonly motivated by and reflective of public and political sentiments towards accepting immigrants and extending welfare benefits to them (Xu & Zhu, 2014). In addition, some legal immigrants might not be aware of their eligibility in the absence of well-designed state outreach programs. States may introduce more restrictive

policies to avoid being a welfare magnet and deter ethnic minorities and immigrants from residing in the state (Soss et al., 2001).

## **V. Tests and robustness checks**

Panel models are vulnerable to two fundamental problems: heteroskedasticity and serial correlation. Both violate time series assumptions (Wooldridge, 2013, p. 412). Heteroskedasticity underestimates the standard errors and hence statistical significance is artificially inflated leading to overly optimistic results in estimation (Studenmund, 2014, p. 102). Similarly, serial correlation leads to underestimating the standard errors leading to an artificially high t-statistic that might lead to type I error (rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true) (Wooldridge, 2006, p. 371). A likelihood ratio and Wooldridge tests indicated the presence of a first order serial correlation and heteroskedasticity in the data. To correct these problems, I clustered the standard errors on the state level, which is the most stringent method to deal with both problems. Most studies examining SNAP caseload use clustered standard errors either on the state or country levels – depending on the unit of analysis (see for example Klerman & Danielson, 2011; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Ganong & Liebman, 2013).

The models also incorporate state fixed effects. While they absorb some variation in the data, it was essential to include them to control for omitted variables resulting from unobserved state characteristics. In addition, a year time dummy is used to control for year-specific shocks. A linear time trend is also used in all models to rectify non-stationarity and avoid spurious correlation when variables are moving according to a trend.

## **VI. Descriptive Statistics**

Throughout the time period of this analysis (1996-2016), states adopted different sets of SNAP rules that affected eligibility, transaction and information costs, and welfare stigma, as shown in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Observations	Average	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Caseload (persons)	1071	592,264.3	701,904.5	22,485	4,417,772
Participation rate	1071	70.86741%	14.5588	35%	100%
Average Benefits per person/ month (in US\$)	1071	99.10227	27.37544	55.612 <sup>2</sup>	228.3274 <sup>3</sup>
Unemployment rate	1071	5.578354	1.921988	2.3%	13.60833%
Poverty rate	1071	12.67012	3.488103	4.5%	25.8%
Proportion of Hispanic population	1071	9.321982	9.510665	0.508469	48.52805%
Proportion of African American Population	1071	10.90563%	11.26949	0.1838592%	62.9419%
Average certification period (in months)	1071	10.55188	2.910491	4.775025 <sup>4</sup>	19.56359 <sup>5</sup>

Table 3. Number of States Applying Different SNAP Policies (1996-2016)

SNAP policies	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
Simplified reporting	0	0	39	47	50	51
BBCE	0	1	11	15	41	41
CAP	0	1	5	12	18	18
Telephone interview	0	0	0	8	48	47
Telephone recertification	0	0	2	23	46	49
Online application	0	0	5	19	39	45
Call center	0	4	10	23	34	39
Fingerprinting	3	5	4	4	1	1

By 2016, the only policy that was implemented in all states was simplified reporting. By 2016, the majority of states used the waiver of the **face-to-face interviewing** requirement during **application** and **recertification** processes. Two exceptions are North Dakota that requires

<sup>2</sup> Wisconsin in 1994

<sup>3</sup> Hawaii in 2016

<sup>4</sup> Arizona in 1999

<sup>5</sup> New York in 2014

conducting a face-to-face interview with new applicants as well as SNAP participants who are recertifying their eligibility, and Missouri which requires it only in the application process and uses telephone interviews in recertifying participants. A number of states never applied **BBCE** including Alaska, Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia and Wyoming. All other states have a broad-based eligibility policy in place, which began at different times.

A few states have applied **fingerprinting**, including Arizona (starting in 1998 throughout the state), California from 1998 to 2011 (in the beginning, in some counties only, and from 2001 to 2012 in the entire state, before abolishing), Massachusetts from 1996-2003 in the entire state, New York from 1996 to 2011 (from 2007 in some counties and in the entire state before), Texas from 1996 to 2011 (from 2000 in the entire state). States that do not have a **CAP** are: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, DC, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming. In 2016, the following states did not have **call centers**: Alabama, Hawaii, Kansas, Montana, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. Alaska, Arkansas started operating a statewide call center in 2016. Georgia started very early in 1998 by operating a call center in some parts of the state before providing a statewide call center in 2009. Utah started a partial call center in 1999 before operating a statewide one in 2009. Minnesota operated a call center in some parts of the state only between 2010 and 2014, Mississippi from 2012 to 2014, and New Mexico from 2009 to 2011.

In 2016, Alaska, Wyoming, DC, Hawaii, Idaho, Mississippi, Kentucky and South Dakota still did not have an **online application** system. Some states started using online applications recently such as Oklahoma and North Carolina, which started in 2014, and New Mexico in 2015. Other states started earlier – for example, Pennsylvania and Washington in 2002 and West Virginia in 2003.

## VII. Results and Discussion

Table 4. Short and Long Run Determinants of SNAP Participation Rates

Independent variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV t-1	Model V t-2
<b>A. SNAP Policies</b>					
Benefits	0.110*** (0.000)	-0.176 (0.258)	-	0.217** (0.026)	0.138* (0.083)
Simplified Reporting	-0.038 (0.961)	2.561** (0.042)	-	3.460*** (0.001)	2.063* (0.060)
Average Certification Period	0.896*** (0.000)	0.512* (0.054)	-	0.232 (0.419)	-0.064 (0.808)
Broad-based categorical Eligibility (BBCE)	3.629*** (0.000)	1.707 (0.232)	-	3.385*** (0.000)	2.524*** (0.005)
Combined Application Project (CAP)	1.213 (0.208)	2.295 (0.201)	-	0.471 (0.786)	-0.144 (0.935)
Telephone Interview	5.013*** (0.000)	0.137 (0.914)	-	1.405 (0.154)	2.094** (0.045)
Face Recertification	2.405 (0.024)	0.220 (0.802)	-	0.996 (0.299)	0.041 (0.968)
Call Center	0.890 (0.251)	1.480 (0.162)	-	1.142 (0.217)	0.318 (0.659)
Fingerprinting	-5.366*** (0.002)	-1.939 (0.397)	-	-4.898* (0.065)	-3.301 (0.324)
Online Application	2.322*** (0.005)	-1.679 (0.178)	-	-0.740 (0.505)	0.372 (0.740)
<b>B. Political Variables</b>					
Republicans full control	-1.439 (0.115)	-3.175* (0.057)	-2.810* (0.070)	-2.248* (0.067)	-3.052** (0.011)
Shared control	-1.989*** (0.005)	-2.605** (0.012)	-2.688** (0.012)	-1.959** (0.040)	-2.045** (0.033)
<b>C. Demographics</b>					
Poverty	0.049 (0.740)	-0.787*** (0.000)	-0.793*** (0.000)	-0.195 (0.188)	-0.145 (0.320)
Unemployment	0.206 (0.315)	2.231*** (0.000)	2.206*** (0.000)	2.973*** (0.000)	2.176*** (0.000)
Hispanic Population	-0.175* (0.062)	0.559 (0.343)	0.764 (0.174)	-2.307 (0.136)	-3.479** (0.012)
AA Population	0.177** (0.026)	1.080** (0.040)	0.992 (0.119)	3.966*** (0.000)	3.690*** (0.006)
No. of observations	1,070	1,069	1,071	1,018	967
Clustered SE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup> within	0.637	0.763	0.742	0.799	0.822

Note: Dependent variable is SNAP participation rate

\*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate significance on a 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence levels, respectively.

Year and state dummies are not shown in the table. P values statistics are given in parentheses.

Note: Model I is a baseline model that does not correct for heteroskedasticity, and no state of year fixed effects. Model II is a panel regression model with state and year fixed effects, linear time trend, and standard errors clustered on the state level. Model III is a reduced version of Model II to estimate the impact of political and demographic variables on participation rates

## **The impact of SNAP policies on participation rates**

Several SNAP policies behaved as expected. The amount of SNAP benefits has a positive impact on SNAP participation rates in the distributed lag model where each additional dollar in benefits is associated with a 0.217 percentage points increase in participation rates in a subsequent year, holding all other variables constant. The coefficient is significant at the 95% confidence level. The positive impact of increasing benefits also endures after two years, however, with a lower significance. When SNAP benefits increase by one dollar, participation rates increased by 0.138 percentage points after two years as shown in column 5 of Table 4. The positive coefficient of benefit levels holds in the estimation of two regions as shown in columns 2 and 3 of Table 5. The positive marginal effect of increasing SNAP benefits on participation rates is expected. The literature suggests that notwithstanding the advantages of SNAP, the low benefit amount discourages many eligible households from enrolling in the program. With higher benefits, eligible households find it more worthwhile and cost effective to enroll in the program.

Simplified reporting is another variable that has a positive impact on participation rates. In model II in Table 4, it is significant at the 95% confidence interval level with a beta coefficient of 2.561, indicating that applying simplified reporting in a given state in a given year leads to a 2.56 percentage points increase in participation rates, *ceteris paribus*. Its effect becomes higher and more significant when a one-year lag is used as shown in column 4 of Table 4 (associated with 3.46 percentage points increase in participation rate and significant at the 99% confidence level). After two years, simplified reporting continues to have a positive impact on participation rates even though its significance becomes milder as shown in column 5 of Table 4 (2.063% on the 90% confidence level). Simplified reporting also has a highly significant and more positive effect on participation rates in Southwestern states. In states such as Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, simplified reporting contributed to increasing SNAP participation rates by 7.13 percentage points as shown in column 2 of Table 5. Dickert-Conlin et al. (2016) estimated that the impact of simplified reporting on SNAP caseload size ranged between 2.4% to 4.7% in distributed lag and dynamic estimations. Ganong and Liebman (2013) also found that simplified reporting increased SNAP take up by 3%. Simplified reporting is a policy that targets current SNAP recipients. Instead of reporting changes in their eligibility once those changes take place,

simplified reporting allows participants to report those changes on a periodic basis. Its positive impact on participation rates, in the same and subsequent years after it was applied, indicates that it is a beneficial policy for both the enrolled and potential recipients. It helps keep SNAP recipients enrolled in the program by reducing transaction costs. Current recipients are expected to be aware of any new changes in policies faster than those who are not enrolled because they have more communication with SNAP administration. The effect of simplified reporting in a later time period suggests that eligible individuals are induced to apply and enroll once they become aware of the policy.

Lengthening the average certification period has a positive impact of participation rates as shown in column 2 of Table 4, where SNAP participation rates increase by 0.51 percentage points when certification period increase by an additional month. The effect and statistical significance of extending certification periods is even higher in Western region (as shown in column 1 of Table 5), where every additional month is associated with almost two percentage points increase in participation rates, and the coefficient is highly statistically significant. Similarly, longer certification periods leads to higher participation rates in Northeastern region, as each additional month associates with almost one-percentage point increase in participation rates. Neither the impact nor the statistical significance of lengthening certification period holds in the distributed lag model, indicating that extending the certification period does not have an enduring effect on participation rates. The positive and slightly significant impact in the same year suggests that longer certification periods motivate current SNAP recipients to continue their enrollment in the program rather than encouraging eligible households to enroll in the program.

As for using a broad-based categorical eligibility, the variable has a positive and highly significant impact on participation rates one and two years after its implementation. As shown in columns 4 and 5 of Table 4, using BBCE in a given year increases participation rates by 3.385 and 2.524 percentage points one and two years later, *ceteris paribus*. However, the variable does not have a statistically significant impact in the subsamples presented in Table 5. Unlike simplified reporting, BBCE does not affect current SNAP recipients since it is a policy related to program eligibility and enrollment. Therefore, its positive impact does not appear in the same year it is applied. For eligible households, which do not participate in SNAP, BBCE reduces

transactions costs and thus encourages them to enroll in the program. Essentially, using a broad-based categorical eligibility makes it easier for both SNAP administrators and applicants. The policy does not mean that those who participate in other welfare assistance program, such as TANF, are automatically enrolled in SNAP, but it exempts them from the asset and income tests, and thereby reduces the administrative burdens and complexities associated with applying. Eligible households are still required to fill out a SNAP application and conduct an interview with the state/county SNAP officials. Several studies have shown that BBCE has a positive impact on caseload and encourages eligible applicants to enroll. For example, Ratcliffe et al. (2008) have suggested that in states where this policy was applied, caseload size increased by 1.6- 2.1%. Dickert-Conlin et al. (2016) has estimated an even higher effect on caseload size concluding that BBCE led to a 6% increase in caseload after one year of policy implementation.

The Combined Application Project does not have a statistically significant impact on increasing participation rates in the whole sample. It has a positive impact only in the Southwestern region, where it is associated with a 2.92 percentage points increase in participation rates as shown in column 2 of Table 5, holding all other variables constant. CAP targets SSI recipients who are either elderly or disabled. It operates similar to the broad-based eligibility criteria, whereby SSI recipients are automatically eligible for SNAP and exempt from the income and asset tests. Nevertheless, they still need to apply for SNAP through normal application procedures. A plausible explanation for the weak significance of the combined application project is that it targets a specific and small group of eligible households and individuals. Consequently, its positive impact varies depending on the demographics, age structure and the number of SSI recipients in the state where it is applied. Other studies also found that CAP's effect on caseload is not uniform across all households and varies depending on the demographic composition of the state (Ganong & Liebman, 2013).

The variable of using telephone interviews to apply for SNAP has a positive impact on SNAP participation rates but after two years of its implementation, where it leads to increasing participation rates by 2.094 percentage points as shown in column 5 of Table 4. In the subsamples presented in Table 5, the variable has even higher marginal effect and statistical significance in Western states, where it associates with a 5.365 percentage points increase in

participation rates, holding all other variables constant. However, the impact of the policy is negative in Southwestern region where it is associated with a 6.85 percentage points drop in participation rates. This inconsistency suggests that the impact of the variable is not uniform across all states, and there are other factors that determine the direction of its impact. While substituting a face-to-face interview with a telephone interview in the application process might be a plausible factor in increasing participation rates, there are strong arguments that suggest the opposite. It is true that for some eligible individuals, eliminating the face-to-face interview eliminates the direct interaction with caseworkers and hence mitigates the negative feelings of stigma. It is also more convenient for individuals who work full time or live far from SNAP offices as it reduces transaction costs. However, it is an impediment for other groups, such as those who do not have phones or change their phone numbers frequently (for example, homeless people). In addition, some people prefer face-to-face communication with caseworkers when applying because they can better elaborate on their status and respond to questions in personal interactions rather than over the phone. Indeed SNAP officials highlighted the following drawbacks of phone interviews (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2015):

- 1- The difficulty to obtain precise information from applicants, especially those with complex cases (such as homeless, student and self-employed applicants).
- 2- Limiting the ability of caseworkers to make an accurate decision.

In two demonstration projects implemented by the USDA (2015) in Utah and Oregon, it was found that groups with earnings in Oregon had lower rates of participation when the state started using telephone interviews. In addition, the same research showed that using phone interviews did not lead to reductions in cost or time or increases in efficiency. In Utah, for example, the time spent on a single application was 1.9 hours when phone interviews were used, compared to only 1.1 hours in face-to-face applications. This is due to the difficulty that SNAP offices had in contacting applicants and in obtaining clarifications regarding application materials and required documentations. The findings of the demonstration project in Utah support the estimates presented in column 2 of Table 5 below.

Likewise, waiving the requirement to conduct a face-to-face interview with current SNAP recipients to recertify their eligibility does not seem to have a strong impact on SNAP participation rates. Although the variable has a positive coefficient in the estimates presented in Table 4 and 5, none of them is statistically significant at any conventional level. These results suggest that current SNAP recipients prefer to recertify their eligibility by visiting SNAP offices rather than conducting an interview over the phone.

With regard to operating a call center to provide information to eligible and already enrolled SNAP recipients, the variable is insignificant in affecting participation rates whether lags are used or not. It is only significant in the subsample of Western states. In states such as California, Oregon and Washington, operating call centers in a given year leads to a 5.509 percentage points increase in participation rates, *ceteris paribus* (see column 1 in Table 5). However, the impact is negative in Southwestern states as shown in column 2 of Table 5 (leading to a 4.32 percentage points decrease in participation rates). Intuitively, providing information on eligibility, application and benefit amounts is an important factor in improving enrollment in public assistance programs. Call centers help overcome an important barrier to enrollment by reducing information costs. The failure of this variable to be significant except in only one region, and its negative effect in another do not indicate that call centers are not important. However, the reason could be the active role that nongovernmental organizations have played in providing information through other mediums. Furthermore, information could be obtained from other sources such as visiting SNAP offices or through the agencies' websites. The literature has found mixed results regarding the effect of operating call centers on caseload. Call centers either have a very small positive effect (Dickert-Conlin et al., 2012), or negative effect (Ziliak, 2015) on SNAP caseload.

Fingerprinting is another variable that has a strong negative impact on participation rates. In the regression of the whole sample presented in Table 4, fingerprinting SNAP applicants in a given year led to 4.898 percentage points drop in participation rates a year later. Its marginal effect and statistical significance are higher in the regions where one or more states applied this policy, as shown in the subsamples presented in Table 5. Fingerprinting reduced SNAP participation rates by 10.67 percentage points in Western states, 6.741 percentage points in

Southwestern region, and 5.496 percentage points in Northeastern states, and the coefficient is statically significant at the 99% confidence level. These estimates are in line with the existing literature that suggested that fingerprinting is an impediment for enrollment in SNAP. Ratcliffe et al. (2007) found that in the states where SNAP applicants were required to be fingerprinted, food stamp receipt decreased by 4.3%. A study by California Public Policy Institute found that fingerprinting reduced participation in CalFresh by 7 percent (Danielson & Klerman, 2011). Many eligible individuals viewed fingerprinting as a stigma. In addition, some applicants, particularly those with criminal backgrounds or living illegally in the country, were reluctant to apply fearing legal consequences and deportation. Not only illegal immigrants, who are ineligible to apply, but also immigrants living legally in the U.S. but in mixed-status families with other illegal immigrants, undoubtedly fear that their application might lead to legal issues for their family members.

Finally, using online application was insignificant either in the short or long run when the entire sample is used. Unexpectedly, it had a negative impact in the subsample of Western states and significant at the 95% confidence level. Some studies found that online applications do not have a significant impact on enrollment (Klerman and Danielson, 2011). A study by Edwards et al. (2016), comparing caseloads in Florida and Oregon after the recession, found that while Florida had introduced some innovative and technological advancements in SNAP application, including online application, caseload was remarkably higher in Oregon, which did not have an online application system at that time. Allowing eligible households to apply online definitely makes the application process easier and more convenient. However, examining the SNAP eligible population might explain why online access has not had a big impact. Many applicants lack access to computers or a reliable Internet service. Others may not be familiar with using the Internet such as the elderly, disabled or people who are homeless. For example, CalFresh applicants indicated that they prefer visiting SNAP offices to apply in-person because they need help and assistance in filling out the application and contended that the online application is complex and frustrating (Campbell, 2015).

Table 5. Determinants of SNAP Participation Rates in Different Regions

Independent Variables	Region 1	Region 2	Region 3	Region 4
<b>A. SNAP policies</b>				
Benefits	-0.200* (0.053)	0.485* (0.066)	0.386** (0.040)	-0.184 (0.122)
Simplified Reporting	-0.281 (0.906)	7.133*** (0.000)	1.524 (0.608)	1.770 (0.249)
Average Certification Period	1.969*** (0.003)	0.461 (0.436)	0.771 (0.163)	0.998* (0.080)
Broad-based categorical Eligibility (BBCE)	0.086 (0.988)	0.037 (0.982)	3.473 (0.131)	2.020 (0.236)
Combined Application Project	-1.578 (0.788)	2.921* (0.096)	-3.320 (0.135)	2.055 (0.369)
Telephone Interview	5.365** (0.028)	-6.854** (0.022)	-2.061 (0.449)	0.348 (0.825)
Face Recertification	0.888 (0.633)	2.721 (0.212)	1.041 (0.711)	1.231 (0.668)
Call center	5.509* (0.097)	-4.324* (0.057)	-1.317 (0.650)	-0.060 (0.976)
Fingerprinting	-10.670*** (0.003)	-6.741*** (0.007)	-	-5.496*** (0.001)
Online Application	-5.340424** (0.028)	1.793145 (0.480)	-2.144321 (0.352)	-1.865154 (0.505)
<b>B. Political Variables</b>				
Republicans full control	-1.812 (0.673)	-0.621 (0.774)	-3.335 (0.355)	-4.936** (0.012)
Shared control	-3.210 (0.198)	1.945* (0.074)	0.616 (0.810)	-4.353*** (0.000)
<b>C. Demographics</b>				
Poverty	-1.975*** (0.000)	-0.589*** (0.005)	-0.703** (0.022)	-1.718*** (0.003)
Unemployment	1.172 (0.534)	1.976** (0.044)	1.327 (0.208)	-0.651 (0.532)
Hispanic Population	-0.150 (0.848)	1.3813 (0.106)	2.868*** (0.000)	1.0212 (0.323)
AA Population	13.236*** (0.001)	3.894 (0.147)	-0.1589 (0.932)	5.886*** (0.000)
No. of observation	147	147	168	146
R <sup>2</sup> within	0.844	0.853	0.915	0.940

Note: Dependent variable is SNAP participation rate

All models use state and time fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered on the state level

Region 1 includes Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Nevada, Alaska and Hawaii. Region 2 includes Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas. Region 3 includes Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida. Region 4 includes New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

## The impact of partisanship on SNAP participation rates

As hypothesized, the party in control of government has a significant impact on SNAP participation rates. Specifically, when the Republicans control the government on the state level, SNAP participation rates are lower than if the Democrats are in control. As shown in column 2

of Table 4, in a given year, when the Republicans controls the legislature and the governor is a Republican, participation rates drop by 3.175 percentage points the same year, compared to if the Democrats have full control. This negative and statically significant impact also holds in the reduced model presented in column 3 of Table 4, where only political and demographic variables are incorporated. Similarly, in the distributed lag models, the variable shows higher significance when a two lags rather than one lag is used. After two years from the Republicans control over the state's political institutions, SNAP participation rates decrease by 3.052 percentage points compared to if the Democratic Party is in power. The variable holds its negative impact in the regressions ran on the subsamples, as shown in Table 5, however it is only statistically significant in the Northeastern region with a beta coefficient of 4.93 and significance at the 95% level. Similarly, when power is split between the two parties, SNAP participation rates are lower than if the Democratic Party has full control. The variable of *shared control* has a consistent statistically significant negative coefficient in all models presented in Table 4. SNAP participation rates drop by 2.6 percentage points in the year power is shared between the two parties, and by almost 2 percentage points one and two years later.

Essentially, the state legislature is in charge of producing legislative bills that affect SNAP administration and outcomes. PRWORA allowed states to opt out from the application of certain policies, such as banning convicted drug felons from enrollment in the program and applying waivers for work requirements imposed on ABAWDs. In addition, it is within the prerogative of the state legislature to approve state budgets, including allocating funds to different departments and counties to finance programs that enhance SNAP administration such as outreach activities and SNAP Education and Training programs. Dickert-Conlin et al. (2012) suggested that SNAP received more publicity when Democrats had higher shares in the state government. Particularly, in states where the governor is a Democrat or the House has a Democratic majority, there is higher probability of broadcasting more SNAP television advertisements.

Several studies suggest that governors are influential in affecting welfare policies, particularly after the 1996 welfare reform when states became more independent in designing their programs. "Governors affect state policymaking in a systematic and theoretically

predictable way” (Barrilleaux & Berkman, 2003, p. 415). Democratic governors, in particular, favor redistributive policies and welfare generosity (Dye, 1984; Winters, 1976). Ziliak (2015) found that Democratic governors had a positive impact on SNAP participation, arguing that they tend to create a more supportive environment for SNAP enrollment. While governors do not make laws, they affect policy design and outcomes through their approval of the state’s budget and the power to veto legislative bills. In California, for example, Governors Arnold Schwarzenegger and Pete Wilson vetoed several bills that aimed to eliminate the fingerprinting requirement. Importantly, governors’ influence is not restricted to their institutional and functional powers. Governors are the most prominent political figures in the state. While state policy makers are held accountable to their constituents, governors have a statewide electoral base, and hence they have moral obligation and influence over the entire state’s population. Furthermore, it is evident that the party affiliation of policymakers and politicians has an important effect on public opinion including public sentiments towards welfare programs and recipients as “partisanship influences what information individuals encounter, whether they accept or discount the information, and how they interpret the information” (Enns & McAvoy, 2012, p. 629).

The impact of political variables can also be observed in the interaction between the *Republicans full control* variable and SNAP policies, as presented in Panel D of Table 6. For example, while using simplified reporting, implementing a combined application project, and lengthening certification period are associated with an increase in SNAP participation rates, the effect of these policies becomes negative when either the Republicans has full control or the power is split between the two parties, compared to if the Democrats has full control over the state’s political institutions. This indicates that having a Republican governor and a Republican majority in both houses outweigh the positive impact of SNAP policies that reduce transaction costs such as simplified reporting and combined application project. Similarly, while the *average certification period* variable is associated with higher participation rates, when Republicans have full control or power is split between the two parties, the policy essentially has no effect. This indicates that in addition to longer certification periods, Democratic controlled governments provide a supportive and encouraging administrative environment for enrollment in SNAP. SNAP agencies may facilitate the process of recertification itself, for example by requiring fewer

documents to prove eligibility, expediting approving applications, providing help to recipients during the recertification process, and also recipients may feel less stigmatized when they recertify their eligibility. Conversely, lengthening certification periods in Republican controlled states might not have the same effect because the extension itself is not a guarantee that SNAP agencies will simplify the process of recertification. Therefore, even when the recertification period is longer, the process might be complicated, and consequently transaction costs of enrollment are not reduced.

In contrast, Table 6 shows that using a broad based eligibility and waiving the requirement of conducting a face-to-face interview during recertification are only significant in increasing participation rates when Republicans have full control over the state's political institutions. A plausible explanation for these particular findings is that SNAP recipients, in a Republican controlled state, may prefer to be interviewed over the phone to avoid being stigmatized by SNAP case workers if they are interviewed in person. To say it in other words, given the Democrats pro welfare leniencies, recipients in Democratic controlled states may prefer to be interviewed in person because they are treated well by SNAP caseworkers and do not feel stigmatized, rendering the policy (waiving the face-to-face interview requirement) to be ineffective. Regarding BBCE, SNAP eligible households might be encouraged to enroll in the program when this policy is in place because in its absence, the process of proving eligibility is difficult and costly. Without BBCE, a household should pass an income and asset test, which could be more difficult and troublesome under a Republican controlled government. In addition, given that BBCE is a policy that targets eligible recipients, rather than current ones, its impact is likely to appear in a later time period as suggested by the distributed lag models presented in columns 4 and 5 of Table 4.

Table 6. Interaction of Partisanship with SNAP Policy and Demographic Variables

Independent Variables	Coefficient
<b>A. SNAP policies</b>	
Benefits	-0.209** (0.044)
Simplified reporting	5.429** (0.037)
Average certification period	1.675*** (0.000)
BBCE	-1.975 (0.397)
CAP	5.093** (0.028)
Telephone interview	1.542 (0.425)
Face recertification	-2.474 (0.173)
Call Center	0.583 (0.723)
Fingerprinting	-3.898 (0.230)
Online Application	-1.449 (0.467)
<b>B. Political variables</b>	
Republicans full control	2.257 (0.791)
Shared control	-1.395 (0.831)
<b>C. Demographic variables</b>	
Poverty rate	-1.538*** (0.000)
Unemployment rate	2.405*** (0.000)
Hispanic population	0.744 (0.219)
AA population	0.933** (0.029)
<b>D. Interaction terms</b>	
Republicans full control*Benefits	0.023 (0.754)
Republicans full control*Simplified reporting	-1.504 (0.598)
Republicans full control*Average certification period	-1.647*** (0.000)
Republicans full control*BBCE	8.022** (0.022)
Republicans full control*CAP	-4.323 (0.198)
Republicans full control*Telephone interview	-4.162 (0.149)
Republicans full control*Telephone recertification	5.417** (0.046)

Table 6 (Continued)

Independent Variables	Coefficient
Republicans full control*Call center	-1.025 (0.668)
Republicans full control*Fingerprinting	-2.972 (0.595)
Republicans full control*Online application	0.984 (0.777)
Republicans full control*Poverty	0.588 (0.230)
Republicans full control*Unemployment	0.124 (0.821)
Republicans full control*Hispanics	-0.077 (0.711)
Republicans full control*African Americans	0.022 (0.874)
Shared control*Benefits	0.029 (0.470)
Shared control*Simplified reporting	-3.677 (0.205)
Shared control*Average certification period	-1.175*** (0.002)
Shared control*BBCE	2.884 (0.211)
Shared control*CAP	-2.923 (0.130)
Shared control*Telephone interview	-0.583 (0.777)
Shared control*Telephone recertification	3.581* (0.067)
Shared control*Call center	1.671 (0.298)
Shared control*Fingerprinting	1.536 (0.603)
Shared control*Online application	-1.099 (0.537)
Shared control*Poverty	1.033** (0.015)
Shared control*Unemployment	-0.732** (0.046)
Shared control*Hispanics	-0.0139 (0.879)
Shared control*African Americans	-0.025 (0.804)
R <sup>2</sup> within	0.789

Dependent variable is SNAP participation rate.

This model shows the interaction of party in control of government and all other independent variables

State fixed effects, a linear time trend and year dummies are incorporated in the model.

Standard errors are clustered on the state level.

## The impact of demographics on SNAP participation rates

With regard to demographic variables, unemployment rates, as expected, have a positive and significant coefficient in almost all models. The estimates presented in Table 4 suggest that a

one-percentage point increase in unemployment rate associates with a 2.231 percentage points increase in participation rates, *ceteris paribus*. The effect of unemployment is consistent in almost all models. In the distributed lag model, unemployment positive correlation with SNAP participation rates holds with high significance, suggesting that as unemployment rate increases by 1 percent in a given year, SNAP participation rates increase by 2.973 and 2.176 percentage points one and two years later. This finding is in line with other literature suggesting that unemployment is among the main economic variables leading to higher caseloads. However the magnitude of the effect of unemployment on participation rates is way less than its effect on caseload size.

On the other hand, the coefficient of poverty rate is negative and significant, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. The participation rate is an equation that calculates how many SNAP eligible individuals/households (falling behind the poverty line) actually participate in the program. Therefore, when poverty rate increases, the denominator of the equation increases, resulting in a lower participation rate. Poverty rate has a positive and statistically significant impact when caseload is used as the dependent variable instead of participation rate with the same model specifications (table not provided here), indicating that while higher poverty rate increases caseload size, it decreases participation rate. Poverty rate has a negative and significant impact on participation rates as shown in Tables 4 and 5, but it loses its significance in the distributed lag model since participation rates are calculated based on poverty estimates of the same year.

Regarding racial and ethnic composition, the results show that the proportion of Hispanics and African Americans have different impacts on participation rates. As shown in Table 4, a one percentage point increase in the proportion of African Americans in a given state in a given year is associated with a 1.08 percentage points increase in participation rates the same year, 3.966 percentage points one year later, and 3.690 percentage points two years later. The positive impact of African American proportion of the population on SNAP participation rates is higher in Western and Northeastern regions, as shown in columns 1 and 4 of Table 5, leading to a 13.236% percentage points increase in the former and 5.886 in the latter, and the variable is has a high statistical significance. On the other hand, the variable of *Hispanic proportion* is statistically insignificant in most models, and the direction of its impact changed from being

negative in the whole samples, as shown in Model 5 of Table 4, to having a positive effect in Southeastern region, as shown in column 3 of Table 5. Importantly, the variable of Hispanic population is statistically insignificant in the two regions with the highest concentration of Hispanics in the U.S. In Western and Southwestern regions including states like California, Texas, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona, Hispanic population does not have a significant impact on participation rates.

African Americans and Hispanics suffer higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than other groups in the U.S. In fact, their participation in public assistance programs was one of the causes to which many analysts attribute welfare retrenchment in the U.S. Both groups participate in public assistance programs more than other ethnic and racial groups, and their participation is disproportionate to their population size. For example, in 2012, 41.6% of African Americans and 36.4% of Hispanics in the U.S. participated in different public assistance programs, compared to the 21.3% national average in the same year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Almost a third of SNAP recipients are African Americans while they represent only 12% of the U.S. population. For example, in 2003, 34.3% of SNAP recipients were African Americans (Cunningham & Brown, 2004). And almost 25% of African Americans in the U.S. receive SNAP benefits. In fact African Americans' participation rate in SNAP is higher than the average participation rate nationally (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2007). In 2016, 43.5 million individuals were enrolled in SNAP nationwide, of which more than 11 million were African Americans (representing more than 25% of all recipients), and 7.5 million were Hispanics (17.2% of total participants) (Lauffer, 2017). The percentage of Hispanics participating in SNAP has been increasing over time particularly in the past few years. Hispanics made about 17.1% of all SNAP recipients (7,730,000 out of the total 45,184,000 enrolled nationwide) in 2015 (Gray et al., 2016), 16.4% in 2014 (Farson et al., 2015), 16.1% in 2013, and 14.1% in 2012 (Gray & Eslami, 2014). The inconsistent and insignificant impact of the proportion of Hispanic population on SNAP participation rates as shown in this chapter suggests that the effect is based on the legal status of Hispanic households within each state. An increase in the Hispanic proportion of the population may increase participation rates if the majority of Hispanic households are legally present in the US, but will have a negative effect if there are large percentages of undocumented immigrants or SNAP eligible individuals living in mixed status families.

## VIII. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have utilized the variation between states in SNAP policies, political and demographic variables to investigate their impact on SNAP participation rates. An empirical examination using panel data from 1996 to 2016 was conducted. The analysis suggested that SNAP policies, political and demographic factors help explain the variation in SNAP participation rates over time.

Several policies are associated with increasing participation rates either in the same year they were implemented or in a later time period. Simplified reporting is one of the important policies that contributes to improving participation rates. Using simplified reporting led to an increase in participation rates by 2.561 percentage points the same year it was applied, 3.46 percentage points a year later, and 2.063 percentage points after two years. The effect is even higher in Southwestern states where it led to a 7.133 percentage points increase in participation rates. Increasing the amount of SNAP benefits also encourages eligible households to enroll, where every additional dollar of benefits in a given year leading to a 0.217 and 0.138 percentage points increase in SNAP participation rates one and two years later. Likewise, using a broad-based categorical eligibility, whereby recipients of TANF and other public assistance programs are exempted from SNAP income and asset tests, is associated with a 3.385 and 2.524 percentage points increase in participation rates one and two years after the policy is implemented. Using a combined application project to exempt SSI recipients from SNAP income and asset tests has a positive impact on participation rates but only in the Southwestern region.

The empirical findings also show that fingerprinting SNAP applicants as part of the application process was an important impediment for participation that had both an immediate and long-run effects. The variable had a consistent negative and significant coefficient in almost all models developed in this chapter. The policy led to a drop in participation rates by 4.898 percentage points one year after its implementation. Its negative impact is very high in Western US states as it is associated with a 10.67 percentage points decrease in participation rates. The negative effect of fingerprinting demonstrates that stigma is a strong barrier to participation in SNAP. This implies that other measures that impose stigma on SNAP recipients, such as drug

testing SNAP applicants or requiring ID verification in grocery stores checkouts, will likely reduce participation rates.

While some policies intuitively contribute to increasing participations rates, the empirical examination suggests they do not have a significant impact. Using a telephone interview during the application and recertification processes instead of a face-to-face interview did not show significant impact on increasing participation rates. This indicates that some eligible households might prefer to be interviewed in person in order to elaborate on their financial situation and respond correctly to caseworkers' questions. Using an online application also seems to have insignificant impact on participation rates. Moreover, it has a negative impact in Western states, suggesting that some households might not have access to computers, internet service, or simply are not familiar with online applications. Operating a call center to provide information and answer questions of current and potential participants does not have a consistent impact on participation rates in different regions.

On the other hand, the Republicans full control of government explains a part of the variation in SNAP participation rates. Having a Republican governor and a Republican majority in both houses led to 3.175 percentage points drop in the same year, 2.248 and 3.052 one and two years later. Not less important, the Republicans full control of the state's political institutions outweighed the positive impact of policies such as lengthening certification period and applying simplified reporting.

The results presented in this chapter suggest that demographic variables also matter. Estimates of the impact of the proportion of African American on participation rates confirm the data and arguments that this group participates in public assistance programs disproportionately to its percentage of the entire U.S. population. According to the models developed in this chapter, an increase in the percentage of African Americans in a state leads to higher SNAP participation rates. An important finding, though, relates to Hispanic population, as their impact fluctuates between being negative in the whole sample to being positively correlated with SNAP participation rates in the Southeastern region. Additionally, the variable does not have a statistically significant impact on participation rates in the two regions with the highest

concentration of Hispanics including states such as California, Texas, Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico. This can be attributed to state-specific policies that aim to limit or impose restrictions on the participation of Hispanics to avoid being a welfare magnet or encouraging illegal immigration to the state. The results also show that unemployment is an important factor in increasing participation rates, whereby a one-percent point increase in state unemployment rate leads to a 2.231 percentage points increase in participation rates in the same year, 2.97 and 2.176 percentage points increase one and two years later.

## Chapter 5. California Case Study

### I. Introduction

At first glance, one might expect that California with its progressive reputation and liberal leniencies will be among the top states in providing SNAP benefits to low-income and poor populations like its neighboring states Washington and Oregon. However this is not the case. Notwithstanding that California has the highest SNAP caseload in the country, it has one of the lowest participation rates. This highlights the difference between caseload size, which is the absolute number of those who enroll in the program, and participation rate, which measures how effectively a state is reaching and enrolling those who are eligible to participate in the program.

Importantly, low participation rates not only entail omitting eligible households who struggle to secure enough food for their families, but it also represents a loss to the state and counties which forgo federal funding that would ultimately be funneled into the state and local economies. The Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that every additional \$1 the government spends on SNAP leads to \$0.80 to \$1.50 increase in GDP (Canning & Morrison, 2019). In 2009, the peak year of the recession, \$50 billion in benefits led to \$85 billion in local economic activity (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, n.d.). In Marin County, California, where the participation rate is as low as 38.2%, the county loses \$21.6 million in federally funded benefits each year or \$38.6 million that benefit the county's economy (Call & Shimada, 2015).

SNAP recipients do not belong to a single group. They comprise different ethnic, racial, and age groups. They live in different geographic areas (urban and rural), and have varied employment and immigration status. What they all have in common is their financial situation that makes them eligible for participation. However, there are certain subgroups whose participation is usually lower than the average, both on the national and state levels. This includes children, seniors, non-white and non-citizens. These subgroups experience different obstacles when applying for and receiving benefits ranging from misinformation about their eligibility, the high cost of applying, as well as stereotyping and fear of deportation due to being

unlawfully living in the U.S. or having a family member who is an undocumented immigrant. Therefore investigating state demographics, and in particular racial and ethnic compositions is an essential undertaking to unveil the dynamics of participation in SNAP.

Policy problems result from several causes, and the failure to achieve high participation rates are plausibly caused by multiple factors. In an interview with a senior CalFresh official, (CalFresh is the name for SNAP in California), I asked about the reasons for low participation rates in California, and the answer was “if we knew the causes, we would have already solved the problem. There isn’t a singular cause that any one in the field can point to, it’s a combination of California’s make-up, demographics, geography ... a combination of access and the different ways the program is operating, some people suggest that our population in terms of the large number of immigrants is contributing, some would argue that the history of stigma is contributing, it’s a kind of a long list that CalFresh advocates will point to”.

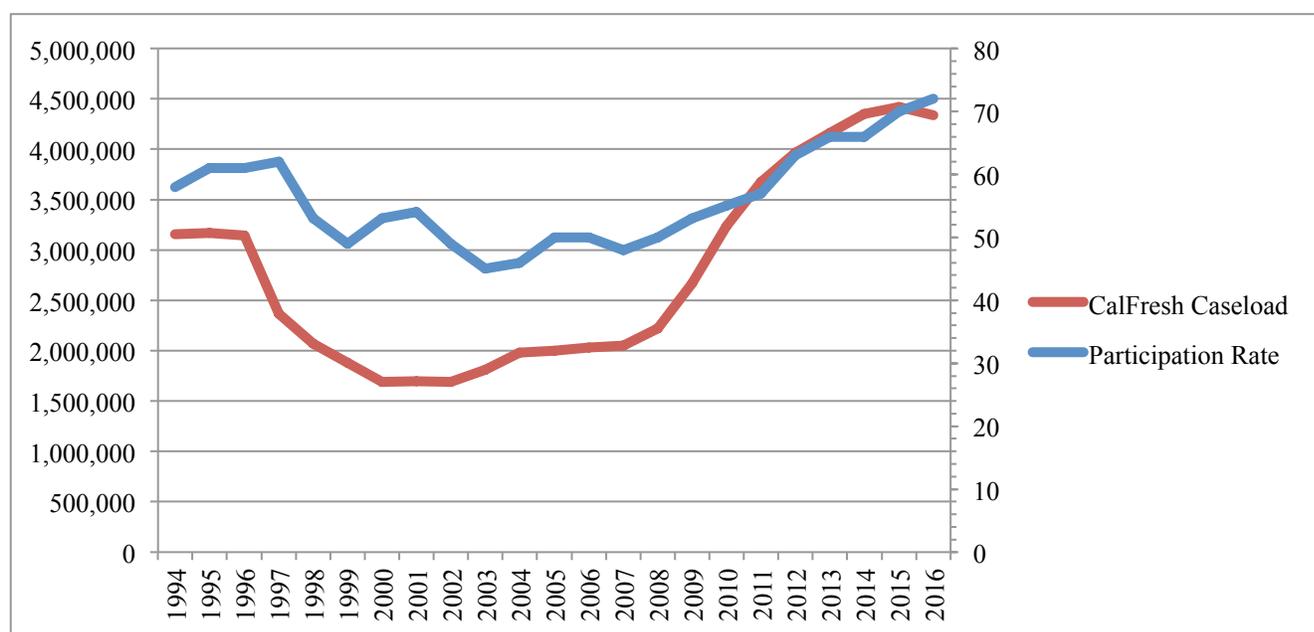
As illustrated in chapter four, SNAP policies, as well as political factors, play important roles in explaining variations in SNAP participation rates among states. The empirical model incorporated state fixed effects to account for state-specific circumstances that were not captured in the model but nevertheless have an impact on SNAP participation rates. Therefore, in this chapter, I thoroughly investigated SNAP policies, administration, demography, politics and the state SNAP and welfare policies to explore why California has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the country. In what follows, I will begin by providing a snapshot of SNAP caseload and participation rates and efforts made by California to boost participation. I will then discuss the decentralized approach California pursued in implementing SNAP, before moving on to examine particular policies that have contributed to low SNAP participation rates. Special attention will be paid to the political and cultural attitudes that motivated anti-immigrant welfare policies.

## **II. SNAP Profile in California**

SNAP caseload and participation rates in California, as well as a comparison between participation rates in California and the U.S. from 1994 to 2016, are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Caseload size in California exhibits similar patterns to the national levels in response to policy

changes and changing macroeconomic conditions. For example, enrollment fell sharply after the passage of PRWORA, declining from 3,143,390 in 1997 to 1,690,077 in 2002. It subsequently increased from 1,689,369 in 2002 to 1,978,075 in 2004 in response to the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, which restored eligibility to legal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for five years. Caseload size then dramatically increased from 2,048,185 in 2007 to 3,238,548 in 2010, following the great recession and sustained this trend until 2015 when it reached 4,417,772.

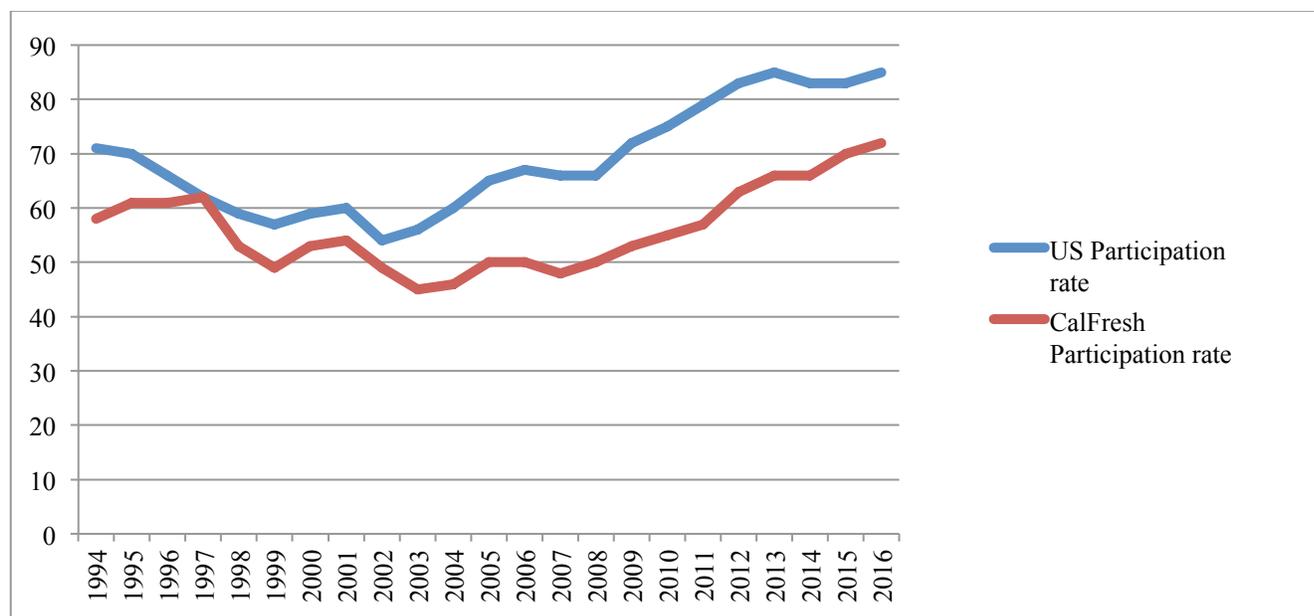
Figure 2. CalFresh Caseload and Participation Rates from 1994-2016



Participation rates in California tracked a similar pattern as national participation rates. It grew, however, at lower rates and fell at significantly higher rates than in the U.S. due to the demographic differences particularly relating to the high Hispanic population in California, as will be discussed in detail in this chapter. For example, after passage of PRWORA, participation rates in California dropped by 13-percentage points from 62% in 1997 to 49% in 1999, compared to only 5-percentage points drop in the national participation rate, which decreased from 62% to 57% during the same time period. Likewise, after the recession and passage of the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act of 2009, which increased SNAP benefits and relaxed enrollment restrictions, participation rates increased from 50% in 2008 to 57% in 2011, a modest increase

compared to the national participation rates which increased from 66% to 79% during the same period. This, in fact, demonstrates that California is one of the states that pulls the national average participation rates downwards, and also indicates some unique factors that make California an instructive case study.

Figure 3. SNAP Participation Rates in the U.S. and California from 1994-2016



In light of low SNAP participation rates as well the high prevalence of poverty and food insecurity, California recently enacted a number of measures to help boost SNAP participation rates. In 2012, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) decided to discontinue the application of the statewide fingerprinting imaging system, which had been in place for more than 12 years. California was one of a handful of states that had implemented this restrictive policy. In the same year, CDSS waived the face-to-face requirement during the application and recertification processes, and allowed counties to use telephone interviews. In 2013, the recertification period was extended from once every three months to once every six months, making it easier for SNAP recipients to continue enrollment in the program, thus reducing churn and administrative costs. Furthermore, the California legislature, in an effort to rebrand the program, passed AB 433, which required renaming SNAP to CalFresh to make it more appealing to beneficiaries (Zavis, 2010). Rebranding SNAP aimed at reducing welfare stigma associated with the terms of food stamps and food assistance. It also underlined the benefits of using the

program that provides access to more fresh and healthier foods. California is the only state that changed the name of SNAP. All other states either use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Food Stamps (Georgia, Idaho, New-Hampshire), Food Assistance Program (Alabama, Colorado, Florida), or Food Assistance (Iowa). California uses this approach in rebranding other social assistance programs such as TANF (CalWorks) and Medicaid (Medi-Cal).

### **III. The Devolution of SNAP Administration**

One of the distinctive features of SNAP in California is its decentralized administration. In the majority of the states, SNAP is administered on the state level. However, a few states, including California have pursued a decentralized approach, which allows counties to be in charge of administering the program, including determining strategies to increase participation rates and improve access to the program under the supervision of the state government. Decentralizing the administration of SNAP could be an effective approach given the unique circumstances, needs and contexts every locality has. It could enable local units to design their own rules and outreach programs that respond to the local needs and circumstances.

CalFresh's decentralized implementation has allowed counties to embark on unique approaches and innovative programs to reach eligible households and has encouraged them to enroll in the program. For example, San Francisco County introduced some new policies that helped increase participation rate among people facing food insecurity. The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFC-HSA) established a food security taskforce composed of 30 members from the SFC-HSA, health clinics, faith based and nongovernmental organizations, and the public. The role of the task force is to maximize the utilization of CalFresh, reduce food insecurity among county residents, improve access to nutritious food and decrease food waste. Furthermore, SFC-HSA has provided an expedited service whereby benefits are provided on the third day from the application date to certain individuals and households. To qualify for this immediate food assistance, an applicant should either:

- Have a household monthly income of less than \$150 and less than \$100 on hand.

- Have a combined household income and money in hand that is less than the household's rent and utilities.
- Be a migrant or seasonal farm worker and have less than \$100 in hand (City and County of San Francisco, Human Services Agency).

Furthermore, both the city and county of San Francisco partnered with Help a Mother Out - a nonprofit organization - to establish the San Francisco Diaper Bank, which distributes two cases of diapers (costing around 80-\$100 for each child monthly) free-of-charge to each child in a CalFresh recipient household. Moreover, CalFresh recipients can use their benefits to purchase hot meals and prepared food from certain restaurants under the CalFresh Restaurant Meals Program. This is a unique policy given that under conventional SNAP rules, benefits can be used only at grocery stores and participating farmers markets to purchase groceries but not for hot food and prepared meals. This program caters to the elderly, disabled, and homeless who often have difficulty preparing food at home. There are currently 50 restaurants registered in the program including local restaurants and well-known fast food franchises such as Subway, KFC, and Burger King. Another program introduced in San Francisco in 2004 was Project Homeless Connect (PHC), which provided services to homeless individuals. Among the services provided is same day Calfresh application whereby eligible homeless people apply and receive their EBT cards on the same day. This project helped overcome two key barriers to enrollment. First, it is proactive in reaching eligible individuals and thereby provides information and awareness for those who are not aware of SNAP or their eligibility to participate. Second, it reduced administrative and transaction costs since the application, approval and EBT card issuance were all done on the same day. In addition, homeless individuals could enroll in the program without going to government offices where they can be subject to stigma and mistreatment.

The decentralized SNAP administration has led to varying participation rates among counties in California. Campbell (2015) examined two extreme cases of SNAP participation; Yolo and Sacramento to find the main determinants of participation in CalFresh as well as the role of community-based organizations in outreach and the identification of SNAP eligible households. At the time of conducting the study, Sacramento had one of the highest participation

rates in the state (70% and ranking 15 among California's 58 counties) while Yolo had one of the lowest participation rates (43%, ranking 51). According to government officials at both counties who were interviewed for the study, the key reason for the low participation rates was the extensive paperwork required to verify eligibility, which included pay stubs, bank statements, lease agreements, utility bills, medical receipts, and childcare bills. Furthermore, while Californians can apply for CalFresh online and schedule an interview over the phone, many applicants found it frustrating and confusing and preferred to apply and be interviewed in person at a SNAP office to seek help and guidance while filling the application. Unfortunately, many offices were overcrowded and only open during working hours, making it hard for working individuals to apply. In addition, CalFresh offices in Yolo county were not user friendly as they did not have information or help desks, and the few signs they had are often only in English extending the time the applicants needed to navigate the place.

The findings of the aforementioned research highlight the fact that the devolution of SNAP administration has allowed some counties to be innovative in designing outreach programs that helped in reaching out to eligible individuals. But they also show large variations in participation rates within counties in the same state. While decentralized administration may be useful and perhaps provides better service delivery, it could impede effective and successful implementation of the program at the state level if counties use different applications, business models, systems and computer software, which make it challenging to coordinate the program implementation on the state level. McCoy Wade, the former chief of CalFresh in the Department of Social Services, lamented that decentralization is one of the causes of the low participation rates in California "Because we are decentralized ... it takes us longer to move the whole ship" (Gorman & Rowan, 2018).

On the other hand, SNAP is a federally funded program in which the federal government fully funds the benefits delivered to recipients. The administrative costs of running the program are shared between the federal, state and county governments. Administrative costs differ from one state to another depending on a number of factors, including caseload size, the number and salaries of SNAP staff, inflation, the location of state agency offices, type of issuance system, training costs, degree of automation, and level of fraud-control activity (U.S. Department of

Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2017). It is not surprising that California has the highest administrative costs among all states given the huge number of participants compared to other states. In 2016, administrative costs totaled \$1.7 billion, which represented almost 22% of the total administrative costs in the entire nation (\$7.8 billion). What is puzzling is the very high administrative cost per household per month, which reached \$68.52 in 2016 (the second highest average cost in the U.S. after Wyoming \$70.62) and more than double the average national cost \$29.98 as shown in Table 7 below. The high administrative cost is another potential factor that may be contributing to reducing participation rates in California, especially because those costs are partially paid by the state and counties, and hence increasing participation adds a cost on the state and county governments.

*Table 7. CalFresh Administrative Costs per Household per Month*

<b>Year</b>	<b>California</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
2010	\$78.57	\$31.02
2011	\$66.81	\$27.02
2012	\$65.37	\$25.74
2013	\$67.84	\$25.21
2014	\$67.23	\$26.90
2015	\$68.92	\$28.32
2016	\$68.52	\$29.98

Source: Author's tabulation from SNAP State Activity Reports FY2010-FY2016.

NOTE: These costs include both the federal and state share.

Limited research has been conducted on the causes of variation among states in SNAP administrative costs per case. A recent study by USDA found that states where SNAP is administered at the county level, such as California and nine other states, administrative costs per household per month are 24% higher than in states where SNAP is administered at the state level (Geller et al., 2018). However, administration at the county level alone does not explain the high cost California incurs per household per month. Ohio is another state where counties assume the responsibility of administering SNAP, however the cost per month in 2016 \$21.5, which is lower

than the national average. This suggests that while administering SNAP at the county level may be one factor that leads to the high administrative costs, there could be other factors as well. Nevertheless, an important finding in the study mentioned above is that the higher administrative cost per case is not significantly related to better program performance or service delivery.

In addition to variations in state employee salaries and the state economic conditions, some SNAP policies are significant in explaining variations in the cost per case, particularly simplified reporting and the application of broad-based categorical eligibility. Geller et al. (2018) also found that the application of each of these policies contributed to lowering administrative cost per case by 7%. California began using broad-based eligibility to enroll TANF (CalWorks) recipients automatically in SNAP in 2010 and simplified reporting was in place as late as 2014. Still the research findings only partially explain the variation in administrative costs per case. The study thus suggested that unobserved state characteristics play a large role in determining those costs.

Furthermore, the cost-sharing arrangement of SNAP administrative costs does not induce counties to undertake efficient ways to reduce costs. In California, the county is responsible for 15% of the cost, the state 35% and the federal government 50%. This creates a weak financial incentive for counties to reduce their costs (Office of Inspector General, 2016). Also, the federal share of the administrative costs is considered an entitlement for states and counties who incur eligible expenses in SNAP administration and delivery. This means that once expenses are made in accordance to laws and regulations, the federal government has to reimburse states and counties 50% of what they have spent. A report by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) that investigated the causes of variation in SNAP administrative costs suggested that among the reasons as to why states with county-administered SNAP have considerably high cost per case include the weak oversight that FNS (USDA's Food and Nutrition Service) undertakes on states (the Western Regional Office of the FNS reviews California every five years and does not review counties at all) and the lack of effective state and county financial management controls (Office of Inspector General, 2016, p. 12).

More importantly, the above-mentioned OIG report found that the California's practice of

reporting estimated administrative costs, instead of the actual costs the state and counties incur, does not comply with the federal regulations for financial reporting. In fiscal year 2014 California was reimbursed for estimated costs rather than actual incurred administrative expenses, resulting in unsupported unliquidated obligations totaling over \$111 million that the California Department of Social Services was unable to justify or provide evidence for, as well as producing unreliable data on the state administrative costs (Office of Inspector General, 2016).

#### **IV. Low CalFresh Participation Among Children and the Elderly**

Child poverty is a serious problem in California. In 2015, an estimated 21.2% of California's children lived in poverty. This percentage varies considerably within California counties, reaching as high as 30.8% in Santa Barbara County. Welfare programs target low-income households with a special focus on children who are usually viewed as a vulnerable and deserving group of public assistance. While there are specific programs that aim to reduce poverty and malnutrition among children in particular such as School Meals and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), SNAP is also an important public assistance program that benefits children living in low-income and poor households. Among social assistance programs benefiting children in California, including Free School Meals and WIC, enrollment in SNAP is the lowest with only 24% of California's children enrolled, compared to 51% in Free School Meals and 34% in WIC (Danielson & Bohn, 2016). In comparison to other programs such as TANF (CalWorks), Child Tax Credit, SSI, and School Meals, CalFresh is considered the most effective social assistance program contributing to reducing child poverty in California. It is estimated that in the absence of CalFresh, the percentage of children living in poverty would increase by 3.2% (Bohn et al., 2019).

What is unique about children's participation in the majority of public assistance programs is that they are not the persons who actually apply or receive the benefits. Their participation, of course, depends on their parents' or caregivers' actions and decisions about enrollment. Consequently, barriers to enrollment that reduce adult participation are by default the same barriers that prevent eligible children from participation. As will be emphasized later in this

chapter, children who live in mixed-status families in which one or both of their parents are undocumented immigrants will be deprived from participation despite their eligibility and need.

In addition to children, one of the main groups whose participation in CalFresh is considerably low is low-income seniors. California is no exception when it comes to senior participation rates in SNAP as this group in particular has historically participated at lower rates than the general population (Eslami, 2015). While senior enrollment in SNAP in California has increased over time, it has remained the state with the lowest participation rates of senior individuals in the country. In 2015, it was estimated that only one of every five eligible senior individuals participated in CalFresh (19%) (Food Research and Action Center, n.d.). This percentage is substantially lower than the national average of low-income seniors' participation in SNAP, which was 42% in 2015 nationally. States with the highest level of participation include New York (70%), Vermont (68%), Massachusetts (67%) and Oregon (62%) (National Council on Aging, n.d.). This shows that the increase in enrollment could be misleading and might give a false impression about the effectiveness of the program in reaching those most in need. For example, from 2008-2013, senior enrollment in CalFresh increased by 100,000 individuals, or 206% from the base year (one of the highest increases among states during this period). Senior participation rates also increased during the same period, however at a considerably lower rate than the increase in enrollment (from 9% in 2010 to 18% in 2012, which is a 100% increase and then 19% in 2015) (Eslami, 2015).

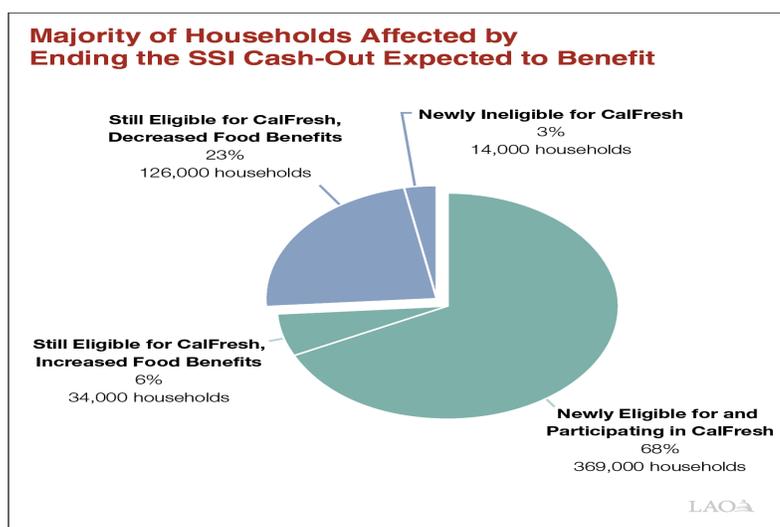
Birnbach (2011) argues that the key barriers for senior participation in CalFresh include isolation, misinformation, welfare stigma and the cumbersome application process. Many seniors live alone in remote areas and sometimes suffer disabilities, which make them unaware of their eligibility. In addition, some seniors may have misperceptions about CalFresh. For example, they may think that owning a car makes them ineligible for SNAP benefits or that the amount of benefits is too low. Furthermore, some seniors believe that receiving welfare benefits is a form of charity, which is demoralizing. Another factor is the transaction costs associated with applying including transportation to the social welfare office and the lengthy application they must fill out.

Another reason for the low participation of low-income seniors is that California is among the states that did not implement the Combined Application Project (CAP) whereby recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) can be enrolled automatically in SNAP with little hassle and paperwork. SSI is a federal program for low-income people who are 65 years or older, visually impaired or disabled. CAP has proved to be effective in increasing participation rates in SNAP in states that have implemented it. It reduces the transaction costs associated with applying and also helps in eliminating the misperceptions and lack of information about SNAP eligibility among SSI recipients. The empirical model developed in chapter four suggests that CAP is one of the policies that has a positive impact on SNAP participation rates.

Since 1974 California has implemented what is called SSI cash-out or CalFresh cash-out policy, which is arguably an impediment to participating in CalFresh among eligible senior individuals. According to the cash-out policy, the state provides SSI recipients an extra \$10 monthly. However, they will be denied participation in CalFresh even though they remain eligible. This policy was driven by the desire to curtail government spending on welfare benefits given that the cost of providing SSI recipients an extra \$10 monthly offsets the costs of providing them with SNAP benefits, including the administrative costs of running the program. Estimating the number of households that would benefit from eliminating SSI cash out is somehow complicated depending on the composition of the household. For a single SSI recipient living alone, ending the cash out policy would have a substantial positive effect on their food benefits. These individuals would become eligible for CalFresh and receive more benefits than the lost \$10. Similarly, households with an SSI recipient and no earned income, would be eligible for CalFresh benefits that exceeds the additional SSI \$10. On the other hand, households that would experience fewer benefits are those which have earned income and include at least one SSI recipient. These households might receive CalFresh benefits if their income falls below the SNAP threshold. However, with the termination of the SSI cash out, SSI benefits would be calculated as earned income and thereby might reduce their CalFresh benefits or even make the household lose benefits entirely. These households are generally the more well off among SSI recipients and according to a recent Legislative Analyst's office report (2018) represent about 23% of SSI recipients. (Their incomes are relatively high compared to others and hence any increase in their net income will make them ineligible for CalFresh).

It is hard to precisely estimate how many households would benefit from or become worse off if SSI cash-out policy is terminated given that deductible costs that include medical and shelter costs differ greatly among SSI recipients (determining SNAP eligibility and the benefit levels depend on net income and a set after eligible deductibles). In 2018, California had 1.3 million SSI recipients, the majority of whom were disabled adults (Legislative Analyst Office, 2018). The California Food Policy Advocates (2018) estimated that at least 500,000 low-income households with elderly and disabled members would be newly eligible for CalFresh (see Figure 3).

Figure 4. The Effect of Terminating SSI Cash-out on Calfresh Enrollment



Source: Legislative Analyst's Office. The California Legislature's Nonpartisan Fiscal and Policy Advisor. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3729>

## V. Cultural and Political Attitudes Towards Welfare

As discussed in chapter two, public policies are the outcome of a complex process that involves a large number of stakeholders with competing, and most often, contradictory values and beliefs. Policymakers have their own unique perceptions about the state of the world. They hold normative values and they design policies that align with how they classify groups impacted by the policy under consideration. Consequently, policies either confer benefits or impose burdens

on groups based on whether the group in question is positively or negatively constructed, in addition to the political power that this group has (Schneider et al., 2014).

Since policymakers are concerned with claiming credit for successful policies and avoiding blame for unsuccessful policies (Pierson, 2000), they justify their actions based on public sentiments towards certain groups and whether the society believes those groups are ‘deserving’ or ‘non-deserving’ of public assistance. They do not want to reward negatively constructed groups or punish positively constructed ones.

While California is currently considered a blue state with progressive and liberal agenda, it has not always been so. In the 1990s, California witnessed a remarkable period of anti-immigration and anti-welfare sentiments that coincided with the welfare reform era. Governor Pete Wilson, a Republican, who held office for two consecutive terms from 1991 to 1999, was a fierce opponent of illegal immigration. During his tenure, California pursued the nation’s most controversial anti-immigration and restrictive welfare policies. In his first state of the state address in 1991, Governor Wilson devoted a great deal of his speech to lay down the foundation of his vision towards welfare and public assistance:

But wholly apart from government’s financial straits, we must never- if we care about poor children- permit welfare to be accepted as anything but a transition from dependency to independence and the dignity that goes with it. We must not even by implication legitimize the receipt of welfare as an acceptable permanent life-style (Wilson, 1991)

Indeed this vision corresponded to the philosophy of the U.S. welfare system. It reiterated the idea that public assistance is not an entitlement but rather a temporary cushion for people who experience unfortunate times in their lives. People should rely on themselves and make a dedicated effort in order to survive and prosper. The government should only intervene to support the people on a temporary basis to help them stand on their own feet. Even worse, California had known one of the most restrictive and punitive welfare policies in the entire nation during the nineties.

In 1997 the County [San Diego] established a program known as Project 100%. Under the program, all individuals who apply for CalWORKs are subject to

unannounced home visit by a plain-clothed welfare fraud investigator. ... Home visits ... consist of an interview and a walk-through of the home. Investigators may, and do, look inside closets, bathroom cabinets, laundry baskets, and trash cans. ... Anyone who refuses consent for the interview or walk-through will automatically have her welfare application denied. If the home visit and walk-through reveals any evidence of criminal activity, the county investigator may make a referral for criminal investigation (Gustafson, 2009, p. 645)

In his 1995 state-of-the-state address delivered just one year before the passage of PRWORA, which dramatically transformed the U.S. welfare system, Governor Wilson reaffirmed his position about welfare when he said:

We're reforming welfare to require individual responsibility and to put people back to work-offering a model for the nation ... We will set a limit on our generosity, for the sake of the recipient and the taxpayer. For all able-bodied adults on welfare, the rule will be: Two years and *you're off...you're off...* (Wilson, 1995)

Governor Wilson's position and statements on welfare were not rhetorical. The policies he promoted and endorsed during his terms proved that words can turn into action when there is enough political will and public support. As I will discuss in the coming section, many restrictive SNAP and welfare policies in California can be explained in light of political sentiments towards immigrants and welfare recipients such as the requirement to fingerprint SNAP applicants, imposing a lifetime ban on convicted drug felons and the maximum grant family rule.

While anti-welfare sentiments have been historically drawn along racial lines, in California ethnic stereotyping was especially evident in the 1990s. Immigrants and particularly undocumented immigrants were blamed for social and economic ills. They were labeled the new "welfare queens" and portrayed as system abusers who came to the U.S. to take advantage of its welfare state at the expense of taxpayers. They were viewed as a threat to hard working Americans, competing with them in the labor market on an unequal footing given that they were willing to work for lesser wages and do not pay taxes. Many studies conducted in the 1990s suggested that illegal immigrants were an economic burden and their presence in the U.S. and participation in social assistance programs cost the federal government and the states that hosted them huge sums of money, estimated at \$18 billion annually in California alone (Calavita, 1996).

The narratives promoted by policymakers regarding illegal immigrants spurred negative public attitudes towards immigration that ultimately led to dehumanizing undocumented immigrants and stereotyping Hispanic population in general. Undocumented immigrants were not only conceived as a fiscal burden. Even more importantly, large segments of the public viewed them as more likely to commit crimes and possess cultural traits that do not conform to the American culture and way of life (Espenshade, 1995). While racial stereotyping was not new at that time, Hispanics suffered from a double stereotyping. Unlike African Americans who were discriminated against on a racial basis, undocumented immigrants were stereotyped based on their ethnicity as well as the legality of their presence in the U.S. Indeed the intensity of discrimination against Hispanics was not as severe as that against Blacks in much of the country, but the discrimination against Hispanics was uniquely based on ethnicity and legal status (Brown, 2013). What is remarkable about ethnic stereotyping is the impossibility to distinguish between Hispanics who are legal or illegal immigrants, naturalized citizens or citizens with Hispanic origins, without checking their legal documents. As such, everyone with a Hispanic appearance was potentially held in suspicion and subject to discrimination and stigma, regardless of her or his legal status. Indeed many of the negative perceptions about undocumented immigrants are misguided. The majority of undocumented immigrants are active in the labor market. It is estimated that 75% of undocumented immigrants work and 90% of the male undocumented immigrants are part of the workforce. In addition, the majority of undocumented immigrants came to the U.S. to join their families who reside in the U.S. legally (Johnson & Hill, 2019).

While anti-immigrant and welfare rhetoric faded in the late 1990s, California's political leadership did not take effective actions or measures to rectify or expand SNAP participation. Unlike Governor Wilson, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger did not address welfare issues in his inaugural or state-of-the-state speeches. Aside from his veto of AB 696 that aimed to eliminate the fingerprinting requirement of SNAP applicants, his two terms were largely characterized by inaction towards SNAP. This was also true of Governor Gray Davis who vetoed three bills aiming to lift the lifetime ban on convicted drug felons. As Jessica Bartholow, a policy advocate in the Western Center on Law and Poverty told me in an interview "We had Pete Wilson, and after that we had Gray Davis, Schwarzenegger ... none of those none of them cared about food

stamps or want to do something ... Gray Davis was a conservative democrat who was not interested in expanding food stamps program”

## **VI. Mixed-Status Families, anti-immigrant sentiments and Proposition 187**

Hispanics are the largest ethnic minority in the U.S. In 2018, an estimated 18.3% of Americans have Hispanic origins (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). California has the largest Hispanic population in the U.S. In 2016, Hispanics comprised almost 39% of Californians, Blacks, in contrast, comprised just 5.5% of its population. Hispanics in California experience higher levels of food insecurity, and Hispanic children in particular, are more likely to suffer from food insecurity than their white counterparts (Bourbonnais, 2013; Thomsen, 2016). For a variety of causes that will be discussed in more detail in this chapter, the incidence and prevalence of poverty are higher among Hispanics in California, making them vulnerable to food insecurity and other health and nutrition problems. For example, 40% of Hispanic children in California, aged between 10-17, are obese or overweight compared to 30% among children in the overall population. This trend continues as Hispanics age. Indeed, almost three quarters of Hispanic adults suffer from obesity and overweight which is well above the national average. Food insecure Hispanic women are more likely to be obese than their white counterparts (Adams et al., 2003; Kaiser et al., 2004). In counties where Hispanics constitute the majority of the population including Imperial County, Fresno County, Kings County and Merced County, the rate of food insecurity is higher than the national average.

While Hispanics are more likely to participate in social assistance programs disproportionate to their population size, compared to whites and other ethnic minorities, their participation rate is conditioned upon their legal status and the cultural sentiments towards immigration. A survey conducted in Santa Cruz county - a county with 33.5% Hispanics - among food insecure individuals showed that almost 68% of respondents did not participate in CalFresh for a variety of reasons, including lack of awareness about the program, fear of being deported, and the hassle some participants believed they would encounter when applying (Sanchez, 2017). In examining the causes of low participation in Calfresh, Susan J. Algert, Michael Reibel, and Marian J. Renvall (2006) collected and analyzed data on 14,317 clients attending two different

food pantries in greater Los Angeles area. 60% of the sample was Hispanic, 90% reported having incomes less than \$1000 a month, and 25% said that they spent over 75% of their incomes on food. The study found that the likelihood of enrolling in CalFresh increased with lower ages, lower education and when eligible persons had better English language skills. In other words, in Los Angeles, older, better educated individuals as well as those with lower English skills were less likely to participate in SNAP even though they were eligible (Algert et al., 2006).

This indicates that ethnicity alone is not sufficient in explaining the level of Hispanic enrollment in SNAP. Florida and New Mexico have substantial Hispanic populations, yet both states have one of the highest SNAP participation rates in the country. Hispanics constituted about a quarter of the population in Florida, and half the population of New Mexico. However, in 2016, the participation rate in Florida was 92% and 100% in New Mexico. Conversely, Wyoming, where only 9.6% of the population is Hispanic, historically has had the lowest SNAP participation rate among all states, and North Dakota, which has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the nation, has only 3.4% Hispanics.

While SNAP is provided only to citizens or legal immigrants, illegal immigrants whose children are U.S. citizens and hence SNAP eligible are reluctant to apply for SNAP and other welfare assistance programs fearing the legal consequences that might include deportation and family separation. Mixed-status families are an important demographic feature across the U.S. and particularly in California. Families in the U.S. are not classified as citizen or non-citizen families, but combined citizens, non-citizens, naturalized, legal and illegal immigrants who “all live under one roof” (Fix & Zimmermann, 2001). This structure has profound implications, in many aspects, particularly when it comes to receiving public benefits. Within the same household - in mixed-status families - some members are eligible for government assistance while others are not. This creates a great deal of confusion, fear, complications and administrative difficulties in welfare receipt. For example, if a male illegal immigrant is married to a female legal immigrant and their child is a U.S. citizen by birth, the father may fear applying for SNAP or other programs on behalf of his child because he might be deported. On the other hand, if the mother applies for SNAP, it will be difficult to determine benefit levels since the benefits are calculated at the household level and one household member (the father) is

ineligible. In 2017, an estimated 16.7 million people in the U.S. had at least one household member who was an unauthorized immigrant, and 5.9 million citizens or naturalized children had one family member who was living in the U.S. illegally. California has the nation's largest number of mixed-status families. In 2017, 12% of the state's population lived with an unauthorized immigrant in their household, including almost 2 million citizens or naturalized children (Mathema, 2017).

In 1994, California voters approved the infamous Proposition 187, establishing a state-run citizenship screening system whereby illegal immigrants were banned from benefiting from a wide range of public services. The Save Our State (SOS) initiative, championed by Governor Pete Wilson, aimed at reducing the number of illegal immigrants in the state, reflecting the public sentiments towards immigrants and the growing concerns of both politicians and the public towards illegal immigration. The proposition came in response to the state's increasing number of undocumented immigrants. According to the proposition, "no person- citizen, legal immigrant, or illegal immigrant – shall receive any public social services to which he or she may otherwise be entitled until the legal status of that person has been verified". Undocumented immigrants were to be banned from attending public schools, utilizing non-emergency health services or receiving other cash and in-kind public assistance. It also required public agencies to verify the legal status of individuals seeking such services, including the parents of school age children.

Indeed, California has the highest percentage of illegal immigrants among all states. From 1990 to 2000 the number of unauthorized immigrants residing in California increased by 732,000 persons (from 1,476,000 to 2,209,000), and by 2000 the percentage of unauthorized immigrants in California was almost triple the national percentage (6.5% compared to 2.5%) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). At the time when Proposition 187 was approved, California hosted 40% of the undocumented population in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.).

The proposition sparked a huge controversy both in California and nationally. Before its passage, President Clinton urged California voters to disapprove the proposition and allow the

federal government to “keep working on what we're doing - stiffening the border patrol, stiffening the sanctions on employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants, stiffening our ability to get illegal immigrants out of the workforce, increasing our ability to deport people who have committed crimes who are illegal immigrants” (Martin, 1995, p. 285).

Proposition 187 was a serious impediment to participation in CalFresh not only for illegal immigrants (who are ineligible) but also for legal immigrants and naturalized citizens. As noted above, California has the highest percentage of mixed-status families in the nation. These households, even though their members were eligible, were deterred from applying for public services fearing that unauthorized family members would face legal consequences and ultimately deportation. The proposition did not only mandate public agencies to deny services to unauthorized aliens but also to report them to the concerned authorities. Thus the risk of applying to public assistance not only entailed being denied, but potentially deportation. Several reports and studies showed that 300,000 to 400,000 children of illegal immigrants stopped going to schools.

Notwithstanding that Proposition 187 was ruled unconstitutional two days after it was passed and hence never implemented, it had an enduring effect on political and cultural sentiments towards immigrants and welfare recipients in California. In fact, such discriminatory policies continue to have longstanding effects even after their repeal. The literature on path dependency suggests that once a policy is in place, it is hard to reverse its consequences. Some analysts suggest that President Trump’s position towards illegal immigration is an extension of California’s anti-immigration policies in the 1990s. “The president [President Trump] is not making his own campaign, he’s copying from California twenty years ago” Jessica Bartholow told me when I asked her about the effect of Proposition 187. While it was ruled unconstitutional immediately upon approval, it still resonates decades later.

Proponents of the proposal and California voters who supported its passage wanted to send a message to illegal immigrants that they are not welcomed in the U.S. not to mention receiving public assistance. It was embraced by anti-immigration supporters and fueled hostility towards Hispanics. For example, in the aftermath of the proposition, a restaurant cook in

California was harassed by a group of customers who insisted on seeing his green card because it was their “responsibility to kick out all the illegals” (Latino Community Foundation, 2020). Moreover, while the proposition mainly targeted undocumented immigrants, it provided an opportunity to stereotype Hispanics in general and a license to harass and abuse those who came to the U.S. legally to join their families and ended up on the welfare rolls (Brown, 2013).

## **VII. The Maximum Family Grant**

The Maximum Family Grant rule was a significant welfare-restrictive policy enacted in California that capped the amount of benefits that a household may receive following the birth of a new child in the family.

For the purposes of determining maximum aid payment... the number of needy persons in the same family shall not be increased for any child born into a family that has received aid under this chapter continuously for the 10 months prior to the birth of the child (California Welfare and Institutions Code, 1994, section 11450.04.a)

While the maximum family grant policy applied to CalWorks (TANF), it severely affected poor families’ finances and decreased the amount of benefits they received from TANF and thereby reduced the household’s overall spending and consumption of necessity goods, including food. This policy was introduced at the height of the war on welfare and illustrates the role that negative social construction and the framing of welfare recipients as irresponsible, welfare dependent and system abusers played in assaulting programs that sought to help poor populations. It resonated with Governor Wilson’s position towards welfare as exemplified in his second inaugural address delivered on January 2, 1995:

We must choose whether California will be the Golden State- or a welfare state. It can’t be both. ... We will make clear that welfare is to be a safety net, not a hammock- and absolutely not a permanent way of life. We will correct our laws to make clear that bringing a child into the world is an awesome personal responsibility for both the mother and the father ... We will insist that those who receive public assistance earn it (Wilson, 1995)

California was not the only state to enact such a restrictive policy. Twenty-three other states pursued similar welfare cap rules. In defending this policy, Curt Pringle, the last

Republican to serve as the Speaker of the California State Assembly, said:

In July 1994, California passed common-sense ‘family cap’ welfare reform legislation to end the perverse practice of increasing payments to welfare recipients who have additional children ... it is unfair to tax low-income working mothers whose wages are not based on family size and use the money to subsidize welfare recipients who choose to have more children. Fairness and self-reliance will be the cornerstones of California’s new welfare system (Pringle, 1996)

The implications of the maximum family grant policy on poor and low-income families were substantial. Not only did it deprive many eligible and needy families of benefits they deserved, but even more importantly it symbolized public and political sentiments towards welfare recipients, which translated into deeper forms of welfare stigma and discrimination. For example, it reinforced the idea that welfare recipients are irresponsible and that their actions needed to be monitored by the government. On its face, the maximum family grant might seem a reasonable policy aimed at encouraging parents to secure a job before committing to having a new child. However, several studies contended that it carried an institutional discrimination since it infringed upon the reproductive rights and personal choices of poor and low-income individuals (Pilchman, 2016). The policy has also been described as intrusive and required women who wished to waive the rule to report very intimate and personal information including how they got pregnant and what type of contraceptive measures they were using (the rule does not apply in the case of rape, incest or failure of contraceptive measures) (Gutiérrez, 2013). “For more than twenty years, California’s maximum family grant rule has assaulted the dignity of women’s rights and left hundreds of our state’s children in abject poverty” said California Senate President Kevin de León after Governor Jerry Brown agreed to terminate the maximum family grant rule in 2016 (Cooper, 2016).

Furthermore, many studies found that the policy did not effectively alter the behavior and decisions of low-income or poor families in giving birth (Romero & Agenor, 2009; Jagannathan et al., 2010; Romero & Fuentes, 2010). To the contrary, it often harmed poor children who are undisputedly the most vulnerable and needy. The Maximum Family Grant policy punished the children born into low-income families since it deprived the newly born children from receiving the welfare assistance they were in dire need of. Several studies found that such punitive policies

tend to harm the children of dependent families the most. A study by John Cook et al. (2002) followed 2718 children aged 36 months and younger of caregivers who received or lost welfare benefits through sanctions in 6 states from August 1998 through December 2000. The study found that children in households whose welfare benefits were decreased or stopped due to punitive measures had greater odds of being food insecure, being hospitalized since birth or being admitted to emergency rooms, compared to children in households whose welfare benefits had not been decreased.

With the changing political landscape in California, the Maximum Family Grant policy was terminated in 2019. The political sentiments that gave rise to this restrictive policy have changed, and thus the social construction of those who were targeted by the policy has also changed. Statements by policy makers who opposed the policy and led the efforts to repeal it show how the changing social construction of targeted populations result in a change in the policies directed towards them. “I don’t know a woman — and I don’t think she exists — who would have a baby for the sole purpose of having another \$130 a month” said California State Senator Holly Mitchell who led the repeal effort describing the policy as “a racist, classist, sexist policy” (The New York Times, 2016). She added that “It is not the universal answer to poverty alleviation, but it is the most significant step we’ve taken of late to address the needs of those living in deep poverty across the state” (The Associated Press, 2016). Indeed the California Department of Social Services estimated that after repealing the Maximum Family Grant policy, 93,000 families would receive an additional \$138 in benefits each month. More than 125,000 children would also benefit as a result (The Associated Press, 2016).

### **VIII. Fingerprinting CalFresh Applicants**

Among the most controversial and restrictive SNAP policies is the requirement to fingerprint SNAP applicants. Paradoxically, California, which is considered one of the most liberal and progressive states in the U.S., had this policy in place for almost a decade. Knowing when and how this policy was introduced and endured can provide some insights into how politics and ideology drive public policy outcomes. In July 1996, Governor Pete Wilson approved Senate Bill 1780, and in 2000, the Department of Social Services started applying a Statewide Fingerprint

Imaging System (SFIS) in all the 58 counties of California, as an additional step in the process of applying to CalWorks and CalFresh. While there is no federal requirement to fingerprint applicants for SNAP or other welfare assistance programs, California as well as New York, Arizona and Texas have used this technology to prevent fraud, detect duplicate aid cases and ensure that each eligible individual and household does not utilize the benefits more than once in a given month or in more than one SNAP jurisdiction.

Fingerprinting SNAP applicants has proven to be a serious impediment for participation in SNAP as it stigmatizes SNAP applicants and frames them as deviants and system cheaters. The empirical model developed in chapter four showed that fingerprinting is associated with a substantial decrease in participation rates in the regions where this policy was being implemented. Other studies examining the determinants of SNAP caseload found that fingerprinting reduced caseload by 6.4% to 10.5% over a 12-month period and by 3.9% to 10.4% over 24-month period (Dickert-Conlin et al., 2016). In California, the requirement to fingerprint CalFresh applicants was correlated with a decrease in caseload size by 7% and by 9.6% in SNAP mixed age households (Danielson & Klerman, 2011). Many applicants felt that fingerprinting is degrading and demoralizing since this requirement is usually associated with criminal proceedings, notwithstanding that Senate Bill 1780 stipulated that “fingerprint images ... shall be used only for the purpose of verifying eligibility and preventing multiple enrollments”. Although the bill mandated government agencies not to “use or disclose the data collected and maintained for any purpose other than the prevention or prosecution of fraud”, many eligible individuals who had no intention to enroll more than once were deterred from applying at all. Specifically, individuals who had relatives or household members who were undocumented immigrants were afraid that their participation in the program might have negative legal consequences, especially since the fingerprinting requirement came in the years when anti-immigration sentiments were at their height. Similarly, naturalized children, with one or both parents who were undocumented immigrants, would be deprived benefits if their parents feared that applying to the program might lead to their deportation.

In evaluating the benefits of the fingerprinting requirement, the California State Auditor (2003) indicated that the Department of Social Services did not precisely establish the number of

fraud cases before the implementation of the fingerprinting requirement. This makes it hard to assess the extent to which the system prevented duplicate aid fraud cases. Importantly, the application of fingerprinting did not actually prove to be cost effective. At the time fingerprinting became a statewide requirement, the cost of developing a SFIS in all the 58 counties was estimated to be \$31 million. In addition, annual operating costs were estimated to be \$11.4 million. However, the financial benefits were never carefully estimated. As the report noted “Although they have taken some steps, neither the counties nor Social Services has performed any meaningful analyses to determine the cost-effectiveness of their efforts to detect and deter fraud in the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program and the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program” (California State Auditor, 2009, p. 19).

In fact, when California started applying fingerprinting as a part of the SNAP application process in a limited number of counties in 1996, it was not established that duplicate utilization of benefits was a serious problem. Furthermore, the vast majority of states were able to combat fraud without using a fingerprinting system. To the contrary, many states had been indeed very effective in eliminating duplicate aid fraud with conventional means of verification such as computer matching within and across states whereby applicants are checked using their names, addresses, social security numbers, etc. (California State Auditor, 2009).

To assess the utility and efficiency of the SFIS, CDSS would have needed to compare duplicate aid fraud cases before and after the implementation of the fingerprinting requirement, which did not happen. Forty-six counties reported that from 1995 to 2000 when fingerprinting became a statewide requirement, there were 1408 suspected duplicate aid fraud cases and only 583 proven cases (California State Auditor, 2009). This number shows that duplicate utilization of benefits was not a serious problem in California. What makes it even harder to evaluate this policy is that CDSS compiled all fraud cases together and the data is not broken down into different types of fraud. Hence, there is no available data on the number of duplicate aid fraud cases, which could have helped in looking at how the policy helped to reduce duplicate fraud.

Table 7 presents data on CalFresh fraud cases when fingerprinting was required as well

as three years after its termination. Fraud investigations are classified as pre-certification and post certification. Pre-certification are cases investigated and completed before an applicant is certified; post certification cases are investigated and completed after an applicant is already certified and enrolled. The figures below show that positive pre-certification fraud cases were remarkably lower after fingerprinting was eliminated. Similarly, positive and negative post-certification fraud cases were considerably lower after fingerprinting was eliminated than when it was enforced. Finally, fraud dollars recuperated by post-certification investigations after terminating the fingerprinting requirement were at least 6 times the amount recuperated while fingerprinting was in place. These figures strongly support other findings that fingerprinting was not effective in capturing fraud cases and factors other than case duplication seem to affect fraud.

*Table 8. CalFresh Recipient Fraud Investigation (Compiled from SNAP State Activity Reports published by USDA FNS)*

Year	Pre cert investigations negative	Pre cert investigations positive	Post cert investigations negative	Post cert investigations positive	Total Investigations completed	Fraud Dollars Determined by Post-Cert Investigations
2004	89,166	37,465	131,881	4,263	262,775	\$1,705,200
2005	86,564	34,466	131,011	3,702	255,743	\$1,480,800
2006	82,768	34,355	136,787	3,470	257,380	\$1,388,000
2007	88,227	33,906	132,522	3,320	257,975	\$1,328,000
2008	96,337	39,325	151,134	2,612	289,408	\$1,044,800
2009	112,990	37,464	186,576	2,881	339,911	\$1,152,400
2010	88,413	38,118	147,085	2,767	276,383	\$1,106,800
2011	85,311	36,241	146,550	2,602	270,704	\$1,040,800
2012	87,598	23,165	97,674	3,334	211,771	\$8,481,696
2013	85,391	22,415	70,600	3,308	181,714	\$6,056,948
2014	92,120	19,568	32,740	3,541	147,969	\$5,821,404

## **IX. Lifetime Ban of Convicted Drug Felons**

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) disqualified convicted drug felons from benefiting from TANF and SNAP. However, the Act also allowed states to opt out or modify this rule and use less restrictive policies towards convicted drug felons. Only seven states opted out from banning drug felons. California, however, was among the states that imposed a lifetime ban, denying convicted drug felons from participating in both TANF and SNAP. Other states that imposed a lifetime ban on drug felons included Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Indiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and West Virginia. Yet, as of 2017, only four states in the U.S. (Indiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and West Virginia) continue to impose a lifetime drug ban, 23 states have a modified ban system, and 24 states have no ban, including California which opted out in 2015. There are different types of the modified ban, including, for example, requiring drug-testing of applicants, imposing a ban only in the case of drug sales and not consumption, requiring the completion of a probation sentence, and requiring the individual to be admitted into a drug treatment program.

Banning convicted drug felons from participating in SNAP and other public assistance programs was designed to deter people from using or selling drugs. It also intended to send a message that drug felons should not be rewarded for their deviant behavior. Drug felons, it was reasoned, often engage in criminal activities and represent a threat to their communities. Hence they are not worthy of public assistance. Drug felons have a negative social construction. Given their legal and social status, they are also a powerless group. Consequently, policies that address them tend to impose burdens rather than confer benefits. “Convicted felons do not deserve the same treatment as law-abiding citizens, especially those that manufacture, transport or distribute drugs” proclaimed California Governor Gray Davis who vetoed three bills aimed at lifting the drug ban in California (Eadler, 2011, p. 134). Policy makers across the political spectrum supported the rule and it was unanimously adopted in the Congress. Indeed policy makers did not want to damage their reputations or lose popular support by voting against punishing drug felons.

Denying the participation of convicted drug felons in SNAP was regarded as a part of a nationwide war on crime that started during Nixon’s administration to combat the crack

epidemic and rising crime rates in the U.S. Adding a provision to restrict drug felons from using SNAP and other welfare assistance programs in PRWORA represented a culmination of efforts that began many years before its passage. Senator Phil Gramm the sponsor of the drug felons ban provision in PRWORA said during a Senate floor debate: “If we are serious about our drug laws, we ought not give people welfare benefits who are violating the Nation’s drug laws” (McCarty et al., 2016, p. 3). He added “I don’t believe that people who are using drugs and who are selling drugs should be getting welfare ... It is a tough provision but it’s time to get tough” (Eadler, 2011, p. 128). While it is hard to counter the argument that drug usage and trade are social ills and pose harm to both their users and the society at large, a lifetime ban is considered a punitive policy and a double jeopardy in that convicted felons are punished twice- both while they are serving time and once they are released. It is an “invisible punishment” which “takes effect outside of the traditional sentencing framework” (Travis, 2002, p. 16). That is it is not part of the criminal sentence but it rather inflicts an additional social punishment for breaking the societal norms and morality.

This policy had a very harmful effect on convicted drug felons particularly on their health nutrition, and food security, and it created a barrier to their reintegration into the society (Payne & Morrow, 2016). In addition, children of drug felons and people living in their households also had their benefits reduced or even cut completely. While a household was still SNAP eligible, when one member was banned from the program, the benefit amount will decreased since one household member was not be included in the benefit formula. Although there is no source providing reliable data on the number of convicted drug felons who were denied SNAP benefits, or the impact of the policy on caseload and participation rates, the effect was likely to be substantial. The Sentencing Project (2015) estimated that from 1996 to 2011 more than 180,000 women were denied TANF benefits in states that implemented a lifetime ban on convicted drug felons. The number does not include those who are affected by modified bans. Given that states which imposed a lifetime ban on receiving TANF also included a ban on SNAP, it is expected that the same number was also denied SNAP benefit. In addition, if we include men who on average have higher rates of drug-related crimes, including crimes related to drug consumption and sales, we might plausibly expect that at least double that number was denied participating in SNAP. On the other hand, there is no concrete evidence that denying benefits prevent people

from drug addiction or trade. Indeed it is hard to assume that they will actually cease to consume or trade in drugs because they will be denied public assistance. Actually, many drug addicts or dealers might not even be aware that a ban on using public benefits exists, and if they are aware, it could be a less of a deterrent than imprisonment.

In 2005, California modified the policy. Instead of imposing a lifetime ban on all convicted drug felons, it restricted it to those engaged in the production, sale, transportation, and distribution of drugs. Meanwhile, those convicted for drug consumption were allowed to enroll in the program once they participated in and completed a drug rehabilitation program in a facility recognized by the government (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2005). In 2015, California lifted the lifetime ban on drug felons who were denied from participating in TANF and SNAP. In a statement by Jessica Bartholow, a longtime activist and food advocate who led the repeal efforts, she noted:

We were motivated by the stories of people like Rosie, who was abused as a child, turned out onto the streets by her family, jailed for drug use and finally turned her life around. Because California employed a lifetime ban for people with prior drug-related felony convictions, she was denied basic needs assistance, job training, and childcare as she tried to straighten out her life. Now, she can (Western Center on Law and Poverty, 2015)

This statement conveyed the sentiments of many organizations that had joined the repeal efforts, signaling a shift in the social construction of convicted drug felons, particularly drug users and addicts. Instead of being demonized and framed as deviants who pose a serious threat to society, they are conceived more as victims who had no or little responsibility for the events in their lives that led to their addiction. The government, then, should not abandon them, but rather extend a helping hand to assist them in integrating back into the society where they can lead productive and healthy lives once they have completed their sentence and quit drugs.

Jessica Bartholow, a policy advocate in the Western Center on Law and Poverty in California who I interviewed for this dissertation, elaborated on the story about Rosie mentioned above. Rosie was molested by a family member when she was a child. The person who molested her was later imprisoned for child abuse and pornography. When he was released from jail, he was eligible for SNAP and eventually enrolled in the program. Rosie, on the other hand was

convicted for drug possession and consumption and thus denied participation in SNAP. This story embodies the unfairness of the drug felon ban policy, which in this case discriminated against the victim.

## **X. Conclusion**

It has been argued in this chapter that low SNAP participation rates in California cannot be attributed to a single factor but rather a multitude of factors that span across policy, politics, administration and cultural attitudes. Focusing on SNAP policies only might divert the attention from other significant “low profile” policies and measures that tend to affect SNAP enrolment. This chapter provides some insights that may help in solving the puzzle of why California, a state with democratic and liberal tendencies, failed to fulfill the promise of reaching all those in need.

California is among a few states that follows a decentralized approach in administering SNAP, allowing counties to execute the program under the general supervision of the California’s Department of Human Services. While the federal government continues to fund the program, administrative costs are shared between the federal and state governments. California has substantially higher administrative cost per household per month compared to the national average. In 2016, the administrative cost in California was \$68.52, second largest in the nation, and more than double the national average, which was \$29.98. As a result, counties lack the incentive to enroll all eligible individuals in the program since they share a portion of the costs. Furthermore, the devolution of authority made it harder for the state to mainstream policies and coordinate outreach programs, leading to large variations in participation rates among counties.

This chapter also suggests that the high percentage of undocumented immigrants in California is a key factor affecting SNAP participation rates. Notwithstanding that Hispanics suffer from higher rates of poverty and food insecurity, many were deterred from enrolling in SNAP and other public assistance programs, fearing legal consequences and deportation. The growing number of both legal and illegal immigrants helped fuel anti-immigration sentiments among the public and propelled policymakers to promote restrictive welfare and SNAP policies to deny benefits to illegal immigrants. California passed Proposition 187 that denied public

benefits to undocumented immigrants. It also mandated public agencies to report undocumented immigrants to the concerned authorities. The consequences of such policies extended to other SNAP-eligible individuals and Hispanic groups at large. While not mainly designed to target Hispanics and immigrants, the impact of some policies was higher on them than other demographic groups. For example, the fingerprinting requirement sought to reduce fraud, but it acted as a deterrent for Hispanics who feared that their undocumented immigrant relatives might face legal consequences.

With the passage of PRWORA, states started to have more control over implementing SNAP. Consequently, California, like other states, gained considerable influence in affecting SNAP outcomes through state-specific policies. In California, those policies contributed to lowering SNAP participation rates. In 1974, California began implementing the SSI cash-out or CalFresh cash-out policy, whereby the recipients of the Supplemental Security Income were given an extra \$10 monthly benefit but at the expense of becoming ineligible for SNAP. The policy had a negative impact on disabled and senior individuals living alone who constitute a large percentage of SSI recipients in California. It was estimated that at least 500,000 low-income households with elderly and disabled members would be newly eligible for CalFresh. In addition, California implemented the Maximum Family Grant policy that placed a cap on the amount of benefits that a household would receive with the birth of a new child in the household. Essentially, this policy demonstrated the negative social construction of welfare recipients and helped frame them as welfare dependents and irresponsible. Finally, banning convicted drug felons from enrolling in SNAP deprived this group from participation even though they remained financially eligible.

## **Chapter 6. Oregon Case Study**

### **I. Introduction**

Oregon is a national leader in SNAP participation rates. It was the first state to succeed in enrolling all eligible households and individuals in the program starting in 2009. Indeed, this success is not confined to SNAP. Oregon provides one of the most accessible social safety nets in the nation (Scherpf et al., 2018). It is difficult to attribute Oregon's success in enrolling all eligible households in SNAP to a single factor. A single policy is not capable of solving a multifaceted problem such as food insecurity and low participation rates in welfare programs. Inversely, success in reaching all eligible individuals and households in SNAP is a result of a multitude of factors that span across policy, politics, administration and community efforts. As indicated and discussed in the previous chapters, the nonparticipation of eligible households in social assistance programs is caused by several factors, including transaction costs, information costs and welfare stigma. Consequently, overcoming such impediments requires not a single policy or a measure, but a set of comprehensive and coherent policies that address the root causes of low participation.

Oregon's experience is worthy of study, given that political, administrative, governance and policy variables all contributed to making it one of the most successful SNAP accessibility cases in the U.S. The state utilized different federal grants and opportunities to expand outreach, improve program administration, enhance access, reduce enrollment barriers, and provide incentives to SNAP recipients. Oregon was also one of the early adopters of several SNAP policies that make it easier for SNAP-eligible households to participate in the program, such as using a broad-based categorical eligibility, simplified reporting and the operation of statewide call centers that provide information and assistance to SNAP applicants. Furthermore, the state government relies extensively on the efforts of nongovernmental organizations to reach eligible individuals through institutionalized forms of collaborative governance. Collaborative governance and the role of nongovernmental organizations are crucial elements in understanding the strength of the state's welfare system, particularly when it comes to fighting hunger and enhancing SNAP

outreach and enrollment.

On the administration level, Oregon has also undertaken several proactive and less restrictive policies to improve participation rates. One of the most effective policies has been the “same day-next day” interview policy whereby applicants are interviewed on the same or the day after their enrollment applications are received (Edwards et al., 2016). Oregon also implemented the ‘No wrong door policy’ to reduce transaction costs and improve service delivery. According to this policy, applicants are served and given the necessary information even if they visit a Department of Human Services (DHS) office that is not located in the locality where they live.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section II discusses the political and cultural attitudes towards welfare recipients in Oregon by focusing on the statements of Oregon governors. Section III investigates Oregon’s collaborative governance and the role of nonprofit organizations in SNAP outreach. Section IV examines the ethnic composition of Oregon’s population and highlights how the structure of the Hispanic population helped to increase SNAP participation rates in Oregon. Section V analyzes how Oregon’s policies towards Able Bodied Adults without Dependents mitigated the negative effects of welfare reform on the participation rates of this group in SNAP. Section VI discusses the application of medical deductions. Section VII investigates extending SNAP benefits in farmers markets, and section VIII concludes this chapter.

## **II. Political and Cultural Attitudes towards Welfare Recipients**

In 2007, Governor Kulongoski, who had just concluded the first year of his second term decided to go on a food stamp challenge by living on food stamp dollars (\$21 a week) for a week in an effort to increase public awareness of the problem of hunger in Oregon, and to urge the federal government not to reduce SNAP benefits (Yardley, 2007, May 1). His food stamp challenge received national attention and many activists and politicians alike praised him for drawing public attention to the difficulties faced by low-income households and SNAP recipients. The governor’s food stamp challenge signaled the salience of food insecurity in Oregon, seeking to increase broad public sympathy for SNAP recipients.

Oregon is well known for its progressive tendencies. The state has consistently voted for Democratic presidents starting 1988 and has elected Democratic governors since 1995. In addition, the majority of its US Senators are from the Democratic Party, and the majority of its five seats in the US House of Representatives have been held by Democratic representatives. Democrats have a liberal agenda that favors welfare generosity and expansion. In the empirical model developed in chapter four, SNAP participation rates are expected to increase when the Democrats control both houses and the Governor is a Democrat.

In addition, negative cultural attitudes towards welfare recipients in Oregon is mitigated by the fact that the state is one of the least ethnically and racially diverse in the country. As argued in previous chapters, welfare stigma and stereotyping welfare recipients has always resulted from racial stereotyping. The development of the US welfare system was influenced by the negative social construction of welfare recipients. In particular, racial dynamics has played a significant role in stigmatizing welfare recipients and framing them as lazy, unproductive and welfare dependents, and represent a moral threat to the American culture of work and self-reliance. National welfare reform of 1996, which led to a dramatic transformation in social assistance programs, was motivated by racial sentiments towards African Americans, particularly women and single mothers. But, as is still the case, during the 1990s, Oregon was predominantly white. According to the 1990 Census, Oregon's population were 75.7% white and only 1% were Black. This could partially explain why Oregon's sentiments towards public assistance are milder than other states that have substantial racial and ethnic minorities. Statements and positions of policy makers, particularly Oregon governors, on welfare assistance sharply contrasted with those of California. For example Governor Barbara Roberts, a Democrat who served as the first woman governor in Oregon, said in her inaugural speech delivered on January 14th 1991:

If it means giving a single mother on welfare job training and help with childcare so she can work, my administration will make it happen. If it means retraining some timber workers for new, and better employment, I will make it a priority. If it means expanding program like Head Start and making sure every Oregon child is literate in reading, math and foreign languages, this administration will move us along that path, preparing Oregonians to function effectively in a changing marketplace (Roberts, 1991)

This statement clearly demonstrates how the problem of poverty and unemployment were conceived, and highlights how the government viewed its role in addressing those issues. Instead of blaming and demonizing single mothers, the unemployed and low-income individuals for their situation, Governor Roberts explicitly advocated for a proactive role for the government in helping those in need. The reference to single mothers in particular has symbolic significance in the context of the welfare reform. PRWORA was the culmination of decades-long effort to frame and stigmatize single mothers on a racial basis. Critics blamed AFDC (pre-cursor to TANF) for ruining the morals of the American society and destroying the ideal family model. Opponents of AFDC and welfare in general believed that providing assistance to single mothers encouraged out-of-wedlock births, especially among African American women, leading to intergenerational poverty, particularly among Black families (Chappell, 2009).

Certainly, policy narratives are powerful tools in shaping public opinion and policy outcomes. Policy makers use their informational advantage and charisma to influence public perceptions of policy problems. They promote their preferred policy solutions by using figures, symbols, words and metaphors that resonate with popular beliefs and perceptions (Shanahan et al., 2011). They present stories that include a villain, hero or victim depending on the policy in question, and attempt to popularize solutions according to their classifications. In the context of welfare and public assistance policies, policy makers commonly frame welfare recipients as either victims or villains. For example, during Reagan's presidency, public opinion was greatly affected by the story of the welfare queen. She was portrayed as a villain who cheated and abused the system. She was an undeserving woman who owned a lot of expensive cars and held lush bank accounts, yet she was still benefiting from public assistance. Contrasting this narrative, in Oregon, policy makers often portray welfare recipients as victims rather than villains. Their suffering, in this telling, results from institutional and structural failures rather than their own personal failures. By promoting such a belief, public opinion would likely be more sympathetic towards low-income people and those on the welfare rolls. Governor John A. Kitzhaber pursued the same direction as his predecessor, Governor Roberts. In his first inaugural speech delivered in 1995, his pro-welfare vision is presented as follows:

So let us dare to be different -- to make a difference. Let us boldly proclaim a new

kind of progress ... the kind of progress that considers more than our own private interests, but understands that the welfare of others is vital to our own ... the kind of progress that sees diversity not as a threat, but as a treasure; an opportunity to enrich and strengthen the fabric of our society (Kitzhaber, 1995).

He reaffirmed this position in his state-of-the state address delivered on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2002, when he said:

It is about the value we place on ensuring that every child born in this state has the support, the nurturing and the adult attention necessary to fully participate in, and contribute to, the Oregon community. ... It is about the value we place on compassion -- on providing a safety net for the most vulnerable among us: our children, particularly those at risk; the frail elderly; the poor who cannot afford health care for themselves and their families; those with disabilities or who suffer from mental disorders, who, if we do not extend them help as a society, will end up on our streets or in our jails (Kitzhaber, 2002)

In his statements, the governor made it clear that Oregon would prioritize the values of compassion, equity and community welfare. He contended that it was the responsibility of government to support economically vulnerable groups. In discussing 2002 budget plan he noted: "This is not as simple as lining up numbers on a piece of paper. Behind the numbers are real people -- people with real lives and with hopes and dreams of their own. ... This is not an accounting exercise. This is an exercise in values" (Kitzhaber, 2002).

In fact, values are the main driver of public policies. Conceptually, values refer to the broader goals that a society and political system seek to achieve. These values include, for example, efficiency, equity, equality, social justice, liberty, security, stability and progress. Values are "the informing principle of collective action: it is both motivator and object" (Stewart, 2009, p. 14). By identifying the key values that a political system pursues, public officials are able to emphasize the salience of policy problems, promote specific solutions, justify specific policies, enhance the legitimacy of what they are trying to accomplish, and garner public support. Importantly, there is no right or wrong policy. Evaluating public policies depends on assessing how effectively they realize the goals they are seeking to achieve. These goals represent the materialization of values adopted by the community and policy makers. As Stone (2012, pp. 39-42) explains, the question of values represents a policy paradox because the people often disagree on which values should be prioritized. In addition, while a society may embrace one value such as

equality or social justice, there are many different interpretations and approaches to operationalize them. Although not necessarily at odds, there are always tradeoffs involved in prioritizing values. For example, Hayek argued that economic inequality is a precondition for progress. He believed that “the rapid economic advance that we have come to expect seems in a large measure to be the result of this inequality and to be impossible without it” (Hayek, 1960, p. 42). Therefore, to achieve progress and economic growth, economic equality should be ignored. Similarly, at times, achieving security could technically mean forgoing liberty and personal freedoms. Government intervention in the economy to achieve equity is also believed to be an infringement upon the people’s freedom of choice (Friedman & Friedman, 1980).

Importantly, during tough economic times, values and beliefs are always invoked to determine how policy problems are framed, and hence how they could be resolved. During the Great Recession of 2008, when Oregon was among the hardest hit states, Governor Ted Kulongoski once again reiterated his vision and beliefs about welfare in his state of the state address delivered in 2009:

Oregon has always been a family – and like any family, the pain of one is felt by all. So in these difficult times – those of us who remain sheltered from the economic storm must never turn our backs on those who are not. We are our brother’s and sister’s keeper – and there are food banks and other organizations that stand ready to help if we stand ready to contribute (Kulongoski, 2009)

In his historic fourth term inaugural address in 2015, Governor John A. Kitzhaber said:

Why are one in five Oregon children still living in poverty? Why do over 30 percent of Oregon children face food insecurity on a daily basis? Why is poverty among Latinos 27% and poverty among African Americans, Native Americans, Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders and people with disabilities over 30%? And most importantly why is that acceptable to us? I think we can all agree that this situation is not only unfair – but that it serves to widen the disparities that divide us and makes it more difficult for us to come together as a community. . . . Disparity is the enemy of community; it separates us; it divides us; it reflects inequality; a lack of fairness; and it means someone is being left behind; that someone is being excluded from the community. And for those who are excluded there is no common purpose. And if there is no common purpose there is no community. And if there is no community there is no way we can successfully meet the challenges we face as a state and as a society (Kitzhaber, 2015)

Those statements encapsulate the philosophy and political traditions of Oregon over the past three decades. From a moral perspective, they reinforce the idea that poverty is unfair and unjust. The growing poverty rates among ethnic and racial minorities do not mean that only those groups will suffer, but the community as a whole will. The community's goals and aspirations cannot be met without the participation and inclusion of everyone. The government and the community should work together for the prosperity of everyone. This is how Oregon came to be a "welfare utopia" (Semuels, 2016).

### **III. Collaborative Governance and the Role of Nonprofit Organizations**

Oregon is nationally recognized for having forged an effective collaboration between the state government and nonprofit organizations in addressing and solving the state's problems, particularly those related to fighting hunger (Edwards, 2012). Ansell and Gash (2008) defined collaborative governance as "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (p. 544). Oregon serves as a national example for effective collaborative governance and provides a model for how public agencies, together with nonprofit organizations and food advocates, can work together to achieve a common goal. The role of community-based organizations is evident in many SNAP activities. As will be discussed in this chapter, these organizations played an important role in SNAP outreach activities, policy design, and implementing SNAP employment and training activities to help able-bodied adults to continue to be enrolled in the program. Such efforts also helped to extend using SNAP benefits in farmers markets.

Perhaps what makes collaborative governance in fighting food insecurity successful in Oregon is the nature of the policy problem itself. Collaborative governance in other policy areas might be contentious and prone to wide disagreements due to conflicts of interests and power imbalances among the stakeholders. In environmental protection regulations, for example, business groups are more powerful than environmentalists and are likely to have greater access to policy makers (McCloskey, 2000). This allows them to constrain other stakeholders and to exert

more control over the entire process to reach policy solutions that maximize their self-interests at the expense of others. Conversely, fighting hunger has always been a salient problem in Oregon in which all stakeholders agree on its severity, magnitude and negative consequences on the society as a whole. It is not a zero-sum game where some stakeholders will win and others will lose from the policies produced from the collaborative governance process. Widespread hunger is a losing proposition for all stakeholders. For that reason, it is evident that both policymakers and nongovernmental organizations broadly agree on the importance of extending food assistance to all needy and food insecure Oregonians. For example, in his first state-of-the-state address, delivered on Friday, February 21 in 2003, Governor Theodore R. Kulongoski highlighted the problem of hunger in the state, and also emphasized the role of nonprofit organizations:

Of all the challenges we face, none is more troubling than the fact that thousands of Oregonians – many of them children- don't have enough to eat. Oregon has the highest hunger rate in the nation. This is not just a problem for the poorest of the poor. There are working families in this state who need food assistance. ... I've asked our state employees and citizens to donate food and money to the Oregon Food Bank. Today, I ask again. And next week I'll be meeting with state, federal and local government leaders - and advocates for the hungry - to talk about where we go next to end the shame of hunger in Oregon. ... No one in Oregon should ever be forced to choose between eating and other necessities (Kulongoski, 2003)

This statement underlined the significance of the hunger problem in Oregon. By noting that children are the majority of those who suffer from hunger, people are more likely to believe that it is a serious problem that warrants the government intervention. Children are always regarded as a group deserving of assistance and support. In addition, the governor emphasized that it is not the exclusive job of the government to solve the problem of hunger in the state. The role of nongovernmental organizations and food advocates must complement the government efforts and is essential for advancing the common good of the society. Furthermore, the statement challenges the notion that welfare recipients are unworthy of public assistance by emphasizing that many families on the welfare rolls are productive and hardworking people. In fact, there is a misperception about welfare recipients. They are viewed as unemployed and unproductive. Thus, by continuing their enrollment in public assistance programs, they are more likely to remain welfare dependents. This is untrue, or at least cannot be generalized about the majority of welfare

recipients. Most SNAP recipients are active in the labor market. Research shows that in a given month, 74% of individuals receiving SNAP benefits in a given month either worked during the year before or after that month (Keith-Jennings & Chaudhry, 2018). By illustrating that food insecurity is also a challenge for working families, a statement like this helps to improve the image of SNAP recipients. In the process, it helps to create positive public sentiments towards them, reducing the welfare stigma that has prevented many eligible households from participating in the program. More broadly, it helps inspire nonprofit organizations and society as a whole to work together to address the problem.

Such a view is also embraced by nonprofit organizations, which play an integral part in SNAP outreach and fighting food insecurity among Oregonians. After US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrested and detained an illegal immigrant who was living in the US under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (Hernandez, 2017), the Oregon Food Bank made the following statement:

But at Oregon Food Bank, we care about one thing above all – that you are nourished. We want you and your family to have three healthy meals today, tomorrow and the next day. ... We welcome you – no matter who you love, what you think, what you look like, what your gender is, what you believe, what your citizenship status is (Oregon Food Bank, 2017)

While other states might have developed different forms of collaboration with various stakeholders, what makes Oregon unique is the institutionalization of its collaborative governance efforts. By incorporating these forms of public policy making into its statutes, Oregon has ensured that collaborative governance is not just political rhetoric. (Bingham, 2006). In chapter 458 of the Oregon Revised Statute, the legislative assembly declared “all persons have the right to be free from hunger” and committed to make Oregon “rank among the top states in the nation in providing food security without hunger” (Oregon Revised Statute, section 2). In addition, the statute stipulated the following (Oregon Revised Statute, section 3):

The policy of this state is to provide and encourage activities and programs necessary to fulfill the commitment stated in subsection (2) of this section and that the purpose of policies stated in this section is to provide a guide for the establishment, implementation and operation of activities and programs designed to alleviate or eradicate hunger in this state. The Legislative Assembly

further declares that the activities and programs shall be initiated, promoted and developed through:

- (a) Volunteers and volunteer groups;
- (b) Public and private not-for-profit organizations;
- (c) Partnership with local governmental agencies;
- (d) Coordinated efforts of state agencies;
- (e) Coordination and cooperation with federal programs;
- (f) Partnership with private health and social service agencies.

The state legislature established the Oregon Hunger Task Force in 1989 to “promote community awareness, compile research, develop proposals for government action, and conduct outreach to expand participation in federal nutrition programs” (Oregon Hunger Task Force, n.d.). The task force is composed of 28 members who serve three years term, and are selected from the state legislators, representatives from the state government, including the Department of Human Services, Oregon Health Authority, Department of Education, State Department of Agriculture, and representatives from various nonprofit and community leaders. The task force represents an important coalition of stakeholders whose main purpose is to fight hunger. The task force is vested with significant powers and responsibilities that make it not a mere consultative body. According to Oregon Revised Statute (ORS 458.545), the task force is authorized to study the programs, budgets and concepts of all governmental bodies that provide services for hunger eradication. It is also empowered to propose and recommend plans and actions to the governor and legislative assembly that aim to reduce hunger and boost participation in federal and state nutrition programs. Furthermore, the task force is mandated to conduct research on a wide range of hunger-related issues, including determining the dimensions of hunger, identifying groups and individuals suffering from hunger, verifying participation rates, detecting barriers to enrollment in SNAP, and exploring opportunities for public-private partnerships in areas pertaining to fighting hunger.

In 2006, the Hunger Task Force established Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon (PHFO) as a nonprofit organization to act as an executive arm that translates the taskforce recommendations into action. PHFO consists of more than twenty advocates, social service providers, state agencies and elected representatives. Since its establishment, the organization has become the most active player in efforts to reduce hunger and improve SNAP participation rates in Oregon. It provides training to other organizations throughout the state on SNAP outreach design and implementation.

Furthermore, it offers information on its website regarding SNAP eligibility, rules and application procedures to all eligible households, including senior citizens and non-English speaking individuals. The organization also prints user-friendly brochures in multiple languages (English, Spanish, Russian and Vietnamese) and distributes them to different places where eligible households are likely to be present. PHFO also offers a four-module online free training program that provides an overview of SNAP's history and importance, the eligibility criteria and application, benefits, recertification requirements and outreach. PHFO also produces reports and data on SNAP participation rates that analyze trends in caseload size and helps identify affected populations. In 2017, PHFO provided SNAP training to 400 people working in community organizations such as Meals on Wheels. It also connected 54,000 individuals to SNAP, including 1147 senior citizen individuals who received help in applying to the program (Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, 2018). In 2018, 791 persons were trained, including 189 at Oregon colleges, and 55,656 were given information and assistance in applying for SNAP (Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, 2019).

In addition to Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, in 2010, the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) contracted ten partners to design and implement SNAP outreach activities (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2011). Some of these partners were contracted to carryout outreach activities throughout the state and to provide services to all SNAP eligible households/individuals. Some organizations focused on specific geographic locations and targeted particular eligible households through tailored outreach programs. For example, Safenet/211 Info was contracted to provide information to SNAP-eligible households through phone calls and online in the entire state, and to all eligible households. Centro Latino Americano and La Clinica del Valle provide SNAP information online and in person in Lane and Jackson counties and refer cases of Hispanic groups to the ODHS for eligibility screening. Oregon State University provides information, application assistance and referrals to DHS for students and Hispanic individuals in Linn, Benton, Polk and Yamhill counties. Battered Person's Advocacy works with victims of domestic violence in Lake and Klamath counties, and Relief Nursery provides SNAP information to families in crisis in Lane County. The approach of tailoring services and outreach programs to specific groups has proven effective since every SNAP eligible subgroup has different circumstances requiring different outreach strategies. For example, Hispanics and immigrants

might be concerned about the legal consequences of their participation, particularly the risks this might pose to their chances of naturalization or the deportation of their undocumented immigrant relatives.

In its most recent report, *Plan to End Hunger (2019-2022)*, the Oregon Hunger Task Force identified the needs and recommended measures and policies that would advance its ultimate goal to end hunger in Oregon. The plan spoke of one goal in particular: “Nutritious food is accessible to everyone and nutrition support programs are adequate, effective and equitable when we need them” (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2019, p.7). To achieve this goal, the report recommends “increasing access to nutrition programs for college students as well as to support “SNAP Match” at Farmers’ Markets through Double-Up Food Bucks” (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2019, p.7). On the federal level, the report also recommended that the federal government adjust the income eligibility requirements for participation in SNAP to allow more people to enroll and to allow states to increase SNAP benefit levels for “persistently underserved groups such as college students, immigrants and people with barriers to work” (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2019, p.8).

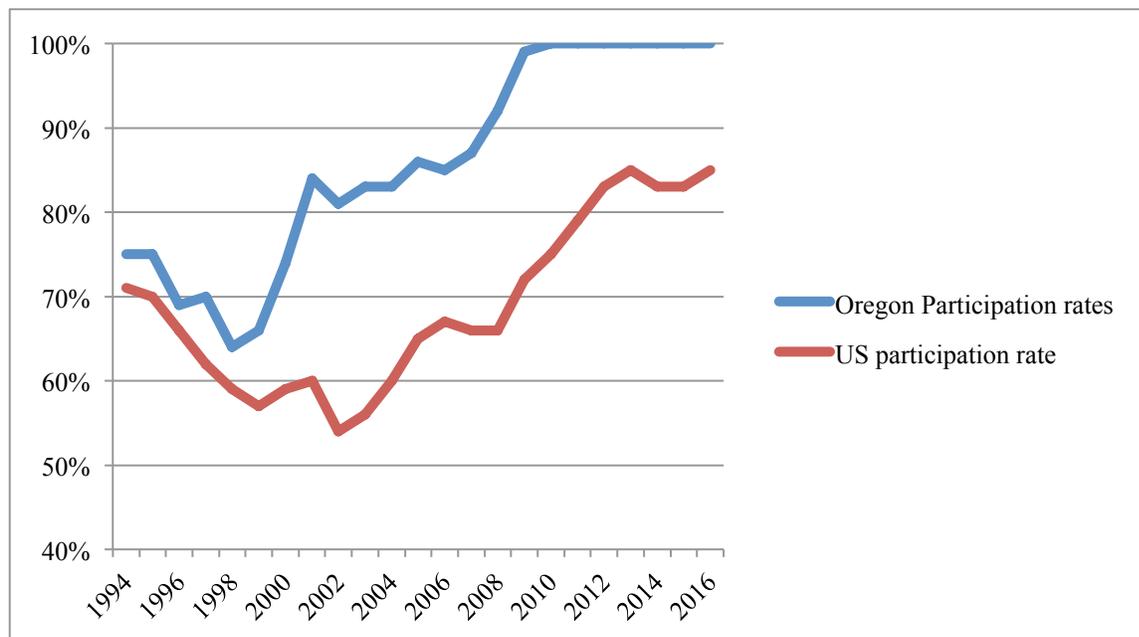
It is evident that these efforts have contributed to reducing hunger in Oregon, which once had the highest rates of food insecurity in the nation. Due to the effective policies that the state has pursued to enroll eligible households/individuals in SNAP, as well as other welfare and food assistance programs, rates of hunger have declined over time. In 2018, food insecurity was no longer as elevated in Oregon as it had been a decade before. The rates of low food insecurity (12.9%) and very low food insecurity (5.4%) are now closer to the national rates (11.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Edwards, 2018). One interesting fact about food insecurity in Oregon is that the percentage of those who suffered from food insecurity remained almost the same before and after the Great Recession. This is the result of the successful efforts to keep SNAP participation rate at 100% since 2009. While the recession led to higher unemployment and poverty rates, those suffering from food insecurity were less in the years of the recession than before the recession (from 13.6% on average between 2009 and 2011 to 13.9% on average between 2007 and 2009) (Nord et al., 2010; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2012). This was due to the continuing enrollment of all eligible populations in the program and also because SNAP benefits rose during the recession, which boosted the purchasing power of the recipients.

#### **IV. State Demographics (Ethnic Minorities)**

SNAP caseload in Oregon tracks the same pattern as the national caseload. Enrollment in SNAP increases and decreases in response to changes in welfare policies and macroeconomic circumstances. For example, after the 1996 welfare reform that introduced some restrictive policies on particular groups, caseload in Oregon fell from 287,607 in 1996 to 240,990 in 1997 and 224,828 in 1998. On the other hand, after the recession and following the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, enrollment in SNAP dramatically increased from 469,315 in 2008 to 581,025 in 2009, and to 705,035 in 2010, and reached 815,221 in 2012.

Participation rates in Oregon also followed the same trend as in the US, as shown in Figure 4. However, what is remarkable about Oregon is the modest drop in participation rates in the immediate years following the 1996 welfare reform compared to national rates. Participation rates in Oregon decreased only 3 percentage points, from 69% in 1996 to 66% in 1999. Meanwhile, SNAP participation rates throughout the US dropped from 66% to 57% during the same period (9 percentage-points). The drop was even sharper in California, from 61% to 49%. This indicates that Oregon was more successful than other states in enrolling SNAP eligible individuals/households after welfare reform. Oregon pursued many proactive policies to help eligible populations gain access to SNAP. In addition to the effective outreach programs to identify and recruit eligible participants, Oregon undertook other measures to keep eligible households enrolled (Lehner, 2015). Edwards et al. (2016) found that SNAP participants in Oregon had longer spells compared to Florida in the two years following the Great Recession (2008-2009). The median duration where participants remained in the program was 11 months in Florida compared to 17 month in Oregon. Additionally, only 48% of Florida's SNAP participants remained enrolled for more than 12 months, compared to 63% of SNAP recipients in Oregon.

Figure 5. SNAP Participation Rates in Oregon and the US 1994-2016



There are several factors that helped mitigate the negative impact of welfare reform on SNAP participation rates in Oregon. Essentially, the reforms imposed restrictions on the participation of immigrants and ABAWDs. Legal immigrants living in the US for less than five years were denied participation in SNAP. Therefore, examining the demographics of Oregon's population provides useful insights in understanding why Oregon succeeded in keeping participation rates minimally affected after welfare reform. According to the 2000 US Census, 8% of Oregon's population were Hispanics, compared to 12.5% on the national level, and 32.4% of California's population. Furthermore, 90.7% of Oregon residents, at that time, were US born and 8.5% were foreign born (roughly half had entered the US between 1990-2000). This compares to 72.7% of California residents who were US born and 26.2% who were foreign born (with the majority being noncitizens). Although the Hispanic population has been increasing in Oregon at higher rates than in the US, Oregon continues to have one of the lowest racially and ethnically diverse populations in the nation (in 2016, 12.7% are Hispanics and 1.8% are African Americans). In addition, the growth in the Hispanic population in Oregon was mainly driven by an increase in the number of US born Hispanics rather than Hispanic immigrants. In 2014, almost two-thirds of the Hispanic population in Oregon were US born (The Oregon Community Foundation, 2016). In addition, language does not seem to be a barrier for Hispanics and

immigrants to participate in SNAP in Oregon. Almost three quarters of immigrants in Oregon speak English well or very well (American Immigration Council, 2017). On the other hand, unlike states with a high percentage of mixed-status families, Oregon does not have a substantial undocumented immigrants population. The percentage of Oregon's population living with at least one undocumented immigrant in the same household is 5%, the same as the national rate (Mathema, 2017).

Ethnic and racial minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans suffer from higher rates of poverty and food insecurity particularly among children. Thus, they are more likely to participate in social assistance programs disproportionate to their population sizes. Indeed, Hispanic enrollment in SNAP has been increasing over time. However, their participation rates vary depending on their legal status (Delgado et al., 2015). Immigrant families and children residing in households where one or both of their parents are foreign born are less likely to participate than families and children born in the US (Hanson et al., 2014). Therefore, states with higher immigrant population are more likely to have lower SNAP participation rates compared to states with fewer immigrants. It is even suggested that the impact of higher proportions of ethnic minorities in a state on participation rates might offset the positive welfare policies that a given state implements. Edwards et al. (2016) examined how Florida and Oregon performed after the 2008-2009 recession, and found that notwithstanding the modernization of the application process in Florida, Oregon did better in enrolling eligible households due in part to the presence of high Hispanic and Black populations in Florida. More importantly, the same research showed that Hispanics in Oregon have significantly longer SNAP spells than their counterparts in Florida (4-5 months longer) indicating that citizenship and legal status, not ethnicity alone, is the main driver of participation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, one reason for the low SNAP participation rates in California is the presence of a high proportion of Hispanic populations who are living either illegally in the US or in mixed-status families. In addition to the language barrier, ethnic minorities, even if they are in the US legally, face a welfare stigma that discourages them from enrolling in welfare assistance programs. Furthermore, legal immigrants when they are eligible for participation, are often reluctant to participate for fear that other family members who are

illegally present in the US might be deported. In 2017, a proposed executive order has been leaked from the White House concerning considering some welfare assistance as a public charge that may make green card seekers and legal immigrants deportable in certain circumstances. In response, many children started missing school, households stopped using both their SNAP and WIC benefits. Some families were even afraid to leave their homes (Oregon Hunger Task Force, 2017).

## **V. Waiver of the Work Requirement on Able- Bodied Adults Without Dependents, and SNAP Education and Training**

Among its fundamental changes, PRWORA imposed a work requirement on ABAWDs. Individuals aged between 18-49 who do not suffer a physical or mental disability that make them unfit for work, do not have children living in their SNAP household, do not care for a disabled person in their household, and are not pregnant can only participate in SNAP for three months every three years, unless they work at least 20 hours a week or engage in other job-related activities (education, job search, training, community service, etc.). This rule aligns with the political and ‘moral’ ideas prevailing at the time of PRWORA’s passage. Basically, it was intended to reduce welfare dependency by encouraging people to move from the welfare rolls to the labor market. Since then, the work requirement has become a key feature in the US social assistance programs that applies to TANF and SNAP. Many policymakers with more liberal and progressive orientations, as well as food advocates, have consistently criticized this rule, perceiving it more as a time limit for assistance than a work requirement. They view it as a restrictive policy that deprives those who are in dire need from meeting a basic necessity. They argue that there is no guarantee that a person who is looking for a job can actually find one. There are many factors that affect a job seeker’s chances of finding jobs, such as labor and macroeconomic conditions on both the national and state levels, and hiring discrimination.

The literature suggests that the work requirement has led to a substantial drop in ABAWD’s participation in SNAP while contributing only minimally to higher employment or increased earnings (Gray et al., 2019). While ABAWDs do not belong to one racial, ethnic, demographic or geographic group, they are considered among the poorest people in the US. Their incomes, on average, are just 17% of the poverty threshold (\$2,000 a year) (Thomhave, 2016).

Consequently, ABAWD's income and financial assets qualify them for participation. Nevertheless they become ineligible for SNAP if they exhaust three months of participation without complying with the 20-hour weekly work requirement.

Several states' SNAP agencies have described the time limit rule as complex, burdensome to enforce, "error prone", "administrative and operational nightmare" and "the most complicated SNAP rule" (Office of Inspector General, 2016, p. 5). Unfortunately, some ABAWD participants who had satisfied the 20-hour weekly work requirement, and were eligible, did not participate, while others who did not meet the work requirement, and were hence ineligible, did participate beyond the 3-month limit (Office of Inspector General, 2016). This contradiction is due to the difficulty that state agencies face in tracking ABAWD's work status, including verifying the number of hours participants work over three years, especially if the work is performed in a state different than the one they reside in.

To make SNAP more accessible, particularly in tough economic times, PRWORA allowed states to request a waiver for enforcing the ABAWD time limit under certain circumstances, either throughout the entire state or in some geographical areas. States may request this waiver if unemployment in the entire state or some parts of the state is substantially high (10% or higher), or if there are insufficient jobs in the area. States were also allowed to suspend the rule entirely from April 2009 to September 2010, following the economic recession due to the proliferated unemployment rates and the lack of jobs that the states suffered from at that time. Figure 5 shows that, in 2010, almost all states applied for waivers that covered 88.6% of the population.

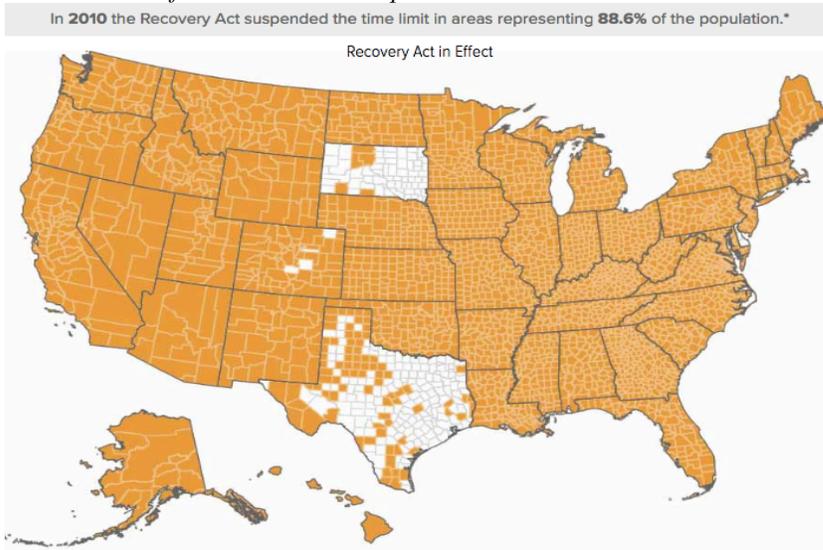
As with other SNAP policies, states have varied considerably in terms of when and how frequently they requested waiving the work requirement. Not only did a state's decision to withhold the work requirement depend on its economic conditions or eligibility to request a waiver, but other factors seem to have played a role as well. For example, Louisiana was eligible to request a statewide waiver, but it had not done so except during the administration of a newly elected Democrat governor (Office of the Governor, 2016). Delaware is another state that has never requested a full state waiver (Bolen & Dean, 2018). It is unclear why these two states - and others - chose not to request waivers even though they were eligible to do so. Yet, waiving the

work requirement is undoubtedly an important factor that contributes to increasing participation rates among a group that is financially eligible to participate in the program. It also indicates that political will is an important factor in impacting SNAP implementation and outcomes.

Oregon started requesting waivers for the work requirement on ABAWD in 2000 for nearly the entire state. From 2002-2015, Oregon was one of only a handful of states that extended the waiver to the entire state (see Figures 5 and 6). This practice helped the state maintain the number of SNAP recipients at virtually the same level following major changes to enrollment and eligibility policies. For example, in 1999 Oregon enrolled almost half of all nonworking TANF recipients in work-related activities, making them eligible for continuing participation, compared to only 20% of the same group on the national level (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

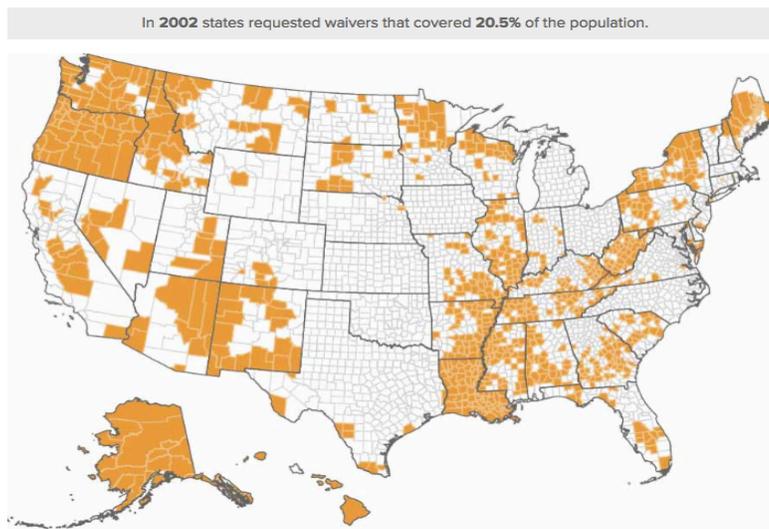
In addition to requesting waivers for the work requirement, determining who qualifies as an ABAWD and hence who is subject to the work requirement (time limit) is crucial in determining the population size that will be subject to this rule. To be exempt from the work requirement, a person falling in the ABAWD age range and who does not care for a child or a disabled person has to prove her/his unfitness to work through a disability certification. Oregon has one of the most lenient policies in this regard (Czajka et al., 2001). A person who claims disability can submit a certificate provided by a medical doctor, licensed or certified psychologist, licensed therapist, nurse practitioner, registered nurse, physician assistant, drug/alcohol treatment program professional, or a practitioner of alternative medicine. This policy is stricter in other states. In California, for example, such a certificate is only accepted from a doctor or certified psychologist. In addition, in Oregon, it is sufficient to exclude a person from the ABAWD category if that person is receiving disability benefits, without the need to provide a health certificate verifying the physical or mental unfitness to work. Oregon applies this to recipients of railroad retirement disability, state disability-based benefits, workers compensation, private disability, and veterans disability benefits.

Figure 6. *Waivers of ABAWDs Work Requirement in 2010*



Note: Reprinted from Center of Budget and Policy Priorities <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-have-requested-waivers-from-snaps-time-limit-in-high-unemployment>

Figure 7. *Waivers of ABAWDs Work Requirement in 2002*



Note: Reprinted from Center of Budget and Policy Priorities <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-have-requested-waivers-from-snaps-time-limit-in-high-unemployment>

## SNAP Employment and Training (E&T)

On the other hand, a controversial part of the work requirement imposed on ABAWDs is that

PRWORA did not mandate states to provide assistance to ABAWD in job search, training, education or engagement in work-related activities that would qualify them for participation in SNAP over three months in three years period. However, USDA provides grants to states willing to implement SNAP education and training activities (SNAP E&T). States are given the flexibility on whether to implement SNAP E&T, as well as the types and scope of those activities. SNAP E&T activities are implemented by states and overseen by the USDA. Permissible activities include job searches and job-search training; workfare; work experience; educational programs to improve basic skills and literacy; vocational training and postsecondary education; and job retention services (DeRenzis & Kaz, 2016). Once again, state practices have varied in this regard. Many states have not utilized those funds at all, while others have only partially used them. For example, Maryland spent only \$700,000 of its \$1.2 million federal grant in 2015 (Fritze, 2016, March 2).

According to a GAO report, in 2018 there were 43.5 million SNAP recipients, of which 6.1 millions were subject to the work requirement, and only 200,000 were served by SNAP E&T programs (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). This shows that the percentage of those who benefited from SNAP education and training programs has been very small. It is unclear why states have not made use of those funds. One plausible explanation is that the expansion of extending waivers technically removed the work requirement in many states, and hence states were not eager to implement educational and training programs. Also, some recipients who are subject to the work requirement may have participated in other training programs or job-related activities not necessarily through SNAP E&T. In addition, some ABAWDs could already have been in compliance with the work requirement and therefore did not need to participate in job search and training activities to remain eligible for continued enrollment.

Notwithstanding the small effect of SNAP E&T programs had on participation rates (given the small percentage of ABAWDs to the overall SNAP population, as well as the presence of other programs where ABAWDs satisfy the work requirements), Oregon remains one of the nation's most active states in utilizing federal grants to implement those activities. Portland Community College formed a coalition of 14 community colleges in Oregon to implement SNAP

Training Employment Program (STEP) (DeRenzis & Kaz, 2016). The program, which provides several training and education activities, has been growing in terms of the size of its budget and the number of its beneficiaries. For example, in 2017, the program had a \$2.4 million budget and benefited 484 individuals; in 2019, the budget increased to \$5 million and the number of beneficiaries grew to 1131 individuals. STEP is also integrated within the Portland Community College's Career Pathways Program, which is a nationally recognized education and training program (Hill, 2014).

In 2019, in response to the growing concerns regarding a new federal rule that would restrict the states' abilities to request waivers for ABAWDs and increase the work requirement to 40 hours a week, Oregon legislature passed House Bill 2310 (Prosperity 1,000 Pilot Program) "to provide career coaching, occupational training and job placement services for at least 1,000 low-income job seekers who reside in areas of concentrated poverty" (Section 2). The bill mandates that at least 100 participants of the program be SNAP recipients. It places a particular focus on individuals who left SNAP but who remain in poverty due to low-wage employment.

## **VI. Medical Expenses Deduction**

SNAP eligibility and benefit levels are based on a person's or household's gross and net income. According to federal criteria, a household is eligible for participation if it has a gross monthly income equivalent to or less than 130% of the national poverty threshold, and a net income that is equivalent to or less than 100% of the poverty threshold. Net monthly income is calculated after a set of allowable deductions is made. Allowable deductions include, for example, a dependent care deduction, child support, a standard shelter deduction for homeless households, and excess shelter costs including electricity, water, fuel for heating and cooking, and rent and mortgage costs. Among the most important deductions are medical expenses incurred by elderly or disabled individuals or households containing one elder or disabled person. When claimed, medical expenses can make a household eligible for SNAP, and also lead to substantial increases in benefit levels. For example, the Center on Budget and Policy Priority estimated that a senior recipient living alone may have an additional \$7-\$69 in monthly benefits when claiming \$50-\$200 in medical expenses (Jones T., 2014). Nevertheless, medical deductions remain

underutilized. In 2017, for example, only 16% of SNAP households with a senior individual and 9% of households with disabled individual claimed medical expense deductions (Food and Research Action Center, 2019).

What is unique about medical expenses deductions is that they cover a wide range of expenses that are not commonly covered by medical insurance, which means that households usually pay those expenses even if they receive Medicaid. These expenses include hearing aids, eyeglasses, special communication equipment and devices such as telephones with amplifiers and warning signals, as well as home renovations to increase accessibility for disabled persons such as elevated toilet seats, wheelchair ramps, shower seats, chair lifts, and others (Jones T., 2014).

In 2012, Oregon ranked fourth among all states in the percentage of eligible SNAP households that claimed medical expense deductions. While the average percentage in the US in that year was 12%, in Oregon 22% of households with elderly or disabled persons claimed these deductions (30,000 households out of 137,000 participating households), exactly double the percentage of California's households which claimed these deductions (11%). Furthermore, to reduce the complexity of calculating medical expenses, in 2017, Oregon joined 20 other states in launching a standard medical expense deduction demonstration project whereby a household with monthly medical expenses above \$35 could claim a standard amount of deduction even if it exceeded the actual amount they incurred. In the event that medical expenses are above the standard amount, a household can claim the actual amount of expenses. The standard amount in Oregon was set at \$205 a month, which means that any household that paid any amount above \$35 and below the \$205 standard deduction can claim the \$205 in full. The interesting part is that in 2012, the average medical deduction was \$133, which means that the standard amount in Oregon is 54% higher than the average medical expenses. In addition, the standard medical deduction in Oregon is the third highest among the 21 states that have implemented demonstration projects, only preceded by Illinois and Virginia.

Table 9. Standard Medical Deduction Demonstration FY2018

State	Standard Medical Deduction in Dollars
Alabama	200
Arkansas	138
California	155
Colorado	200
Georgia	185
Idaho	179
Illinois	245
Iowa	140
Kansas	175
Massachusetts	190
Missouri	200
New Hampshire	150
North Dakota	200
Oregon	205
Rhode Island	176
South Carolina	210
South Dakota	200
Texas	137
Vermont	173
Virginia	235
Wyoming	138

From “Technical Documentation for the Fiscal Year 2018 Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Quality Control Database and the QC Minimodel: Final Report” by Kathryn Cronquist, Sarah Lauffer, Chrystine Tadler, and Sarah Hong, 2019 ([https://host76.mathematica-mpr.com/fns/PUBLIC\\_USE/2018/FY%202018%20Tech%20Doc.pdf](https://host76.mathematica-mpr.com/fns/PUBLIC_USE/2018/FY%202018%20Tech%20Doc.pdf)).

In Oregon, a SNAP senior or a household with a senior or disabled individual is allowed a significant number of medical deductions encompassing the following items (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2014):

1. All health insurance premiums, deductibles and coinsurance not covered by Medicaid.
2. The cost of maintaining an attendant, a home health aide, a housekeeper or dependent care services.

3. Prescriptions, over-the-counter and naturopathic items when prescribed by a health provider.
4. Medical, dental, psychiatric and outpatient treatments as well as the cost of rehabilitation or hospitalization.
5. The cost of medical transportation and lodging needed to obtain medical treatment and services.
6. The cost of acquiring service animals, their training, food and veterinarian bills as long as they are prescribed by a medical professional

SNAP-allowable medical expense deductions can be complicated to figure out. There are no standard rules for eligible expenses. This creates a lot of confusion for both SNAP recipients and program managers. The majority of SNAP recipients eligible for medical expense deductions end up paying for those services because they are not aware of these deductions. Consequently, outreach and raising awareness are essential for helping recipients to take advantage of those deductions. Oregon has given particular attention to this shortcoming, and accordingly provides training to recipients as well as caseworkers on how to utilize medical deductions. For example, the Oregon Department of Human Services provides training on its website to interested SNAP households and caseworkers on eligibility rules and allowable expenses.

## **VII. Using SNAP in Farmers Markets**

Farmers' markets have been growing in number and size over the past two decades throughout the US. While on average, food prices at farmers markets are higher than grocery stores, they represent an important and unique venue for food shopping. The quality and freshness of fruits and vegetables available at those markets make them attractive to many people. In addition, in some communities, shopping at farmers markets is driven by the desire to support local farmers and the economy.

Given that food prices at farmers markets are usually higher, SNAP recipients, a low-income group by definition, do not find it cost effective to shop there. In addition, farmers markets sell a limited number of foods, making it inconvenient for many shoppers, especially low-income groups, since they would have to do their food shopping in multiple places (Grace et al., 2007). In a USDA survey, 73% of the SNAP respondents who did not shop at farmers markets indicated that they preferred to purchase all their groceries from one place, and 33% said that

prices at farmers markets are too high (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014).

Nevertheless, many farmers markets have been designated SNAP authorized retailers. A key challenge to using SNAP benefits at farmers markets arose after PRWORA mandated that states substitute food vouchers with EBT cards. By the late 1990s, many states started operating EBT programs, which technically precluded farmers markets. While there are a number of advantages for using EBT cards, this technological transformation made it difficult to use SNAP in farmers markets. To allow SNAP participants to use their benefits, vendors at farmers markets have to purchase specific machines located at a central location where SNAP users swipe their EBT cards and receive tokens or vouchers that can be used at the stalls. To overcome this technological obstacle, and the additional costs farmers markets have to incur, USDA provided wireless EBT equipment to interested farmers markets at no cost through the SNAP EBT Equipment Program. In addition, USDA afforded grants to farmers markets to support operating costs and cover EBT service fees. For example, USDA partnered with the Farmers Market Coalition to fund the purchase of EBT equipment and related services to interested farmers markets nationwide. By the conclusion of the three-year program (2014-2017), 1,005 farmers markets across the country benefited from free EBT equipment and related services (Farmers Market Coalition).

Once again, Oregon has been in the forefront of authorizing using SNAP benefits at farmers markets and consequently diversifying shopping venues where SNAP users can purchase eligible food items. According to the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service), in 2017, Oregon was home to 195 SNAP authorized farmers markets where SNAP benefits could be used. This number had increased by 75.7% from 2012 when only 111 farmers markets were authorized SNAP retailers. This is a modest growth rate compared to other states such as Alabama where the number increased by 547.4% during the same time period (from 57 in 2012 to 369 in 2017) and Wyoming where the number increased from 2 to 13 (550% growth rate). However, almost all farmers markets in Oregon are authorized SNAP retailers, meaning that Oregon has almost reached the saturation point regarding participating farmers markets. In addition, as shown in Table 10, in 2017, Oregon was among the top 11 states in the number of

authorized farmers markets and ranked fifth in SNAP authorized farmers markets per capita (almost 3 farmers markets per 10,000 SNAP recipients). More importantly, Oregon's predominantly white population makes the farmers markets better shopping venues given that African Americans and non-white individuals are 30% less likely to shop at farmers market than white individuals (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014).

*Table 10. Number of SNAP Authorized Farmers Markets and Farmers Markets per capita*

State	Authorized farmers markets	SNAP recipients	Farmers markets for every 10,000 SNAP recipients
Alabama	369	804,336	4.6
California	598	4,112,066	1.5
Georgia	282	1,625,415	1.7
Iowa	237	365,893	6.5
Kentucky	264	654,873	4
Massachusetts	410	765,714	5.4
Michigan	365	1,375,434	2.7
New York	439	2,910,894	1.5
North Carolina	316	1,365,394	2.3
Ohio	224	1,501,795	1.5
Oregon	195	672,413	2.9

Source: Author's tabulation from SNAP Community characteristics and SNAP Authorized Farmers and Markets FY2017 (USDA)

To encourage SNAP recipients to use their benefits at farmers markets and improve their nutrition intake, USDA initiated the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive (FINI) program. In participating markets, users are given additional vouchers or gift cards when they use their SNAP benefits. The value of the incentive varies from one market to another and can reach \$1 bonus for each \$1 SNAP spent in the market, which is basically a doubling of SNAP benefits. However, most markets that participate in the FINI program capped the amount of incentive to a maximum of \$10 bonus in a single day (Farmers Market Coalition, 2017). The program has proved to be

very effective in increasing SNAP users' consumption of fruits and vegetables. In the first year of its implementation, participating farmers markets nationwide provided \$3 million in incentives and 16-32 million additional servings of fruits and vegetables. USDA also offered grants to farmers markets, nongovernmental organizations and state and local governments to improve SNAP usage by providing staff training, producing educational materials and raising SNAP users' awareness about the eligibility of using SNAP benefits at farmers markets. According to FNS data, SNAP redemptions at farmers markets in the US grew by 350% from 2009 to 2014 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service, 2015).

### **Double Up Food Bucks**

In 2016, Oregon started the Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) program in 48 farmers markets serving urban and rural communities in 16 counties, where every additional dollar spent with SNAP benefits is rewarded with one dollar for purchases in those markets. According to the Farmers Market Fund (FMF), SNAP usage in their participating markets grew quickly when the match of DUFB increased from \$5 to \$10 (Farmers Market Fund, n.d.).

SNAP customers and farmers alike applauded the SNAP match program as it increased the purchasing power of SNAP recipients while boosting sales at the market. For example, SNAP transactions in Hollywood Farmers Market in Portland increased by 39%, and 90% of SNAP customers said they increased their purchase and intake of vegetables and fruits after the Double Up Food Bucks program started operating (Farmers Market Fund, n.d.). The Farmers Market Fund conducted a Farmers Market Customer Surveys among SNAP shoppers in participating farmers markets across the state to evaluate the DUFB success, as well as to learn about SNAP users' satisfaction with the program. Survey results revealed some important insights highlighting DUFB's success. For example, 63% of the respondents said that they shopped three times or more every month at farmers markets in 2016 (after the DUFB) compared to 49% who did in 2015 (before DUFB); 89% of SNAP shoppers said that DUFB is very important factor for their decision to shop at farmers markets; 82.2% tried new types of fruits and vegetables because of DUFB; and 74.8% said they reduced their consumption of processed foods such as candy, chips and cookies.

FMF is another nongovernmental organization that played an important role in impacting state policies on SNAP, particularly in providing incentives to SNAP recipients to shop at authorized farmers markets. Its partnership with government and other nongovernmental organizations is another example of the role of effective collaboration in SNAP outreach. Starting in 2015, FMF partnered with the Oregon Food Bank to implement DUFEB in 53 farmers markets in 16 counties in Oregon (Oregon Food Bank, 2019). Importantly, in 2019, the Farmers Market Fund prompted a coalition of multiple organizations across Oregon and sponsored Senate Bill 727 that was approved by the state legislature. The bill called for \$3 million from the General Fund to be appropriated to the ODHS to finance the continuation of Double Up Food Bucks program that would be implemented and administered by contracting “nonprofit organization”: Farmers Market Fund. In supporting the Bill, Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay; Rep. Duane Stark, R-Grants Pass; and Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland wrote a letter to the state Senate which noted that, “Making food budgets last is challenging, especially when you have a desire to eat healthy and nutritious food. No one should be put in the position of choosing between running out of food completely or eating unhealthy food so that their money lasts longer” (Double Up Food Bucks a good deal , 2019, July 1).

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Oregon is the national leader in SNAP participation rates, and represents a highly successful case for reaching those in need of food assistance. Oregon is among a very few states to reach a 100% participation rate, meaning that every eligible individual and household actually participates in the program. While Oregon historically has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the nation, it has managed to mitigate this problem by extending SNAP benefits to all eligible households.

In this chapter, I closely investigated the factors that led to this success. Indeed there are several factors that made Oregon a shining star among states in enrollment and participation rates. One important argument is that we cannot detach policy from politics. In fact, if politics is the authoritative allocation of values (Easton, 1965), then public policy is the means to realize those values. Oregon is one of the most liberal and progressive states in the nation. The statements of several Oregon governors presented in this chapter showed that Oregon has pursued a pro-welfare

agenda in the past three decades that nurtured a supportive public opinion and positive sentiments towards welfare recipients.

In addition, I have highlighted that collaborative governance was a key factor in increasing SNAP participation rates. By institutionalizing collaborative governance through its legislative statutes, Oregon managed to create an inclusive and pluralistic mode of public policy making. Fighting hunger became a unifying force that enabled the government and nonprofit organizations to find a common ground in making this issue a high priority. The Oregon Hunger Task Force is a key multi-stakeholder body that contributed enormously to SNAP's success. The task force established the Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, a nongovernmental organization that played -and continues to play- a proactive role in SNAP outreach. It trains staff in nonprofit organizations on how to reach eligible households and provides assistance and information to applicants.

Among the key reasons for Oregon's success in reaching 100% participation rate is its demographic characteristics. Oregon endured the changes of the welfare reform as it had one of the least diverse populations in the nation during the 1990s. While the Hispanic population has been increasing over time, the majority of them are US born. Therefore, their participation in SNAP was not affected by the restrictive welfare reform policies that excluded immigrants who had been living in the US for less than five years from using public assistance.

Moreover, Oregon applied proactive policies to help keep SNAP recipients continuously enrolled in the program. Following welfare reform in the mid 1990s that limited the participation of ABWADs for more than three months every three years, Oregon consistently requested waivers to permit this group enrollment in the program. In addition, it utilized federal funds and grants to implement employment and training programs to ensure that ABWADs complied with the federal work requirements. Oregon also improved the process for claiming medical expenses deductions that mainly benefit senior and disabled individuals. Extending the usage of SNAP benefits to farmers markets is another area where Oregon has excelled. Almost all farmers markets in Oregon are SNAP-authorized retailers where SNAP participants can use their EBT cards to shop for fresh food products. In addition, Oregon implemented the Double Up Food

Bucks program where SNAP benefits are doubled when used at farmers markets. This provided a strong incentive for using SNAP in farmers markets and also led to greater client satisfaction. This in turn encouraged SNAP users to continue their enrollment in the program.

## **Chapter 7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **I. Conclusion**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a cornerstone in the US social safety net. It has proven effective in reducing food insecurity and has contributed to improving the health and nutrition of low-income households. SNAP provides near cash assistance to eligible individuals to put food on their tables. Nevertheless, many eligible households do not enroll in the program. Barriers to enrollment include information and transaction costs, and welfare stigma attached to receiving public assistance. However, the variation in SNAP participation rates among states indicates that some states were able to mitigate the effect of those barriers. Following the 1996 welfare reform, states gained considerable latitude in implementing SNAP, leading to a myriad of factors that need to be investigated in order to identify why some states reached a 100% participation rate, and others did not.

This dissertation attempted to explore and identify the leading factors that explain the variations in SNAP participation rates. Through empirical and case study examinations, this dissertation argues that there is no single factor or policy that can fully explain the variation in participation rates. Instead, it contends that a multitude of factors including SNAP policies, political, demographic, administration and governance factors contribute to impacting SNAP participation rates.

People's behavior, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions differ immensely. Consequently, public policies affect target groups differently. The findings of this dissertation suggest that people respond to SNAP policies in different ways. While some policies might induce one group to enroll in SNAP, the same policies might not have the same effect on other groups. This explains why some policies, which are predicted to improve participation rates, do not actually have a significant effect. For example, using online applications is a policy that aims at reducing transaction costs by making it more convenient and easier for people to enroll in the program. Applying online saves eligible households the hassle and time to visit a SNAP office to apply. It

also eliminates the embracement and stigma that some individuals might experience when applying in person. However, for other groups, who lack access to internet services or require help while filing an application, this policy could be in itself a barrier to enrollment. This also applies to using phone interviews during the application and recertifying the eligibility of current recipients, where both variables did not have statistical significance in affecting participation rates.

On the other hand, other policies seem to be effective in improving participation rates. For example, simplified reporting, whereby SNAP recipients are not required to verify their eligibility periodically, but rather when their income, expenditures or household composition changes, is an important policy that has helped keep SNAP recipients enrolled for a longer duration. Likewise, broad-based categorical eligibility, that according to which recipients of other public assistance benefits are exempted from SNAP income and asset tests, has encouraged eligible households to enroll in the program by reducing transaction costs, as well as simplifying the administrative work of SNAP administrators. Increasing the amount of benefits is also a positive factor that encourages eligible households to enroll in the program.

Conversely, the fingerprinting requirement has been a strong impediment for participation. It imposes a stigma on SNAP applicants and deters eligible individuals from applying particularly those with previous criminal records. In addition, individuals who live in mixed-status families or have family members who live illegally in the US are reluctant to apply fearing legal complications or even the deportation of their family members.

The two case studies of California and Oregon indicate that SNAP policies alone are not sufficient in explaining the variation in SNAP participation rates. High or low participation rates result from the unique combination of factors characterizing each state, which span across issues related to policy, politics, administration, demographics and governance. The case of California illustrates key barriers to enrollment in SNAP, including language barriers for immigrants, welfare stigma, lack of knowledge on eligibility, misperceptions about the program, poor access and outreach, and the cumbersome of the application process. In addition, the high administrative cost per household per month in California is another factor that makes enrolling all eligible

households a costly process, given that state and county governments share part of these administrative costs. Furthermore, while the majority of states administer SNAP on the state level, in California, SNAP is county-administered, making it challenging for the state government to address all the problems affecting participation in all counties.

The findings of the case studies also reveal that some state-specific policies and measures are important in affecting SNAP participation rates. For example, Proposition 187 in California, which aimed to bar illegal immigrants from benefiting from public assistance programs, deterred eligible households from participation for fear that their illegal immigrant family members might be deported. Conversely, the Double Up Food Bucks program in Oregon, which provides cash incentives for using SNAP benefits in farmers markets, reduces the stigma of SNAP receipt, and hence encourages current recipients to continue their enrollment in the program. Moreover, the case of Oregon highlighted that collaborative governance also matters. Oregon established the Oregon Hunger Task Force as a permanent multi-stakeholder body to help the state in solving the problem of hunger. The Task Force played an important role in reducing hunger in the state as well as embarking on effective outreach programs through the Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon.

Additionally, the impact of partisanship and politics on SNAP participation rates should not be underestimated. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that party in power can affect participation rates directly and indirectly. By controlling the state political institutions, particularly the state legislature and governorship, policy makers issue and veto legislative bills, allocate funds to outreach programs, and provide the overall direction of the state departments in issues pertaining to SNAP including seeking of waivers for work requirements. On the other hand, using their informational advantage and moral influence over the electorate, policy makers tacitly popularize certain beliefs about public assistance recipients, thereby shaping public opinion in ways that are either supportive of or hostile to welfare programs. The analysis presented in this dissertation suggests that participation rates decrease when the Republicans have full control over the government. In California, for example, Republican policymakers initiated some measures that restricted enrollment in SNAP and other public assistance programs. Such measures included a lifetime ban of convicted drug felons from enrolling in

SNAP, the SSI cash out policy, and the maximum family grant rule. Also, Republican governors vetoed several bills that aimed to eliminate the fingerprinting requirement. In contrast, Democratic governors and legislatures in Oregon pursued a pro welfare agenda, and promoted the values of equity and solidarity in the community. This supports the arguments made in the literature that the Democratic Party promotes welfare policies, is in favor of welfare generosity, and more inclined to expand public assistance.

Regarding state demographics, Hispanics and African Americans have higher rates of food insecurity and poverty than the US average. Accordingly, they participate in SNAP and other public assistance programs in higher percentages relative to their population sizes than other groups in the US. The empirical findings suggest that an increase in Hispanic and African American populations explain the increase in SNAP participation rates. However, this correlation is not uniform among all states. In states with high percentage of Hispanic populations, such as Texas, California, Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico, additional increases in the Hispanic population does not significantly affect participation rates. California and Oregon case studies provide some insights on why the case is such. The large percentage of Hispanics in California, who are foreign born, non-citizens and undocumented immigrants, has had a negative impact on participation rates. SNAP eligible Hispanic individuals, who live in mixed-status families or have illegal immigrant family members, are deterred from enrolling for the fear of legal consequences and deportation. In Oregon, on the other hand, the percentage of Hispanics living in mixed-status families is within the national average. In addition, while the Hispanic population has been growing at a fast pace over the past two decades, in Oregon the majority of them are either US born or live legally in the US. Therefore their participation in SNAP is not hindered by their legal status. This shows that the legal status and family structure of Hispanic population in a given state helps determine the effect this population has on participation rates.

## **II. Recommendations**

It is important to make some SNAP policies optional in order to respond to the different needs of different groups. For example, conducting a face-to-face interview during the application and recertification should be an option. It could be useful for some applicants and recipients to

conduct a physical interview with SNAP caseworkers as it allows them to elaborate on their status and better answer questions regarding their eligibility. Similarly, applying online does not have a significant impact on participation rates, suggesting that while it might be a preferred option for some groups, others may not have access to computers, internet service or unfamiliar with completing applications online. Therefore, SNAP applicants should be given the choice to apply online or in person.

Community efforts and the role of nongovernmental organizations in outreach activities should be prioritized. The government alone is not capable of reaching and enrolling all eligible individuals and households without the help and cooperation of non-state actors. SNAP serves a huge and diverse population. Therefore, communication and outreach strategies should not be uniform since there is a need to reach out to different groups. For example, Hispanic groups who are eligible to participate may need assurances that family members living illegally in the US will not be harmed from their enrollment in the program.

Authorizing the use of SNAP benefits in farmers markets is another area that can enhance participation rates. Farmers markets are unique shopping venues that have been growing in size and number during the past few years. By allowing the use of SNAP benefits at farmers markets, SNAP eligible individuals, who value fresh and locally grown foods, could be encouraged to enroll in the program.

Banning drug felons from participation in SNAP is another measure that should be revised. As of 2017, Indiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and West Virginia were imposing a lifetime ban on convicted drug felons, and 23 states had modified ban in place, which requires drug-testing applicants or temporarily disqualifies them from participation. This policy is meant to discourage people from engaging in drug related activities including drug consumption and sales. However, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that it has helped reducing drug sales or addiction. It is not even intuitively convincing that denying or losing SNAP benefits serve as strong deterrents to stop drug related activities. Instead, it seems that it sometimes punishes the weakest and most vulnerable in the society.

Increasing SNAP benefits is another area that could have a profound impact on

increasing participation rates. There is a general consensus that the amount of SNAP benefits is low, and for many households, it is insufficient to lift them out of poverty. The assumption that individuals spend a third of their disposable income on food, which is the formula upon which the benefit levels are set, underestimates the amount of money people spend on other activities, including healthcare, education, utilities, transportation, etc. Increasing benefits will encourage eligible households to enroll, especially those with higher incomes whose benefits under the current benefits levels are very minimal.

Improving, or more accurately, correcting the image of public assistance recipients is another important area that should receive more attention. There are many uninformed, subjective and biased opinions that create misperceptions about SNAP recipients. For example, the view that SNAP is encouraging people not to work is one of the common myths that reinforces stigma. Policymakers, nongovernmental organizations and food advocates should continue to raise public awareness regarding the deservedness of SNAP recipients and to highlight the positive impacts on the whole society that result from reducing hunger and poverty among various groups.

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## Appendix A: Acronyms

ABAWD: Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents  
 AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children  
 Broad Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE):  
 CAP: Combined Application Project  
 California Department of Social Services (CDSS)  
 DUFB: Double Up Food Bucks  
 EBT: Electronic Benefit Transfer  
 Farmers Market Coalition FMC  
 Farmers Market Fund FMF  
 FNS: Food and Nutrition Service  
 FSP: Food Stamps Program  
 GAO Government Accountability Office  
 Most Similar Systems Design (MSD)  
 The Narrative Policy Framework  
 OIG Office of Inspector General  
 OLS: Ordinary Least Squares  
 Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS)  
 Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon (PHFO)  
 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)  
 PRT: Power Resources Theory  
 PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and  
 San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFC-HSA)  
 The Social Construction of Targeted Populations Framework: SCF  
 Statewide Fingerprint Imaging System (SFIS)  
 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)  
 SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program  
 SNAP E&T SNAP Education and Training  
 SSI: Supplementary Security Income  
 TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families  
 TFP: Thrifty Food Plan  
 USDA: United States Department of Agriculture  
 Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)