FARM BILL TO TABLE: PREGNANCY AND THE POLITICS OF FOOD ASSISTANCE


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In the dissertation, Farm Bill to Table: Pregnancy and the Politics of Food, I use comparative-historical methods to examine the disparate trajectories of two U.S. food assistance programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, is a generally-targeted food assistance program for low-income individuals. Recipients use a debit-type card to purchase groceries with few restrictions. WIC, on the other hand, targets low-income pregnant and breastfeeding individuals and children under five years old. The program restricts the types, brands, and quantities of foods recipients can purchase. Program requirements further stipulate that participants attend nutrition education courses. The WIC program is not only uniquely restrictive, it is also uniquely durable. During times of welfare retrenchment and reform, the WIC budget and access to the program were maintained. One simple question orients my research: Why did WIC and SNAP take divergent approaches to participant surveillance and dietary restrictions? To answer this question, I draw upon thousands of pages of documents including: congressional records, presidential records, USDA documents, publications from advocacy organizations, and media from the 1960s to present. I argue that racialized conceptions of the poor as ignorant and unable to make healthy food decisions dominated discussion about WIC and the Food Stamp Program. However, rhetoric about the WIC program also contained concerns that poor dietary choices were detrimental to fetal and infant health. I argue that pregnant women's rights were circumscribed as the government chose to act in loco parentis—making strides to strip WIC recipients of decision-making power otherwise granted to Food Stamp recipients. In doing so, poor pregnant women accessing the program, both then and today, have their privacy rights restricted and cannot act as autonomous consumers.