

Food Politics and Policy FREE

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Summary

The food industry is a vast conglomeration of national and international companies that produce, process, manufacture, sell, and serve foods, beverages, and dietary supplements. Together, these companies generate close to \$2 trillion in annual sales in the United States alone. To protect sales and profits, food companies use strategies that firmly link politics to food and *food systems*—everything that happens to a food from production to consumption and waste. *Food politics* refers to how governments of groups, cities, and countries make decisions affecting food systems and how they balance stakeholder pressures in making those decisions. *Food policies* are the means through which governments implement political decisions through food laws, regulations, administrative actions, and programs. Politics and policies are instruments of power over food production and consumption and over who profits or benefits from them. This power, however, is distributed unequally and inequitably, with large corporations—Big Food, Big Agriculture—holding far more power than individuals or groups acting in the public interest. Hence, politics.

Keywords: agricultural policy, conflicts of interest, dietary guidelines, farm bill, FDA, food assistance, food industry, food systems, sustainability, ultra-processed foods

Subjects: Food Politics and Policy

Introduction

Food—essential for life, a basic component of culture, and source of pleasure—might seem to be the antithesis of politics, associated as it is with power and corruption, yet the two are inextricably linked. Politics affects every conceivable aspect of food systems. Everyone eats. Everyone has a stake in food production and availability. But some stakeholders hold more power than others to determine how food systems function and who most benefits from them.

In *Sweetness and Power*, a book considered foundational to food studies,¹ the anthropologist Sidney Mintz decisively connected food to politics by linking a single food—sugar—to the origins of British industrial capitalism in the enslavement of Africans to work on Caribbean sugar plantations.² Other scholars similarly have linked food production to colonial regimes and capitalist economic systems,³ and food consumption to health and environmental politics.⁴

In the United States, the food industry can be divided into sectors, each with its own set of stakeholder interests. The agribusiness sector raises food crops and animals and makes and sells fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, and feed. Other sectors sell machinery, labor, real estate, and financial services to farmers, or they transport, store, distribute, export, process, and market farm products. Food service includes restaurants, fast food outlets, and bars but also the production of meals provided by institutions such as schools,

hospitals, prisons, and workplaces. The retail sector includes supermarkets, convenience stores, vending machines, and online food sales. Within these sectors, large national and multinational corporations vie for market share and compete for control of production, labor, and sales.

Together, these sectors collectively generate well over \$2 *trillion* a year in sales.⁵ This system's extraordinary size and complexity are sufficient to explain the ferocity of political debates about who benefits—and at what cost to human health and the environment—from current policies governing matters such as agricultural subsidies, food safety, school meals, food assistance, or dietary advice. Everyone wants food to be adequate, nutritious, safe, culturally appropriate, affordable, delicious, and environmentally sustainable. But food industry stakeholders have one additional and overriding interest: to sell products at as high a profit as possible. The conflict between the profit goals of food companies and the cultural, social, health, or environmental goals of other stakeholders explains why food issues are so politically contentious.

For the purposes of this discussion, *food systems* refers to everything that happens to a food from production to consumption to waste (farm to fork to garbage). *Food politics* refers to how governments of groups, cities, or countries make decisions affecting food systems and how they balance pressures from stakeholders—food companies, trade associations, lobbyists, nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups, and individual citizens or consumers—in making those decisions. *Food policies* are the means by which governments implement those decisions through food laws, regulations, administrative actions, and programs.

In this context, *food industry* encompasses the major national and international companies that produce, process, manufacture, sell, and serve foods, beverages, and dietary supplements (pejoratively Big Agriculture, Big Food). Taken together, this industry provides a food supply so plentiful, varied, inexpensive, and almost entirely independent of geography or season that all but the poorest of Americans can obtain enough energy and nutrients to meet daily physiological needs. Indeed, the US food system as a whole—the amount of food produced domestically, plus imports, less exports—provides about four thousand calories per day per capita.⁶ This amount is about a third higher than the caloric needs of most men, twice the amount needed by most women, and far greater than needed by babies, young children, and the sedentary elderly. Even if, as the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates, a third of those calories is wasted, their overabundance poses a major problem for the food industry: It forces competition to sell those calories.

Like other industries, the food industry not only must generate profit but also continuously increase profits to satisfy the demands of investors. Because the amount of food any individual can eat is limited, choosing one food means rejecting others. To increase profits, food companies have limited choices. They can raise prices or cut costs; they can convince people to choose their products over those of competitors; or they can encourage customers to consume more food overall—regardless of the effects of food overconsumption on nutritional status, body weight, or the environment.

Political Strategies

To increase sales in an overabundant food economy, the food industry advertises and markets its products, spending more than \$14 billion a year to do so, with most of that spending aimed at promoting sales of fast food, sugary drinks, candy, and unhealthful snacks. Food companies target the most profitable but often least healthful products to children, youth, and communities of color. The amounts of money spent on such marketing greatly exceed government expenditures on public education about nutrition and health.⁷

Marketing, however, is only the most visible aspect of food industry sales efforts. Less visible are its political strategies, those analogous to the “playbook” used by the tobacco industry to distract attention from evidence for the harm of cigarettes: emphasize personal responsibility, cast doubt on unfavorable research, fund favorable research, promote self-regulation, lobby, and when all else fails, litigate.⁸ The food industry uses playbook strategies to convince Congress, government agencies, food and nutrition experts, the media, and the public that their products promote health, are not addictive, and have no effect on obesity, diet-related chronic disease (type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, certain cancers), or the environment, and, therefore, require no restrictive regulations.⁹

Food companies form trade associations to promote their products through public relations and lobbying. A nonprofit group, Open Secrets, tracks and reports the amounts of money industries and their associations spend on election campaigns and lobbying. Table 1 summarizes such expenditures for selected sectors of the food industry. These figures should be used only as estimates; Open Secrets groups spending by food industry sectors but sometimes assigns companies or trade associations to more than one sector. Nevertheless, the numbers are impressive. Agribusiness companies and trade associations, for example, contributed nearly \$200 million to election campaigns in the 2020 cycle, most of it to republican candidates.¹⁰

Table 1. Food Industry Political Expenditures, Selected Examples

Industry category	Top contributors, examples, 2021–2022*	Campaign contributions, 2020, \$ million	Lobbying expenditures, 2022, \$ million	Number of lobbyists employed, 2022
Sector				
Agribusiness	Mountaire, American Crystal Sugar,	198.2	169.4	1,308
Bars & restaurants	McDonald’s, National Restaurant Association	43.8	12.2	147
Food products manufacturing	Morning Star, JM Smucker	11.8	14.3	191
Food stores	Publix, Kroger	11.5	7.8	67
Specific Foods				
Beer, wine, liquor	National Beer Wholesalers Association, Anheuser Busch InBev	28.7	29.9	283
Dairy	Dairy Farmers of America, Land O’Lakes	5.8	7.3	86
Livestock	National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, National Pork Producers Council	24.1	4.8	67
Meat processing, products	Tyson Foods, North American Meat Institute	3.7	4.5	66

Industry category	Top contributors, examples, 2021–2022*	Campaign contributions, 2020, \$ million	Lobbying expenditures, 2022, \$ million	Number of lobbyists employed, 2022
Dietary supplements	Raas Nutritionals, Herbalife International	6.7	3.2	39
Poultry and eggs	Mountaire, National Turkey Federation	16.3	1.4	25
Sugar cane, sugar beets	American Crystal Sugar, Minn-Dak Farmers Co-op	11.9	15.5	64
Vegetables, fruits, nuts	Grimmway Farms, National Pecan Federation	7.6	6.6	96

*: Note Some companies appear in multiple categories.

Source: “Alphabetical List of Industries [<https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/alphalist.php>](https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/alphalist.php),” Open Secrets, 2023.

Lobbyists are required to register with the federal government;¹¹ Open Secrets uses this information to report how much they are paid, the issues they discuss with legislators, and whether they previously worked for the US government (the “revolving door”). Lobbyists do not have to disclose their positions on issues, but these can usually be inferred from who pays them. Because the revolving door raises issues of undue influence, the federal government and many states require waiting periods before former officials can be paid as lobbyists. These periods are not long; they vary from 6 months to 2 years.¹²

Open Secrets reports agribusiness as paying more than \$169 million to more than 1,300 lobbyists in 2022. (The site lists names and amounts.) It also reports payments by specific companies and trade associations. In 2022, for example, the Coca-Cola Company spent \$4.6 million on lobbying, the American Beverage Association spent \$1.6 million, and Kraft Heinz spent \$790,000.¹³

The number of lobbyists and amounts spent correlate to a considerable extent with the size of a food sector as well as with its political power. Tyson’s (Big Meat), for example, spent \$705,717 on campaign contributions, more to republicans than democrats, and \$1,886,000 to employ twenty-five lobbyists in 2022. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when workers in meat packing plants were sick and dying, Tyson’s drafted President Trump’s executive order to keep meat packing plants open.¹⁴

Political clout in part explains why US agricultural policy so strongly emphasizes commodity crops—corn and soybeans—almost all intended as feed for animals or fuel for automobiles.¹⁵ Because producers of fruits, vegetables, and nuts tend to be smaller and more diversified than meat or dairy producers, they do not spend nearly as much on election campaigns and lobbying—one reason why they have so much less power to influence policy.

Food companies and trade associations also engage in political strategies that are less quantifiable. They partner with professional nutrition organizations, fund research, sponsor professional journals and conferences, and work to ensure that influential professionals—researchers, doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, and the media—will favor and not criticize their products. To distract attention from health, safety, or environmental concerns, they argue that restrictive regulations excessively involve governments in personal dietary choices (“nanny state”) and threaten constitutional guarantees of free speech.

Such actions are routine, legal, and thoroughly analogous to the political activities of the tobacco industry in attempting to influence the advice and decisions of health experts, federal agencies, or Congress. Food, of course, differs from tobacco. Cigarettes are a single product with one public health message: Do not smoke. Food, in contrast, includes thousands of products, is required for life, and causes health problems only when consumed inappropriately or in excess. But the marketing purposes are the same: to sell products. Advice to promote health by reducing consumption of saturated fat, sugar, salt, or alcohol, or to prevent obesity by eating less food overall, conflicts with the commercial interests of food companies. Eating less is bad for business. Similarly, concerns about the pollution of air, water, and soil conflict with the economic interests of agricultural producers and giant chicken, beef, and hog operations.

Thus, decisions about how food is produced and consumed invariably generate conflicts over how governments balance corporate against public interests. Although everyone has the right to use the political system to create a food system that promotes health, safety, and environmental sustainability, food corporations use their much greater resources for one overriding purpose: to protect profits. It should not be surprising that struggles over specific food policies invariably involve politics.

Food Politics in Action: US Food Policies

The challenge facing any government is to ensure the availability of enough food to meet the energy and nutritional needs of its population. But food systems should not only prevent hunger and food insecurity but also prevent obesity and related chronic diseases, ensure food safety, and promote environmental sustainability.¹⁶ In the United States, these goals are addressed by multiple laws and regulations implemented through multiple agriculture, food, and nutrition programs and administered by multiple federal and state agencies. Each program has its own political leadership, constituency, and agenda. Each competes with the others for areas of operation and funding. And each attracts its own set of stakeholder lobbyists.

As summarized in table 2, these policies can be grouped into distinct categories. They deal with foods from farm to table, nationally and internationally. They address agricultural production—its quantity, safety, environmental effects, and labor and trade issues. With respect to consumption, the policies address nutrition education, monitoring, research, food product regulation, and food assistance. Separate policies govern the production and marketing of alcoholic beverages.

Table 2. US Policy Areas Addressing Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition

Policy area	Mandate	Oversight agency or agencies
Agricultural support	Payments to agricultural producers based on Farm Bill legislation	USDA
Alcoholic beverages	Regulation of production, imports, labels, advertising	TTB (beer, wine, hard liquor); FDA (wines less than 7 percent alcohol; nonmalt beers)
Environmental impact of food production	Standards for protecting quality of soil, water, and air; farmland conservation	USDA, EPA
Food and nutrition monitoring	Food quantity and quality, dietary intake, effects of diets on health	USDA, CDC
Food and nutrition research	Studies of agriculture, environmental effects, food, nutrition, and health	NIH, USDA, FDA, CDC
Food assistance	Nutritional support for low-income adults and children through programs such as SNAP, WIC, school meals	USDA

Policy area	Mandate	Oversight agency or agencies
Food labor	Regulation of working conditions for farm, slaughterhouse, restaurant, and grocery employees	U.S. Department of Labor (wages, working conditions, child labor, migrant and seasonal workers); USDA (surveys, statistics); OSHA (worker safety and health)
Food product regulation	Package contents, labels, health claims, advertising	USDA (meat and poultry); FDA (all other foods, supplements); FTC (advertising)
Food safety	Procedures, inspections, enforcement	USDA (meat and poultry); FDA (all other foods). Exceptions: eggs (shared responsibility), catfish (USDA), game meats (FDA)
Food trade	Regulation of international agricultural, food product, ingredient, and supplement imports and exports	USDA, FDA, and 20 other federal agencies
Nutrition education	Dietary Guidelines for Americans; MyPlate food guide	USDA and HHS (guidelines); USDA (MyPlate)

Note: CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; EPA = Environmental Protection Agency; FDA = Food and Drug Administration; FTC = Federal Trade Commission; NIH = National Institutes of Health; HHS = Department of Health and Human Services; OSHA = Occupational Safety and Health Administration; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; TTB = Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau; USDA = Department of Agriculture; WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Source: Adapted with permission from M. Nestle and K. Trueman, *Let's Ask Marion: What You Need to Know about the Politics of Food, Nutrition, and Health* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), x.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for many of these policies but not all. Other agencies also oversee food policies and programs, and some policies are overseen by multiple agencies—the antithesis of a systems approach and one of the reasons for decades of calls to establish a single food agency.¹⁷ More than twenty federal agencies are involved in regulating food imports and exports, for example.¹⁸ It takes political history to explain why the oversight of US agriculture, food, and nutrition policies is so fragmented and complicated. Most of the current regulatory arrangements developed piecemeal during the 20th century in response to crises or specific problems as they arose. Congress assigned regulatory authority to whichever agency seemed most appropriate at the time.

The classic example of regulatory fragmentation is oversight of food safety, an effort shared between the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) but in ways that sometimes seem inexplicable. In general, the USDA oversees meat and poultry, and the FDA oversees all other foods, but exceptions are notable. The FDA is responsible for game and zoo animals; the USDA is responsible for catfish. As for sandwiches, the FDA regulates those that are closed-face (two bread slices), whereas the USDA regulates open-face sandwiches.¹⁹

This strange division of responsibility is rooted in decisions dating back to 1906, when Congress passed two food safety laws in response to the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a fictionalized but shocking account of the unsanitary and inhumane treatment of animals—and workers—in meat slaughtering plants in the Chicago stockyards.²⁰ The laws were implemented through two separate agencies within USDA. The Federal Meat Inspection Act went to the USDA's Bureau of Animal Industry. But the Pure Food and Drug Act was assigned to the USDA's Department of Chemistry. Over the years, the Bureau of Chemistry evolved into the FDA, which was transferred to what is now the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 1940.²¹

This history explains why the FDA, although an agency of HHS's US Public Health Service since 1944, receives its federal funding through Senate and House agricultural—not health—appropriations committees. The primary focus of these committees is to support agricultural production; public health is barely on their radar, in part accounting for the FDA's chronic underfunding for its mandated responsibilities.²² Although the FDA oversees the safety of more than 80 percent of the US food supply, it receives only about 40 percent of the funding for this purpose; in contrast, the USDA, which regulates less than 20 percent of the food supply gets 60 percent of the funding.²³ In 2024, Congress increased the FDA's budget by a small percentage.²⁴ The agency relies on user fees to make up shortfalls, raising serious questions of conflicts of interest.²⁵ It collects most of these fees from drug and device manufacturers but charges food companies for safety reinspections.²⁶

The USDA, historically and by law responsible for ensuring an adequate food supply, has long favored corporate agriculture over small farms. Its main administration building in Washington, DC is named after Representative Jamie Whitten, a democrat from Mississippi, whose decades of service on the House agricultural appropriations committee made him known as the *permanent* Secretary of Agriculture. Long-standing cozy relationships among agribusiness, the USDA, and congressional agricultural appropriations subcommittees ensured unwavering support for Big Agriculture.²⁷

That system changed to some extent in 1964 when then-President Lyndon B. Johnson induced Congress to put the Food Stamp program into the Farm Bill, thereby coupling food assistance to agricultural subsidies and inducing urban members without ties to agriculture to join its appropriations committees.²⁸ In the late 1970s, the USDA acquired lead responsibility for nutrition education—dietary guidelines and food guides—essentially by default; what was then the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now HHS) did not want that responsibility. Although the USDA had issued food guides for the public since the early 1900s, these guidelines called for greater consumption of the full range of American agricultural products. When diet-related chronic diseases replaced deficiency diseases as the primary nutrition problems among Americans, it became necessary to switch basic dietary advice from “eat more of everything” to “restrict unhealthy dietary components” or to “eat less” in general.²⁹

Sugar is a prime example of the contradictions inherent in the USDA's responsibility for dietary guidance: The agency protects the production of sugar beets and sugar cane while advising the public to eat less sugar.³⁰ The USDA's focus on agricultural production also makes it an uncomfortable home for food assistance. The tensions generated by the USDA's contradictory missions—and the politics of US food policies in general—are easily illustrated by three examples of USDA policies and programs: agricultural support, food assistance, and nutrition education.

Agricultural Support: The Farm Bill

US agricultural policy has been codified in farm bill legislation passed by Congress roughly every five years since the 1930s.³¹ Given the high prevalence of food insecurity, diet-related chronic disease, and agriculture-related climate and ecological damage, a rational agricultural policy ought to mitigate such problems. It should, for example, aim to reduce the effects of food production on greenhouse gas emissions. The US government estimates that agriculture is responsible for 11 percent of such emissions.³² Estimates from other sources are much higher; they suggest food production accounts for about a third of greenhouse gas emissions, perhaps because they consider a broader range of sources: methane from cattle digestion, nitrous oxide from fertilizers, carbon dioxide from forest destruction (to grow commodity crops), and emissions from manure management, rice cultivation, land and fuel use, and food waste.³³

Farm bills might be expected to address such problems directly, but instead the legislation is designed to maintain industrial food production and reward Big Agriculture. Consider domestic corn production. About 40 percent goes to feed livestock animals (cattle, hogs, poultry). As a result of congressional requirements for renewable fuel standards, at least 45 percent of domestic corn is used to make ethanol. The remaining 15 percent or less is processed into food ingredients: high fructose corn syrup, glucose and dextrose sugars, corn starch, corn oil, corn meal, and brewers' grits. Only a tiny fraction of US corn is actually consumed as food—on the cob, canned, or frozen.³⁴

If the idea that nearly half of US corn is grown to fuel automobiles seems like a wasteful and unsustainable use of food and land resources, the producers of corn and ethanol would disagree. They are eager not only to fuel automobiles but also to produce jet fuel for the airline industry³⁵—despite the environmental hazards of expanding corn production into areas of increasing drought and limited water.³⁶

One consequence of the farm bill's promotion of commodity agriculture has been to promote and sustain food system inequities. Historically, farm bills have firmly discriminated against small farmers, particularly those of color. The USDA has a long, acknowledged as shameful, but still ongoing history of systematically denying support to Black farmers. In the 1920s, more than 15 percent of farmers were Black; today the percentage is less than 2 percent. Class action lawsuits in the late 1990s and early 2000s failed to redress the inequities. By one analysis, the USDA in 2022 granted loans to 36 percent of Black applicants, but 72 percent of White applicants. In 2022, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan with provisions for debt relief for "socially disadvantaged farmers," but courts blocked payments.³⁷ Whether the next farm bill will redress these long-standing inequities remains to be seen.

The most recent version of the farm bill (as of this publication), the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, expired at the end of October 2023. Congress, unable to agree on the terms of its reenactment, voted to continue the 2018 legislation into 2024.³⁸ An examination of the 2018 bill demonstrates its extraordinary complexity—more than 500 pages of small-print text, introduced by an 11-page table of contents. The bill is divided into twelve major sections ("Titles") dealing with support of agriculture (e.g., Commodities, Crop Insurance, Credit, Trade), and related matters such as Conservation, Rural Development, Research, Energy, Forestry, and Miscellaneous. All of these deal with commodity agriculture—corn, soybeans,

cotton, and sugar. One much smaller title, Horticulture (“specialty crops”), addresses food for humans; it mandates programs for local and organic agriculture and markets, food safety, and such matters as hemp production.

The elephant in the farm bill is Nutrition. This title authorizes and sets the terms for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps), the primary instrument of food assistance in the United States and the “elephant” because it accounts for about 80 percent of total farm bill spending.³⁹ SNAP is governed by the farm bill as a result of a classic political “logroll” engineered by President Johnson in 1964. By coupling cotton and wheat subsidies (an interest of rural and Southern legislators) with food assistance (wanted by urban representatives), he was able to get each group to vote for the other’s measures and to pass both.⁴⁰

SNAP funding is set independently and does not affect funding levels for agricultural support.⁴¹ These take up the remaining 20 percent of farm bill spending in the form of crop insurance, commodity payments, and conservation.⁴² Within these areas, the farm bill authorizes well over a hundred specific programs. Lobbyists work to continue to expand every program of interest and are expert on its provisions. But the overall bill covers so many programs that only a handful of individuals, if any, can understand the details of overall agricultural policies.⁴³ The agriculture-support components of the farm bill essentially are taxpayer-funded subsidies of Big Agriculture, backed by farm-state members of House and Senate agricultural committees.

Farm bills too are the result of history and politics. Congress first passed one in 1933 to help farmers survive the Great Depression, when jobs had disappeared, people had little money to buy food, and farmers could not sell the foods they produced. To maintain prices, the government paid farmers to reduce production; it then bought what they did produce to feed the hungry.⁴⁴ Policies like these changed in the 1970s when the USDA urged farmers to produce as much food as possible, leading to the surpluses that continue to exist.⁴⁵

The last few farm bills, including the one under debate in 2024, have become increasingly difficult to pass as Congress has become increasingly divided, the political climate increasingly polarized, and concerns over federal spending increasingly acute. The major political arguments are about the cost of SNAP, but provisions for crop insurance, conservation, and commodities also generate debate. Advocates for farmers want to help them cope with the droughts and floods resulting from climate change while introducing more sustainable practices.⁴⁶ Fiscal conservatives, however, want to cut funding for agricultural support.

Conservatives are particularly concerned about crop insurance. This program requires farmers who get federal aid to buy insurance, but the government pays two-thirds of their premiums. These payments go to private insurance companies, half of them foreign owned. In 2022, crop insurance cost taxpayers \$17 billion, of which nearly \$4 billion went to insurance companies; these companies earned a 17 percent return on the premiums.⁴⁷ The program has unfortunate unintended consequences for food systems; it creates an incentive to plant commodity crops even in inhospitable places, thereby encouraging overproduction. Overall, it benefits Big Agriculture and Big Insurance, not farmers.⁴⁸

Fiscal conservatives have nothing good to say about this system: “Over the past 44 years . . . the federal crop insurance program has become a fiscal monster while generating incentives that significantly discourage the efficient use of scarce resources by agricultural producers, have harmful environmental impacts, and allow less productive and relatively inefficient farm businesses to survive.”⁴⁹ Despite such criticism, improving agricultural support will be difficult. The 2014 farm bill specifically blocked the government from taking any action to reduce future underwriting gains. The insurance industry is politically powerful and does all it can to remain so. In 2022, this industry spent nearly \$160 million to employ as many as 845 lobbyists to make sure Congress does nothing to reduce its profits.⁵⁰

Food Assistance: SNAP and More

Despite the country’s great wealth, food insecurity—unreliable access to sufficient food on a daily basis—persists in America. In 2022, 12.8 percent of households were considered food insecure, a significant increase from the 10.2 percent in 2021.⁵¹ By some estimates, fully 20 percent of US adults experience food insecurity, and the percentage of those reporting very low food insecurity has nearly doubled since 2022.⁵² Food insecurity is higher among communities of color, in part as a result of the long-term effects of low wages, housing restrictions, and other policy-level effects of racial discrimination.⁵³

Efforts to strengthen food security began in the United States during the Great Depression with a food stamp program linked to support for farmers; the poor bought stamps that could be traded for groceries and farm surpluses.⁵⁴ Over the years, the program evolved into one benefiting retailers; the stamps (and, later, Electronic Benefit Transfer cards) were mainly spent at retail groceries and supermarkets.⁵⁵ SNAP is one of multiple nutrition assistance, child nutrition, and food distribution programs authorized by Congress to prevent and alleviate hunger and food insecurity. Table 3 lists these programs along with their costs in 2022.⁵⁶

Table 3. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs, Approximate Cost, 2022

Program	Cost, \$ Millions
Nutrition assistance programs	
SNAP	119,500
WIC	5,700
Nutrition Assistance Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Northern Marianas	1,600
Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program	25
Nutrition Services Incentive Program	1
Child Nutrition	
School Breakfast Program	6,400

Program	Cost, \$ Millions
National School Lunch Program	22,600
Child and Adult Care Food Program	3,900
Summer Food Service Program	700
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program	250
Special Milk Program	4
Summer EBT Program	N.A.
Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grants Program	0.4
Food Distribution	
Commodity Supplemental Food Program	350
Emergency Food Assistance Program	1,200
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations	100
USDA Foods in Schools	N.A.
Disaster Feeding	76

Note: Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT); Not applicable (NA); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants, and Children WIC). Figures are rounded off.

Sources: Adapted with permission from M. Nestle, “Equitable Access to the USDA’s Food Assistance Programs: Policies Needed to Reduce Barriers and Increase Accessibility” *American Journal of Public Health* 113, no. S3 (2023): e1–e4. Figures are from “FY 2023 Budget Summary,” and “Costs and Participation,” USDA, 2023.

SNAP, by far the largest of these programs, is authorized by the farm bill, which also mandates the food distribution programs.⁵⁷ But entirely different legislation is responsible for child nutrition programs, historically authorized through separate acts. In 2010, however, the Obama Administration dealt with them collectively in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, enacted as part of its Let’s Move campaign.⁵⁸ That act, however, expired in 2015. As of early 2024, Congress had not yet reauthorized it.

In the peculiar way such things operate, the child nutrition programs do not have to be reauthorized in order to continue; their ongoing funding is granted through appropriations committees.⁵⁹ From the standpoint of child advocates, the bills badly need formal reauthorization to better meet the needs of American children.⁶⁰ But child nutrition programs are caught up in politics. In the House, reauthorization comes from the Education and Labor Committee’s Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services programs; some republican members of this subcommittee oppose these programs as dependency-

inducing forms of welfare.⁶¹ In the Senate, reauthorization comes from agriculture committees apparently too preoccupied by the farm bill to bother with political disagreements about child nutrition reauthorization.

No matter how authorized, federal food assistance programs unquestionably help to reduce food insecurity.⁶² The COVID-19 pandemic especially revealed their effectiveness. Early in the pandemic, the prevalence of household food insecurity rose to nearly 15 percent and to 17.5 percent among households with children,⁶³ but the Biden Administration increased funding and expanded access to most programs, funded school meal distribution during summers, and authorized waivers to some rules limiting program eligibility.⁶⁴ Most important, for the first time since 1975, the administration updated the “Thrifty Food Plan,” the basis of SNAP benefit levels, enabling significant increases.⁶⁵ Overall, these and other measures contributed to the sharp decrease observed in food insecurity among households with children during later stages of the pandemic. In 2021, levels of food insecurity were the lowest on record since 1998.⁶⁶

In December 2022, despite the well-documented effectiveness of these measures, Congress chose to terminate most of them over the objections of more than 550 organizations.⁶⁷ Predictably, food insecurity increased sharply, particularly among households with children and of color, thereby widening existing disparities.⁶⁸

School meals followed a similar pattern. At the pandemic’s onset when schools were forced to close, the Trump Administration authorized free meals for every school child, regardless of family income—the “universal” school meals long sought by public health advocates;⁶⁹ the Biden Administration convinced Congress to extend these benefits through June 2022.⁷⁰ When those benefits ended, some states passed legislation to fill the gap and provide universal school meals, and other states are considering such measures.⁷¹

In 2023, in a sharp break with a long-standing tradition of bipartisan support, the republican-led Congress deliberately excluded extra funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) from its spending bill.⁷² WIC served 6.2 million participants in 2022 but reached only about half of the low-income women with children who qualified for its benefits.⁷³

Republican lawmakers frame reduced WIC spending as a fiscal measure, but their underlying motivation is political opposition to welfare, most evident in efforts to cut SNAP benefits. Spending on SNAP typically reflects enrollment levels, which rise and fall with shifts in the economy. Unlike other food assistance programs, SNAP is an entitlement; anyone eligible for benefits can receive them without Congress having to authorize additional spending.

Following the economic downturn of the 2008 recession, total SNAP expenditures doubled from about \$35 billion to \$70 billion per year. Expenditures declined to \$60 billion as a result of Trump Administration efforts to make the benefits less accessible but rose during the pandemic as a result of need and benefit increases. In 2022, SNAP served 41 million Americans at a cost of nearly \$120 billion.⁷⁴ Its entitlement status—and the increase in the Thrifty Food Plan—have helped to protect the program’s funding against legislators who view food assistance as an overly expensive promoter of welfare-state dependency and who want SNAP spending reduced to prepandemic levels.⁷⁵

Other conservatives go further; they want SNAP removed from the farm bill:

The farm bill is an unwieldy pile of programs with little connection to one another that are cobbled together in a single piece of legislation for no good reason. The most egregious of the odd couplings is the position of the farm bill's nutrition title. It was odd back in the early 1970s when the tradition began, and it is absurd a half century later.⁷⁶

The original reason for SNAP's inclusion in the farm bill, of course, is that neither it nor farm subsidies could attract enough support in Congress to be enacted on its own. This situation remains unchanged.⁷⁷

Critics of SNAP raise one additional issue: the nutritional quality of the food products that participants are permitted to buy with their benefits. Restrictions are minimal: alcohol, cigarettes, tobacco, hot foods, and nonfood items. Thus, SNAP recipients may use their benefits to buy sugar-sweetened beverages and other ultra-processed “junk” foods associated with poor health.⁷⁸ In contrast, WIC participants are limited to a small selection of healthy foods.⁷⁹ Proposals to promote the health of SNAP recipients by restricting purchases of sugar-sweetened beverages, for example, are opposed not only by retailers and food companies, but also by major antihunger groups who view restrictions as stigmatizing and unfair. This dispute is unlikely to be resolved soon.⁸⁰

Although the USDA's food assistance programs continue to reach millions of low-income American adults and children, they do not come close to serving everyone who qualifies for them. Participation levels vary by program, state, and county. In 2021, for example, only 70 percent of SNAP-eligible persons in Arizona were enrolled⁸¹ and, as noted earlier, only about half of WIC-eligible women and children receive benefits. Advocates for antipoverty measures want to expand these programs and make them easier to access, noting that participants represent all races and reside in rural as well as urban areas. They point out that antiwelfare politics have made the processes of enrolling and remaining in these programs exceptionally difficult; in many states, participants must extensively document their financial and citizenship status, be highly proficient in English, and have enough technical prowess to use smartphones to negotiate the USDA's online information and enrollment systems.⁸² Whether advocates for food assistance or those who oppose such measures will prevail depends on how the politics play out.

Nutrition Education: Dietary Guidelines

The USDA first issued food guides for the general public in the early 1900s. These advised daily consumption of foods from varying numbers of groups—meat, dairy, fruits and vegetables, grains, and sometimes others; their “eat more” message generated little controversy or opposition.⁸³ This situation changed when chronic diseases overtook nutrient deficiency diseases as major causes of death and disability, and dietary advice needed to shift from “eat more” to “eat less.”⁸⁴ The first such advice was issued in 1977 by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. Its *Dietary Goals for the United States* recommended reduced intake of sugars (to 10 percent of calories or less) along with specific targets for reduced intake of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. To achieve these goals, the committee advised reduced intake of foods rich in these nutrients—meat, whole milk, butter, and eggs.⁸⁵

Producers of sugar and high-fat foods objected strongly, as did some medical and nutrition groups. The furor over the recommendations forced the committee to hold further hearings and to tone down its advice. Its revised report, for example, replaced the direct statement “decrease consumption of meat,” with the less inflammatory “choose meats, poultry, and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake,”⁸⁶ thereby setting the precedent for phrasing dietary guidelines euphemistically so as not to offend the food industry.

To strengthen the scientific basis of advice to prevent diet-related disease, the USDA and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now HHS) determined “to address the public’s need for authoritative and consistent guidance on diet and health.”⁸⁷ They jointly issued *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* in 1980. The agencies intended the guidelines to be science-based and, therefore, uncontroversial, but they generated immediate objections from food producers, especially meat producers, along with demands for revision from medical authorities and some nutrition scientists.⁸⁸ Under the then-recently installed Reagan Administration, the agencies appointed a scientific advisory committee to review the guidelines. But the committee made only minimal changes and the revised guidelines in 1985 continued to elicit scientific and political controversy.⁸⁹

Again, to try to make the guidelines less controversial, the agencies appointed yet another advisory committee to review the science. Its 1990 guidelines gave basically the same advice, but stated it more positively—“choose” rather than “avoid.” Until then, guideline revisions had been voluntary. But the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990 instructed the agencies to jointly issue dietary guidelines every five years:

Each such report shall contain nutritional and dietary information and guidelines for the general public, and shall be promoted by each Federal agency in carrying out any Federal food, nutrition, or health program . . . based on the preponderance of the scientific and medical knowledge which is current at the time the report is prepared.⁹⁰

The guidelines would then have to be revised every five years as a matter of law.

Their subsequent history is one of increasing complexity and obfuscation, as illustrated by the evolution of advice about sugar, as illustrated in table 4. Sugar has calories but no other nutrients; its calories are “empty,” and its excess consumption is associated with weight gain, metabolic problems, and chronic disease.⁹¹ Because nobody would be healthier eating *more* sugar, the 1980 and 1985 guidelines advised “avoid too much sugar” (four words). The say-it-positively 1990, 1995, and 2000 guidelines used “choose” and “moderate” (five and six words, respectively). After that, the word counts increased along with the addition of beverages, the main source of sugars in US diets, in 2005. The 2010 guideline coupled sugars with “solid” fats (meaning the saturated ones from meat and dairy foods); the 2015 guideline grouped sugars with saturated fat and sodium; and the 2020 guideline added alcohol to the mix, along with specifying that sugar consumption be restricted to 10 percent of daily calories.⁹²

Table 4. Evolution of the US Dietary Guideline for Sugar

Year	Guideline
1980	Avoid too much sugar.
1985	Avoid too much sugar.
1990	Use sugars only in moderation.
1995	Choose a diet moderate in sugars.
2000	Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars.
2005	Choose and prepare foods and beverages with little added sugars or caloric sweeteners.
2010	Reduce the intake of calories from solid fats and added sugars.
2015	Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake.
2020	Limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium, and limit alcoholic beverages.

Source: “Previous Editions of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans,” USDA, 2023.

Along with the number of words per guideline, the number of pages in the guidelines document also increased. The 1980 guidelines were issued as a thin pamphlet of 20 pages; the 2020 guidelines comprise 164 full-size pages. As a statement of US nutrition policy, the guidelines are ostensibly intended for policy makers, leaving the 2010 MyPlate food guide as advice for the general public.⁹³ All federal food and nutrition programs (table 2) are supposed to adhere to them, and they greatly influence food industry practices. If food companies want their products served or sold in schools, for example, those products must meet guideline nutrition standards.

With the importance of the guidelines in mind, it is difficult to know how much of their increased complexity can be attributed to the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC), the agencies, or to which agency is in charge. USDA and HHS alternate lead responsibility for the guidelines. HHS led the 2015–2020 process and is again in charge of the 2025–2030 edition.

The roles of the DGAC and agencies have changed over time, with increasing responsibility going to the agencies. From 1980 through 2000, the DGAC was responsible for the entire guidelines from start to finish: It chose the research questions, reviewed and reported on the research, and wrote the guidelines based on that research. In 2005, however, the agencies took over the writing of the actual guidelines. This change separated the science from its communication and allowed the process to become more politicized. (Agency officials are typically selected by the political party in power.) In 2020 the agencies assumed even greater control; they also set the research questions for the DGAC to consider. This leaves the DGAC with only one task: writing a report based on its research review.⁹⁴

Regardless of which agency is in charge and the level of agency control, every edition of the guidelines has elicited criticism of their wording and use of euphemisms. Since 1980, the guidelines have recommended eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—*foods*. But they switch to *nutrients*—sugar, saturated fat, sodium—whenever they advise eating less. This reductionist switch now has its own name —“nutritionism”—the substitution of single nutrients to stand for the complex foods that provide them.⁹⁵

The most contentious arguments are about how guidelines might affect sales of foods in the “eat less” categories.⁹⁶ Food companies want their products protected against “eat less” advice; they nominate advisory committee members, file position statements, and lobby behind the scenes to head off unfavorable recommendations. Their actions generate three especially contentious concerns about undue food industry influence over dietary advice: (a) conflicts of interest among DGAC members, and arguments about how to deal with (b) sustainability and (c) ultra-processed foods when advising the public about nutrition and health.

Conflicted Interests

Financial ties to food companies could influence how members of the DGAC interpret research. As part of the appointment process, DGAC members are required to disclose industry ties, but USDA and HHS do not have to make the disclosures public—and they do not. Because most scientific journals require disclosures of research funding and financial ties to interested parties, critics of the guidelines process have used the published papers of DGAC members to obtain this information. Such efforts revealed 19 of the 20 members of the 2020–2025 DGAC to have financial connections with companies such as Kellogg, Abbott, and Dannon.⁹⁷

An investigative reporter used the Freedom of Information Act to find out who had nominated members of the 2025–2030 DGAC. The National Potato Council and the National Coffee Association, for example, nominated people who might be likely to favor the health benefits of those foods—an example of the food industry’s “persistent efforts to influence” the agencies responsible for the guidelines.⁹⁸

For the 2025–2030 guidelines, the agencies disclosed the reported potential conflicts of DGAC members, but not individually. Instead, they listed all reported ties together without distinguishing professional from financial connections, treating membership in the American Diabetes Association as equivalent to consulting for the Egg Nutrition Center or the National Cattleman’s Beef Association.⁹⁹ An independent investigation of members’ disclosures found nine to have financial relationships with food, drug, weight-loss, or other industry groups having a stake in the outcome of the guidelines and an additional four to have possible conflicts of interest. It also found groups such as the National Dairy Council to have financial ties to two or more members.¹⁰⁰ Conflicted interests matter because DGACs are now confronted with two especially fraught issues: sustainability and ultra-processed foods.

Sustainability

With respect to sustainability, meat, especially beef, is the largest single food contributor to climate change, responsible for nearly 60 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions derived from the production of food plants and animals.¹⁰¹ Advice to limit meat consumption would benefit the environment as well as health.¹⁰²

In 2015, the DGAC report included this statement: “A diet higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, and lower in calories and animal-based foods is more health promoting and associated with less environmental impact than is the current US diet.”¹⁰³ The beef industry objected¹⁰⁴ but also took further measures. While the DGAC report was in progress, the beef industry successfully lobbied the House Appropriations Committee to intervene:

Dietary Guidelines.—The Committee is concerned that the advisory committee for the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is considering issues outside of the nutritional focus of the panel. Specifically, the advisory committee is showing an interest in incorporating sustainability, climate change, and other environmental factors and production practices into their criteria for establishing the next dietary recommendations, which is clearly outside of the scope of the panel. The Committee directs the Secretary to ensure that the advisory committee focuses only on nutrient and dietary recommendations based upon sound nutrition science and not pursue an environmental agenda.¹⁰⁵

In response, the Secretaries of USDA and HHS said, “we do not believe that the 2015 DGAs are the appropriate vehicle for this important policy conversation about sustainability.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, as written by the agencies, the word *sustainability* does not appear anywhere in the 122 pages of the 2015 guidelines publication. Furthermore, although that publication noted strong evidence for the health benefits of eating patterns containing less meat, it did not say “eat less beef.” Instead, it recommended eating “lean meats.”¹⁰⁷

For the 2020–2025 guidelines, sustainability was off the table from the start. In its record-breaking 835-page report, the DGAC recommended consideration of sustainability as part of a food systems approach to the 2025–2030 guidelines.¹⁰⁸ But for this process, sustainability was still off the table. The agencies, however, noting that “sustainability and the complex relationship between nutrition and climate change is an important, cross-cutting, and high priority topic that also requires specific expertise,” said they would address this topic separately.¹⁰⁹ As of spring 2024, they had not yet done so.

Ultra-Processed Foods

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers about 70 percent of American adults to be overweight and 42 percent to be obese and at greater risk of chronic disease.¹¹⁰ Obesity prevalence is highest among low-income households, especially those Black or Hispanic.¹¹¹ No federal program exists to counter obesity beyond encouraging individuals to follow dietary guidelines.¹¹²

An obvious dietary approach to preventing weight gain is to advise minimizing intake of “ultra-processed” foods. This term refers to a category derived from a food classification system—Nova (a name, not an acronym)—developed in 2009 by Carlos Monteiro and his colleagues at the University of São Paulo. Nova classifies foods not by their nutrient content but instead by their levels of processing: (a) unprocessed (e.g., apples, carrots); (b) processed culinary ingredients (sugar, salad oils, salt); (c) processed (frozen, canned, cooked foods); and (d) ultra-processed. Nova 4 ultra-processed foods, are those made mainly from industrially extracted substances, containing little or no whole food, formulated to be irresistible if not addictive, and designed to replace whole foods for purposes of long shelf life and profit.¹¹³

Once defined, ultra-processed foods could be studied. They were soon found to comprise at least 60 percent of the calories of American adults¹¹⁴ and more than 70 percent of the calories of children and adolescents.¹¹⁵ Extensive research now associates their frequent consumption with obesity, chronic disease, and overall mortality.¹¹⁶ Such findings, consistent as they are, only suggest correlation; they cannot demonstrate causation.

In 2019, however, Kevin Hall and his colleagues at the National Institutes of Health published the results of an exceptionally well-controlled clinical trial conducted in a locked metabolic ward where the dietary intake of participants could be firmly managed and monitored.¹¹⁷ Twenty volunteers agreed to remain in that facility for a month and eat whatever meals were provided. For two weeks each, they ate as much as they wanted of diets entirely ultra-processed or almost entirely unprocessed or minimally processed. The diets were matched to contain equivalent amounts of nutrients, fat, sugar, salt, and fiber. The study subjects deemed the diets equally palatable and could not tell them apart.

The investigators did not expect the degree of processing to have any effect on dietary intake. The results surprised them. When given the ultra-processed diet, participants consumed 500 more calories a day on average—and gained a pound a week. When on the minimally processed diet, they ate less and lost weight. Hall et al. are investigating why ultra-processed foods cause overeating; participants ate faster on the ultra-processed diet perhaps because the foods were easier to eat.¹¹⁸ But the implication of the study seems clear. If people eat many more calories and gain weight when consuming ultra-processed foods, dietary guidelines should advise reducing or avoiding consumption of such foods.

The 2020–2025 DGAC cited the Nova classification system in its report but said nothing about it. For the 2025–2030 guidelines, USDA and HHS asked the DGAC to consider this question: “What is the relationship between consumption of dietary patterns with varying amounts of ultra-processed foods and growth, body composition, and risk of obesity?”¹¹⁹ Because the DGAC had been instructed to ignore clinical trials lasting less than 12 weeks, it was told not to include the study by Hall et al. in its research review.¹²⁰

Whether the committee will follow that instruction remains to be seen. The study by Hall et al. is the only controlled clinical trial of ultra-processed diets to date. It is difficult to imagine finding study subjects willing to live in a metabolic ward for 12 weeks—or a federal agency willing to pay the astronomic cost of so lengthy a trial. The ultra-processed concept and its implication for dietary advice pose an existential threat to companies marketing highly processed foods and products. It is not surprising that food trade groups oppose the concept and are using every imaginable playbook strategy to undermine its validity.

Food Politics Advocacy

Food, as demonstrated here, is inextricably linked to politics. The overriding goal of food companies is to provide continuously expanding returns to stockholders; their resources for taking actions in support of this goal are much greater than those of advocates for healthier and more sustainable food systems. Advocates, therefore, must create a playbook of their own to counter food industry opposition to public health measures.¹²¹ The “rules” of successful advocacy are well established: advocates must set clear goals, identify targets of campaigns, recruit allies, identify resources, develop strategies, persist, and repeat.¹²² When food advocacy campaigns are thoughtfully organized according to those precepts, they have a chance of succeeding even in the face of strong food industry opposition.¹²³ Food will always be linked to politics. It is worth learning how to use political strategies to transform food systems to achieve health and environmental goals.

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