

The Oxford Encyclopedia of
FOOD AND DRINK IN AMERICA

Second Edition

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Andrew F. Smith

VOLUME 3

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2013

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

festivity in the Polish diet, marking the absence of a fast day. The yeast-raised bread, usually rye, pumpernickel, or egg-rich *babka* symbolizes Christ's resurrection. Finally, salt is added to the food basket to acknowledge its life-preserving qualities and the flavor that Christ and Christianity added to the world described in Matthew 5:13.

The basket might also include horseradish to represent the bitter struggles for faith that have taken place. Lambs, shaped from butter, hard sugar, or cake, represent the Paschal Lamb. Chocolate, a reward for the hard work characteristic of Polish people, might be added, as well as any other item that a person wants blessed. Sprigs of pussy willows or spring greens decorate the basket to celebrate the new cycle of life and the fragrance of youth. The straw basket itself uses materials that have sprung from the earth and may be a representative of a folk art form.

At church blessings, priests say prayers that celebrate the symbolic meaning of each of the food items in the baskets and then sprinkle holy water through the church. Once blessed, the foods are considered to be transformed and amplified by the power of the blessing. Traditional Polish beliefs hold that participants consume the blessing, internalizing it when they eat the blessed food.

[See also Cabbage; Jewish American Food; Jewish Dietary Laws; Pierogies; Sausage.]

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POLITICS

Most people perceive food as a basic biological need, an indicator of culture, a source of enjoyment, and sometimes as a trade commodity or generator of employment, but they rarely view it as political—an element in the mundane realm of power and manipulation in the interests of commerce. Food and politics, however, are inextricably linked. Politics affects every component of the American food system from production to consumption. Much money is at stake, and the principal stakeholders—the food industry, government regulators, public health officials, nutrition educators, and the general public—have different interests in the food system. Although everyone wants food to be plentiful, safe, environmentally sound, culturally appropriate, affordable, healthful, and palatable, the food industry has one additional interest: to sell products. The conflict between the commercial interests of food companies and the widely varying concerns of other stakeholders drives the politics of food.

The term "food industry" refers to any business that produces, processes, makes, sells, or serves foods, beverages, or dietary supplements. It is usually described in sectors. The agribusiness sector raises food crops and animals and produces fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, and feed; it also includes companies that sell machinery, labor, land, buildings, or financial services to farmers, or that transport, store, distribute, export, process, or market their foods. The food-service sector includes restaurants, fast food outlets, bars, and any other business that serves food: workplaces, schools, hospitals, bookstores, and clothing stores, for example. The retail sector comprises outlets such as supermarkets, convenience stores, or vending machines. This vast industry produces a food supply so abundant, varied, inexpensive, and independent of geography or season that nearly all Americans except the very poorest can obtain enough food to meet biological needs. Indeed, the supply is so overabundant that it contains enough to feed everyone in the country nearly twice over—even after exports are considered. This surplus, along with a society so affluent

that most citizens can afford to buy as much food as they need, creates a highly competitive marketing environment. To satisfy stockholders, food companies must work hard to convince people to buy *their* products rather than those of competitors, or to entice people to eat more food in general—regardless of the consequences for nutrition and health.

Companies promote sales through advertising and public relations, but they also use the political system to convince Congress, government agency officials, food and nutrition experts, the media, and the public that their products promote health (or at least do no harm), and should not be subject to restrictive regulations. To protect sales, they contribute to congressional campaigns, lobby members of Congress and federal agencies, and when all else fails, engage in lawsuits. Nearly every food company belongs to a trade association or hires a public relations firm responsible for promoting a positive image of its products among consumers, professionals, and the media. Companies form partnerships and alliances with professional nutrition organizations, fund research on food and nutrition, sponsor professional journals and conferences, and make sure that influential groups—federal officials, researchers, doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, and the media—do not criticize their products or suggest eating less of them. To divert attention from health, safety, or environmental concerns, they argue that restrictive regulations overly involve the government in personal dietary choices and threaten constitutional guarantees of free speech. Much of this political activity is so invisible a part of contemporary culture that it attracts only occasional notice.

In using the political system, food companies behave like any other business—tobacco, for example—in attempting to exert influence. Promoting food raises more complicated issues than tobacco however. Tobacco is a single product, is unambiguously harmful, and requires simple advice: don't smoke. Food, in contrast, is available in more than 300,000 different products, is required for life, causes problems only when consumed inappropriately, and elicits more complex health messages: eat this product instead of that one, or eat less in general. The

“eat less” message is at the root of much of the controversy over nutrition advice, as it conflicts with food industry interests. The primary mission of food companies, like that of tobacco companies, is to sell products. Health enters the picture only when it helps to sell food, and food companies rarely consider the ethical choices involved in such thinking. Thus, government advice about healthful eating is especially fraught with political overtones.

The Politics of Dietary Recommendations. The U.S. government has issued dietary recommendations for more than a century, but its advice did not become controversial until the 1970s. This history reflects changes in agriculture, food product development, and international trade, as well as in science and medicine. In 1900, the leading causes of death were infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and diphtheria. These conditions were fostered by the nutrient deficiencies and overall malnutrition prevalent at the time, especially among the poor. Life expectancy at birth for both men and women barely exceeded forty-seven years (in 2007, it was seventy-eight years). To improve public health, government nutritionists advised the public to eat more of a greater variety of foods. The goals of health officials, nutritionists, and the food industry were much the same—to encourage greater consumption of the full range of American agricultural products. Throughout the twentieth century, an expanding economy led to improvements in housing, sanitation, and nutrition, and diseases related to nutritional deficiencies declined. By the 1970s, health officials were well aware that the principal nutritional problems had shifted: they were now conditions associated with overnutrition—eating too much food or too much of certain kinds of food. Overnutrition causes a different set of health problems; it changes metabolism, makes people overweight, and increases the likelihood of chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease, certain cancers, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, and others—the leading causes of illness and death among any overfed population. With this shift in dietary intake and disease patterns, nutritional

recommendations also had to change. Instead of promoting “eat more,” the advice of nutritionists shifted to emphasize eating less of certain dietary components—or of food in general. Advice to eat less, however, runs counter to the interests of food producers. Hence: politics.

“Eat less” advice also causes conflicts within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Although that agency had issued dietary advice to the public since the early 1900s, its “eat more” publications caused no debate. Only in the late 1970s, when Congress designated the USDA as the leading federal agency for issuing dietary advice to the public, did its dual missions cause conflict. One branch of the USDA continued to promote eating more of American agricultural products, while another issued advice to eat less of certain of those products.

The most celebrated example of that conflict occurred when the USDA attempted to release its *Food Guide Pyramid* in 1991. That pyramid displayed a recommended pattern of food intake in which most servings were to come from the grain, fruit, and vegetable groups; fewer should be from the meat and dairy groups; and even fewer should be from foods high in fat and sugar (which are high in energy but relatively low in nutrients). USDA nutritionists developed the pyramid over a ten-year period in which they conducted studies to determine the optimal numbers and sizes of servings from each food group as well as the design that would best convey the most important features of healthful diets: variety (multiple food groups), proportionality (appropriate numbers of servings), and moderation (restrictions on fat and sugar).

Proportionality was the critical factor; the pyramid clearly conveyed the idea that people were supposed to eat more of some foods than others. This idea, however, runs counter to the interests of food companies. The food industry much prefers advice based on somewhat different concepts: foods cannot be considered good or bad, and the keys to healthful diets are balance, variety, and moderation. Such advice effectively grants permission to consume *any* food product, no matter where it appears on the pyramid. This preference explains why the National

Cattlemen’s Association and other producers of meat and dairy foods objected to release of the pyramid and induced the USDA to withdraw it from publication. USDA officials explained this surprising action by announcing that the pyramid had never been tested on low-income women and children and that further research needed to be done. Few observers believed this explanation, however, as it seemed evident that the agency had acted under pressure from food producers. When the new research confirmed the value of the original design, the USDA was faced with a dilemma. It could issue the pyramid against the wishes of the food industry, or issue a different design and face charges that it had yielded to food industry pressure. In a compromise in 1992, the USDA released the pyramid with design changes that met some of the industry objections.

That time, the controversy resolved satisfactorily for the USDA and for the public. The pyramid survived, and the delay and persistent press coverage gave it much favorable publicity. The 1992 pyramid became widely distributed, well recognized, and iconic. It appeared not only in nutrition education materials, posters, and textbooks, but also in food advertisements, cookbooks, board games, and Christmas ornaments. It spawned progeny pyramids that illustrated the recommended dietary patterns of one or another cultural, religious, or ethnic group: Mediterranean, Asian, vegetarian, kosher, and soul food, for example.

In 2005, however, the USDA replaced the pyramid with a new version that emphasizes physical activity but displays no food. Its new key messages are meant to be physical activity, variety, proportionality (this time meaning amount—not hierarchy—in food choice), moderation, gradual improvement, and personalization, as determined through use of information on a website (<http://www.mypyramid.gov>). The USDA eliminated all traces of hierarchy in the final version, presumably because it did not want to advise eating less of any food, useful as such advice might be to an overweight public. For all its flaws, the 1992 pyramid was easier to understand and use.

A second example is that of the U.S. dietary guideline for sugar. Dietary guidelines are nutritional

precepts that form the basis of food guides like the pyramid. Since 1980, the USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have issued *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* at five-year intervals. Sugars (sucrose and those in corn sweeteners) contain calories but no nutrients. In societies that typically consume excess calories, advice to eat less sugar makes sense. The 1980 and 1985 guidelines for sugar said so explicitly: "Avoid too much sugar." Since then, partly in response to pressures from sugar trade associations, the guideline has become increasingly ambiguous. In 1990, in an effort to state dietary messages more positively, the agencies changed the guideline to read: "Use sugars only in moderation." The 1995 guideline expressed the advice even more positively: "Choose a diet moderate in sugars." The 2000 guideline further weakened the suggestion to eat less sugar: "Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugars." This peculiar wording is explained by politics.

Sugar was one of the more contentious guidelines in 2000. Sugar trade associations argued that research on sugar and disease did not support a recommendation to eat less sugar, mainly because studies cannot easily distinguish the health effects of sugar from those of the foods in which it is present or from calories in general. The committee reviewing the guideline at first suggested this wording: "Go easy on beverages and foods high in added sugars." This guideline implied a benefit from reducing consumption of sugars, particularly those added to processed and prepared foods (as opposed to those naturally occurring in fruits and vegetables). After further discussion, the committee changed the recommendation to say: "Choose beverages and foods that limit your intake of sugars." The word "limit" troubled sugar lobbyists, who induced thirty senators, half from sugar-growing states, to question the USDA secretary as to whether the agency had the right to make this suggestion. They also objected to singling out individual foods and beverages (like candy, desserts, and soft drinks) as major sources of sugars. Instead, they preferred advice to consume foods containing sugar as part of a total dietary pattern. The USDA agreed and changed the

word "limit" to "moderate" in the final guideline. The difference between these two words may be a matter of semantics (and few Americans are aware of the *Dietary Guidelines*), but this incident illustrates the extent of food industry efforts to prevent the government from issuing "eat less" advice.

Food lobbyists are just as concerned about international dietary advice. In 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO), alarmed about rising rates of obesity among its member populations, proposed to recommend intakes of added sugars that did not exceed 10 percent of daily caloric intake, an amount well within the range recommended by the USDA pyramid. Nevertheless, representatives of the beet, cane, and corn sweetener industries objected to this "restriction" and asked the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to withdraw funding from WHO unless the recommendation was eliminated. Rather than defending sensible dietary advice, the department sided with the sugar lobbyists. Eventually, the WHO acceded to some of the lobbyists' demands, and the final report in 2004 omitted specific dietary targets.

That event left federal agencies with few choices. Although the 2005 dietary guidelines committee reviewed the growing body of research linking habitual consumption of sugary foods and drinks with obesity in adults and children, its sugar recommendation is buried in a chapter on carbohydrates and requires twenty-seven words: "Choose and prepare foods and beverages with little added sugars or caloric sweeteners, such as amounts suggested by the USDA Food Guide and the DASH Eating Plan." DASH takes five more words to explain: *Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension*.

The Politics of Food Marketing. In comparison to the pyramid, American diets clearly are out of balance. Servings of added fats are at least one-third higher than they should be, and caloric sweeteners half again as high. The extra calories in American diets come from eating more food in general, but especially more of foods high in fat (meat, dairy, fried foods, grain dishes with added fat), sugar (soft drinks, juice drinks, desserts), and salt (snack foods).

It can hardly be a coincidence that these are just the foods most profitable to the food industry and most promoted by it. To understand this connection, it is necessary to know a bit more about the U.S. food industry.

The American "food-and-fiber" system generates a trillion dollars or more in annual sales, accounts for about 10 percent of the gross national product and employs more than 15 percent of the country's labor force. This industry has been remarkably successful in capitalizing on twentieth-century shifts from small farms to giant corporations, from home cooking to nearly half the meals prepared and consumed outside the home, and from a diet based on locally grown "whole" foods to one based on processed foods transported over long distances. These changes created a farm system that is much less labor-intensive and far more efficient and specialized. In 1900, 40 percent of the U.S. population lived on farms, but in the early 2000s no more than 2 percent did so. Just since 1960, the number of farms declined from about 3.2 million to 1.9 million, but their average size increased by 40 percent and their productivity by 82 percent. Most farms in the twenty-first century raise just a single commodity, such as cattle, chickens, pigs, corn, wheat, or soybeans. Many are part of a system of vertical integration, meaning that one corporation owns all stages of production and marketing. Chickens constitute an especially clear example. In the mid-1950s, farmers raised chickens in small flocks. Today, chickens are factory-farmed in massive numbers under contract to a few large companies.

Economic pressures force food and beverage companies to expand and merge to great size. In the early 2000s, U.S. companies such as ConAgra, Mars, Tyson Foods, and Walmart ranked among the largest food companies in the world, as did Coca-Cola, McDonald's, PepsiCo, and Burger King. The very largest of such companies generate more than \$50 billion in annual food sales. McDonald's nearly thirteen thousand U.S. outlets bring in over \$20 billion in annual sales, more than twice as much as the nearest competitor.

In an economy of overabundance, such companies can only sell products to people who want to

buy them. Whether consumer demands drive food sales or the industry creates such demands is a matter of debate, but much industry effort goes into determining what the public "wants" and how to meet such "needs." Nearly all research on this issue comes to the same conclusion. When food is plentiful and people can afford to buy it, basic biological needs become less compelling, and the principal determinant of food choice is personal preference. In turn, personal preferences are influenced by religion and other cultural factors, as well as by considerations of convenience, price, and, sometimes, nutritional value. To sell food, companies must be more concerned about those other determinants than about the nutritional value of their products—unless nutritional value helps to entice buyers. Thus, the food industry's marketing imperatives principally concern taste, cost, and convenience. It is no surprise that people prefer foods that taste good, but taste preferences do not occur in a cultural vacuum. Family and ethnic background, levels of education, and income, age, and gender all influence food preferences. Taste is a response to flavor, smell, sight, and texture. Most people prefer sweet foods and those that are "energy-dense," meaning high in calories, fat, and sugar; they also like the taste of salt. Such preferences drive the development of new food products, as well as the menus in restaurants.

The cost issues are more complicated. An overly abundant food market creates pressures to add value to foods through processing. Producers of raw foods receive less than twenty cents on each food dollar spent at supermarkets, and this "farm value" has been declining for years. The farm value is unequally distributed; producers of eggs, beef, and chicken receive as much as half the retail cost whereas producers of lettuce and grapefruit, for example, often receive less than 10 percent. The proportion represented by the farm value declines further in proportion to the extent of processing. The farm value of frozen peas is 13 percent, of canned tomatoes 9 percent, of oatmeal 7 percent, and of corn syrup just 4 percent.

The remaining 80 percent of the food dollar goes for labor, packaging, advertising, and other such

value-enhancing activities. Conversion of potatoes (cheap), to potato chips (expensive), and to those fried in artificial fats or coated in soybean flour or herbal supplements (even more expensive) illustrates how value is added to basic food commodities. Added value explains why the cost of the corn in Kellogg's Corn Flakes is less than 10 percent of the retail price. With this kind of pricing distribution, food companies are more likely to focus on added-value products rather than fresh fruits and vegetables, especially because opportunities for adding value to such foods are limited. Marketers can sell fruits and vegetables frozen, canned, or precut, but consumers balk at paying higher prices for such products. Americans pay a smaller percentage of income for food—about 10 percent—than people anywhere else in the world, only in part because of the high average income. The government subsidizes production of certain crops through price supports, but also supports farm production through a system of quotas, import restrictions, deficiency payments, lower tax rates, low-cost land leases, land management, water rights, and marketing and promotion programs. The subsidized cost of corn, wheat, and soybeans makes processed foods less expensive to produce and stimulates sales of added-value, top-of-the-pyramid products.

Convenience also drives the development of value-added products. As women entered the workforce and people began to work longer hours, demands for convenience increased. These societal changes explain why nearly half of all meals are prepared or consumed outside the home, why fast food is the fastest-growing segment of the food-service industry, and why the practice of snacking nearly doubled from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. They also explain the development of prepackaged sandwiches, salads, entrées, and desserts, as well as power bars, yogurt and pasta in tubes, prepackaged cereal in a bowl, salad bars, hot food bars, take-out chicken, supermarket home meal replacements, McDonald's shaker salads, chips prepackaged with dips, and foods designed to be eaten directly from the package. Whether these "hyper-convenient" products will outlast the competition remains to be

seen, but their success is more likely to depend on taste and price than on nutrient content. Many such products are top-of-the-pyramid foods high in calories, fat, sugar, or salt but marketed as nutritious because they contain added vitamins and minerals, or have eliminated fat or carbohydrates.

Nutritionists and traditionalists may lament such developments, as convenience not only overrides considerations of health, but also the social and cultural meanings of meals and mealtimes. Many food products relegate cooking to a low-priority chore and encourage trends toward one-dish meals, fewer side dishes, fewer ingredients, larger portions to create leftovers, almost nothing cooked from scratch, and home-delivered meals ordered by telephone, fax, or Internet. Interpreting the meaning of these developments is likely to occupy sociologists and anthropologists for decades. In the meantime, convenience adds value to foods and stimulates the food industry to create even more products that can be consumed quickly and with minimal preparation.

Creating an "Eat More" Food Environment. In a competitive food marketplace, food companies must satisfy stockholders by encouraging more people to eat more of their products. They seek new audiences among children, target members of minority groups for special marketing campaigns, and develop international markets for their products. In existing markets, they expand sales through advertising, but also by developing new products designed to respond to consumer "demands." In recent years, marketers have embraced a new strategy—increasing the sizes of food portions. Advertising, new products, and larger portions all contribute to a food environment that promotes eating more, not less.

Advertising operates so far below the consciousness of everyone—the public, most nutritionists, and survey researchers—that it is rarely mentioned as an influence on food choice. The ubiquity of food and beverage advertising is a tribute to the power of its subliminal nature as well as to the sophistication of the agencies that produce it. Extraordinary amounts of money and talent go into this effort.

Food and food-service companies spend more than \$10 billion annually on direct media advertising in magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and billboards. In 2008, for example, McDonald's spent \$1.2 billion, Burger King spent \$388 million, and Coca-Cola spent \$752 million just on direct media advertising. For every dollar spent in that "measured" way, the companies spend another two dollars on discount incentives—for example, coupons for consumers and "slotting fees" for retailers that ensure space on supermarket shelves. In total, food companies spend more than \$34 billion annually to advertise and promote their products to the public. The largest part of this astronomical sum is used to promote the most highly processed and elaborately packaged foods and fast foods. Nearly 70 percent of food advertising is for convenience foods, candy and snacks, alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, and desserts, whereas just 2.2 percent is for fruits, vegetables, grains, or beans. The advertising costs for any single, nationally distributed food product far exceed federal expenditures for promotion of the pyramid or of eating more fruit and vegetables. Despite protestations by marketers that advertising is a minor element in food choice, advertising has been demonstrated to promote sales of specific food products and to do so in proportion to the amount spent. Food sales increase with intensity, repetition, and visibility of the advertising message, with promotion of nutritional advantages (low-fat, no cholesterol, high-fiber, "low-carb," and contains calcium), and with the use of health claims ("lowers cholesterol," "prevents cancer," and "supports a healthy immune system"). Advertising is especially effective with children, and advertisers deliberately promote food brands to children, at home and at school.

Added value and convenience drive new product development, and food companies introduce more than 10,000 new products annually. Since 1990, more than 100,000 new products have joined a marketplace containing 320,000 food items that compete for shelf space in supermarkets able to handle about 50,000 products each. The glut of food products means that only the most highly promoted products succeed; even these may encounter difficulties if

they do not taste good, raise questions about health or safety, or are too expensive. More than two-thirds of the new products are condiments, candy and snacks, baked goods, soft drinks, and dairy products (cheese products and ice cream novelties). Nearly one-third are "nutritionally enhanced" so they can be marketed as low in fat, cholesterol, salt, or sugar, or higher in fiber, calcium, or vitamins. Some such products, among them no-fat cookies, vitamin-enriched cereals, and calcium-fortified juice drinks, contain so much sugar that they belong with the others at the top of the pyramid, even though they are marketed as "healthy." Developing such foods has one principal purpose: to attract sales.

"Eat more" marketing methods extend beyond billboards and television commercials; they also include substantial increases in the sizes of food packages and restaurant portions. When the pyramid recommends six to eleven grain servings, these amounts seem impossibly large with reference to the actual portions offered by restaurants, fast food chains, or take-out places. The pyramid serving numbers, however, refer to serving-size standards defined by the USDA: a standard grain serving, for example, is one slice of white bread, one ounce of ready-to-eat cereals or muffins, or one-half cup of rice or pasta. A marketplace bakery muffin weighing seven ounces, or a "medium" container of movie-theater popcorn (sixteen cups), meets or exceeds a full day's grain allowances with some left over for the next day. Larger servings, of course, contain more calories. The largest movie-theater soft drink (sixty-four ounces) can provide eight hundred calories if not too diluted with ice. Larger portions contribute to weight gain unless people compensate with diet and exercise. From an industry standpoint, however, larger portions make excellent marketing sense. The cost of food is low relative to labor and other factors that add value. Large portions attract customers who do not need much mathematical skill to understand that the larger units can be 40 percent cheaper by weight.

Advertising, convenience, larger portions, and adding nutrients to foods otherwise high in fat, sugar, and salt, all contribute to an environment

that promotes eating more food, more often, and in larger quantities. Because dietary advice affects sales, food companies also conduct systematic, pervasive, and unrelenting (but far less visible) campaigns to convince government officials, health organizations, and nutrition professionals that their products are healthful, or at least do no harm, to avoid any suggestion to the contrary, and to ensure that federal dietary guidelines and food guides will help promote sales.

Food Politics: A Matter of Democracy. America's overabundant food system and the consequences of food-marketing practices occur in the context of increasing centralization and globalization of the food industry and of altered patterns of work, welfare, and government. The food system is only one aspect of society but it is unusual in its universality: everyone eats. Because food affects lives as well as livelihoods, the politics of food generates substantial attention from the industry and the government, as well as from advocates, nutrition and health professionals, the media, and the public at large. No matter what the specific area of controversy over food issues, all reflect several recurrent themes central to the functioning of democratic institutions.

One theme is the "paradox of plenty," the term used by the historian Harvey Levenstein to refer to the social consequences of food overproduction, among them the sharp disparities in diet and health between rich and poor. Health habits tend to cluster in patterns, making it difficult to tease out the effects of diet from those of any other behavioral factor. Wealthier people are usually healthier, and they choose better diets. They also tend to avoid smoking cigarettes or drinking too much alcohol and to be better educated and more physically active. One paradox of food overabundance in the United States is that large numbers of Americans lack food security; they do not have enough to eat or cannot count on having enough resources to purchase adequate food on a daily basis. The economic expansion of the twentieth century differentially favored people whose income was higher than average and provided much smaller gains for the poor.

In the United States, low-income groups seem to have about the same intake of nutrients as people who are better off, but they choose diets higher in calories, fat, meat, and sugar; they also display higher rates of obesity and chronic diseases. The income gap between rich and poor can be explained by the functioning of economic and related educational systems. The gaps in diet and health are economically based, but they also derive from the social status attached to certain kinds of food—meat for the poor and health foods for the rich, for example. Food and beverage companies reinforce this gap when they seek new marketing opportunities among minority groups or in low-income neighborhoods. The alcoholic beverage industry is especially active in marketing to disenfranchised groups.

A second theme is that of the conflict among belief systems that affect food choices. These systems include scientific beliefs about the value of specific nutrients or foods to health, but many people regard science as just one of a number of belief systems of equal validity and importance. Religious beliefs, concerns about animal rights, and views of the fundamental nature of society also influence food choice, as do vested interests. The conflict between scientific and other belief systems underlies much of the controversy over food issues. Government agencies invoke science as a basis for regulatory decisions. Food and supplement companies invoke science to oppose regulations and dietary advice that might adversely affect sales. Advocates invoke science to question the safety of products perceived as undesirable. Like any other kind of science, nutrition science is more a matter of probabilities than absolutes and, therefore, subject to interpretation. Interpretation, in turn, depends on point of view, but scientists and food producers who might benefit from promoting research results, nutritional benefits, or safety, tend to view other-than-scientific points of view as inherently irrational. When discussing food issues that affect broad aspects of society, scientific proof of safety often becomes the focus of debate whether or not it constitutes the "real" issue, largely because alternative belief systems cannot be validated by scientific methods.

A third theme is the central thesis of this article: diet is a political issue. Because dietary advice affects food sales, and companies demand a favorable regulatory environment for their products, dietary practices raise political issues central to democratic institutions. Debates about food issues nearly always reflect opinions about who should decide what people eat and whether or not a food is "healthy." As a result, food issues inevitably involve differing viewpoints about the way the government balances corporate against public interests. This last issue is revealed whenever a food company attacks its critics as "food police" or justifies self-interested actions as a defense of freedom of choice or exclusion of an Orwellian "Big Brother" from personal decisions. It is expressed whenever food companies use financial relationships with members of Congress, political leaders, and nutrition and health experts to weaken the regulatory ability of federal agencies, or when they go to court to block unfavorable regulatory decisions. Such disputes, of course, are fundamental to the functioning of the American political system. Despite the overwhelmingly greater resources of food companies, consumer advocates can also use the political system to convince Congress, federal agencies, and the courts to take action in the public interest, and sometimes they succeed in doing so.

The Politics of Food Choice. Like other businesses, food companies use lobbying, lawsuits, financial contributions, public relations, advertising, partnerships and alliances, philanthropy, threats, and biased information to convince Congress, federal agencies, nutrition and health professionals, and the public that each of the following precepts holds true: (a) the keys to healthful diets are balance, variety, and moderation; (b) all foods can be part of healthful diets; (c) there is no such thing as a good or bad food; (d) overweight is a result of inactivity, not overeating; (e) research on diet and health is so uncertain that there is no point in trying to eat healthfully; (f) only a small fraction of the population would benefit from following population-based dietary advice; (g) diets are a matter of personal responsibility and freedom of choice; (h) advocacy for more healthful

food choices is unscientific; and (i) government intervention in dietary choice is unnecessary, undesirable, and incompatible with democratic institutions—except in situations in which following dietary advice favors their products.

With such statements, food industry officials appeal to fears of totalitarianism and other such emotions to argue against something that no nutritionist, private or governmental, advocates. Some foods are better for health than others. But the food industry fiercely opposes this idea, and uses its substantial resources, political skills, and emotional appeals to discourage attempts to introduce "eat less" messages into public discussion of dietary issues. These tactics are a normal part of doing business; they are no different from those used by such other large commercial interests as drug or tobacco companies. Sellers of food products, however, do not usually elicit the same level of attention. They should.

Americans cannot make informed decisions about food choice unless they understand how food companies influence their choices. An emphasis on personal choice serves the interests of the food industry for this reason: if diet is a matter of individual free will, then the sole remedy for poor diets is education—not advocating for societal changes that might promote more healthful dietary patterns.

The business press complains that advocates are trying to make food the next tobacco—subject to taxes and lawsuits in the name of health. Such parallels are difficult to avoid. Cigarette companies have long argued that smoking is a matter of individual choice and government has no right to interfere in the private lives of citizens. They use science to sow confusion about the harm caused by cigarettes. They use public relations, advertising, philanthropy, experts, political funding, alliances, lobbying, intimidation, and lawsuits to protect cigarette sales, and they promote cigarette smoking to children and adolescents, minorities, women, and the poor in the United States and internationally. Despite legal judgments against them, cigarette companies continue to lobby government and agencies and become financially enmeshed with nutrition and health

experts. Such actions elicited protests that succeeded eventually in getting warning labels on cigarette packages, smoking-restricted areas in businesses and on airplanes, and attempts to regulate tobacco as a drug. The parallel practices of food companies however have not attracted anywhere near this level of protest.

One reason for this difference is that food is more complicated than tobacco. Although poor diets are believed to be responsible for as much illness and death as tobacco, as noted earlier, tobacco is a single product requiring one health message: don't smoke. Food comprises hundreds of thousands of products requiring more complex messages: choose this product instead of that one, or eat less in general. Nevertheless, nutrition advocates have much to learn from the tobacco wars. Antismoking advocates based campaigns on four elements: a firm research base, a clear message, well-defined targets for intervention, and strategies that address the social environment as well as the education of individual smokers—age thresholds for buying cigarettes, taxes, and bans on smoking in airplanes, restaurants, and worksites, for example. Such elements could be applied to dietary change also. The evidence for the health benefits of dietary patterns rich in fruits, vegetables, and grains is strong; the message to follow such patterns is more complicated than “don't smoke,” but not impossible to understand. If antismoking campaigns succeeded when they began to focus on environmental issues rather than the education of individuals, then promoting more healthful diets means using similar measures to counter food industry lobbying and marketing practices.

[See also Advertising; Advertising Cookbooklets and Recipes; Community-Supported Agriculture; Counterculture; Department of Agriculture, United States; Farm Labor and Unions; Farm Subsidies, Duties, Quotas, and Tariffs; Food and Drug Administration; Food and Nutrition Systems; Food Stamps; Hunger Programs; International Aid; Marketing; Meals on Wheels; North American Free Trade Agreement; Prohibition; Pure Food and Drug Act; Radio Food

Shows; School Food; Soup Kitchens; Television; World's Fairs.]

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An author, journalist, editor, educator, and professor of journalism, Michael Pollan (1955–) is one of the most eloquent champions of the contemporary food