



Food Politics in an Era of Misinformation

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I write books about the politics of food, most recently *What to Eat Now*. When my first book on the topic, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, appeared in 2002, the first question everyone asked me was “What does food have to do with politics?” But since President Donald Trump appointed Robert F. Kennedy Jr as Secretary of Health and Human Services, I am no longer asked that question. Trump introduced Kennedy’s nomination with this statement: “For too long, Americans have been crushed by the industrial food complex and drug companies who have engaged in deception, misinformation, and disinformation when it comes to public health.”¹ It is now more obvious than ever that just as food has cultural, religious, and socioeconomic dimensions, it also has political dimensions. Here, I present examples of how politics affects food choice in three areas especially vulnerable to misinformation: food and nutrition research, ultra-processed foods, and dietary guidelines.

Food and Nutrition Research

Food companies are not social service or public health agencies; their primary, first-priority job is to generate profits for shareholders. One way food companies express this priority is to sponsor research. But industry-funded studies tend to follow what Sheldon Krimsky termed the “funding effect”—industry-funded studies strongly tend to produce results favorable to the sponsor’s commercial interests.² Such studies are not invariably biased in a corporate-friendly direction; they just are skewed in that direction more often than not. When researching my book on this topic, *Unsavory Truth*, I was only able to find 11 studies published on the funding effect in food and nutrition research (by 2018). These varied in methods, products, and health effects, but all reported benefits to sponsors’ interests. Recipients of industry funding often appear unaware of the influence of industry funding and deny it. They may conduct their studies according to high scientific

standards, but investigations of funding effects demonstrate that the bias mainly shows up in the framing of the research question or in the interpretation of results (null results interpreted as positive, for example). It is one thing to call for open-ended research on diet and health, but quite another to request proposals for research to demonstrate benefits. Food companies are unlikely to sponsor research that might produce unfavorable results.³

Some scientists argue that concerns about funding effects represent ad hominem attacks on researchers. Career goals, scientific beliefs, dietary practices, and belief systems, they insist, are just as biasing as industry funding; disclosure is sufficient to deal with the problem.⁴ But not all influences in science pose conflicts of interest. All scientists have beliefs about the likely outcome of their research; they have hypotheses they are trying to prove. These beliefs differ among researchers, as do the outcomes of their studies. But with industry funding, the biases are the same; they tend to favor the sponsor’s interests.⁵ Companies fund studies to “prove” their products are superfoods, or health promoting, or at least not harmful. Industry-funded research is about marketing, not science.

Ultra-Processed Foods

In 2025, The Lancet released three comprehensive reports on the science,⁶ policy,⁷ and politics⁸ of ultra-processed foods (I am a co-author on the last two). The process for producing these reports was lengthy and difficult, not least because the journal’s editors were skeptical of the concept of ultra-processed foods and pushed the authors to clarify the concepts and strengthen the evidence. Eventually the editors were convinced; they introduced the reports with an editorial powerfully titled “Ultra-processed foods: time to put health before profit.”⁹

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In This Issue

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By Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH I

Ultra-processed foods were defined by Carlos Monteiro et al in 2009 according to what they called the Nova system, which divides foods into four categories based on their degree of processing: unprocessed or minimally processed (Nova 1), processed culinary ingredients (Nova 2), processed (Nova 3), and ultra-processed (Nova 4).^{6,10} Ultra-processed foods are industrially produced, do not resemble the foods from which they were produced, typically contain sugars, salt, and industrial chemicals, and are designed to be irresistible (if not addictive)—and highly profitable. Many studies link diets high in ultra-processed foods to poor health outcomes. Although most of these studies are observational and cannot prove causation, well controlled clinical trials demonstrate that ultra-processed diets induce people to greatly overconsume calories, without realizing it.¹¹ This result alone is reason enough for advice to reduce consumption of ultra-processed foods.

Understandably, the food industry opposes this concept: eating less is bad for business. Food trade associations argue that all foods are processed, processing is necessary, and the concept of ultra-processed is poorly defined, especially because it excludes highly nutritious foods such as commercial whole wheat breads and yogurts. The food industry is joined in these criticisms by some nutrition scientists concerned about inaccuracies in observational studies and the short duration and limited number of subjects in the controlled clinical trials.¹² These criticisms hold grains of truth, but the overwhelming preponderance of evidence argues in favor of advice to reduce intake of ultra-processed foods.

The food industry, however, is on the attack. It much prefers education focused on salt, sugar, and saturated fat (encouraging product reformulation) Business advisors call for strongly defending ultra-processed foods in two ways. The food industry should educate the public about the benefits of ultra-processed foods and the flaws in the Nova classification system; it also should conduct its own research to demonstrate those benefits and flaws¹³—misinformation via public relations and funded research.

Dietary Guidelines

The call for education brings me to the 2025-2030 dietary guidelines, supporting documents released on January 7, 2026, and the process used to produce them. When I was a member of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) in 1995, we selected the topics to be researched, did the research, wrote the research report—and wrote the actual dietary guidelines. We turned these documents over to HHS and USDA to be printed. We were fully responsible for their content. That changed in 2005 when the agencies took over writing the guidelines. Since 2010, the agencies have taken over the entire process except for the DGAC research review. The dietary guidelines are now an almost entirely political—rather than scientific—document.

The DGAC for the 2025-2030 guidelines was appointed during the previous administration; it released its report in December 2024.¹⁴ Its recommendations were much like those of previous guidelines since 1980: balance calories; eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; reduce intake of sugars, sodium, saturated fat, alcohol, red and processed meat; choose low-fat dairy. Although this DGAC was asked to consider a recommendation on ultra-processed foods, it chose not to on the basis of flaws in observational data and the short duration of the one, then available, exceptionally well-controlled clinical trial conducted in a metabolic ward.¹¹

The Trump administration's HHS and USDA, however, rejected most of that report and started over. It gave nine experts three months or less to write their own reviews of the science; these formed the basis of the new guidelines and the new inverted pyramid food guide released under the slogan "Eat real food." While most of the eight guidelines are similar to those issued previously, one of the differences is advice to limit intake of highly processed foods (a euphemism for ultra-processed). So far, so good.¹⁵

Beyond that advice, however, the new guidelines include recommendations less well supported by existing evidence. They call for prioritizing and doubling intake of protein (a euphemism for red meat), consuming whole milk, and choosing "healthy" fats rich in essential fatty acids. Unfortunately, the guidelines' examples of such fats are olive oil, butter, and beef tallow, none of them good sources of the two essential fatty acids, linoleic and linolenic. Errors like these, confusing messages (add salt, but restrict sodium; eat animal fats but keep saturated fat to 10% or less of calories), and the way animal-source foods are presented in the accompanying website for the inverted pyramid ([RealFood.gov](https://www.RealFood.gov)), make the guidelines appear to have been influenced by the meat and dairy industries, especially because so many writers of the science summaries reported financial ties to meat-and-dairy trade associations.¹⁶ The guidelines also appear to reflect the dietary ideology of Secretary Kennedy, who consumes a publicly avowed carnivore diet.

The new dietary guidelines are aimed explicitly at personal responsibility for dietary choice. But placing the dietary burden entirely on individuals absolves the government from doing anything other than educate. If objections to the guidelines from the food industry have been mild so far, it is surely because its leaders know that education is not enough to change dietary behavior. They much prefer education to policies aimed at regulating product contents or marketing. But to really help people eat real food and reduce intake of ultra-processed foods, we need a wide range of policy options—taxes, subsidies, marketing, procurement, product placement⁷—to make healthier foods more available, accessible, and affordable, so that the healthy choice is the easier choice.

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