“Do the food nazis want your Twinkies?”

“Should the government be the nutrition police?”

15.0 | Food Policy
Is Ketchup a vegetable? Why are around 44 million Americans getting food stamps? Is the government planning to take away my Big Gulps and other sweetened drinks? Is sugar going to be treated like tobacco products? Will the government make people eat broccoli as part of a national health care plan? These are just some of the unusual ways that we talk about the politics of food. In 1981 the Department of Agriculture considered a proposal to reduce federal spending by defining ketchup as a vegetable for the federally subsidized school lunch program. The proposal was widely ridiculed by food activists who were promoting children’s nutrition. Stories about welfare queens using food stamps to buy sodas and candy have been told for decades by critics of the welfare state who think that a program to help the truly needy has expanded beyond its original purpose.
More recently, government policies to promote nutrition and good diet in order to reduce increasing rates of obesity have prompted worries about government plans to take our Twinkies, Big Gulps, and French fries. During a 1990 press conference, President George Herbert Walker Bush confessed that he had disliked broccoli ever since he was a child and now that he was president he was not going to eat it anymore. (The statement did not make broccoli growers very happy!) Then broccoli played a surprisingly central role in the political and legal debates over the constitutionality of The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (better known as Obamacare). Critics argued that argued if government could require a person to buy health insurance it could also require people to eat broccoli. In her concurring opinion in the Supreme Court ruling that upheld the constitutionality of Obamacare, Justice Ginsburg described the argument against the individual mandate as a parade of “broccoli horribles.”

This chapter examines the politics of food policy. Food policy is an area of federal policy that is often overlooked because the public, the political parties and interest groups, and the media pay more attention to higher profile issues such as national security, the economy, crime, and other issues such as education and health care. The government’s role in ensuring food security (that is, an adequate supply of food) and food safety is not controversial. People expect the government to ensure that they have enough food and safe food. But food policy has become controversial as the government has begun to promote healthy diets by regulations that require labeling menus and limit portion sizes and proposals to tax certain items such as sweetened drinks. The chapter focuses on three aspects of food policy. First, it describes food policy. Second, it describes how diet and nutrition were put on the government agenda (i.e., the politics of food). Third, it describes the main government and non-government actors who make food policy as participants in the food issue network.

15.1 | Is Food a Private Good or a Public Good?

Why is food even a political issue? In one sense food is a classic example of a private good. Food is a divisible good (one whose benefits can be limited to those who pay for it). Private goods are available in the private sector based on the ability to pay. Food is a matter of private choice: an individual decides what to eat, how much to eat, and how much to pay for it. These decisions are based on a person’s ability to pay and personal tastes. In this sense, food is provided according to the *market model* rather than the *government model*. But food is not considered a completely private good that is available only to those who can afford to pay for it. Food is also considered a public good that the government provides for some people regardless of their ability to pay for it. The government’s food policy goals include *food security, food safety, promotion of American agriculture, and healthy food*.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s unemployment, poverty, and hunger were nationwide problems. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt captured the scope of the problem in his *Second Inaugural Address* (January 20, 1937):

I see a great nation, upon a great continent, blessed with a great wealth of natural resources.... But here is the challenge to our democracy: In this nation I see tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very
moment are denied the greater part of... the necessities of life. I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day. I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago. I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children. I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions. **I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.** [Emphasis added] It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out....The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

Freedom from want includes freedom from hunger. Today, food security is provided by the food stamp program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), two social welfare programs that provide food support for low-income people.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines **food security** as access to an adequate and safe supply of food: “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life—in U.S. households and communities.” In 2008, 85 percent of U.S. households were food-secure throughout the entire year, and 14.6 percent of households were food insecure at least some time during that year, up from 11.1 percent in 2007. This is the highest recorded rate of food insecurity since 1995 when the first national food security survey was conducted.²

The government also has responsibility for ensuring a safe food supply. Food is more political today than in the past because today’s consumers are much more dependent upon others to provide their food. Most people are dependent on others for their food: they are consumers of food rather than producers of food. And people are not getting their food from family, friends, or neighbors; they are getting it from national and international commerce. Consumer protection is one of the functions of government. Protecting food consumers, ensuring a safe food supply, is also a government function. Unsafe, tainted, contaminated food, and outbreaks of E. coli, salmonella poisoning, and other food borne illnesses and deaths are public health issues. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports on food borne illnesses in the U.S. illustrate why food safety is a political issue.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

“CDC Estimates of Food Borne Illness in the United States”
In 1999, 76 million ill, 325,000 hospitalized, and 5,000 deaths in the U.S. from food borne illnesses. In 2011, 48 million illnesses, 128,000 hospitalizations, and 3,000 deaths.


Food Safety News

From a political science perspective, food is a public good in the sense that governments everywhere are responsible for insuring an adequate, affordable, and safe supply of food. Food is also made a political issue by events such as droughts, crop failures due to diseases, health threats from unsafe foods or food borne-illnesses, and high rates of inflation. A century ago, food consumed a large share of the typical American family’s budget. In 1900, more than 40% of a family’s income was spent on food.3 But federal food policy has emphasized increasing farm production, which has resulted in cheap food. The result has been a dramatic reduction in the food share of the average American family’s budget.

Today, the efficient production of an adequate food supply is not a serious problem for federal food policy. The new food issues are safety and nutrition and health.

15.12 | The Politics of Food

There is broad consensus that the federal government has a legitimate role in ensuring the safety of the food supply. But the government’s role in promoting health and nutrition is much more controversial. The federal government does have a long history of promoting diet. One early government campaign promoted good diet as a patriotic contribution to the effort to win World War I.

The Department of Agriculture also sponsored one of the earliest radio programs, “Aunt Sammy,” (the domestic equivalent of Uncle Sam) as part of a government campaign to get farmwives to promote healthy diets.

15.2 | The Food Issue Network

The term issue network describes participation in the formulation of public policy. An issue network consists of the two main government participants (the congressional committees and executive departments/agencies with authority over a particular issue) and the various non-government participants (the interest groups who are interested in a particular issue). The food issue network consists of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees (and subcommittees), which are the primary congressional food policy makers; the Department of Agriculture (and the Food and Drug Administration); and interest groups. The following describes the traditional and modern food issue network.
Chapter 15: Food Policy

15.21 | *The Traditional Food Issue Network*

The traditional food issue network consisted of the House and Senate agriculture committees, the Department of Agriculture, and agri-business interest groups that primarily represented farmers and ranchers (the food producers).

**The Traditional Food Issue Network**

15.22 | *The Modern Food Issue Network*

But today another set of interest groups have worked their way into the food issue network. In the past, food producers and food processing companies were the main private sector participants in making food policy. Today, however, consumer groups, environmentalists, and public health advocates have joined the food issue network. They provide a different perspective on the goals of federal food policy.

**The Modern Food Issue Network**
These new participants in the policy making process have made food policy more contentious because consumer, environmentalist, and public health groups have different interests than the food producers and processors. The following sections describe the three main types of participants in the modern food issue network.

15.23 | Congress: The House and Senate Agriculture Committees

Congress makes food policy. The House of Representative Agriculture Committee (and subcommittees) and the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee (and subcommittees) have jurisdiction over bills, programs, and issues related to agriculture as well as supervision of the Department of Agriculture and other agencies with jurisdiction over food programs.

The following describes the agriculture committees and subcommittees in the 112th Congress. The House Agriculture Committee had six subcommittees, one of which was the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Horticulture which had jurisdiction over nutrition policy. The Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee had five subcommittees, one of which was the Subcommittee on Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Food and Agricultural Research. Its legislative portfolio included provisions of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008; domestic and international nutrition and food assistance and hunger prevention; school and child nutrition programs; local and healthy food initiatives; food and agricultural research, education, economics and extension.

A letter from the ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee (Kansas Republican Senator Roberts) to the Secretary of Agriculture illustrates how the Senate Agriculture Committee interacts with the executive branch to advocate on behalf of agricultural interests. The October 3, 2012 letter entitled “Senator Roberts Concerned School Nutrition Programs Don’t Meet Needs of Active Students” expressed concern that the Department of Agriculture was developing healthy food standards that provided insufficient calories for active students. In 2010 Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The Act required the Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service to revise rules for the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program to promote healthy food—in effect, to provide healthier school meals that included more vegetables and fruits and grains and fat-free or low-fat milk. Senator Roberts was concerned that the healthier food would increase student plate waste, increase costs, and not provide enough calories for active students.

15.24 | The Department of Agriculture

The second government participant in the food issue network is the Department of Agriculture. In the U.S. and elsewhere one of the basic functions of government is to ensure that people have enough food to eat and that the food supply is safe. The origins of the federal government’s food policy can be traced to President Lincoln’s creation of an agricultural department in 1862. Lincoln called it “the people’s department.” Agriculture
is sometimes called the nation’s first industry; it was here before manufacturing. The department that Lincoln created eventually became one of the Cabinet agencies when the [Department of Agriculture](https://www.usda.gov/) was created in 1889.

Historically, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has functioned as a cliente agency. A clientele agency is an agency that is created to serve the needs or represent the interests of a specific group. The departments of Labor, Education, and Commerce are also clientele agencies that were created to represent labor, education, and business, respectively. The USDA was created to advocate for its major cliente—farmers and ranchers. In the 1920s, the USDA promoted industrial farming to increase production. The [Green Revolution](http://www.cimmyt.org/) greatly increased agricultural production and in 1960 the USDA produced a video extolling the “Miracles from Agriculture” that made many of the amenities of modern life possible.

The International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) played a pivotal role in the Green Revolution and continues to be a major research center working on increased productivity. [http://www.cimmyt.org/](http://www.cimmyt.org/)

The Department of Agriculture’s mission has been broadened beyond merely increasing production as federal food policy has expanded to include goals other than the promotion of agriculture. Today the USDA has the following areas of policy responsibility: promoting and marketing agricultural products at home and abroad; food safety and nutrition; conservation of natural resources; rural and community development; and providing job and housing assistance. However, the following short story about Pizza Politics reveals that the USDA is still a clientele agency that sees its mission as promoting American agricultural products. Domino’s Pizza had falling sales. A consumer survey of national pizza chains revealed that the Domino’s pizzas tied for last in taste. In order to turn the sales trends around, Domino’s worked with an organization called Dairy Management to develop a pizza with 40% more cheese. Dairy Management paid for a $12 million marketing campaign. The “Pizza Turnaround” television ads that were part of the Domino’s marketing campaign.

The advertising campaign for the new cheesier pizza worked. It produced double-digit sales increases. This business case study is interesting but it would be irrelevant to the study of food policy except for the fact that Dairy Management is not a private industry business consultant. Dairy Management is an organization that was created by the USDA. Dairy Management worked with other restaurant companies to increase the amount of cheese that was on restaurant menus. But the USDA also sponsors a healthy diet campaign that recommended lowering the amount of milk fats in the American diet! The cheese story illustrates how the USDA’s dual mission—to promote American agriculture (in this instance, dairy products but in other instances beef or wheat or corn) and to promote healthy diets—sometimes conflict.
A third main government participant in the food issue network is the Food and Drug Administration (the FDA). The FDA is an independent regulatory commission but for the purposes of issue networks it is considered an executive agency because it implements legislation. Food safety was put on the federal government’s agency in the early years of the 20th Century. In 1906 Congress passed the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906, which prohibited companies from interstate commerce in misbranded and adulterated foods, drinks and drugs. The 1906 Act was a response to two works that focused the public’s attention on problems in the nation’s food supply. Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906, and a ten-part study by Harvey Washington Wiley on additives and chemicals in the nation’s food supply. *The Jungle* was a novel that exposed the terrible conditions of the meatpacking industry. It focused on the plight of workers in meatpacking plants. Sinclair had gone undercover in meatpacking plants in Chicago and wanted to expose the American public to the problems faced by blue-collar workers. But the public’s attention was captured by Sinclair’s prose describing the unsanitary conditions in which their food was being handled in an industrial system that they did not associate with food. Sinclair wrote:

THEME

The meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water—and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public’s breakfast. *The Jungle*, Chapter 14, page 1.

Congress created the Food and Drug Administration (the FDA) in 1930. The FDA is the primary federal regulatory agency with authority over food safety, although the Department of Agriculture also plays an important role in making federal food policy. The USDA promotes American agricultural production and sales abroad as well as ensures a safe food supply by inspecting food-processing plants. Today, the FDA has regulatory authority over about 25 cents of every dollar the consumer spends.
And of course significant portion of that dollar is spent on food consumed outside the home. The average person consumes about one-third of their calories on foods prepared outside the home. As a result, the FDA has proposed new regulations that require labeling the calorie content of food served in restaurants and vending machines. The regulations would apply only to chain restaurants or vending machines companies with 20 or more locations as a concession to small businesses. The FDA’s focus on food consumed outside the home reflects changes in patterns of consumption. But the FDA has not kept up with one change in where Americans get their food (and drugs). The U.S. now imports a larger share of its food. In the past, certain foods such as fruits and vegetables were only available seasonally. Today peaches and asparagus are available during the winter months in northern states because they are imported from other countries. But the FDA inspects only about 1% of imported food. Public concerns about the safety of the food supply have increased pressure to have the FDA expand its inspection of imported foods. The FDA has proposed placing more inspectors in the foreign countries from which we import food and drugs, rather than waiting until they enter the U.S., and it has opened an office in Beijing, China. But expanding the scope of the FDA’s operations is controversial. It requires increasing the FDA’s budget and increasing federal regulations. Addressing the food safety problem requires more than hiring more inspectors and doing more testing; it requires creating a regulatory system that works to provide food safety.

The Food Movement and Genetically Modified Organisms
In 1992 the FDA issued a rule that GMO were not materially different from other foods. [http://www.councilforresponsiblegenetics.org/genewatch/GenewatchPage.aspx?pageId=393](http://www.councilforresponsiblegenetics.org/genewatch/GenewatchPage.aspx?pageId=393)

15.26 Interest Groups

The third category of issue network participants is interest groups. Traditionally, these were groups that represented farming and ranching or food processing and distributing companies. Agribusinesses such as the [Archer Daniels Midland](http://www.councilforresponsiblegenetics.org/genewatch/GenewatchPage.aspx?pageId=393) Company have a vested interest in food policy and are important participants in the food network. Today, however, a broad range of interest groups participate in the food issue network. Take, for example, consumer groups. Consumer groups represent individual consumers (i.e., people who buy food) and business consumers (e.g., companies such as The Coca-
Cola Company, PepsiCo, Mars Incorporated, and The Hershey Company) that buy commodities such as sugar and corn syrup. Two groups that take opposing positions on food issues such as labeling the caloric and nutritional content of food, limiting the size of food portions, or taxing sodas are the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Center for Consumer Freedom. The former organization generally plays offense: it is a consumer group that advocates for more government regulation of food. The latter organization generally plays defense: it is an industry group that opposes more government regulation of food. Public health advocates also generally support more government regulation to provide consumer information and to promote public health by reducing the consumption of fat, salt, and sugar. The food industry worries about the general trend toward treating sugar or fat, for example, the way that tobacco and alcohol have been treated. Tobacco and alcohol have been subjected to “sin taxes.” A sin tax is a tax on a vice such as smoking or drinking. The American Beverage Association, for instance, has mobilized industry opposition to treating sweetened beverages the way that tobacco and alcohol have been treated. The policy proposals to tax sugar or certain fats as harmful are based on the belief that consumption can be discouraged by taxing and regulating consumption.

15.3 | The Farm Bill and the Food Aid Program

The Farm Bill is a major component of the federal government’s food policy. The Farm Bill, which is enacted every five years, is a nearly $300 billion dollar federal program. It was originally intended to promote food production, to promote marketing of U.S. food products abroad, and to keep food prices low. Crop subsidies are one of the primary ways that these goals were achieved. The USDA has commodity programs that subsidize growing wheat, corn, rice, cotton and a few other crops. The USDA also subsidized sugar prices and dairy prices, primarily milk price supports.

15.31 | The Food Aid Program

One component of the Farm Bill is the Food Aid Program. The Food Aid Program is a good example of a public policy that is both domestic policy and foreign policy. In 2007, the Food Aid Program was a $2 billion dollar program to provide food aid to other countries. The Food Aid Program began in 1954 as a way for the U.S. to dispose of surplus crops abroad. The Green Revolution, which began in the 1940s, greatly increased agricultural production. It was the result of the following developments:

- Biology. Scientific research produced more fertile and productive plants and animals.
- Chemistry. The chemical industry created more effective herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, which increased food production.
• Management. The industrial revolution transformed manufacturing before it reached agriculture, but eventually the agricultural sector changed from small family farms to large-scale corporate, agribusiness, or factory farming. The result was increased efficiency in growing, processing, and transporting foods.

The Green Revolution made American agriculture so productive that food policy had to address the problem of surplus, not scarcity or hunger. Food scarcity has not been the most important problem for food policy for decades. American agriculture produces far more food than can be consumed domestically. The economy of scale associated with factory farming made agriculture more efficient and more productive but it also contributed to the decline of the family farm. The “family farmer” is now analogous to the cowboy. Both are important symbols in American cultural heritage but they are no longer central figures in the economy. There are other critics of the Green Revolution. The Institute for Food and Development Policy, which is also known as Food First, advocates self-sufficiency and food sovereignty rather than dependence on international agribusiness companies.

15.32 | Food Policy is both Domestic and Foreign Policy

Domestic and foreign policy are often considered distinct areas of public policy. However, the food aid program is a good example of how domestic policy and foreign policy are linked. The food aid program includes provisions requiring 75% of the food aid be shipped in U.S. vessels, 25% of the food aid be shipped from Great Lakes ports, and mandating that the food aid be in the form of food (that is, American agricultural commodities such as dairy products, grain, or corn) not money. These requirements apply even when the food aid is a response to emergencies such as drought or disease. These requirements build domestic political support for the food aid program because American farmers, food processing companies, and transportation companies benefit from the program. The domestic political support is important because foreign aid is often welfare for other countries and therefore vulnerable during times of tight federal budgets and deficits. But the food aid program’s requirements to buy American and ship American also create problems. One problem is that the high transportation costs of sending grain grown in the American Midwest (e.g., Kansas) to countries on the other side of the globe, and the time it takes to deliver food to where the food aid is needed, limit the effectiveness of the food aid program. A second problem is that federal corn subsidies keep the price of corn high and therefore reduce the amount of corn purchased for the food aid program. A third problem is that ethanol subsidies have resulted in corn being used for fuel rather than human or animal consumption. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) study found that it takes five months to get a new food aid to the country where it is needed. This means that the food aid may not be timely. In addition to timeliness, international food aid programs can also have a negative unintended consequence for local growers and producers. International aid can disrupt the local economy by displacing local producers when U.S. products flood the market in a country that receives foreign food aid because of a drought or other food supply problem. The food aid can solve an immediate problem but driving local companies out of business is
an unintended consequence that has a negative long-term impact on a country’s (or region’s) ability to feed itself.

These problems of timeliness and impact on the local market have caused a new set of interest groups to participate in the creation of the food aid program in the Farm Bill. The new participants are lobbying government policy makers to pay more attention to nutrition, environmentalism, and international economic development as elements of the federal government’s food policy. These new participants complicated federal food policy. The traditional food policy focused primarily on ensuring an adequate food supply in the U.S. For example, CARE is a private international humanitarian organization that was created after WWII to alleviate poverty. It is one of the new participants in the food issue network that questions the effectiveness of the Food Aid Program’s efforts to alleviate poverty in other countries.

The United Nations Food Program and the World Bank are two international programs that provide emergency aid and economic development that is intended to help countries grow enough food to feed their own people. The United Nations Food Program provides food aid and The World Bank provides aid that will help countries achieve food self-sufficiency. In Africa, The World Bank programs have encouraged countries to eliminate fertilizer subsidies in favor of free market programs. One unintended consequence of The World Bank’s program is a steep increase in fertilizer prices which can actually decrease food production. The United States Agency for International Development has also focused on promoting the private sector’s role in providing fertilizer and seed, and considered government subsidies an impediment to the development of a private market in African countries such as Malawi, where famine has required extensive foreign food aid. The U.S. and international aid organizations have a major impact on the way that government officials in other countries think about food policy because are associated with advanced technological and organizational skills that increase productivity.

The **Green Revolution** refers to the steep increase in agricultural production that began with wheat in Mexico in the 1940s. The Green Revolution contributed to economic development by making it possible for countries that were not able to produce enough food to feed their own people to produce enough food to feed their people or even surplus production to be sold abroad. Food security means producing enough food so that the government can assist during times of drought, conflict, or natural disasters in order to avert starvation. One standard way that governments achieve food security is to regulate food prices in order to ensure that producers were profitable so that they were able to stay in business. Some developing countries created food marketing boards which regulated the food industry. The boards managed the industry to stabilize commodity and food prices at levels that allowed businesses to be
profitable while ensure that consumers had an affordable and adequate supply of food. The boards also bought commodities and stored them as insurance against a crop failure or inflation. These are examples of how the market model works.

15.34 | The Marketization of Food

Beginning in the 1980s, international aid agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF changed the goals of their programs. They strove to get countries to adopt food policies that reduced the government’s role in achieving food security and increased reliance on market approaches. In effect, the international aid agencies urged countries to move away from the government model and toward the market model. This change in policy has been called the **marketization of food**.

The marketization of food is part of the broader trend toward privatization in other areas of domestic public policy. Privatization refers to the policy of returning government functions to the private sector or having services such as waste removal provided by private sector companies rather than government workers. The government model relies on regulations and subsidies to provide an adequate and safe food supply. In recent decades, the international aid community has begun to reconsider the government model which has relied on price supports; subsidies for the costs of fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides, or high-yield crop seeds; and tariffs on imports. As economic development in general has promoted private sector activity, the international food aid community has considered the government model for food an unwise intervention in the marketplace. As a result, economic development policies have promoted market efficiency rather than government regulation.

The marketization of food meant that development aid encouraged countries to adopt policies that supported growing cash crops rather than food crops. Cash crops could be sold in the international or global marketplace. Food crops are grown primarily for domestic consumption. One result of international aid programs that emphasized marketization is that farmers grew crops like cocoa instead of staples such as maize, rice, or corn. Governments often encouraged international private investors to enter the marketplace in search of profits. Marketization and globalization are based on the assumption that each country or region of the world should grow for the international marketplace what it can most efficiently produce, based on its distinctive climate or local soil. International food aid therefore emphasized economic development as measured by international trade in commodities rather than food self-sufficiency. The results are now evident in some unusual data. For instance, there has been a marked increase in the concentration of production of certain commodities. Fewer than five countries now account for around 90 percent of the corn exports and around five countries now account for around 80 percent of the world’s rice exports. The increase in global efficiency has been accompanied by a global vulnerability to disruptions in trade or production. The increase in private investment has not entirely compensated for the public disinvestment. As a result, policy makers are rethinking the emphasis on market efficiency, and making food policy that encourages agricultural self-sufficiency as well as market efficiency. This will mean some government management of the agricultural sector of the economy. Food crises produce political crises (e.g., food riots) that
governments are expected to respond to even if the politics does not. Some countries with rapidly growing populations and changes in patterns of food consumption are buying foreign land for growing crops to import.

Think About It!
How Many Earths Do We Need?
The Global Footprint Network is an alliance of scientists who research the food supply necessary to sustain populations. The organization calculates, among other things, how many earths will be required to sustain human life at 1) current population levels and rates of consumption; and at 2) projected increases in population levels and consumption. The GFN measures consumption and waste at both individual level data and country level data.

15.4 | The Price of Food

Along with clothing and shelter, food is a basic commodity. It is one of the major items in the household budget. But the share of the average household budget that is consumed by food has steadily declined over the last half-century or so. See the following figure from U.S. Department of Agriculture data: 10
The decline in the food share of a household’s disposable income explains why food security is not a high-profile issue in the U.S. However, a long-term change in food consumption patterns has made food more political: the increased share of food that is now consumed outside the home. In 1970, 26 percent of all food spending was on food away from home; by 2005, that share rose to 41 percent. A number of factors contributed to the trend of increased dining out:

- A larger share of women employed outside the home;
- More two-earner households;
- Higher incomes meant more disposable income;
- More affordable and convenient fast food outlets;
- Increased advertising and promotion by large foodservice chains; and
- The smaller size of U.S. households.

The continuation of these economic and demographic trends is expected to keep boosting the percentage of American income spent on eating outside the home. Restaurants now account for almost half of the average household’s food expenditures. As a result, food safety and nutrition are on the government’s agenda. Consumers expect the government to inspect restaurants and food processing companies. And consumers are beginning to expect restaurants to provide consumers with more nutrition information about the items on the menu.

15.5 Public Health Interest Groups and the Food Wars

The increase in rates of diabetes and obesity has prompted public health advocates lobby to add nutrition to the traditional emphases of federal food policy. Getting nutrition on the government’s agenda has been an ongoing effort by individuals and organizations. Previously, such groups successfully lobbied the national government to make regulation of tobacco products a public issue after it was learned that nicotine was an addictive drug. Media campaigns play an important role in convincing government officials that they should act. The 2004 documentary *Super Size Me* (Directed by and starring Morgan Spurlock) called attention to the adverse health consequences of consuming fast food.


Interest groups representing the food industry, consumers, and health advocates have put food policy on the government’s agenda by emphasizing two issues: food safety and public health. Food safety periodically becomes a high profile issue when outbreaks of E. coli, salmonella, botulism or some other food-related illnesses capture the public’s attention. The demand for government action to ensure a safe food supply rises and falls with these episodic crises. Concerns about the health of the American population have also prompted calls for government action. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention periodically conduct Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys. The surveys show increased weight: In the early 1960s, 24 percent of American adults were overweight, defined as a body-mass index greater than 27. In 1980 the
survey showed 33 percent were overweight. The weight increase presents an interesting research question: what caused the increase? The answer is essential to any policy solution. Explanations of the cause vary. Some natural scientists attribute the increased weight to biology: our brains have been developed to eat a great deal during times of plenty so that the body stores fat for lean times when the fat stores are consumed. Social scientists identify other causes. Economists blame public policies that make cheap food widely available. The Green Revolution did make food cheaper relative to other goods and services that people purchase therefore people could consume more food—and chose to do so. Soft drinks, for example, are now part of daily calorie intake. Some public health advocates attribute the weight increase to addiction.

David Kessler is a former head of the Food and Drug Administration who advocated government regulation of nicotine as an addictive drug. Kessler maintains that the food industry has been reengineering food in ways that appeal to other kinds of human hunger. The food industry has successfully used marketing that emphasizes “eatertainment” rather than nourishment. It produces fun products, interesting products, social products, products that are craved. Kessler calls the industry approach “conditioned hypereating.” He compares the consumption of sweet and fatty foods with the conditioned response to gambling or substance abuse. McDonald’s discovered that re-portioning (or super-sizing) was a very effective marketing strategy because the average consumer doesn’t think in terms of calories, doesn’t count calories, but rather thinks and counts in terms of the number of portions consumed. In fact, neither consumers nor food manufacturers seem to think in terms of nutrition. Most food marketing is not about nourishment—large food companies such as Pepsico, for instance, advertise the “aspirational” or lifestyle goals of consuming their product. The Pepsico Web site markets its brands as “bringing fun and refreshment to consumers for over 100 years.” This is one reason why the comparison of the tobacco wars and the food wars is both appropriate and revealing.

The role that large multi-national corporations play in providing food has caused some concern about their control over the food supply. After the Supreme Court ruled that life forms could be patented, companies began aggressively asserting property rights to, among other things, seeds. The documentary, Food, Inc., describes the role that the chemical company Monsanto has played in this movement. Monsanto now has property rights over 90% of the soybean seeds and asserts those rights in court to maintain control over the growing of soybeans.

Governments are resorting to some innovative and controversial public health approaches to regulating diet. One such approach is the use of zoning laws to limit the number of fast-food establishments. In July of 2008, the Los Angeles City Council adopted an ordinance that established a one-year moratorium on the building of new fast-food establishments in a 32-square –mile area of the city, including South Los Angeles which has around 900 restaurants (many of which are fast-food), and high rates of both adult obesity and diabetes. As more than two-thirds of American adults are fat, declaring war on junk food is politically risky; the government has to be careful about declaring war on junk food. Will the metaphorical war on junk food work like the war on drugs or the war on tobacco?
Is sugar the new nicotine?

The following is based on an interview with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg about his portion control proposal to ban sweetened drinks in containers larger than 16 ounces. Mayor Bloomberg has become famous (or infamous) for his proposals to require restaurants to provide nutrition labeling on menu items and to ban “supersized” soft drinks. A journalist asked Mayor Bloomberg about his “campaign against the sugar-industrial complex,” the responsibilities of government and the responsibilities of individuals, and how he decides to pick his fights (priorities). Bloomberg replied that the government should not ban goods; it should provide consumers with information and then let them make decisions about what to buy. He considered calorie counts and portion control two ways to provide such information about how much sugar is being consumed.

Is eating like smoking? One person’s weight does not hurt another person the way that one person’s smoking hurts other people in the same area (second-hand smoke), but obesity does cost society which pays for health care. There is general agreement that government should prevent certain harms. Are sugary drinks like asbestos? The government would immediately pull people out of a building with an asbestos problem. The answer to the question, should the government regulate sugary drinks, is that it depends on the public-health issues. Bloomberg commented that obesity is an unusual public health problem because it is a disease that has gone from a rich person’s disease to a poor person’s disease: “For the first time in the history of the world, this year, more people will die from the effects of too much food than from starvation.” He decided to make health an issue as mayor and for his foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, because he likes to tackle problems that others consider too political or too complex—guns, for instance. The portion-size question is interesting because of the correlation between the rise in obesity and the consumption of sugar. “Look, the beverage companies aren’t stupid. Coca-Cola is run by a very smart guy; PepsiCo by a very smart woman. They see this train coming down the tracks at them. And that’s why they’re trying to get people to move over to Coke Zero or Diet Coke or Pepsi—Diet Pepsi—because down the road, the public is going to say “No mas. The cost of treating obesity is just out of control.”

McDonald’s sued New York City when it first required the calorie now they are voluntarily providing them.” The City is not proposing banning big drink it is proposing portion control: “All we’re saying is that restaurants and theaters can’t use cups greater than 16 ounces. So if you want to buy 32 ounces, you can buy 32 ounces, you just got to carry it back to your seat, or your table, in two cups.” The public and the food industry initially opposed smoking bans. But now cities, states, and countries are creating smoke-free places.

Environmentalism

American agriculture is extremely productive. The modern corporate, factory-farming model is very productive but it is also very energy and chemical intensive. The environmental movement has focused attention on the environmental costs of the industrial model of producing food. American agriculture requires a large amount of energy to produce crops such as corn and wheat and to produce commodities such as meat. Government crop subsidies increase food prices, increase food consumption, and
increase environmental damage. The average American consumer eats 8 ounces of meat per day. About 30 percent of world’s ice-free land is used directly or indirectly for livestock production, according to the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization. Livestock production generates 20 percent of world’s greenhouse gases, which is more the greenhouse gases produced by a more familiar source of pollution: transportation. If Americans reduced meat consumption by 20 percent, the energy saved would be equivalent to their switching from a standard sedan (say a Toyota Camry) to a hybrid (say a Toyota Prius).

15.7 | Final Food for Thought

Food is a good case study of issue transformation. Food used to be a private sector issue where individuals, families, farmers, food processors and providers made decisions about what to grow, how to provide food to consumers, and what food to buy without much government involvement. Today, food is on the government agenda and food policy is a substantial area of public policy. Changes in economic conditions, patterns of consumption, the environment, or health can prompt individuals and organizations to put food on the government’s agenda. These organizations then join the food issue network as participants in making food policy. These individual policy entrepreneurs and organizations are playing offense. Other individuals and organizations play defense and work to keep food policy off the government’s agenda. The American Beverage Association and the National Restaurant Association generally oppose more government regulation of their industries. But government inspections that prevent food-borne illnesses can actually protect the food industry by ensuring a safe food supply. Nutrition is another issue. The initial opposition to menu labeling has softened as public opinion has supported it. Portion control is still opposed because it raises anew the central issue in the tobacco wars and the food wars (or the food fights): —the political debates about the proper size and scope of government as much as the proper size of soft drinks.

15.8 | Additional Resources

Earth Policy Institute: http://www.earth-policy.org/


Sinclair, Upton. 1906. The Jungle. Available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/140

15.12 | In the Library


**KEY TERMS**

- Food security
- Modern food policy
- Clientele agency
- Green Revolution
- Marketization of food

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8. See the CARE “White Paper on Food Aid Policy,” (June 6, 2006).