



Emily Fritch
PharmD student, University of Findlay
Email – slonce@findlay.edu

HOW POLITICS INFLUENCES THE FOOD INDUSTRY

Food is a daily need that everyone requires to survive, yet there are so few people that consider how political decisions and the people that are in power affect the food system. In the webinar “*How Politics and Policies Affect Our Food*,” Michael Baranowski, PhD, takes a dive into the way politics affects food access, the disagreements in food policy, food labeling, the standards behind organic food, regulations on trade, and the cost changes that affect the foods that everyday Americans can buy¹. The reason that I chose this video for Dr. Sekars’ class is because I have always been interested in the way that politics and the political environment affect health decisions for the everyday person, specifically as someone who is vegetarian and relies heavily on fresh produce. Over the last year, grocery stores have seen an incredibly sharp increase in food prices, especially for things like fruits, vegetables and other produce items, so when given the opportunity to understand the impact of political actions better I was interested. Baranowski’s webinar gave me the chance to have a clear view of how the government’s decisions, food labeling policies, and bipartisan disagreements cause economic fluctuations and shape the modern American diet. This review will go over the strengths and limitations of the claims that Baranowski presented in his video and argues that while he effectively highlights the way that politics can influence food there are some complexities that need to be further examined through evidence-based methods.

Before viewing this webinar, I had a general understanding for the fact that government decisions could influence access and cost of food, but I underestimated the scale in which government decisions had that impact. Baranowski makes it a point to discuss how trade policies and tariffs have directly impacted the price of imported goods, especially fresh produce. Because of these trade policies and tariffs the prices have greatly increased, causing access to food to be limited. While there is a lot of data supporting this statement, The US international Trade Commission found that recent tariffs have significantly increased the prices of fresh produce and agricultural products, including fruits, vegetables, and nuts due to rising import costs being passed on to the consumer². Baranowski made a comment regarding the fact that fresh foods have become more expensive while processed foods remain widely accessible which aligns with USDA food price outlook data¹. This data shows that fruits and vegetables have experienced some of the largest and fastest price increases in grocery categories over the past several years. While the prices of fresh produce increased, in contrast overprocessed foods such as cereal, snack foods, and sweetened products have maintained a relatively stable pricing because they rely heavily on crops such as corn and soy that are already subsidized. USA Economic Research service reports confirmed that federal subsidies favor commodity crops used in processed foods disproportionately rather than fresh produce which creates a cost imbalance across the entire food supply³. The speaker of this webinar argues that political actions create nutritional inequality, and this is heavily supported by real market data from both the USDA and the USITC.

Another highlighted point in this webinar was the discussion of “pure American foods” and how the accessibility of these over processed products has increased. This point is also supported by nutrition research. There is a significant imbalance between access to fresh foods and access to inexpensive processed carbohydrates, and this issue is well documented as a public health crisis. As the speaker states, cereals and cheap carbohydrate heavy foods have remained prominent mostly because they are inexpensive to manufacture under the current subsidy system. Multiple studies show that the affordability of these highly processed foods can contribute to a higher intake of these foods among low-income households which increases their risk for chronic disease and nutrient depletion⁴. While



Baranowski does have some good points regarding this issue, I felt as though he framed it as a smaller problem and not a fundamental issue within politics¹. I think it is important to address the smaller issues and the larger structural problems because these substantial reforms such as a subsidy change or a restructuring of the entire policy remain neglected while something as simple as a labeling change receives a lot of political attention. One of the most intriguing parts of this webinar was the discussion regarding the term “organic,” which Baranowski states has become a highly politicized word. As someone who regularly spends quite a bit of money in the fresh produce section of my grocery store, I always assumed that an organic label on something was a very clear indicator of increased safety or quality, but the political processes are significantly more complex than I originally thought to be able to have an organic certification on a product. The USDA establishes the regulatory standards for the production and labeling of something being organic, these standards have been shaped not only by negotiation but also lobbying from both parties and ongoing debates⁵. The AMS specifies that organic foods do have to meet a certain criterion regarding the use of pesticides during and after farming practices, but the organic label does not necessarily mean or even automatically guarantee that there is an improved nutritional value in the product. There is a widely cited systematic review by Stanford where researchers found no strong evidence that conventional foods are any less or any more nutritious than organic foods even though organic products may reduce exposure to pesticide residue⁶. Even though there are numerous settings and large amounts of evidence, organic labeling usually functions as a marketing mechanism that gives companies the ability to charge a substantially higher price for produce labeled organic than for produce without that label. The speaker for this webinar points out that organic has become less of a health claim and become more of a price booster which is well supported by both research from the consumer side and federal agricultural policy.

This webinar also covers a significant portion of food safety standards and how they have evolved over the last decade. Baranowski makes a comment that seven years before the webinar was

made there were plenty of food safety crises going on such as contamination in spinach, eggs, and beef which dominated not only political discussions and debates but also public discussions about food safety¹. Since that time the food safety modernization act or FSMA has made a large impact on how the United States works towards the prevention of foodborne illness. The FDA reported that FSMA implementation not only strengthened supply chain oversight but enhanced inspection standards and created a more preventative framework rather than a reactive framework⁷. Baranowski discusses the fact that if nothing else political parties have moved closer together on food safety issues, and the fact that documentation is needed to support these changes¹. The FDA supports this shift towards bipartisan recognition of food safety as a critical public health priority. Despite all of this, however, partisan divides still remain in other areas including school nutrition guidelines, agricultural subsidy allocation, and even environmental regulations when regarding food. The webinar and the two speakers acknowledge the political tension surrounding these guidelines and policies however I believe that a deeper exploration of the way that these divides impact access and cost of foods for middle to lower class Americans is needed.

Something else that the speaker briefly touches on is micronutrient deficiencies that arise when individuals and their families do not have access to fresh produce which is a point that is supported by multiple different studies and public health data. The CDC makes note in several places that the intake of fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables is associated with deficiencies or normal levels in vitamins such as vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin K, and potassium. Deficiencies in these vitamins contribute significantly to an increased risk of chronic disease and fatigue⁴. This webinar does not go in depth as to supplementation for these deficiencies however the connection between the two is relevant. When access to fresh food declines, individuals and their families often turn to supplements to fill the gap and while these supplements can help in certain situations, they are not a foolproof plan to fill the gap between deficiencies. Throughout pharmacy school we are often told that while supplements are beneficial, they need to be used very cautiously, they need to



be verified for quality and ideally, they need to be recommended by a healthcare provider before they are just used. In most cases if an individual cannot afford the fresh products that would allow them to have the micronutrients to begin with, they will not be able to afford a provider to recommend the appropriate supplements to them, leading to a dangerous cycle. While it is not directly mentioned in this webinar it does add to the speaker's claims that reduced access to fresh produce can impair health and it's important to consider patients and providers alike when we discuss the political impacts of food accessibility.

This webinar overall provides an accessible and incredibly compelling overview of the topics, the purpose of it appears to be to introduce and not necessarily exhaust the topic that it is discussing and it succeeds. It conveys the essential relationship between politics and food without the overwhelming technical data that comes along with many of these discussions. However, I feel as though supporting some of these statistics and claims with specific percentages or some quantitative data would have been helpful in strengthening the argument for the people viewing that were unfamiliar with food policy. Certain statistics such as the specific percentage of increase in produce prices or the way that the subsidies are distributed throughout agriculture would have allowed the viewer to see a visual representation of the actual problem. In my experience, when it is something that a viewer does not understand having a visual representation of the statistics such as a pie chart or a bar graph of the numbers goes a long way in getting the point across to the viewer. I think that the speaker was in a unique position to be able to reach a larger audience with these visual aids and should have taken advantage of that.

In conclusion, Baranowski's webinar "*How Politics and Policies Affect Our Food*" provided a well-supported explanation of how the modern American food environment is shaped by access to fresh food, food pricing, political divides, and food labeling¹. Research from the USDA, FDA, CDC and other academic institutions support the majority of his claims with quantitative data. As someone who is personally affected by the rising food prices for fresh produce and the changes in availability, I have found the webinar both

educational and approachable. It is my opinion that understanding the political forces behind not only our diets but our access to food as a consumer and a health professional is vital. The speaker made it incredibly clear that the food system is not just a matter of agriculture, it is a reflection of the many political choices that go into determining who has access to healthy produce, how much they cost and the way that they are marketed to the public. This webinar does a very good job in showing the viewer that recognizing these influences is the first step in creating a fairer and healthier food landscape for everyone not just those that can afford the increased prices.

References:

1. Lemerond T, Baranowski M. How Politics and Policies Affect our Food presented by Michael Baranowski, PhD. YouTube. 2018. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHIK3cH7sSQ>.
2. Economic Impact of Trade Agreements. United States International Trade Commission. 2021. Accessed December 1, 2025. www.usitc.gov/publications/332/pub5161.pdf.
3. Food price outlook - summary findings. Food Price Outlook - Summary Findings | Economic Research Service. 2025. Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings>.
4. Micronutrient facts. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2025. Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/features/micronutrient-facts.html>.
5. Ohio Food Regulations. Federal Register: Ohio Food Regulations. 2025. Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-I/subchapter-M/part-205?toc=1>.
6. Smith-Spangler C. Correction: Are organic foods safer or healthier than conventional



alternatives? *Annals of Internal Medicine*.
2012;157(9):680. doi:10.7326/0003-4819-
157-9-201211060-00026

7. Food Safety Modernization Act . Food and
Drug Administration. 2020. Accessed
December 1, 2025.
[https://www.fda.gov/media/125884/down
load](https://www.fda.gov/media/125884/download) .