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POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF FOOD SYSTEMS: CORPORATE INFLUENCE, POLICY, AND PUBLIC HEALTH ACCESS

Today, the people's food system has become an economic and political issue as it seeks to balance the public's daily nutritional needs. In the Terry Talks Nutritional webinar, "*How Politics and Policies Affect our Food*," Dr. Michael Baranowski, a political scientist, offers his "analytical" explanation of how food production, regulation, labeling, and corporate practices are intertwined with political decision-making. His main claim is that food choices are, at their roots, political and shaped by economic interests and regulatory structures.¹ Looking deeper into how politics and policies affect public access to food, concerns of influence in nutrition, access, quality, and public health arise.

The webinar's foundation was built on many aspects, one of which was how every food purchase carries political consequences. Such consequences include economic resources toward particular producers, farming practices, and regulation.¹ Leach et al. emphasize in their review how food systems are shaped by "pathways of power." These "pathways," such as state institutions, corporations, global markets, and consumers, shape public access to food, among other things. Food is not just a human need to the "pathways of power," but is embedded within political economies.² This results in every food purchase driving greater governance over food and access.

Dr. Baranowski highlights that the rise of organic

and cruelty-free markets demonstrates how consumer trends shape food-related politics and policies. This trend, for example, has strengthened advocacy groups, increased lobbying influence on policymakers, and driven regulatory shifts.¹ The article by Woodhouse and Woodhouse supports Dr. Baranowski's claim by showing how corporate food actors leverage their influence to alter regulations. However, these corporate food actors do respond when consumers collectively change their demands.³ This all points to how, in Dr. Baranowski's claim, when organic food sales rise, the producers of these products gain leverage to push for what they want, whether that be different, stricter standards, or looser standards depending on their focus. Dr. Baranowski's point showed how consumer behavior can ultimately shape regulatory attention, consistent with empirical findings in markets.¹

Another central foundational point of the webinar is the disproportional power that large agricultural businesses and food corporations have. "Big Food" has leverage and outweighs consumer protection efforts in lobbying, food labeling laws, pesticide regulations, and stricter animal protection regulations.¹ The power these businesses have has significant consequences due to the disregard for morals and the impacts it has on people's and animals' lives, among other issues.

Woodhouse and Woodhouse's article demonstrates another central point by documenting how large food manufacturers use their political power to shape policy. These policy changes can affect issues such as children's nutrition, school meal standards, and food advertising. The article's analysis showed how corporate interests target regulatory processes, delaying or weakening regulations and reforms intended to protect vulnerable populations.³ Dr. Baranowski's example of how the continued delay of the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices rule is a similar example to what Woodhouse and Woodhouse describe.^{1,3}

Godrich et al. described how the structural and political barriers that the food-system reform has led stakeholders to favor public health approaches to food insecurity. This has created institutional resistance that slows policy change.⁴ Dr. Baranowski also demonstrated how political and lobbying efforts will not stop and will persist when public attention to the issue fades.¹ This approach to cause policy change requires dire circumstances for those affected before they see results. Dr.



Baranowski, Woodhouse and Woodhouse, and Godrich et al. validate one another in showing that the pursuit of financial gain dominates food policy, leading public-interest reforms to face long, resource-intensive battles before change is seen.^{1,3,4}

Dr. Baranowski criticized misleading food-labeling claims as false advertising during the webinar. Brands often label their products as “natural,” “gluten-free,” or “cholesterol-free” when these claims are not valid. Due to weak regulation, companies have adopted strategies to boost profits. This has created a loophole and an exploit that companies can use to promote their products.¹

Leach et al. explored how corporations regularly use ambiguous labeling to position themselves as “ethical brands,” yet do not deliver on improved nutritional and/or environmental outcomes.²

Woodhouse and Woodhouse also described many misleading health claims that were targeted at children. These claims would imply they were superior products and healthier than the competition, but were actually nutritionally poor. This is due to lax regulatory definitions that allow nutritionally poor products to appear more nutritious than they claim.³

Dr. Baranowski’s argument that weak regulation standards have allowed companies to use deceptive and manipulative labeling is supported by Woodhouse and Woodhouse, and by Leach et al.’s analyses. Major criticisms Dr. Baranowski had were those involving health claims in labeling, such as vitamins added to sugary cereal. Labeling like this influences consumers to purchase something they think is healthier, even when it is not. This misleading approach to product labeling obscures the underlying nutritional issues. The obscuring of these underlying issues is often validated by research demonstrating how marginal reforms can be used to avoid bigger structural change.^{1,2,3}

The webinar also discusses the political food issue of GMOs. Dr. Baranowski emphasized that the health and environmental effects of widespread pesticide use (mainly glyphosate) and the economic monopolization by companies that control genetically modified seeds have caused deep political issues in food. These issues are significant concerns for public health and food

access.¹

Although the vast majority of scientific results have not uniformly condemned the use of GMOs or labeled them harmful, much research has raised concerns about their use. Dr. Baranowski’s worries about politics and economics have been widely confirmed by research.¹ Leach et al. argue that the national-level policy decisions and global corporate structures have significantly shaped food technology and availability. This has led to things such as seed monopolies. These monopolies have created a dependency among farmers on patented technologies. This has led to significant concerns in the international policy literature, as politics and economics have put a chokehold on food access.²

Furthermore, Leach et al. emphasize that, though there are debates over GMOs, these debates are less concerned with biology. The primary debates over GMO use focus on governance, equity, institutional trust, and farmer autonomy. Dr. Baranowski highlights this as well in the webinar: the GMO debate is not solely a scientific issue but a political one that continues the narrative of political and economic gain over public health.^{1,2}

Cao et al. further emphasize the support of Dr. Baranowski’s claims by showing, empirically, that food markets respond intensively to policy uncertainty. Because of government decisions on trade, subsidies, and food availability/pricing regulations, public food access is directly affected. Dr. Baranowski emphasized this point as well by explaining how political decisions have a majority say in whether food is affordable and accessible, regardless of the consumer’s willpower.^{1,5}

Kamanga goes further, specifically in the context of COVID-19. Kamanga expands on how emergency policies during this time had disrupted food access worldwide. This lack of access disproportionately affected more low-income communities, hitting them the hardest and causing significant damage. Dr. Baranowski also emphasized this point by raising concerns about “food deserts,” socioeconomic barriers, and disparities in access to food. These concerns are not anecdotal; however, they are structurally reinforced in food policy frameworks that require reform.^{1,6}

Godrich et al. also argue that food insecurity has become a product of political decisions. This fundamental issue is not an individual failure; it is the result of political choices that have led to this



point. Dr. Baranowski confirmed this point as well, asserting that people who need food lack access to it. Low-income and vulnerable populations need high-quality food, but due to structural barriers, they have difficulty obtaining adequate access to healthy and nutritious food.^{1,4}

Dr. Baranowski advocated several policy directions leading to reform. By including stronger animal welfare standards, clearer labeling laws, and superior regulatory oversight, steps in the right direction can be taken. A review of the literature shows support for these areas. Godrich et al. showed how the rights-based food governance and more decisive state intervention can lead to reform. Leach et al. called for more equitable and institutionally supported food-system transitions. Woodhouse and Woodhouse recommended that stricter regulations in food marketing and improved standards of children's nutrition can also help lead to reform. This literature aligns well with Dr. Baranowski's conclusion that meaningful progress cannot occur without political will, public pressure, and a balance of consumer and corporate interests. Without this, no reform can happen, prolonging these issues of food access due to politics and policy.^{1,3,4}

The Terry Talks Nutrition webinar provided a visually clear and well-grounded overview of how politics structures and shapes the modern food system. Upon deeper examination and comparison with the academic literature, Dr. Baranowski's analysis becomes not only more persuasive but also well supported by empirical and theoretical research. The sources used in this review help confirm Dr. Baranowski's thoughts and analysis, while also showing how many factors shape policies. An imbalance of power, corporate influence, market volatility, inadequate access to healthy food, and regulation gaps/faults shape food policy. This webinar's central claim that food choices are political, labeling and marketing mislead customers, and structural reform is necessary, is continually reinforced by the literature. The webinar and Dr. Baranowski's conclusion are academically justified and consistent with current research on food politics and governance.¹⁻⁶

References:

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