

How Covid changed U.S. dietary health policy

Abstract

Since January 2025, three surprising changes have been made in U.S. dietary health policy. Under Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s leadership, 1) the Food and Drug Administration began to emphasize the safety of industrial ingredients in foods, rather than the nutrients in food; 2) together with the Department of Agriculture, FDA ignored independent expert advice and promulgated new Dietary Guidelines for Americans that sharply increase recommended protein intake from meats, butter, and whole milk; and 3) USDA approved requests from 22 states to block the use of SNAP benefits to purchase ultra-processed foods like soda and candy. President Trump had championed none of these changes in his first term, and many nutrition scientists remained skeptical of their value. It was the social trauma of the 2020-21 COVID pandemic that led to these changes, by reducing citizen trust in scientists and inspiring the rise of a new Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) social movement led by non-scientists.

Keywords: nutrition, policy, ultra-processed foods, MAHA, COVID, DGA, FDA, USDA, SNAP

Volume 13 Issue 1 - 2026

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Received: March 23, 2026 | **Published:** April 8, 2026

Introduction

Dietary health policy in the United States has undergone significant change since Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025. FDA has switched its focus from nutrition to the safety of industrial ingredients in food; new dietary guidelines have been issued promoting protein-heavy diets; and the Department of Agriculture has, for the first time, allowed states to block the purchase of soda and candy in the SNAP (food stamp) program. The improbable leader behind these changes has been an anti-vaccine trial lawyer with a famous last name, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who was appointed by President Trump to be Secretary of Health and Human Services, and was told by Trump to “go wild on food.”¹ Kennedy's rise would not have been possible without the social trauma of the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic, which sharply reduced citizen trust in scientists and researchers, particularly among heartland-based Republicans.

Loss of trust in scientists

Survey data measuring “trust in scientists and researchers” tell an important story. They reveal that the COVID trauma initially pushed Republicans and Democrats in opposite directions.² Early in the crisis, most Democrats appreciated the leadership of Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, in communicating public health requirements surrounding the pandemic, so their trust in “scientists and researchers” increased. Between April 2020 and November 2020, the trust level among Democrats increased from a strong 66.5 percent up to an even stronger 68.3 percent. Among Republicans, however, levels of trust in scientists and researchers declined over this same period from 53.7 percent down to 44.3 percent. As the pandemic dragged on, trust among Republicans eventually fell to an abysmal level of just 25.3 percent.²

Given the Trump administration's unprecedented success in delivering a life-saving vaccine for the COVID virus in less than a year's time through “Operation Warp Speed,” this declining trust among Republicans might seem puzzling. It is additionally surprising because up until 2006 Republicans had been more trusting in science than Democrats. Republican trust in scientists had nonetheless been falling even before COVID, thanks to a significant partisan realignment underway, based more on educational attainment than on income.³ This change increasingly sorted science-savvy college graduates into the Democratic camp, while non-college grads were becoming more

Republican. When COVID happened, these less trusting Republicans were primed to mobilize against the unwelcome advice they got from experts, such as masking requirements, public school closures, and novel vaccine mandates. The adverse reaction was particularly strong in the more religious heartland and in the South, where trust in science often competes with the language of faith.

As citizen anxiety over vaccine and testing mandates ramped up during COVID, RFK Jr. saw an opportunity to launch a political campaign skeptical of vaccines under the banner of a new populist Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement. Kennedy's presidential candidacy never took off, but when he dropped out in 2024 and endorsed Trump, the president-elect soon returned the favor by naming him Secretary of Health and Human Services. Once in office, Kennedy not only began pushing his anti-vaccine agenda; he and his “MAHA Mom” followers also began pursuing a new dietary health agenda, based in parallel fashion on populist fears and natural cures, rather than science. Natural foods such as berries, fish oils, and leafy greens do boost our immune system,⁴ but they are not an adequate substitute for medical vaccination.

MAHA had correctly identified poor dietary health as a leading cause of chronic disease in America, but it departed from FDA's emphasis on balancing and moderating the consumption of foods with added sugars, salt, and saturated fat, warning instead against petroleum-based food dyes, cooking with seed oils, genetically engineered foods, and chemical residues on foods. MAHA was also correct to warn against diets heavy in “ultra-processed” foods, since these have multiple non-food ingredients like flavors and emulsifiers, they often lack fiber and nutrients, and are made to be hyperpalatable, leading to overconsumption.⁵ But this new food category still under-researched, and it lacks an agreed definition, so designing a science-based policy response to ultra-processed foods remains difficult.

Three policy changes

Once on the inside, Kennedy's first move in the food space was to sideline a multi-year effort at FDA to approve what nutrition advocates had long sought, a front-of-package (FOP) nutrition labeling requirement to provide at-a-glance information regarding added sugar, salt, and saturated fat in foods.⁶ Instead of alerting consumers to excessive nutrients in food products, FDA began promoting “ingredient safety” instead, making it more difficult to

classify food ingredients as “generally recognized as safe” (GRAS) by requiring food companies to provide documentation of safety to FDA in advance.⁷ MAHA advocates refer to this as “closing the GRAS loophole,” but it will impose large burdens both on food companies and on FDA, with no guaranteed improvement in health. Proving the absence of a long-term chronic disease risk from a new food ingredient is, in the short run, essentially impossible; it is trying to prove a negative with no long run evidence at hand. Even for the safest new ingredients it will be a time consuming and expensive process. When this kind of notification was required for GRAS in the 1990s, it took the agency up to six years to approve each new ingredient.⁸

A second important policy change came at USDA, where in May 2025 Secretary Brooke Rollins began soliciting and approving requests from states to restrict the purchase of sugary beverages through the SNAP program, and in some cases candy as well.⁹ Soda and candy can indeed harm dietary health, but the SNAP program only serves low-income households, just 12 percent of the population, so these restrictions will impose MAHA standards only on the poor. Red state Republicans had come to view SNAP as a bloated welfare program and were comfortable with this targeting. In Congress in 2025, Republicans enacted a new law that cut the SNAP budget by 20 percent over the next ten years. The new food restrictions in SNAP were in part another anti-welfare MAGA move as well as a MAHA move. All but two of the 22 states granted soda and candy restrictions by USDA were Republican states. The more promising approach to reduce unhealthy soda consumption would be through excise taxes not restricted just to poor consumers, a step only a handful of Democrat-controlled cities have taken so far.¹⁰

Implementation of these USDA-approved food restrictions in SNAP will be technically challenging. Before 2025, both Republican and Democratic Secretaries of Agriculture had always rejected state petitions to impose new food restrictions in SNAP.¹¹ With 20,000 new food products introduced into the market every year, maintaining an up-to-date inventory of ineligible SNAP foods, state-by-state, is an unwelcome new administrative burden. The restrictions will also challenge SNAP shoppers, who might now be surprised at checkout to learn that their favorite energy bar has been classified as “candy,” and can’t be purchased with the benefit. Checkout delays and public shaming will result. SNAP recipients in five states have already brought a suit to roll back the changes. Retailers will be burdened as well. They might have to invest in “split tender” payment systems separating eligible from non-eligible foods for SNAP shoppers, a cost that could drive small rural retailers out of the program.

A third MAHA-inspired policy departure came when the Secretaries of USDA and HHS, in January 2026, promulgated new Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). Ignoring a two-year scientific review by 20 independent nutrition experts, they relied instead on their own hand-chosen team of advisors, many of whom had ties to the meat and dairy industries.¹² As a result, the new DGA increased recommended dietary allowances for protein by 50-100 percent over previous guidelines. The new DGA also promoted beef tallow and butter as “healthy fats.”¹³ Fats are important to our diet, and some foods—for example avocados, olive oil, fish, peanuts and peanut butter—provide an excellent source of monounsaturated healthy fats. Foods that combine meat and dairy products are higher in saturated fats, and raise levels of cholesterol (bad as well as good) in the blood.¹⁴

Conclusion and future prospects

One surprising feature of these three policy changes was the minimal role played by Donald Trump, who had not promoted any

of these steps in his first term as president, and who in his second term gave executive branch control on health policy almost entirely to RFK Jr. and his MAHA followers. Kennedy has encountered industry resistance in Washington, D.C. to his vaccine and farm chemical agenda, but his food agenda has been pushed forward with considerable grass roots support. This is thanks to newly created and well-funded organizations like MAHA Alliance and MAHA Action, and because there is money to be made once science has been pushed out of the way.¹⁵

Dietary supplements sold online and over the counter without any FDA screening for safety or efficacy have become part of a \$70 billion industry. RFK Jr. has said he takes “a ton” of them.¹⁶ Uncredentialed Internet influencers, such as Vani Hari (the “Food Babe”), generate controversy to draw traffic to their websites, to increase ad sales and subscriptions. When the Associated Press investigated MAHA in 2025, it found what it called “a web of well-funded national groups led by people who’ve profited – financially and otherwise – from sowing distrust of medicine and science.”¹⁵ Rebuilding trust in science is now a necessary task to protect future dietary health.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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