

Jerusha Klemperer:

On this episode of What You're Eating, we're joined by the co-hosts of the podcast Forked, which discusses “the politics and policy that are turning the American food system on its head.” For the past year-ish — maybe a little less, you can fill us in — co-hosts, Helena Bottemiller-Evich and Theodore Ross have spent a lot of their time discussing the Make America Healthy Again movement, or MAHA, its connections to de facto leader HHS Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, and the ways in which he and they are shaping policy and practice from federal and state laws, to food companies’ promises to change the formulas of their products. So, welcome, Helena and Ted.

Theodore Ross:

Thanks for having us.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah, thanks for having us. I'm happy to be here.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can you each briefly introduce yourselves a little bit about your background and why you two forces coming together make good sense? Do you want to start? Helena,

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Thank you so much for having us. We're glad to be here. I have covered food policy as a reporter here in Washington DC for about 15 years. I have always focused on food, so I'm a little bit of a strange reporter. Usually reporters bounce around topic to topic, but I really love covering food policy, so that has been my focus. I most recently was at Politico for nearly a decade, and I left in 2022 to launch my own publication called Food Fix, which is a twice a week newsletter that anyone can sign up for. You can get on the free list at foodfix.co. It's really B2B and B2C. So I do the insider Washington stuff. What's USDA doing? What is HHS saying about what's going on? And then I also try to cater to consumers.

I, throughout my career, have really felt that it's important to hold power to account, and follow all the nitty-gritty details, but then also be able to explain what's going on to consumers. And so I have really enjoyed doing that at Food Fix. And actually early in my career I did a piece for the Food and Environment Reporting Network where Ted is, are you the top editor? Is that what your title is?

Theodore Ross:

I am the Editor in chief.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Editor in Chief, there you go. So I've long been familiar with the work of FERN, and they actually do a lot of podcasts. You've had several podcasts over the years. And we started chatting about a year ago I guess, about doing a podcast focused on food politics. And it just seemed like a really good idea to team up and the rest is history. It's been I think a little under a year that we've been recording, and the response from the audience has been really great.

Theodore Ross:

So yes, I am the Editor in Chief of the Food and Environment Reporting Network, and we are an independent non-profit news organization that largely works in partnership with other outlets to put out journalism at the intersection of food and the environment. So food policy is a natural place for us to be, and working with Helena I think, Helena, you told me the other night that your story for FERN was our first story back in 2012, was it? Is that correct?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

I don't remember what year it was, but that sounds right.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Wow. It was a long time ago.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

It was about Ractopamine, which is a drug that is still at the center of a lot of trade fights. I know way too much about that drug.

Theodore Ross:

Helena is OG FERN, that's the technical term for her. My background is much more of a generalist sort. I've worked at a lot of monthly magazines and websites. I had a brief, not so brief, four year stint in television. And one of the reasons we started Forked, of course the subject matter is so vital, so much is happening in the food policy and food political space right now. And it's so unsettled, and sometimes unsettling. So I think it's very natural for FERN and for Food Fix to jump into this category. We also just do food and environmental coverage across the board, whether it's labor and immigration, soil, pesticides, however you get your food in whatever way, we are looking at the ramifications of it and trying to explain it to people. And also we had an email newsletter, which was a one-man news service called Ag Insider by Chuck Abbott and Chuck retired. And in my feeling, and I don't know if Helena thinks of it this way, I think she's a logical successor for us at FERN to what Chuck was doing, which couldn't really be replaced.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah, we should give Chuck Abbott his due, long-time reporter and the ag space and really just knew more than most anyone about, especially ag policy in Washington. And we're very delighted that he is getting the retirement he deserves, but he's missed on the beat. Yes.

Theodore Ross:

Absolutely. Chuck is missed. And I just wanted, for us for FERN, this was a modern way of not replacing what Chuck was doing, because that wasn't going to be possible for us, but for meeting that same kind of a need for informed, I think fun at times, analysis about food politics.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That's great, and I hope readers, or our listeners, get from this that both of your publications are absolutely essential reading. For me, I couldn't do my job without them. So grateful to have you guys here and to maybe introduce what you're doing to some new folks. So I've actually been watching your podcast on YouTube, which is not the way that I usually consume my podcasts.

Theodore Ross:

Can I make a little plug? It is available at FERN News on YouTube. And the kids today, as they say, they like to watch their podcasts.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Watching all of your episodes, it's really remarkable. It's not a MAHA podcast, however, so many of the episodes for the past, how many months have you been doing this?

Theodore Ross:

We started out earlier in the winter this year. We did three pilot episodes once a week, and then once we got our feet set, we changed to a bi-weekly cadence. So we come in every two weeks. I think we're on our 12th or 13th episode at this point.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And certainly a great number of them have focused on MAHA. And so what I want to do for What You're Eating listeners is really break down the nuts and bolts of, what this even every time I say movement, I pause because to me a movement really feels like something outside the halls of government. But this movement has moved into the very highest offices of our government. So I want to break down what it is and how it's influencing food policy right now in this country. For those of our listeners who don't know, what is MAHA? Is it a movement? Is it a policy initiative? Is it a commission? Is it all of those things?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Okay, so yeah, it's a great question. What is MAHA? So for anyone who has not been following, MAHA the acronym stands for Make America Healthy Again. So it is a play off of MAGA, which is the moniker Make America Great Again. So MAHA is a phrase that was born out of the alliance between Robert F. Kennedy Jr. when he dropped out of the presidential campaign and endorsed Trump. So this was late summer, before the election. And that phrase was really I guess the moniker under which they melded parts of RFK's agenda into parts of Trump's agenda for the final stretch of the campaign. That would include things like talking about pesticides in food, and vaccines and health freedom. There's a lot of things that are interwoven into this. MAHA is a big tent, really big tent, includes a lot of issues. It includes concerns about, there's people who don't like microwaves, there's people who don't like fluoride in public water.

There's people who are super worked up about microplastics. There's a lot of issues that plug into it. A big chunk of it is concerns about vaccines. And a big chunk of it, I think a much bigger chunk of it in terms of the number of people, is concerns about food. And what we basically saw is that this marriage, this unlikely alliance between them, because of course RFK Jr. had been a Democrat and then an independent, this unlikely alliance between them helped Trump win. It helped Trump win the election. How much? It's an interesting, I look forward to reading the dissertations about all of that, but a lot of folks within Trump's orbit seem to openly acknowledge how much this was helpful to bringing home some independents and some particularly women, so probably young people as well.

And that alliance has now thrust us into this place where we have, of course HHS led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. And we have a lot of other MAHA types running key parts of the government. They're inside, I think it's interesting to think about movement versus whether that's outsiders or insiders. They're inside, they control the levers of power. FDA Commissioner, Head of NIH, CMS, we're talking about \$2

trillion of government spending that is now ostensibly under MAHA. So I think that's the Cliff Notes version of MAHA and where we are now. Ted probably has some thoughts about, yeah, it's an interesting question. Is it a voting bloc? Is it a coalition? Is it a movement? It all happened really fast, I can tell you that.

Theodore Ross:

I think it's an interesting thing to think about whether or not it is a political movement. And I do think that it is. And I think what's interesting about it as a political movement, and of course the defection of RFK Jr. From Democrat to Republican, or his rejection by the Democratic Party that pushed him in his sort of messianic power seeking way into the Republican Party, that's a pivotal moment. But it also tracks with a longer trend. I think it's either that the things of the left vaccination that were originally of the left, concerns about food quality, potential fear of vaccinations, those were oftentimes things that stood to the left. But over time, and this predates RFK Jr's political switch, they were moving to the right. So when RFK Jr. jumped, it made sense. There was a political foundation there for him to be accepted as a Republican because the people in this movement had already gotten there before him. They were really just waiting for him there.

This is one of the things that we talk about on Forked a lot is how does the politics of the MAHA movement split along left and rightward lines? I think what we're seeing now is its pretty much a party political movement of the right at the moment, but I don't know that that's going to be permanent. I don't think we can really, really tell. But I think yes, everything that Helena said about that moment in time when RFK Jr. jumped into the Republican Party, that's a big turning point in this country and it has had massive ramifications in the near term.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

And just to add one thing, I think it's so true that that moment was a turning point, and I've heard different MAHA leaders talk about what it was like to witness that moment. And actually you can go back and watch it. When RFK Jr. comes onto the stage with Trump at the rally. It was a rally in, I think it was Glendale, Arizona, it was somewhere in Arizona. There are literal fireworks, they're shooting pyrotechnics, and the crowd is going crazy. There is so much energy for Kennedy in this crowd, and I think Trump even makes a comment like, "Oh, nobody can get applause or whatever like Bobby." Those close to him, call him Bobby. And you can just sense that, it's almost like you can see Trump doing the math. There's energy here. Does Trump actually care about toxins in food? I'd never heard him bring it up until that day, ever. I've covered him, his first administration, never, ever.

Theodore Ross:

He certainly likes ultraprocessed foods as we've seen.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Loves McDonald's, loves Diet Coke. These are not, he's open about this. So these are not issues he wakes up and thinks about. I do think that he has had some concerns about vaccines over time, and I am not really sure the whole origins of that. But I don't think he wakes up thinking about them. But he saw energy, grassroots energy and excitement around some of these ideas. And I think that's why this caught on, is that there was real excitement among some voters about these issues. And I think it caught a lot of people by surprise, because we have not seen these be campaign issues. Anyone who's followed food, you would almost never see food brought up in a presidential debate. It just wasn't an issue that would

be considered that high priority. So to watch it enter the main political message in the final weeks of the campaign was just fascinating

Theodore Ross:

In the way that it did.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

And it worked.

Theodore Ross:

In the way that it did, too. Because if you think about it, it's very rare for one party or another to be able to successfully claim the other's ideas, or political energy. You could look at the case of healthcare. The popularity and unpopularity of the ACA wax and wanes over time, but it sticks with the Democrats. Imagine if we woke up tomorrow and there was a figure within the Democratic Party who jumped onto the right with healthcare at its center. I don't think it would work. The reason why I worked with RFK Jr. is because those people had already gone. They had already moved. And I don't think there is a political comparison that could be made to that. I don't know of one that you could say, "Oh, it worked like that."

Jerusha Klemperer:

And obviously there are compromises, then, to be made. And I have some questions for you about how much anyone planned to compromise, or understood or thought ahead about those compromises. But as you were talking, that image of RFK and Trump, and I can't remember if it was some Trump Jr's or whatever all together on Air Force One eating a McDonald's meal, or at least posing with a McDonald's meal with a thumbs up. And I just thought, all of us wondered, what is going through RFK Jr's mind right now? Because I am sure that he does not eat and has not and will not, but he's made a calculus here.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

He ate it apparently that day.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Oh, okay.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

That's what people said. That's what they said. But I think he doesn't eat it normally. There was recently a podcast where Cheryl Hines, his wife, said that he only eats steak and fermented food, and he will ask her to bring his sauerkraut in her purse and she'll be like, "No, I'm not carrying your sauerkraut around."

Theodore Ross:

She stopped doing that once she found out about Olivia Nuzzi.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Well, no, this was recent. Nope, Ted. Nope. This was like last week. This was like two weeks

Theodore Ross:

She's still carrying his sauerkraut.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

No, she said she wouldn't because it would get her purse stinky. You can't carry sauerkraut in a nice purse.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Everybody knows that.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Everybody knows that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

My question about that unholy alliance that started was, and we're going to tease out some of these confusing contradictions.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

So many.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Anyone who has paid attention to these things could look at that rally, or at that McDonald's meal on Air Force One and think, "How is this going to square away in these various ways?" Like I said, we'll come back to the contradictions, but do you have a sense of, in the beginning, was RFK Jr. being played? Were the MAHA moms being played? Was it like, "We just need your votes, we just need you here. We'll take high fructose corn syrup out of Coke, and some red food dye out of some Fruit Loops and you guys will be happy. And we got the votes we needed to deport immigrants." You know what I mean? Was it that, or was everyone just like shrug, "let's see what happens and we'll come to things as we come to them"? This is highly speculative, but I wonder what each of you thought then and what now, all these months later watching every step of this, what you think now.

Theodore Ross:

I don't think that they thought they were being played, no. I think, like I said, I feel like the ideas that are in the MAHA movement had already jumped over to the right anyway. So really what you saw from RFK Jr. was a political opportunity to do the things that he wanted to do, which he did not have with the Democrats. If Kamala Harris had been elected, and in some bizarro world he was Secretary of HHS, which would not have happened, he would not be able to do the kinds of things, or attempt to do the things that he's doing right now. So no, this was always a really good deal for both sides.

And what I do think is interesting, you were talking about flashing forward a little bit, you look at somebody like Elon Musk getting a hold of DOGE for the first few months of the administration. Usually what you see with Trump is people do that, and they go buck wild for a while, and then he gets mad at them and then they're gone. And here we are almost a year into almost a year until the first State of the Union address, and RFK Jr. is still, and this is a technical term, going ham on the food system as he was in the beginning too. So yeah, I don't think anybody got the short end of the stick.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

I think in the beginning, RFK made it really clear that they really believed that this commitment to the MAHA agenda was very genuine. And how genuine it was at that time, I don't know. I was not inside those rooms. But I think right now, fast-forward to the actual implementation of the agenda, we're seeing a lot of compromises, and a lot of questions about how serious that commitment really is. Because so many of the things that they talked about on the campaign trail are now not happening. So a good example would be, RFK stood in front of USDA before the election and said basically, "If you get me inside the government, I'm going to reform farm subsidies and ban pesticides that are controversial." And neither of those things have happened in any way. In fact, environmentalists are very critical right now because a lot more pesticides are going to be approved.

The stance seems to be that they're going to clear these backlogs, and a few pesticides have been approved that environmentalists are concerned act a lot like PFAS in the environment. And so they're like, you told the MAHA moms you were going to restrict pesticide or bring down the hammer in some way, and now what you're doing is this other thing which is actually potentially making it easier to get pesticides to market, and you're actually not cracking down on these controversial pesticides in any way. And so that would be an example of where the rhetoric that they had on the campaign trail doesn't match what they're doing. Now, I don't know how much of that contradiction is breaking through to voters, but it's probably a matter of time before some of that conflict starts to come out more. It's mainly played out in terms of MAHA advocates within the movement being critical of the administration, or being frustrated. So we've seen some of that play out on social media or whatever, but I don't know that it's really broken through yet on the food side,

Theodore Ross:

But that's on the food side of the tent. If you're looking at the MAHA movement more broadly, it just depends on which of those two issues you think is more important. Because the vaccine stuff-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Some of the vaccine people are really mad though too. They don't think he's gone far enough pretty, even though he's definitely done more substantive changes, they've done a lot more substantive changes on vaccines. No question.

Jerusha Klemperer:

On the pesticide front and the angry MAHA moms, I just want to tease out for our listeners a little bit too, that when you're trying to get rid of pesticides... What would it look like to get rid of pesticides? What are the policy things that they could have, that he could have, and maybe they would say should have done to make organic food more widely available, or to have non-organic food, just mainstream industrial agriculture, use fewer dangerous pesticides? What were the things that they hoped that he could make happen that he is not doing?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

I think he straight up said they were going to ban Atrazine and certain things that, that EPA could do. A lot of the MAHA folks are quick to not blame RFK for not doing these things because they're like, "Well, he doesn't control EPA. It's like, ugh, Lee Zeldin over there." But it's all the same administration. They all helped vote that administration in. And so I think that excuse isn't going to work for the long term. You can't just be like, "Oh, well." A good example is I was just at an event with Kennedy a couple of hours ago, and he said that basically we're poisoning kids again with ultraprocessed foods in school meals. Well, USDA could write new rules today. Republicans control the House, the Senate, and the

administration. Where's the plan? If that is the concern, if that is the administration's position, I just think it begs the question, what are they doing about it? So people will say, "Oh, well Bobby doesn't control USDA." But you told the voters you were going to do these things.

So I think there is a lot that remains to be seen in terms of how serious they are about actual policy changes. Almost nothing has actually changed in terms of food policy. They have bullied food companies into removing some synthetic food dyes, and I think they've gotten a lot of credit for that. That's popular with Republicans and Democrats. But they've done that because West Virginia banned those things as of 2028, and so they had this bludgeon, they had this hammer on the horizon. That's not the federal, that's not the same as using federal policy. So FDA has not banned anything. So there's this very big gap, I think just between the rhetoric and the reality. Yeah.

Theodore Ross:

I think the issue at play here is just how Republican this movement is. So my belief, and the polling seems to suggest that the people who support MAHA most strongly are ideologically driven and they are Republicans. However, the problem with that is that Republicans, as a general rule of thumb, they don't believe in strong regulation by the government. So which flavor of the Republican philosophy holds sway? I don't think anybody knows that. So far, while the rhetoric has been very much about the bully pulpit, and forcing, getting rid of dyes and all that stuff, but so far the tried-and-true, anti-regulatory cut-the-government philosophies are still in power. Whether that's going to remain true forever, who knows?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah. It's interesting. If you look at the polling, Republicans actually overwhelmingly support more regulation of processed foods, more regulation of pesticides. The polling almost matches the Democrats on that, and so the vibes have shifted a lot. But it's like, yeah, did the ideological underpinning that would be required to actually follow through on that shift?

Theodore Ross:

Not yet.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

We're not seeing that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So you mentioned PFAS before, and I just wanted to come back to that a little because it's something that we've covered a lot on Food Print and also on What You're Eating. And just to explain that those are perfluorinated chemicals known as forever chemicals, that end up in our soil, and our water. And that right before the new administration started, there were some promising and hopeful moves towards regulating them strongly. They are now understood to be extremely dangerous. Something that I think is so weird and interesting is to understand RFK Jr's past as an environmental activist, specifically around water. And PFAS and water have come to be understood as married in a terrible way. What happened here? If we regulate water, if we get PFAS out of our water and out of our soils, all of these downstream upstream, up the pyramid, down the pyramid, however you want to talk about it, health outcomes get better. Is this part of what he had to shed to get food additives fixed?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

First of all, food additives are not fixed. I think they're saying that that. Yes.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm going to put that in quotes.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yes, put it in quote, put it in quotes.

Theodore Ross:

Not fixed. And fixing PFAS would be more important than fixing food additives, right?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Correct, much more.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

I don't know. Probably. Probably. But I don't know. The fact that we don't have an actual plan for getting PFAS out of the environment and out of water is a real scandal. I don't know that RFKs had to answer for that, honestly. I don't know that he has directly been asked about the administration's relaxing of certain PFAS standards, or I think in some cases they've moved the timeline out. I don't know that he has specifically answered for that. And part of that is because of this division between, that's technically not under his purview. And so I think some folks within the MAHA movement really have given him a pass on that. But there's no question that all of this goes together. Yes, water is an EPA issue, but spreading whether it's water or sludge or whatever used on farmland, that very quickly becomes a USDA and FDA issue because it is in the food. And so you can't really silo these off into one agency or another.

Theodore Ross:

No, you can't. But they would love to. They would love to. I think if you were to hold RFK Jr to account for it, you would be forced to acknowledge the fact that his jump from Democrat to Republican is wildly, staggeringly self-interested. He did what was best for him to get the things done that he wanted to get done. How much that actually extends into the implementation of rules, and laws that are related to the things that he believes in, I don't know. He'd have to speak for that himself. But the fact that he's not getting anything done on PFAS hasn't hurt him. He's still in a position of ascending popularity on the right and authority on the right. So far, he hasn't paid much of a price for not following through on the things that he has been for many, many years saying were important.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. I wanted to come back to, you said that he eats mostly meat and fermented foods, and I wanted to talk about meat.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

According to his wife, so that's what she said.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I want to talk about meat for a minute, and this meaty moment as I keep thinking of it. And it's connected to some of these tiny wins, wins with corporations. So many months ago, there were a bunch of announcements about bringing us back to beef tallow for fries instead of seed oils, and what a great gain that is, lots of PR around, is it like Steak and Shake, Shake and Steak?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Shake and Steak.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I don't know what? That they switched.

Theodore Ross:

The butter burger. Yeah, their thing is that they cook their fries in beef tallow, and they also have something called a beef butter burger. It's just a hamburger with a big old slab-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

But also people don't realize that the fries are still coated in seed oils. And so the MAHA diehards were not fully impressed with this move, which just made it even more added to the silliness.

Theodore Ross:

Coated it before they-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah, so they buy the fries frozen and they're coated.

Theodore Ross:

Oh, they buy them frozen. Yeah, I see, I see.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

But yes, the fact.

Theodore Ross:

There's no truth in beef tallow, you can never really get it.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

The fact that it was being touted as a health move really upset a lot of nutrition experts who were like, "This is still a burger and fries. How can you claim this is healthier?" It just really broke their brains and everyone was just like, "What are we doing here?" It's interesting though. The administration in a lot of ways has backed off the whole seed oils moral panic. You do not hear them talking about this much lately. Really, I'm trying to think the last time I heard.

Theodore Ross:

It hasn't come up as much. You're right.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Brought it up. And I think it's because the farm groups really pushed back, and they were like, "What are you doing? You do not have the evidence to support these claims." And also American farmers grow these products, basically FU, in a nicer way. They were pushing back really hard. And so in a way, I think that that has gone through, but we'll see. I don't know.

Jerusha Klemperer:

But that's maybe a backing off of seed oils maybe, but the meat thing-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Oh yeah, they love meat.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I want to know what you both think is coming down the pike in the dietary guidelines. Are we going to see something pushing meat? There's been a lot of talk about bringing back the food pyramid, or there's lots of expected changes. Can you both share some thoughts on what we can expect to see around meat?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Meat's going to be, I think, treated very well in the dietary guidelines that are going to be coming out. They've said pretty openly that they're not going to tell people to cut back on saturated fat like we have been told for decades. They are starting now to use the term natural saturated fat, which I think suggests they're not going to say any saturated fat, but things like butter, whole milk, obviously meat that's not lean cut or lean ground beef. I think all of those things are going to be treated preferentially. I also think they're going to have a focus on whole foods, and they're going to tell people to eat fewer ultraprocessed foods, which actually a lot of nutrition people are, like, the evidence supports that to an extent.

What else are they going to do? Oh, there is some rumor that they might bring back the food pyramid. I think if they do that, it could be upside down or look, it'll be different. It's not going to be recognizable I think to the old one. Which by the way, we haven't had for a long time. The food pyramid got retired back in 2011. Not a lot of people know that. But the messaging around nutrition is going to change a lot. And I actually think it's going to end up being similar to what we've seen happen with vaccines, where the American Academy of Pediatrics is essentially making its own schedule now, that's different than the CDC schedule. Because they're saying basically, we can't trust the government to follow the evidence.

And I think a similar thing could happen around nutrition, where we're going to see the new dietary guidelines come out and certain health groups, health experts are going to say, "Some of these are not based in evidence." And they're going to say, "Actually, you should do this." And so it's going to be chaotic. That's my prediction. But I also think they're still working this out. We may see them in December, but it could end up being in January. I'm not sure.

Theodore Ross:

I think that's a pretty comprehensive answer right there. I don't have much to add to that. But what I do think is useful to notice with someone like RFK Jr, and it's true of Trump as well, you can have a situation in which no matter what happens, the RFK Jr. benefits politically. So whether they use the all beef food pyramid, and whether it's isosceles or right, I don't know. He's okay. However much of that gets put into

action, he's fine. But if whatever does not get into that, the byproduct of it is this balkanization of received understanding of what is good for you to eat. And if you are somebody who's bent on knocking all these institutions down, when you are effectively a destructive force in politics, that's fine. You either get through the thing you want, or you harm the thing you don't want, so you win either way.

And I think that's a lot of what we've seen with the institutions that RFK Jr. has authority over. If you look at vaccine policy, some of the vaccine policies go forward, some of them don't, but everything is undermined. Everything is cut down at the knee. So I think this will be probably a less dramatic version of that, but I think you'll see the same kinds of outcomes.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. I want to talk a little bit about business and big business, and we've touched on this in 100 different ways. We've mentioned fast food chains, or maybe I said Coca Cola bringing back sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup. There's a lot of-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

By the way, they're bringing back, they're having another option. They did not actually take, but it was the President spread a rumor that was not true, but yes.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yes.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yes. They're adding a line that uses cane sugar instead of corn syrup.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And so MAHA has had a lot of interplay with big food businesses that are some a little antagonistic, some friendly, and it's like everything we've discussed, it's the equivalent of an upside down food pyramid. It's chaotic. It's confusing. But it of course makes me think any one of us who've been thinking about, talking about, writing about food and how to improve the food system for many years, is thinking all the time about Michelle Obama's attempts to make some of the same changes, some in different ways, some different. But my understanding of the narrative from the Obama administration was a real attempt for reform, and then realizing that you have to contend with food businesses, food and agriculture businesses. And that there were huge losses, and huge compromises, and dropping of conversations around things like antitrust, but then also some of the health work, that it's really hard to fight business and fight big business.

And of course in this administration, which is hugely pro-business and anti-regulation, that comes up especially. And I'm curious to hear both of your thoughts on the evolution of MAHA's relationship to business, to big business and food business. In your newsletter a few days ago Helena, you mentioned going to this sort of under-advertised MAHA Summit, and described this unholy marriage there of tech, of business. Anyway, I would love to hear each of you talk about what you perceive, is the relationship friendly, hostile, both, changing every day, between MAHA and business?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

A couple of things. I think the first is going back to the Obama years, they dropped their work on certain things, like antitrust, really good one, food marketing to kids, that folded pretty quickly. Even inserting

sustainability into the dietary guidelines. That was a huge fight. They walked away from that. There were certain things where they just were like, "We can't fight this." But overall, they got a lot of the things they wanted to get done on nutrition. They got them through. They did an added sugars label. We got calories on menu labeling. They reformed school meals. But I think looking back, it looks pretty modest what they did. There were huge fights over half a cup of fruits or vegetables being required, things like that. And Republicans lost their frickin minds. They thought it was a nanny state takeover. It was really, really controversial.

So I think in many ways, the Obama administration was pretty adversarial to big food, although they definitely found ways to try to work together so that it wasn't like pushing a boulder uphill. They did a lot of corporate commitments, like with Walmart, trying to reduce sodium and their private label stuff. There was a lot of that work trying to convince them to do things for good PR. And then the First Lady would show up, and they were trying to do the carrot and stick approach. Going to what MAHA has done, I think overall, they're pretty adversarial against big food. And I think most food company leaders are pretty scared of not just, maybe not the policy actions, but the rhetoric coming out of these officials is really damaging to them. We're actually seeing snackings going down. We're seeing these processed food companies are in real trouble in terms of not being able to generate growing consumer demand.

That's not all MAHA. Some of it's probably GLP-1s, just general interest in food and nutrition, and some of it's generational. There's a lot going on there, but they're having a lot of challenges. They're scared of MAHA. And what I've noticed is there's a huge difference between the political power of the food industry in Washington right now, and the political power the agriculture side has. So we mentioned they've backed off of seed oils, they've backed off of pesticides. Those are things that the agriculture lobby has pushed back on. But the big food companies are not as organized. They don't have as much political power. And in some ways, some of that is leftover from the Obama years. They all fought with each other on how to fight back, and there was a lot of splintering. The big lobbying group actually broke up during the Obama years because they were divided in how to push back.

And so big food is splintered. It's not as politically powerful, and I think that's why it's been a lot easier for MAHA to punch down at them. That said, they have still found ways to work with industry. And the MAHA Summit's a really good example of that. There was a lot of biotech, and VC and just wearable tech there. You could tell there was a lot of wellness money there, and that's all big business. It's just a different kind of business. So there weren't a lot of food companies there, certainly not big food companies, although Walmart was there, which was interesting. I think they just took out a lot of synthetic food diets from their private label. So I think they're trying to get in front of this. They're seeing consumers change how they're reading labels and such.

So there's some examples where MAHA seems to be okay working with business, wellness things, bio-hacking things, certain they were giving out potato chips fried in beef tallow that run you \$79 for a six-pack, which is very expensive for potato chips. Love potato chips, something of a connoisseur, that's very expensive for potato chips. And so yes, and there was protein powder, creatine and all these things in the goodie bag, or the swag bag. So I don't think they're opposed to working with business, but there's still a lot of attacking big food, and attacking ultra processed food in a way that does scare the food industry. They hate it. They hate all of it. So I think there's a big difference in the political power of the two. It's been interesting to watch. Yeah.

Theodore Ross:

I just want to add very briefly to that. Earlier this summer, I went to the national conference at the state level Departments of Agriculture. And so there's representatives from all 50 states, all the parties, obviously the Republicans are in ascendance right now, so you hear a lot more from them than you did

from Democrats. And there were speeches by folks from Walmart, and Cargill, and Tyson and things like that. And across the board it seemed, it was interesting to me, tracked from both parties, everyone there was concerned gravely about the MAHA movement. And not necessarily from some partisan or philosophical perspective, it's just they just didn't know what they were going to do. So when we talk on Forked all the time about these contradictions, and the mixed messaging, and you're going to do vaccines, and you're going to do dyes and how does it work together? What those folks at the Department of Ag level and the big companies, what they just want is they want stability. They're not going to give up their-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

It's chaos.

Theodore Ross:

It's chaos. And they are scared. Not scared of what MAHA might do, just scared that nobody's going to do anything and they won't be able to operate. So I think that's more than there's like, "Oh, MAHA won't work with big business." I think they will. I don't see why they wouldn't. They may just force some tweaks to what the products are, but right now there's so little coherence to what's happening that it's just bad business.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

They've been cheering when the food companies announced we're going to get rid of synthetic dyes by X date, which is, I look at it and I'm like, "Well, they're doing that because it's banned in West Virginia." But setting that aside, let's give them credit for pulling synthetic food dyes out even though they have to. Okay, let's give them credit. I look back though to Michelle Obama, and when I ask a lot of the MAHA people, "Did you support the Michelle Obama, the Let's Move era? Because this is pretty in line with a lot of what you're asking for now." And they'd be like, "Well, she kind of sold out to big business." And I'm like, we're seeing the same thing happen where they're like, well, we have to work with them, and praise them when we do what they want. And it's interesting to see that pattern repeat, and I don't know that they're really getting that much heat for it, but it's interesting.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So I also want to touch on, we've hinted at this, but it's Make America Healthy Again, but there's definitely a big emphasis on kids and children, and I wanted to talk a little bit about SNAP, and WIC and hunger. And the government shutdown has ended, but there were interruptions, and fear, and instability, and it was really a scary and terrible time for the millions of people in this country who worried about being able to eat. And I wondered, I didn't see anything, but you both may have followed this more closely. Did MAHA speak at all to SNAP? Do they ever talk about hunger, especially childhood hunger?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

I don't ever see it. The only time I see MAHA talking about SNAP is wanting to restrict what you can purchase. So they really support the state level waivers that allow states to say, knock out sugary drinks, or energy drinks or candy. They tend to support that and they'll say, "SNAP's important. We need to focus it on healthy foods, or we need to focus it on the highest need families." And it's interesting, because there was a time when that was a more liberal position actually, that there were progressives pushing to try to get SNAP restrictions. Although the politics on that have changed a lot. You really do not see a lot of support for the traditional parts of the safety net that are essential for tens of millions of

people, SNAP, WIC, school meals, or even universal free school meals. California is doing a lot around trying to get more money into their school nutrition program so that they could do more scratch cooking, so that they're trying to push some of the ultraprocessed foods out of their schools.

So all of that takes money, and focus, and looking at these traditional safety net programs. And so far, we have not seen MAHA focus on that, and I really didn't hear much, if anything from folks during that time, which was so incredibly stressful. The rulings were changing every hour. Someone trying to plan their family budget, trying to figure out when they were going to be able to go to the grocery store. It was just her horrifically stressful and confusing, and yeah, I didn't hear MAHA talk about that at all. But it's possible I missed, but I do follow a lot of these folks.

Theodore Ross:

I don't think that's very surprising though. Again, we keep going back to the same thing where it's like the politics are unsettled, but at the moment, this is a Republican political movement, and they are in government, and the Republican Party is not in favor of these programs. They are much more willing to cut them and limit benefits. You're not going to be a successful MAHA person if you are talking about the kinds of things that you're suggesting, that you want to expand SNAP, and you want to make sure that people have unlimited access to food. That ain't where the party is.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

It was interesting though, during all this, you started to see Republicans really coming out and talking about the importance of SNAP, because they were so angry at the Democrats. They were trying to blame the Democrats.

Theodore Ross:

Yeah.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

And so Josh Hawley wrote this piece in the New York Times basically saying, SNAP was so important. It was a lifeline. And I was like, wow, this is actually a really mainstream Republican defense of SNAP in a way that you don't always see. But it's because the political dynamics were such that they were trying to bludgeon the Democrats to reopen the government in that moment. It was just a huge mess though. What a mess. SNAP benefits had never lapsed until this shutdown, and it's just an absolute governance failure. Whoever you want to blame for the shutdown, it's an absolute governance failure that Washington let SNAP lapse. It was bad.

Theodore Ross:

But it's also one of those things that-

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

It still is going to be causing chaos for some time.

Theodore Ross:

That's what I wanted to say. It's like I was talking about how if you are in RFK Jr's shoes, and I know he's not responsible for the government shutdown, the failure to address SNAP during the shutdown, its lingering impact is less trust in that system, which is similar to what we saw with vaccines, which is

similar to what we've seen with all of these things. If your goal is to knock these institutions down, whether SNAP comes back quickly, comes back slowly, or doesn't come back at all, you win.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. You mentioned Helena, that state and federal discrepancies around SNAP lapsing. There's also some really interesting state, federal policy fights happening with MAHA, and I wondered if you two could talk about some of the preemption fights, and what does that mean when we hear preemption? What is happening on the state level versus federal level with MAHA policies?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah, we just did a live podcast taping in DC, and one of the panelists we had is a woman named Summer Barrett who played a really big role in passing the West Virginia bill actually, to ban synthetic food dyes in the state. Well, actually it's already been implemented in school food, but it will apply to all foods sold in the state as of January 2028. She's a self-described MAHA mom. And just looking at how much work went into that, passing a state level bill, it was the first in the nation bill to do that. RFK Jr. Was actually there to sign the bill with the governor. It was this big thing. And she is so angry that Congress is now considering possibly preempting all of these state bills. So the food industry has really been pushing to have basically federal uniformity. They want Congress to step in and say, "We're not going to have all this chaos. We're not going to let West Virginia do this. We're not going to let Texas have a labeling bill, Louisiana. There's all these states that have passed MAHA bills that do create a patchwork."

,And for someone like Summer or all of these other state leaders that have put these bills into place, with a lot of grassroots support, they're pretty furious that there's a possibility that they would not only have all their bills overturned, and they wouldn't be able to be implemented, but also they argue it's like it's not Republican. Because Republicans usually are pro-states rights. So it's this very confusing, I don't know, mishmash of ideology and I don't know. It was interesting though, to talk to them about it.

Theodore Ross:

Yeah. I don't know that I have much more to add to what Helena said other than it's a "through the looking glass" thing, where the behaviors and the political motivations, they're not super clear.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

It's also wild that MAHA pushed back so hard that the first vehicle that could have included preemption was the bill from Senator Roger Marshall, Republican from Kansas. And MAHA pushed back so hard, he pulled preemption out of the bill. So he actually did introduce legislation that does some other food additive policy, but does not include preemption, which is the whole reason that you'd ever have industry support. They would put up with some of these other reforms if they could get federal certainty and uniformity. And I think MAHA proved itself as a potent political force to get legislation changed before it was even introduced. We'll see what happens. I think they could find other vehicles. I'm sure this isn't the last we've heard of preemption, but it was interesting to see that fight won that way. I've covered GMO labeling. I've covered some of these other fights, and usually the food and ag folks have more sway on Capitol Hill. So it's interesting.

Jerusha Klemperer:

So in the summer, I think probably late July, Helena, you had a New York Times opinion piece, and it ended with this: "If Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Trump now want to demonstrate that they are serious about making Americans healthy, they must lay out a policy agenda that would accomplish that goal, and then use their grassroots army to get it done." That was several months ago now. I would posit that we are even farther away from any demonstration of seriousness, but I would like to know from you two, where are we now, in your expert opinion, on that journey?

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Well, I think that the strategy that they laid out a few weeks after I wrote that, does not include the specifics that would really get you there. Especially, I'll speak to the food stuff. I don't cover some of the other issues as much, but we have not seen a policy agenda that matches the rhetoric that they have campaigned on, and continue to talk about at the highest echelons of the government. So I'm still hearing the Secretary talk about how concerned he is about ultraprocessed foods, and yet they have taken no actions against ultraprocessed foods. So that's where things stand right now.

Theodore Ross:

Yeah, I don't think there's going to be meaningful change along those lines. You just have to look at every step of it. Right now, one of the things that's in the news, and we're doing this in late November, is how Donald Trump has called for an investigation of JBS, the largest meat processor in the world, shortly after blaming the ranchers and cattlemen of the country for the high prices of beef. So we have Donald Trump ping-ponging from policy to policy on food issues, in this case beef, because he has made a promise to lower food prices, which he was not able to do.

No step in that chain there, his promise to lower food prices, his attack on the cattlemen, his attack on JBS, the threat to investigate JBS and the other major food processors, none of that is a coherent legislative sequence of events, and I don't think you can expect that. You can expect that the Trump administration and the MAHA movement will work in the same way where we'll have a lot of rhetoric, maybe some use of the bully pulpit, but ultimately it's a Republican movement and regulation is not coming.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. Any longer-term predictions? Obviously, there's policy and there's culture, and I think it was you, Helena, who earlier mentioned this thing of people are eating healthier, they are not snacking, they're not whatever. Changes can come in all different ways. But looking even further ahead, we have three more years of this administration, personally that feels extremely long, but also hopefully there's life after that. And I'm curious from either of you, and I don't know if we should have you go first this time, Ted, what do you see for this movement? And maybe it's about just the movement, or maybe it's about the goals of the movement and a push towards healthier eating. What do you think three plus years ahead, what are your predictions for that?

Theodore Ross:

Well, I forgot my magic eight-ball at home before I came, so I may not be right in these. But I'll say most people are not going to go broke betting on the American appetite for unhealthy food. We tend to like that stuff. So whatever we may be seeing in the moment, whether it's GLP-1s, or seed oils or whatever it is, people are going to eat the food that they like to eat. With that said, and this is what we've talked about, how the way that RFK Jr. was able to succeed to move from left to right, was that those ideas were already there. That means there is broad consensus. People don't like the food choices that we are

being offered in this country, and they are slowly and very hesitantly starting to make changes. So I think that will continue.

Do I think that we will truly be eating healthier in three and a half years? No. No, I don't think we will be. But I think that there will be specific areas of change that you might see, and maybe, I don't know, if there were one thing, if you could get one thing done during the Trump administration when it relates to food, it would be some action in terms of how we market foods to children. If you could do that one thing, that would be a huge impact, and Helena, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think there's the tiniest inkling of that happening anytime soon.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Well, it's interesting you bring up food marketing to children. I was really shocked that the MAHA strategy did include that, and they had 128 little action items, bullets. It was a very thin report in terms of detail, but I had never heard anyone bring that up. So I was like, "Where did this come from? This is random." But do I think they're actually going to do that? I mean, the political capital that would be required to do that, it'd be... the Obama's were not able to, it was a huge fight. I've seen no sign that that's actually going to happen. I think it's an open question of whether or not people are eating healthier in three years. We are seeing some consumer sentiment shift. We are seeing some packaged food demand soften. Now what are people replacing it with? Great. Good to know. I think it's very early.

What I do think is happening is that these issues are moving into the mainstream in a way that will not be undone. So it may be that we from now on do see food, and wellness, and nutrition, or whatever, that lane of issues be brought up in presidential elections or on the campaign trail. This may be an issue that is now mainstream to talk about, to think about, "What are we serving our kids in school meals?" Maybe it's not going to be this administration, but I think looking at the polling, the amount of people that are talking about this on social media, it's, I don't know how you put that back the box. And so it's interesting to think about in the next administration, whether it's Republican or Democrat, is this now up for grabs to do? If you think going back to California, who's the number one Democrat? Who's antagonizing Donald Trump right now? It's Gavin Newsom.

Well, Gavin Newsom as Governor of California has taken some moves against ultraprocessed foods, and likes to say, "In Washington, they're not doing anything. So we're doing it in California." There's some shade going back and forth there. So if you talk to some of the MAHA folks who are not particularly partisan, they're just very focused on their issues. They really want to see competition between the left and the right, or Democrats or Republicans on these issues. They want to see both sides competing for these voters and talking about these issues. I don't know if that will happen, but watching how mainstream it's become in even just a year, year and a half, I think it's possible that these just will be issues that we talk about, just like we talk about education, and taxes and healthcare. Maybe we're getting to that point. We haven't been there before. So that's to me, what feels different. So we'll see. I don't know.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, the way for people to stay abreast of this and see if your predictions are right, one of those ways is to listen to Forked, subscribe to it. Stay tuned for your expert analysis. I really love the interplay of the two of your points of view on the show, and I'm so glad that you brought that to What You're Eating today. Thank you so much for being here.

Helena Bottemiller-Evich:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Theodore Ross:

Yeah, thank you. It was fun. I'm glad we were here.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and FoodPrint.org, which is a project of the Grace Communications Foundation. Special thanks to the Forked podcast and its co-hosts Helena, Bottemiller-Evich and Theodore Ross. You can find FoodPrint at www.foodprint.org where we have this podcast as well as articles, reports, a food label guide and more.