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The Great Food Blackout of 2016

How the Presidential Election Ignored the Most Vital Ingredient to Human Survival

By Christopher D. Cook

Remember the great 2016 presidential campaign debate about food and agriculture, the backbone of human nourishment and survival? Remember when the candidates were forced to articulate their stances on soil regeneration, farm subsidy inequities, labor abuse in the food industry, and how to rein in pesticides and GMOs while expanding organic diversified farming? Remember when the media pressed candidates to explain how they would make food and farming equitable, truly sustainable, and deeply healthful for generations to come?

You didn't forget—it never happened.

“From the systemic impoverishment of food and farm workers, to nutritional and food access divides, to the food industry’s entrenchment in monoculture-based, pesticide-fueled production that endangers the planet, food represents the foundation of America’s inequities and power relations.”

In an often-riveting and raucous election season that saw Bernie Sanders push inequality and climate change to the front burner of the political hot stove, integrally related food and agriculture issues (including mass hunger, food insecurity, and the food industry’s huge role in climate change) were left neglected on the shelf.

Instead, throughout the primaries, this primary ingredient in human existence received sporadic moments of attention aimed at harvesting votes. We heard a bit about ethanol and biofuels in Iowa. In Pennsylvania, in one of the few high-profile electoral food fights, Hillary and Bernie clashed over a Philadelphia soda tax (Clinton supported, Sanders opposed). Here and there, a sprinkling of talk about child and family nutrition, farmworkers, and trade. No prominent debate (or even a debate question) about hunger, sustainable agriculture, soil and climate change, food and farmworker poverty, or GMOs.

Given food and agriculture’s electoral invisibility, one could easily think our food system is in fine shape, feeding everyone

nutritiously, supporting small farmers, and combating rather than contributing to climate change.

How can this be? With individual and global life-and-death issues stemming from how we produce, distribute, and consume food, how can this vast, multi-dimensional terrain be marginalized and ignored by candidates and the media? What does this say about electoral politics and the power and voice of food movements?

With so much at stake – from the looming [Trans Pacific Partnership](#) expansion of corporate and agribusiness power, to the urgent climate-healing need for regenerative agriculture and soil regeneration, to the more than 17 million Americans battling hunger on a regular basis¹ – why is food and agriculture not a central campaign issue? “Why aren’t we hearing anything about food from our candidates and why has our issue fallen completely off the radar in this election cycle?” asked Suzan Bateson, executive director of the [Alameda County Community Food Bank](#), at a Food First [forum](#) this June.

While there has not been a

prominent united effort to thrust food into the electoral forefront, a few voices have sought to elevate the crises behind human sustenance to the debate. In a June 25 article for Huffington Post, the Aspen Institute’s Dariush Mozaffarian, Dean of the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy, wrote: “...astonishingly, the 2016 elections have so far ignored the one topic that is among the biggest challenges and opportunities of our time: our food...As we’ve watched the 2016 elections unfold, where are all the corresponding questions on food, nutrition, and health? On food and the environment? On the impacts on healthcare spending and the economy? On nutrition and social justice? This gap, between the size and scope of the problem and the attention it receives, is larger for food and nutrition than for any other issue.”²

Why would politicians and the media ignore an issue with such far-reaching impacts? Perhaps because the agri-food sector’s panorama of harm stretches so vast and deep, from individuals’ daily lives to the guts of the U.S. political-economic power structure. From the systematic impoverishment of food and farm workers, to nutritional and food access divides, to the food industry’s entrenchment in monoculture-based, pesticide-fueled production that endangers the planet, food represents the foundation of America’s inequities and power relations.

“Politicians don’t want to open that can of worms,” says Y. Armando Nieto, executive director of [The California Food & Justice Coalition](#). “We have a robust food movement that could and would hold politicians accountable. It

would be as uncomfortable as the Bernie Sanders campaign is for the institutionalized political system. Because food in the US is a weapon. And agriculture has little to do with food. It's about maximizing yield on food-like products to feed Americans but mostly, to shove down the throats of third world countries and domesticated animals...The system that has systematically turned food into merely a mechanism to achieve wealth is moribund.”

Despite the bipartisan disinterest, voters—who also happen to be eaters, farmers, food workers, nurses, doctors, and taxpayers—want action and leadership on issues such as nutrition, health, pesticides and GMOs. Citing polls conducted for “[Plate of the Union](#),” an initiative to prod electoral discussion about food, Navina Khanna, director of the HEAL (health, environment, agriculture, and labor) Food Alliance, says voters “are passionate about these issues and their far-reaching implications. They’re not only aware of problems with our food system, they are frustrated by it...They believe special interests and money in politics influence the system, and that our current food policy is more focused on money than on health. Voters want change that makes healthy foods more affordable.”

In April, amid Democracy Awakening’s mass protests urging deep political reform, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy’s Ben Lilliston drew connections between Big Money’s dominance in elections and in food and agriculture policy: “the power of corporate money in our political system is literally everywhere. In the last Farm Bill, the crop insurance

industry flexed its muscles through more than [\\$57 million in lobbying](#) firepower to shift government payments to benefit the industry. From buying state ballot initiative wins on [GMO labeling](#) and pro-factory farm “[Right-to-Farm](#)” rules, to rolling back [financial reform](#) that wreaked havoc in agriculture markets, to blocking the fight to increase the [minimum and tipped-minimum wage](#)—the fingerprints of corporate money and influence seem to be omnipresent.”³

There is a disturbing dissonance between the lack of public debate on food issues, and the food industry’s vigorous and well-heeled presence in politics. Since 2008 through this year’s election, agribusiness has doled out heaping truckloads of cash—\$356 million in campaign contributions, roughly two-thirds to Republicans and one-third to Democrats—to cultivate an agenda that includes expanding corporate trade deals, protecting pesticides and GMOs, maintaining crop insurance subsidies for large-scale monocrop farms, and more. On top of that, agribusiness groups spent \$132.6 million lobbying federal lawmakers and officials in 2015 alone.⁴

Perhaps the biggest ticket of all in terms of lobbying and economic stakes is the Trans Pacific Partnership—one of the few agriculture-related issues debated during the elections, though never in terms of how it would affect food and farming. As the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting revealed in November 2015, US agribusiness firms have led the pro-TPP charge: “In addition to Cargill and the American Farm Bureau Federation, Monsanto, the Biotechnology

Industry Organization, Caterpillar, Dairy Farmers of America, the National Pork Producers Council, Louis Dreyfus Commodities, several state-level farm bureaus and a long list of other agribusiness powerhouses have all reported lobbying on the trade deal.”⁵

Food Crumbs on the Campaign Trail

On the rare occasions when Sanders and Clinton have raised food and farming issues, they offered policy visions that sometimes dovetailed – yet often diverged – on questions of corporate power. (Full disclosure: I am a Sanders supporter and elected delegate.) While Clinton spoke in support of local foods, family farms, and nutrition programs, Sanders framed these concerns around agribusiness power. At a December 2015 campaign event in Reno, Nevada, Sanders stated, “The debate should be—how do we make sure that the food our kids are eating is healthy food? And having the courage to take on these huge food and biotech companies who are transforming our agricultural system in a bad way.”

Voicing his longstanding support for GMO labeling and organic farming, Sanders added, “We need legislation and efforts designed not to protect factory farming, corporate farming, but to protect family-based agriculture.” At a campaign event in New Hampshire that same month, Clinton promoted local food and health issues, though did not confront corporate food power: “Nutrition is so essential for good health, and particularly for kids, and there are so many people who don’t

have access to quality good food. So we've got to get more locally produced food and we've got to get more good quality food available at an affordable price. And I think communities can do a lot of that work and I will support it when I am president."

Both Democrats' platforms proclaim support for family farms, local foods, family nutrition programs, renewable energy on the farm, and greater investment in rural farming economies. But in keeping with his larger critique of corporate power, Sanders goes farther, calling for "Reversing trade policies like NAFTA," and "Enforcing our country's antitrust laws against large agribusiness and food corporations" which, he points out, have remarkable concentrated power over our food supply. Perhaps most significantly, Sanders highlights agriculture's role in climate change, and says he would "Establish an on-going regeneration of our soils." No other candidate, nor platform, speaks of this central aspect of sustainable food production and climate repair.

In these respects, Sanders' food and farming agenda, while limited, goes far beyond the 2012 Democratic Party platform, which fails to mention anything about soil, soil regeneration, or agriculture's profound and central role in climate change. Likewise, the platform says nothing about the deep inequities in subsidy and crop insurance programs, which largely favor large-scale monocrop producers and agribusiness.⁶ As the battleground has shifted to this year's party platform and the convention at the end of July, Sanders has swayed Clinton on planks such as the \$15

minimum wage—yet as of press time, Clinton and Democratic Party appointees had successfully resisted any opposition to the TPP, and any mention of a carbon tax.

While the 2012 Democratic platform says nothing about GMOs or labeling, Sanders has vigorously supported Vermont's GMO labeling law, and strongly opposed the Stabenow-Roberts GMO "labeling" legislation—a.k.a. the DARK (Deny Americans the Right to Know) Act—which preempts state GMO labeling laws and undermines efforts at food transparency and democracy. Clinton, who has received substantial donations and high-level advisory staff from Monsanto and other agribusiness firms, has voiced support for labeling, but also supports GMOs.

The Green Party platform pushes much further, challenging policymakers to "Subsidize farmers' transition to organic agriculture while natural systems of soil fertility and pest control are being restored." The Green Party also urges reforms to "Break Up Corporate Agribusiness," and "Create family farms and farmworker cooperatives through a homesteading program and land reform."⁷

Stepping up to the Plate

In this election's final chapter, how can food movements get a word in edgewise? What are the ramifications of an election, and two dominant political parties, that give food and farming short shrift—as if eating and our future were somehow tangential to human survival?

"We want the candidates to understand that our current food system is impacting families in an incredibly problematic way," says Khanna. "We want the nominees to understand that the structure we have in place has caused a public health crisis that is perpetuated by a set of agricultural subsidies and other government policies, created and maintained by powerful lobbyists. Candidates need to commit to creating a new system that rewards farmers and farming practices that protect our environment, that provides dignity and fair wages to workers and ensures that all Americans have access to healthy food that they can afford."

To get this message across, says Khanna, "We are taking our Plate of the Union food truck across the country talking to voters about how this is impacting their lives and bringing together those voices to call for change."

Although the initiative—led by Food Policy Action, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and the HEAL Food Alliance—is more provocation than platform, the project may offer the food movement's best chance, at the moment, to spread a basic message: "Current food policies prioritize corporate interests at the expense of our health, the environment, and working families. This has led to spikes in obesity and type-2 diabetes, costing taxpayers billions of dollars each year... Together, we're calling on the next President to take bold action for a food system that rewards farmers and farming practices that protect our environment, that provides dignity and fair wages to workers, and ensures that all Americans have access to healthy food that they can afford."

At [Food First's panel on food and the elections](#), Doria Robinson, executive director of [Urban Tilth](#), encouraged a reframing of the discussion around food and politics: "We need to think on a whole other scale and stop flexing with this machine that's just killing us... We get nowhere by using the existing language and the existing mechanics of the policies we are living with. We need to redefine the machine."

Nieto urges politicians and society to "wake up and smell the coffee, and the cookies, and the other food

cooking in the kitchen. And the babies crying for lack of nutritious food. And the farmers struggling not only against climate change and the elements, but against a system rigged towards corporate agriculture. And think! Look at what happens throughout history when the leaders have used food to control populations and enrich a few privileged families and entities--in our case, corporate interests. At least understand that history will record you as woefully inadequate to the great challenges of our time."

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Notes:

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