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COMMENTARY

Skepticism isn't cynicism: The diet wars show the difference

BY HANA KAHLEOVA

This year Americans got two opposite sets of instructions for the same dinner plate. Many of us responded the way we now respond to almost everything: we picked a team.

In January, the Department of Health and Human Services released new federal dietary guidelines built around red meat and full-fat dairy. Less than three months later, the American Heart Association issued guidance pointing close to the opposite way: build meals around plants and plant protein, choose unsaturated fats over saturated ones, and cut back on red meat and full-fat dairy.

Two credentialed bodies, opposite advice. The obvious question is which one to believe. The more common answer, from left and right alike, is neither. That answer feels like skepticism. It is something else, and the difference matters well beyond nutrition.

A disclosure first. I direct clinical research at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit that advocates plant-based nutrition. In January, we petitioned HHS to withdraw the guidelines, arguing that many of the outside scientists who shaped them had financial ties to the beef, dairy, and pork industries. I am not neutral, and you should weigh my argument with that in mind.

But the funding question, important as it is, does not settle the scientific one.

TWO QUESTIONS, NOT ONE

Whether an institution's process was compromised and whether its conclusion is correct are separate questions. Financial disclosures answer the first. Primary data answer the second. A conflicted panel can still cite findings that hold up. An independent one can still get things wrong.

Treating who paid as the answer to what is true is the most common mistake thoughtful people make when two authorities collide. I hear it from readers who distrust the AHA as an establishment body and from readers who distrust anything connected to HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Both instincts are understandable. Both skip the step that would actually settle the question. And because each side skips it in mirror image, the dispute stops being about food and becomes one more marker of political identity.

A THREE-STEP TEST

There is a better approach, and the order matters.

First, narrow the claim. The statement that red meat is bad cannot be tested. It has no comparison, no dose, no outcome, and no time frame, which is exactly why it travels so well in press releases and on social media. Research asks something smaller. A 2024 analysis of 31 cohort studies, for example, linked each daily 50-gram serving of processed meat, about two slices of ham, to roughly 15% higher risk of Type 2 diabetes. That is a claim you can check.

Second, check the narrow claim against the primary studies. Not against either institution's summary, and not against the commentator or podcaster vouching for one side. This is the step almost everyone skips, because deciding in advance whom to trust is far easier.

Third, notice what actually changed. Run this test on the guidelines dispute and the narrow findings mostly agree, even though the institutions do not. Diets built around vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and minimally processed foods have been consistently linked to lower rates of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and early death for well over a decade. What changed this year was not the data. It was which parts of it were emphasized, and with how much confidence.

That is a fact about influence and access. It is not proof that nutrition science is unknowable.

HOW TO TELL THEM APART

Apply the test to a few disputes and two postures that look alike from the outside come apart. A skeptic runs the test and is willing to land somewhere unexpected. A cynic reaches the same verdict every time: nothing can be trusted.

Cynicism passes for rigor because it is triggered by the same event that should prompt a real update, an authority visibly serving someone other than the public. But it lacks the one property that makes rigor worth anything, a willingness to be proven wrong. The simplest way to tell the two apart is to ask what would change the person's mind. A cynic usually has no answer. A skeptic does: a well-powered trial, a replication, a finding that holds up after adjusting for the factors they already suspected.

None of this argues for trusting institutions by default. Industry funding measurably shapes which questions get asked and which conclusions get drawn. That is the basis of my organization's complaint about the January guidelines, and it rests on specific evidence: a particular disclosure, a particular financial tie, a particular recommendation, checked against the record. A documented problem with specific relationships is not a license to stop checking claims about food and health altogether. That is a far bigger claim than the evidence supports, and one no evidence could ever correct.

A HABIT WORTH MORE THAN A SIDE

Federal agencies and professional societies will keep issuing advice that conflicts. That is what happens when contested science runs through politics, industry money, and genuine scientific disagreement at once, and no election in either direction will end it.

That makes the habit more important than any single verdict. Self-government depends on citizens who can hold an institution accountable without writing off the possibility of knowing anything. Reflexive trust hands that job to whoever holds power. Reflexive dismissal abandons it. Checking the claim keeps it with us.

The next time two authorities collide, picking a side will feel like the sophisticated response, and withholding judgment will feel naive. It is the reverse. Running the test is slower and less satisfying, and it does not come with a team. But it is the only response that keeps the pressure where it belongs: on whoever is writing the guidance.

Hana Kahleova, MD, PhD, is a physician board-certified in internal medicine, endocrinology, and lifestyle medicine, and director of clinical research at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nonprofit that advocates plant-based nutrition and petitioned HHS to withdraw its January 2026 dietary guidelines. (The Fulcrum covers what's making democracy dysfunctional and efforts to fix our governing systems. Sign up for our newsletter at thefulcrum.us. The Fulcrum is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news platform covering efforts to fix our governing systems. It is a project of, but editorially independent from, Issue One.)

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COMMENTARY

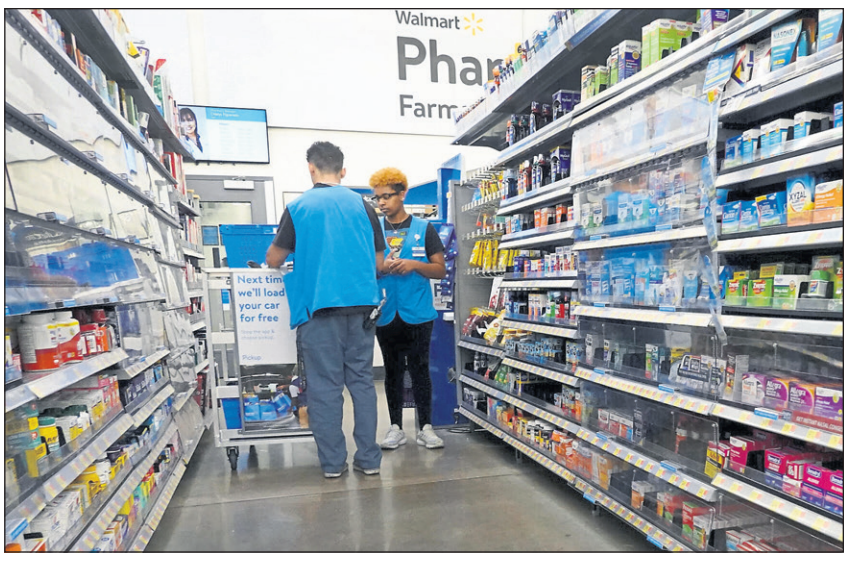


Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Families face higher costs for rent, gas, health care, child care and other essentials.

Voters are revolting over affordability

Here's how Kentucky officials should respond

BY JASON BAILEY

For the second election in a row, voters made it clear that affordability is their chief concern. The inflation numbers show us why. Because of price hikes over the past two years, the median Kentucky household is now spending $4,127 more annually for the same goods and services than they were at the end of 2024.

Gas prices make up the single biggest item in that increase, but families are also shelling out more for everyday household purchases, utilities, groceries and more. That would matter less if wages were keeping up. But they are not.

An end to the war in Iran and the president's chaotic, across-the-board tariffs would surely help. But the cost of living was voters' top priority even before those problems.

With the Kentucky General Assembly coming up, there are countless ways the state legislature could ease household budget strains. We at the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy laid out dozens of ideas in a comprehensive report last year.

But it makes sense to start with low-hanging fruit, including issues many in the Republican majority already support.

In the 2026 session, lawmakers nearly passed Senate Bill 9, legislation that at least begins to address the housing crisis by streamlining some regulations, encouraging density and allowing a way to clear eviction records. It stalled only because of a last-minute poison pill that would prevent local regulations of short-term rental properties like AirBnBs.

Lawmakers should discard that harmful portion and pass a stronger package. Funding for housing is critical, so the legislature needs to enact HB 411 sponsored by Rep. Steve Bratcher (R-Hardin), which modernizes the real estate fees used to fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. And they should take an additional step to jumpstart that fund with one-time dollars.

A rare, one-time corporate income tax payment this summer has given the state $330 million in unexpected tax revenue. That money could be invested in the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to spur the construction of new mixed-income housing. Legislators have spent nearly $5 billion on capital projects over the last couple of budgets, but only 0.3% of it for housing. Shouldn't we do more for the biggest cost in any Kentucky family's budget?

The most pressing issue is the need to fully fund Medicaid, which covers one in three Kentuckians and is short $421 million that was left out of the original budget.

The cost of health care is also a grave concern. The most pressing issue is the need to fully fund Medicaid, which covers one in three Kentuckians and is short $421 million that was left out of the original budget. Otherwise, we'll see cuts to services, as nearly happened last summer, leading to lost coverage and care and higher costs for everyone seeking health care. The money to make the program whole sits in the Budget Reserve Trust Fund, but lawmakers must appropriate the funds.

In addition, utility bills continue to strain Kentucky families. The biggest fear in the short term is that the demand from artificial intelligence (AI) data centers will drive those costs higher. Lawmakers should quickly pass robust rules that prevent Big Tech from passing burdens to ratepayers, require local community involvement and democratic buy-in to the location of data centers, and roll back the enormous tax breaks that the legislature offered these companies.

Much more can and should be done. From infant care to retirement, from home insurance to health insurance, and from college debt to drug costs — there are commonsense policy actions the state could take to make life more affordable. That includes taking on new forms of price gouging — like the "surveillance pricing" big corporations now use to adjust what you pay in real time based on the data they collect about you.

And let's not forget the central need to raise wages and job quality for Kentucky workers. Affordability is not just about how much things cost, but how much is in your pocket to pay for them. Very popular ideas to raise wages are already available, like repealing right-to-work, restoring the prevailing wage law, permitting more public sector union organizing, and raising the outdated minimum wage.

Some of these issues aren't politically viable yet. But in the 2024 and 2026 elections, voters revolted against incumbents from both parties over the problem of affordability. It's a risky bet to expect they won't do so again.

Jason Bailey is executive director of the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, www.kypolicy.org.

This commentary was originally published by the Kentucky Lantern, a nonprofit news site covering state government and politics, at kentuckylantern.com.