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# Political Options, Political Futures

by Nancy Chapman

**A**s the nation heads into an election year, both parties wrestle for the winning position with voters. Political debates will focus on health care reform, economic growth, enhanced education opportunities and advantageous trade agreements. Regardless of whether the 1990 Budget Agreement stands, increased spending for health care, education, unemployment benefits, road and bridge repairs, food assistance or tax cuts will come most likely at the expense of defense programs.

### Health Care

The escalating costs of health care and the growing numbers of uninsured Americans spotlight the health care problems. In 1991, the average family paid \$1 for health care out of every \$8.50 they spent/earned, up from \$1 out of every \$11 in 1980. The number of uninsured Americans rose from 24.5 million in 1980 to 34 million in 1991. Costs to those insured rise as the numbers of uninsured increase because the unpaid health care bills of the uninsured are passed on to the insured in the form of higher premiums. Health care in the United States needs reforming.

As the debate on health care reform unfolds, Democrats are floating two approaches — a *pay or play* plan versus a *Canadian-style, single payer* plan. Moving through the Senate is a bill by Senators Kennedy (D-MA) and Mitchell (D-ME) that would require most employers to pay a 7.5 percent payroll tax or provide health insurance. This *pay or play* plan would replace Medicaid with a new federal program called *Americare*. Representatives Stark (D-CA) and Russo (D-IL) and Senator Kerrey (D-NE) would like to make the Federal government the nation's single insurer and add new taxes to finance care. Republicans staunchly oppose government intervention and seek solutions in the private sector.

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For example, Senators Chaffee (R-RI) and Dole (R-KS) want to enact tax credits for businesses and individuals to encourage the purchase of health insurance. These proposals are but a few of the numerous bills from either party that will be debated during the second session of Congress.

### Economic Growth

The condition of the national economy is, of course, critical to health, food, and nutrition issues. Banking on the continuation of world peace and suppression of Communism, the President, members of Congress and Presidential candidates, all have plans to reinvest savings from defense cuts to revive America's economy. Be they tax cuts for the middle class, reduction in the capital gains tax rate, personal tax exemptions for children, or tax credits for first time home buyers, these proposals have little benefit for farmers or workers who build tractors. Neither food retailers or food stamp recipients will reap few benefits from these reforms either, according to some economists.

Still other politicians seek to shift funds from defense to domestic programs that create jobs, increase benefits for food purchases, or improve worker skills. Paying for new programs or for tax breaks will be as controversial as agreeing on how to "jump start the economy." Thus, many politicians look for a no-cost growth stimulator and endorse tough trade positions that force foreign markets to open to American commodities and products. Resolution of the agricultural subsidy controversies in the GATT continue to elude Trade Representatives at the Uruguay Round.

### Agriculture Initiatives

Soon after Edward Madigan assumed the role as Secretary of Agriculture last March, he outlined several ambitious initiatives for the Department. Funding to support several of these initiatives was evident in the President's Budget. First, new value-added uses based on agriculture and forestry commodities could create new international markets and pull agriculture sales out of a



slump. An infusion of an additional \$5.5 million or total of \$10 million into the Alternative Agricultural Research and Commercialization (AARC) program should induce new nonfood, nonfeed uses of new and traditional commodities. To date, government and private sector research have created biodegradable plastics, soybean-based inks, carbohydrate-based chemicals, biopesticides manufactured from starch, industrial lubricants and coating, and corn-based calcium magnesium acetate.

These products not only boost farm economies, they also promote food safety and protect the environment. The Secretary's second initiative seeks to improve the environmental impact of agriculture practices and products. Passage of the Clean Air Act amendments, a National Energy Strategy, and many state environmental statutes have spurred demand for cleaner fuels, such as ethanol and biodiesel substitutes. Making biofuel products economically viable will test consumer demand, technological capability, biotechnology innovations, and public policy commitment.

Innovation on the farm doesn't stop with commodity based products and doesn't always need government research funding. A January 29 *Wall Street Journal* article profiled several farmers who started businesses to sell new inventions. The American Farm Bureau has showcased many of these novel gadgets at its annual conventions. Labor saving devices ranging from jar openers to "feed buggies," from a bi-rotor combine to a portable livestock corral, have launched dual careers for many ag entrepreneurs.

Just as farmers seek new uses for commodities, nutritionists are defining new food guides that support the USDA/DHHS Dietary Guidelines. Teaching nutritionally at risk groups about how to improve their diets constitutes Secretary Madigan's third initiative. *Using Education to Achieve Better Nutrition*, the nutrition initiative, received an increase of about \$25 million for nutrition education, \$5 million for nutrition monitoring, and \$5 million for nutrition research. Three audiences — child care providers and preschool age children; pregnant, lactating women at nutritional risk; and hard to reach groups at risk of nutritional deficiencies — become special targets for nutrition education.

## Food Safety

Though not mentioned in the State of the Union address, in Presidential candidate speeches, or in media reports, food safety remains a hotly contested issue in Washington, DC. Dr. Richard Haynes in the 1991 Third Quarter *CHOICES* aptly profiled the various viewpoints emerging in the debate. At one pole are the producers and processors who must produce food economically; at the other are consumers who raise difficult questions about potential risks in the food supply. In between these two views are government officials who must decide safety questions even though they lack complete data and use very conservative assumptions. Representing these different perspectives are three major food safety bills currently working their way through Congress. Political pundits call the Kennedy/Waxman *Safety of Pesticides Act of 1991*, the consumer bill; the Bruce/Bliley/Roberts *Food Quality Protection Act of 1991*, the industry bill; and the Rose *Pesticide Safety Improvement Act of 1991*, the most likely to succeed bill. The Administration has not submitted a specific food safety bill, but have forwarded a seven-point food safety plan.

## WIC

Using an appropriation bill to change program rules is technically not legal but tactically very effective and done all the time. Because Congress must appropriate funds to operate programs,

money bills are often the only legislative vehicles certain of enactment each year. Therefore, appropriation bills become the target for program reform provisions. Here is an example.

The current USDA sugar limit for approved cereals is six grams of sugar per one ounce of cereal. A cereal manufacturer, questioning USDA's sugar limit for cereals approved by the Special Supplemental Food Program for Woman, Infants and Children (WIC), sought exemptions from these rules through an amendment to the agriculture appropriations bill. A provision requiring USDA to report back to Congress on its policy regarding "the issue of cereals containing fruit in the WIC food package, specifically counting the sugar in raisins" was added to the FY1992 Agriculture Appropriations Act (P.L. 102-142).

Twelve health, nutrition professional, and consumer groups joined to fight against any liberalizing of the sugar limit. In a letter to USDA Secretary Madigan, the coalition cited governmental documents recommending limits on sugar consumption especially among low-income children without dental care or access to fluoride. They also noted the availability of low-sugar, fruit-containing cereals on the WIC-approved food list. Nine states already enforce stricter sugar limits than the USDA-imposed limit.

At the end of 1991, Secretary Madigan decided not to make an exception to the rule and kept the sugar limit at 6 grams per 1 ounce of cereal. But the Secretary's decision does not signal an end to a manufacturer's quest for an exemption. The manufacturer is trying different avenues through the Vice President and the Governors.

## Labeling

With passage of the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, the debate on food labeling moves from Congress to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). The publication of over 500 pages in the *Federal Register* made food law attorneys, consumer advocates, nutrition professionals, food companies and voluntary health organizations pick up their magnifying glasses and begin speed reading. Comments on most of the proposed rules for food and nutrition labeling are due February 27, 1992. A public hearing held in late January shortened the time line for many parties to formulate their viewpoints and testify.

By November 27, 1992, FDA and FSIS must review all oral and written comments and finalize regulations. These agencies will decide which nutrients must be declared on labels and in what format, how nutrient descriptors such as "low fat," "high fiber," "excellent source of vitamin C" and health claims can be used, and what dietary reference values are appropriate.

To assure that consumers understand the new labels, one professional group, the Society for Nutrition Education (SNE), has urged FDA and FSIS to evaluate the effectiveness of labeling reforms and to consumer test the total package of proposed labeling concepts. SNE has also testified on the need for a comprehensive, government-generated public education program on nutrition labeling.

And, if the proposed changes in labels were not an ambitious enough task, Food and Drug Administrator, David Kessler, has recently described his vision of nutrition labeling aimed at children ages 6-12. He suggests that the food industry voluntarily use a children's label on their food products. KIDSNET, a computerized clearinghouse for children's television and radio programs, will spearhead the Administration's effort with advice from nutrition educators, market researchers, food industry representatives, voluntary health organizations, and health professionals. A children's label will be a launching pad for nutrition education campaigns on television and in schools. 