Public Opinion about an Emerging Food Policy Issue: Where Evidence, Policy, and Politics Intersect

Authors: Sarah Gollust1 and Wendy Rahn2
Department of Health Policy and Management and Department of Political Science

Policy analysis related to agriculture and nutrition issues needs to account not only for the state of the scientific evidence, but also the larger political context in which the policy making process is set. What constitutes “strong” evidence for, or “solid” information about, a desired public policy is frequently in the eye of the beholder, and several contemporary food policy issues involve claims and counterclaims about what the science proves or doesn’t prove. The sale of unpasteurized (raw) milk has become one such issue in the food policy landscape. This work mapped the contours of its political geography in three ways. Authors first documented the prominence of raw milk in the mass media and charted its changing visibility over time. Second, they cataloged the arguments used by raw milk defenders and detractors as reported in the news media; on advocacy and interest group websites; and as issued by public health authorities. Third, authors conducted a novel survey experiment designed to test whether and how the public’s views on this issue respond to the different arguments and who is making them. Authors found that:

- Raw milk, until recently, has been a low-salience issue in both the national and regional media. In the last few years, however, the overall volume of media coverage of raw milk has expanded, but media attention in this period is characterized by distinctive spikes rather than a gradual increase in the issue’s prominence.
- Supporters and opponents of raw milk compete to frame the issue, offering a relatively small set of arguments for and against the sale of raw milk that employ a combination of scientific evidence and political and personal values.
- Framing access to raw milk as an issue of consumer choice is more persuasive than the opposing frame of health risks.
- Differences of opinion between Democrats and Republicans are smaller on the question of raw milk regulation than other food policy issues, but providing political party cues in addition to framing arguments widens the gap between them. Differences between partisan groups on raw milk policy are smallest when the issue is presented as one that involves consumer choice.