

Eyeing the Midterms, Kennedy Pivots Toward Food and Away From Vaccines

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who focused heavily on vaccine policy in 2025, will spend this year talking up healthy eating.



Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the boxer Mike Tyson and Brooke Rollins, the agriculture secretary, at an event on Wednesday promoting Mr. Kennedy's healthy eating agenda. Credit...Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

By [Sheryl Gay Stolberg](#) – The New York Times

Sheryl Gay Stolberg, who covers Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., reported from Washington. Feb. 11, 2026

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., making a calculated election-year pivot away from vaccines, staged a Hollywood-style event on Wednesday promoting his “Eat Real Food” agenda, featuring a celebrity cast that included the boxer Mike Tyson in a campaign to make healthy food “achievable, practical, affordable and within reach of every American family.”

The gathering, at the Department of Health and Human Services, featured slick videos and musical introductions. Mr. Tyson, who embraced the “Eat Real Food” message in a high-profile Super Bowl ad on Sunday, had top billing. The secretary, who spoke second to last, promised “a steady series of actions” in the coming months to reform the food served at prisons, schools and hospitals. He was not specific. But underlying those promises was a political reality: Mr. Kennedy’s healthy eating agenda is popular. His vaccine agenda is not.

Just one in five voters approves of rolling back established vaccine recommendations, which has been a signature of Mr. Kennedy's first year as health secretary, according to the Republican pollsters Tony Fabrizio and Bob Ward, who surveyed voters in 35 competitive congressional districts about the Make America Healthy Again movement.

“While the MAHA agenda is broadly popular” with respect to food and agriculture, [they wrote in December](#), “vaccine skepticism stands as an outlier, rejected by most voters even within the MAHA movement.”

Within the Trump administration, there is a strong desire for Mr. Kennedy to focus on issues that unite people and to de-emphasize vaccine policy, according to a person familiar with internal strategy discussions who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe them.

The new emphasis belies an aggressive vaccine agenda in Mr. Kennedy's department, where regulators this week [refused to review](#) a potentially promising flu vaccine, and where the leader of a key federal vaccine panel [recently said](#) that shots against polio and measles should be optional.

But Mr. Trump appears to be counting on Mr. Kennedy to woo a cross section of voters who have flocked to the former vaccine activist for other reasons, including his attention to healthy eating. “I read an article today where they think Bobby is going to be really great for the Republican Party in the midterms,” Mr. Trump said during a cabinet meeting last month. “So, I have to be very careful that Bobby likes us.”

At Wednesday's event, Mr. Kennedy made clear he liked the president — a man he called “a bully” and “a threat to democracy” when the two were opponents in the last presidential election.

“Every parent in this country knows that something is wrong with the American diet,” Mr. Kennedy said. “Now, for the first time in a generation, you have leaders in Washington who are willing to confront the truth and to change course, and that change started because of President Donald Trump.”

Mr. Tyson's embrace of the secretary's agenda has given it some gloss, in television interviews and also in ads on taxis in cities across the country. “This is the biggest fight of my life,” the boxer said on Wednesday, in brief remarks that were halting but seemed heartfelt. “I want to be a hero in this particular field.” Mr. Kennedy rolled out new dietary guidelines in January, flipping the old food pyramid on its head by putting steak, cheese and whole milk at the top. He has declared an end to what he calls “the war on saturated fat,” and is stepping up his assault on ultraprocessed foods. He adopted the slogan “Eat Real Food.”

The campaign also benefits from slick marketing, including a new graphic for the upside-down food pyramid and an interactive [RealFood.gov website](#), both designed by a team led by [Joe Gebbia](#), a billionaire co-founder of Airbnb who left Silicon Valley to join the Trump administration as the nation's first “chief design officer.”

Democrats say they will counter Mr. Kennedy by putting a spotlight on the Trump administration's [massive cuts to Medicaid](#) — \$1.2 trillion over 10 years, according to [new Congressional Budget Office estimates](#) published on Wednesday — and the expiration of certain tax credits under the Affordable Care Act that will deprive millions of coverage.

“One shiny object on food is not going to overcome the environment that Republicans are facing right now,” said Brad Woodhouse, a longtime Democratic strategist and president of the advocacy group Protect Our Care. He added: “The overwhelming evidence is that the public trust Democrats more than Trump and Republicans on the issue of health care.”

Since Mr. Kennedy's arrival in Washington, he and Republicans have managed to alter the food pyramid and the food policy conversation. After accusing Michelle Obama of perpetuating a “nanny state” when she promoted healthy eating and exercise as first lady, Republicans are now making those issues their own.

Republican governors have embraced Mr. Kennedy's call to bar recipients of the federal food assistance program known as SNAP from spending the money on sugary sodas. Representative Mike Haridopolos, a Florida Republican who attended Wednesday's event (and whose wife is the chief of staff in the currently unoccupied Office of the Surgeon General), called the food issue "a win-win for everybody."

The gathering, in the great hall of the health department's headquarters, was short on news but long on vibe. It had the feel of an awards ceremony. The chef and TV personality Andrew Gruel spoke. So did film producer Brett Ratner, who produced the Tyson ad and the recent documentary about the first lady, Melania Trump. Peter Arnell, a designer and branding executive who helped direct the Tyson ad, also delivered remarks.

Members of the audience waved "Eat Real Food" placards bearing Mr. Gebbia's graphics: colorful pictures of steak, salmon, broccoli, apples and carrots.

"We didn't make a commercial for the Super Bowl," Mr. Arnell said. "We started a movement." The changes have won praise in surprising places. The president of the American Medical Association, Dr. Bobby Mukkamala, who is at odds with Mr. Kennedy on vaccine policy, joined the health secretary at Wednesday's event.

Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, who advised former President Joseph R. Biden Jr., told reporters on a conference call on Tuesday that while Mr. Kennedy's emphasis on red meat, which is linked to heart disease, was misguided, he saw the secretary's food agenda as a rare bright spot in his tenure.

"It's a very good program," Dr. Emanuel said, "and I thought the ad at the Super Bowl was actually a positive sign."

Dr. David Kessler, who ran the Food and Drug Administration under Republican and Democratic presidents, has also [publicly backed](#) Mr. Kennedy's war on ultraprocessed food, and has submitted a petition to the F.D.A. outlining a path for the agency to define ultraprocessed foods and regulate them. The petition calls on the F.D.A. to ask the food industry to provide research showing that its ingredients are safe, research that Dr. Kessler says is required by law. Calley Means, a top adviser to Mr. Kennedy, said after Wednesday's event that Dr. Kessler had "brought up some very important points," and that the administration would respond to them.

The upcoming midterm elections will not be the first time the health secretary has pivoted away from talking about vaccines. Mr. Means made clear during Mr. Kennedy's confirmation hearings early last year that he wanted the former activist to downplay the issue. That is the tack the health secretary took when he was running for president in 2024, according to Charles Eisenstein, his speechwriter at the time.

"We did our very best," Mr. Eisenstein said, "to get him to avoid the issue like the plague."

Sheryl Gay Stolberg is a correspondent based in Washington for The New York Times, covering Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and President Trump's health agenda.