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Inside the Powerful Lobby Fighting for Your Right to Eat Pizza

Other corners of the fast-food industry have folded against public pressure for healthier choices. Not pizza



Photographer: Tojosan/Flickr

By **Andrew Martin**

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There are 11,781 registered lobbyists in Washington, more than enough to represent even the most arcane special interests. The American Racing Pigeon Union has a lobbying firm to work on its behalf. So do the Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute, the Owners of Ivory Miniatures, and the International Natural Sausage Casing Association. Within corporate America, food industry lobbyists represent particularly specific interests:

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But there is nothing quite like the pizza lobby, a rare coalition of competitors who have banded together to advocate for a specific dish. There's no sandwich lobby, no burrito trade association. The macaroni-and-cheese people have yet to get their act together.

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Pizza is special, says Lynn Liddle, executive vice president **Bloomberg**

for communications, investor relations, and legislative affairs at Domino's Pizza and chair of the American Pizza Community – the APC, as it calls itself. “You can't make pizza in a minute. You can't drive through. We don't have fryers,” Liddle says. At the same time, many pizza joints aren't sit-down restaurants, and sometimes, as the pizza folks have learned recently, the National Restaurant Association just doesn't get it.

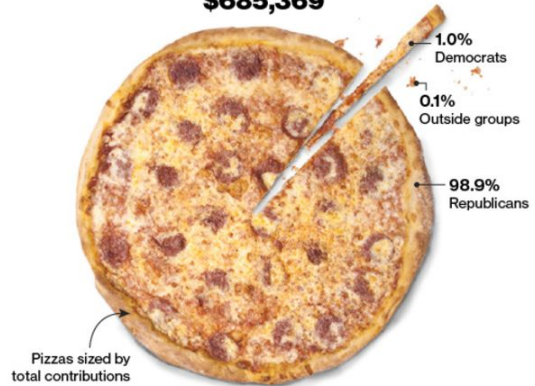
For decades, pizza makers have relied on the food's natural advantage: Everybody loves it. Some 41 million Americans – more than the population of California – eat a slice of pizza on any given day. If pizza were a country, its sales would put it in the top 100 of global gross domestic product. “Pizza is, without a doubt, the food of the gods,” says a 2014 video produced by the American Chemical Society that explains the chemistry behind pizza's appeal. “All pizzas deliver divine, rich, cheesy, mouthwatering experiences that hustle your brain's pleasure centers into overdrive.”

Until recently the U.S. government was inclined to agree. Pizza is such an efficient cheese-delivery vehicle that a farmer-funded promotional agency, authorized and overseen by the federal government, pushed fast-food chains to load up pizzas with more cheese. That effort led to Pizza Hut's 2002 “Summer of Cheese” campaign and partially funded Domino's 2009 introduction of its “American Legends” pizzas – pies topped with 40 percent more cheese. “These specialty pizzas are as American as apple pie,” Domino's crowed, as part of its marketing campaign.

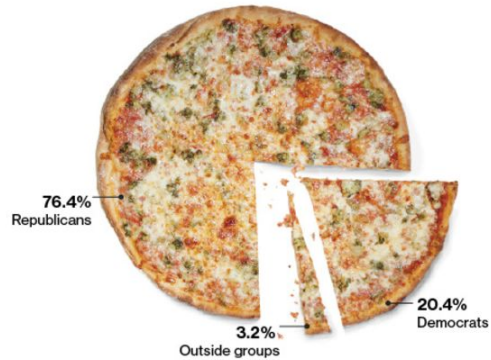
Counting the Dough

U.S. pizza companies made political contributions totaling \$1.5 million in the 2012 and 2014 elections, with 88 percent going to Republican candidates and groups.

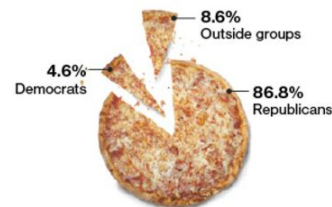
Pizza Hut \$685,369



Other pizza makers \$549,214



Papa John's \$116,807



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Schwan \$107,100



More recently, though, pizza has become a target, lumped into a number of articles remaining.

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evil along with French fries and soda. New federal nutrition standards for school lunches, part of a 2010 law, squarely targeted pizza's dominance in cafeterias. Menu-labeling rules, which take effect later this year, have seemed particularly onerous to pizzeria

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And in the popular imagination, no less than First Lady Michelle Obama and *Top Chef* judge Tom Colicchio, though they claim to love the stuff, have emerged as enemies of pizza in their push for healthier school lunches. "I hear people say, 'We would like to improve the school lunch program, but the kids, all they want to do is eat pizzas and burgers,'" Colicchio said in testimony to Congress in 2010. "We are adults here. It is up to us to do better."



Domino's
\$45,726

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Little Caesars
\$2,775



Source: Center for Responsive Politics

One by one, other purveyors of fast food have been convinced, nudged along by new laws or public shaming. McDonald's, for example, voluntarily took soda out of Happy Meals and added calorie counts to its menus long before the government required it. Wendy's also removed soda from its children's menu, and Darden Restaurants reduced calories and sodium in kids' meals at its restaurants, including Olive Garden and Red Lobster, and made vegetables and milk the default side options.

Pizza advocates have taken a different, more combative tack. They've separated themselves from other food groups in Washington to become their own lobbying force. They're not throwing money around – pizza's biggest spenders devoted less than \$500,000 to lobbying last year and just \$1.5 million in political contributions in the last two election cycles. But they have notched some successes, proving that under the right circumstances, firm resolve and a thin crust can still be persuasive in Congress.

The early rumblings of the war on pizza began more than two decades ago, when Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, began calling for chain restaurants to put calorie information front-and-center on their menus. At first, Wootan got little traction in Congress, so she directed her lobbying efforts at city councils and state legislatures instead. New York City was the first to sign on, in 2006, and more than a dozen similar laws were enacted in other cities and states. Even the National Restaurant Association eventually supported a national menu-labeling law, and in 2010 it passed as part of the Affordable Care Act.

But when the Food and Drug Administration's draft regulations came out a year later, pizza makers were ticked. They said they, too, supported a national labeling law, but what they didn't like – and continue to oppose – were the specifics, which had been hashed out with help from the National Restaurant Association, but no other pizza industry. (The Association says that's not true.) Regarding the APCA, the article remaining given the potential

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combinations of pizza toppings, posting accurate calorie information would be “near impossible.” And chains that specialize in delivery have said it’s ridiculous to install a menu board with calorie information when so few customers would see it. “Having to post that information on a menu board is a very costly exercise in humoring government bureaucrats,” says Ron Berger, chief executive officer of Figaro’s Pizza, an Oregon-based chain.

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What’s more, the FDA’s proposed regulations required pizzerias to post calories for a whole pie, rather than a single slice. “It is sticker shock,” says Marla Topliff, president of Rosati’s Pizza in suburban Chicago. “When somebody looks at nutritional on a large pizza and they see 10,000 calories, they may be reluctant to buy it.” Most large pizzas don’t typically top 4,000 calories, even fully loaded, but Topliff’s point is well taken: While many people might eat more than a single slice in a sitting, few eat the whole pie.

Domino’s hired a lobbyist in Washington to fight against menu labeling, while Little and her counterparts sounded the alarm far and wide. They recruited franchise owners, suppliers, and other big chains such as Papa John’s and Little Caesars, representing roughly 20,000 restaurants. Created in 2010, the American Pizza Community devoted itself to advocating for the pizza industry and fighting the aspects of menu labeling that they found most objectionable. The APC held weekly conference calls to discuss

strategy, and in June 2012, members flew to Washington to schmooze members of Congress and their staff – “the first wave of an ongoing effort to

inform leaders about the industry,” according to an APC press release.

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Although Domino's plays a commanding role, the APC presented itself as a voice for local pizzerias, which it calls "the quintessential small business." Specifically, it encouraged legislators to support an alternative to the FDA's proposed regulations. Called the Common Sense Nutrition Disclosure Act, that alternative would have eased some of the menu-labeling restrictions, like allowing primarily delivery-based pizzerias to provide calorie information online. That bill had a lot of support, but the FDA ultimately eased up on one of the regulations most irritating to the pizzeria owners: They can now post calorie information by the slice. (The FDA also says only standard menu items need to be labeled, not every possible combination.)

It was a modified win for pizza. Still, Liddle wasn't happy. In response to the FDA's final regulations, released last fall, she put out a statement on behalf of the APC, complaining that the FDA had provided only "small concessions that don't solve many of the regulation's problems." She went on to promise that the pizza lobby would not give up this fight: "The APC will now enlist the help of allies to right this wrong."

At the same time pizzerias were fighting menu labeling, frozen-pizza makers were defending their own territory: the school cafeteria. Along with promoting menu labeling, Wootan, the nutrition activist, had also begun pushing for better nutrition standards for federally subsidized school lunches, where almost \$500 million worth of pizza is served each year. For Wootan and her allies, the goal was to add more fruits and vegetables to school lunches while cutting back on junk food – specifically pizza and French fries – or at least making it healthier.

In 2010, Congress approved a nutrition update for federally subsidized school lunch that's been championed by Michelle Obama. When the Department of Agriculture released the details the next year, they included a seemingly obscure provision that increased the minimum amount of tomato paste required to be counted as a vegetable serving – and lit a torch under the frozen-pizza lobby. (As of now it operates independently from the fresh-pizza lobby, perhaps because Domino's described frozen pizza as "the root of all evil" on its pizza boxes a few years ago.)

Under the existing rules, tomato paste is given extra credit toward a vegetable serving because it's made of concentrated tomatoes. So 2 tablespoons of tomato paste – roughly the amount on a slice of pizza – is counted as a half a cup, or the equivalent of one vegetable serving. For school lunch purposes, a slice of pizza was considered a serving of vegetables, a point first made by Wootan in 2011 that became a late-night punchline. The Department of Agriculture's new rules, though, would have stopped giving tomato paste extra credit. From now on, 2 tablespoons

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would count as 2 tablespoons. Kraig Naasz, CEO of the American Frozen Food Institute, a trade group that lobbies for frozen pizza, says the tomato paste rule was simply a crafty way to get pizza out of schools: “None of our members wanted the federal government to say, ‘Pizza is bad for you.’ You would have been telling an entire generation that pizza is a food you shouldn’t consume.”

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In a 2011 letter to the USDA, the National Frozen Pizza Institute – frozen pizza’s trade association and an arm of Naasz’s organization – said the amount of tomato paste would need to be increased so dramatically that it would overwhelm pizza and make it “incapable of holding cheese and other toppings.” And in testimony before Congress in August of that year, Karen Wilder, chief nutritionist for Schwan Food, said many foods packed with nutrients, including pizza, risked elimination from school lunch by the proposed rules. A subsidiary of Schwan supplies 70 percent of school lunch pizza.


In November 2011, Congress blocked the Department of Agriculture from making some of the proposed nutrition changes. Since then, reductions to sodium and increases in whole grains have been delayed – which the frozen-pizza lobby favored – and the USDA gave up on closing the tomato paste loophole altogether. Wootan conceded the round: “When it comes to school food, pizza is king. It was the pizza industry that went to members of Congress to prevent USDA from implementing this.”

For the pizza lobby, even better times may lie ahead. Fresh and frozen, the pizza industry tends to support Republicans. In the last two election cycles, Republican federal candidates received about \$1.3 million from the industry, according to an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics of major companies and those listing “pizza” in their name. Democrats received just \$157,000. (The biggest beneficiary was 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney, despite published reports that he pulls the cheese off his pizza.)

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American as apple pie, and it's closing in on mom. "Pizza is, like, the greatest food in America," says Joe Clayton, executive director of the National Frozen Pizza Institute, who's understandably biased. "It is part of America, and it has been for a long time."

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Correction: Darden Restaurants sold Red Lobster in 2014. An earlier version of this story said Darden still operated the seafood chain.

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