Review Paper

Getting food policy on the Mayoral table: a comparison of two election cycles in New York and London

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ABSTRACT

Cities and Mayors are increasingly being recognized as important in shaping social policy and improving social well-being. And municipal food policies are increasingly important as a tool to reduce food insecurity and prevent diet-related chronic diseases. Thus city governments have a unique ability to improve local food environments.

To realize this potential for improving urban food environments, nutrition advocates will need to find innovative approaches for influencing municipal food policy.

This paper examines Mayoral elections as a vehicle to advance food policy. To explore this strategy, Mayoral elections in two cities, New York City (NYC) and London, during two recent cycles were compared.

To gather evidence multiple sources were used including campaign documents, media and opinion polls as well as the authors' own observations as food policy observers and participants in the two cities.

Mayoral governance differs between NYC and London, with the Mayor in NYC having greater powers of management and administration, whilst the London Mayor has a more strategic role and may need to also use 'influence'.

Food policy and related issues did not feature strongly in the first election cycles in either city. However by the 2012 and 2013 elections food issues were definitely 'on the table' and featured in main candidates' campaign literature.

These latter elections also saw the importance of food advocates coming together to form common alliances and place food issues higher on the municipal agenda. In this way, food policy has become part of the election dialogue in both cities and candidates are expected to consider food policy issues. This analysis leads to make observations which could guide advocates as to how to use Mayoral elections to raise policy objectives for the benefit of public health.

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Introduction

Health professionals, policy makers, researchers and advocates have recently recognized the growing importance of municipal food policy as a tool for reducing food insecurity and preventing diet-related chronic diseases. More broadly, new scholarship points to the growing capacity of cities and Mayors to shape social policy and improve well-being.[1] Cities are now home to more than half the world's population and concentrate groups at high risk of food insecurity and diet-related diseases. While many global, national and regional actors influence local food policy, city governments have a unique ability to improve local food environments. Mandates for regulating retail outlets, protecting food safety, overseeing institutional food in schools and other settings, and promoting local economic development in the food sector contribute to this capacity.

To realize this potential for improving urban food environments, nutrition advocates will need to find innovative approaches for influencing municipal food policy. In recent years, investigators have examined various strategies,[2] including municipal food policy councils that bring together representatives of different sectors of the food system to guide policy[3]; inter-governmental bodies, which seek to coordinate municipal action on food across sectors and sometimes levels[4]; social food movements, which put pressure on government to modify policies and programs[5]; and technical and scientific groups, which offer expert recommendations for modifying policies to improve nutritional health.[6]

This paper examines another approach, Mayoral elections, as a vehicle to advance food policy to reduce food insecurity and prevent diet-related diseases. To explore this strategy, Mayoral elections in two cities, New York City (NYC) and London, during two recent cycles were compared. The authors seek to answer these questions:

1. How do different governance structures and Mayoral duties influence Mayoral involvement in food policy in each city?
2. To what extent has food policy been a significant issue in the last two Mayoral elections in each city?
3. What are the differences in how food policy was discussed in the first and second election in each city? What are the differences between the cities?
4. What are the lessons about how to use Mayoral elections as forums for democratic discussion of municipal food policy and to advance food policies that promote health and equity?

New York and London were chosen, as each has been active in food policy for the last decade and the two cities have similar demographic characteristics but different governance structures, making a comparison fruitful.

Methods

To gather the evidence for this study, online databases and the policy networks in each city were used to collect available food-related campaign documents (e.g., white papers, manifestos, and policy and advocacy reports) for each of the Mayoral elections under study. Given the lack of an enumeration of the universe of these documents, it was not possible to assess the completeness of the records collected. Media coverage of food-related topics was also searched during the campaigns in the major metropolitan and national daily newspapers in each city and election-related reports from other media outlets were reviewed. Public opinion polls were conducted in each election cycle and the data were gathered. Each author has been observer and participant in food policy deliberations in one city during the last two decades, and an observer in the other. While these experiences may reduce the detachment from the subject and introduce idiosyncratic perspectives, they provide a grounded understanding of relevant historical and contextual factors. Finally, the authors used their own previous research on health and obesity policy in NYC and London.[7–10]

Theoretical framework

Two political science theoretical frameworks guided research and analysis. First, the Kingdon's policy streams approach was used. Kingdon posits that policy changes when three streams that he labels the problem, policy and political streams, converge to enable policy makers to take advantage of 'windows of opportunity' to effect change.[11] Kingdon defines the *problem stream* as the list of public matters that require government attention. In a specific time and place, political players compete to get 'their' problem on the list. *The policy stream* describes proposals for change. Once a problem has been defined, stakeholders compete to advance arguments and evidence for favoured solutions. Finally, *the politics stream* is the flow of formal and informal jockeying for power and influence. It includes elections, legislative battles, interest group campaigns and changes in public opinion. The three streams develop independently from each other although they often intersect. This study examines how this framework helps to understand how various food policy issues moved in and out of these three streams during the Mayoral election cycles and beyond.

The second conceptual approach used was the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) developed by Sabatier.[12] He and his colleagues argue that constituencies sharing beliefs about solutions to problems coalesce to form a 'policy subsystem' that acts over time to translate these beliefs into policy. Sabatier and his colleagues investigate how competing policy subsystems succeed or fail in a given political environment. The ACF was used to characterize the various subsystems working to advance or reject food policy proposals were used during Mayoral campaigns and beyond.

Governance in NYC and London

Municipal governance differs in important ways between the two cities. While both give significant power to their Mayors, the powers of city government in relationship to higher (e.g., state and national) and lower (e.g., boroughs or community

districts) levels of government differ.[13] As a result, each Mayor has different levels of control over the various sectors that influence food policy and environments.

In general, the New York Mayor has management and service delivery responsibilities for many public services including schools, hospitals and jails and across the five boroughs and 59 community districts that constitute the city. In contrast, the Mayor of London develops citywide strategies, for example on spatial and economic development and transportation, which influence how policy is developed and effected at borough level, but has limited responsibility for service delivery. In London, unlike in New York, 33 local authorities (boroughs), with support from the national government, manage schools, some social care facilities, and other community services. They also undertake planning, licensing and environmental health roles. The National Health Service (NHS) manages local and London-wide health services and other national bodies such as the Food Standards Agency serve as regulators. The Mayor has responsibilities for economic development, most aspects of transport, police and fire services, but not schools and hospitals. However, the Mayor holds strong 'influencing' powers and has the statutory duty to take the health of Londoners into account[14] and to develop a London 'health inequalities' strategy.[15]

In NYC, in the last decade the Mayor has used his powers to improve food served in city institutions such as schools, hospitals and jails; remove trans fat from food served in restaurants and offer incentives to super markets and food vendors to locate in low-income neighbourhoods and sell healthier food.[16] In the early 2000s, the Mayor of London adopted an approach using health impact assessment (HIA) to ensure the health of Londoners was taken into account in all strategies.[10] The Mayor's economic development responsibilities, through the London Development Agency (now defunct) was the vehicle used to develop the London Food Strategy, recognizing the importance of food jobs and the local economic impact of food, but making the strategy broader than purely economic aspects.[17]

Governance and food policy

How do different governance structures and Mayoral duties influence Mayoral involvement in food policy in each city? Table 1 shows the Mayoral responsibilities for food issues in New York and London. While food issues are not a specific remit of either Mayor, both have recognized the significance of food and its relationship to obesity, food insecurity, health and economic development. A contrast of the two Mayoral approaches to school food illustrates their different powers. The New York Mayor used his direct power to develop mandatory nutritional standards for meals served in schools and other city institutions.[18] In contrast, the Mayor in London was required to use his powers of persuasion. For example, the London Mayors have worked with celebrity chefs to encourage local schools to adopt better nutritional standards.[19] These differing powers create the context for the debates about food policy in the Mayoral elections. In each city, nutrition advocates have asked, 'What can the Mayor do to improve municipal food environments and encourage healthier diets?'

Food policy in the Mayoral elections

New York

In New York, food was not a significant issue in the 2009 Mayoral Campaign. In 2007, Michael Bloomberg appointed a Mayoral-level food policy coordinator and championed several innovations in food policy, including banning trans fat from restaurant food, requiring calorie labelling in restaurant chains and improving school food. For the most part, however, these accomplishments did not come up in the campaign. The 2009 election pitted Bloomberg against William C. Thompson, the city comptroller, an elected official responsible for monitoring the city's fiscal health and overseeing investment of the city's pension funds.

On the campaign trail, Thompson criticized Bloomberg for blocking a proposal to make able bodied adults without dependents eligible for Food Stamps (a program now known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP),[20] an option offered by the federal government as a response to the 2008 economic recession. 'Obviously the Mayor has not had to go to bed hungry,' observed Thompson. In this debate, food assistance policy was viewed as a sub-set of poverty policy. Progressive forces in NYC had long mobilized to expand or resist cutbacks in food assistance as a way of reducing the harmful effects of poverty,[21] an example of a food-related advocacy coalition that has demonstrated its power to influence policy agendas.

In 2007, Comptroller Thompson had released a report called 'Health and Wealth: Assessing and Addressing Income Disparities in the Health of New Yorkers'.[22] The report documented widening inequalities in mortality and hospitalization rates among poor and better off New Yorkers, especially in diet-related diseases such as diabetes. However, he did not raise this issue in the campaign.

With the exception of SNAP, Mayoral candidates did not discuss food in the 2009 election but shortly after the election, two other elected officials, Christine Quinn, the Speaker of the City Council, and Scott Stringer, Borough President of Manhattan, each released comprehensive food plans for NYC, claiming an issue that would later play an important role in their campaigns for higher office in 2013. In addition, each of these officials enlisted numerous food-related activists and community organizations in developing their food plans, helping to bring these individuals and groups into the political arena and perhaps convincing other candidates that food and food inequalities were viable issues. These campaigns also served to create (in Sabatier's term) an emerging food policy advocacy coalition that would play an important role in 2013.

In 2013, food was a more salient issue in the Mayoral campaign. With no incumbent running for office and nine candidates vying for selection as the nominee of the two major parties, candidates were forced to distinguish themselves and to appear at more than 200 public candidate forums where they debated the issues in front of groups of a few dozen to more than a thousand voters. In several of these forums, food issues did arise. In one forum sponsored by a community coalition of health-related groups, all six

Responsibility	New York	London	Comments
Table 1 – Mayoral responsibilities for food related issues in NYC and London.			
Strategic overview on food issues	Mayor appointed food policy coordinator in his office to develop intersectoral food strategies	Encouraged by Green Party, Mayor developed The London Food Strategy: 'Healthy and Sustainable Food for London' (2006) covering wide range food issues from 'farm to fork' and set up the 'London Food Board' to oversee its delivery.	London Mayor has used his influence to develop food policy strategy
Food, obesity and chronic diseases	Mayor supports health department initiatives on child obesity and diet-related chronic diseases and appointed an intersectoral Mayoral commission on child obesity to make recommendations for city policy	Mayor set up London Health Improvement Board with childhood obesity initially as a priority. However subsequently, while still acknowledging childhood obesity as a 'challenge' it is now recognized that most work in this area will be carried out at local government level	Major issue in both cities, each mayor using powers they have to address and with some early success in NYC. In London however it is now deemed more appropriate for work to take place at local level. This is likely to mean there is less London –wide coordination on childhood obesity issues.
Mayoral support on food and health	Mayor appoints Health Commissioner and food policy coordinator	Mayor appoints a 'health' political lead but also has statutory 'health advisor' in the London Regional Director of Public Health	
Food safety in retail settings	Mayor appoints health commissioner who enforces local food safety laws; State also has responsibilities in this area	National Food Standards Agency regulates with Local Authority enforcement, hence no direct Mayoral locus	NY Mayor has direct power whereas no locus for London Mayor
Institutional food	City agencies that report to Mayor serve or contract for meals served in schools and other public agencies, about 270 million meals per year	Mayor and city not responsible for operational delivery of food in public agencies	NY Mayor has direct powers, whereas London mayor can only influence by raising issues and developing strategy
Food marketing	Limited power to restrict marketing on public property such as schools	No powers to restrict marketing on public property. Several local authorities currently reviewing opportunity of such powers	Both Mayors try to use their 'influence ' where they can but food industry lobby is powerful
Schools	Mayor appoints school chancellor who oversees nutrition education and school food, following state and national guidelines	Mayor has no formal powers, but used 'influence' working with celebrity chef to raise issues of poor nutritional value of school food	Direct powers in NY whereas only 'influence' in London
Urban agriculture and community gardens	Mayoral agency allocates vacant land for community garden or farms and operates licensing system for farmers' markets	Mayoral responsibility for overall 'London Plan', spatial strategy but not at local detailed level	In both cities economic value of land means 'space' for urban agriculture is limited but both cities have focused on importance of green space for 'health'
Public education	Mayor appoints health commissioner and uses 'bully pulpit' to discuss food policy with media and public, Department of Health designs and executes media campaigns on nutrition and obesity	The London Food Strategy: 'Healthy and Sustainable Food for London' (2006) media launch and subsequent press coverage of a wide range of food issues from 'farm to fork'. Mayor's Health Advisor has drawn attention to these issues.	In both cities the Mayoral 'voice' is powerful and has been used to raise importance of food and related health issues
Health care	Mayor has strong role in public hospital system which provides health and some nutrition related services	Mayor has no direct role in NHS, but his Health Advisor provides link and advocates for 'health'. Health aspects of food strategy were strong	Mayoral 'voice' can be powerful on health issues
Economic growth	Various Mayoral agencies promote economic growth and have supported various food sector job development efforts	Utilized economic development powers for jobs and improved 'training' of catering staff	
Taxes	No independent authority power to levy taxes	GLA is a precepting body and levies alongside local 'council tax' to contribute to the overall GLA budget	
Food benefits	Administers federal food benefit programs such as SNAP(Food stamps)	No specific food benefits in London or UK	Welfare systems differ, so no specific food benefits in UK

participating candidates mentioned improving food choices and environments as one of their top three health priorities.

In July 2013, another coalition of New York-based food related organizations sponsored a Mayoral Forum specifically on food policy. The Wall Street Journal reported, 'A new voting bloc hosted a Mayoral forum before a sold-out crowd Wednesday night. Its bread-and-butter issue: food. The forum called The Future of Food in NYC is believed to have been the first focused solely on food policy issues, ranging from hunger and nutrition to restaurant labour and sustainability'.[23]

New York University Professor of Nutrition Marion Nestle wrote that the forum was a turning point in the food movement. 'This had to be the first time that food advocacy organizations – an astonishing 88 of them – joined forces to induce candidates for city office to agree to respond to questions about issues of concern to every one of those groups… What they said hardly mattered… What does matter is that they thought this audience important enough to come and state their positions on how food production and consumption affect public health, and how political leaders can use their authority to improve the food system. Food issues have become prominent enough to make politicians and would-be politicians take notice. I can't think of a better time for food advocacy groups to join forces and work collectively toward common food system goals'.[24]

While the Mayoral Forum on Food Policy showed that a broad advocacy coalition focused on food had emerged and begun to exert influence, its impact on the broader population of voters appeared limited. A poll of registered voters taken in June 2013 showed that neither food nor health were among the top eight concerns listed by New York voters in a telephone poll of a representative sample of 1421 adult New Yorkers. The top concerns were jobs (ranked top by 23%), education (20%), economic development (12%), housing (8%), and security from terrorism (7%).[25]

Although food had not yet become a voter priority, in the 2013 election, food advocates gained important ground compared to 2009. First, the coalition of food groups that organized the Food Forum created an ongoing network that by December 2013 had more than 60 organizational members and had prepared a policy agenda for the new Mayor that linked food policy to other top-ranked issues (e.g., job creation, education, inequality).[26] The Forum also offered the potential for the first time that an organization with diverse constituencies and experienced leaders could hold the Mayor and other elected officials accountable for food policy.

Second, in the 2013 election media covered food policy. For example, newspapers ran articles on the candidates' positions on outgoing Mayor Bloomberg's proposal to limit the size of sugary beverage containers as a way of reducing caloric intake.[27,28] Several media outlets covered the Mayoral food policy forum. This coverage legitimised food policy as an election issue and also normalized municipal involvement in food policy, a powerful challenge to the prevailing belief that food choice was solely an individual responsibility.

Finally, the winning candidate's main theme in his campaign was income inequality and the need to create 'one city' that offered pathways into the middle class for low income New Yorkers. The themes of fairness and social justice provided food justice advocates with a window of opportunity to make their case. At the beginning of 2014, food justice advocates in New York were in a much better position than at any time in the last decade to organize to pressure city government to make food policy a higher priority issue.

London

The 2008 election in London had ten candidates, with the incumbent, Mayor Ken Livingstone, challenged strongly by Boris Johnson, each representing the main political parties. It was essentially a two-person competition with the third candidate only achieving 10% of the vote. Johnson was elected with a 53% majority.

The London Food Strategy, had been developed by Livingstone in 2006,[17,29] prior to the election, with the support of a third party, the Green Party. Many of the food issues raised in the strategy, particularly those related to sustainability, were part of the dialogue between the Green Party and the incumbent Labour Party. In this case, the smaller Green Party played an important role in raising food as a sustainability issue.

While the London Food Strategy set a long term vision and outlined several key strategic objectives, it was not raised as an issue in the 2008 election and was not mentioned specifically in party manifestos, debates, or media campaign coverage. Both candidates did discuss green and environmental issues, perhaps reflecting the influence of advocates on these issues. Where health issues were raised these related to the NHS, echoing national debates on the NHS. As in New York, the main concerns were about the economy, policing and crime, and transport, i.e., the issues for which the Mayor has direct responsibility.

By 2012, food had become a more mainstream issue for candidates. There were seven candidates and the main four all included food and environmental issues in their manifestos. The race evolved into a two-person competition between Livingstone, the former Mayor, and Johnson, the incumbent. The Green Party came in third, with less than 5% of the initial vote. Livingstone's manifesto called for re-energizing the Food Board and Food Strategy and also discussed urban agriculture, healthy schools with food-growing projects, good food on the public plate, fresh fruit and vegetables in corner shops and challenging fast food outlets. Johnson's approach was more focused on general environmental issues with an emphasis on green spaces for growing. He later developed 'Capital Growth' which proposed to identify and develop 2012 green spaces across London to allow Londoners to grow their own food, to link with the 2012 Olympics.[30] The Green candidate included a number of food, environmental and sustainability issues in her manifesto and drew attention to the existing achievement of increasing food jobs and training for catering staff in schools and hospitals. The Liberal-Democrat candidate's manifesto, 'Fairer, Greener, Safer', called for reducing food miles, growing food and encouraging fresh food carts, street markets and jobs in the food industry.[31]

The London Food Strategy was in its second implementation phase and the London Food Link and Sustain, the partners involved in its implementation, were instrumental in raising food related questions. In the run up to the election, they produced 'Menu for Change', a policy agenda

identifying key food issues for Mayoral candidates and asking 'How a commitment to good food can help candidates for London Mayor.'[32] The document asked London Mayoral candidates to 'promise' to make a number of changes in food policy and local food environments. Most of these recommendations did not fit within the Mayor's main responsibilities but the document linked each 'promise' to the London Food Strategy, showing its value as a tool for campaign discussion and a vehicle for more widespread media coverage than in 2008.

Comparison of elections in New York and London

Over time, food policy debates have become more prominent in Mayoral politics in both cities. While much of the media attention focuses on the 'headline grabbing' issues such as Mayor Bloomberg's proposed limitations on the size of soda portions, policy makers, advocates and journalists in both cities now see food policy as a legitimate domain of city politics. In New York, the recent formation of a unified coalition of food organizations represents an important step forward and can be seen as the emergence of a new advocacy coalition. In London, the Food Strategy is still in place and there is a renewed focus on its implementation through the London Food Board and its three implementation groups.[33] One new initiative 'London Flagship Food Boroughs'[34] aims to engage and fund pilot boroughs to improve food using schools to catalyse change in the environment, health and educational attainment. Other initiatives focus on small food entrepreneurs, managing food waste in business and encouraging apprenticeships in the food industry.

The nature of discourse has also changed over time with food security, food waste and environmental sustainability, the working conditions of food workers and the impact of climate change on food becoming more salient issues for mainstream consideration, although there is still an emphasis on the priority of reducing obesity. In NYC and London, active social movements are pushing these issues, illustrating the cross over between mainstream and more transgressive politics. These new developments reflect both an academic food systems perspective which through the work of writers such as Michael Pollan,[35] Mark Bittman[36] and others has made it into mainstream discourse and the increases in poverty and income inequality triggered by the 2008 economic recession and the austerity response to it.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on this analysis of the last four elections, several observations were made that may guide food advocates considering the use of Mayoral and other municipal electoral campaigns to advance policy objectives.

1. *By identifying policy windows and policy entrepreneurs, advocates can develop more effective ways to use Mayoral campaigns to advance food policy.*

As Swedish analysts noted in another context:

'If policy makers could learn to predict the opening of policy windows, the planning of public health measures might be more straightforward… A means to speed up the coupling of the three streams might be to have solutions 'stored' for occasions when the two other streams (the problem stream and the politics stream) are seemingly joining'.[37]

In New York and London, food advocates and sympathetic elected officials used the interval between the two elections to develop and make a case for a variety of policy ideas. The second election provided the opportunity to present these proposals (e.g., free school lunch for all and protecting children from junk food) to the candidates, the media and the public.

2. *Mayoral elections provide food advocates with an opportunity to educate the public and policy makers on food policy issues.*

Food did not become a top tier policy issue in any of the four Mayoral elections described here, perhaps because the media pay more attention to crime, jobs and education or because food has only recently emerged as a political as well as a personal issue. Nevertheless, the greater attention to food in the second elections in each city provided food advocates an opportunity to educate the public both at campaign events, within community organizations and through the media. Developing clear messages and defining a few common policy goals, as the NYC Food Forum and Menu for Change did, increases the chances that food advocates can become an advocacy coalition with longer-term impact.

3. *Special interest advocacy coalitions (e.g., the food and beverage industry, trade associations of restaurants) are more likely to participate in electoral campaigns behind the scenes than openly.*

In New York and London, the commercial interests that often opposed healthier food policies participated actively in election campaigns, but used less open methods such as campaign contributions and funding of front groups. On the one hand, this provides advocates with a more open field to make their case, a distinction from the legislative campaigns (e.g., to defeat the state-level soda tax in New York) in which industry groups actively lobbied and presented testimony. On the other hand, their hidden presence makes it more difficult for advocates to identify the opponents of healthier policy. In the future, using Mayoral campaigns may provide advocates with an opportunity to educate the public on the undue influence of special interests.[38]

4. *The success of using Mayoral elections depends on having mobilized constituencies that can put pressure on the successful candidates to implement proposed policies.*

The observations on the role of food policy in the recent Mayoral elections show that the relative success in making food a more salient issue in the second cycle was not the result of a single decision by advocates. Rather, the changes reflected years of effort: analysing issues, developing relationships with sympathetic public officials, educating

policy makers, mobilizing communities, and weaving disparate constituencies into a more unified political force. This suggests that to make food policy a campaign issue, advocates need a long term perspective, an ongoing commitment to creating the conditions that enable success and the ability to come together as a powerful voice.

5. *Success in achieving change through cities and Mayors is enhanced by utilizing their specific powers.*

New York and London's Mayors have differing powers, levers and control. Identifying the specific levers or influence that the Mayor has and linking 'asks' from Mayoral candidates to these appears more likely to be successful than a more wide ranging food or health related agenda. However, the 'influence' factor of the Mayor should not be ignored, as can be seen in London.

6. *Success in framing food policy as a Mayoral campaign issue serves as a powerful antidote to the belief that food and diet are the sole responsibility of individuals and family.*

A primary obstacle to public action to create healthier food environments, vigorously promoted by the food industry and deeply rooted in American and, to some extent, in British culture, is the belief that responsibility for food choices rests mainly with individuals and families.[39] Success in making food policy an election campaign issue directly contradicts that belief by publicly asking what actions can government take to improve food environments and what responsibilities Mayors have for setting policies that make it easier for people to make healthier food choices. In this way, making food policy a municipal campaign issue, food advocates can open another front in the effort to promote societal action on the social determinants of health.

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