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“Favoring those who contributed to their political campaigns”: an analysis of the incentives received by the food industry in Colombia in the period of 2018—2020

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Summary

The food industry is a very influential actor in public health policies in Colombia. In particular, industry incentives, such as financial donations and other gifts to political parties, can help develop future alliances and initiate an exchange of favors. The objective of this study was to analyze the incentives granted by the food industry to policymakers in Colombia from 2018–2020 and to understand how these incentives could affect public health policy in the country. An analysis of interest groups was carried out via qualitative methods, which was carried out in six stages: i) a documentary review of information and a content analysis of digital social networks; ii) the identification and characterization of actors in the food industry and decision makers; iii) twenty semi-structured interviews with key actors identified in previous stage); iv) characterization of the types and mechanisms through which incentives are provided; v) a mapping of actors; and vi) the reporting of results. Food industry actors, mainly at the national level, were identified as incentive providers to Colombia's government officials in the executive and legislative branches. We identified six types of incentives: financing electoral campaigns, financial donations, in-kind support, gifts, entertainment, and travel. Our analysis shows that the incentives of the food industry in Colombia can help influence the processes of formulation and implementation of food and nutritional public policies.

Keywords Food industry, Political donations, Lobbying, Corporate political activity, Colombia

Contributions to Health Promotion

- Understanding the economic power of the food industry in public health.
- Incentives are granted to political campaigns as a form of corruption that threatens public health.
- Encourage transparency in government entities to protect health governance.

Introduction

The growing political, social, and economic influence of food industry actors on political processes is receiving increasing attention from the academic community and other social sectors [3]. In Colombia, actors representing

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the food industry strongly opposed the introduction of recent public health policies, including policies related to mitigate overweight and obesity, food environments, and front-of-pack nutrition labeling [49, 15, 10, 47]. There is emerging evidence that the food industry in Colombia uses a wide range of strategies known as “corporate political activity” (CPA), such as coalition management, information management, direct involvement and influence in policy, legal and discursive strategies to undermine public health policies [16, 32]. In Colombia, a recent study on the influence of interested parties in developing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) revealed the capacity and power of the food industry to block public agenda processes that contradict public interests (Madureira and Galea, [26]). Indeed, food industry actors have used discursive strategies* (*non-coercive methods corporations use to influence public opinion, policymakers, and regulatory environments through the strategic use of language, framing, and communication) to improve their image in public opinion, demonstrating their efforts to strengthen food environments and their role in the economic development of Colombia [12]. The food industry promoted public–private partnership initiatives, engaged the media, and attempted to influence science on nutrition and noncommunicable diseases. Through their pressure groups, food industry actors manage to establish close relationships with high-ranking policymakers and promote weak voluntary self-regulation initiatives in the country [30, 31]. Food industry actors in Colombia are very close to the government administration, including having former members of trade associations act in government decision-making positions, a practice known as the ‘revolving door’ [44], 14, 53].

One of the specific forms of influence is the granting of incentives. An incentive is the promise of compensation for performing an action desired by the person granting the stimulus; it is a form of reward that encompasses financial and nonfinancial aspects [16]. The food industry offers incentives to political parties and politicians in the form of financial donations, as well as gifts, entertainment, and other in-kind support [37, 20, 43]. Incentives can modify behaviors and are used to generate certain reciprocity between the parties involved [32, 26]. Studies on political incentives have shown that these incentives have the potential to develop future alliances [13] and to start an exchange of favors. Incentives aim to obtain business support from the public or “buy the will” of political actors [48].

Although in Colombia, there is information on donations to political parties, no analysis has been carried out on the subject [37, 43], except for a newspaper article that documented numerous financial donations made by the food industry to the candidates for the 2018 Colombian

presidential elections [49]. Therefore, the present study aimed to understand the incentives provided by the food industry to policymakers in Colombia between 2018 and 2020.

Methods

Between January and July 2021, we searched for publicly available information on Twitter and conducted semi-structured interviews.

The framework of the International Network for Food and Obesity/Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS) developed by Mialon et al. [34] was used as a starting point to identify the different incentives of the food industry observed in other countries. Seven types of incentives were classified based on the framework developed by Mialon et al. [39]: financing of electoral campaigns, financial donations, donations in-kind, gifts, trips, entertainment, and others. Theoretical elements from economist Deborah Stone were also incorporated regarding incentives as a three-part system: who gives the incentive, who receives it, and the incentive itself [48].

For this study, the “food industry” refers to companies dedicated to producing, packaging, distributing and marketing ultra-processed edible products and sugary drinks such as SSBs [46]. “Political actors” refer to people and organizations in the Colombian legislative and executive branches.

Phase 1: document review – content analysis of digital social networks

For the identification and selection of key actors and for documenting the granting of incentives, a documentary review of the scientific and gray literature and a content analysis of the digital social network Twitter were carried out. A total of eighteen Twitter accounts of food industry actors operating in Colombia, such as Postobón Sa, Alquería, Alpina, Golden Arches Unlimited – McDonald’s, Grupo Nutresa, Bavaria, Aldor Groceries, Frikaz Groceries, Grupo ÉXITO, and Nestlé de Colombia, were examined. Manitoba SAS, Ramo, Coca-Cola, Unilever, National Federation of Commerce of Colombia, National Association of Businessmen of Colombia, Grupo Santo Domingo, Ardila Lülle Organization. Tweets with the words donate* or gift* or help* or support* or deliver* or contribute* were used to identify advertising about possible incentives offered by the food industry.

Five databases were used to search for scientific articles specializing in political analysis, public health, or health policy, both in English and Spanish: Web of Science, PubMed, Scopus, SAGE Journals, and the Google Scholar search engine. Journalistic notes, news, and reports from two Colombian national newspapers were

also recovered: *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador*. Reports and notes from civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Global Health Advocacy Incubator and the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers Collective, were also considered. The search was conducted in Spanish and English via the following keywords: *conflict of interest, influence, tactics, donation, incentive, financing, lobbying, corporation, food industry, or food industry*. We also conducted semi-structured interviews (see the section below), and some study participants shared material that was used for our documentary analysis.

We decided to study a relatively long period for our documentary analysis, between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2020, given that several political processes took place: electoral campaigns, presidential elections, and the process of debate and approval of a new front labeling system based on warnings. Food industry corporate political activity does not occur only during a specific event nor is it subject to specific time periods (e.g. during the development of specific policies that could

threaten the activities of the industry), but instead it is used to influence public health policies in both the short and long term [30, 31].

As a result of the documentary review and Twitter analysis, thirteen scientific articles, fifteen gray literature documents, and one hundred and two tweets were obtained (Fig. 1).

Phase 2: identification and characterization of actors

Based on the documentary review and content analysis of Twitter, a list of actors ($n = 121$) was established, including actors from the academic community ($n = 8$), the food industry ($n = 45$), the media ($n = 5$), nongovernmental organizations ($n = 7$) and the legislative and executive sector of the Colombian government ($n = 56$). All these actors were selected as they have participated and had experience and/or knowledge in the political processes of Colombia. One-by-one analyses, and componential analysis were subsequently used by applying principles of the public policy network approach and social network analysis to characterize its essential qualities, such as the

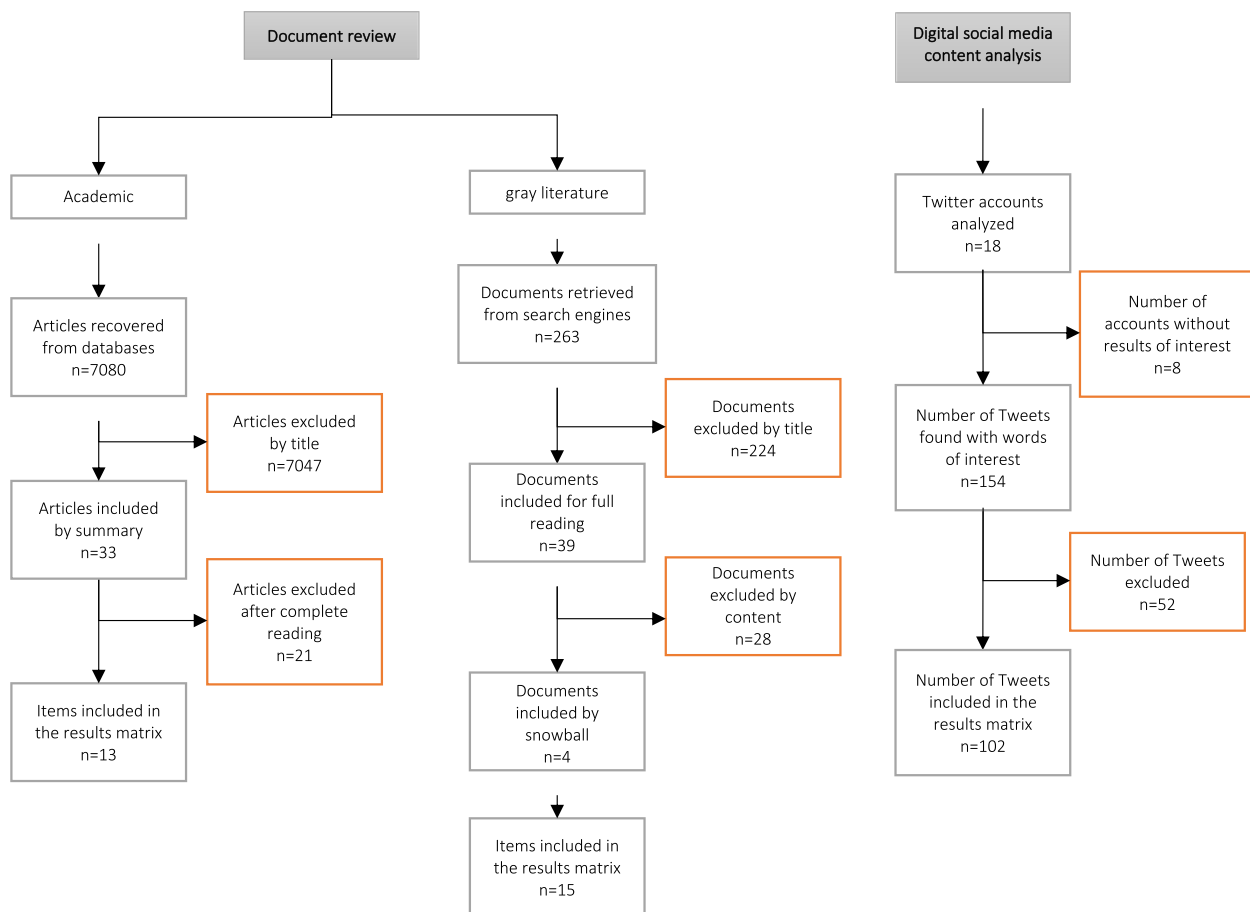


Fig. 1 Flowchart of document review and Twitter analysis

name and origin of a sphere and belonging to a field or sector [see File 2].

Phase 3: semi-structured interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews to gather first-hand experiences from those closest involved in public health policymaking in Colombia. The selection of participants ($n = 116$) was intentional, since we contacted all the actors in phase 2, except for five with whom we could not contact because we could not find their email, social media account or phone number. We also employed the snowball sampling technique, inviting participants to identify other potential interviewees through their networks. The 110 participants were invited via email and LinkedIn and of those invited, ($n = 17$) declined to participate, and there was no response to the remaining invitations ($n = 73$). A total of ($n = 20$) individuals participated in the study, three from the food industry, one from the legislative branch, three from the executive branch, four from academia, three from civil society, two from non-governmental organizations, and four from the media.

The people agreed to participate in the study voluntarily and under conditions of anonymity and confidentiality. An ethical agreement was signed between the interviewer and the participants, who consented to digital audio recording and note-taking. The main author conducted the interviews through Google Meet, with an average duration of one hour, relying on a semi-structured interview guide [see File 3]. All information that could identify participants was removed from this manuscript.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using an inductive method. Through this process, we developed explanations that are grounded in the participants' perspectives and the real-world context in which the study takes place, this allowed for an open and flexible exploration of the topics, themes and categories, addressed and provided a deeper and richer understanding of the interviewees' experiences. The interview results were verified through triangulation with the documentary review and Twitter content analysis.

Phase 4: determination of the type and mechanisms of incentives

Following Stone's incentive theory, the research team documented the mechanisms through which incentives were provided by exploring:—how relationships between industry and political actors were established;—how the granting of incentives occurred;—what benefits from the incentives were then translated or what purpose they had;—whether there was any risk of influence due to the receipt of these incentives; and—what was the context or temporality in which the incentives were granted (Fig. 2).

We consider in-kind support that was directed to sectors of the population but in which political actors intervened in their delivery. By being intermediaries of these deliveries, the political actors received some benefit in exchange, such as advertising or information that favored their public image.

Phase 5: actor mapping

A review of the primary information collected in the interviews and the results of the documentary review revealed that a group of actors ($n = 29$) from the food industry were directly involved in the granting of incentives to political actors (Fig. 4). UCINET 6.0 software was used to graphically represent the relationships between these actors and the type of incentives granted. We subsequently assigned the power of each incentive according to the algorithm proposed by the PolicyMaker 4.0 software, which is based on a qualitative assessment of the possession of financial, organizational, and symbolic resources (such as leadership charisma or followers on social networks), as well as the ease and direct access to decision-making and the media. Thus, the greater the power is, the greater the political influence of the actor.

Phase 6: results report

A matrix was built in Excel using the information collected from the documentary review, the content analysis of the social network X (formerly called Twitter), and the interviews, in which we determined who gave and received incentives. Each source of information, interview, and tweet was assigned a unique consecutive code that begins with the letter A [see File 4].

Results

Key actors

Participants from sectors such as academia, the media, civil society organizations, and the executive government identified Postobón SA as an outstanding, visible, and active actor in granting incentives. In the interviews, Grupo Nutresa was also distinguished as a predominant actor, along with Bavaria, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestlé, Alpina, and the National Association of Businessmen of Colombia, Grupo Éxito, which includes its foundation and chain stores with the same name. The business groups that some of these companies belong to also participated, such as the Ardila Lülle Organization and the Santo Domingo Group.

Nine of these actors published information related to the incentive strategy on their Twitter accounts. The industry players with the highest number of mentions were Postobón SA, Bavaria SA, Grupo Nutresa, Grupo Éxito and Coca-Cola. Except for the latter, the companies

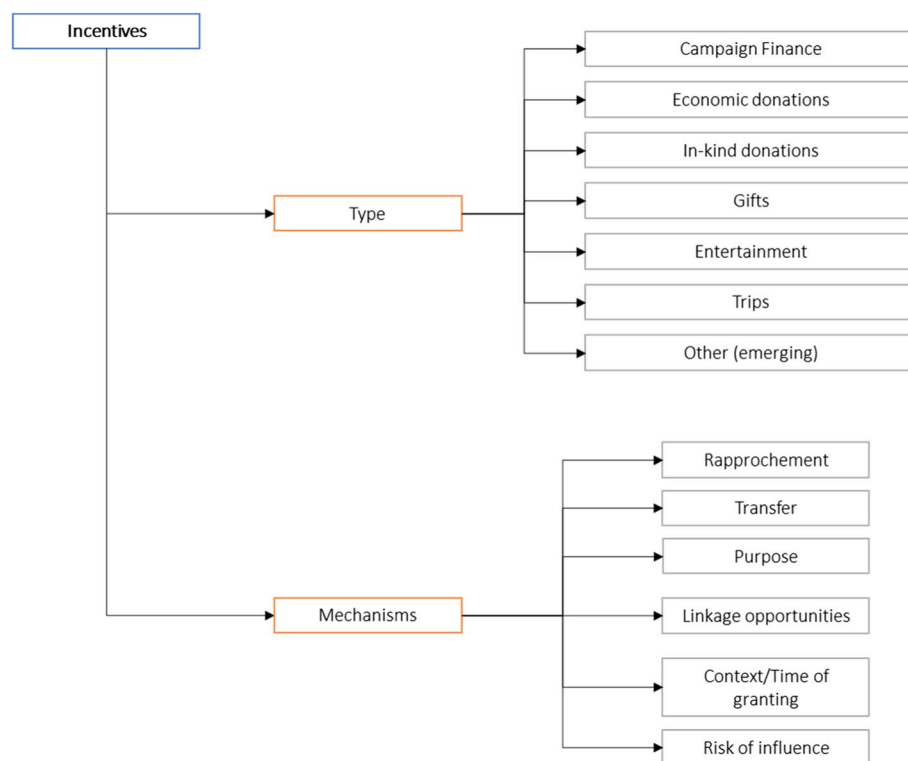


Fig. 2 Types and mechanisms through which incentives are offered, as proposed for this study

Table 1 Characteristics of the companies highlighted in the granting of incentives

Company	Territorial level of the organization	Food sector (food category)
Postobon SA	National	Sugar-sweetened beverages
Farmhouse	National	Dairy products
Alpine	National	Dairy products
Golden Arches -McDonald's	International	Fast food
Grupo Nutresa SA	National	packaged food
Bavaria	National	Sugar-sweetened beverages
Aldor Groceries	National	Packaged food (Confectionery)
Frikaz Groceries	National	packaged food (French fries)
SUCCESS Group	National	Food retail
Nestle of Colombia	International	packaged food
Manitoba SAS	National	Packaged food (Sweets and savory snacks)
Bouquet	National	Packaged food (Bakery products)
Coca Cola	International	Sugar-sweetened beverages
Unilever	International	packaged food
National Federation of Merchants	National	Trade association
National Association of Businessmen of Colombia	National	Trade association
Santo Domingo Group	National	Economic group with sugar-sweetened beverage and food retail companies
Ardila Lülle Organization	National	Economic group with sugar and sugar-sweetened beverage companies

with the greatest participation in granting incentives occurred at the national level (see Table 1).

According to the information recovered from Twitter, five ministries, eight governors, and forty-three mayors' offices in the country have received in-kind support. According to the literature, we identified 36 legislative actors whose electoral campaigns have been financed by the food industry. Notably from executive branch, Iván Duque Márquez, former president of Colombia (2018–2022), declared having received \$700,717,339.68 Colombian pesos (\$173,181.8 USD) from the SSB industry during his 2018 electoral campaign [A14]. In addition, his Senate campaign in 2014, he received financing from Grupo Nutresa and Bavaria [A16].

Eight of the thirteen political parties registered in the 2018 Colombian parliamentary elections received incentives from the food industry. However, interviewees highlighted that the industry tends to grant a greater number of incentives to right-wing political parties such as the Centro Democrático (Democratic Center), Cambio Radical (Radical change), and the Partido Conservador (Conservative Party). In addition, some members of the Partido Alianza Verde (Green Alliance Party), the Partido Polo Democrático Alternativo (Polo Democratic Alternative Party), and a member of the Indigenous and Social Alternative Movement also received financing from SSB companies during their electoral campaigns. Although most political parties have received funding from the food industry, it usually goes to a few political parties and, as one of the interviewees noted,

"[The industry finances] partisan sectors have openly declared themselves promoters of Colombian business." [A145].

By investigating how the food industry selected who it awarded incentives to, our participants stated that the industry must have marketing criteria. The granting of incentives is concentrated in scenarios in which political initiatives or actions of interest are being developed, which may be at the regional or national legislative level or an instance involving the executive branch. In the Senate of the Republic (divided into 14 th commissions), industry focused on the 7th Committee (discussion of health issues), 3rd Committee (discussion of tax aspects) and 6th Committee (discussion of education topics). In both chambers of the Colombian Congress (Senate and House of Representatives), they identified the leaders of the partisan groups, and once the presentations had been defined, they approached the speakers of the food and nutrition initiatives. This information about the selection process was triangulated with what we obtained in our documentary review. Corporations strategically select politicians with legislative power directly related to their

interests, prioritizing strategic criteria over ideological criteria [A4], and creating links with influential or potentially influential political actors, financing rising actors [A1]. The results showed that most of the actors involved in granting incentives have high power, as shown in Table 2.

Types of incentives

The most frequent incentives were the financing of campaigns for elections for Congressmen and executive leaders, including mayors, governors, and the Presidency of the Republic. The financial contributions of the SSB industry to individual electoral campaigns ranged between 7,471,436.20 and 1,168,688,829.28 COP (1,829.31 and 286,142.33 USD). Table 3 describes the political parties with the highest level of declared financing from the SSB industry for their candidates for Congress (2018–2022) [A14] (Gómez, 2020).

One of the participants referred to the financing of electoral campaigns as a special type of incentive:

"Postobón, for example, made a strategy in which it financed all the candidates for Congress, gave them six million pesos equally, in such a way that it marked everyone with a conflict of interest, everyone, those who won, those who did not win," and it is another type of incentive that they call something like "support for democracy" ". [A139].

Another type of incentive is financial donations, which refer to cash transfers. Financial donations are regularly reported on government websites, in the media [A18–A20] and on the Twitter accounts of food industry companies. Industry actors donated money to the national executive branch during political campaigns or to programs in charge of transferring these resources to vulnerable sectors of the population or in conditions of poverty that were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, financial donations were initially received by entities such as the Mayor's Office of Bogotá or the Presidency of the Republic. Some of the interviewees mentioned that the food industry can provide large sums of money, which are difficult to trace, aimed directly at Congressmen involved in bills that seek to regulate the industry's products. One interviewee explained,

"...a vote against the tax could be worth 50, 100, 200 million Colombian pesos... it depends on how far along the project is and its impact." [A147]

We also identified donations in-kind, in which many of the tweets analyzed alluded to this type of incentive. Some corporations provided water, food stamps, and food packages with items from their brand catalogs, such as SSBs and ultra-processed food products, which were

Table 2 Power of key actors according to the variables of the software according to the variables of the PolicyMaker 4.0 software

Actor Name	Does the actor have substantial financial resources that can be used to influence the policy?	Does the actor have significant organizational resources that can be used to influence the policy?	Does the actor have significant symbolic resources that can be used to influence the policy?	Does the actor have easy and direct access to the decision-maker on the policy?	Does the actor have easy and direct access to the mass media?	Power
Food industry actors						
Postobon SA						
Farmhouse						
Alpine						
Golden Arches Unlimited – McDonald's						
Nutresa Group						
Bavaria						
Aldor Groceries						
Frikaz Groceries						
SUCCESS Group						
Nestle of Colombia						
Manitoba SAS						
Bouquet						
The National Trade Federation of Colombia						
Coca Cola						
Unilever						
Santo Domingo Group						
Ardila Lülle Organization						
Political actors						
Ministry of sports						
Ministry of Health and Social Protection						
Bogota City Hall						
Presidency of the Republic – Iván Duque						
Democratic Center Party						
Radical Change Party						
The Union Party for the People						
Colombian Liberal Party						
Conservative Party						
Indigenous and Social Alternative Movement						
Green Alliance Party						
Alternative Democratic Pole Party						
High	Medium	Low				

Black: high level of power; gray: medium level of power; and white: low level of power

Table 3 Parties that received the most money from sugar-sweetened beverage corporations for their 2018–22 Congressional candidates, in Colombian pesos and dollars according to the exchange rate for 2018 Information collected by the authors [50]

Politic party	Reported money (COP)	Reported money (USD)
Radical Change Party	2,306,630,000	780,207.89
Conservative Party	1,953,288,000	660,691.44
Democratic Center Party	212,968,000	72,035.53
Unity Party	60,894,000	20,597.14

given to mayors and governors to be allocated to vulnerable populations in their regions [A18, A20, A21, A24]. The food industry also donated bicycles [A99, A115] and school furniture [A102] and (in the context of COVID-19) offered hygiene products, masks, antibacterial gel, medical equipment and even paid for the development of a hospital to care for sick people [A108, A110]. The interviewees also claimed that the food industry delivered free snacks for sponsored events organized by government agencies.

Gifts from the food industry to political actors included restaurant invitations, dinners on holidays such as Christmas and New Year's Eve, and yacht rides. The food industry also financed trips domestically and internationally and, in one case, paid for a policymaker's entire family. This was also noted in a newspaper article:

"It is likely that Cartagena de Indias is the largest relationship resort in the country. Among the annual congresses organized by unions and private entities, tickets and travel expenses are usually reserved for some parliamentarians to travel with their partners or family" [A14].

Additionally, the industry provided entertainment incentives, such as tickets to concerts and soccer games, and held union events concerning health, food and nutrition in tourist locations. Other types of incentives include aid to facilitate admission to universities for children of political actors and pay for the expenses associated with higher education.

Congressmen from the provinces of Colombia were offered financial and in-kind support for their residency in Bogota, the city where the parliamentary precinct is located. The industry also connected providers with different decision makers at the national level. Furthermore, when political actors want to build parks and schools in their regions, the food industry supports them. As one interviewee explained,

"...before becoming a congressman, [the political actor] was mayor of [the region] and he developed a strong agenda with all the parks in [the region], with schools made by Postobón... so those are also certain favors that the industries offer them, as the congressmen in any case, they have a place where they get their votes, what the industry does is say 'what do we do in your town' Let us make parks, give bicycles for the children, and see if Postobón can get there >>. Therefore, in the political life of these people, Postobón or the industries become an alternative to finance their programs, their political visibility." [A139].

Figure 3 shows the relationships between political and food industry actors, as well as the types of incentives that were granted.

Mechanisms through which incentives are granted

According to the interviewees, the food industry rarely interacts with political actors directly; instead, it hires lobbying agencies that present themselves as public relations representatives or strategic communication units, law firms, or consultants, who visit legislative venues and congressional offices. For each issue generated in the legislative field, the food industry uses different pressure groups, usually hiring physically "attractive" people who negotiate directly with political actors and iterate food industry talking points. One interviewee explained,

"[The approach] is the same everywhere in the world, all companies, unions, etc., have people called liaisons and it is normal, they know about projects... what projects they are for or against... They are workers, they are aware of the projects and if there are any, they approach the legislator to talk to him... because he agrees, why not? If there is legislative weakness, you can allow yourself to be induced by that. It is daily bread, and it happens in all parts of the world" [A143].

One participant explained that companies alternate spokespersons and approaches according to their reputation with the public and at a given moment [3]. According to one interviewee, the food industry and its lobbyists studied the needs and interests of political actors before offering incentives and stated the following:

"Lobbying firms carry out judicious parliamentary monitoring where they evaluate each parliamentarian's social, family, and political capital to know where to enter or approach them to achieve a negotiation or dissuade them" [A150].

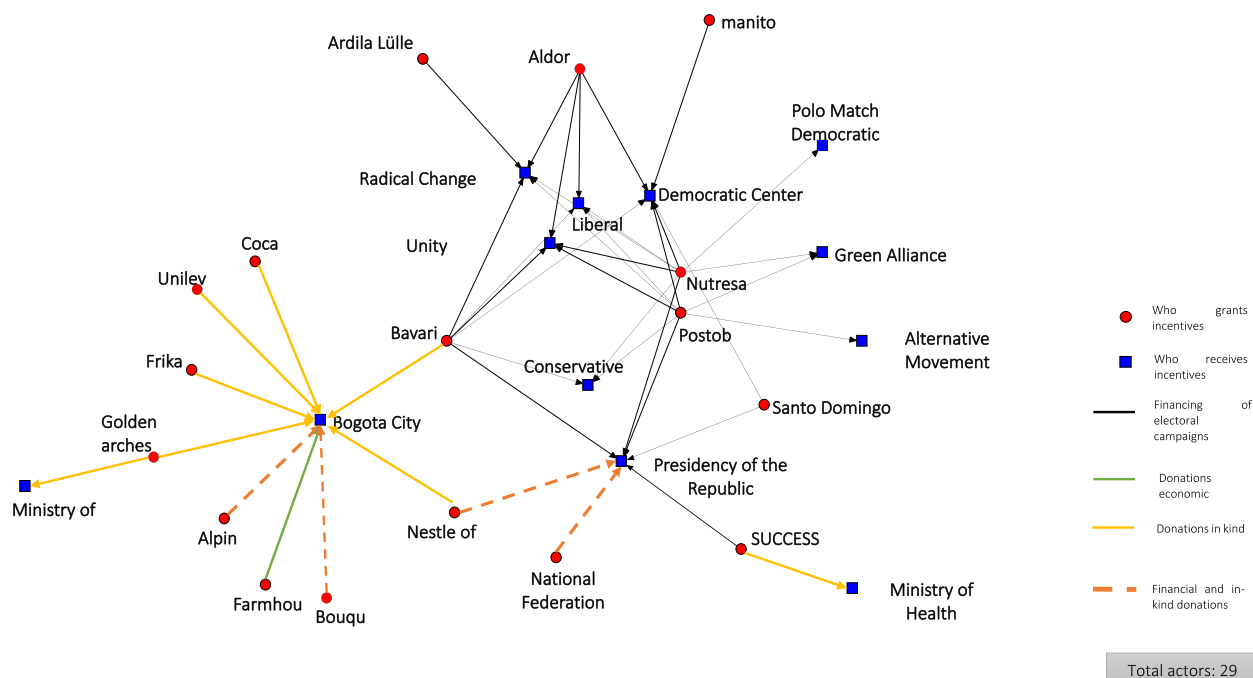


Fig. 3 Map of actors involved in the granting of incentives in Colombia and types of incentives involved in their relationship (2019–2020)

During the period of analysis, many lobbyists, media, beverage, and ultra-processed food product companies attended deliberative sessions of Congress, where "rivers of silver flowed" [A150]. The interviewees explained that these actors could be seen sitting next to policymakers during the Congress sessions. In our analysis of the literature review, we discovered that lobbying and outreach activities are concentrated on actors in the legislative branch and not on those in the executive branch [A4]. We also observed in the interviews that once the politician receives donations for his campaign, the donor company performs lobbying activities in a short period since the donation may not be as effective after a few years [A4]. The interviewees verified that this approach is made through lobbyists [A9, A11], who engage in conversations with powerful spokespersons, when proposals that favor or affect industry interests are debated [A5]. However, one of the participants had a contradictory experience, stating that.

"For years, they have not reached the Congressional offices directly" [A150].

Meetings between the industry and political actors can take place at entertainment events through invitations to restaurants or events paid for or organized by the food industry. Colombian congressmen are invited to large-scale events with famous international companies through organizations such as Concordia*. These spaces

are private and closed spaces where industry actors and politicians establish agreements on public health issues. In this regard, one participant commented,

"There are large relationships between industries and states, large organizations created in the world for that, in which suddenly Colombian Congressmen begin to be invited to share a panel with the big American industrialists... There you can find strategies like that of Concordia, which is a North American organization whose mission is to generate links between industries and states. If you are going to look at the structure of who the partners or bosses of Concordia are, you are going to find all the big food industries like Coca-Cola, and tobacco industries... you are going to find that there is a kind of group of CEOs of the Concordia at least 16 or 20 former presidents, among other people, who share with senior officials from different governments. You will also find the former director of the American National Intelligence Agency, Negroponte, former director of the CIA..." [A139]

Several participants described the phenomenon of 'revolving doors' as a way in which the industry learns about the dynamics, times, and rules of operation of the country's legislative chambers. With that knowledge, they know how and when to approach decision-makers. One of the interviewees commented:

"[The rapprochement between actors] is something that is already very established. It is not something in which alliances have to be reestablished every four years. Furthermore, because in Colombia, politics is very static, the same candidates are re-elected from one election to another, and political movements, if they change their name, are usually led by politicians who have a long tradition, not only in the Senate but also in the Congress; however, they are children of politicians who have been doing politics all their lives. Therefore, the relationships are already very entrenched." [A131]

The interviewees explained that the transfer of incentives such as financing electoral campaigns is done through foundations or entities created by the food industry. The financial contributions are made by legal entities and commercial chambers dedicated to other activities, but they belong to the same economic conglomerate of SSB and ultra-processed industries.

From the interviews, it is clear that the transfer of incentives, unlike campaign financing, is an act that occurs behind "closed doors", often not recorded and not visible to an external observer. One participant summarized this approach as follows:

"Tell me who you send it to or what you need, and it does not appear... it is that simple..." [A132].

Regarding the context and temporality in which the food industry granted incentives to political actors, one participant explained that gifts, trips, and entertainment activities are constantly granted to all congressmen, but the offer of money is made when the events are about to take place, such as voting on bills. In the past, the food industry granted incentives to political actors during the formulation and debate processes of the tax on SSBs, [A22, A24] the debates concerning the adoption of new front-of-package nutrition labeling (FOPNL) systems and the development of marketing restrictions for unhealthy products [A14, A23]. We also found evidence of contributions from the food industry to regional electoral campaigns for the chambers of the Congress of the Republic and the presidential elections in 2018 [A15, A26, A27]. In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, donations were provided to the National Government during the period of "Mandatory Preventive Isolation" that began in March 2020 [A20, A21, A25] and during government election campaigns launched during the pandemic. One of these programs of the Bogotá District System was 'Basic Income Bogotá', an economic relief program to meet basic needs during the quarantine of households in conditions of poverty/extreme poverty and vulnerable conditions [A19]. On Twitter, we identified financial and

in-kind support from the food industry to the 'Helping Does Us Good' campaign led by President Duque [A35, A96, A101, A107, A114, A127], to state strategies related to maternal and child feeding and nutrition [A39-A41, A43, A47, A48, A50, A53], as well as donations in-kind granted to the government to address the natural disaster caused by Hurricane Iota in San Andrés and Providencia in 2020 [A34, A97].

The information shared by the participants indicated that the food industry tends to be more active when legislative changes occur. Food industry actors have found opportunities to link electoral campaigns for regional and national political positions, the formulation and discussion of food and nutritional security plans, the deliberative processes of projects (e.g. SSB taxes, FOPNL), the resolution to reduce sodium content, and the advertising of ultra-processed products aimed at girls and boys. Additionally, one participant mentioned,

"The pandemic [COVID-19] marked a context in which industries in general took the opportunity to strengthen their ties and to almost come out of the closet in those relationships with the State and with state decision makers." [A139]

When discussing the purpose of different types of incentives, participants stated that financing electoral campaigns is a way to shield the political participation of corporations; thus, a "public defense of corporate interests" is generated [A136], and "they collect favors from financed congressmen" [A139].

The financial or in-kind support made by the food industry to the executive sector of the Colombian government within the framework of campaigns or to serve vulnerable populations allowed the industry to receive publicity for its actions, increasing the visibility of its products on Twitter. The industry was also seen as having a "lifeline amid the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes making health claims without scientific backing" [A24]. On the topic, some participants commented:

"The risk [of influence] is total, the risk is everything, the balance is then unbalanced in favor of the purely economic issue and against the food issue" [A132].

"A conflict of interest is generated because [political actors] legislate in favor of contributors to their campaigns, or those who offer an incentive. They divert from the primary interest, which is population health, for a particular interest [of the industries]" [A148].

The interviewees suggested that the granting of incentives from the food industry to political actors is a reflection of what is known as "corporate capture of the State" [A142, A145] since Congress legislates for

companies' benefits and not for the population in general, generating a co-governance where corporations influence legislative and executive government decision-making rather than being subject to control or regulation [A24].

Discussion

The analysis of the literature and interviews conducted for this study sheds light on a better understanding of the different incentives that the food industry offers to political actors in Colombia. We have discussed how these incentives can influence public policies, for example, as one of the elements that could block initiatives to place taxes on SSBs or weaken bills for FOPNL. In our study, the food industry actors most active in granting incentives were food companies in Colombia, including those from the SSB sector (Postobón SA, Bavaria SA, and Coca-Cola), food retail (Grupo Éxito), and producers of packaged food and snacks (Nutresa Group). This contrasts with other regions of the world, such as Mexico, in which transnational corporations are the most active food industry actors in granting incentives [30, 31, 32, 43, 48, 44, 53].

These results are consistent with other studies that concluded that the industry tends to finance more political parties that can publicly assume sympathies in favor of private corporations [1, 25, 51]. Like in the United States, contributions to political campaigns are carried out by corporations that use different names that refer to the same company [23]. The approaches of the food industry are mainly through lobbyists and, at times, when initiatives close to their interests are being developed [21]. Granting incentives by the food industry is a recurring strategy to block, weaken, and delay public policy initiatives [11].

Contributions to electoral campaigns were the type of incentive with the greatest number of results in our study, and it is a topic of which different investigations can be found in terms of high-level support [1, 23, 24, 28, 19]. Colombian President Ivan Duque received financing from the food industry at different moments in his career, a case that is similar to that of the former president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, who had previously been a Coca-Cola executive and benefited from receiving contributions for his campaign. As a result, Coca-Cola had a great influence on Mexican health policy and blocked the proposal of SSB implementation [14].

Our results are similar to the conclusions of other studies; incentives are used to create relationships between political and food industry actors [20, 1, 24, 7], and corporations have recognized the power of reciprocity as a tool for influence and persuasion [27] since the granting of incentives can translate into political influence [20, 8, 4, 51]. Incentives can modify public policy

formulation and deliberation processes to negate any legislative impact that affects food industry interests. Contributions to political campaigns have been shown to increase the likelihood that funded actors will participate in legislative activities involving bills that may be related to the funding corporation [23]. Furthermore, a political actor is 3.5 times more likely to introduce a legislative requirement made by someone who financed him than by someone who did not, and that chance increases when the senator shares ideological positions with his donors [28].

This study described a wide range of incentives such as in-kind support, gifts, entertainment, and travel that is beyond the financing of electoral campaigns commonly described in other studies. This study also analyzed the mechanisms through which incentives are granted to political actors, in which those involved create forms of interaction that take advantage of regulatory gaps and where deficiencies are also manifested in the implementation of current laws. The study also concludes that the 'revolving door' phenomenon occurs in the Colombian context, even though there is an anticorruption statute that prohibits public officials from joining the private sector during the two years following their resignation. Like the United States, Colombia allows private entities to finance electoral campaigns. Since 2019 when Congressional regulations were modified, Congressmen have been able to vote and discuss bills that involve sectors that have financed their electoral campaigns without declaring these conflicts of interest [42]. However, in September 2021, the Constitutional Court of Colombia declared this activity unconstitutional because it ignored the higher goals and purposes that legislative activity must pursue, particularly the satisfaction of the general interest and the common good [9].

The evidence produced for Colombia makes it a unique case in terms of the political scope of incentives. Other authors have discussed the importance of imposing limits on these practices [45]. In the Americas region, Chile has a public registry of lobbyists, public authorities and officials must record meetings requested by lobbyists whose purpose is to influence a public decision, as well as the trips they take as part of their duties and the gifts they receive [17].

The granting of incentives by the corporate sector to decision-makers for political purposes can distort public policymaking, favoring private interests over public interests and human rights. This phenomenon can generate bias in decision-making, resulting in policies that benefit powerful groups and perpetuate social and economic inequalities, negatively impacting the most vulnerable.

A limitation of our study is that we had limited participation from actors directly involved in the granting

and/or receiving of these incentives. The granting of incentives is not usually done transparently; therefore, it was not possible to delve deeper into these cases. Despite the limitations of transparency processes in Colombia, various cases of granting incentives to decision-makers or political parties could be identified as a representation of corporate political activity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the significant influence of the food industry in Colombia on public policymaking. Granting incentives to political actors by this sector has been a standard practice that ignores the potential risks of violating rights such as health and healthy eating, as well as generating conflicts of interest in decision-making that call into question the constitutionality of government decisions.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-025-01123-6>.

Additional file 1. COREQ: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research Checklist

Additional file 2. Componential analysis: Matrix with component analysis of key actors

Additional file 3. Guide: Semistructured interview guide

Additional file 4. Data: Results matrix with data collected from publicly available information

Additional file 5. Spanish version of the manuscript

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank their interviewees for participating in this study.

A special thank you to the Latino Research Center at the University of Nevada, Reno, for their valuable contribution in sharing their translation resources through graduate student Thania Castañaza.

Authors' contributions

María Alejandra Niño Duque was the principal researcher, contributing to the methodological design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. Emanuel Orozco, Eliana María Pérez, and Christian Paul Torres participated in the methodological design, data analysis, critical review with important contributions, and writing of the manuscript. Mélisa Mialon contributed to the design of the conceptual and methodological framework, critical revision with important contributions, and writing of the manuscript, and Eric Crosbie contributed to critical revision with important contributions to the manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This research did not receive any grant funding from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency. The authors are solely responsible for the opinions, hypotheses and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines established in the Declaration of Helsinki, and all procedures that involved the study participants received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the National Institute of Public Health of Mexico with identification folio F49. Cl: 629 and the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Antioquia in Colombia with endorsement ACEI: 03–2021.

'Human Ethics and Consent to Participate declarations: not applicable in this section'.

Consent for publication

Written consent was obtained from the participants to publish the data under conditions of anonymity and confidentiality.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 19 December 2024 Accepted: 7 May 2025

Published online: 19 May 2025

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