Criticism of the food industry has itself become a niche industry. But the tendency to embrace a US-centric conception of how the industry works risks masking local variants and inhibiting a targeted response in other countries.

Since the 2001 book *Fast Food Nation*, a spate of books, films and documentaries on the American food industry have helped to shape the popular idea of “Big Food”.

The food industry is depicted as a highly organised set of multinational food and beverage lobbyists peddling the global diet of sugary drinks and highly processed, energy-dense salty foods – akin to tobacco industry lobbyist Nick Naylor in the 2005 film *Thank You For Smoking*.

But although it is highly globalised, the food industry is far from homogeneous. Big Food in Australia is not the same as the industry in the United States, where much of the popular media has come from.

Still, that doesn’t mean Australian food and beverage lobbying is benign.

**A public health problem**

Responding to the threat posed by the food industry to public health locally requires a clear understanding of food industry tactics in the context of Australia’s political and lobbying culture.

The food manufacturing industry is Australia’s largest manufacturing sector, accounting for $111 billion and almost one in six jobs. Its peak body, the *Australian Food and Grocery Council* (AFGC), wields enormous power.
The AFGC aims to shape a regulatory environment that increases the profitability of the food and beverage sector. Its approach generally involves securing a seat at the policy table and arguing food industry regulation is unnecessary or flawed.

It uses three main tactics to do this.

First, it pre-empts government regulation by introducing its own voluntary schemes.

Consider the long-running dispute around the food industry’s daily intake guide nutrition labelling system. Much criticised by public health experts, it has now been included alongside the health star rating system favoured by health and consumer groups.

The Responsible Children’s Marketing Initiative is another attempt at voluntary self-regulation. The food industry introduced it in 2008, just as the federal government was considering tighter restrictions on food advertising to children.

While appearing to tick a regulatory box, public health researchers argue the initiative’s many loopholes prevent it from achieving its aims. Companies are able to choose their own nutrition criteria to identify “healthy choice” products, for instance, and the initiative doesn’t cover widely-used marketing techniques, such as product packaging and point-of-sale advertising.

Like many self-regulatory schemes, it has no formal sanctions for non-compliance, and relies instead on peer pressure and companies' fear of damage to their reputations.

Voluntary schemes such as this function both as a delaying tactic and a distraction: the rear-guard actions of companies that recognise the changing tone of public opinion and know government regulation can’t be far away.

Then, there are corporate social responsibility initiatives focusing on the exercise side of the energy imbalance equation that is leading to population-wide weight gain.

Given a choice, the food industry would prefer us to move more, rather than consume less. Sponsoring children’s sporting events and facilities has been one highly visible way of encouraging this.

Public health physician and researcher, Nathan Grills argues that McDonald’s has “inserted itself into the health DNA of our schools and youth clubs” in a manner that blurs the lines between altruism and exploitative marketing.

Less overt strategies include campaigns that recruit celebrities to encourage people to make better choices while ignoring the fact that our food environment does the opposite. One good example of this tactic is the Together Counts campaign, which features swimmer Susie O’Neill encouraging families to take a pledge to “making changes towards a healthier lifestyle”.

By focusing on exercise and consumer choice, the food industry reinforces ideas that health is a matter for personal responsibility and self-regulation - not government regulation.

The AFGC’s third tactic is to influence policy, from both inside and outside the tent.
As encapsulated by this report on “Reforming regulation of the Australian food and grocery sector” from October 2013, the AFGC’s vision of regulation is in direct conflict with that of public health advocates – especially when it comes to preventive health.

It seeks to realise its vision of lighter regulation through submissions to government enquiries, representation on government committees and working groups, and new industry-centric regulatory initiatives such as the Food and Health Dialogue.

And it seems the efforts are paying off. Parts of its wishlist came closer to being granted in the recent federal budget. This included cutting funds to the National Preventive Health Agency and National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health. The AFGC believed these bodies increased regulatory complexity and prescriptive policy interventions.

**Deregulation is the new regulation**

These tactics don’t have quite the Big Food drama of lacing your hamburger with high-fructose corn syrup, covertly funding NGOs to act as front-groups for the sugar lobby or working with the agriculture department to invent stuffed-crust pizzas as happens in the United States.

But it would be a mistake to confuse this lack of pyrotechnics with a lack of power. The AFGC’s tactics may seem vanilla, but they have a profound influence on the Australian food system and the way it’s regulated.

And don’t succumb to the temptation of reading corporate influence along party lines. Australian governments since the 1980s have been bipartisan in their faith that a thriving market economy can address most social ills.

The food industry’s preferences are in keeping with the broader trend for governments from both sides of politics to favour deregulation of business as a default. AFGC arguments about “easing the burden of regulation” fall on fertile ground, while calls to regulate industry influence or protect public health struggle to get a hearing.

These shifts are not only a problem for public health, but also for our political health.

Popular US representations of Big Food have been helpful in raising awareness of the influence of the food industry on diet, public health, and government action.

“Big Food” in Australia may not have the shock appeal of a Food Inc or an Omnivore’s Dilemma. But taking the time to understand Australian regulatory and policy trends, and the impact of local food industry lobbying on them, will ultimately have more relevance and critical purchase.