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# Political Appetites: Food as Rhetoric in American Politics

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# Political Appetites: Food as Rhetoric in American Politics

## **Abstract**

Food is mobilized as a site of political communication. The framing of food as politically relevant is possible because food is deeply rooted in a particular cultural context; because food is symbolic of its culinary community, therefore, it can be deployed as a form of strategic messaging. For that reason food has played a role in political campaigning since the earliest American elections. However major changes to the conditions under which politics is undertaken have altered the messages sent through food. Specifically, the emergence of image-based campaigning and a taste-based notion of elitism has created an environment in which food politics is designed to demonstrate a political figure's connection to, or disconnection from, middle class American culture. This qualitative study investigates three sites--diner politics, food faux pas, and the regulation of food--where food and politics intersect. Data for this analysis consists of textual analysis of over 400 articles published in newspapers and magazines; semi-structured interviews with public health advocates, political officials, and strategists; and candidate speeches and peripheral campaign materials. Analysis of these data demonstrates that political strategists deploy food tastes commonly associated with down-home culinary culture--namely tastes for diners, bars, and local restaurants--as a way to present their candidate as in touch with average Americans. Conversely, food faux pas committed by presidential candidates are treated by their opponents and the press as evidence of the erring candidate's elite food tastes. But food tastes do not carry the same symbolic weight in legislative contexts as they do in campaign contexts. This is because food tastes invoke little symbolism for legislators. Even so, proposed food policy legislation can nonetheless be framed by the press as a site of symbolic conflict if and when oppositional voices adopt the "food police" narrative. In sum, the mobilization of food's symbolic value is motivated by the desire to frame political figures according to their food tastes. This is the case because such a narrative maps onto the increasing role of personal tastes in the cultural organizing of the American public.

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POLITICAL APPETITES:  
FOOD AS RHETORIC IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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Alison Perelman

DEDICATION

To Amaya,

To my parents,

To my committee

Thank you.

## ABSTRACT

## POLITICAL APPETITES: FOOD AS RHETORIC IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Alison Perelman

Michael X. Delli Carpini

Katherine Sender

Food is mobilized as a site of political communication. The framing of food as politically relevant is possible because food is deeply rooted in a particular cultural context; because food is symbolic of its culinary community, therefore, it can be deployed as a form of strategic messaging. For that reason food has played a role in political campaigning since the earliest American elections. However major changes to the conditions under which politics is undertaken have altered the messages sent through food. Specifically, the emergence of image-based campaigning and a taste-based notion of elitism has created an environment in which food politics is designed to demonstrate a political figure's connection to, or disconnection from, middle class American culture. This qualitative study investigates three sites—diner politics, food faux pas, and the regulation of food—where food and politics intersect. Data for this analysis consists of textual analysis of over 400 articles published in newspapers and magazines; semi-structured interviews with public health advocates, political officials, and strategists; and candidate speeches and peripheral campaign materials. Analysis of these data demonstrates that political

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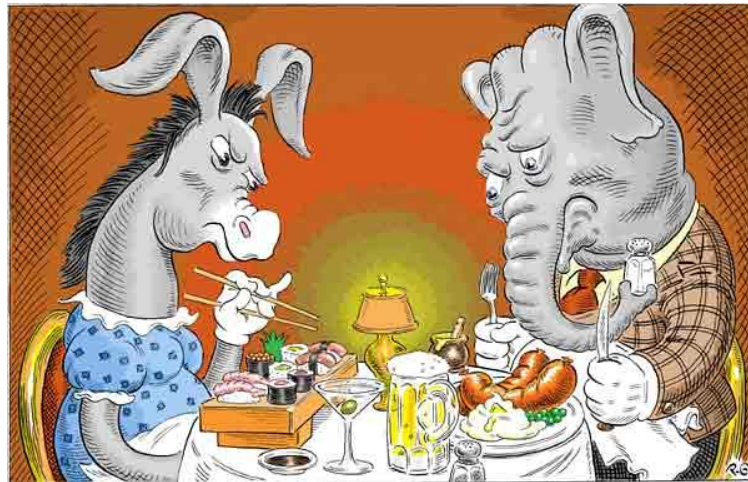
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**CHAPTER 1:  
TELL ME WHAT YOU EAT AND I WILL TELL YOU WHAT YOU ARE<sup>1</sup>**



“What’s for Dinner? The Pollster Wants to Know,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2008  
(Image 1)

### **Introduction**

In the second episode of the HBO series *Veep*, Vice President Selina Meyer is told by a her Chief of Staff that the office is planning a photo op at a local frozen yogurt shop. To prepare for the appearance Meyer and her team discuss what flavor of yogurt sends the best message to voters. Her Deputy Assistant lists a few good options (chocolate, peach, mango) and bad (red velvet cake, peanut butter, praline) but is interrupted when the White House liaison to the Vice President walks into the office. After the yogurt conundrum is explained, the visitor offers his suggestions: “Mint. It implies freshness,

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, 1825.

trust, traditional values... This is one of my areas, food choices. Seriously. Swirl. Racial harmony and crossing the aisle.” Despite recommendations from an expert in matters of politics and food, the Vice President ultimately decides on Jamaican Rum.

American politicians have always used food as a way to connect with voters. While running for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1758, nearly twenty years before America gained independence, George Washington distributed 160 gallons of rum, beer, and cider to his potential constituents (Boller, 2004). Thirty years later, during an election for a seat in the House of Representatives, James Madison and James Monroe made appearances where food and drink was served (Saslow, 2008), participating in a series of pseudo-events not unlike more recent examples of diner politics. Although food has played a role in campaigning since the earliest American elections, major changes to the conditions under which politics is undertaken have changed the way food is mobilized by elected officials, their surrogates, and the press.

Food has always served a symbolic function. Indeed, food carries with it such rich information that Barthes contends it is “perhaps the foundational unit of communication” (1972, p. 21). It is not surprising, therefore, that Washington, Madison, and Monroe used food as a way to connect with voters. Food, furthermore, communicates information about its origins, those who eat it, and those who don’t. This is because eating “operates according to rules that are by their nature culturally specific, [and] socially and historically derived” (Mintz, 1997, p. 173). For this reason, although food undoubtedly serves a biological function, it is inherently culturally coded and

socially organized (Schudson, 1991). Consequently, “What we think about food may have little to do with the actual material properties of the food itself” (Belasco, 2007, p. 13). And because food is so deeply rooted in a cultural context, at the intersection of food and politics we find a productive site for making claims about borders, both imagined and geographic, and conceptions about the qualities, values, and memories around which such boundaries are situated. Without drawing too heavily on an old cliché, we know a lot about a person by what she likes to eat. And because food, as a symbol, is so easily understood as a totem of its cultural heritage, it is readily mobilized by those for whom the creation of narratives is a central focus of their engagement with the political world.

But while its communicatory potential hasn't changed over time the message political figures intend to send through food has. For example, when then-candidate Barack Obama made an appearance at a sports bar in Latrobe, Pennsylvania and, before enjoying a pint of Yuengling, confirmed with the bartender that it “wasn't some designer beer” (Brown, 2008), he was participating in a form of campaigning that bore little in common with presidential elections of even fifty years earlier<sup>2</sup>. Like other contemporary elections, the 2008 campaign was defined by constant media attention, a focus on personal image, and a near-obsessive aversion to the trappings of elite culture. These factors are generative of an environment in which food tastes are treated by politicians

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, during the 1972 presidential election Democratic vice presidential candidate Sargent Shriver visited a bar in a New Hampshire mill town and famously announced: "Beer for the boys, and I'll have a Courvoisier" (Milbank, 2003; Cillizza, 2007).

and the press as providing a specific kind of information about political actors. They also contribute to a shift in the public's understanding of the relationship between personal tastes and political beliefs.

In my investigation of food as a site of political claims-making I investigate three phenomena: diner politics, food faux pas, and the legislative regulation of food. These perspectives comprise the three empirical chapters of this dissertation. In the first I interrogate the way political strategists use foods tastes that are commonly associated with down-home culinary culture—namely tastes for diners, bars, and local restaurants—as a way to present their candidate as in touch with average Americans. Specifically, I argue that campaigns mobilize the symbolic entailments of diners by arranging photo opportunities in them to create the public image that their candidate shares the values of average Americans. Moreover, the chapter outlines the ways campaigns tap into the symbolic value of the diner in arenas outside the diner's physical space, such as in speeches, advertisements, and on social media, in an effort to foment an advantageous public persona.

The second chapter considers what happens when this plan fails and a candidate reveals him or herself to have food tastes that are more closely aligned with the rhetorical elite than the average American. In these contexts a simple food gaffe becomes a food mistake when it resonates with an existing narrative about the candidate, specifically a narrative that suggests the candidate is more elite than average. In such a scenario the food faux pas is treated by opponents and the press as an incident for which the

consequences are negative and self-evident. In both these contexts (and chapters) the political press play a significant role in the framing of food and its symbolic entailments as relevant evaluative criteria. Indeed, just as political strategists use food tastes to strategically frame their candidate and his or her opponent, so too do members of the media frame food tastes as providing information about a candidate's true self, an insight that journalists view as politically and electorally important.

The final empirical chapter considers whether food tastes carry the same symbolic weight in legislative contexts as they do in campaign contexts. I interrogate this question through an analysis of three proposed food regulations: soda taxes, trans fat bans, and Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign. In this chapter food tastes are operationalized not as what one eats but as what one believes others should eat. For legislators, food tastes invoke little symbolism; to these political figures food policy is viewed almost exclusively as a pragmatic matter. Their interpretation, moreover, is largely reflected in media coverage. However, in instances of regulations around which there is considerable controversy and industry lobbying the media tend to frame a legislator's position on a proposed food policy through the same lens that is applied to a candidate's food tastes on the campaign trail. That is to say, just as food tastes are treated by the media as providing evidence of a candidate's average or elite status, so too are positions on controversial food policy regulations framed by the media as demonstrating a legislator's position on the average/elite scale. Taken in aggregate, these three empirical chapters demonstrate a tendency among political and media elites toward narrative conflict, a conflict that is grounded in the framing of political figures as either average Americans or out of touch



elitists.

*Political Polarization, Culture War Rhetoric, and the Communicative Capacity of Food*

The current political environment is shaped by factors that empower—or even require—politicians, their surrogates, and the media to use food in the creation of broader narratives. Specifically, food is mobilized to create, reinforce, and challenge narratives about a politician’s relative connection to, or cultural distance from, “average” Americans. This section draws on literature from food studies, consumer culture, and political communication to outline the factors that allow for food to be mobilized in this way.

*Why Do We Care About Tastes? Class, Culture, and Political Polarization in the United States.*

The question of whether a political figure is in or out of touch with average Americans is critical to contemporary political activity. This is the case because the notion of political polarization has become a dominant framework within political discourse. The theory of political polarization (cf. Stonecash, 2005; Bartels, 2006; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009) contends that the longstanding supremacy of class as the primary organizer of the American electorate has, over the past few decades, been challenged by values and cultural issues. But the contention that Americans are more concerned with cultural issues than economic interests, as measured by voting patterns relative to income, is

controversial. Those who support this theory argue that white middle and working class Americans have become increasingly turned off by the Democratic Party's liberal stance on social issues. As a result, these voters have migrated to the Republican Party, which is better aligned with their cultural values, at the potential expense of their own economic interests (Stonecash, 2005). Conversely, other research posits that there has not been a change in the dimension along which Americans are organized, as partisan identification and vote choice remain strongly tied to class. This dissertation does not argue for or against the theory of political polarization; instead, it takes the position that the concept of political polarization, whether it is an accurate reflection of partisan demographics or not, has become a central tenet of political and media discourse. Specifically, it contends that those who are invested in controlling the narrative about political figures—namely political and media elites—rely on the polarization narrative as both a rhetorical construct and a driver of professional strategy.

Frequently offered as evidence of political polarization is the defection of middle and working class whites away from the Democratic Party. This shift is evidenced by a documented migration of white working and middle class Americans in this direction beginning in the 1970s (cf. Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009). Specifically, between 1970 and 2005, 20% of working class white Democrats stopped identifying as Democrats (Kenworthy et al, 2007). Data also suggest that the Democratic Party identification among low-income white families since 1992 has deteriorated, further indicating a move away from class politics (“Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years,” 2012). To those who support the polarization theory the migration of southern whites to the

Republican Party does not fully account for this phenomenon (Kenworthy et al, 2007). Additionally, it is not explained by the overall shift, beginning in the 1970s, away the Democratic Party (Frank, 2004). Instead, the migration of working and middle class whites from the Democratic Party is the result of an increased focus on social issues that began in the post-New Deal environment and escalated in the 1970s.

Political polarization was possible, proponents argue, due to the shift away from economic concerns and toward the cultural issues that defined the post-New Deal political environment. According to this narrative, an aggregate increase in voter affluence resulted in a relatively greater concern for social issues and an attendant decline in New Deal-era class divisions (Stonecash, 2005). At the same time, and stemming from the Democratic Party's control over government planning during the New Deal and its subsequent focus on Civil Rights and social welfare, a Republican Populist narrative emerged that framed the Democratic Party as comprised of out of touch elitists (Gelman et al, 2007). Historically, populist rhetoric relies on the narrative of a larger force is destroying society; in the case of the post-war Republican Populists, that force was the intellectuals in the Democratic Party who used the government to enact widespread social change (Stonecash, 2005). Positioning themselves against the Democrats, leading Republican populists—Wallace, Nixon, Goldwater, and eventually Reagan—framed their opponents as out of touch intellectuals who believed they knew better than regular Americans. In this way, Republican Populism defined the terms and lead the fight between the common man and the malevolent elite (Kazen, 1995). Polarization, therefore, was both symptom and cause of the increased the political value of cultural

issues, such as abortion, women's rights, and gay rights, to formerly-Democratic white working and middle class voters.

Opponents of the polarization hypothesis, however, contend that there is no evidence that values outweigh class as a matter of political concern amongst the white middle and working class voters, or that cultural wedge issues have driven Democratic white working class voters to the Republican Party. In support of this position scholars offer data suggesting that voting patterns among white Americans changed very little between 1952 and 1996 (Stonecash, 2005). Indeed, the status quo has been maintained expressly because less-affluent whites have *not* moved away from the Democratic Party. [Here excepting the exodus of Southern voters away from the Democratic Party (Bartels, 2006).] Instead, since the 1960s income differences in voting have increased, not decreased (Stonecash, 2005; McCarty, 2006), as data suggest a growth in support for Democrats since 1970s by the poor and those who live in poor areas (Stonecash, 2000; Stonecash, 2005). Additionally, since 1980 there has been no consistent difference in voting behavior between whites as mediated by their college status (Bartels, 2006). For these reasons, polarization opponents argue that there is little or no proof that cultural issues have supplanted economic interests as drivers of party identification for white working and middle class Americans (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). In fact, white working class voters, as measured by income or education, attach less weight to cultural issues than economic ones when deciding how to vote (Bartels, 2006).

Putting aside arguments in the polarization debate, however, it is clear that the polarization theory, as a media narrative, has become a prominent facet of political discourse. Specifically, the polarization theory has become a central component of the Culture War media narrative, which describes an America organized around cultural values. The prevalence of both the polarization narrative in particular and the Culture War narrative in general is a consequence of the fact that political and media elites have themselves come to adopt more extreme ideological positions. Political parties and politicians have, in recent decades, become more ideological and more likely to take extreme positions on political issues (McCarty et al, 2006). The polarization of political elites began in the 1970s primarily as a consequence of realignment of the South. Due to this regional shift political elites—office holders, party and issue activists, and interest group leaders—have come to hold, at least publically, political positions that are increasingly ideological. One consequence of this increased ideology of elites is the appearance of a polarized citizenry (Fiorina et al, 2006). This argument, not surprisingly, is used against the polarization hypothesis. However the effects of polarization among the political and media elite has also resulted in the development and legitimization of political polarization as a media narrative. Writing about the 1980 presidential election Curtis Gans opined, “Instant political analysis is often politically self-serving and wrong... [but] it produces lasting political myth which, in turn, tends to color the conduct of American politics” (from Stonecash, 2005, p. 69). In the case of the polarization narrative, the misinterpretation of election returns and public opinion data—perhaps best illustrated by the red state/blue state map—has resulted in the strengthening of media

frames that describe a culturally-divided America. Consequently, the notion that white working and middle class Americans are more influenced by cultural values than economic issues has come to be treated as orthodoxy by the media even though that position might not be born out by the corresponding data (Stonecash, 2005).

It is for this reason that, although this dissertation does not argue for or against the polarization hypothesis, it strongly contends that the polarization narrative has come to play a central role in contemporary American political discourse. The dissertation takes this position because the privileging of cultural issues is clearly apparent among the political and media elite. For example, the conservative Club for Growth Political Action Committee ran a television advertisement the during the 2004 Iowa caucuses in which a farmer opines, "Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading . . .," only to be interrupted by his wife, who continues "...Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs" (Ehrenreich, 2004). The deferral to the polarization narrative is also observable in commentary by the media. In her response to the 2004 presidential election, for example, right-wing commentator Linda Chavez explained that John Kerry's presidential loss was a consequence of the fact that he did not "understand the American electorate," a liability that could have been avoided had he "[spent] less time at Starbucks sipping double lattes over the *Sunday Times* and more time at church or the local high school football game or in line at Wal-Mart" (Nunberg, 2006).

These examples not only speak to the perceived value of cultural issues but also suggest that personal tastes in particular are a site of political import. As will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, the increased political value of personal tastes is attributed to the re-emergence of conservative populism during the 1990s. Breaking away from the post-New Deal's framing of elitism as a matter of intellectualism, Republican Populists of the past two decades redefined the notion of elitism as the purview of personal tastes and preferences. Consequently, the Culture War narrative that emerged from this period argues that Americans are organized along not only to the axis of values but the axis of tastes, with the latter defined by what one wears, where one shops, and what one eats (Frank, 2004).

The reframing of a taste-based notion of elitism and the development of the Culture War narrative were politically savvy pivots that relied on a national uneasiness with overt references to class. In the American context, tastes are useful alibis for class because they obviate a direct allusion to money or income (DeMott, 1990). That is, one's preference for Starbucks over Dunkin Donuts becomes a useful analogy that eliminates the need for a more explicit classed reference. For this reason it is at the intersection of taste-based elitism and a national unease with class that we find, as Thomas Frank offers, a "class war in which class doesn't matter," and where what matters instead are the personal markers of class, specifically personal tastes (2004, p. 114). Although Frank's assessment is informative, this dissertation takes the position that perhaps the better description of the confluence of these factors is a class war not in which class doesn't *matter*, but in which class isn't *mentioned*. In place of direct references to class

contemporary political discourse instead relies on direct references to tastes; these references to tastes are politically valuable because they function as indirect references to the inherently classed environments in which they were produced. Consequently, tastes are mobilized by the political and media elite to define political figures as average or elite, and in doing so create a narrative about politicians' connection to, of distance from, everyday American voters.

*What are Food Tastes? And What Can They Tell Us About Political Figures?*

Food tastes can be framed as politically relevant information because they tell voters about a candidate and his or her background. This is the case because food tastes are the product of a number of cultural and biological factors which, when considered in concert, provide a template for understanding foods and, more importantly, those who eat them. Specifically, tastes tell us about the eater because the notion of taste refers to a range of phenomena. In particular, though, "taste" describes three different modes of analysis: a physiological sensation, a preference, and a measure of discernment. These alternative (though interconnected) concepts outline the ways in which socialized notions of taste are naturalized through cultural forces.

The physical experience of tasting food is highly naturalized and therefore difficult to unpack. The understanding of taste as a physiological phenomenon derives from human biology and is "generally used to denote the sensation people feel when they take food or drink into their mouths, linked of the arrangement and sensitivity of taste



buds on their tongue” (Lupton, 1996, p. 94). Such biological responses to foods are genetically-determined evolutionary artifacts that are responsible for innate taste biases (Rozin and Vollmecke, 1986). Broadly speaking, sensory-affective factors, particularly those on the mouth or in the nose, are responsible for an individual liking or having distaste for a particular food (Rozin, 1990b). Research demonstrates that humans have innate preferences for sweet foods, as they are generally safe to eat and provide a caloric boost, and an innate distaste for bitter foods, which are more likely to be toxic (Rozin, 1990a)<sup>3</sup>. Biological and psychological approaches to the study of taste, however, only account for part of the story; although taste, as a biological experience, greatly influences diet, it is not the determining factor.

There is a biological wisdom of the body, however physical reactions to food don't explain the wide variance in what is considered edible, let alone what is considered tasty. In contrast to non-human animals, human food preferences, such as nutritional beliefs, preferences, and cuisines exhibit a predominant influence of cultural factors (Rozin, 1990a). This is not the case because parents, or mothers in particular, greatly influence food likes and tastes; indeed, there isn't a significant correlation between the food preferences of children and their parents (Rozin, 1990a, 1990b). Instead, psychologists argue, cultural factors play the primary role in dictating what foods an individual eats and thinks tastes good. Specifically, culture develops food likes and

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<sup>3</sup> Within the psychological literature, *liking* a food describes a hedonic reaction and explains the consumption of the food for its own sake, simply because it tastes good. *Distaste* refers to those foods that disliked and rejected on the basis of taste, smell and, to a lesser extent, appearance (Rozin, 1990a).

distastes by determining what and how food is experienced and by modulating tastes through the demonstration of pleasure experienced by eating certain foods (Rozin, 1990a). As such, the question that is by far the most effective in predicting food tastes is, “What is your culture or ethnic group?” (Rozin and Vollmecke, 1986; Rozin, 1990a, 1990b).

Since taste in food is rooted in a cultural context, what one eats communicates information about the eater’s identity and origin. Bourdieu (1984) argues that because culture determines physiological tastes, food tastes communicate critical information about the eater. According to Bourdieu, food tastes develop as a result of one’s habitus, or the circumstances of one’s life experience. By generating a set of dispositions from one’s relative level of economic, social, and cultural capital, habitus instantiates tastes, understood as both physiology and preference, that reflect who one is and where one comes from. Although enjoying or being repulsed by certain foods is experienced as a natural process because it is an embodied process, these physiological responses are inimitably socio-cultural. As such, just as one constantly experiences physiological responses to eating food, so too does one constantly make determinations about foods and those who eat them. Therefore through eating, and eating certain foods at the expense of possible alternatives, “one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). Consequently habitus and the tastes it fosters allows for individuals to be understood by, and to understand, those around them.

Finally, the equating of biology and inclination allows for the creation of a hierarchy of tastes, more specifically a hierarchy of tastes according to class. Some scholarship argues that taste, understood as a matter of refinement, is defined by the upper class, and that those in the lower classes consume as a way to emulate those higher on the social ladder. Veblen (1967) asserts that objects of status are determined by the leisure class, which sets standards of consumption in the service of distinguishing itself from lower classes. Within this framework good taste is defined as refined taste, and is determined by the alignment of the hierarchies of economic and cultural capital (Ibid).

For this reason, conceptions of good and bad taste in food can also be organized according to the class hierarchy. What constitutes good taste in food is related to conceptions of good taste in other arenas. Bourdieu (1984) contends that good taste in art is determined by the mode of representation; those with good taste enjoy aesthetics, luxury, and form, while middle or lowbrow tastes dictate a preference for quantity, representativeness, and function. These findings can be applied to food. In his analysis of the food habits of the French in the 1960s, Bourdieu found that those in the upper class preferred original and exotic meals assembled with a concern for style, presentation, and aesthetics. Similarly, in a contemporary American context, the *nouvelle* and California cuisine movements of the 1980s exemplified the privileging of abstract presentation of food on a plate (Johnston and Baumann, 2010). Conversely, Roland Barthes found that the petit bourgeois has an “irrepressible tendency toward extreme realism” that manifest in food tastes, such as the preference for log-shaped Christmas cakes (1972, p. 79). In this way food serves a critical role in the production of one’s class identity, as well as in

the maintenance and reinforcement of class distinctions predicated on differences in tastes.

Some scholarship, however, argues that just as consumers attempt to distinguish themselves from those of lower social standing through consumption, so too can consumers define “good taste” in direct opposition to the preferences of the upper class. In part this reconceptualization derives from the idea that styles can trickle up, and that good tastes can be the product of subcultural capital designed to disrupt traditional hierarchies of value (Thornton, 1996). This inversion of the traditional flow of tastes also develops out of an idea that shoppers might engage in consumption oriented around a lifestyle that is explicitly thrifty and inherently mainstream. This mode of consumption defines the Wal-Mart brand identity, which is manifest in a dime-store aesthetic and a marketing strategy that celebrates the tastes and preferences of working and middle class “bargain” shoppers (Moreton, 2009). Notably, it is the inversion of the traditional class-based hierarchy of taste that allows for distinctly working and middle class cultural capital to be framed as politically valuable.

Taste, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, is at the root of how identity is made visible. However it is precisely because food tastes have a communicatory capacity that they can be mobilized to make visible an identity that is not a faithful reflection of one’s habitus. Indeed, political figures actively use food tastes to create a desirable public identity that insulates them from accusations that they are elitists or otherwise out of touch. The adoption of this “Wal-Mart approach” to strategic food taste

reflects the fact that, within the context of political discourse, the hierarchies of taste are inverted along the axis of class; political figures consume not to distance themselves from the lower and middle classes but to embrace them. The mobilization of tastes in this way is possible both because tastes are a reflection of habitus and, conversely, because consumer culture dictates that tastes are part of the modern identity-making project.

### *How Does Food Communicate?*

Taste is reflective of individual and social identity because consumption plays a critical role in making identity—or a desirable version of identity—public and visible. Although Bourdieu posits that one's taste inherently reflects his or her habitus, other approaches to consumer culture research contend that, within a modern context, tastes are a matter of choice, and identity is not a birthright but the product of those choices. In this way there are no fixed identities, only those that are negotiated (cf. Giddens, 1991). For this reason there is not a self that is independent of the consuming self; instead, the self is responsible for choosing between the goods, services, and lifestyles produced explicitly for consumption within the marketplace.

The consuming self, and the identity-making enterprise of consumption, is unique to modernity and the attendant choices therein. Prior to social and technological advances consumer decisions were mediated by shopkeepers who selected products and offered recommendations. By the early twentieth century new types of retailers, especially chain and department stores, and new types of technologies, particularly cash

registers, created a new shopping environment in which shoppers made nearly all decisions independent of merchants (Strasser, 2004). Following these innovations consumer choices were made according to the meanings produced, marketed, and circulated about available products. More specifically, the symbolic values of goods came to be negotiated within and by the marketplace, and in particular through “the relation between lived culture and social resources” (Slater, 1997, p. 8). Objects in the consumer marketplace, therefore, were no longer understood according to their use values; instead, they came to operate within a “field of signification” through which they were endowed with symbolic meaning by virtue of their position within the field’s network of signs (Baudrillard, 1998). Consumers no longer selected products for what they did, therefore, but for what they meant.

For this reason food choices make visible a consumer’s identity and desired projection of self. This is the case because food not only nourishes, it also signifies (Fischler, 1988). Historically, food was imagined to be communicative of identity due to its role in religious ceremonies (cf. Simmel, 1910). However all food, not just that which is used for ceremonial purposes, serves a communicative function. Foodways are culturally and socially shaped; consequently food is a central element in the establishment and circulation of meaning (Schudson, 1991). This is the case in part because eating is an act of incorporation; when food is consumed it moves from the world into the self, from the outside of the body to the inside (Rozin and Fallon, 1981 from Fischler, 1988). Through eating, therefore, the symbolic qualities of a food are incorporated into the eater (Fischler, 1988).

Food choice is also a part of the identity-making project because food, like other consumer goods, functions as a sign (Barthes, 1972). Foods come to be associated with other goods—or, more specifically, other signs—and consequently are endowed with the values attributed to that symbolic matrix. Once a food is recontextualized within a sign network it cannot be disassociated from its respective symbolic function (Barthes, 1997). This accounts for the production of multiple variations of the same food product; each version has a unique sign value and therefore was produced to satisfy not a particular physiological taste but a particular symbolic one (Mennell, 1985).

Additionally, food choices contribute to the making public of a desirable identity because they contribute to the cultivation of a desirable lifestyle. Lifestyle describes the intersection of social character and identity (Carey, 1997). Early examples of market segmentation were limited to the targeting of shoppers according to class, however beginning in the 1960s product orientations shifted to consumer distinctions based on lifestyle (Cohen, 2003). In the post-Fordist context marketers not only target messages to specific consumer groups but, in doing so, instantiate the lifestyles with which they hope those consumers will ultimately identify (Slater, 1997). The creation of symbolically-consistent lifestyles, therefore, has come to be evident in the interpolation of individuals through the lens of marketers.

The practice by which foods are incorporated into lifestyles is evident in socio-cultural movements. For example, the 1960s counterculture movement adopted brown bread as an explicit alternative to white because, within popular and marketing discourse,

the latter was understood to be unhealthy, industrial, and traditional. Once the two types of bread were positioned in contradistinction the selection of one over the other became a symbolically-loaded consumer choice (Belasco, 2007). This choice, moreover, reflected and reified the consumer's identity, and associated him or her with either a mainstream or countercultural lifestyle.

In these ways food choices distinguish the eater through both association and differentiation. In some cases, food is part of an identity-making project intended to associate the eater with good (as in, refined) tastes, while in other contexts the aim is exactly the opposite. In America, the connection between food, lifestyle, and good taste developed primarily in the 1970s and gained increased currency amongst “yuppies” in the 1980s (Johnston and Baumann, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, during the 1980s coffee makers developed new strategies geared toward selling gourmet coffee to those for whom the drink was a means of distinction (Roseberry, 2002). Starbucks turned this strategy into a corporate identity. In an effort to build a brand that appealed to the upper-middle and creative classes, the company created an “authentic” atmosphere through their deployment of baristas, faux Italianized names, and fair trade beans accompanied by a jazz soundtrack. Not surprisingly, market research demonstrates that Starbucks patrons “seek out things that make them feel important” (Simon, 2009, p. 72).

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<sup>4</sup> Beginning in the early 1980s a changing perception about food's identity- and lifestyle-building capacity came to be reflected in the media. Nearly 40% of all newspapers with a circulation over 100,000 added a Lifestyle section between 1979 and 1983. During this shift, moreover, coverage of food moved away from a practical and egalitarian slant to a new focus on “good food, gourmet cooking, and fine wine” (Hanke, 1989).



At the same time, however, for other consumers food serves as a means of demonstrating an explicitly working or middle class status (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 2008; Moreton, 2009). To wit, during the height of the Starbucks' craze in 2005, Dunkin Donuts paid a dozen regulars to try Starbucks coffee for a week; "Despite the entre into a different coffee world," however, "none of the participants switched 'tribes'" (Simon, 2009, p. 72). The refusal of Dunkin drinkers to migrate to Starbucks is not surprising, as food is central to how we understand tribes, both those defined by lifestyle and those organized by geographic borders.

*What Does It Mean to Eat American?*

Just as individual identity is established through consumption, group identity and membership is also instantiated through the consumer decision-making process. This is the case because consumption is a classifying project through which social categories are established and redefined (Douglas and Isherwood, 1980). We choose to eat what we eat at the expense of the universe of potential alternatives, and those choices create the boundaries of our culinary communities (Belasco, 2002). Furthermore, because goods are endowed with symbolic value, eating not only incorporates a food's symbolic value into the eater, it also transposes the eater into the culinary community within which the food resides (Fischler, 1988). In this way, the expressive and symbolic functions of food aids in the creation of a cognitive order based on social divisions; as such, food tastes and choices make visible and stable the categories of culture (Douglas and Isherwood, 1980). One such category that is made visible and stable is national identity.

Historically, Americans have mobilized food choices not only as a way to demonstrate their nationality but as a way to create it. Following the French and Indian War the British Crown attempted to impose tariffs on consumer goods like paper, glass, and tea. Unwilling and unable to pay these taxes, Americans called for a boycott on British goods, the most famous example of which involved the public dumping of tea into the Boston Harbor (Breen, 2005). During World War I the United States Department of Agriculture, under the authority of President Hoover, spurred the public to reduce its consumption of food with the slogan “Food will win the war,” and by sponsoring wheatless and meatless days that were widely observed (Schlesinger, 1983). As a result of Hoover’s campaigns, Americans came to see abstinence from food, and the resulting slimming effects that it had on their bodies, as a demonstration of sacrifice for their country (Schwartz, 1986). Similarly, during the Second World War, Americans came to think of conscious consumption as a means of aiding the war effort. Rationing and Victory Gardens exemplified the idea that private and domestic tasks were relevant to the civic arena and, for that reason, were endowed with political value (Cohen, 2003).

Eating and abstaining from food instantiates group identification; it is for this reason that food is instrumental to the identification of nationality (Ashley et al, 2004). Food and drink can be symbolic of the nation and nationality because certain foods come to serve as edible metaphors for the national family (Barthes, 1972). In part, the connection between food and nationality is forged through the development of a national cuisine. The emergence of national cuisines broadly coincided with the formation of nation-states (Mennell, 1985). Nationalism is rooted in modernity and emerged as a

force only in politically and culturally centralized societies that had some level of social mobility; in other contexts, such as in agrarian societies, nationalism amongst elites was always overridden by religious, regional, or class loyalties. For this reason national cuisines are also a modern phenomenon. European elites in the Middle Ages ate a diet that crossed national borders; it was only in the early-modern era that chefs created national, as opposed to class-based, cuisines. To wit, beginning in the modern era chefs catering to the wealthy in France developed a cuisine that favored elaborate sauces, while those working in English estates came to favor simpler country cooking (Cwierka, 2006). These unique cooking styles marked the beginning of what we understand to be national cuisines.

Looking across nations, food scholars argue that certain conditions must be present for a national cuisine to develop. National cuisines are fostered in nations in which there were long-established peasantries strongly bonded to the land (Symons, 1982 from Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo, 1993). Furthermore, national cuisines, like nationalism more broadly (Cwierka, 2006) are present only in societies in which there are both social elites and social competition<sup>5</sup> (Goody, 1982). The most salient feature of national cuisines, therefore, is the bridging of regional, ethnic, class, and gender differences, thereby creating a food culture with which entire populations “willingly and

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<sup>5</sup> Societies in which there are social elites but not a sense of social competition include the Lo Daga and Gonja tribes of North Ghana which, despite having vastly different hierarchies, ceremonies, and daily diets, feature cuisines that similarly lack any major differences related to social strata. The lack of elite cuisine, therefore, explains the lack of national cuisine (Goody, 1982).

often ardently identify” (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 178). This bridging of differences also emerges through negotiations between the local and foreign, and interactions between “practice and performance, domestic and public, high and low” (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 178). Therefore the expression of nationality through food is due to both the “ubiquity of food as a medium of communication,” as well as the “malleable, modular nature of national identity” in which nationalism, and national cuisine, takes root (Murcott, 1996, p. 33).

The notion of a national cuisine is less a matter of the food served than the conditions of its preparation and consumption. More specifically, national cuisines are defined less by ingredients alone than the classifications and rules by which they are governed and given meaning. Primary among these rules are those that determine when and how it is appropriate for food to be eaten (Fischler, 1988). In the case of France, for example, both steak frites and wine are connotative of French tradition, and wine and steak are “nationalized even more than socialized” (Barthes, 1997). For the French, moreover, knowledge about drinking wine is considered a “national technique,” as one’s taste in wine and skill in drinking it is demonstration of one’s Frenchness (Barthes, 1972). And because wine is an integral aspect of French national cuisine there are consequences for choosing to imbibe an alternative. When French President René Coty was photographed sitting at home with a bottle of beer instead of a glass of wine, for example, the “whole nation was in a flutter,” as wine is considered an essential part of the French nation and French nationality (Ibid).

Although the idea that there is a singular American cuisine (or French cuisine, for that matter), is contentious, there are certain definitional qualities of American culinary tradition. American foods, or foods that are thought of as American, are emblematic of culturally important values. The connection between values and cuisine is part of an historical lineage that began when colonial and early Americans—despite relying almost exclusively on British culinary culture—came to favor, in contradistinction to the British, the cooking of the country everyman as opposed to the country gentry (Levenstein, 1988). The privileging of the relaxed over the formal is perhaps the defining theme of American food. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cooking schools, cookbook authors, and cooking magazines participated in an effort to make “American cooking American” by celebrating the simple dishes of colonial New England that symbolized restraint (Gabaccia, 2000). In a more contemporary context, a cup of coffee, which is by no means an American food, has come to symbolize a prized American value: neighborliness (Taylor, 1976).

Although American food is understood according to values that vary across different segments of the U.S. population there are also foods that define American eating habits on a singularly (or more singular) national scale. Specifically, the American diet is distinguished by a taste for standardized, mass-produced and, paradoxically, ethnic offerings. This is the case because the distinction between standardized and ethnic is perpetually collapsing. Historically, the pressure towards mass production uncoupled many foods, such as fried chicken, hot dogs, and pizza, from their ethnic origins, and

converted them into meals as accepted and widely available as white bread<sup>6</sup> (Gabaccia, 2000). As knowledge of ingredients, cooking methods, and dishes that originated in ethnic and regional cuisines breached local borders through mass production, tastes for them spread as well (Mintz, 1997). The result of this ongoing process is a collection of dishes made ubiquitous through demographic changes and technological development. This culinary trajectory, moreover, has created a homogenizing pressure on Americans to focus their diets on a narrow menu of food options such as ice cream, hamburgers, and pizza. Consequently, and taking into account the role of values in the American diet, while there may not be an American cuisine there is undoubtedly a clear sense not only of what it means to eat American but what eating American really means.

It is no surprise, therefore, that politicians prefer, or present themselves as preferring, a cup of Joe to a cappuccino. This concern with tastes, which stems from the belief that the public deployment of tastes can steer a politician's media narrative, is derived from the communicative capacity of food. Moreover, campaigns operate within a discursive context in which tastes are framed by journalists and other political elites as both relevant political information and proof of a political figure's true self. Part and parcel of that true self is an answer to the question: Is he or she a regular American or an out of touch elitist? Food tastes are presented as an answer to that question because they reflect of a political figure's personal and classed history. However, while tastes are

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<sup>6</sup> At the time it entered the market American bread or white bread was widely considered to be "the world's worst;" nonetheless, it came to symbolize how the American middle class operated within an expanding industrial food market (Gabaccia, 2000).

indicative of one's "true self" they are also forged within the market of consumer culture; consequently, political figures frequently claim non-native tastes in an effort to create a more advantageous personal narrative. Specifically, politicians demonstrate that they have middle class cultural capital through their preference for foods clearly associated with Main Street American culture in an effort to prove that they understand and care about members of that culinary community.

The political mobilization of food, specifically the discursive framing of food tastes by political and media elites, raises a number of questions that are the focus of this dissertation. Specifically, this dissertation is an analysis of the following questions:

- How do political figures and their surrogates use food as a way to create a desirable public persona? What are the primary qualities political elites look to assume, and what qualities do they try to avoid? To what extent is this practice a response, either direct or indirect, to the Culture War narrative?
- How do the media participate in this process? Is the Culture War narrative interpreted and enacted in the same way by political journalists as it is by political actors? What are the typical frames employed in media coverage of food tastes? Who drives the framing of food tastes as politically relevant, political or media elites?
- When is food just food? In what political contexts are the symbolic entailments of foods largely ignored? And what do the cases in which food is

not mobilized as a form of political communication tell us about the inclusion of food tastes as part of broader political narratives?

## **Method**

My dissertation investigates the mobilization of food as a means of communication over the past twenty-five years. The project is limited to the contemporary political world because I am interested in the way three factors—media technologies, interest in political actors' personal lives, and the (real or imagined) cultural polarization in America—affect the treatment of food tastes as relevant political information. As such, while I provide an historical background in each chapter, my data and analysis begins with the 1988 presidential election.

Additionally, the topical scope of my dissertation includes both state and federal politics. Chapters two and three investigate national politics exclusively, while chapter four is concerned with both state-level (soda tax and trans fat bans) and national (Let's Move) food regulations proposals. There is one reason for the inclusion of both state and federal policies in this chapter: excepting legislation related to agriculture, specifically the labyrinthine Congressional Farm Bill, the vast majority of food regulations are proposed and enacted at the state level. Indeed, President Obama proposed including a soda tax in the Affordable Care Act; that idea was broadly viewed as a nonstarter. Notably the legislation associated with Michelle Obama's national Let's Move campaign is an exception to this rule and for that reason proves to be informative. In sum, to



consider the how food functions in a legislative context, not simply a campaign context, it was necessary to look beyond national politics.

Working within these arenas my dissertation draws on two primary forms of data: interviews with practitioners and experts, and textual analyses of articles published in mainstream newspapers and newsmagazines. This methodologically pluralist approach allows for richer analysis, particularly as I was able to interview the authors and subjects of some of the articles I analyzed. These complementary and occasionally conflicting sources of data provided a useful perspective into the motivations of journalists and political stakeholders. This approach also allowed for data collection and analysis to be a more iterative process, as I was able to identify and categorize important media narratives through both news sources and interviews with journalists (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

My approach to this project was a hybrid of “bottom-up” inductive or grounded theory development and “top-down” deductive testing of hypotheses that emerged from extent theory. Specifically, I entered this process with an existing theory; that theory led me to have certain expectations while it guided my grounded analysis. In this way, my existing theory served as a point of entry into my interviews and textual analysis of news articles. At times the data and my interpretation of them supported and explained my existing theory and expectations; in other cases, however, that theory was directly challenged by my findings. For this reason the relationship between my expectations and my findings helped me rethink and refine my existing theory.

### *Textual Analysis*

I analyzed over 400 news articles published in newspapers and magazines for my dissertation. My analysis of news articles served three primary aims. Firstly, from this data I was able to develop a framework for understanding and categorizing instances of food politics covered by the mainstream press. Additionally, the data allowed me to outline the types of journalistic frames within which these stories were situated. This was important as my analysis is particularly concerned with the way comments made by relevant actors are framed and recontextualized in the process of newsmaking (cf. Eco, 1992). Finally, and most importantly, I considered news products because that is where the story was. News coverage is the primary arena in which this phenomenon is discursively constructed and circulated, and texts embody and produce discourse and social realities (Philips and Hardy, 2002).

I compiled my collection of articles through a series of searches using the Lexis Nexus database. Specifically, I conducted a number of targeted searches of print sources. I considered both national newspapers (primarily *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and *Newsweek*), as well as local papers (such as the *Sacramento Bee*, *Contra Costa Times*, and *Albany Herald*). This dissertation is exclusively concerned with the mainstream press; as such, I did not include partisan sources, newspaper tabloids (like the *New York Post*), or hyper-local publications. The articles I analyzed for this dissertation were assembled in a dynamic

library, using the web application Evernote, in which articles were categorized by topic and organized by keywords.

However, the use of Lexis Nexis to compile article data created a possible methodological shortcoming: by searching for instances of food politics that were covered by the press I could have unknowingly missed examples that were not attended to by journalists. In this way the dissertation cannot speak to moments that may have been considered food gaffe but were not covered by the media. So long as a food mistake was mentioned in at least one article, however, I was able to compare the extent of its media coverage to that of other food faux pas. Additionally, having become an expert in the history of food gaffes, I am extremely confident that my data set is appropriately comprehensive.

In addition to news articles I also analyze other types of textual campaign data. This campaign miscellany—stump speeches, candidates' online fundraising stores, Twitter feeds, and “family” recipes—illustrates the broader phenomena I address in the context of presidential elections. The data, which serve as both primary and secondary sources, provide insight into how campaigns want their candidate to be perceived and the ways they go about creating that public impression. I was particularly interested in determining whether these data mirrored the language and themes that were revealed through analysis of my interviews and print sources. Additionally, these campaign data proved illustrative of the strategies that underlies the political curation of food tastes. For

this reason, I looked at the data as providing “unmediated” access to the way campaigns use food to their competitive advantage.<sup>7</sup>

### *Interviews*

My collecting and analysis of news articles is complimented by a set of twenty interviews with purposively selected journalists, public health activists, elected officials, and political strategists. These interviews, and my readings of them, were designed to explicate how the politics of food is understood and used by the principle actors in campaigns and governance (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). Through an iterative combination of prior expectations and grounded theory-building, and without taking explanations offered to me at face value, these loosely-structured conversations with experts and practitioners allowed me to better understand such things as what motivates politicians and newsmakers to engage in food politics, the contexts in which they do so, and the constraints under which they operate.

My method for selecting interviewees could be best described as “purposive elite sampling,” i.e. selecting specific potential interviewees based on their particular role in the politics of food. Specifically, I began by emailing 107 potential interviewees across a number of relevant professions: print, digital, and television journalists; elected officials;

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<sup>7</sup> Additionally, I spent considerable time working with the archivists of the George Bush, Bill Clinton, Michael Dukakis, Bob Dole, and Al Gore campaign collections in an effort to collect schedules and agendas. Despite the fact that Bill Clinton’s daily schedule included a daily line item for a morning jog, none of the schedules went into the level of detail necessary to be useful for analysis of diner stop locations, durations, or frequency.

presidential campaign staff; lobbyists; authors; and public health advocates (see Appendix A).<sup>8</sup> When soliciting interviewees I sent out between 1 and 20 emails at a time over the course of 14 rounds of solicitations. Ten of the individuals I contacted responded but declined to be interviewed. Another 70 never responded. Overall, public health advocates had the highest response rate and political strategists the lowest; journalists responded at a rate that fell between the two. This was not surprising. The public health advocates I contacted were frequently involved in communication strategy and perhaps saw my dissertation as a vehicle through which they could share or discuss their message. The low response rates among political strategists and, to a lesser extent, journalists, reflected both the status of the people I contacted as well as the timing of my solicitation. I contacted individuals at the beginning of 2012, which marked the early stages of the Republican presidential primary. Those involved in the race—primarily strategists but also political journalists—were likely busy with the campaign. To that point, my interview with John McCormick took place while he was driving through Iowa on his way to the primary caucuses.

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<sup>8</sup> The email addresses of most journalists, elected officials, and public health organizations are available online. Contact information for current and former campaign staff, as well as lobbyists, was harder to come by. In the cases where I could not find email addresses from public sources I relied on my own network of contacts. A high school friend, for example, went to Colgate University and used the school's alumni directory to find Howard Fineman's email address. Reed Galen is a former lecturer at Annenberg USC, and the Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies at Penn's Annenberg School was able to track down his contact information. Through these and similar efforts I was able to find email addresses for most of the individuals I originally hoped to contact.

In the end I was able to conduct 20 interviews. These interviews were with a Republican presidential campaign strategist; a member of the New York State Assembly; a former Chief of Staff to a member of the New York State Senate; a member of the California State Assembly; six political journalists; four journalists who cover food regulations; and five high-level employees at major public health advocacy groups (Appendix B). All but one of my interviews was on the record. The interviews were conducted over the phone and generally lasted between 25 and 35 minutes. They were recorded with a voice recorder and later transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, and in many cases I allowed the interviewee's expertise and interest to guide the conversation (Appendix C). As was the case with my close reading of news articles, I conducted an analysis of my interviews in which I looked for themes in content and language. Although I generally treated matters of logistics and protocol at face value, my analysis of the interviews was always guided by a recognition that those with whom I spoke brought their own interests to bare in our discussions. In that way, the data that my interviews provided was in what my interviewees said, how they said it, and why it was said.

### *Reflexivity*

My interest in the topic of my dissertation is driven by scholarly and applied concerns; I have both academic and personal interests in food, as well as a strong ideologically progressive position regarding the issues I investigated. I—like any scholar—could not fully mitigate my subjectivity on this matter; indeed, my views and concerns helped

guide the direction of my research. Nonetheless it was my goal to produce serious scholarly work and not something that was little more than a long form progressive blog. In such a context self-reflexivity is particularly important (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). Helpful in this regard was my conscious effort, inspired in part by my interviews with journalists, to avoid partisan analyses by adopting a kind of “objective” journalistic approach to my research. That said, I confess to taking some satisfaction in the fact that, at least in the 2012 presidential campaign that forms the basis of some of my research and the context in which my research was conducted, it was not only liberals or Democrats who were framed as out of touch elitists.

### **Project Summary and Overview**

Drawing on the theories and research discussed above my dissertation attempts to answer two primary questions: 1) How, and to what end, are consumer tastes and behaviors mobilized (primarily by candidates and their campaigns, but also by policy advocates) as a form of political communication; and 2) What role do the media play in the framing of political figures and policy issues according to tastes in food and positions on food regulations?

To answer these questions my dissertation is organized as follows. In chapter two I define “diner politics” and explore how it is used by campaign strategists and the media to present presidential candidates as being connected with average Americans through their taste for down home fare. My analysis suggested that, following the dual shifts

towards image-based campaigning and a taste-based notion of elitism, diner politics functions less as an exercise in retail politicking and increasingly as a strategically-orchestrated photo opportunity. In the context of local bars and restaurants, therefore, presidential campaigns and the press work together to generate a narrative of the presidential hopeful as a guy or gal who shares the tastes of everyday folks.

Chapter 3 investigates what happens when diner politics goes wrong and candidates align themselves with foods that are decidedly elite. In these cases, the erring candidate's opponents use the revelatory gaffe as evidence of the fact that the offending eater is out of touch. This framing is supported by the media's coverage of such incidents as food faux pas for which the consequences are politically relevant, negative, and self-evident. In sum, the deployment by political and media elites of the "food faux pas narrative" is, I argue, a consequence of two factors: the pervasiveness of the divided America framework and the broader interest among journalists to tell stories about candidates' "authentic" selves.

The final empirical chapter looks at the role of food in politics once the rubber hits the road; that is, when the context is legislating, not campaigning. In legislative contexts food tastes are manifest as proscriptions for the American diet. In most cases a politician's stance on a food policy issue is not mobilized by opponents or the press as symbolic evidence of the politician's authentic self. However, even though legislators express little concern about the relationship between support for food regulations and the perception of elite food tastes, under certain circumstances journalists covering food



policy proposals lean on the divided America narrative in their coverage. In these cases the notion of taste-based elitism is reified through the “food police” narrative, a discourse that draws on fears of intrusive big government and the loss of individual freedom and responsibility. Using media coverage of the anti-tobacco movement as a point of comparison, this chapter argues that the media rely on conflict narratives, primarily the food police narrative, when covering controversial proposed food regulations such as New York and California’s soda tax bills. However in other cases—such as New York and California’s trans fat bans and Michelle Obama’s national Let’s Move campaign—the lack of strong opposition from industry lobbyists mitigates, or even eliminates, the media’s tendency towards a symbolic interpretation and a conflict frame.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I summarize my general arguments and findings, using them to theorize about what the broad shift away from retail politics and towards online campaigning means for food as a form of political communication. Additionally I contend that, taken together, the findings of the three empirical chapters demonstrate the media’s disposition towards a conflict narrative. Specifically, the conflict narrative activates the mobilization of food and its symbolic entailments as evidentiary of a bigger story; it is for that reason, I contend, that print journalists write articles about the strategy behind diner politics. In the same vein, this general tendency also explains how the Culture War conflict narrative supports the framing of food faux pas as mistakes with negative and self-evident consequences. Finally, I contend that because the media rely so heavily on a conflict frame, and because it is only within that context that food tastes are presented as negatively affecting a candidate, that campaigns

might increasingly look to social media to curate the public impression of their candidate's personality and taste. There is increasing evidence that campaigns are using social media to publicize otherwise entirely non-political events—campaigns tweet about what a candidate had for breakfast, for example—as a low-risk and cost-effective way to shape public opinion.

## CHAPTER 2: A CANDIDATE WALKS INTO A DINER...



“Obama in Iowa: Mountains and Volcanoes,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2011 (Image II)

### **Introduction**

In 2008, during a town hall meeting for undecided voters in the Quad-Cities region of Iowa, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama told Cynthia Ross Freidhof, the owner of nearby Ross’s Restaurant, that he would visit her diner. Three years later President Obama made good on that promise. At Ross’s he treated some of the hungrier members of the traveling press pool to the restaurant’s specialty, the Magic Mountain, a sandwich made with grilled Texas toast, hamburger meat, French fries or hash browns, homemade cheddar cheese and onions that is topped, for the exceptionally ambitious, with a scoop of spicy chili. Obama’s visit to Ross’s was one of the most reported on political news stories of the day despite the fact that it is unusual for an incumbent’s campaign to take

top billing during the heat of the opposition's primary season. The political story, however, was stoked by more than a passing fascination with an outrageous local dish. The appearance was treated by the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post* and others as a microcosm of Obama's efforts to connect with average Americans as part of his reelection bid. And while an appearance at a diner is, all things considered, pretty soft news, it is telling that, in the face of considerable uncertainty regarding its ability to garner middle and working class support, the Obama 2012 campaign organized a photo opportunity featuring the President at a diner in the middle of Iowa. The decision to stop at Ross's, however, was predicated on the belief that imagery generated at the appearance would be beneficial. The Obama campaign, that is, agreed with John Ydstie, the host of *Weekend Edition* on National Public Radio, who surmised five years earlier in a conversation with David Greene, "To show you're really *Iowa* out on the campaign trail, you have to sample the local fair. The candidates have eaten pizza, fried Twinkies, ice cream, and all sorts of meat sandwiches [to do so]" (Weekend Edition, 2007).

Diner politics, the political strategy that takes candidates to diners, bars, and restaurants as a way to connect to voters, has long been a part of presidential campaigning. Historically, candidates made appearances at local restaurants and taverns in an effort to engage with voters directly and, hopefully, earn their votes by doing so. The repurposing of diners as political spaces in this way was traditionally a consequence of their status as gathering places. But the use of food in campaigns in early presidential elections was not limited to this practical function; even then, candidates used food as a

symbol through which they could create an impression about who they were as individuals beyond their party affiliation. However, despite evidence that candidates as far back as George Washington used food to connect with voters, it is not the case that food has always communicated the same message. Instead, changes in the conditions under which modern campaigns are undertaken have created a rhetorical environment in which candidate tastes, such as those in food, are treated as viable, even essential, topics of political discourse.

Food served a primarily retail function in early presidential elections because the nature of those contests differed sharply from the heavily mediated campaigns of the last five decades. In short, pre-1950s presidential elections were focused on party, not candidate, and the lack of televised coverage dramatically reduced access to candidates' personal lives. By the 1960s, however, the nature of presidential campaigns shifted, with the focus on party giving way to an increased interest in the candidate as a person, his image and personality. This shift to image-based campaigning proceeded in parallel, or perhaps even in tandem, with an increasing tendency toward labeling candidates as either regular Americans or out of touch elitists. Concern with the regular/elitist dichotomy was spurred by Republican Populists in the 1950s and 1960s and came to carry additional rhetorical weight during the 1990s, when the political notion of elitism was reconfigured not as a matter of wealth but as the way wealth is enacted through personal tastes and practices. These two factors—increased interest in candidate personality and the reframing of elitism—coupled with explosive growth in voter research, resulted in new campaign strategies designed to package candidates according empirical understandings

about the sort of person, not just the sort of politician, for whom Americans want to vote. Working within this context, therefore, candidates mobilize their everyday tastes as proof of their connection to, and concern for, average American voters.

As a result of these changes diner politics has come to serve a new strategic function. Specifically, diner appearances are used as photo opportunities through which candidates can align themselves with the symbolic trappings of diner culture, thus providing visual evidence of their familiarity with, and concern for, the sorts of people who patronize diners. And as photo opportunities, diner stops also provide journalists with necessary media content. Consequently, diner politics has become an established political routine that is valuable to candidates and the media who cover them. From a campaign team's perspective, the efficacy of this strategy is contingent upon the political press treating the symbolism of the diner as relevant news content. On this front, journalists are generally amenable. Indeed, a journalistic trope has been carved out around the practice of diner politics, one that frames the diner and those who eat there as emblematic of Main Street America; it is within that narrative, furthermore, that most diner appearances are contextualized.

However there are exceptions. Also resulting from the creation of the diner narrative is press coverage of the political strategy that underlies diner politics. These stories call attention to, and often entirely break down, the wall between campaign strategists and voters. By and large, thought, despite the fact that media narratives are perhaps the primary sites of discursive contention during presidential elections,

campaigns and political journalists generally operate under the more straightforward narrative of diner politics. Consequently, the narrative that frames the diner as both a site of regular America and the antithesis to out of touch elitism is remarkably stable.

*The Personalized Candidate: Image-based Campaigns, Candidate Tastes, and Journalists' Professional Conventions*

The shift in the focus of presidential campaigns away from party and towards personality has created the conditions under which diner politics serves a primarily symbolic function. In the past fifty years presidential elections have become increasingly concerned with personality and character. Between the 1830s and the 1960s presidential elections were primarily fought between parties, not candidates, with presidential hopefuls campaigning largely as figureheads. Consequently, political messaging was centered on the traditional party platform with a focus on policy issues and voter education. These electorate-wide appeals, moreover, weren't targeted toward specific demographics but instead were designed for a broad audience (Shea and Burton, 2006). By 1960, however, the role of the presidential candidate had changed. More specifically, electoral contests were reoriented around the competing candidates, resulting in presidential elections becoming more "personality-driven and candidate-centric" (Ibid). Additionally, the move towards the personal occurred under the influence of increasing television coverage; together, these changes resulted in a shift towards image-based campaigning (Fiedler, 1992). Indeed, the coupling of the (relatively) reduced import of political party and increased media coverage has resulted in a particular, and peculiar,

campaign process. Specifically, the nature of modern presidential campaigns as heavily mediated contests between two people “keeps the issue of character at the apex” (Louden, 1990). As a result, campaigns place increasing importance on presenting their candidate as the type of person, and not simply the type of politician, who is most appealing to the voting public.

The increasing concern with who candidates are as people, and the shift in perception about the relative political value of personality and policy, has resulted in a strategic refocusing of campaign craft on the promotion of certain candidate traits. The term “traits” refers to qualities that are demonstrated through outward behaviors and are reflective of an individual’s true self (Carr and Kingsbury, 1938)<sup>9</sup>. Voters come to understand a candidate’s traits through the same cognitive processes of impression formation that they rely on in everyday life. That is, just as they do when they meet a person for the first time, voters draw on small, necessarily incomplete data as heuristics from which they can make more global assessments about presidential candidates. Voters do this by relying on the same schematic categorization that helps them organize all people, as well as by tapping into data that are specific to the political arena. In the case of a presidential election, voters use data provided by campaigns and the media—information that is understood within the context of past elections and presidents—that

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<sup>9</sup> When campaigns, the media, and scholars discuss image, traits, characteristics, character, and personality they refer to an overlapping set of criteria that explain fundamental aspects of the candidate as a person. From a discursive perspective, the difference between the terms is a matter of degree, not kind, as they describe the same underlying concept: the aspects of a person that explain who he or she is as determined by his or her observed behaviors. As such, this dissertation will use the terms traits, image, character, and personality interchangeably.



are supplemented by relevant political facts (Popkin, 1991). For this reason nearly any behavior can serve as a source of trait inferences from which voters develop an understanding about the candidate (Funk, 1996). Through the use of cognitive shortcuts, therefore, voters develop a much clearer sense of a candidate's personality and traits.

Not only do voters come to understand candidates' traits through standard cognitive processes but they also evaluate candidates, based on those traits, in the same way they evaluate friends and strangers. Indeed, voters talk about candidates primarily as people, not in reference to their ideology or party (Just et al., 1996). This is the case because, as Lane (1978) argues, people seek mostly the same qualities in leaders as they do in friends; consequently, they "simply generalize their demands from one case to the other" (from Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 73). Furthermore, although new data about candidates is understood largely according to a framework of existing political knowledge, the data themselves are not categorized as strictly political or personal. Instead, assessments of a candidate's policy positions produce a comprehensive image-based judgment of that candidate (Louden, 1990). That is to say, discussions of political issues provide voters with a sense of the priority the candidate gives that issue, and in doing so generates information about who the candidate is as a person (Just et al., 1996). Consequently, issue positions aren't interpreted by voters as stand-alone judgments, or even judgments that are exclusively political, but rather as answers the question, "What kind of person acts this way?" (Louden & McCauliff, 2004, p. 88).

For that reason, modern candidates create and project images of themselves according to a strategic, research-driven understanding of the personalities, characteristics, and traits that voters seek in potential office-holders (Nimmo, 1995). Campaign and academic research demonstrates that impressions of who a candidate is as a person are critical to voter evaluations and, ultimately, vote choice. This is the case for two primary reasons. Firstly, voters develop impressions of candidates according to the candidate's perceived traits, and in turn evaluate the candidate according to those criteria (Funk, 1996). Additionally, observed data are not only used to draw conclusions about unobserved behaviors but to make projections about future performance (Miller et al, 1986; Popkin, 1994). This is because voters view information they learn during campaigns as predictive of future governance (Keeter, 1987; Firdkin and Kenny, 2011). And because most of America is middle class—or, at least, most Americans *identify* as middle class (Demott, 1990)—campaigns engage in strategic efforts to create the impression that a candidate will govern with concerns of the middle class in mind. Consequently, one of the most important traits campaigns try to cultivate is the sense that their candidate is “in touch” with average voters<sup>10</sup>.

Campaigns create the impression that a candidate understands the middle class not only to validate that connection but to demonstrate that he or she is not an out of touch elitist. The adoption of elitism as a political boogeyman began during Joseph

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<sup>10</sup> The quality of “in touch” is operationalized in public opinion polling by asking, for example, “How well does (Candidate) understand the problems of average Americans?” or “Which candidate connects well with ordinary Americans” (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, January 26-29, 2012; Pew Research Center for People and the Press, October 8, 2012).

McCarthy's 1946 senatorial campaign and was bolstered by a series of presidential elections, beginning in 1960, in which Richard Nixon assumed an anti-elitism mantle. The McCarthy and Nixon campaigns represented the initial phases of rhetorical shift during which the idea of elitism was loosened from its economic mooring (Perlstein, 2008). During this era the elite were not, as they had been, simply those with the most money and power; instead, intellectualism, education, and profession came to be their defining characteristics. By relaxing the formerly static relationship between elitism and wealth, McCarthy, Nixon and their successors created an environment in which elitism was determined on the ground and could be defined according to personal tastes, preferences, and practices (cf. Black and Black, 2003; Gelman et al, 2007).

The shift from a theoretical to a practical conception of elitism was made even more explicit by the redefining of elitism as a matter of personal tastes and preferences. This new notion of elitism is attributed to the emergence of Culture War rhetoric during the 1990s (Frank, 2004). The term Culture War first entered the American lexicon with the publication of James Davison Hunter's book by the same name. Hunter's *Culture Wars: The struggle to define America* (1991) is primarily concerned with understanding the religious schism that developed in post-war America between two camps: the orthodox, committed to clear notions of authority; and the progressives, concerned with reconsidering faith to better account for contemporary culture. These two camps describe an America divided by values. Although religious observance is still, to proponents of the Cultural War thesis, a central pillar around which Americans are organized, the more commonly employed Culture War rhetoric pivots from this religious focus. Specifically,

Culture War rhetoric, as a discourse employed by the political and media elite, couples the notion of a divided America with a conception of elitism as defined by the everyday tastes. One's status as average or elite, therefore, is both implied and inferred by what one eats, wears, and watches (Frank, 2004). Consequently presidential candidates, like all Americans, can be categorized as average or elite on the grounds of their observed personal tastes and preferences. And because the Culture War narrative is endemic to political discourse as a result of the promotion, by political and media elites, of the polarization theory (Stonecash, 2005), a political figure's average/elite status is a site of perpetual negotiation. For that reason, one of the ways a campaign's staff attempts to cement their candidate's status as an average Joe or Jane is by associating him or her with the personal tastes that are symbolic of middle class American culture.

As a campaign strategy, diner politics makes sense not only because it taps into the symbolic entailments of the diner but because the type of casual, unscripted campaigning it necessitates has its own symbolic value. Diners are understood as cultural products of the middle class (cf. Bourdieu, 1984), and therefore diner politics is an attempt to align political figures with the functional and symbolic values through which the diner is understood. However the benefit of diner politics is not limited to the space or the patrons. Instead, the interpersonal aspects of diner politics—the lack of a script, podium, or direct intervention by campaign staff—are explicitly casual and are therefore more reflective of the diner narrative than are other, non-retail styles of presidential campaigning.

The symbolic advantage of diner politics as a form of retail politics stems from the real functional advantage that interpersonal contact provides in early presidential contests. During early primary contests diner stops are valuable largely because they serve as arenas for interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication between the candidate and a voter is the most effective channel of political persuasion in a number of election contexts (Kaid, 1977), such as the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary. Indeed, during the 2000 New Hampshire primary, a voter personally meeting a candidate increased the voter's sense of favorability for that candidate (Vavreck et al., 2002). The interpersonal boost provided by diner politics in early primaries is important because primary wins give campaigns momentum (Bartels, 1987, 1988). Retail politicking *for retail politicking's sake*, therefore, is most effective in the earliest primaries. Once there are multiple states on the menu, however, the retail aspect of diner politics comes to serve a largely symbolic function.

Following New Hampshire and Vermont candidates stretch their focus to include several states at the same time. Consequently, the intended audience of any particular campaign event is not simply those in attendance but the broader national news audience. Therefore, although interpersonal contact is advantageous, the primary aim of a diner stop is to provide imagery that illustrates a candidate's comfort in the diner setting. And as opposed to stump speeches, where the focus is on the message as spoken, diner politics is a type of photo opportunity in which the primary message is the context as opposed to content (Shea and Burton, 2006). This is because, while stops at local diners, bars, and restaurants closely resembles grassroots politicking (Herr, 2002), the primary value of

these appearances is as a photo opportunity. Indeed, the retail medium of campaigning—highlighted by unscripted interaction with everyday people—functions primarily as a source of imagery and visual content. And because media outlets covering elections must satisfy their own demand for content, diner politics has not only developed into a political routine but a media routine as well.

Diner stops function as a journalistic routine not simply because they are events the press are obligated to cover but because they tap into existing political narratives. Specifically, the diner politics narrative provides a framework through which journalists process information and make it into news. As Tuchman (1978) explains, newswriters position stories within broad journalistic conventions and dominant media narratives. This organizing of particular but reoccurring events within an existing journalistic framework is central to the routine of the journalist's process. Through experience, media makers develop a mental catalogue of themes, plots, actor types into which new stories are categorized. This thematic typification serves as a cognitive shortcut that streamlines the news decision-making process. For this reason, quick-developing spot news stories, like a candidate's appearance at a diner stop, are easily typified within a basic framework, like that of the "diner story." And because diner stops typically adhere to journalists' expectations, the diner politics narrative is both reliable as a narrative and a consistent as a source of content.

For these reasons, and because the demand for campaign imagery flows between journalists and campaigns, this chapter argues that the diner politics narrative has become

a well-worn collaboration between presidential campaign teams and the press. This is the case because stakeholders on both sides of the lens rely on a generally consistent interpretation of what a diner stop says about a candidate. Additionally, this chapter also addresses the ways in which the diner narrative is mobilized through other non-diner platforms in an effort to connect with voters. Specifically, it argues that the diner narrative has become so conventionalized that it can be accessed in contexts outside the diner. To that end, evidence is presented that visits to distinctly local and ethnic restaurants are powered by the same logic, and serve the same underlying function, as candidate appearances at traditional diners. The chapter also outlines the way diner politics is extended to contexts that are at an even greater remove from the diner. Indeed, the diner narrative is employed, for example, in direct appeals to voters in campaign advertisements and speeches, through a candidate's family recipes, and through diner-inspired, candidate-branded culinary accessories sold by the campaign. In each of these cases the diner and its symbolic entailments are mobilized as a form of political and cultural capital. However, despite the messaging consistency that is provided by the diner narrative, not all efforts to use food as a way to connect are successful. That being the case, the chapter concludes by briefly outlining the way a candidate's efforts to connect to middle class voters can have the inadvertent consequence of revealing tastes that are easily framed as antithetical to diner culture. In those cases, a candidate's failure to succeed at diner politics is offered by opponents and the press as evidence of the candidate's elite tastes and disconnection from average voters. The third chapter in the dissertation deals directly with that issue.

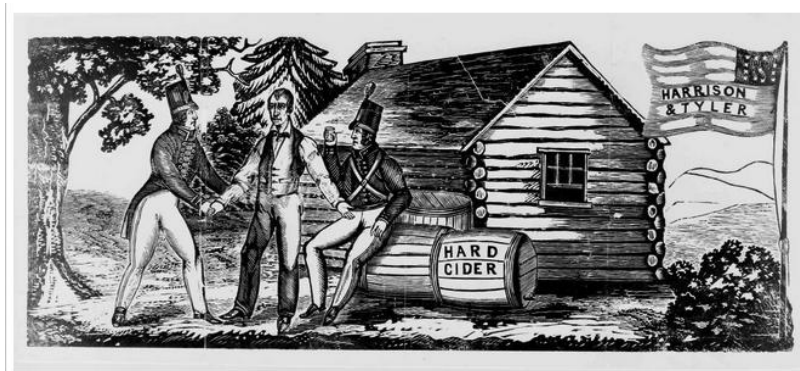
## **History of Diner Politics**

Diner politics, in a general sense, has always been a part of American presidential campaigning. This is the case because even early presidential candidates used food to connect with voters. George Washington, for example, distributed rum, beer, and cider to potential voters; Andrew Jackson held barbecues; and in 1896 William McKinley, campaigning from his front porch, sampled dishes brought to his home by voters. Similarly, early candidates made appearances at local bars and restaurants, as those spaces provided candidates with an opportunity to interact with a large group of voters in a short period of time. In these cases food served as a vehicle for connection between a candidate and voters; even so, however, its communicative scope was limited. But during a unique series of elections in the 1830s and 1840s food was mobilized expressly for its symbolic entailments and its capacity to influence the public persona of the candidate with which it was associated.

In 1840 William Henry Harrison and Martin van Buren engaged in the second of two highly competitive presidential elections. During this election Harrison crafted and promoted a what would become a ubiquitous political narrative: the common-man myth. In Harrison's case, like many presidential hopefuls who followed, the stories he deployed described, or more accurately obscured, his true personal history. Specifically, in an effort to prove his populist bona fides and conceal his privileged upbringing, Harrison campaigned around the country as a self-made man from an average American background (Grinspan, 2008). To aid in this effort, supporters and fellow Whigs referred



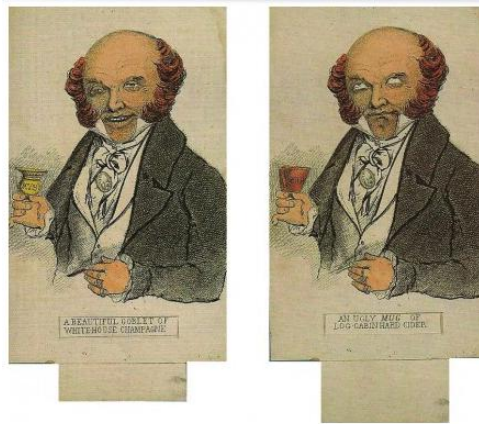
to Harrison as the “log cabin and hard cider candidate” and distributed copies of the *Log Cabin and Hard Cider Almanac* in cities like Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia (Smith, 2013). The narrative was also promoted through imagery, principally that of Harrison in front of a log cabin and alongside a bottle of cider, the popular alcoholic beverage (Saslow, 2008). In fact, the symbols of the election were so pervasive that a



Sketch of candidate Harrison in front of a log cabin and barrels of hard cider (Image III)

Philadelphia distiller, E. G. Booz, bottled Log-Cabin Whiskey in long cabin shaped bottles, a drink that grew to be so popular that the name Booz became synonymous with whiskey (Holt, 2003).

Through these efforts Harrison and his Whig compatriots successfully used the candidate’s supposed taste for the hard cider to create the impression that he was as a man of the people (Howe, 2013). Moreover, Harrison and the media worked to create the impression that it was his opponent, Martin van Buren, a man of a truly modest background, who was the wealthy candidate. In service of that effort van Buren was frequently presented as an elite man with elite tastes, a claim that was frequently



Harrison looking more comfortable with champagne than cider (Image IV)

illustrated through depictions of van Buren enjoying champagne out of a glass goblet (Holt, 2003; Smith, 2013).

The Harrison-van Buren campaigns demonstrate how food tastes can be mobilized as a proxy for class in a political context; they also, however, demonstrate the differences between early presidential elections and their modern counterparts. Early presidential elections differ from their contemporary counterparts due to their focus on party rather than candidate. They also, moreover, are defined by the relatively muted role played by the media in the campaign process. As a result of these two factors, which combined to keep voters at a great distance from the candidates, it was possible for media and political elites to obscure the personal class histories of Harrison and van Buren to a profound degree. Consequently, the candidates' food tastes could be used to create a public narrative built almost entirely outside personal engagement with voters.

In the contemporary context, however, diner politics serves a different function; appearances at diners demonstrate a candidate's taste for down home American cooking

precisely because they provide evidence of his or her physical connection with middle class voters. In recent cases, that is, food tastes in general and diner politics in particular are mobilized to deflect or reinforce notions about a candidate's class status, not create it from whole cloth. Unlike the 1840 presidential election, therefore, contemporary diner politics is defined by its status as a political and media routine as well as its symbolic function in an image-based political environment. And it is because campaign strategists believe associations with diners and their patrons are effective in these capacities that diner politics has come to be viewed as a tried and true method of contemporary presidential campaigning.

### **Anatomy of a Diner Stop**

Presidential campaign strategists schedule diner stops despite their considerable cost because they are believed to serve a function that cannot be achieved through other means. The perceived value of the diner stop becomes even more impressive when put in context with the financial costs of such appearances. Reed Galen is a political strategist who worked on both of George W. Bush's presidential campaigns as well as John McCain's failed bid in 2008. In our interview he explained the financial outlay required of campaign events this way:

In 2004, which was a reelection campaign, I spent \$75,000 on every town hall meeting \$160,000 on every rally. That was for the President and all the things that come along with the President. Scale that back even at say 80%, most campaigns are not going to shell out \$30,000 or \$40,000 a day for events; that's \$1 million a month. And most of them are just not going to have that kind of [money]. Even if it's not [the work of the advance team], just to travel alone.

Considering the cost, which includes the potential that the candidate might make a mistake, relative to the potential positive impact, it is surprising that campaigns haven't placed an even greater emphasis on connecting with voters through social networking<sup>11</sup>. But campaigns are still fought on the ground. And for that reason, although it is impossible to control what a candidate says or does in a diner, considerable work and research goes into organizing appearances to ensure that the media content they provide stays on the candidate's message.

The primary objective of advance team preparation is to ensure that the only aspect of the diner with which the candidate is associated is the diner's symbolic association with regular, middle class America. This is accomplished through advance team operations and stage management. First, the advance team chooses where the stop will take place. Diner stops are Off the Record (OTR)<sup>12</sup> stops; unlike nearly everything else the candidate does over the course of the day, these stops are not on the daily schedule. However although they are treated as un-official campaign events, OTR events nonetheless require considerable planning. Leading up to a visit by a candidate, campaign advance teams scout local restaurants and diners based on their popularity,

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter five addresses this question and the potential impact it could have on the use of food as political communication.

<sup>12</sup> This special treatment of diner stops as OTR events is apparent when looking at official campaign schedules of election events. Campaigns provide different degrees of specificity in their official schedules. President Clinton schedule included information about nearly all of the events that the candidate and Hillary would be attending. In contrast, the official schedule from the Dole campaign contained only the largest events in any given week, providing little to no information about the candidate's activities on any given day. Despite the fact that they do not appear on the official schedule, stops at diner are managed as meticulously as any other component of the candidate's campaign.

convenience, and appropriateness. Galen explained that his teams selected spots because they had local significance; for example, he explained, “You're in South Carolina and there's a place in Charleston that has the best fried shrimp or you're in Columbia and there's a place with the best mustard barbecue in the world or whatever it is.” They also have to be accessible: “Logistically speaking, if it's easy to get to, if it's on the way to or from someplace” it's worth a visit; otherwise, “If it's a great shot but [if] it's twenty-five minutes there and twenty-five minutes back, that's an hour gone.”

Just as advance teams search for local spots that have a symbolic importance, campaign staff also work to avoid associating their candidate with establishments that carry any potentially negative connotations. For this reason, “Everyplace is vetted,” Galen explains,

Has it showed up again any negative news articles? Does it have any tax liens? Is there anything embarrassing that can it come out about the president or candidate going there that's going to overshadow the fact that they went there? Because a lot of this stuff is like being a doctor, first do no harm. If it's a really cool visual, but all you can hear about is the fact that the owner never paid his taxes and beat up his wife, then everyone asks why would you go to a place owned by tax thief who beats up his wife. Just globally speaking, on campaigns of this nature, if they're reasonably well run, very little, if anything, is ever left a chance if it's possible.

A second part of the preparatory process is assuring that the diner is full of patrons, ideally those who support the candidate. For that reason advance teams coordinate with local staff and volunteers to create an atmosphere that will appear, from a visual perspective, entirely favorable to the candidate. “You want to have the crowd, you want to have a full restaurant,” Galen explains, so campaign staff work to fill the diner; this

can mean stacking the space with local supporters and volunteers, a practice that is “entirely likely for most of these things.” It’s worth noting, however, that this level of stage management might not be necessary. Although the best photographs and videos show the candidate interacting with supporters, the atmosphere of the campaign diner stop can turn even the most staunch opponent into a (temporary) fan. “When you get into a general election it’s not just the bus anymore,” Reed Galen posits, “It’s a whole Secret Service motorcade. It’s like a big deal when this stuff shows up: its lights and sirens and big black SUVs and guys with guns. And Americans may not like royalty, but they sure like the impression of it.”

This ongoing concern with presenting the candidate in the best light possible reflects the fact that diner stops are fundamentally photo opportunities. Since most diner stops are routine events during which very little hard news is generated, campaigns approach the diner stop as a largely visual operation. Toby Harnden is the former United States editor for *The Telegraph* newspaper in the United Kingdom. He surmises if you’re a candidate, “You want to get on the news or you want to get in the local paper”; for that reason, Harnden contends, diner stops are “designed” as photo ops. Additionally, “Think about it from the perspective of what you’re going to see on the evening news,” Reed Galen suggests, “Or what picture you might see in the *Inquirer* or *The New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, or what an AP photographer is going to upload.” What we see are images, primarily televised images, of the candidate sipping a cup of coffee and chatting with a table of patrons eating lunch. These images serve as “quickie, easy video for the TV stations,” according to John McCormick, a print news journalist for *Newsweek*

magazine and Bloomberg media, because, from the media's perspective, the diner stop is a compelling background for a broader analysis of the election. As McCormick explains,

If you're putting together a 90 second video package story and you're a television producer, you can only spend probably 15 or 20 seconds on that story... You know focusing on the managed podium with the flow background behind him is boring and static does not make great television. But if you have the B-roll of him at the diner stop, and he's mixing up, and you can blend in 15 or 20 seconds of that into a 90 second story and end up with something, that's visually compelling.

On one hand, the traveling press corps treat diner stops as news content because campaigns define candidate appearances in those terms. However as McCormick explains, the relationship between supply and demand flows in the other direction as well. Television news broadcasts need video content for their election coverage, and campaigns are more than willing to provide them with a diner story that can serve as a compelling background visual.

But despite the fact that diner stops are a political and media routine they are not simply rote politicking; instead, the ubiquity of diner politics reflects the fact that campaigns see them as politically advantageous. As David Greene, the host of *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio and a former member of the traveling press corps argues, "I think it's really calculated. Anything calculated so many times over, the campaigns don't even have to think about it, they just have to do it because they know it works." This is the case because the diner's symbolism operates on two levels: it is a symbol of the middle class vis-à-vis its class associations, and it is a symbol of the candidate's camaraderie with middle class Americans vis-à-vis the symbolism of the retail mode of campaigning. For that reason, therefore, although the diner functions as a

site of functional and symbolic localness, even the functional aspect of diner stops are presented as an illustration of a candidate's facility with average Americans.

### **The Diner as a Stage: Diners as Sites of Symbolic Politicking**

The symbolism of diner stops derives from both their content and their context. Diner politics is symbolically rich both because diners are understood as totems of middle class American culture and because the style of retail interaction that they demand is suggestive of a grounded connection to middle class voters. By tapping into these dual symbolisms a candidate creates the image that he or she shares the tastes, and therefore the concerns, of average Americans. And because they are routine photo opportunities, a consistent media narrative has developed around diner stops that frames the appearances largely according to the terms that the participating candidate seeks.

The primary strategic capacity of diner politics resides in the nostalgic, nationalistic, and classed symbolism of the diner and its patrons. As Toby Harnden explains: "If you look at how many campaigns stops are in diners, a diner is quintessentially American, it's almost sort of iconic really. And so just the notion of the candidate being in a diner sort of screams out, regular American, ordinary guy." Similarly, Todd Purdum of *Vanity Fair* contends, "Food, and especially a kind of casual food, has become a marker for [a] person's plebeian credibility." Facility with diner culture, therefore, provides a candidate with middle class cultural capital. These points were emphasized in my conversations with political strategists and members of the



political media, all of whom strongly voiced the belief that the selection of the diner as the *de facto* site of unscripted politicking was not simply incidental. Instead, both strategists and members of the political press agreed that the decision to hold campaign events in diners, despite the fact that retail politics is cost ineffective, was a product of the notable symbolic value of the diner. This is because tastes are particularly important in the campaign context, as a candidate's demonstration of middle class tastes is framed by campaigns as more accurately reflecting who the candidate is than his or her actual class status or personal history.

Voters know that all presidential candidates are in positions of power and that most are wealthy, however they also want to know whether a candidate understands the problems facing average Americans. Reed Galen describes the conflation of, on one hand, political power, material wealth, and personal taste, and on the other, the desire among voters for a president who understands average Americans, as the "irrationality of the electorate." Specifically, Galen argues, "I think the difference is that they want an elite who understands and cares about, or at least says they care about, their problems." For this reason, he continues, "Voters are not necessarily outright opposed to elites, but they also don't want it splashed in their face." In making this comment Galen distinguishes between elitism, as a matter of what is in one's bank account, and the trappings of elitism, or the way that money is made apparent to others. By distinguishing between cultural and economic elitism, Galen's position assumes that voters have adopted, or at least absorbed, the Culture War privileging of embodied manifestations of elitism over more abstract ideas like wealth and influence. Consequently, according to

Galen, Americans are comfortable with the idea of a wealthy president so long as that wealth doesn't impact his or her personal tastes. That is, so long as the wealth doesn't dictate, or isn't perceived as an authentic reflection of, the candidate's true self. (This idea will be addressed in greater detail in the following chapter.)

Consequently, diners provide a rich symbolic environment for candidates to demonstrate that they are not cultural elites and that, despite their political and perhaps economic capital, they possess middle class cultural capital. From that perspective Galen values diners as a site of middle class, or even working class, cultural capital, as he posits that the diner serves as effective campaign images because it “makes for a very middle-class photo op” that “somehow humanizes or blue collar-izes a candidate.” Indeed, Galen explains, “Any time the candidate specifically and the campaign generally can project that their candidate is in touch with regular Americans, that's something that they want to really push.” Toby Harnden echoed Galen's description of the diner as a “good visual” when he described it as providing “good imagery” because it lends itself to images of a candidate “Looking animated with working-class people.” To both Galen and Harden, the diner provides a good picture for the campaign because voters understand the diner as a space of middle class culture. Not surprisingly, therefore, diner politics and related attempts to use food to connect with voters serve a more important function for candidates who are framed by their opponents and/or the press as struggling to connect to average voters.

In our interviews journalists expressed a belief that diner politics was perhaps most effective for those candidates fighting a public perception that they are wildly out of touch connect with voters. Some candidates, despite their background, never confront this perception. “You look at Bill Clinton, you look at George W. Bush,” David Greene explained, “They’re pretty different politically, and they both had a knack for walking into a room and shaking hands and making connection... I think it just a personality thing, how well a candidate can go into a diner and seem like an average guy or an average gal.” For “candidates who need to cultivate the image” that they understand average Americans diner politicking is, according to Greene, “especially important.”

Candidates who struggle to connect are often described according to a media narrative that questions whether they are so out of touch as to be not “normal.” Democrats might fall disproportionately in this category. As Todd Purdum, the political correspondent for *Vanity Fair* magazine, describes, in the post-1960s political environment, “Democrats have to work overtime, have to bend over backward to prove the populist credentials, to prove their worthiness.” It is worth noting, however, that during the 2012 presidential election Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s credibility as a “normal” American was the subject of such debate that *The New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story called “Building a Better Romney-Bot.” To the Romney strategists interviewed, one of the central problems the campaign faced was the perception that the candidate was not a competent diner politician. Specifically, as Robert Draper of the Times notes, “Stories of Romney’s wooden people skills are legion. ‘The Mormon’s never going to win the who-do-you-want-to-have-a-beer-with contest,’ concedes one

adviser, while another acknowledges, ‘He’s never had the experience of sitting in a bar, and like, talking.’” (2011). This framing of Romney as robotic resonated with the language used by journalists I spoke with who used the term “human” as a proxy for “regular” or “normal” when describing candidates viewed as extraordinarily out of touch. Reed Galen described diner politicking as providing an opportunity for candidates to be “humanized.” Similarly, John McCormick, the *Newsweek* and Bloomberg correspondent, contended, “It becomes crucial for candidates to perform well in this type of diner environment if there's any doubts about whether they're humans.” In the same vein, David Greene surmised that diner politics is “An easy way to again make a politician or candidate appear like a regular guy, regular human being.” From both a strategic and rhetorical perspective, therefore, diner politics provides candidates who are perceived to be wildly out of touch with an opportunity to prove that they are not so cloistered as to be completely removed from the normal practices that define most people’s day to day lives.

In sum, eating at a diner is a proxy for the middle class cultural experience and is therefore politically valuable as a way to demonstrate middle class cultural capital. But it is not simply the case that appearing at the diner proves a candidate’s Main Street culinary tastes and history; indeed, it is also through the physical and interpersonal connections made visible while engaging with diner patrons that a candidate establishes his average Joe bona fides. Diner politics demands a form of casual and unscripted political interaction, and retail politics is the *diner* of voter engagement.

### **And Everyone Plays His Part: Retail Campaigning as Symbolic Politicking**

Diner politics also serves a symbolic advantage that derives from the nature of retail politics as an unscripted mode of interpersonal communication. By physically engaging with voters diner politicking serves as proof of the candidate's connection with the same group to whom the appeal—and the interaction—is directed. As Toby Harnden stated, part of the reason the diner produces “good imagery” is because it is a site in which a candidate can appear “animated” as he or she interacts with diner patrons. This animation is beneficial because it serves as evidence of the candidate's ease with regular Americans. For that reason, part of the motivation behind diner stops is, from Galen's perspective, that “you want [the candidate] to emote that you understand regular people, and that picture is far more important than a candidate saying, ‘I feel your pain.’” In that way, the retail aspect of diner politics is just as valuable as the setting. Some candidates can connect with voters simply through verbal communication. For example, “Bill Clinton<sup>13</sup> could say [‘I feel your pain’] and make people believe him,” Galen explains, “But most of these folks can't pull that off just by standing in front of a crowd in a gymnasium saying, ‘I feel your pain.’” For that reason, Galen concludes, candidates are obligated to “Show, don't tell.”

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<sup>13</sup> Clinton's extraordinarily plebian food tastes were the subject of considerable media interest, perhaps exemplified most famously in a skit on *Saturday Night Live* in which the President was depicted at a McDonald's eating food off strangers' plates. With that in mind, this anecdote from my interview with Todd Purdum is not terribly surprising: “James Carville once told me, ‘Clinton could happily eat cold, coagulated pasta from an Olive Garden.’ And once at a rally, someone handed him a pie, and he got in the backseat of the car, and with his bare hands began to eat, after he'd shaken thousands of hands without washing his hands, began to eat the pie with his bare hands. And halfway through he [asked] George Stephanopoulos, ‘Do you want some pie?’”

Retail politicking, as it is practiced in the diner, is symbolic of the type of (seemingly) unmediated interaction that illustrates a candidate's casualness, accessibility, and ease with average Americans. For that reason part of the advantage of in-person campaigning is that it demonstrates—ironically, given the extent to which these stops are planned and managed—the candidate's ability to connect with regular voters without the visible help of campaign strategists. By shaking hands or sharing in corn dogs at the state fair, candidates can demonstrate that they are capable of engaging in the routine aspects of regular interpersonal interaction. Conversely, to run a campaign that appears overly researched or stage managed leaves the candidate vulnerable to attacks that he or she can't get along with regular people without intervention or assistance.

Additionally, by pressing the flesh in a way that feels casual and natural, candidates can appear more likeable. As Evan Thomas of *Newsweek* explains, “Likability is a huge issue, huge issue,” and to achieve that status as likable, candidates “Have to show that [they] can walk into a diner and be at home.” In this way, likability is a product of a candidate's ability to physically interact with diner patrons as a way of demonstrating his or her facility and comfort with middle class culture. “So one of the things people say all the time,” Purdum explains, is, “Is he the kind of guy that a person might have a beer with?” It is not simply enough, therefore, to hear from a candidate that he likes beer; voters need to see a candidate interact with voters in a bar. For that reason, as Harnden contends, “One of the prime aims of any political campaign is to be able to signal that you can relate to [regular Americans] and to achieve the actual relating.” In the case of diner politics, the relating to a very few voters signals to voting public at large

that the candidate can talk to people like them. The perception of likeability, therefore, can be incubated by providing voters with evidence of a candidate seemingly being liked by those with whom he or she is engaged at a diner. And it is through making public the appearance of a likable candidate that campaigns can mobilize the symbolism of retail politics as a symbolically-advantageous type of voter communication.

The symbolic value of diner politics, as derived from the location, the patrons, and the sorts of interactions it facilitates, is unique to the diner. And it is because it is unique to the diner that campaigns continue to make appearances at local spots despite both the cost and the possibility that the candidate might make a mistake. However, while diner politicking is inherently tied to the diner as an institution with unquestioned symbolic value, it is also the case that candidates mobilize the underlying principles of diner politics in image-building efforts outside the diner. Specifically, candidates visit distinctly local and ethnic restaurants and make public their personal culinary histories in an effort to connect with voters outside the campaign trail. They also make direct appeals to diners in campaign advertisements and speeches. These strategies rely on the same communicatory capacity of foods that fuels diner politicking, and they also make apparent a broader quality of diner politics as *itself* a type of strategic messaging designed to appeal to a targeted audience.

### **The Role of Pancakes Will Be Played by Plantains: Local and Ethnic Diner Politics**

Diners aren't the only culinary venues mobilized by presidential campaigns; indeed, campaigns make appearances at local and ethnic restaurants in an effort to connect with more specific culinary communities. Although certain symbolic entailments are unique to the diner, diner politics, as a campaign strategy, is powered by a communicative capacity of food that is operative in other culinary contexts. For that reason diner politicking can be employed as part of an effort to connect with voters in a targeted population by capitalizing on the specific symbolic value of iconic local and ethnic foods and restaurants.

Food is central to the identity of geographic and cultural communities, thus eating at an expressly local institution allows the politician to prove that he or she is familiar with that community's food culture. David Greene of NPR surmises that candidates eating "Barbecue in North Carolina, cheesesteaks in Philly, Coney dogs in Michigan" is a way of communicating an understanding that, "This is important to you, this is a part of your culture, I want to taste it and understand where you're from." This explains why, Reed Galen posits, the image of Barack Obama sitting in the Steelworkers bar in Pittsburgh, drinking an Iron City beer, is "A picture that the campaign wants to represent [Obama]." In this scenario, Obama isn't simply having a drink, or even having a domestic beer<sup>14</sup>, but he is having a local beer that carries significant cultural resonance

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<sup>14</sup> When President Obama had perhaps his most famous beer, during the Beer Summit with Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cambridge, Massachusetts police Sgt. James Crowley, that nearly all media coverage of the event mentioned the beers enjoyed by each of the



for those whose votes he is trying to earn. Consequently, these sorts of appearances are made throughout the campaign, and are designed to create imagery demonstrating the candidate's connection to, and shared tastes with, members of those immediate communities.

To the same end, candidates make appearances at ethnic restaurants to demonstrate their familiarity and facility with the cuisine of specific demographic groups. Jesse Jackson spoke of the importance of this while describing Lloyd Bentsen, David Dukakis' running mate in the 1988 election. Bentsen's strength, according to Jackson, was that he could "go from biscuits to tacos to caviar real fast... he knew instinctively if you go and campaign among Hispanics, [you] talk Spanish and eat taco, or [you] go over to the Black side of town and do a soul shake or some cultural expression, eat a biscuit" (Popkin, 1994). For this reason candidates make appearances at ethnic restaurants as part of a strategy to connect and make visible that connection. The visibility of that connection is critical because, Galen argues, it is much more effective to show than to tell. "Don't tell somebody something," Galen explains, "If you show it to them they will inherently process." As such, campaigns regularly stop at the Versailles Restaurant in Miami, for example, to show their candidate's concern and familiarity with the city's Cuban community. Just as is the case in diners generally and a local bar in Pittsburgh more specifically, by eating at the Versailles a candidate creates a logic by which, as Galen argues, voters infer that "He is sitting in a Cuban diner so he cares about Cubans."

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participants. Gates had a Sam Adams, the President drank a glass of Bud Light, Vice President Biden had a non-alcoholic Buckler, and Crowley enjoyed a Blue Moon. (Tomsho, 2009)

In sum, the goal of generating imagery of a candidate visiting a local spot, sharing a local delicacy, or eating at an ethnic restaurant is fundamentally the same as those of appearances at diners.

Appeals to local and ethnic communities through food are predicated on the same underlying logic that powers diner politics. This is the case for two reasons. Firstly, diner politics is local politics. Indeed, the communicative power of the diner derives from its position as both a functionally and symbolically local space. Specifically, the value of the diner is its ubiquity—which is connotative of a specific notion of America—as well as its particularity—which is denotative of neighborhoods and small towns. This is why campaign events “must take place in locally owned restaurants,” according to a Republican political activist quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, and “not the McDonald’s” (Abcarian, 2011). Local and ethnic restaurants are similarly symbolically valuable because they are both specific to, and synecdochic of, broader communities; they too are both functionally and symbolically local.

Additionally, while diner politics is predicated on a national-level understanding of the diner, appearances at diners are designed to generate messages that are just as targeted as those that result from visits to local or ethnic restaurants. In both the diner and Cuban restaurant examples, that is, the imagery produced is geared toward an intended audience—that is, an intended demographic. This is the case because, although diner politics is powered by a national myth about the diner, diner politics is also a political strategy designed to appeal directly to those who identify as, or sympathize with,

the white working and middle class. Reed Galen alludes to exactly this fact when he describes the value of diner stops as “Surrounding the candidate with, and I put this in quotations, regular people.” Galen’s use of rhetorical quotations speaks in part to a discomfort with demographizing people based on their taste for the diner. However it also refers directly on the fact that diners, while certainly appealing to a diverse population of eaters, are primarily associated with white working and middle class Americans. The discourse of the diner, of course, elides this demographic with the notion of “regular” Americans. Consequently, and for this reason, to appear at a diner is to engage in messaging that is no less demographically targeted than eating a *ropa vieja* at a Cuban restaurant. In this way, the difference between the three variations of diner politics—local, ethnic, and traditional diners—is a matter of degree, not kind.

This is not to say, however, that all campaign events organized around food are made visible in an effort to connect with a specific audience. Nearly all appearances at fundraising events are, in fact, generally closed to the press. This is the case because, as Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* explains,

The diner is what you always see. What you won't see is hotel ballrooms where candidates go to raise money with their supporters, which conveys a much different symbolism than a diner. It's a fundraiser, which means it's fat cats, it's those elites... it's a different kind of food and a different kind of setting for that food. It's usually lousy, but nonetheless it's served on very nice plate by waiters in a uniform in a hotel with chandeliers. But you never see that<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Famously in the 2012 presidential election voters did in fact see video from a Mitt Romney fundraiser in which Romney argued that 47% of Americans “who are dependent upon government... believe that they are victims.” The ultimate diner fail, Romney was not able to recover from the perception, driven by the Obama campaign, that he neither understood nor

It is no surprise that campaigns are scrupulous about preventing images of a candidate in such a setting from reaching public consumption. Indeed, as we learned in the aftermath of Mitt Romney's "47 percent" video, specifically in the comments made by the bartender who surreptitiously recorded Romney's speech, both guests and staff attending high-end campaign events are generally required to relinquish their cell phones at the front door. Campaigns engage in defensive maneuvers to limit their candidate's exposure in unflattering contexts outside such places as the diner or local restaurant. However, campaigns are also proactive in their attempts to align their candidate with other culinary cultural mediums that would contribute to a positive public image. This is accomplished through appeals to diner culture in campaign communications, like advertisements and speeches, as well as family recipes that appeal to a diner sensibility.

### **Taking the Show on the Road: Mobilizing Diner Politics in Other Venues**

It is no surprise that diners, and the qualities of food and culture they represent, are repackaged by candidates in other non-diner contexts. Specifically, it is because food is such an effective medium of communication that candidates mention diners in television ads and stump speeches, publish down-home family recipes, and sell campaign-branded beer and BBQ accessories, all with the same goal in mind as they have when eating a plate of waffles at the Melrose Diner. Through these efforts campaigns tap into the

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cared about average Americans. This outcome was reflected in public opinion polling, as Obama held a two-to-one advantage over Romney among voters who were asked which candidate connects well with average Americans (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, October 8, 2012).

symbolic value of diner culture in an attempt to reinforce the same message that is sent by appearances at diners and local restaurants.

The most direct attempt to leverage diner politics outside the diner is through stump speeches and television advertisements. Even when looking at only one candidate, Barack Obama, it is clear that diner rhetoric can be viewed as applicable to multiple contexts. Part of the Obama campaign's strategy for expanding the diner across different platforms included featuring diner culture prominently in television advertisements. To that end, the 2008 spot "Coin" closes with an image of Obama sitting at a family's kitchen table, and "Spending Spree" from the same year fades out on an Obama at a barbeque in a family's backyard. In both images the candidate was presented, as is the case in diner stops, connecting with regular folks through the medium of Main Street food.

Additionally, Obama employed the diner rhetorically as a proxy for Main Street America in his scripted stump speeches. In a speech he presented at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, notably the speech that introduced the Illinois Senator to a national audience, Obama explained: "The people I meet in small towns and big cities, in diners and office parks, they don't expect government to solve all their problems" (Obama, 2004). He has since echoed the framing of the diner as a site of regular America through references to meeting with "[F]olks in VFW halls and diners" (Obama, 2011a) and "Workers in factories and families in diners" (Obama, 2010). In some speeches, moreover, Obama is even more explicit about exactly what the diner represents in this

rhetorical context, specifically that it is a proxy for small town or Main Street America. At a fundraiser in New York Obama explained that, as a candidate, “You talk to folks on Main Streets, you talk to folks in town halls, you go to a diner” (Obama, 2011b), and during a White House Rural Economic Forum in Iowa he described “Traveling through these small towns and talking to folks, sitting down at diners” (Obama, 2011c). This type of verbal appeal to the symbolic diner, moreover, was documented in speeches made by all candidates who fielded competitive campaigns during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. And in all cases, allusions to the diner were provided as evidence of the candidates’ attempts to meet regular Americans where they lived and talk about the problems that they faced.

Diner politics and references to diners in speeches relies on a logic that the candidate’s image can be influenced by projecting outward—that is, by connecting the politician to people and places—however campaigns also engage in messaging efforts that project inward—that is, by connecting voters to the candidate’s personal history. Whereas stops at diners incorporate the candidate into the symbolism of diner culture, other methods reverse that equation by situating American culinary culture directly into the campaign. One of the primary ways this is accomplished is through the making public of family recipes<sup>16</sup>. In every presidential election year since 1992 the magazine *Family Circle* has run a recipe contest in which readers vote on the two cookie recipes

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<sup>16</sup> In 2012 Republican candidate Ron Paul tapped into this interest by releasing *The Ron Paul Family Cookbook* as a fundraising tool. For \$10 supporters could have access to family recipes for King Ranch Chicken, Fruit Salsa, and Cheese Soup.

submitted by the potential First Ladies<sup>17</sup>. Campaigns also release their own family recipes ad hoc. Through social media, however, the use of recipes as a campaign tool has grown.

In the 2012 election both potential First Ladies curated substantial family recipe collections on the social network Pinterest<sup>18</sup>. For example, Michelle Obama posted a recipe for white and dark chocolate chip cookies on her Pinterest page that she annotated with the note: “These cookies, courtesy of the girls’ godmother Mama Kaye, are perfect for special occasions. –mo” (Obama, 2012). Additionally, Michelle Obama included personal recipes in her cookbook, *American Grown*, a memoir about the White House vegetable garden. Ann Romney took the use of recipes one step further as she used cooking as a way to directly connect with potential voters. On the October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012 episode of *Good Morning America* Romney prepared Welsh cakes, a nod to her family’s heritage, the recipe for which was later posted by campaign staff on the official Mitt Romney Twitter feed. Two weeks later Mrs. Romney made meatloaf cakes, which she identified as her husband’s favorite dish, on an episode of the *Rachel Ray Show* (*Good Morning America*, 2012; *Rachel Ray Show*, 2012)

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<sup>17</sup> The outcome of the cookie contest has predicted the winner in five out of the last six elections.

<sup>18</sup> New media giveth, and new media taketh away. Not surprisingly, some candidate’s “family” recipes are eventually identified as fakes. Cindy McCain and the McCain campaign got into trouble when it was determined recipes listed as “McCain Family Recipes,” such as one for Ahi Tuna with Napa Cabbage, were copied word-for-word from the *Food Network* website. When this culinary sleight of hand was made public it led to the discovery that a recipe for Passion Fruit Mouse, which was identified in the *New York Sun* as a McCain family recipe, was also a *Food Network* rip-off. It turned out the problem was systemic, as the campaign also submitted a recipe for Oatmeal Butterscotch Cookies from the Hershey’s website to *Parents* magazine.

This use of recipes as communication strategy, whether staged on the campaign trail or curated in an online social network, is part of a larger goal of employing mediated technologies to project a particular image of the candidate, his family, and his personal history. The goal of talking about diners in stump speeches or cooking of a family favorite on a daytime talk show are the same as staging a photo opportunity at a local restaurant. In all these cases the aim is the creation of an advantageous public persona by connecting certain foods, and their symbolic, values, to the candidate and his or her family.

However, the strategies discussed thus far are only viable so long as the media adopt the desired narrative that food is mobilized by campaigns to create. Neither the symbolic nor the strategic value of diners, local restaurants, or family recipes matter much if the resulting imagery and narrative is not framed by journalists in terms of a candidate's connection with the group to which he or she is appealing. More specifically, attempts to use food to connect with voters are only valuable so long as the media covering those efforts don't highlight their underlying strategic aims. When journalists pull back the curtain and treat diner politics not as examples of a candidate's connection to the middle class, but rather as evidence of the candidate's strategic attempts to forge such a connection, a very different story emerges. At times this stage management narrative only goes so far as to shine a light on the strategy that underpins diner politics; in other contexts, however, explicit media coverage of the underlying stage management serves as a direct affront to the contention that the candidate truly shares the tastes and culture of average Americans.



### **When Journalists Flip the Script: Coverage of Diner Politics as Campaign Strategy**

Despite the existence of journalistic conventions around diner politics, it is not predetermined that coverage of diner politics results in a campaigns' desired media narrative. Indeed, it is exactly because diner politics has become so conventionalized that members of the political press see it as a story in and of itself, and one that is worth covering. The status of diner politicking as routine campaign strategy has created its own media narrative, with stories about diner politics directly addressing the use of food as a means of strategic political communication. Consequently, over the past few years numerous articles about diner politics have been published in the nation's most prominent news sources, including "Obama Ponders the Diner Menu," The New York Times; "Obama eats Buffalo wings in Buffalo," Associated Press; "The Lure of the Diner," Wall Street Journal; "Where the Voters Are, So Are the Calories," The New York Times; "In Manchester, N.H., A Diner Serves the Candidates Over Easy," Washington Post; "Fried Food and Retail Politics at the Iowa State Fair," The Telegraph (UK); "Miami Political Stop and Cuban Restaurant Versailles Turns 40," Associated Press; and, in the most recent election, "Romney Compares Puerto Rico Win to Massive Pancake," published on the ABC News website. Although the articles that represent this cottage industry land only a soft jab at campaigns who attempt to obfuscate the strategic element of diner politics, other media coverage of diner politics reflects the frustration and cynicism experienced by the political press as a result of these efforts at stage management.

Some articles about diner politics reflect the experience of covering a presidential campaign; other news stories, however, not only describes life on the campaign trail but are influenced by the often negative experience of dealing with strong arming by campaign staff. It is often the case that friction develops between journalists and the campaign staff. From the campaign's perspective, Reed Galen explains, "The safest place politically for a candidate is on stage giving a speech." When in an unscripted context, therefore, staff do all that they can to mitigate the possibility of a mistake as they recognize, according to Galen, that there are "many exit points for the information that comes from those things." It is for this reason, as Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* surmises, that "Everything is managed, from the way their hair is combed, what they say, the music that's played, what they eat." Determinations about what constitutes the best music and food, he continues, are made according to their symbolic value:

All sorts of things are weighted for some sort of symbolic value. There's only the illusion of spontaneity, if you want to be totally cynical about it, that the candidate is doing something off the top. It usually isn't working that way, or there's some calculation to it. There's usually some momentary thought to how this will play the media.

Journalists, of course, recognize this. As John McCormick, a member of the traveling press for *Newsweek* magazine and Bloomberg media explains, "I think candidates are always just trying to prove that they're real people and so they can go into a tavern and have a cold beer. I think their strategists believe that helps them relate with average voters. I think anybody who's spent a lot of time with the candidate on the road realizes that." Although journalists covering presidential elections undoubtedly realize that most

aspects of the campaign are stage managed, this recognition can nonetheless boil over into frustration.

Journalists' frustration with the stage management of campaigns derives from the fact that it complicates their ability to satisfy their dual roles of covering the campaign and acting as political watchdogs. As John McCormick asserts, the role of a political journalist is "vetting candidates and telling the stories of these campaigns." However, in an effort to craft an appealing "authentic" self, campaigns make difficult the process by which journalists learn about, and report on, the person behind the politician. NPR's David Greene spoke to exactly this point in an interview about his coverage of Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign. On a Saturday night before Super Tuesday Greene interviewed Clinton at a sports bar in St. Paul, Minnesota. "She was coming in and supposed to do a lot of handshaking and she wanted to show that she was one of the gals, could go to the bar and hang out," he explained, although it quickly became apparent that she was exhausted,

She came back and we did the interview, and what struck me is she seemed so tired and I just thought to myself... it's not my job because I'm a reporter, but if I were your campaign advisor I would say just go out there and show your true self, and show how tired you are, it's been an exhausting day, people will connect with you better at the end of a long day with you having a beer. All the lights were on, all the stagecraft and everything... There are just times the you should be yourself, and be completely vulnerable, and be completely transparent... But it must've been a huge challenge for her to decide when to let your guard down and be yourself and those moments when you're in diners and in bars in Minnesota.

These moments reveal the human element within the presidential campaign process and for that reason might be beneficial to a candidate in the context of the image-and

personality-driven campaign. However, it is also the case that in these moments the press find unexpected stories, and stories that the campaign would rather they didn't tell.

The conflict between campaign teams and political journalists results in a kind of cynicism on the part of the political press that can spill over into the way they cover events. As David Greene explains, candidate appearances at diners and local restaurants “[Aren't] a candidate just saying, ‘Gosh, I'm kind of hungry, let me just stop by this hot dog stand,’” and therefore cannot be covered as such. Consequently, awareness of the scripted nature of diner politics occasionally bleeds into media coverage of campaign events. John Byrne of the *Chicago Sun Times*, for example, pointedly wrote that Hillary Clinton's stop at Bronko's Bar in Crown Point, Indiana—where she famously had a pint of Old Style and a shot of Crown Royal—was “an ‘unannounced’ (*quotations in original*) post-script to her speech in Valparaiso earlier in the day” (Byrne, 2008). Similarly, in his coverage of Obama's 2008 campaign, Kevin Helliker of the *Wall Street Journal* noted that the candidate referenced “pie” twelve times in a discussion about an Ohio diner he visited earlier in the week, while tailoring his comments—“I like sweet-potato pie”—to the Southern crowd he subsequently addressed (2008).

Additionally, this cynicism can result in efforts by the press to find moments, principally mistakes, that occur because there is a breakdown in the management of the campaign and that reveals something important about the candidate's true self. As Toby Harnden describes, the relationship between campaign staff and the political press resembles a game of chess. “A lot of these things are it's almost like chess moves,” he

explains, “The campaign stages it at the diner, so that's the first move. And then the reporters collectively or individually respond to that.” In this chess match, a journalist’s primary response to the series of stage managed, loosely-scripted, and occasionally ridiculous photo opportunities is to try to find moments of authenticity. This approach is predicated on finding someone in the diner who could break the fourth wall of the performance that the campaign is staging. This is accomplished, Harnden continues, by “Finding anybody that is trying to eat their breakfast and was suddenly confronted by the candidate and just couldn't care less, the reporters who go make a beeline for that person because it's something the campaign hasn't organized.” This type of un-organized, un-anticipated moment is what David Greene refers to as a “Joe the Plumber moment,” that is to say, a moment that is framed by the press as providing important and revealing information about the candidate. Harnden offers two different motivations for reporting on a Joe the Plumber moment: authenticity and “looking for something that's trying undermine what the campaign is trying to do.” Journalists’ intentions are certainly important, however regardless of their motivations the media products that result from coverage of these unanticipated, unscripted moments share certain traits. Namely, mistakes committed by candidates who step out from behind the teleprompter are framed by journalists as stories about the candidate’s authentic failure as a diner politician.

### **Playing to Bad Reviews: Candidate Failures at Diner Politics**

Despite any campaign’s best efforts, appearances at local diners and are only managed, not scripted; for that reason, there is always the potential that depictions of the candidate

will veer off the intended track. To a significant extent, the factor that determines whether the campaign's image of the candidate will hold fast is the *a priori* media narrative about the candidate. Toby Harnden explains that media narratives are the product of a number of small moments that, when taken together, tell a bigger story with a consistent theme. Mistakes, such as a failure as a diner politician, become news when the gaffe taps into an existing narrative about the candidate. In such a context, Paul Farhi explains, the mistake becomes a story because it "plays into a narrative that has... a context," which is to say, "When you take something that has superficial support for it, people... are able to buy it" despite the fact that "in many cases it's a complete deflection of the reality of the facts." At the same time, moreover, contradictory information is generally dismissed because it doesn't contribute to the larger story. For those candidates who are defined, through the prevailing media narrative, as elitists, small moments that confirm their elitism can become larger news stories and touchstones for the rest of the campaign.

Due to his high level of cultural capital Barack Obama was framed throughout the 2008 presidential election as an elitist. This narrative insulated Obama from being framed as unintelligent or uninformed—his mistaken reference to America's "57 states" was largely ignored, for example—however he was routinely criticized for his perceived elite food tastes, which were perceived as emblematic of his disconnect from average American culture. One of the clearest examples of the media narrative by which Obama was described as a failed diner politician was offered by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who contended, "Obama's problem is he doesn't seem like a guy who can

go into an Applebee's salad bar and people think he fits in naturally there" (*Race for the White House with David Gregory*, 2008). Chris Matthews echoed this sentiment when he wondered, "What's so hard about doing a diner? I don't get it. Why doesn't he go in there and say, 'Did you see the papers today? What do you think about that team? How did we do last night?' Just some regular connection?" (*Hardball with Chris Matthews*, 2008). In the case of his food tastes, Obama's perceived elitism fit the media narrative, consequently any moment that evidenced his elite food tastes was treated by the press as a mistake that revealed his true self.

By presenting voters with better approximations of candidate's true self, mistakes provide journalists with the opportunity to serve as a political gatekeeper. In this position, John McCormick explains, the onus is on journalist to "point out that the slickness of their campaign might not quite match the reality of their personal life experience or how they actually act when the cameras are off." This is accomplished by attending to mistakes that suggest hypocrisy, or inauthenticity, on the part of a candidate and his or her staff. Specifically, mistakes demonstrate the inconsistency between the image created by "high dollar strategists who are trying to paint a certain picture" of a candidate as having "pulled myself up from the bootstraps, I know just what your life is like here, I'm a Joe Six-pack," as compared to the candidate's personal biography made visible through his tastes and practices. "People love hypocrisy, right," Evan Thomas contends, "If the Democrat is seeking to represent the poor and it turns out that they're secretly eating *foie gras* or arugula, [there's] nothing more that we love in journalism than hypocrisy. It's got great gotcha possibilities." And as Toby Harnden explains, these

kinds of gaffes look particularly bad because they are instances of a candidate “trying to be regular and blowing it, which is worse than not trying.”

For that reason mistakes, or moments that can be framed as mistakes, represent a opportunity for “vigilante justice” amongst journalists (Patterson, 1994, p. 156) who, as Toby Harnden explains, “have a certain feeling of being unhappy about being sort of kept in the dark, kept at arm’s length.” As a result, Harnden continues, journalists “[rub] their hands in anticipation that something unpredictable” will happen. Consequently, moments are treated by the press as both mistakes and as newsworthy when they shine light on a hypocrisy, thus revealing a deeper truth about a candidate, and when the hypocrisy that is revealed fits within existing media narratives about the candidate. In such situations, Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* explains, not only do mistakes gets reported, they are frequently the subject of “disproportionate, or [what] seems like disproportionate coverage.” This is because, David Greene surmised, “Within the current media environment... everything can turn into a story all its own.”

In sum, and as was outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the primary aim of diner politics—the creation of a public persona that appeals to a particular demographic through the appearance of shared culinary tastes—is predicated on three factors: the move to image-based campaigns, the shift to taste-based notions of elitism, and the professional routines of campaign media coverage. As this analysis of diner politics demonstrates, it is only because there is increased interest in, and increased access to, candidates’ personal traits that food tastes can be treated by political and media elites as



both relevant news and evaluative criteria. That is, candidate image is only politically valuable when it is believed to reveal information about the candidate as a person, a curated portrait that will impact of vote choice because it can be categorized within the cultural schema by which American voters are organized. However, extant literature that interrogates the importance of candidate image does not account for the increasing role of taste in the creation of candidate image; likewise, research addressing the reframing of elitism does not explain how this process is tied to the importance of candidate image. This dissertation contributes to both bodies of literature by highlighting the interplay between candidate image and taste-based notions of elitism through an analysis of diner politics. As this chapter argues, candidate image cannot exist outside the average/elite dichotomy. Similarly, the reframing of elitism as a matter of taste is a constructive political strategy only if the personal is valued along with, and perhaps as party to, the political. Indeed, the relative import of the conflation between image-based campaigning and new conceptions of elitism is perhaps most evident in the fact that the contemporary litmus test for candidate likability is the question, “Which candidate would you rather have a beer with?”.

However, despite the fact that the mapping of traits and tastes has resulted in the near-scripting of diner stops, the media continue to following candidates as they attempt to use their taste for down home food in an effort to cultivate a desirable public persona. This relative stasis is attributable to both the persistence of media routines as well as the seemingly contradictory professional norm in journalism to challenge that which is presented as truth. Diner politics functions as something more than an arena for

interpersonal connection—that is, as an arena for symbolic connection—only if and when it is legitimized as such by the media. Were the media to ignore diner stops because they believed them to be outdated or hyper-managed campaigns would be compelled to look to other venues to demonstrate their candidate’s connection to ethnic or middle class cultures. However, despite the fact that journalists have grown tremendously skeptical of the diner politics routine, the diner politics story has become one of the most well-established tropes in presidential media campaign coverage. Literature that investigates the journalistic norms would attribute this to the strength of professional routines and economic expectations. As this chapter demonstrates, however, those factors are perhaps both stronger and more malleable than the current literature contends. Indeed, two seemingly contradictory developments are evident in media coverage of diner politics: despite skepticism, diner stops continue to be a widely-covered political routine; while at the same time, journalists have developed a parallel narrative that highlights those aspects of diner politics ignored by the traditional narrative. As such, this chapter illustrates that both the strength of established media narratives, and thereby the strength of established media routines, as well as the tendency by journalists to develop new stories that, while potentially contradictory, better explain the exigencies of contemporary presidential campaigning.

### CHAPTER 3: WHEN IT ALL GOES HORRIBLY WRONG



President George H. W. Bush tries a new scanner at a grocery convention; Associated Press, February 4, 1992 (Image V)

#### **Introduction**

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1992, in the midst of his reelection campaign, President George H. W. Bush made an appearance at the National Grocers Convention in Orlando, Florida. Andrew Rosenthal, who wrote an article about the event for *The New York Times*, described something unusual; the President, he explained, was awed by a grocery scanner. Rosenthal's story, "Bush Encounters the Supermarket, Amazed," ran on the front page of the *Times*. In his account of the event, Rosenthal described the President as awed by the seemingly ordinary technology: "He grabbed a quart of milk, a light bulb and a bag of candy and ran them over an electronic scanner. The look of wonder flickered across his face again as he saw the item and price registered on the cash register screen"

(Rosenthal, 1992). With that, Bush's fascination with something common to the lives of most Americans became the source of national fascination.

The *Times*' interpretation of the incident, however, quickly became a news story itself. Like all events in which the President made an appearance a limited number of print reporters were provided access; as a result, journalists who were not at the convention compiled their stories according to the pool report generated by one of their colleagues. Rosenthal was not present in Orlando, and as such relied on a two paragraph summary written by Gregg McDonald of the *Houston Chronicle*. As the story gained traction, other media outlets and the administration pointed out that the pool report made no mention of the President's so-called fascination with the scanner. The administration was particularly upset—White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater called the story “totally media-manufactured and maintained” (Brinkley, 1992)—and over the following month news sources provided additional information about the event that challenged Rosenthal's account. The Associated Press, for example, explained that the technology exhibited at the convention was new and impressive, and that the President's behavior seemed to be the driven by a desire to be polite, not by sincere interest. *The New York Times* responded to these claims by insisting, as a spokesman did to a reporter at the *Washington Post*, that the scanner itself was far from exciting, and that in a network video they reviewed the President appeared “clearly impressed” (Kurtz, 1992). Eventually McDonald, the author of the pool report, waded into the fray, explaining that he “Probably should've done a better job of saying how new some of this stuff was” (Ibid).

The scanner mistake turned into a major news story because it tapped into an *a priori* narrative that Bush did not understand the lives of average Americans. As Toby Harnden of the *Telegraph* UK explains, the scanner story was yet “another example of something that fit into the narrative of him being a New England blueblood, son of a Senator who is out of touch with ordinary people.” And it was because of that narrative, moreover, that other small food moments in Bush’s political career—his request at a New Hampshire truck stop for a “splash” more coffee, his efforts to convince the public that he loved pork rinds—were regarded as newsworthy moments with political implications (cf. Dowd, 1991; interview with Todd Purdum). Additionally, the scanner story was a point of such media fascination because, as then-ABC White House Correspondent Brit Hume explained in reference to the incident, journalists “love stories about rich and powerful people and their alleged insensitivity to everybody else” (1993). Evidence of Hume’s assertion is found in the fact that the scanner story continues to be cited by political and media actors as an example of a food faux pas (cf. Milbank, 2003; *CBS’s Early Show*, 2011; Bruni, 2012; *Chris Matthews Show*, February 5, 2012), despite real disputes about its validity (cf. Goldberg, 2008).

As is evident in the scanner case, media interest in food faux pas derives from the focus on image-based campaigns and the taste-based notion of elitism. For this reason, and similar to coverage of diner politics, news accounts of food faux pas are contextualized within the Culture War discourse. Food faux pas are also, moreover, situated within the specific Culture War rhetoric of the “divided America” narrative.

According to the divided America or “two Americas” framework, sociological differences are treated as *prima facie* evidence of political polarization. That is to say, not only do tastes reveal a candidate to be average or elite, but they reveal him to be average or elite within an electoral context in which Americans themselves are organized along lines of taste and values. The use of the divided America framework as an organizing principle is evident in media coverage of the scanner incident, particularly the editorial published in *The New York Times* titled “Abroad at Home; The Two Nations” (Lewis, 1992).

Journalists organize food faux pas within the divided America narrative because doing so allows for the framing of the mistake as politically relevant. This is the case for two reasons. Firstly, as a mistake, food faux pas are understood as evidence of a deeper truth about the offending candidate. Consequently, food faux pas are useful to journalists interested in vetting candidates according to, and informing the public about, candidates’ authentic selves. Secondly, because the information revealed about the candidate, specifically his or her elite tastes in food, is used to label the candidate as an “authentic” member of elite America, journalists can claim that the consequences of committing such a mistake are, within the divided America context, negative and self-evident.

In this chapter I investigate the way in which two primary forces—interest in candidates’ authentic selves and the divided America narrative—have steered media coverage of food faux pas over time. To that end, I focus on three perspectives on food faux pas: two case studies of diner politics gone wrong, the naturalization of

microtargeting, and the framing of healthy eating as a food mistake. Taken together, these areas illustrate how small moments are framed by media and political elites as proof of a candidate's authentic disconnect from average Americans. Additionally, these perspectives demonstrate why the treatment of food faux pas as legitimate political news has increased over time. As I demonstrate in this chapter, prior to the emergence of the Culture War narrative in the 1990s only Republican political elites perceived food gaffes to have electoral value. In addition, the media covering these moments made few claims that such errors were problematic for a presidential hopeful. By 2004, however, the food faux pas trope and divided America narratives had matured. For this reason, food gaffes came to be framed by political and media elites as mistakes that could both serve as evidence of a preexisting disconnect from average voters and hurt the offending candidate's electoral chances. The food faux pas, therefore, was presented as both symptom and cause of a larger campaign issue.

Before beginning my analysis, let me clarify my use of terms in this chapter. I use the terms food faux pas, gaffe, and mistake to describe three different yet related concepts. "Food faux pas" encompasses both gaffes and mistakes and refers to the broad phenomenon this chapter investigates. "Gaffe" refers to the actual instance itself, which may or may not be treated by the media as newsworthy. "Mistake" specifically refers to those gaffes that are attended to by the media and are treated as meaningful blunders. In short, all gaffes and mistakes are food faux pas, but only some gaffes become newsworthy mistakes.

*Conceptualizing Candidate Mistakes: Media Framing and Priming, Narratives, and Voters' Assessment of Candidates*

Gaffes enter the public conversation when they are framed as “mistakes,” or errors in opinion, behavior, or judgment that are seen as consistent with preexisting personal or societal narratives. This is true of life both on and off the presidential campaign trail. Regarding the latter, candidates’ food gaffes are likely to become newsworthy mistakes when they are seen by journalists as fitting within the intersection of two major frames and their resulting narratives. The first, resulting from journalists’ tendency towards stories that reveal a deeper truth about public officials, frames gaffes as mistakes that are indicative of candidate’s authentic self. The second, a more societal-level frame that can be found both within and beyond political media coverage, is the framing of stories that fit into the narrative of a divided America. The applicability of these two frames provides the conditions under which a simple gaffe can become a newsworthy mistake.

Journalists, in the process of making news out of information, rely on narrative frames to make comprehensible otherwise non-narrative facts. A media frame provides a context to do this, as the frame is a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). Of course, the framing of issues or events (for example, the framing of a gaffe as a mistake) is not rhetorically neutral; by embedding information within a larger network of established thematic connections, journalists promote a particular reading at the expense of all others. Furthermore, in organizing a story within a narrative frame, journalists necessarily include some facets of an issue while excluding



others. As a result, the process of framing a story “[promotes] a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solutions” of and to the issue at hand (Entman, 2004). It is for this reason that “it is impossible to talk about an ‘unframed’ media portrayal” (Delli Carpini, from Callaghan & Schnell, 2005, p. 15). And while some frames aren’t accepted or acceptable as news, other frames dominate political culture so powerfully that they become naturalized (Entman, 2004). These pervasive, accepted news frames “organize everyday reality” since the frames become “part and parcel of everyday reality” (Tuchman, 1978). The reliance on these frames, moreover, leads to homogenous news coverage (Bennett, 2001)<sup>19</sup>, which further develops the underlying frame. For this reason, and because food faux pas themselves have developed into a narrative trope, food mistakes are more likely to be covered, and covered in the same way, by multiple journalists (Reese, Grant, and Danielian, 1989).

Gaffes become stories when the implications of the gaffe can be contextualized, as a point of reference, within an existing frame about the candidate and/or society more broadly. Journalists rely on news “pegs,” or topical events that provide an opportunity for broader, longer-term coverage and commentary, when assembling a story (Gamson, 1992). Gaffes are useful as news pegs because they are factual moments that are both cause and symptom of a bigger story about electability and the cultural state of America. Sometimes, however, gaffes “fail” as both news stories and pegs precisely because they

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<sup>19</sup> Here, of course, I am thinking about mainstream media sources. If one were to include partisan media in this analysis one would find symmetry within media groups that mirrors, in its consistency, the symmetry Bennett is describing.

do not speak to a broader, accepted narrative about the offending candidate. These gaffes fail to become stories because newsworthiness relies on a synthesis between facts and frames. Stories need to make sense to become news. For a story to make sense it must present information in a way that is consistent with previous framings of similar events (Scheufele, 2000). For that reason incidents become important only when they draw upon other related incidents and concerns (Popkin, 1994). Consequently accepted media frames dictate whether a story seems reasonable or incredible (Entman, 2004). Therefore what constitutes news, or what is treated by newsmakers as viable news, is “not simply that which happens,” but is instead “that which can be regarded and presented as newsworthy” (Fowler, 1991, p. 13). In short, the media tell stories that reinforce existing frames and provide news pegs as *a priori* justifications for those frames. Food mistakes are productive news pegs when they tap into two existing news frames: the two Americas narrative and narratives about candidates’ authentic selves.

In part, food faux pas are newsworthy because food mistakes can be framed as offering insight into a candidate’s authentic self. In a general sense, mistakes matter because they are thought to be particularly revealing of one’s true character (Popkin, 1994). This is the case because we ascribe meaningfulness to mistakes (Freud, 1989 [1919]). The relationship between mistakes and the authentic self is critical since authenticity functions in opposition to performativity. Authenticity can only be ascertained through actions that are believed to be involuntary; because they are involuntary, that is, these classes of actions cannot be deliberate attempts to create a public persona (Goffman, 2008). Mistakes are the quintessential involuntary action, and

for that reason are treated as the truest markers of the authentic self. Indeed, ungovernable behaviors reveal the true self at a remove from any performative impulses. Although ungovernability is relative, tastes in food are understood to be *particularly* ungovernable, and are therefore uniquely indicative of one's authentic self.<sup>20</sup>

Mistakes, or gaffes that can be framed as mistakes, are popular news pegs because authenticity, and notions of the authentic self, play a central role in contemporary political campaigns. In a political context, authenticity is assessed by the relative gap or overlap between the true self—one's attitudes, beliefs, and emotions—and the public presentation of the self. This notion of authenticity is elegantly expressed within the political communication scholarship as a "Candidate's fit with self" (Louden and McCauliff, 2004, p. 97). Authenticity, moreover, describes a quality that is larger than the individual. Indeed, the "sources of the self"—the components from which the self is created—are social and cultural factors (Taylor, 1989). As a result, culture and national character are the bearers of authenticity, and authenticity is achieved through the community, not the individual (Williams, 1998). The authentic self, therefore, describes the confluence of tastes, values, and beliefs that are the result of one's specific historical and social context. For this reason, ungovernable behaviors are understood as being particularly revealing of one's true self because they provide insight about individual as

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<sup>20</sup> In regards to the ungovernability of food tastes, Goffman posited that the preparer of a meal could tell whether it was as well received by evaluating the speed in which it was consumed. It's nearly impossible to eat quickly that which we don't find tasty, with the inverse being almost as true (2008).

well as his or her broader cultural context. It is not surprising, therefore, that voters care about candidate authenticity (Louden, 1990; Louden and McCauliff, 2004).

Campaigns try to influence the public's perception of their candidate's authentic self by steering, as best as possible, the way he or she is covered by the media. Media effects research demonstrates that the media largely determine what issues the public know and care about (Weaver et al., 2008). In the case of presidential election coverage, this means that the aspects of each candidate that receive media coverage dominate voters' images of that candidate (McCombs, 2005). Consequently, the goal of influencing the media agenda is the management of the public agenda (Weaver et al., 2008). Additionally, the media also prime voters to evaluate candidates according to certain issues and traits; specifically, by emphasizing certain issues from among the universe of what is possible, the media influence the criteria voters use to assess presidential candidates (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Campaigns respond to this by maximizing the attention paid to traits that favor the campaign's candidate, while minimizing attention to traits and evaluative criteria that favor his or her opponent (Funk, 1999). This is critical because voters' impressions of candidates, once formed, are fairly static. Consequently, information that is consistent with their stereotype of the candidate is the most salient (Ibid). Despite these efforts, however, campaigns are not entirely successful at controlling the media agenda (Weaver et al, 2008), because the media are "institutional players who construct and promote unique frames of their own" (Callaghan and Schnell, 2001). Campaigns may consider events important because they have the

potential to drive vote choice, however it is through media attention that events are made significant (Shaw and Roberts, 2000).

Although it has always been the case that public impressions of candidates are largely the result of media effects, two institutional media changes have altered, and now largely dictate, what it means to understand a candidate's authentic self. Firstly, and on the broadest level, public perception of a candidate's authentic self is the result of an increase in "deconstructionist journalism," or the practice of using a single moment or anecdote to tell a much larger truth that may not have been known prior to its discovery (Fielder, 1992). As a result, the public's notion of the candidate, as a person, is influenced by the journalistic process of assembling "statements and actions in an attempt to describe the 'real' candidates" (Jamieson and Waldman, 2004, p. 34). Additionally, as a result of new digital media technologies and increasingly ratings-driven economic demands, there has been a shift in the media towards "soft news" as a source for information about candidate traits and behaviors (Funk, 1994). Soft news describes news that is more "sensational, more personality-centered, more entertainment oriented, and more incident-based than traditional public affairs" (Patterson, 2001). As such, soft news conveys "information whose political relevance is not obvious" (Shaw, 1999). Soft news is generally favored over discussions of policy, especially when those soft news topics concern a candidate's personality and traits (Bartels, 1988; Bennett, 1983; Patterson, 1994). Not surprisingly, therefore, mistakes receive considerable news coverage (Patterson, 1994). That a large story can be told about an instance of soft news like a food faux pas is possible because everything is endowed with a critical meaning during

presidential elections, and data down to the level of sound bites are contextualized in the context of the broader, accepted frames (Jamieson and Waldman, 2004). Consequently, because certain food faux pas can be framed by the media as providing insight into a candidate's authentic self, moments that might otherwise appear to lack political news value are treated by journalists as sources of real and important campaign information.

In addition to tapping into the media narrative of a candidate's authentic self, food faux pas are newsworthy because they are news pegs within the media narrative that describes a divided America. Like the Culture War rhetoric of which it is a component, the divided America frame takes as its underlying assumption the notion that Americans are organized by their tastes and values. The notion of an America divided along these terms is both evidenced and illustrated by the red state/blue state map, which is presented by media and political elites as a reification of this cultural division. Within the divided America narrative political polarization along the lines of values and tastes are treated as "*prima facie* evidence of deep cultural divisions" (Fiorina et al, 2006, p.4). For this reason red states are categorized by their love for guns, country music, NASCAR, while blue state residents favor Volvos, fine arts, chardonnay, sailing (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). Implicit in this categorizing schema is "the presumption that social characteristics correlate highly with political positions." By this logic, therefore, difference in food tastes translates into a "comparable difference in views on the legality of abortion or the necessity of gun registration" (Edsall, 2003, p. 567-8). Like the notion of political polarization more broadly, the notion that Americans can be demographed in this way is controversial; however, mirroring the Culture War context, the conflation of

tastes and ideology has been adopted by political and media elites as gospel. Consequently, sociological “facts”—such as a candidate’s food tastes—are presented within political discourse as compelling self-evident electoral implications (Fiorina et al, 2006). For this reason food faux pas are framed by the media as newsworthy mistakes as they reveal a truth about the erring candidate’s disconnect from average American culture.

The prevalence of the divided America narrative relies on its framing of America as a site of conflict. Conflict is newsworthy (Gans, 1979). And the specific conflict that underlies the divided America frame is the product of two factors. Firstly, because journalists get information and direct quotes from political elites (Bennett, 1990), a group that has been demonstrated to be more polarized than the American electorate as a whole (Saunders and Abramowitz, 2004; McCarty et al, 2006; Poole and Rosenthal, 2007), political news coverage reflects the divisiveness of political elites. Additionally, because the media function in an increasingly ratings-driven environment, journalists lean heavily on conflict as a narrative framework (Bennett, 1983; Bennett, 1996). Indeed, conflict and polarization have news value and are, for that reason, useful journalistic constructs (Fiorina et al, 2006). The institutional value of conflict, as well as the conflict endemic to journalists’ political sources, results in the presentation of the American social landscape as a nation divided along cultural lines.

In sum, the confluence of two media frames—the candidate’s authentic self and the divided America narrative—creates a journalistic environment in which food gaffes

are treated as news stories that both illustrate and instantiate problems for a presidential campaign. However the divided America narrative, like deconstructive journalism and the media focus on soft news, are relatively recent journalistic conventions. As such, early examples of food faux pas are treated as far less politically relevant than more recent examples. Indeed, mistakes that predate the food faux pas narrative were not treated by journalists as providing politically relevant information. However, once food mistakes could be contextualized within the divided America frame, and once the food faux pas trope developed from that media environment, journalists came to treat food faux pas as mistakes for which the political consequences were both negative and self-evident.

### **The History of Food Faux Pas**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, food has long been incorporated into presidential campaigning. Consequently candidates have committed food gaffes long before those incidents were treated by political or media elites as having electoral relevance. The first documented food faux pas occurred in 1960. It was not attended to by the press; indeed, it is only part of the public record because it was viewed by non-political actors as culturally relevant. By 1976 the perceived value of such a cultural mistake had increased, and as a result the media treated the mistake as a political error. Even in this case, however, the media did not make claims that the food mistake either signaled a bigger issue facing the campaign or would itself be problematic to the candidate. As such, both these instances of food faux pas are distinguished from more



contemporary examples—that is, examples that occurred after the divided America narrative became prominent—by the media’s treatment of them as less than politically relevant. Indeed, these moments were treated by the media more as curios than legitimate political news.

The earliest documented example of a campaign food gaffe occurred during Nelson Rockefeller’s first presidential campaign in 1960. The candidate, an industrial heir and Governor of New York, staged a photo opportunity at the original Nathan’s Hot Dogs in Coney Island with Harry Cabot Lodge Jr., Nixon’s running mate that year, and Louis Lefkowitz, the Attorney General of the State of New York. The set-up was



Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Henry Cabot Lodge and New York Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz at Nathan’s Hot Dogs (Image VI)

quintessential local politics: the men were shown eating hot dogs, an American staple that gained popularity following President Franklin Delano Roosevelt decision to serve the snack at a 1939 visit by King George VI, at the most famous hot dog joint in the country. However Rockefeller was not convincing in his role as hot dog connoisseur. As Todd

Purdum suggested in our interview, the resulting photographs presented an image of the three politicians that “Look like they're slumming to say, ‘We are regular guys, we can eat a hot dog too.’” Even so, the images of the candidate were not treated by the media as indexing a broader disconnect between the candidate and average Americans. Exactly that sentiment, however, was offered by singer Nat King Cole during John Kennedy’s presidential inauguration the following year. At Kennedy’s inauguration Cole performed a song he’d written for the occasion, in which he reminisced about Rockefeller’s visit to Nathan’s:

In the Meantime, Henry Cabot made a boo boo.  
One that we should really hesitate to tell.  
He and Nelson ordered hot dogs out at Coney.  
But at Coney, friends, they/know baloney well.  
(Rogers, 1961).

Unbeknownst to Rockefeller or Cole, the Kennedy White House would later employ exclusively French chefs and serve arguably the least “American” food of any modern administration. At the time of the election, however, although there was a clear public perception about Rockefeller’s elite status, the media did not frame the hot dog incident according to, or as evidence of, that narrative.

While Rockefeller’s failure to demonstrate facility with a local food culture went largely unnoticed, Democratic incumbent Gerald Ford’s goof was treated by voters and the press as a clear food mistake. During the 1976 presidential campaign President Ford made a campaign stop in San Antonio in an effort to improve his standing in Texas. Surrounded by cameras, Ford took a bite out of his tamale without first removing the corn



President Gerald Ford attempts to eat a tamale without removing the corn husk (Image VII)

husks in which it was wrapped. An article about this failed attempt to eat the Mexican delicacy, along with an accompanying photograph, was published on the front page of *The New York Times*. In it the author explained the mistake: “The snack was interrupted after the first bite so that [Ford’s] hosts could remove the corn shucks which serve as a wrapper and are not supposed to be eaten” (Hayward, 2009). Although it received media attention, Ford’s faux pas was not framed by the national press as either symptom or cause of a campaign problem. It was, however, viewed in exactly those terms by voters and political elites.

The tamale incident was a major news story in Texas. As former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee recounts: "That weekend every newscast in Texas led with 'President Ford doesn't know how to eat a tamale' ... He lost Texas... and there are a lot of people who will believe forever that it was the shuck on the tamale—not Jimmy Carter—that beat Gerald Ford in 1976” (Lin, 2008).<sup>21</sup> Although Huckabee is

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<sup>21</sup> During a 2012 presidential debate Texas Governor Rick Perry forgot the name of the third federal government agency he’d like to eliminate. The mistake received a fair amount of press,

clearly exaggerating, his comments speak to a sentiment that Ford echoed following his election loss. When asked by a member of the White House press corps to identify the most important lesson he learned during the campaign, Ford responded, “Always shuck your Tamales” (Popkin, 1994, p. 1).<sup>22</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s journalists did not operate from a belief that a food faux pas could either damage to a presidential campaign or signal an existing demographic problem that the campaign faced. This would continue to be the case in 1988 when the first major food faux pas new story emerged, even though political elites at the time argued that such a mistake was politically important. By 2008, however, media coverage of food faux pas came to reflect the view that such mistakes could pose a problem for

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and in response to his mental lapse the candidate’s team sent a letter to supporters comparing the moment to Ford’s tamale mishap.

<sup>22</sup> Here Ford is likely referring to the effects of the tamale incident on his election results in Texas and the Southwest more broadly. It is worth noting, of course, that what constitutes a regional or ethnic food is not stable across time. The impact of the tamale incident on voters’ impressions of Ford was likely limited to those voters in the Southwest with whom he was trying to connect. Even in 1988, when *Life* magazine surveyed the presidential primary candidates about their favorite beverages, the selection of a distinctly Mexican drink choice stood out. In their responses to the magazine’s request, candidates on both sides of the aisle contributed generally expected responses: Milk, Pepsi, tea, coffee, orange juice, and Gatorade. Bruce Babbitt, the former Democratic Governor of Arizona, picked Tecate beer (“Bellying up to ’88 Choices,” 1987). In our interview Todd Purdum mentioned that this moment stood out to him because Babbitt, “God bless him,” picked a Mexican beer that would have been unfamiliar to most Americans. As Purdum explained, “it seems very realistic because you could picture some guy from Arizona one being his Tecate and Mexican food,” an image that stood out compared to the other options. Babbitt was not a competitive candidate, and the mistake received little press. Twenty years later, however, familiarity with Mexican food is not only acceptable, but expected. 2012 Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman posted a video to his campaign website in which he discussed why Mexican food was his favorite cuisine (“Jon’s favorite foods,” 2012), and a year earlier President Obama joked “You do not want to be between Michelle and a tamale” during a Cinco De Mayo press conference (Bradley, 2011).

presidential candidates. Indeed, by that election the media treated food faux pas not only as signifying a bigger campaign issue but as highlighting campaign problems that were negative and self-evident. The framing of food faux pas in this way, finally, was a consequence of the development of a narrative trope that contextualized food faux pas as part of a lineage of past mistakes.

### **Lettuce Entertain You: Two Case Studies in Food Faux Pas**

Early food faux pas were not contextualized within the same narrative framework as more recent food mistakes. This is because the newsworthiness of recent food faux pas is predicated on, and organized within, the divided America narrative. The divided America narrative argues that Americans are organized according to their tastes and values; all Americans, voters and politicians, can be categorized according to those terms. The media have not only adopted this premise but naturalized it, as is apparent in the terms journalists use to describe voters. Specifically, in the context of presidential election coverage, voters have been identified exclusively according to their tastes in food: as “wine track” or “beer track” (McCormick, 2007b), Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks (Auchenbach, 2008), and latte liberal or, as Sarah Palin famously described them, “Just everyday American people, Joe Six Pack” (“2008 Vice Presidential Debate”, 2008). It is because votes can be categorized according to their tastes in this way that the food faux pas has electoral consequences.

Additionally, the media’s recent coverage of food faux pas is driven by the narrative of the candidate’s authentic self. Food faux pas, like all mistakes, are

understood to be illustrative of an individual's true self. When a food faux pas reveals a candidate's authentic self to be electorally disadvantageous—that is to say, elite—journalists frame the mistake as evidence of a broader problem addressing the campaign. In this way food faux pas are effective news pegs for stories about the way in which a candidate's authentic self, and the cultural context from which it emerged, suggest a broader demographic issue facing the campaign. Because food mistakes are small moments that illustrate more complex ideas, the food faux pas narrative has developed into an established media trope. Evidence of this is found in the way journalists refer, for example, to the idea that “Food faux pas have plagued presidential candidates in the past” (Chozick, 2008).

These two narrative frames greatly influence the media's coverage of food faux pas, however their development is fairly recent. It is possible to assess their impact on the coverage of food mistakes by comparing similar food faux pas that fall on either side of the narratives' emergence. To that end, this section compares media responses to two such food faux pas: Michael Dukakis' suggestion in 1988 that Iowa farmers grow Belgian endive with Barack Obama's mention of arugula to a group of Iowa farmers in 2008.

During the 1988 Democratic primary Presidential candidate and former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis suggested that a group of Iowans consider diversifying their crop production by growing flowers, blueberries, and Belgian endive (Weinraub, 1988). Despite the fact that the idea was modeled after a successful initiative

in his home state, Dukakis was skewered for the mere suggestion that corn-fed Midwesterners move beyond their agricultural staples.

Dukakis' comment immediately became the object of derision by his Republican opponents. Acting as a battering ram for his running mate, Vice Presidential nominee Dan Quayle turned the endive moment into a political mint. Quayle told supporters in Omaha that his first reaction to Dukakis' suggestion "was that endive was the 3-meter springboard event at the Olympics." He explained that his opponent's farm policy "is the Belgium endive and his defense policy is the Belgium waffle" (Decker, 1988). Quayle concluded his speech by highlighting the absurdity of Dukakis' suggestion that blueberries and Belgian endive could "pull farmers out of their economic doldrums" by holding aloft an endive that, he explained, his aides had to travel to Kansas City to procure (Coulter, 1988; Weinraub, 1988). "Endive," he exclaimed over the laughter, "Well, if you start growing these little white things, don't count on paying off the farm" (Ayres, 1988).

Throughout the campaign Quayle treated the endive moment not as an issue with limited interest but as a mistake with national implications. To that end, he used the endive suggestion to frame his opponent as an elitist. During the Vice-Presidential Debate he responded to a question about farm subsidies by explaining that "[Dukakis] went to the farmers in the Midwest and told them not to grow corn, not to grow soybeans, but to grow Belgium endive. That's what... he and his Harvard buddies think of the American farmer: grow Belgium endive" ("1988 Vice Presidential Debate Transcript,"

1988). It was the belief, at least among Bush campaign strategists, that the endive gaffe would be compelling evidence against a Dukakis/Bentsen administration.

Barack Obama committed an astonishingly similar gaffe twenty years later in a similar venue in Iowa. In July, 2007, during a Rural Issues Forum in Adel, Iowa, Barack Obama posed a question to the assembled crowd of Iowans: "Anybody gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula? I mean, they're charging a lot of money for this stuff." (McCormick, 2007a). The mention of arugula, coupled with that of Whole Foods, was too easy a target for Obama's opponents.

Mirroring the response by the Bush/Quayle team to the endive mistake, the McCain camp responded to Obama's arugula incident in short order. After Obama mentioned the lettuce and the upscale grocery store McCain's staff released a statement informing the public that the Whole Foods stores nearest to Ames weren't even in Iowa but in Omaha, Nebraska; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Kansas City, Missouri (McCormick, 2007a). Like Quayle's strategy of describing his staff's wild goose chase in search of Belgian endive, McCain staffers sought to highlight just how out of touch Obama must be for mentioning a food, and a store, that the people of Iowa would struggle to find. Additionally, McCain spokesman Brian Rogers sent an email to the press asking whether "A guy who worries about the price of arugula and thinks regular people 'cling' to guns and religion in the face of economic hardship really want to have a debate about who's in touch with regular Americans?" Later in the day Rogers expanded on this logic by arguing, "In terms of who's an elitist, I think people have made a



judgment that John McCain is not an arugula-eating, pointy-headed-professor type" (Achenbach, 2008). The joke was not short lived. Months later, as primary season gave way to the general election, McCain aides alluded to the mistake by ordering an arugula salad while eating with the traveling press. "Do you see how much they are charging for this?" a McCain aide asked a reporter at one such dinner with the press, while pointing to the menu and feigning shock (Thomas, 2008). However, although the McCain and Quayle teams' responses to their opponents' mistakes shared informative similarities, the media's response to the two food faux pas did not mirror each other in the same way.

In both the Dukakis and Obama context the offending candidate was framed by his opponent as an out of touch elitist, however only in the arugula case was that interpretation of the mistake adopted by the media as well. In their coverage of Dukakis' endive incident the media did not operate from the position that the mistake revealed anything particularly important about the candidate or his chances to be elected. Instead, the media focused on the Bush/Quayle team's assessment of Dukakis' mistake, principally that it evidenced both those problems. In this way, although they reported on the Republican narrative that the endive incident signaled a larger problem, journalists reporting on the endive moment did not adopt this view as their own.

Conversely, in their coverage of Obama's arugula mistake journalists not only reported on critical assessments made by the McCain camp but presented similar assertions through their own editorial voice. Indeed, the Obama's arugula incident was framed by the press as a mistake that provided insight into the candidate's authentic self

and which suggested the candidate would have a difficult time connecting with average Americans. And because the arugula incident was mapped onto previous examples of meaningful food faux pas, the consequence of the mistake were presented as self-evident. It is not surprising, therefore, that although both the endive and arugula moments were covered by the media, references to and articles about Obama's food faux pas dwarfed those about Dukakis<sup>23</sup>. In sum, media coverage of the arugula moment was more extensive and more serious than that of the endive incident as it took for granted that such a mistake could be real political news. This distinction is most clear when considering the way journalists' balance source quotes and their own editorial voice in their coverage of the two food faux pas.

The perceived value of Dukakis' endive gaffe did not extend beyond Republican campaign operatives to the political media. In fact, the political press covering the campaign did not treat the damage of the endive reference as irreparable, or even really important, despite the fact the Dukakis campaign was already contending with the perception that the candidate was a Massachusetts liberal. "The endive was a consistent trope for Quayle," Cathleen Decker of the *Los Angeles Times* explained (1988), however the same could not be said of the media. Instead, although Quayle hammered Dukakis on this point in venues ranging from stump events to the Vice Presidential debate, arguably the most public stage for the second on the ticket, media coverage of the faux pas was

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<sup>23</sup> in my analysis I drew from 20 articles that mentioned Obama's arugula comment and four that discussed Dukakis' endive suggestion. The number of articles mentioning "arugula" more than doubles if posts published on well-established political blogs are included.

relatively muted. And when the story was attended to by the press the relationship between the food faux pas and its political consequences was not presented by journalists as self-evident. Instead, the press largely relied on the voices of Quayle and his team to make claims, such as the notion that Mr. Dukakis was not "listening" to American farmers but instead was "talking down" to them (Ayres, 1988). Only one journalist made reference, in his own words, to the potential electoral consequences of the endive incident. In an opinion editorial Bernard Weinraub of *The New York Times* described the Quayle campaign's sense that the endive moment was a political winner in such a way as to suggest that he shared this belief:

J. Danforth Quayle was delighted. His advisers grinned. Let's go after Gov. Michael S. Dukakis with a new weapon, guaranteed to get on the evening news. Let's go after Dukakis with . . . A Belgian endive. When the laughter died down, the Republicans realized that they now had a ready-made issue in farm states to show that Mr. Dukakis was one of those Cambridge elitists who not only ate that stuff but knew little about the needs of farmers in the Midwest. (Besides, real men eat iceberg lettuce. Maybe romaine. Not Belgian endive.) (Weinraub, 1988)

Even in this case, however, Weinraub essentially cites the Quayle campaign; therefore the analysis, although it is a point that he seems to agree with, is clearly presented as the opinion of the Quayle campaign team. Weinraub does not contend, in his own language, that the endive reference was a mistake, or a mistake for which Dukakis might suffer consequences in the so-called "farm states."

Furthermore, it is clear that only the Bush/Quayle camp, and not the political press, viewed the endive mistake as a indicative of a deeper truth about the candidate. Specifically, through his criticism of Dukakis, Quayle made clear that part of the advantage to be gained derived from the fact that the endive moment revealed a deep, and

politically damaging, truth about Dukakis. This is apparent in Quayle's comment during the Vice Presidential Debate: "That's what... he and his Harvard buddies think of the American farmer," that the Republican ticket believed that the endive moment was indicative of Dukakis' true, elite self. However in none of the articles about the endive mistake did a journalist make, though his or her own language, such a claim. Instead, stories about the endive moment were fundamentally about Quayle's response to it. They were not concerned with what the mistake implied about Dukakis or the potential impact it might have on his chances, but with the way in which it became a "trope" for the Bush/Quayle team. To the journalists, therefore, the gaffe was a mistake because the Quayle team made it so, not because they agreed it was a moment of real political value.

Perhaps surprisingly, the one "news" source that took the clear editorial position that Dukakis' food faux pas would turn off some voters was *Saturday Night Live*. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1988, the late night sketch comedy show aired a skit mocking the Democratic Presidential debate. In his only lines in the debate Michael Dukakis, played by Jon Lovitz, was asked by the moderator whether he "Still [feels] that Belgian endive still is the answer to Iowa's economy?" Lovitz-as-Dukakis answered:

Each of us here tonight is asking for America's leadership and trust, allowing us to lead the country. And I don't think you can lead without a vision... and I have a vision for America. I see purple mountains of radicchio; I see wooden valleys of arugula; I see escarole from sea to shining... [timer sounds]... sea. I know I'm running out of time, so let me conclude that with direction, purpose, a little oil and vinegar, and maybe some feta cheese, there is nothing we cannot do. Thank you. (Saturday Night Live, 1988)

The writers' mention of arugula is oddly prescient, and the decision to define Dukakis's joke around his endive mistake is informative. As the clear editorial slant of this skit

demonstrates, the *Saturday Night Live* writers shared with the Bush/Quayle team a belief that the endive moment was an important and informative mistake. In this context, however, the disconnection suggested was not along the axis of average/elite but American/foreign. Specifically, the *SNL* skit calls attention to Dukakis' Greek heritage and highlights the way in which his reference to endive (like theoretical mentions of radicchio, arugula, and escarole) brings to the fore the candidate's non-Anglo heritage. In the context of the *Saturday Night Live* skit, therefore, both Dukakis and his endive suggestion are presented as truly absurd and absurdly out of touch.

In contrast to the media's coverage of Dukakis's endive incident, journalists who wrote about Barack Obama's mention of arugula took the editorial position that the mistake was both indicative of Obama's authentic self, as well as cause and evidence of his disconnect from average voters. More specifically, the media treated the mistake as evidence of Obama's true self, a self that, when contextualized within a divided America narrative, was at an electoral disadvantage. (In this sense, and not surprisingly, the treatment of the endive incident by Republican political elites foreshadowed the development of the divided America narrative and the food faux pas media trope.) Because the arugula mention mapped onto the divided America narrative in general and the food faux pas trope in particular, the consequences of it were treated by journalists as negative and self-evident. Consequently, the political press played an active role in shaping the arugula moment as a mistake that both provided insight into the candidate's true self and argued that the candidate, as a person and not a politician, was culturally at odds with much of the country.

The belief that the arugula moment was political relevant, and relevant in a way the endive incident was not, is apparent in the volume of articles written about the arugula moment. Looking only at the title of articles published in major world news sources the pervasiveness of the arugula story is clear: “The Aura Of Arugulance” (*The New York Times*, Dowd, 2008); “Grits with arugula?: Barack Obama wants to turn [North Carolina] Democratic. That will be harder than he thinks” (*The Economist*, Aug 14th 2008); “Salad Spinning: Today's Campaigns Pick a Side: Arugula vs. Iceberg Lettuce” (*Washington Post*, Achenbach, 2008); “Salad greens have been a big problem for Democrats” (*Washington Post*, Williams, 2010); “Obama and Wine-Track, Arugula” (*Chicago Tribune*, McCormick, 2007b); and “Fighting the Arugula Factor” (*Newsweek*, Romano, 2007). These articles illustrate the extent to which the arugula incident was a touchstone throughout the campaign. That such a small moment could serve a much larger narrative function was possible for two primary reasons: as a mistake it could be framed as revealing a nascent truth about the candidate, and therefore as a news peg it both mapped onto and reinforced the existing perception that Obama was an elitist.

The arugula incident became a story because it was understood as evidence of Obama’s authentic self. However, not all mistakes are viewed as providing such insight; Obama’s reference to the “57 states” was largely ignored because it wasn’t consistent with the public perception of the candidate. This is the case, Toby Harnden posits, because mistakes only “work in terms of being politically effective” if they “play into something that’s already a suspicion, or narrative that started there.” Consequently, for a mistake to be a mistake, and not simply a gaffe, it has to reinforce existing perceptions of

the erring candidate. Harnden spoke to exactly that distinction when he explained that there is “a sort of judgment made by reporters about when a mistake, quote mistake, means something.” As his distinct reference to the inherent framing of a “mistake” as a mistake demonstrates, there is nothing self-evident about what constitutes a mistake or what the implications of a mistake might be. In this way, the only candidate truths that are revealed through mistakes are those that reinforce existing perceptions. As Harnden put it, the arugula incident “pointed out a larger truth, or alleged truth, about the candidate,” because it pointed out a truth that was already there.

Indeed, there wasn't anything self-evident about Obama's mistaken reference to arugula—the lettuce was at the time served at both Olive Garden and Appleby's restaurants—however the press treated the impact of the off-hand mention as an unequivocal political blunder. Obama spoke to both those points when he argued that “Eating habits are changing” but that he had nonetheless been “teased” by journalists for mentioning arugula: “All the national press, they said, 'Oh, look at Obama. He's talking about arugula in Iowa.” On this point, he believed, the press was mistaken; “People in Iowa know what arugula is. They may not eat it, but you know what it is” (McCormick, 2007a). Obama was perhaps on to something; as Toby Harnden suggested, “You know like generals, political reporters, are always fighting the last campaign, and particularly the thing you sort of missed the last campaign.” Consequently media narratives produced by the press are necessarily lagging indicators. As Todd Purdum posited, “The popular mass media stereotypes on these issues probably lag the actual population in so many ways.”

However John McCormick sought, and subsequently found, anecdotal data that contradicted this notion generally and Obama's contention about arugula in particular. In my interview with McCormick, who wrote the original article about Obama's arugula incident, the journalist explained that Obama was a decidedly weaker candidate—"a little bit tone deaf"—during the 2007 Democratic primaries. Contrary to Obama's sense that the media were being unduly critical, McCormick explained that he asked a number of Iowans whether they were familiar with arugula: most answered that they were not. McCormick's survey is in no way generalizable and it likely says less about the American diet than do menus of the nation's most popular casual dining restaurants. Nonetheless, his impulse to treat the arugula moment as proof of Obama's accidental reversion to his "Whole Foods existence of Hyde Park in Chicago," as he put it in our interview, speaks to the extent to which the arugula moment was treated by the press as a fundamental truth about Obama because it coincided with an existing narrative.

Mistakes only become newsworthy, therefore, if they can function as news pegs within an existing narrative. As Reed Galen explained, "One of the main reasons why this stuff is outsize to its importance is because with all of the flow of information going on, these things do break down to points in time and the crystallizing moments." As evidenced by the number of references to the incident, the arugula incident functioned as such a crystallizing moment. And precisely because it spoke to something bigger, as Paul Farhi explains, "political reporters sort of heard that and said, 'Oh, that's interesting,'" and for that reason arugula "became this kind of mini-story... and it did get mentioned a fair bit and then got tracked." That tracking took the form of continuous references to



arugula in the context of discussions about Obama's supposed difficulties connecting to middle class voters.

Notably, in the mainstream press the arugula incident did not track with a narrative that questioned whether Obama's "exotic" background would be a campaign liability. This is surprising, as arugula can be framed not only as an expensive food but as a distinctly European food. In this way, the gravity of his blunder could have been exacerbated by the dichotomy between the (exotic) salad greens and corn-fed Iowans. It was exactly that cultural disconnect that underpinned the *Saturday Night Live* skit about Dukakis' reference to Belgian endive. And even more so than in Dukakis' context, the notion that Obama had elite, vaguely European tastes mapped onto a broader narrative about the candidate as someone who was not fully American. By making public his taste for food that serves as evidence of his otherness, Obama "[showed] his true colors that in many ways he isn't like the rest of us," Todd Purdum explains, which was problematic because "He is by his very nature an extraordinarily unusual president."<sup>24</sup> Despite this, however, few if any mainstream journalists gestured toward the issue of exoticism when addressing the potential consequences of the arugula moment. Instead, it was treated by the press as a touchstone that revealed Obama's "true colors" in a way that could easily be framed within the divide America narrative.

Indeed, the arugula incident served as such an effective news peg because the truth

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<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that Obama for America sold coffee mugs decorated with an image of the President's birth certificate. The mugs were hot sellers, and one is owned by the author of this dissertation.

it revealed could be framed as a liability within the divided America narrative. The framing of it within this narrative was due in large part to the extent to which the divided America frame has come to dominate political reporting. As Toby Harnden of the *Telegraph* UK explains that “The whole two Americas, and politicians relating to ordinary Americans, has become a bit of a staple of campaign reporting and perhaps kind of slightly overdone and created to some extent by the media.” As a result, he continues, “I think you could say that there's an element of slightly lazy journalism, or like painting by numbers journalism, where you have the sort of framework.” In that sense the divided America framework has become a journalistic convention in line with Tuchman’s notion of newsmaking because, Harnden explains, “You have the sort of story templates and sort of fill-in the facts to fit in the templates.” Or, as John McCormick of *Bloomberg* and *Newsweek* put it, “there's lot of groupthink, obviously.” In the case of presidential elections, Harnden surmises, the result of this typification is “endless stories about people connecting and people relating to ordinary people.” Consequently, narratives about candidates and their relative ability to connect to average Americans, which Harnden posits could flow from a campaign but likely predates campaign strategy, has created a “truism in politics” that the “regular guy, the person that can sort of relate to people the most, is the more successful candidate.” Because the arugula incident was offered as proof that Obama was not a regular guy, it was treated as an indication that the candidate would have a difficult time earning enough votes to win the election.

The clearest example of the media’s treatment of the arugula moment as a mistake that foretold electoral problems for the campaign was the cover of the May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008

issue of *Newsweek*. In it, “Obama’s Bubba Gap” is illustrated by the visual comparison between a pile of arugula to a pint of beer. Notably, this image was a visual depiction of the cover story, written by Evan Thomas, which only briefly mentioned Obama’s arugula incident. In our interview Thomas explained that while arugula was only a small part of his article, the cover image “directly got to the point.” This was because, as Toby Harnden explained, “In journalism you're always looking for something that's a detail that encapsulates something bigger. And you're also trying to communicate something that



*Newsweek's* “Obama’s Bubba Gap,” May 5, 2008 (Image VIII)

might be quite complicated in a simple way. And there's nothing that's more accessible than food.” In the case of the arugula incident, as is made clear in the Bubba Gap comparison, the bigger story was Obama’s perceived electoral liability in a culturally divided America. Indeed, as John McCormick explains, “Obama’s campaign advisers acknowledge that his polling was showing that he was having trouble connecting with

what are often known as white working class voters, Reagan Democrats they're sometimes called." From a visual and symbolic perspective, this point was illustrated by visually conflating arugula with beer track voters. As McCormick explained, the problem of Obama's "struggle to connect with working-class voters," was in his estimation and the estimation of the media more broadly, "a Page One story and a real issue." Consequently, as Toby Harnden notes, Obama's mention of arugula "was quite a mistake to make, actually... And *Newsweek* put it on the cover."

It's no surprise, therefore, that Evan Thomas faced considerable resistance from the campaign following the publication of the story. "The campaign hated it," he explained in our interview, "That arugula article was just particularly sensitive with the Obama campaign. Anything that made Obama seem like an elitist and alien to the working Joe's was trouble." For that reason, the Obama campaign feared, voters would see the arugula moment as a mistake that confirmed their suspicions about who Obama really was as a person,

And so Obama's campaign was *extremely* sensitive to this. As I recall they were furious at our arugula cover... They were angry, I know this because they kicked us off the plane and I had to go grovel, I had to fly around for three days, I had to go to Detroit with Obama basically so I could kiss the ring of the Press Secretary, basically had to kiss Gibbs' ass and apologize. I mean, it was sort of a bogus exercise; I had to go grovel to him to let me back on the plane. It was important to me because you're doing his campaign narratives... *Newsweek* needed access to the Obama campaign for this project and they cut it off, so I had to go out there and grovel to Gibbs, but it was a useful insight into how anxious they are about this.

The arugula incident became a story, therefore, because it was already a story; a story about both Obama's inability to connect to average voters and how his tastes in food only

proved that point. “The only reason that it took on any life at all—because it’s pointless, meaningless—was because people were looking for reason to paint Obama as an elitist and this fit into that,” Thomas argued. In this way a signal was created from the noise, and an offhand mention of arugula was viewed as “quite a mistake to make” precisely because it provided evidence about Obama’s true self in a way that played into the divided America narrative.

Because of their larger fear about his perceived problems connecting to middle class voters, Obama’s strategy team made clear and unambiguous efforts to build a narrative that their candidate, or at least their ticket, understood the needs of average



Joe Biden as a literal Cup of Joe and Joe Sixpack, from the Obama for America online store  
(Image IX)

Americans. “The reason why they picked Joe Biden as their vice presidential candidate,” Thomas explains, “was very explicitly and openly to go after the six-pack vote, to get a working man, a working Joe, who could relate to the common man in key industrial states.” Additionally, Obama surrogates who spoke on behalf of the candidate attempted

to prove the candidate was more cheeseburger than garden salad.

This attempt to sway the media narrative continued past his election in 2008 as the team looked forward to 2012. During an exchange with the White House Press Corps about the results of President Obama's annual physical, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, who two years earlier had kicked the *Newsweek* reporters off the campaign plane, tried to convince those in the room that the President was not the arugula-eater they all believed him to be:

ROBERT GIBBS: You guys think he eats carrots and celery. There's more cheeseburgers, fries and pie than you previously knew.

Q: And that's the point -- are there going to be more fruits and vegetables in his diet? The LDL -- are there going to be more almonds in his diet?

ROBERT GIBBS: This is funny. I love this. You guys thought he, like –

Q: But it's real, it's a real issue, it's a real issue. This is the President of the United States.

ROBERT GIBBS: You guys thought he, like, carried arugula in his pocket to snack on. (Gibbs, 2010)

Gibbs' comment that Obama eats more meats and sweets than the press believed was less a comment about the President's diet than who the President is as a person. This is because Gibbs knows that political figures can be framed as simply the aggregate of their observed tastes and behaviors. This conflation of taste with self, however, is not simply a matter of culture; it is also the consequence of the naturalization of a broader political strategy, called microtargeting, that organizes Americans exclusively through their

consumer tastes and practices<sup>25</sup>.

### **You Vote How You Eat: The Naturalization of Microtargeting**

The connections journalists outlined between food tastes and voting preferences is not only presented as symbolic; instead, much of the media's discourse about the 2008 gaffe-turned-mistake was based on the idea that microtargeting, a form of analysis developed by Republican political strategists, could accurately categorize voters according to their consumer behavior. As a result, many of the arugula-as-elitist narratives were mediated by the naturalizing of microtargeting as analytic and cultural gospel.

Microtargeting describes the use of voter databases that contain demographic information, previous voting habits, and purchase data from credit card companies to target those voters a campaign most wants on their side. The technique rose to prominence during the 2004 presidential election when it was employed by Bush strategists to great success (Sosnik, Dowd & Fournier, 2006). Microtargeting works, Reed Galen explains because,

You take a voter, where they live, how their registered, their voter history, which is how many times they voted in the last four elections, one, two, three, or four. Three or four is a high propensity voter, there is a very good chance they're going to show up. Then you overlay the consumer data that you can find about them. And so Barack Obama lives in Chicago, Illinois, he enjoys Chardonnay and arugula, you

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<sup>25</sup> The data used by the Obama polling team in 2008 was considerably less advanced than that which they used in 2012. 2008 data relied largely on credit card information, data that was supplemented four years later with television viewer data (from Joel Benenson at the Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2012 election debriefing)

can almost guarantee that he's a Democrat.

These data are offered as proof that Americans vote how they eat. As Matthew Dowd, one of the architects of microtargeting, explained to *The New York Times*, “Anything organic or more Whole Foods-y skews more Democratic,” and “When it comes to fried chicken... Democrats prefer Popeye’s and Republicans Chick-fil-A<sup>26</sup>” (Severson, 2008). Similarly, Republican Mark Penn was quoted in the same article as positing that Obama “has more of the arugula vote” than Hillary Clinton, since Clinton’s supporters “do a lot more cooking at home and a lot less eating out at expensive restaurants” (Severson, 2008). Although Dowd and Penn’s quotes are the products of their particular political investments, the treatment by journalists of their foundational arguments as fact is consistent across coverage of Obama’s arugula gaffe. Indeed, although scholars that argue against the political polarization hypothesis believe that individual socio-cultural characteristics are not direct indicators of political polarization (Edsall, 2003; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), this view is rarely reflected in media coverage.

Food tastes are offered by the press as synecdoche of demographic groups, groups that are both defined and identified by what they like to eat. The most popular examples of this rhetorical device are references to “Joe Sixpack” and “latte liberal,” however the use of food tastes as evidence of voting patterns expands beyond those two terms. In his discussion of wine track and beer track voters in *Newsweek*, Evan Thomas explained that the McCain campaign, following Hillary Clinton’s lead, perceived an “opportunity to

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Dowd made this comment four years before the public outcry over anti-gay statements made by Chick-fil-A’s CEO Dan Cathy.



paint Obama as an out-of-touch elitist, a Harvard toff who nibbles daintily at designer salads while the working man, worried about layoffs at the plant, belts another shot” (Thomas, 2008). Articles also describe the working class Joes that Obama struggles to reach as those defined by their taste for cheesesteaks (Murphy, 2008) and barbeque (Shahin, 2011). In these contexts, voting blocs are created from a demographics’ perceived taste in food.

That is not to say, however, that the media lacks reflexivity regarding the conflation of consumer habits and vote choice. In fact, just as stories about the role of food in presidential campaigns have become a cottage industry in political reporting, so too have journalists taken to reflecting about the practice by which voters are reduced to what they eat. Kim Severson of *The New York Times*, for example, noted that “the arugula controversy raises an obvious question: When did arugula become the undisputed symbol of elitist food—what you might call the anti-cabbage? And what about the other lettuces? Can a politician seeking to connect with ordinary people safely eat anything other than iceberg?” (2008). Joel Achenbach of the *Washington Post* echoed this question: “We all know, intuitively, that kale is on the elitist side of the elitist-vulgarian divide, but what about romaine?” (2008). *The American Prospect*'s Ezra Klein had a similar query, when he wondered, “When did arugula become the new latte?” (2008). Jason Zengerle helpfully answered in *The New Republic*: “Arugula became the new latte because the word arugula passed Obama's lips (in combination with the dreaded words ‘Whole Foods’)” (2008).

This conversation in print reflects the extent to which coverage of presidential campaigns are organized and fought, to such a large extent, around small moments. It is because food tastes have been naturalized as identifiers of cultural context and voting disposition that arugula can serve both as a totem of elitism and evidence of Obama's disconnection from the broad voting public. The conversation is also suggestive of the degree to which this entrenched symbolism extends beyond the latte liberal versus Joe Sixpack categorization, as it alludes to other differences in everyday habits according to which the two Americas are divided. As Achenbach points out, one of the reasons the arugula moment was so powerful is because, "For years, the beef industry has promoted the notion of beef as 'Real Food for Real People.' Whereas arugula doesn't even sound like food at all" (2008). It is not only the case that arugula is the antithesis to iceberg, but that the salad green calls attention to the distinction between healthy and unhealthy diets.

### **You Don't Win Friends with Salad<sup>27</sup>: Healthy Eating as a Campaign Liability**

Underlying the treatment of Obama's arugula moment was not simply the naturalizing of microtargeting as proof that the candidate was different than average voters but the contention that his specifically healthy diet alienated him from everyday American experience. Discourse about a candidate's health and the potential for such habits to have a negative effect on vote choice is a new phenomenon. It wasn't present in any of the commentary, from either politicians or journalists, following Dukakis' endive moment.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Simpsons*, "Lisa the Vegetarian," 1995.

In fact, the most persistent health related trope of recent elections addressed Bill Clinton's notoriously unhealthy eating. But along with analysis of the implications and impact of the arugula moment, the 2008 election initiated a broader discourse that addressed the candidate's status as a healthful eater. As a result, a push-and-pull developed between the media and the Obama campaign, as both sides attempted to control the candidate's health narrative. This occasionally adversarial dynamic, however, was based in a shared sense that the public perception of a healthy diet would serve as further evidence of Obama's disconnection from average voters. In that way the oppositional narratives offered by the media and Obama campaign were rooted in a common point of departure: that the majority of Americans were not healthy eaters and, for that reason, healthy eating could be framed as a source of estrangement from them. For this reason, Achenbach argues that while Obama's "arugula issue echoes what has become known as the beer-wine divide, also known as the Dunkin' Donuts-Starbucks divide," his lettuce problem could more precisely be described as the "meat-vegetable divide" (Achenbach, 2008).

Obama and his staff worked to combat the perception that the candidate was a healthy eater in large part because the connotations of such a diet were at odds with the persona the campaign was trying to present. The idea of healthy eating, as part of a broader healthy lifestyle, is imbued with notions of restriction and restraint; a healthy president, therefore, shares more of the qualities with a nagging mother than a commander in chief. This is the case because health food is widely perceived as feminine while high-fat food

is considered masculine (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Vartanian et al, 2006). The gendered aspects of healthy food are further exacerbated in the arugula context, as the conflation of elite tastes with European tastes is a common rhetorical parr. Thus candidates who are associated with elite European-sounding foods are doubly implicated as weak in a system in which masculinity and virility are of paramount importance. This point was highlighted by Marion Burros of *The New York Times*, who commented in our interview that “People who eat salads are either gay or elitist. I mean, that's the picture we have... And we have taken that, as it were, as a gospel. And people at diners don't order salads. The guy wearing the lumber jacket is going to be ordering hamburger.” Burros’ description of this framing of salad-eaters as “taken as gospel” speaks directly the naturalization of the health narrative that makes relevant whether Obama had healthy tastes. Instead of challenging the notion that there is a self-evident pitfall to being perceived as a healthy candidate, Obama and the press operated within a sociological framework in which being seen as healthy was necessarily a strike against a presidential candidate.

Just as the Obama campaign tried to reroute the narrative by which the candidate’s taste in food rendered him culturally disconnected from the “other America,” so too did they work within the health narrative to create the impression that the obviously healthy candidate was not as abstemious as voters (or the press) might think. Specifically, the Obama team used food and eating to frame their candidate as someone who shared American’s love for unhealthy food. To that end Obama made numerous mentions not only of his taste for diner food, but to his preference for food that was anything but

healthy. At a campaign stop at a diner in Lebanon, Missouri, for example, the candidate announced to the crowd, “The healthy people, we’ll give them the breasts. I’ll eat the wings” (Powell, 2008). Similarly, he remarked during a stop in Indiana that he had been “losing weight on this campaign,” and for that reason hoped he would get to enjoy biscuits and gravy. A “brick layer type” expressed some skepticism about this request, which the candidate addressed with his claim “Hey, I’m trying to fatten up, right?” (Mills, 2008).<sup>28</sup> Obama also made direct attempts to rectify his healthy eating with his masculinity—“Listen, I’m skinny but I’m tough” (Chozick, 2008). These comments, like those made by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs about Obama’s snack choices, were clear attempts to steer the media away from a story about a candidate who had an atypical concern for food and health. The McCain campaign, however, did their best to perpetuate exactly that narrative<sup>29</sup>.

McCain’s strategist and communications team members worked to reinforce the perception that Obama was a not an authentic biscuits and gravy kind of guy, and they used the available ammunition to prove it. As Evan Thomas explained, all presidential campaigns engage in “oppo,” or opposition research, on their opponent. As image and

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<sup>28</sup> While Obama tried to connect with voters over his efforts to gain weight, his primary opponent Hillary Clinton received a largely positive response to her admission that she has prayed, “Oh Lord, why can’t you help me lose weight?” (Healy and Luo, 2007), a sentiment the media assumed would improve her chances because it was shared by so many Americans.

<sup>29</sup> Republican attacks on Obama for preferring health, foreign-sounding foods did not end with the 2008 election. During a speech in Congress about energy policy, Republican Utah Senator Orrin Hatch made the point that, “President Obama has traded in the hard hat and lunch bucket category of the Democratic Party for the hipster fedora and a double skim latte” (Vamburkar, 2012)

tastes are central to election media coverage, oppo extends to eating and drinking habits. It was through this work that the McCain team became aware of some of Obama's lesser known health habits and made them public. Prior to the release of "Celeb," arguably the most famous television spot of the 2008 election, McCain's campaign manager Rick Davis released a memo explaining why comparing Obama to a celebrity was an apt analogy. In the memo Davis outlined that the comparison of Senator Obama to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears was appropriate because "Only celebrities like Barack Obama go to the gym three times a day, demand 'MET-RX chocolate roasted-peanut protein bars and bottles of a hard-to-find organic brew—Black Forest Berry Honest Tea' and worry about the price of arugula" (Heilemann, 2008). Obama, that is, is not an average American, nor is he even a politician, but a celebrity with a celebrity's diet. Additionally, the McCain camp's decision to hit Obama on his elite tastes was, in part, an effort to inoculate their candidate against attacks that his household wealth rendered him the election's elite candidate. Presidential campaigns, John McCormick pointed out, "Try to conceal their own weaknesses and exploit the opposition," which in the case of the McCain campaign meant focusing on Obama's perceived cultural capital to deflect from McCain's economic capital.

The McCain campaign did not have to work hard to prove Obama's health credentials, as the candidate's healthy habits were treated as an accepted fact throughout the campaign. Part of the reason why Obama was unable to shake this impression was because it was a truth observed by the traveling press corps. As John McCormick explained, "I mean Obama is a health freak, you know I've been on planes with him

where he's had nothing but fish and rice and vegetables. The guy's an extremely healthy eater, so I think most reporters know [his diner diet] is primarily being done for the cameras." Todd Purdum echoed this sentiment, as he described Obama as a "person of unusually healthy, or even abstemious, habits." These habits, which the media witnessed first-hand, played a significant role in the formation of the dominant media narrative.

In this coverage of Obama's eating habits, the media clearly identified the candidate both as healthy and a politician made vulnerable by his overtly healthy diet. Mike Murphy of the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, offered that Obama would "rather hit the executive gym for a cardio workout during lunch hour than share a cheesesteak and beer with the hourly workforce" (2008). Similarly Maureen Dowd explained that the candidate "dutifully logged time at diners and force-fed himself waffles, pancakes, sausage and a Philly cheese steak. He split the pancakes with Michelle, left some of the waffle and sausage behind, and gave away the French fries that came with the cheese steak. But this is clearly a man who can't wait to get back to his organic scrambled egg whites" (Dowd, 2008).<sup>30</sup> For the most part, however, the story was not whether Obama was healthy—that issue was resolved empirically by journalists on the campaign beat—but whether his focus on health would be a detriment. In their coverage of the campaign, the political press assumed the candidate's health, like his ostensibly unusual and elite tastes, would hurt his chances with average voters.

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<sup>30</sup> Toby Harnden explained that the necessity to maintain the diner politics image can "enrage" candidates, however acting on that frustration "is absolutely the last thing you want to show."

Journalists wondered aloud about whether Obama's health would alienate him from voters, thus proving to be a competitive disadvantage. The point of departure for this line of assessment was the assumption that, as Chris Cillizza of the *Washington Post* put it, "A candidate's willingness to eat a fried Snickers bar... says more about a campaign's chances of winning than a pile of worthy position papers" (2006). Todd Purdum suggested it might, and for that reason Obama should "loosen up a little bit, eat a few donuts and hot dogs and not worry about his diet" because while "it may sound trivial... that kind of stuff is stylistically important" (*Race for the White House with David Gregory*, 2008). Conversely, Obama's healthy eating was not good politicking. Amy Chozick of the *Wall Street Journal* queried whether Obama was, as the title of her article suggested, "Too Fit to be President?". Specifically, she posed question:

But in a nation in which 66% of the voting-age population is overweight and 32% is obese, could Sen. Obama's skinniness be a liability? Despite his visits to waffle houses, ice-cream parlors and greasy-spoon diners around the country, his slim physique just might have some Americans wondering whether he is truly like them. (2008)<sup>31</sup>

Jeff Zeleny of *The New York Times* offered insight into the Obama campaign's answer to this question. Specifically, he contended that "Whenever questions of his ordinary-man

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<sup>31</sup> There is, however, a limit to the nation's appetite for unhealthy politicians. While the 27th President William Taft tipped the scales at 300 pounds, no serious recent presidential candidate who could be described (according to the semi-scientific assessments currently employed) as obese has escaped questions about his weight. Former contenders New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson and Mike Huckabee were frequently questioned about their weight, and debates about whether Chris Christie's size essentially disqualified him from the presidency persisted long past his assertion that he wouldn't run for national office in 2012. However the fundamental question of whether he was too overweight to win was typically answered in the affirmative by those who asserted, like *Bloomberg* columnist Michael Kinsey, that he "Cannot be president: He is just too fat" (2011).



credentials arose, his aides were quick to say that Mr. Obama loved a good burger. As he worked to win over male voters, he would suddenly have a stop at a beer joint on his itinerary” (2010). This back and forth between the media narrative of Obama as a healthy eater, and the Obama campaign’s (and later administration’s) attempt to counter the healthy narrative, persisted throughout the election and into the President’s first term. However, because the 2012 general election was fought between two “health nuts,” the question of Obama’s diet largely fell by the wayside once Romney was elected to the Republican ticket.

Just as the press treated Obama’s healthy lifestyle as an empirical truth that could have electoral implications, so too did the journalists covering the 2008 Republican primary contend that Mitt Romney’s healthy diet might be a campaign liability. And like Obama and his campaign team, the Romney camp engaged in a proactive effort to rebrand their candidate as having tastes that more closely alighted with those of average Americans than the media narrative suggested. However, as was the case for Obama, this rebranding effort largely failed.

During the 2008 Republican primary the traveling press corps was informed by the Romney campaign that the candidate would be eating lunch at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. This was a surprise, so much so that the media coverage of the photo opportunity was framed as the campaign’s failed attempt to present the candidate as having accessible food tastes. Journalists from *CBS News* covering the lunch stop remarked that Romney was a “health nut who jogs a few times a week and looks

incredibly fit for a 60-year-old man” and framed the meal, in which Romney removed the skin of his fried chicken, as a story about “Romney Almost [Making] KFC Healthy” (Conroy, 2008). Shortly thereafter, a reporter from *CBS News* asked Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who famously lost 110 pounds after being diagnosed with diabetes, for his response to Romney’s approach to eating fried chicken. Huckabee saw the hook and played along, noting that he was “glad to hear that [Romney] did that because that means I'm going to win Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma—all these great Southern states that understand that the best part of fried chicken is the skin,” Huckabee explained. Huckabee’s victory was assured because, “Any Southerner knows... if you're not gonna eat the skin, don't bother with calling it fried chicken” (Lin, 2008). Romney lost the 2008 primary; not surprisingly, however, the narrative that he was a man of extraordinarily healthy habits, spurred by the press and his Republican opponents, was revisited during Republican primary four years later.

The narrative of Romney’s healthful diet re-emerged in 2012 as there was renewed interest in his particularly abstemious diet. The Romney campaign did their best to fight this narrative. In addition to eating a pork chop on a stick at the Iowa State Fair in 2011, Romney frequently posted information about his unhealthy diet on Twitter. Such updates included a thank you to Subway for breakfast, along with a tweet describing the jalapeño chicken sandwich at Carl’s Jr.’s “delicious” and a picture of the candidate eating a corn dog at the Iowa State Fair (@MittRomney, 2011 a, b). However, as was the case for Obama in 2008, these efforts were unsuccessful.

Journalists' knowledge of Romney's healthy diet made it impossible for the campaign's narrative to stick. Instead of attending to candidates' efforts to look like an all-American eater, journalists covering the campaign focused on his healthful nature. An eBook about the election by journalists Mike Allen and Evan Thomas described the candidate as "A dutiful jogger... [who] runs three miles every morning, on jogging trails, on a treadmill in the gym, even around and around the hotel (often a Marriott), if there's no place else to go" and a health-conscious eater who, "If he has a slice of pizza, he pulls the cheese off the top. Usually, Romney dines on turkey breast, rice, and broccoli, chased by water or maybe a Diet Coke. In South Carolina, for a big treat, he might visit a Bojangles for the fried chicken. Romney relished KFC, but pulled off the skin" (2011). To some extent, the media's interest in Romney's eating habits revolved around the impact of his Mormon faith on his diet. For example, voters learned during the campaign that Romney abstains from caffeine but enjoys caffeine-free Wild Cherry Diet Pepsi and coffee ice cream (Rucker, 2012; Camia, 2012). In this way, Romney's Mormon dietary restrictions resulted in an even more virtuous diet, only adding to the narrative about Romney's dedication to health.

However, despite previous interest in Obama and Romney's diets, the relative value of healthy eating was put to the test in the 2012 general election, as the contest pitted the two healthy eaters against each other. And because Obama and Romney were known by the press to be unusually healthy eaters it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to set one against the other on this issue. Consequently, interest in Romney's diet that was generated during the primary ceased almost entirely after his selection, and there was

little renewed interest in Obama's diet. In sum, very little attention was paid to the diet of either candidate during the general election.

The presence of both Obama and Romney on the presidential ballot, therefore, neutralized the narrative about the relative electoral impact of the candidates' healthful habits. For the narrative of cultural divisiveness to be available to the media there needs to be a wedge. This was the case during the 2008 election despite the fact that there wasn't a serious effort by the McCain camp to present the Republican candidate as a particularly down-home eater. There was, however, a strong effort by the campaign staff to activate the Obama/arugula narrative. Conversely, in 2012 both candidates made attempts at disproving public perceptions about their tastes in food, and while journalists covering the campaigns made some mentions of these attempts, there was not, as there had been in the previous election, a strong narrative suggesting that healthy diets would affect vote choice. In fact, there was little discussion about the candidates' diets at all. In effect, the presence of two healthy candidates on the ballot made it impossible for the media to set the candidates against each other on the grounds of their diets and commitment to fitness or to talk about food tastes more broadly. This suggests both that a candidate needs only a food-neutral opponent for his or her healthy eating habit to be problematic, and that the press will ignore the potential electoral impact of healthy eating if those tastes are shared by both candidates. When food's symbolism can't be framed as a site of conflict it is not mobilized by either the candidates or the political press.

### **Do What I Say, Not What I Eat: Healthy Eating as Legislative Policy**

As such, within the election context a candidate's healthy eating habits are frequently framed as an electoral liability for the same reason his or her elite tastes are; because, within the divided America context, one's authentic food tastes can be framed as both symptom and cause of a disconnect from a broad slice of the voting public. To inoculate their candidate from an attack along those lines campaigns engage in diner politics in an effort to present the impression that their candidate shares the tastes of average American voters. Additionally, however, campaigns rhetorically package mistakes made by their opponent as evidence of the erring candidate's fundamental estrangement from those same regular voters. These efforts to present an unflattering public image of an opponent, when mapped onto the divided America narrative in general and the food faux pas trope in particular, are presented by the media as having both negative and self-evident consequences.

This is because, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the understanding of the food faux pas as a political mistake is a consequence of two factors: the increased focus on candidates' authentic selves and the emergence of the divided America narrative. Extant research on the role of candidate authenticity speaks to efforts by campaigns to cultivate a desirable "authentic" persona (cf. Weaver et al., 2008), as well as attempts by the media to see past such maneuverings in an effort to describe the "real" candidate (Jamieson and Waldman, 2004). Although the tension between these two forces is addressed in the relevant literature, little attention is devoted to the

impermanence of authenticity as it is understood by both campaigns and the press. In a contribution to the relevant literature, this chapter demonstrates the extent to which the notion of an authentic self, or more specifically the qualities on which the “true self” is constructed, is largely determined by prevailing media narratives. As the comparison between the arugula and endive case studies illustrates, it is only since the emergence of the divided America narrative that food gaffes have been treated by the media as meaningful political mistakes; in 1988, only Republican elites believed that food tastes informed assessments of who a candidate was as a person. Prior to the emergence of this narrative, that is, food tastes were not treated by journalists as providing relevant information about a candidate’s authentic self. To some extent, the changing notion of authenticity is a product of the media’s agenda setting function and its related capacity to determine what evaluative criteria are applied to a candidate or election. It is also, however, an illustration of the extent to which the notion of what it means to vet candidates, a central responsibility of political reporting, is steered by *a priori* and prevailing media narratives.

The malleability of authenticity is evident in the media’s recent treatment of healthy diets as political mistakes. Since the notion of elitism is not simply understood as that which is expensive but as that which operates as a cultural distance from Main Street America, the types of food gaffes that can be framed as revelatory are not limited to those, like Belgian endive and arugula, that are easily understood as fancy or foreign; instead, as evidenced by the Obama and Romney examples, candidates running against an opponent with a seemingly traditional American diet are typically framed as having

elite tastes because they have healthy tastes. The healthfulness of a candidate's diet—and what it says about that candidate as a person—becomes a political concern in only those contexts in which health can be framed as an electoral liability. The relationship, however, between media narratives and notions of authenticity is not unidirectional; the divided America narrative, for example, is much less compelling if food tastes are not believed to tell voters about who the candidate is as a person. Consequently, this chapter demonstrates that despite the sense that notions of authenticity operate free from media trends, it is clearly the case that the qualities that define a candidate's true self are largely defined by the dominant media narratives of the day.

Looking forward, however, although this chapter argues for the ways in which food tastes serve a symbolic value for political candidates it does not address whether the same is true once a political figure is elected. This begs the question, are a politician's beliefs about food, when operationalized in a legislative context, mobilized by allies and opponents in the same way as they are on the campaign trail? When considering not what a politician eats but what he or she thinks others should eat, it is possible to consider whether the symbolic value of food extends beyond campaigns and into a legislative context. However, although in the electoral context the focus on food's symbolic value was largely driven by political elites, it is not the case that legislators put much value in food's cultural value when considering legislation by which its consumption would be regulated.

## CHAPTER 4: SOMEONE CALL THE FOOD POLICE!



“How Broccoli Ended Up on the Supreme Court Menu,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2012  
(Image X)

### Introduction

During Elena Kagan’s Supreme Court confirmation hearings in June 2010, Senator Tom Coburn, a Republican from Arkansas, questioned the nominee about her stance regarding the constitutionality of health care reform. Expressing concern about the so-called individual mandate, a proposal that would require all Americans to purchase health care, the Senator pressed Kagan on the possibility that such a law would open the door to increased government intervention in individuals’ personal lives. To assess the nominee’s opinion on this issue, Coburn presented the following scenario: “If I wanted to sponsor a bill and it said ‘Americans, you have to eat three vegetables and three fruits



every day,’ and I got it through Congress and that’s now the law of the land, got to do it, does that violate the Commerce Clause?” Kagan responded that the situation “sounds like a dumb law,” so the Senator clarified his concern, “I guess the question I’m asking you is, do we have the power to tell people what they have to eat every day?” (Gerstein, 2010).

It was the contention of many who opposed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that the legislation would permit, or even require, the federal government to influence the diet of Americans through the regulation of food. The framing of the health care debate around the potential impact it would have on food regulations was first suggested by members of the online conservative media. On October 21, 2009, Terence Jeffrey, Editor-in-Chief of the Internet publication CNS News (formerly Conservative News Service), published a story in which he queried, “Can President Barack Obama and Congress enact legislation that orders Americans to buy broccoli?” (Stewart, 2012). The broccoli question was not limited to online commentary, however, and it entered mainstream discussion about the Affordable Care Act when the *Wall Street Journal* published an opinion editorial that referred to the legislation’s potential “broccoli mandate” (Rivkin and Casey, 2012). The authors of that op-ed posed a question that was not, for them, merely academic; Rivkin and Casey had, the previous year, represented the State of Florida in its victory against the Justice Department and the Affordable Care Act. (The Justice Department’s appeal of the Florida decision was ultimately heard by the Supreme Court.) During the Eleventh Circuit hearing in northern Florida District Judge Roger Vinson asked the State’s attorneys, “If [the federal government] decided that

everybody needs to eat broccoli because broccoli is healthy, can they mandate that everybody has to buy a certain quantity of broccoli each week?”, a supposition that Rivkin responded was “entirely apropos” (Stewart, 2012). Despite an assertion from a Justice Department attorney that “this case is about the purchase of a very particular product, and it is not shoes, it is not cars, it is not broccoli,” the district court ruled the Affordable Care Act unconstitutional in part because it would allow “Congress [to] require that people buy and consume broccoli at regular intervals, not only because the required purchases will positively impact interstate commerce, but also because people who eat healthier tend to be healthier, and are thus more productive and put less of a strain on the health care system” (Ibid).

Arguments on the Florida appeal began in the Supreme Court on March 26, 2012. In total, broccoli was mentioned nine times over the three days and was the central component of the hearing’s most quoted debate. In what *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman referred to as the “already famous exchange” between Justice Scalia and Solicitor General Donald Verrilli, Scalia wondered, “Could you define the market—everybody has to buy food sooner or later—so you define the market as food, therefore, everybody is in the market; therefore, you can make people buy broccoli.”<sup>32</sup> (2012) Verrilli responded that health care was not broccoli, and that the federal government

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<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, many of the news sources that reported on debates about the broccoli mandate referenced President George H. W. Bush’s similarly famous battle cry “I do not like broccoli. I haven’t liked it since I was a little kid and my mother made me eat it. And I’m President of the United States, and I’m not going to eat any more broccoli!” (Dowd, 1990).

could not require that Americans purchase healthy food (Vicini, 2012). The constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act was upheld, however only four justices agreed with Verrilli's assertion that the broccoli mandate was not a concern.

Both the Court's majority and dissenting opinions discussed the legislation's constitutionality vis-à-vis the broccoli question. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts rejected the idea that the commerce clause, which empowers Congress to regulate interstate commerce, rendered the individual mandate constitutional, arguing instead that the government has the right to lay and collect taxes, which can take the form of health insurance coverage. This is because, Roberts argued, the federal government has the authority to regulate commerce however it does not have the power to compel it. Consequently, supporting the individual mandate on the grounds of the commerce clause would set a precedent by which Congress could enact legislation requiring that Americans purchase broccoli. This is the case because, the Chief Justice contends,

The Government argues that the individual mandate can be sustained as a sort of exception to this rule, because health insurance is a unique product. According to the Government, upholding the individual mandate would not justify mandatory purchases of items such as cars or broccoli because, as the Government puts it, "[h]ealth insurance is not purchased for its own sake like a car or broccoli; it is a means of financing health-care consumption and covering universal risks"... But cars and broccoli are no more purchased for their "own sake" than health insurance. They are purchased to cover the need for transportation and food. (National Federation of Independent Businesses v. Sebelius, 2012, p. 27)

This position allowed Chief Justice Roberts to uphold the individual mandate while simultaneously protecting Americans from, he feared, legislation requiring the purchase of vegetables. Such a possibility, however, was not considered reasonable to the other

Justices in the majority.

In her concurrence/dissent, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg responded to Roberts' position by arguing that the government could indeed support the individual mandate under the commerce clause without risking what she termed "the broccoli horrible." Writing on behalf of Justices Sotomayor, Kagan, and Breyer, Ginsburg argues that the "broccoli horrible," or Roberts' fear of a "Government mandate to purchase green vegetables," was not a reasonable concern. Instead, she asks that the Chief Justice,

Consider the chain of inferences the Court would have to accept to conclude that a vegetable-purchase mandate was likely to have a substantial effect on the health-care costs borne by lithe Americans. The Court would have to believe that individuals forced to buy vegetables would then eat them (instead of throwing or giving them away), would prepare the vegetables in a healthy way (steamed or raw, not deep-fried), would cut back on unhealthy foods, and would not allow other factors (such as lack of exercise or little sleep) to trump the improved diet. (National Federation of Independent Businesses v. Sebelius, 2012, p. 29)

Consequently, the Chief Justice's logic—that the "commerce power, hypothetically, would enable Congress to prohibit the purchase and home production of all meat, fish, and dairy goods, effectively compelling Americans to eat only vegetables"—is not sound. And it does not make sense, the four Justices believed, to offer the "hypothetical and unreal possibilit[y]... of a vegetarian state" as a credible reason to "deny Congress the authority ever to ban the possession and sale of goods" (National Federation of Independent Businesses v. Sebelius, 2012, p. 30).

Since the media and Court watchers were primarily interested in the Justices' findings on the issue of the individual mandate, the broccoli story became one of the

primary frames through which the Court's decision was filtered. As Adam Gopkin of the *New Yorker* observes,

One of the really startling things about today's decision on the Affordable Care Act is that the whole broccoli issue, which one might have thought beneath the dignity of the Court, was not only raised in the various rulings and dissents but tossed around, argued back and forth, and made more or less central to the whole thing. (Gopkin, 2012)

Indeed, broccoli was a star of the show, and was treated as such by the media. The following is a sample of articles published in major news sources following the decision: *Wall Street Journal*, "How Broccoli Became the Star of the Health-Care Debate," (Phipps, 2012); *Bloomberg*, "Bush's Despised Broccoli Gets 'Respect' in Health-Care Arguments," (Bjerga, 2012); *The New Yorker*, "The Broccoli Horrible": A Culinary-Legal Supreme Court Dissent," (Gopkin, 2012); *Daily Beast/Newsweek*, "Live-Blogging SCOTUS' ACA Ruling: Broccoli Wins!," (Sullivan, 2012); and *Business Insider*, "Three Supreme Court Justices Used Broccoli As An Argument Against Obamacare" (LoGiurato, 2012).

The role of "broccoli horrible" in the debate about, and coverage of, the Affordable Care Act, informs the broader phenomenon addressed in this chapter. As a case study, arguments about the ACA suggest that Americans experience a high-level of anxiety when faced with potential dietary restrictions, anxiety that is experienced by legislators, judges, and conservative pundits as well. Media coverage of the Affordable Care Act made visible that anxiety, as well as the ways in which the issue of food regulation plays into Culture War narratives about elite authority, health, and the

American diet. This narrative—and the fear that the individual mandate could lead to a vegetarian mandate—suggests that food’s symbolic relevance is mobilized not only in the context of presidential campaigns but also in the context of legislative debates about food and health. The correspondence between campaign and legislative understandings of food, however, is not as consistent as discussions about the broccoli question suggest.

That food is mobilized as a form of political communication during campaigns does not require that it has the same cultural and symbolic value to political figures once they are elected. Nor does it demand that food, even food with strong symbolic entailments, be treated as symbolically relevant once it shifts from campaign to legislative fodder. Were this the case, during legislative debates about food regulation the qualities of regular and elite citizens would be defined not by what a politician eats but by what he or she thinks others should eat. This equivalence, however, does not always extend to the political exigencies that define legislative governance. Instead, legislators are far less concerned than presidential candidates with the symbolic entailments of food. As a result, journalists reporting on food regulation legislation focus primarily on the pragmatic issues associated with passing any kind of regulatory policy, not issues that pertain specifically to the regulation food. There are, however, exceptions; in some news coverage regulatory proposals are framed, at least to some extent, according to the “food police” narrative. The food police narrative holds that liberals and elitists, groups who privilege healthy eating above American culinary culture and personal autonomy, use legislation and government interference as a way to impose their food tastes on the country at large. The conditions that determine whether the food police

narrative will be used in media coverage of a food regulation is not determined by the language used by legislators but instead by journalistic conventions, public opinion, and industry influence.

Three factors determine whether media coverage of food regulation legislation will adopt the food police narrative: the journalistic convention of balanced reporting, public opinion about the science on which the regulation is based, and the level of industry opposition to the proposal. When aligned, these factors can lead to a food police narrative in media coverage. The professional convention of balanced reporting, which gives voice to both sides of a controversial issue, provides the discursive context in which the food police narrative can be activated. This is the case because a balanced narrative is inherently a conflict narrative. When an issue is considered a site of conflict and there is an organized opposing voice, journalists are provided the discursive space, or perhaps even feel the professional obligation, to focus on an oppositional message centered on a food police narrative. In these contexts, and where there is skepticism about scientific research supporting the regulation, opponents—primarily speaking on behalf of industry groups—are provided room to describe supporters according to the food police narrative. Conversely, although professional expectations privilege balanced narratives, not all media coverage of public health initiatives includes arguments from both sides of the issue. Indeed, rhetorical space is not provided for those opposed to food policy regulations in cases in which public opinion supports the science underlying the regulation and industry spokespeople are not as vocal about their disagreement. In these

instances, media coverage of public health initiatives is not oriented around the two sides of a conflict but rather focus on the advantages of the proposed legislation.

Looking at three major areas of food regulation proposed in the last decade—soda taxes and trans fat bans in New York and California; and Let’s Move, Michelle Obama’s anti-childhood obesity program—it is clear that journalists rely on a balance narrative that includes industry opposition unless and until the acceptance of the underlying science reaches a critical mass and, as a result, industry opposition is silenced or delegitimized. This process is expedited if and when research demonstrates that the public health consequences of the product significantly affect children. Trans fat bans and Let’s Move meet these criteria. As a result, media coverage of those regulations largely ignores the voices of opponents, and discursive space is not given to the symbolic implications of regulating food. Conversely, the scientific foundation of the soda tax is not widely accepted and the industry lobbyists were vocal and organized in cities and states in which taxes were proposed. For that reason, media coverage of proposed soda taxes include the food police narrative and, more importantly, the message that such a label is toxic for a politician.

*Telling Both Sides: The Impact of Conflict Frames on Media Coverage of Anti-Tobacco and Anti-Obesity Regulations*

Journalists abide by certain professional expectations. In particular, journalists are expected to adhere to political and economic norms; the former dictates that the media provide information that allows citizens to hold their elected officials accountable, while



the latter requires that they do so in a way that allows for newsmaking to be a profitable enterprise (Bennett, 1996). Norms also guide how journalists are expected to present information. Specifically, standard reporting is designed to provide fair and neutral accounts of political issues. The concept of balanced reporting, which is largely understood as part of the effort to produce neutral reporting, is operationalized as the practice of providing space for voices on both sides on an issue. This balance framework “requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equal attention” (Entman, 1989, p. 30). When journalists cover controversial issues, therefore, balance is provided through the inclusion the most vocal and visible positions, so that “both sides” are presented within the context of the debate (Gans, 1979). The tendency towards including two competing positions is especially relevant in the context of controversial issues, as it is in these situations that journalists are particularly vulnerable to the perception of bias. For that reason, professional norms dictate that controversial issues can only be presented fairly if competing arguments are given equal weight (Gelbspan, 1997).

The balance narrative, however, is not easily distinguished from the equally professionalized tendency towards conflict narratives. Both frames serve a central professional responsibility, as balanced reporting satisfies a news organization’s political need while conflict reporting satisfies its economic requirement. Indeed, the two are not just similar but connected, as the balance ethic is the product of three professional

conventions: fairness, conflict creation, and improved ratings (Braun, 2007). Balanced accounts are designed to be both fair (i.e. neutral) and organized around conflict (i.e. sellable). But by giving equal weight to both sides of controversial issues, journalists can inadvertently reduce complex problems like public health debates to disputes between two competing positions. Those competing positions are generally claimed by spokespeople, whose quotes come to stand for the two sides in the debate (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). As a result, two dialectical media packages are created and defined through the metaphors and catchphrases offered by spokespeople (Ibid).

In the case of media coverage of public health legislations, the balance framework is particularly naturalized since disagreements about these issues are largely fought on moral grounds. Indeed, one's position on a public health intervention is part of a "class of values that cannot be resolved by argument" (Mooney, 1999, p. 3). Consequently, public health initiatives are frequently organized along partisan lines and tend to generate opposing advocacy groups (Meier, 1994). Additionally, the question of assigning blame and responsibility lends itself to the presentation of a public health issue as a controversy; it is for this reason that science reporting, in particular, is often dramatized (Bennett, 1983). And because news routines privilege sensationalism and morality tales (Schudson, 2002), media coverage of public health legislation is largely organized around two sets of conflicting beliefs.

However, while reporting in general and coverage health interventions in particular are organized around a conflict/balance narrative, the strategy of politically

neutral journalism is only applicable if the arguments made by both sides are considered legitimate. In instances of science reporting, for instance, it is frequently the case that a point is reached in which oppositional views that were formerly given equal weight are repackaged by the media as “denial discourse” (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004) and largely ignored. This trajectory—from a default position of balanced reporting to a revised stance that privileges one view—is particularly apparent in media coverage of public health initiatives. Indeed, the clearest example of this transition is newspaper reporting on anti-tobacco regulations. The anti-tobacco example is informative to the food policy context for two reasons: it is the most extensive public health initiative to be covered by the press, and research suggests that it provides a model for assessing media coverage of anti-obesity regulations.

The anti-tobacco movement provides the most extensive and informative example of media coverage of a public health problem and the legislation designed to address it. In short, for the first few decades after tobacco use emerged as a public health issue journalists gave equal weight to stakeholders opposing government intervention. However following broad shifts in public opinion, the balance format largely gave way to single-viewpoint coverage of the health consequences of tobacco use. As a result of the growing consensus about underlying medical research, journalists reframed smoking as an illness as opposed to a vice, as the consequence of systemic factors rather than the produce of individual choices. These shifts are apparent when looking at coverage of tobacco published in *The New York Times* between 1946 and 2001. Over this nearly six decade period the *Times*’ coverage was marked by a dramatic increase in negative

coverage of tobacco use (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Despite this broad-scale shift, media coverage of tobacco issues lagged medical research and public opinion. Indeed, it took decades for research demonstrating the negative health effects of tobacco use, and the related understanding of smoking as an addiction, to be reflected in the media.

Medical research demonstrating that cigarette smoking increased mortality began to mount during the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, however, media coverage of those findings was heavily influenced by the tobacco industry's strategy of producing its own contradictory scientific research. For that reason, journalists' attempts to maintain balance between pro- and anti-tobacco voices resulted in the framing of the science behind anti-tobacco regulations as inconclusive (Warner, 1985). Furthermore, smoking was understood to be an individual-level decision that was not affected by systemic factors. The publication in 1964 of a Surgeon General's report outlining smoking's potential negative health implications did little to change this belief. Although the report discussed the harmful effects of tobacco use it did not directly recommend smoking cessation; instead, it promoted the idea that with more information smokers could make an informed decision about their personal tobacco use (Bailey, 2004). This report reinforced the media and public's position that cigarette consumption was an individual choice made by an informed adult despite the presence of conflicting findings published by other medical researchers (Studlar, 2009). Notably, however, the addictive qualities and health effects of secondhand smoke were not yet widely known.

A shift in the understanding of the health effects of tobacco use began in the 1980s, when the Surgeon General formally endorsed a non-smoking lifestyle and initiated discussions about the dangers of secondhand smoke and the addictive qualities of nicotine (Studlar, 2009). The framing of secondhand smoke as a hazard greatly contributed to a re-conceptualization of smoking. Between 1981 and the early 1990s, the scientific community reached a consensus that passive (or secondhand) smoking had negative health effects (Kennedy and Bero, 1999). This position resulted in widespread concern about the effect of passive smoke on children, a group that is incapable of consent and particularly defenseless against the hazards of secondary smoke (Bailey, 2004). Additionally, information about smoking as an addiction with negative health consequences, along with the publication of the tobacco industry's manipulation of nicotine levels, contributed to a public opinion that smoking was a health issue and not a matter of personal choice (Klein and Deitz, 2010). And due to nicotine's addictive qualities and the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, anti-smoking advocates argued that neither smokers, nor those around them, were capable of providing informed consent.

The movement in public opinion that followed this research initiated a shift away from media coverage in which the voices of tobacco executives and researchers working for tobacco corporations were given the same attention as the voices of doctors and public health officials. While prestige newspapers, between 1981 and 1994, continued to frame the science on secondhand smoking as inconclusive, this time period marked the first era in which journalists, particularly newspaper journalists, began including critiques

of the medical research offered by tobacco industry spokespersons (Kennedy and Bero, 1999). And the shift away from the treatment of pro-tobacco science as legitimate resulted in a new strategy by those who opposed smoking regulations.

Since research about secondhand smoke and nicotine raised serious doubts about the ability to consent to smoking, tobacco groups responded to challenges to their in-house science by focusing on the rights of smokers. Specifically, pro-tobacco (which is to say, industry) spokespeople reframed their position as a matter of personal liberty and choice in an effort to shift the focus away from the health issues associated with smoking (Cardador et al., 1995). The concept of rights plays a central role in efforts to resist regulation of tobacco use; as part of this discourse, smokers have the right to consume tobacco, manufacturers have the right to produce tobacco, and marketers have the right to advertise tobacco (Katz, 2005). Part of this strategy, furthermore, involved reframing those who support anti-smoking campaigns in a negative light. As such, tobacco control advocates were frequently referred to as “nannies, big government, and health fascists” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 264), characterized as elitists trying to impose their values on the middle and lower classes (Katz, 2005, p. ii35), and described as part of a movement that undermines American values and freedoms (Cardador et al., 1995).

The rejection of pro-tobacco research, as well as an understanding of smoking as a matter of health and not rights, resulted in a dramatic move away from balanced coverage of tobacco issues. Initially, this meant the rejection of pro-tobacco medical research. Articles published in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* between 1985

and 1996, for example, were oriented around two separate arguments; proponents of tobacco control focused on health, while the tobacco industry reiterated their core values of freedom, fairness, free enterprise, and autonomy (Menashe and Siegel, 1998). The rights argument, however, was not able to reverse the tide of public opinion; instead, on the issue of tobacco use, the balance between individual and community rights shifted decisively in favor of the latter at the end of the twentieth century. This shift prevented the inclusion of the smokers' rights positions as a legitimate viewpoint. Consequently, in articles about tobacco use published in *The New York Times* between 1996 and 2002, tobacco use was discussed less as an individual concern and more as a systemic problem (Lawrence, 2004). This shift resulted in the orientation of tobacco issues not as a conflict—even one between health and individual rights—but as a relatively uncontroversial issue without a legitimate oppositional voice. Once the anti-regulation position was understood to be a “denial discourse,” the pro-tobacco nanny state narrative ceased being included in media coverage of tobacco use issues.

The trajectory of media coverage of tobacco regulations serves as a template for media coverage of obesity and related health interventions. This is the case because regulations designed to stem tobacco use and curb rates of obesity share critical qualities that define how they are understood by the public and presented by the press. Like smoking, obesity is a complicated issue without self-evident policy solutions (Kersh and Morone, 2002). Additionally, the two health concerns also have multiple causal determinants, implicate questions of individual autonomy relative to government regulations, and raise broader questions about national public health and economic well-

being (Oliver and Lee, 2005). Finally obesity, like smoking, has been medicalized. The medicalization of obesity began in the post-war period; until this point weight, like smoking, was treated largely as an issue of morality (Saguy and Riley, 1995; Conrad and Schneider, 1992). During the 1950s, however, obesity came to be seen as a disease that could be treated by medical intervention (Sobal, 1995)<sup>33</sup>. The framing of obesity in this way had a broad impact, since it not only defined the problem but prescribed the solution (Gamson, 1992). In the case of obesity, the treatment proscribed, whether a medical intervention or behavioral change, is necessarily determined by medical expertise (Boero, 2007). Medical expertise is required because obesity, much like smoking, is framed alternately as a preventable cause of illness (Mokdad et al, 2004) or a disease in itself (Conrad and Schneider, 1992).

The issue of obesity allows for a much wider range of possible interventions than are required in efforts to curb smoking; consequently, food regulations are treated by journalists as policies that are alternately widely accepted and broadly controversial. As it is for all public health issues, in the case of obesity the “assigning [of] responsibility for causes and solutions forms the crux of public discourse” (Lawrence, 2004). The

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<sup>33</sup> The medicalization of obesity is reflected in the media. Obesity is frequently framed as a “chronic disease and condition” that has reached “epidemic proportions” (Kwan, 2009). Content analysis of articles about obesity published in *The New York Times* between 1990 and 2001 demonstrates that the issue was framed as an epidemic and a crisis, the consequence of which are both widespread and dire (Boero, 2007). Looking across major American newspapers<sup>33</sup>, the number of articles that contained the terms *obesity* and *epidemic* increased from forty-eight articles in 1998 to over seven hundred in 2004 (Oliver and Lee, 2005). This framing of the problems posed obesity, however, is not a reflection of the studies cited in many of these articles; news coverage of obesity findings relies on more “evocative” metaphors and language like *epidemic* and *war* than does the research itself (Saguy and Almeling, 2008).



assignment of responsibility also forms the crux of media coverage, as a critical framing issue is whether the news media portrays obesity as the result of individual-level choices or system-level factors (Barry et al., 2011). Broadly speaking, research demonstrates that the media typically frame obesity as a moral problem (Boero, 2007) that is the consequence of irresponsible individual choices (Saguy and Almeling, 2008). This is the case despite increasing evidence that systemic and institutional factors play a considerable role in the development of overweight and obesity (Lawrence, 2004).

However this focus on personal responsibility for obesity has begun to shift. Looking at newspapers with high circulations<sup>34</sup> and articles published between January 1995 and August 2004, for example, content analysis demonstrates a five-fold increase in references to systemic causes (Kim and Willis, 2007). Similarly, looking exclusively at *The New York Times*, there has been a dramatic increase in attention paid to societal factors that contribute to overweight and obesity (Lawrence, 2004).<sup>35</sup> In sum, there is an inconsistency in the way obesity is framed by the media, as some accounts privilege individual responsibility—where the balancing view is provided by the junk science and/or individual rights narratives—while others present obesity as the result of largely systemic factors explained by widely accepted research findings. The tide is shifting towards a privileging of systemic factors, however it is still the case that societal

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<sup>34</sup> *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *USA Today*.

<sup>35</sup> The media's assignment of responsibility could affect policy, as a greater focus on systemic causes might increase support for government interventions. By way of anecdotal evidence there is, not surprisingly, a strong relationship between support for government regulations of smoking and regulations designed to reduce rates of obesity (Oliver and Lee, 2005).

solutions may be considered too drastic or radical to be included in mainstream news coverage (Salmon, 1989).

In some cases, obesity-related public health measures are presented as uncontroversial—these are the cases in which the science is widely accepted and the systemic frame is most applicable—while others adopt a balance frame and the inclusion of oppositional voices. The three anti-obesity regulations that are the focus of this chapter—soda taxes, trans fat bans, and Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign—occupy different positions on the balance spectrum. In the case of articles that privilege a single perspective and are not framed according to a conflict narrative, food serves a primarily material, as opposed to symbolic, function. That deep-fried Twinkies contribute to an advantageous image for presidential candidates is irrelevant, for example, in the context of legislation banning the use of trans fats at the Iowa State Fair. And because Let’s Move is based on widely accepted science and directed exclusively towards children, mainstream media coverage of the program rarely includes any oppositional viewpoints or, moreover, allusions to the food police. Conversely, while politicians directly involved in the soda tax debate speak of largely material concerns, the narrative of the food police is nonetheless prevalent. Just as the controversy around the Affordable Care Act allowed for the broccoli horrible, so too does the conflict around soda taxes—despite the largely pragmatic form this disagreement takes amongst legislators—lend itself to a framing of supporters as out of touch members of the food police.

### **The History of the Nanny State and the Food Police**

Broadly speaking, the Culture War narrative in coverage of food regulations takes form in the terms “nanny state,” borrowed largely from tobacco rights activists, and “food police,” nomenclature that was coined that gained traction during the early stages of the Culture War movement in the 1990s. Ian Macleod, the British Minister of Health, first used the term “nanny state” as a euphemism for the welfare state in a 1965 editorial piece published in British weekly *The Spectator* (Ayto, 2006). In its current usage, however, nanny state is employed by opponents of regulations to describe those who support government interventions. As such, the term has been used with frequency by those who oppose restrictions on tobacco use. Not surprisingly, in 1997 the RJ Reynolds company released a publication challenging claims about secondhand smoke in which it complained about the “Nanny State where government determines for its sheep-like citizens what is good for them, and what is not” and described the American Medical Association and lawmakers who supported tobacco control as “neo-prohibitionists” and interfering “nannies” (Daube et al., 2008, p. 426).

The idea of the food police derived from the nanny state model and in response to the threat of food and beverage regulation. The first use of the term in a mainstream newspaper was a reference to the food police in the context of a collection of recipes, titled “Save the Bacon,” published in the *New York Times* in 1990. In the preamble before her recipes for, amongst other items, a bacon arugula salad, Regina Schrambling explained, “Naturally, no sooner did I go back to bacon than the food police came along and warned that my newfound pleasure was really a vice” (1990). The term gained

cultural currency, however, when it was adopted by opponents of food regulations. Food writer Michael Pollan speculates that “the whole notion of the ‘food police’ got its start in the fevered brain of Rick Berman,” a lawyer and former restaurant industry executive who founded the Center for Consumer Freedom, a lobbying group for the food, beverage, and tobacco industries and the most visible opponent of food and beverage regulation (2006). As rhetorically constructed by the Center for Consumer Freedom and other anti-regulation groups, the food police is comprised of anyone—including the Centers for Disease Control, “trial lawyers, and even our own government”—that promote the regulation of food and beverages and who, in an effort to garner support, have “force-fed Americans a steady diet of obesity myths” (Warner, 2005). At the heart of opposition to the food police narrative is the notion that advocates of food regulation are compelled by the desire to limit the right of Americans to be independent and self-directed consumers. Consequently, the food police narrative plays directly into the Culture War framework, as it relies on the depiction of a category of Americans as elites who eat healthy food and believe they have the right to impose their healthy diet on all Americans. Where the Culture War narrative enters into coverage of food regulations, particularly in the case of soda tax proposals, it is largely through the discourse of the nanny state and food police. Despite the fact that they are also efforts to change the American diet, trans fat legislation and Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign do not generate opposition—at least among the mainstream media—that labels supporters as members of the food police.

### **Trans Fat Bans: Media Coverage and the Rejection of the Food Police Narrative**

Beginning in the mid-2000s a number of municipalities, counties, and states began exploring the possibility of enacting limitations on the use of trans fats, or partially hydrogenated oils, in food preparation. Driven by increasingly compelling science that these low-cost, shelf-stable fats were contributing to heart disease by raising cholesterol levels, particularly “bad” LDL levels, public health officials initiated campaigns against the use of products like Crisco, lard, and margarine in foods prepared by bakeries and restaurants. While the proposed regulations raised some resistance on the grounds of the underlying science—opponents pointed out that margarine, for example, had once been promoted by doctors as a healthy alternative to butter—an understanding about the health consequence of trans fat consumption was, from a very early stage, widely accepted by legislators on both sides of the aisle.

Early support for research demonstrating the potential harm caused by trans fats was likely the result of three factors: nearly a decade’s worth of studies demonstrating the harm caused by even small amounts of trans fats; the requirement by the USDA that nutritional labels include a line item for trans fat content; and the decision by many large food manufacturers, in response to the labeling requirement, to remove trans fat from their products. Prior the enactment of the label requirement on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, a number of major food producers, including Frito-Lay, Starbucks, and KFC, removed trans fat from their offerings. Consequently, the food industry had little reason to engage in a major effort to oppose local and statewide trans fat bans. Considering this environment, a

number of legislatures proposed—and many subsequently passed—regulations limiting the amount of trans fat that could be used in food sold to their constituents. To date, partial and total bans on trans fat have passed in the state of California, as well as cities such as New York City, Philadelphia, Boston; and major metropolitan areas like Montgomery County, Maryland; King County, Washington; and Suffolk County, New York. All told, nearly 20% of United States residents live in areas with some limitations on trans fat use<sup>36</sup>.

This chapter investigates responses by legislators and the press to trans fat legislation in California and New York, the two largest states<sup>37</sup> to seriously consider both soda taxes and trans fat bans. The trans fat ban in California, which was signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on July 25th, 2008, required restaurants to use oils, margarines and shortening with less than half-a-gram of trans fat per serving by January 1st, 2010. The same regulation extended to bakeries on January 1st, 2011. A similar ban, based on regulations enacted in New York City in 2007 and 2008, passed the New York State Assembly in 2009 but stalled in the State Senate, as legislators expressed concerns about the impact of the ban on small food producers like corner bakeries. Notably, the lack of success in the Senate was not a product of fear about public

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<sup>36</sup>From the CSPI website (“Trans Fat: On the way out”).

<sup>37</sup>The state legislature in Texas voted on a trans fat ban however soda tax legislation, although proposed, never got out of committee in either the State House or Senate.

opposition to the legislation; indeed, when surveyed in 2008, 71% of New Yorkers stated they would support state-wide regulations limiting the amount of trans fat in foods<sup>38</sup>.

The California and New York cases are instructive as they serve as examples of the way the lack of opposition, primarily industry opposition, limits the discursive space available to the food police narrative. This is an unexpected finding, since many of the foods most directly affected by the ban, like fried foods and local specialties, are exactly the types of food that play public, symbolic roles in diner politics. However with very few exceptions the food police narrative is not part of legislators' discussions about the bans or media coverage of proposed restrictions on trans fat use. Indeed, due to the broad acceptance of the science underlying and the lack of resistance from industry groups, journalists covering trans fat bans focused on material, as opposed to symbolic, objections.

From a legislative perspective, little attention was paid by those most directly involved in trans fat legislation to the Culture War narrative. Through conversations with Richard Gottfried, Chair of the Health Committee in the New York State Assembly; Bill Monning, Chair of the Health Committee in the California State Senate; and Jane Preston, former Chief of Staff to the Chair of the Health Committee in the New York State Senate, it became clear that members of those legislative bodies were not concerned that supporters of trans fat regulations would be labeled members of the food police. Instead, among these legislators and their peers, opposition was based almost exclusively

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<sup>38</sup> According to a Zogby poll of 800 New Yorkers (Zogby, 2008).

on concerns about the impact on small business and the practicalities of enforcing such restrictions. Consequently, the trans fat bill passed fairly easily in the New York Assembly (it stalled in the Senate) and in both legislative bodies in California.

In the New York State example, a specific concern about the potential impact on small businesses prevented (and continues to prevent) the legislation's passage. As New York Assembly Member Gottfried explains,

I don't recall having to do much in the floor debates on the bill. I know a couple of years before when we were doing the bill requiring chain restaurants to post calories, a bill which, at least when it first came up for a vote, was defeated, which I thought was pretty shameful for the Assembly. I had played an active role in arguing for that bill. I don't think the trans fat bill had that much of the debate. And I don't think I, I may have spoken briefly in support of it, but certainly was not called upon to have a major role in the debate.

In fact, over the course of the New York Assembly debate, only two main issues were raised: the first, a "quasi-scientific" concern that Gottfried described as "bizarre," that people would think the trans fat ban rendered bakery goods and fried foods healthy; and the second, a concern that the ban would be "a burden on restaurants" who might not "be able to make and develop alternative recipes that would be as pleasing to their customers" using expensive alternative ingredients. Gottfried and many other supporters did not find this line of reasoning compelling because the trans fat ban in New York City, which impacted thousands of restaurants, bakeries, and food producers, did not appear to have a demonstrable negative impact on those businesses. As Gottfried explained,

When people would say, "You know, can I make my world-famous fried chicken without trans fat?" You'd say, "Well, somehow world-famous Sylvia's in Harlem



is continuing to make theirs. You know, “Can we make cheesecake?” Well, Junior’s in Brooklyn is still making theirs, and they’re still famous.

Notably, a number of the restaurants and foods Gottfried listed as examples of trans fat ban success stories are prime sites for diner politics. Sylvia’s is a preeminent political spot in New York—Obama visited the soul food restaurant in November, 2007—as is Junior’s, where Mitt Romney had a cupcake during the 2012 campaign. Despite these deep diner politics ties, however, legislative opposition to the trans fat ban was not rooted in a fear of appearing elite or out of touch.

Instead, opponents were concerned about small businesses even though there was not broad industry opposition. Jane Preston, who worked as Chief of Staff to the Chair of the New York Senate Health Committee, explained that opposition was largely the consequence of concerns voiced by small businesses. This was the case despite the fact that there was some support in the food industry, following the bans in New York City and Nassau County, to have “uniform policy statewide... [because] there is a cost to business to meet the demands to adapt to new regulatory structure that differs from county to county.” Preston’s office supported the ban; moreover Senator Hannon, for whom she was Chief of Staff, sponsored a 2012 bill banning trans fat. However, other Republican legislators opposed the ban, Preston surmised, because they heard complaints from small businesses but very little from constituents who supported the measure. “You don’t have the grassroots coming to the capital saying, ‘I’m sick and tired of not being able to afford bananas for my kids,’ she explained, “It just doesn’t resonate.”

The business concern was also the primary issue in the California context, however trans fat legislation was able to get through both state houses and was eventually signed into law. As California Assembly Member Monning describes, opposition to the ban was not the result of anything specific to food in general or unhealthy food in particular; instead, the opposition he and his colleagues faced was the “same polarization... [from] some of the more conservative forces [who] see that as a restraint on a free market and some of the same folks [who] routinely vote against the ban.” In this context, however, the science was so widely accepted that he explained supporters had “a little more wiggle room to maneuver” since they were seeking to ban something that was regarded as a “hazardous substance.” As a result, the trans fat ban passed California Assembly by a vote of 42 to 27.

The support among legislators for the science underlying the trans fat bans was driven by public health officials and advocates. In my discussions with the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), perhaps the most widely-cited public health advocacy group in the United States, and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA), the largest public health advocacy in California, it became clear that lobbying efforts to increase support for trans fat bans was simply a matter of providing legislators medical research about the negative health effects of trans fats. As Harold Goldstein, Director of CCPHA, explained, the group’s work was primarily educational:

People just don't know. So [we] keep bringing to the fore the reality of the situation, as opposed to getting diverted by the stories told by the industry about

choice. I think there's getting the information out in a way that people can hear it and in time the rightness of the policy comes through. And I should say, I'm surprised by that. I thought it was and require a lot more.

Consequently, the foundational medical research was not a point of contention among opponents, even major industry groups, and consequently the framing of the pro-regulatory research as junk science was not part of the media coverage of trans fat bans.

Considering the general acceptance of the science behind trans fat bans and the resulting lack of industry resistance in New York and California, media coverage of the proposed legislation was not organized within a conflict frame that catered to the food police narrative. Instead, media coverage in New York, California, and across the country hewed very closely to the same story, one in which the science was valid and the only legitimate voice of opposition was offered by those who argued that the ban would have a negative impact on small businesses. Articles about the bans in New York State and California, therefore, presented a conflict between health care advocates and small business owners. Consequently news coverage of the bills followed a similar script, first explaining the science behind the ban—“Health experts say that eating excess trans fats increases the risk of coronary heart disease by raising levels of bad cholesterol and lowering levels of good cholesterol” (McCord, 2010)—followed by the concerns of small business owners—“After experimenting with the new product, she found that her butter cream frosting on cakes and cupcakes was ‘breaking down’ and getting ‘watery’” (DeMare, 2009).

Despite the inclusion of oppositional voices, however, the ban's public health benefits occupied a privileged position. This was evidenced by the inclusion of quotes from health experts speaking on behalf of large organizations and the absence of oppositional statements from business experts, small business organizations, or chambers of commerce. In the single case where a major restaurant group was quoted, the question of science was never raised as a legitimate concern. Instead, the spokesperson confirmed his group's support for the science—"We don't doubt the health findings surrounding trans fats." Consensus about the underlying science, furthermore, constrained the language that was available to the industry lobbyist. Indeed, while the spokesman stated "Our opposition was philosophical," the consensus around the trans fat science prevented any reasonable discussion about food police intervention (Steinhauer, 2008). Consequently, because the voices of opponents focused exclusively on the potential impact on small businesses, and because the food industry did not exert much influence on the debates, the food police narrative in particular, and the framing of food regulation as an elitist activity more broadly, did not enter media coverage of the trans fat proposals in New York or California.

Looking across all newspaper coverage of trans fat legislation in California and New York, including articles published in local papers,<sup>39</sup> there were only a two instances

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<sup>39</sup> This assertion applies only to mainstream news sources; not tabloids. If I were to include the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post* in this analysis the findings would look very different. My decision to exclude these media sources from broader analysis is motivated by the same decision-making process that led to exclude partisan news sources; namely, that this becomes a very different project if I am treating as legitimate news daily tabloids, Fox News, and

of a contentious food police narrative. In a 2009 article in the *Sacramento Bee*, Assemblyman Chuck DeVore was described as criticizing the trans fat legislation “as an example of nanny government with little beneficial impact” (Sanders, 2009). Similarly, in an article in *The New York Times*, a National Restaurant Association spokesman was quoted as saying, “This is a misguided attempt at social engineering by a group of physicians who don't understand the restaurant industry” (Lueck and Severson, 2006)<sup>40</sup>. Aside from these quotes, however, there are no other examples of coverage of the trans fat bans in New York or California that included references to the Culture War framework that would frame supporters as disconnected from average Americans or the foods that they eat.

Putting the media’s coverage of trans fat ban legislation in context, even in scenarios in which one would expect the greatest degree of polarization between supporters and opponents it was not the case that advocates of restrictions were categorized as members of the food police. Considering two contexts in which unhealthy food is critical to culinary heritage—the State of Texas and for the Indiana State Fair—the food police narrative was again excluded from media coverage. Instead, legislation was framed by the media in a neutral or positive manner. Coverage of the 2007

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Rush Limbaugh. In sum, I wanted my data to draw on new sources that I could defend as mainstream.

<sup>40</sup> In fact, the only examples of the food police frame serving a prominent role in the context of trans fat bans, outside opinion editorials, is in coverage of the New York City ban in the *New York Daily News*. One in a series of articles about the ban, “Pols Wanna Be Your Nanny; Helping ‘people to make better choices,’” describes New York’s proposed legislation as “one of several so-called nanny-state bills...which critics say are a waste of time and represent an unwanted government intrusion” (Blain, 2010).

announcement of the trans fat ban at the Indiana State Fair was not oriented around a food police framework. *The New York Times* coverage of the policy shift noted that the decision to fry Oreos, Twinkies, funnel cake and French fries in trans fat-free oil was widely accepted by both food producers and consumers. In fact, the Executive Director of the fair, who described the use of trans fats as “An issue we wanted to tackle,” explained that concerns about cost and taste were resolved in the months before the Fair opened (Davey, 2007). Similarly, in Texas, a statewide ban of trans fats that made exceptions for grocery stores and the State Fair of Texas, passed in the State Assembly but did not make it out of the House. In a comment about his opposition to the bill, Sen. Mike Jackson, a Republican from the Houston suburbs, explained to the Dallas Morning News that he was concerned more with applicability than philosophy: “We're saying it's a bad product, but it's OK for kids to eat it on a funnel cake at the State Fair... I don't see why you wouldn't just ban trans fat totally from the state” (Stutz, 2009).

As was the case in New York and California, broad support for the underlying science, along with a lack of industry resistance, largely eliminated the food police narrative from legislative debates and media coverage. The lack of a conflict narrative is even more apparent in media coverage of Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign, her project designed to reduce rates of childhood obesity.

### **Let's Move: An Acknowledgement of Conflict But Not a Site of Conflict**

Let's Move is Michelle Obama's signature program as a First Lady. Like Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and Laura Bush's efforts to increase literacy rates and interest in reading, Michelle Obama has engaged in a series of projects selected, in large part, for their non-partisan and non-political appeal. Announced in February 2010, Obama described Let's Move as an effort to eliminate childhood obesity within a generation. To accomplish this she has engaged in a number of initiatives oriented around healthy eating and physical activity while working with a deliberately diverse collection of partners, such as professional athletes, chefs, and Wal-Mart. Let's Move also includes a legislative component, the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*, a sweeping bill that improved school meal quality, continued the provision of free school lunches, and funded research into childhood obesity and hunger. The legislation also empowered the United States Department of Agriculture to make major reforms to the school lunch program based on nutritional science. Reflecting the political environment more broadly, the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act* passed the Senate unanimously, however it had a more difficult run in the House, earning the support of 247 Democrats and 17 Republicans and while being opposed by four Democrats and 153 Republicans. Despite the lack of House Republican support, media coverage of Let's Move and the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act* framed the campaign as a non-partisan endeavor. And mirroring the shift in media coverage of tobacco regulations following the publication of research demonstrating the negative health effects of passive smoke on children,

mainstream media coverage of Let's Move was universally positive and, moreover, presented the issue as a cause which lacked a legitimate oppositional voice.

Just as journalists excluded pro-tobacco voices from coverage of efforts to reduce rates of youth smokers, articles about Let's Move framed the reduction of childhood obesity rates as an apolitical and non-controversial project. Consequently, nearly all stories about Let's Move followed a very similar narrative that was often limited to a discussion about the problem of childhood obesity and the efforts being made by Michelle Obama to improve health outcomes. Additionally, early media coverage of Let's Move frequently mentioned Michelle Obama's personal account of being told by her pediatrician that her daughter Sasha was overweight, while more recent coverage of Let's Move has focused on corporate partnerships, particularly the relationship the First Lady established with Wal-Mart.

In fact, much of the media focus on Let's Move is dedicated to the ways in which the First Lady has managed to maintain the appearance of a non-partisan endeavor. In coverage of her announcement of the program, for example, an article in *USA Today* noted, "Political observers say it's the right kind of campaign for a first lady who wants to make a difference but wants to be careful not to delve too far into policy." Such is the case because, according to Boston University journalism professor Elizabeth Mehren "Childhood obesity is a no-downside issue" (Hall and Hellmich, 2010). An interest in the relative level of politics involved in Let's Move likely derives from the fact that the First Lady occupies an unusual space between the political and the apolitical; consequently,



discussions about the level of politics are endemic to media coverage of her signature program. And since the politics of food regulation can be presented through the narrative of the food police, it is not surprising that coverage of Let's Move includes analysis of the ways Obama preemptively short-circuited that narrative. Specifically, many newspapers, including the *Chicago Sun Times* and *The New York Times*, included in their coverage of the Let's Move announcement a quote from Mrs. Obama in which she states she hasn't "spoken to one expert about this issue who has said the solution is having government tell us what we can do." In much the same way, and to the same end, articles that included that quote also noted her oft-stated opinion that healthy eating does not precluding occasional treats like hamburgers and French fries (Sweet, 2010; Stolberg, 2010). This content speaks to the way media coverage of Michelle Obama focused not on the politics of Let's Move, but the way in which she was able to avoid the food police label.

When asked how Michelle Obama avoids major mainstream controversy despite the fact that Let's Move has, at its core, a sizable legislative component, journalists universally pointed to her deliberately bipartisan strategy, her choice of partners, and the topic itself. Todd Purdum of *Vanity Fair* contended that "she's somehow managed to do this in a way without by and large becoming a lightning rod for criticism in a way that Mrs. Clinton did twenty years ago with her health care proposal" because "first of all, she's been very strategic about what she does. She's really tried hard to avoid demonizing people." This point was echoed by Marion Burros of the *New York Times*, who remarked, "She has never ever said, and this is part of her style, she never ever said,

‘Don't ever eat X,Y or Z.’” The First Lady has also worked across partisan lines, partnering with Republicans Haley Barbour, Governor of Mississippi, and Mike Huckabee, former Governor of Arkansas. In that way, Stolberg surmises, “While there was some predictable right/left division, she's also been able to make it a fairly bipartisan.” Additionally, as many interviewees pointed out, she has worked with partners—most famously Wal-Mart—not typically associated with public health initiatives.

Working with Wal-Mart provides the opportunity to spur major industry change. As Jeff Cronin of the Center for Science in the Public Interest explains, “It doesn't just affect what's sold in Wal-Mart, it affects what's sold everywhere.” It also offers some protection for Michelle Obama against accusations of elitism. The largest company in America—and an organization her husband criticized during his campaign—Wal-Mart is the ideal partner because it is, Todd Purdum explains, “the opposite of snobby.” By working with the big box chain Obama was largely able to stave off criticism that she is lecturing Americans about what to feed their children.

And finally, Let's Move is a project designed to make children healthier. Media coverage of tobacco regulation is instructive in this case, as knowledge about the effects of secondhand smoke on children played a major role in shifting media coverage away from a balance narrative. There is not much room for opposition when talking about policies designed to benefit children, as Sheryl Stolberg remarks, because “It's a lot harder I find to demonize initiatives that have to do with kids.”

Despite broad support for Let's Move, the conservative press<sup>41</sup> attacked both the project and Michelle Obama as examples of the food police run amok. References to this commentary represent the only avenue through which the food police narrative entered mainstream media coverage of Let's Move. Although this dissertation does not directly address partisan media outlets, commentary by leading conservative figures about Let's Move became a topic of mainstream coverage. Consequently, a brief summary of the major points of opposition provides necessary background information. From the announcement of Let's Move, Michelle Obama was the subject of attacks by the conservative press; these attacks operated entirely in the Culture War narrative, as the First Lady was painted as a member of the food police who wanted to legislate against the foods that define American culture. This was apparent on Fox News, where a teaser for an episode of *Hannity* discussed Let's Move by invoking the threat of the nanny state: "Tonight your America is turning into a nanny state thanks to the Obama administration's efforts to reign in the junk food industry" (*Hannity*, 2010a). Similarly, when discussing the same topic four months later, host Sean Hannity explained that Michelle Obama was "taking the nanny state to a new level" by "tell[ing] us what to eat" (*Hannity*, 2010b). Similarly, Fox News host Glenn Beck responded to the First Lady's suggestion that restaurant swap French fries for vegetables on children's menus by explaining that the proposal would lead to "friots"—French fry-induced riots—because people will "start thinking about punishments, maybe a fine, maybe even jail." Consequently, he

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<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly, House Republicans opposed the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act* on the grounds that it would require government funding and that legislation's calorie cap of school lunches represented unnecessary government intrusion.

demanded that Michelle Obama “Get your damn hands off my fries, lady,” because, he contended, “If I want to be a fat, fat, fatty and shovel French fries all day long, that is my choice” (Glenn Beck, 2010). Rush Limbaugh expressed a similar sentiment on his radio program when he informed a caller, who described the less than healthy meal she was planning for dinner, that for cooking such a dinner she could “expect to be reported to Michelle Obama in the not-too-distant future” (*The Rush Limbaugh Show*, 2010).

Perhaps the most famous attack on Michelle Obama was leveled by Sarah Palin. Before speaking at a fundraising event at Plumstead Christian School in Western Pennsylvania, Palin was made aware of a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review article that inaccurately suggested new Pennsylvania State Board of Education’s nutritional guidelines would ban sweets at school parties (“Correction,” 2010). In response to the news, Palin posted on her Twitter page that she planned to bring cookies to the event to “intro kids 2 beauty of laissez-faire via serving them cookies amidst school cookie ban debate; Nanny state run amok!” (SarahPalinUSA, 2010). When asked about the controversy at the fundraiser, the former Alaska Governor explained that by bringing cookies she hoped to encourage the students to ask themselves, “Who should be deciding what I eat? Should it be government or should it be parents? It should be the parents” (Barr, 2010).

That Michelle Obama was subject to attacks by members of the conservative media and advocates, however, was not necessarily avoidable, despite her efforts to create a bipartisan and uncontroversial health campaign. As Sheryl Stolberg of *The New*

*York Times* explains, “A big part of [Let’s Move] has to do with regulating food;” consequently the “response was somewhat predictable along partisan lines. A lot of liberals felt that she was doing a very good thing by trying to encourage healthy eating, you saw some conservative backlash from people like Sarah Palin and others basically accusing Michelle Obama of running the nanny state.” Similarly, as Todd Purdum posits, “I mean yes, certain people have criticized Ms. Obama, [like] Sarah Palin and Rush Limbaugh, but I don't think she's become the subject of much criticism in the mainstream world, mostly her thing has been seen as quite sensible and well-taken.” That is, those who critiqued the First Lady are those who would be, as Stolberg suggests, “Disinclined to like Michelle Obama anyway.” And support for Let’s Move, Marion Burros of *The New York Times* suggests,

Depends on whether [someone] likes Michelle Obama and Barack Obama or not. Really, basically, what it seems to come down to, because every time I write a piece about it I can tell by the comments how people feel about it. There are people who call her a nutritional Nazi, hardly a new term, it’s been used before for others. There's people who think it's none of their business and parents shouldn't be told what to do. There are people who make racist remarks about her that have absolutely nothing to do with Let’s Move, but they are in the minority.

Conservative opposition to Let’s Move was loud and likely unavoidable. And because negative commentary about Michelle Obama is a topic of media interest, references to comments made by Glenn Beck *et al.* were part of mainstream reporting on the public health initiative.

Although the food police narrative was not directly employed by journalists at mainstream outlets, the outcry among the conservative media was presented as evidence

of hostility towards Let's Move. In this context, conservative attacks on Michele Obama were framed by journalists as examples of extreme resistance, not legitimate voices in the debate. Lynn Sweet of the *Chicago Sun Times*, for example, mentioned the *Drudge Report* headline, "No fries for you!", and the demand by Glenn Beck that Michelle Obama "Get away from my French fries" (Sweet, 2011). Similarly, Mimi Hall from USA Today mentioned the story about Sarah Palin, explaining that "[Obama's] campaign – [was] mocked by some, including former Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, as evidence the Obamas are pushing a 'nanny state'" (Hall, 2011). And finally, Krissah Thompson of the Washington Post referenced this controversy and "the criticism that [Obama] has become the national nag by pressing her dietary agenda" (Thompson, 2011). These references, however, demonstrate the existence of the food police narrative; they do not use it as a framework for explaining the campaign.

Notably, moreover, two mainstream media outlets that one might assume would produce neutral, if not favorable, coverage of Let's Move—*The New York Times* and the *Chicago Sun Times*—were more likely than others to mention the conservative media's use of the food police narrative. Sheryl Stolberg, for example, explained in an interview that she did not think Let's Move generated more or different resistance because it was legislation related to food. Specifically, she stated, "I don't sense that the opposition to the regulation of food is any deeper than the opposition to the regulation of the energy industry or car manufacturers or what have you." Furthermore, she continued, "if you ask most Americans, 'What do you think about Michelle Obama,' even if they didn't like her, I don't think that the first thing that [comes] to mind is, 'Oh, she's running a nanny

state.” In her article about Michelle Obama’s announcement of Let’s Move, however, Stolberg warned, “With Republicans casting her husband’s White House as an agent of big government, Mrs. Obama must be careful not to cast herself in the role of the food police, chiding parents about how they feed their children” (2010). This comment was likely included in the article because the current political atmosphere requires that one acknowledge the connection between Let’s Move and broader concerns about the role of government. Even if the dietary aspects of Let’s Move don’t generate unique resistance, Stolberg explained in an interview, “We’re generally in an environment right now where the issue of regulation is a very big one.” As a result, Let’s Move “comes in the context of a broader debate or having in the country over the role of government” and consequently “taps into some fears that the government is intruding too deeply into the lives of ordinary Americans. Telling them how to live their lives, even so far as telling them how to eat, how to feed their children.” It is also perhaps the case that journalists most sympathetic to Michelle Obama personally—both Stolberg and Sweet have produced considerable coverage of the First Lady—were more likely to either foresee resistance or feel compelled to report on attacks against Let’s Move from the conservative press.

Media coverage of Let’s Move, even more so than articles about trans fat bans in New York and California, operates outside the balance framework and the journalistic convention of including voices on both sides of an issue. However, in the few cases in which those voices are brought into the discussion, the food police narrative is framed as an extreme position that is offered as an example of how far one must go to oppose

efforts to decrease rates of childhood obesity. This is not the case, however, in newspaper coverage of the soda tax proposals in New York and California. In these two failed attempts to reduce soda consumption, supporters of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages were framed by opponents, primarily industry groups, as out of touch elitists who didn't understand the diets of regular Americans.

### **Soda Tax: The Media's Privileging of Symbolism Over Legislators' Pragmatic Concerns**

Unlike media coverage of Let's Move and attempts in California and New York to restrict the use of trans fats, press accounts of soda tax legislation provided a "balanced" account of both sides of the debate. As a result, these news stories were framed as a conflict narrative that pitted soda tax supporters against the most vocal opponents, primarily industry groups, who expressed concerns about the symbolic impact of regulating Americans' diets. In this way the media's inclusion of the food police narrative vis-à-vis industry groups ran counter to the actual policy debate among legislators who, even in their opposition, voiced primarily economic objections. Indeed, the legislators' lack of a concern about the possibility of being labeled members of the food police is not surprising; supporting a tax increase of any kind carries its own significant political cost. Industry opposition, on the other hand, voiced primarily philosophical concerns that drew heavily on the food police narrative.

Although the tax issue dominated political discussion, media coverage of failed soda tax proposals in New York and California focused on the cultural implications of



bills designed to decrease the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. This is because, in the case of soda taxes, journalists relied on industry voices as their primary (and generally exclusive) source of oppositional viewpoints. The reliance on industry instead of legislative voices is a result of the professional norm of contributing to the economic viability of a journalist's institution. Arguments that drew on the food police narrative—that is to say, industry lobbyists—were likely considered more engaging than the policy-oriented issues raised by legislators. And since journalists frame stories around two positions, never three (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), the voices of lobbyists won out. In sum, the presence of the food police narrative in the soda tax context is the consequence of two factors that render the legislation more similar to early efforts to curb smoking than recent efforts to decrease rates of tobacco use: journalists' privileging of industry opposition organized around the more dramatic language of the food police narrative and the public's skepticism of the underlying science.

Unlike the case of trans fat bans, which passed in California and are still being pursued in New York State, bills proposing soda taxes in these two states failed loudly and publicly. In California, Assembly Member Monning proposed a penny-per-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages—including soda, energy drinks, and other drinks with added sugar—on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011. While it was announced to considerable fanfare, two months later the bill was shelved in the Revenue and Tax Committee as Democratic leadership did not want their caucus to take the heat for supporting a tax without having the necessary two-thirds majority to get it passed on the Assembly floor. A similar one-cent-per-ounce tax in New York State was proposed in 2010, and while then-Governor

Paterson included it in his Administration's budget, neither the Assembly nor the Senate supported including the item in their budgets, and therefore it was excluded from the State's final budget.

Soda taxes are distinguished from trans fat bans and Let's Move by the considerable level of industry opposition that they generate. The California soda tax proposal was, according to *Los Angeles Times* reporter Karen Kaplan, the "one that gets people most riled up" because it "sounds like the bogeyman," and therefore, she explained, people think "maybe it would be the first step" down a slippery slope. This fear was stoked by messaging campaigns created by industry lobbyists. This effort to garner public opposition to the soda tax was highlighted by a 2010 Super Bowl commercial, funded by the beverage lobby Americans Against Food Taxes, which aired in a number of states including New York and California. In the advertisement a woman is shown standing in a kitchen while she explains,

Feeding a family is difficult enough in today's economy. Now, some politicians want the government telling me how I should do it. They want to put new taxes on a lot of groceries I buy, like soft drinks, juice drinks, sports drinks, even flavored waters, trying to control what we eat and drink with taxes. Give me a break. I can decide what to buy without government help. The government is just getting too involved in our personal lives.

From the outset, the nanny state discourse, driven by beverage industry groups, was considerably more prominent in the soda tax debate than in discussions about trans fat bans or Let's Move.

Furthermore, industry spokespeople were able to tap into the food police narrative because consumers, by and large, are not aware of the ways in which the government

already intervenes in their diet. Andrea Miller is the Director of Communication of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale, one of most prestigious and frequently cited academic research and advocacy groups. When asked why soda taxes generated such backlash, Miller contended that most people “just haven't made the connection between the food and beverages they consume and purchase and other ways that the government is involved in their lives.” In the case of other sites of government interventions, such as with cigarette taxes and seatbelt laws, there is a much higher level of awareness, “and people understand or accept the fact that the government is involved in our lives in those ways.” This acceptance does not extend to diet, as people “don't necessarily want the government to be involved in the food we eat.” Jeff Cronin, Director of Communications at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, argued that there was indeed a particular type of resistance to food regulations broadly that made passing regulations “tricky.” This is because, Cronin argued, “Food is very personal,” and like Kaplan and Miller he sees resistance stemming from a lack of understanding about the extant level of government involvement in the American diet. “I think most people are content to leave arms control to the experts” he explained, but when it comes to eating “I think people think it's pretty much their own business.”

Even so, while soda tax opponents connected the proposals to the food police narrative, legislators directly involved in policy debates were not concerned with the symbolic costs of trying to decrease soda consumption. Instead, those ultimately deciding whether the proposals would be enacted were largely focused on the limitations of enacting a new tax. Harold Goldstein, the Director of the California Center for Public

Health Advocacy, explained that his lobbying work suggests that legislators don't attribute any additional resistance to the regulation of food,

I don't think politically it's all that different. I think because its food it's a little closer to home for people; no one wants to have food taken out of their mouths... But fundamentally it's the same thing. You've got people who the elected officials use the political process to promote the common good and there are people who think that is socialism.

From a legislative perspective, therefore, soda taxes are not unique because they are designed to decrease soda consumption but are “in a bit of a different category” because “the tax word is so charged these days.” This sentiment was echoed by the legislators I interviewed, including California Assembly Member Monning, with whom Goldstein worked on both the trans fat ban and the soda tax legislation. Monning outlined that, among his colleagues who oppose public health regulations, there is “a convergence of a number of issues where they call it nanny government, ‘We’re trying to dictate what people eat and drink and buy in the market; today it's soda tomorrow it'll be hamburgers and French fries.’” Even so, the failure of the soda tax (as opposed to the trans fat ban that passed in California in 2009), was exclusively the result of “dogmatic resistance to do any tax.”

When asked whether the response to a soda tax would, hypothetically, have been different if it were a tax on some other commonly consumed good that was not a food or beverage, Assembly Member Monning explained that, from a legislative standpoint, all that mattered was that it was a tax. “And because of that we do not have the votes currently in either house with Republican minorities able to block any tax bill,” he

explained, the bill would not make it out of committee. The total resistance to a tax, even one designed to improve health outcomes and not simply raise revenue, rendered it a nonstarter. “I would link this to the Grover Norquist pledge. I think it's critical to include it, because they're exercising this extraordinary veto power in a manner that I think defies basic democratic principles.” In effect, he believed, “they are more loyal to the pledge to Grover Norquist than they are to the oath of office.”<sup>42</sup> When comparing the passage of the trans fat ban to the failure to get the soda tax out of committee, Monning posited, “Although you have some of the same polarization on the ban because some of the more conservative forces see that as a restraint on a free market and some of the same folks would routinely vote against the ban,” there was one critical difference: trans fat legislation “doesn't raise the T word.” Consequently, while he and other supporters attempted to “push this first and foremost as a public health measure,” all that mattered was that it was a tax.

New York Assembly Member Gottfried echoed these points. Like Monning, he described working with legislators who “felt there was a political benefit in defending the right of their constituents to drink whatever soda that they wanted... A fairly strong political strain of making fun of the food police, and what they could do next? Tell us we

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<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that the *New York Daily News*, a tabloid that published articles describing the trans fat ban and Let's Move using the language of the food police, was the only news source to solicit Grover Norquist's opinion on the soda tax. In an article about the absurdity of the proposed New York State soda tax, Norquist described the legislation as “the nanny state looking for cash,” because “adding an excise tax is discriminatory and complicated, and the government should use the power of tax to raise money needed for the legitimate function of government - not to tell people how to run their lives” (Lucadamo, 2008).

can't eat potato chips or hamburgers?" Even so, he did not feel that the existence of this sentiment resulted in a political debate around food regulations that differed from a debate around the regulation or taxing of anything other than food and beverages. In both cases, he believed, "I think the debates may be pretty similar." For that reason, even though New York State is fairly moderate and "the opposition to taxes of any kind is not as inflamed an issue as in some states," the issue of taxes "has always been a very powerful issue. For as long as I can remember, certainly the Republican legislators who are usually in the majority in the state Senate, adamantly say, 'We're against any new taxes.'" Jane Preston, former Chief-of-Staff to one of those Senate Republicans<sup>43</sup>, concurred: "[When] you start saying tax you get a whole other group that emerges to come up and march down and tell you, a whole new coalition will show up." This response is magnified during an economic downturn, when taxes are viewed by some as standing in the way of recovery. Consequently, the Republican response to the soda tax bill was, Preston explained, "You're taxing groceries and you're putting New York jobs at stake, and we're all in the tank here and leave us alone."<sup>44</sup> From the prospective of legislators, therefore, the primary issue was the tax and not that it was a regulation of soda.

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<sup>43</sup> Republican State Senator Kemp Hannon.

<sup>44</sup> Food faux pas can become news stories because journalists are bored of the campaign and frustrated with being kept at arms' length; similarly, legislators and their staff reject ideas (like soda taxes) that complicate budget bills in response to the emotional and physical drain of budget hearings. As Preston explains, "The other thing to is, when you're done, you go through the rigor of a budget process, and I'm telling you I have felt this way, somebody could walk in and say, 'I have the cure for cancer,' and you say, 'I don't care.' That's how weary you get at the end of the legislative process and the same issues coming up every legislative session."

However, while the food police narrative was not prevalent in the legislative discussions, it was nonetheless a major narrative in media coverage of soda taxes. This is because it was only in the soda tax cases that there was strong and vocal opposition from industry groups. In the trans fat contexts the countervailing perspective, where it was provided, was offered by small business owners. Conversely, the most vocal opponents of soda tax legislation were highly-paid public relations professionals. Therefore it was only in the context of soda taxes that the oppositional voice was provided by an organized party, Gamson and Modigliani's primary qualifying criteria for the voice of the countervailing side of a conflict (1989). And because the soda tax legislation was significantly more controversial than either the trans fat ban or Let's Move, journalists covering the story were free to choose the more dramatic conflict narrative. The story about soda taxes is more interesting if the potential harm caused by the passage of the legislation is not felt by small businesses but is cast as a threat to the American principle of self-determination, as implied by the nanny state and food police narratives.

In this way, media coverage of soda taxes resembles that of early efforts to curb tobacco use. Speaking to that point, Goldstein contends, "The beverage industry is using the same kinds of strategies that the tobacco industry has historically used. And always try to convince people so they come up with their own bogus science that soda really isn't as bad as people think and advocates are saying." Not surprisingly, when asked by the *Monterey County Herald* for his response to Assembly Member Manning's assertion that soda consumption "is an immediate public health crisis. It is fair to compare it to tobacco use and cancers," Bob Achermann, executive director of the California/Nevada Soft

Drink Association, responded, "We think the comparison to tobacco is totally unfair" (Hoppin, 2011).

That journalists relied heavily on a conflict narrative when covering soda tax legislation is the consequence of both the conflict narrative broadly and the consistency of messaging that is produced by those who oppose the legislation more specifically. Harold Goldstein and Assembly Member Monning were quoted in support of the California soda tax legislation in nearly every article published on the California legislation. When asked about his approach to dealing with the media, Goldstein explained, "The role of public relations and communications in doing advocacy work cannot be understated," because "The political process is intrinsically a communications process." As a result, advocates like Goldstein know their voices will be provided as one side of a two-sided controversy:

I think the tendency, the basic philosophy, in the media that says, "Working to tell both sides of the story" is flawed... But the tendency to want to tell both sides, which I understand, there's kind of the philosophy of being unbiased, of neutrality by doing that, but itself has a bias, because it makes it look like half the people think one thing in half the people think another... And the media love to tell the story of Us versus Them.

This sentiment was echoed by Jeff Cronin, who described this approach as a "balance fetish, this 'on the other hand-ism,'" that creates a discursive environment in which "no proposition, new matter how sensible, and uncontroversial," must be "balanced with the opposite." This mindset describes media coverage of the soda tax bans.



In the context of articles about the soda tax, the food police narrative is leveled against supporters of the bill in an effort to frame them as elitists who despise the food tastes (and body shapes) of average Americans. This opposition takes the form of both a rejection of the underlying science and an appeal to those who do not adhere to abstemious diets. Furthermore, building on logic employed by the conservative media<sup>45</sup>, some quoted sources in mainstream news outlets assert that supporters of soda taxes reject the American diet and American principles. In the *Contra Costa Times*, for example, Jon Coupal of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association opposed Harold Goldstein's position, which Goldstein offered on behalf of the CCPHA, by arguing, "It's the stupidest thing to come down the pike... Why are we singling out this form of carbohydrate for taxation? What's next? A bread tax? A pizza tax? At the end of the day, this effort is a combination of bad fiscal policy with nannyism in government" (Vorderbrueggen, 2011). A more extreme version of this position was offered by Muhtar Kent, the chief executive of Coca-Cola, was quoted in *The New York Times* as describing soda tax legislation was "Outrageous." He had "never seen it work where a government tells people what to eat and what to drink" because, he surmised, "If it worked, the Soviet Union would still be around" (Neuman, 2009).

And the food police narrative not only enters the debate through quotes from industry spokespeople but journalists as well. For example, in an article in *The New York*

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<sup>45</sup> In response to the soda tax, which was mentioned as part of a discussion about liberal attacks on "great American institutions," Sean Hannity exclaimed, "Yes, that's right, Democrats may soon be taking a bite out of your wallet if you choose to enjoy an all-American product like Coca-Cola" (*Hannity's America*, 2009).

*Times* Anemona Hartocollis, the article's author, commented that opponents to refer to the bill as "the fat tax," a strategy which, she offers, "sounded like a rebuke to anyone who has ever stood on a bathroom scale and winced" (Hartocollis, 2010). The term "fat tax," it is worth noting, is an embellishment on the previous nicknames for the bill, which included the "obesity tax," as was used in *The New York Times* two years earlier (Chan, 2008). Similarly, in his description of the forces opposing the soda tax, David Leonhardt also of the *Times*, explained that a blog created by lobbyists described supporters of the tax as "well-paid professional food police" at "East Coast universities" (2009). By bringing the food police narrative into the discussion through references to a blog, Leonhardt acknowledges that it is a major oppositional voice in the campaign against the soda tax.

### **Soda as Smoking: A Final Analysis of the Journalistic Reliance on Balance Frames in Regulatory Contexts**

The cases of trans fat bans and Let's Move most clearly mirror media coverage of anti-tobacco legislation that emerged after the science on secondhand smoke and the addictive qualities of nicotine became part of the public consciousness. In both these cases there was public support for the underlying science and both proposals were, to varying degrees, supported by stakeholding industries. As a result, the consumption of trans fats was framed exclusively as a health issue, one which clearly, and scientifically, demanded government intervention. Additionally, although Republican Representatives opposed Let's Move's legislative component on philosophical grounds, it is likely the case that the

bill's focus on children, like earlier efforts to reduce rates of tobacco use by children, prevented the inclusion of oppositional voices. For these reasons the balance/conflict narrative was not available to journalists reporting on trans fat bans and *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*. As Karen Kaplan of the *Los Angeles Times* explains, "Just from a journalism point of view, the 'he said, she said' in every case, that's not the same thing as balance in my opinion, so I have no real problem leaving it out." That is, a balanced account of an issue relies on more than simply including an oppositional voice; balance is achieved by the inclusion of two legitimate perspectives.

Conversely, the media's response to soda tax legislation looks very much like earlier coverage of early attempts to curb tobacco use. Specifically, in both the early tobacco and soda tax contexts, the potential regulation was presented according to a rights and/or moral narrative frame. In the case of soda use, moreover, media coverage took into account the possibility that the regulation of food is different from the regulation of other things for reasons related to rights and morality. By including this narrative—that soda tax supporters are elitists, size-ist, and un-American—newspaper articles about the soda tax acknowledge the symbolic value of food in a way that was not apparent in media coverage of trans fats. Notably, these positions do not mirror the reasons legislators offered for supporting or opposing the soda tax (or trans fat bans or Let's Move, for that matter). For those involved on the policy level, the issues are tied inexplicably to policy concerns. The political cost of supporting legislation that might affect Junior's cheesecakes is considerably less than the cost of creating a tax on a can of Pepsi; similarly, the strength of opposition that can be offered by small business is

dwarfed by that of major industry lobbies. That journalists leaned more heavily on the food police rhetoric offered by lobbyists than they did the more pragmatically-oriented concerns of legislators suggests that the Culture War narrative is privileged by journalists even in the case of policies defined by their pragmatic ramifications. When selecting the narrative that will serve as the oppositional voice, therefore, journalists might defer to their economic responsibility, choosing the food police, and not the tax man, as the rhetorical boogeyman.

Journalists' adoption of the Culture War narrative in the legislative arena speaks directly to the degree to which it has become a dominant discursive framework; however, the explicit exclusion of that narrative in the trans fat and Let's Move contexts evidences that it is a viable frame only so long as an opposition group is willing to organize their position around the symbolic values of food. Although journalist may privilege the food police narrative at the expense of other points of view they will not rely on that narrative where it is unavailable or inappropriate. This results in different types of coverage of legislative food policies, and specifically it results in a different framing of food in legislative contexts.

Taking these three legislative proposals in concert, therefore, the complexity of the balance norm comes into focus. Journalists operate in a professional context in which controversial topics are presented as the intersection of two opposing viewpoints. The balanced presentation of controversial issues is particularly evident in media coverage of public health legislation, as moral issues tend to create entrenched, oppositional

perspectives that serve as the poles around which discussion is organized (Mooney, 1999). However, although balance/conflict frames are journalistic conventions, looking to coverage of tobacco regulations it is clear that not all oppositional voices are considered viable and that, over time, legitimacy can be lost (Mooney, 2004). With that in mind, the research in this chapter adds to the small but growing body of literature on the media's coverage of anti-obesity measures. Extant research in this area contends that media coverage of proposed anti-obesity regulations is largely modeled after media coverage of anti-tobacco legislation. Specifically, it demonstrates that the media's coverage of anti-obesity measures is, as was the case with anti-smoking measures, moving away from a balance frame and towards a single voice. Consequently, using the example of media coverage of anti-tobacco legislation as an informative model, this chapter analyzes the conditions under which the anti-obesity regulation narrative is treated as a legitimate oppositional voice and a corresponding balance framework is adopted. This analysis, therefore, contributes to a better understanding of the conditions under which media coverage of anti-obesity measures is likely to accept or reject a balance frame; specifically, it points to the central role of industry voices and the heretofore undocumented lack of concern for the perspectives of legislators.

Finally, this chapter demonstrates that debates around food policy regulations differ greatly from presidential campaigns with regards to both political discourse and media coverage. Specifically, political elites involved in presidential campaigns are considerably more invested in the mobilization of food tastes as a symbolic vehicle for claims-making than are those tasked with supporting or opposing food policy legislation.

Media coverage of the campaign trail, moreover, is much more likely to adopt a symbolic and/or conflict frame than is coverage of legislators' responses to a proposed food regulation. For this reason, making one's food tastes public in the campaign context poses a much greater risk, from a communication and messaging perspective, than opposing a bill like that which bans trans fats.

As a result, a presidential candidate's communication strategist might feel compelled to argue that his or her campaign's approach be adapted to account for the specific risks that food moments poses to presidential hopefuls. Specifically, the communication director might contend that retail events organized around food present too great a risk to be valuable, and therefore the candidate should move away unscripted, mediated environments and instead focus on image-building efforts that relay on curated platforms.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DIGITIZATION OF DINER POLITICS?



A tweet posted by Texas Governor Rick Perry during his 2012 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination (Image XI)

### Looking Back

I started this project hoping to explain why food was such a consistent, if under-the-radar, aspect of the political image-making process. On one hand, the role of food in politics should not be shocking; after all, as T. S. Eliot surmised, culture could be described as “food, sport and a little art” (Eagleton, 2000). At the same time, however, that food tastes would garner increasing attention from the political and media elite shouldn't be treated as an inevitable or self-evident progression; indeed, food tastes are bigger news now than they were thirty years ago even though they are one small data point among increasingly many. To some extent the rising tide has lifted all ships, as access to information begets (a desire for) more information. Conversely, however, none of the

other preferences and practices to which journalists now have access has come to be framed by the media as evidentiary of a candidate's true self in the same way, and to the same degree, as have food tastes.

This seeming contradiction is at the root of my interest in this area. Through interviews with elected officials, political staff, journalists, and health advocates, as well as textual analysis of articles published in newspapers and newsmagazines, I attempted to resolve these inconsistencies by answering two fundamental questions: how and why are food tastes mobilized by politicians and journalists to create a political figure's public persona, and why are instances of the politicization of food increasing? By answering these questions this dissertation contributes to the extant literature in both political communication and food studies. This is the case because prior research has considered the broad role of tastes and practices in American politics, however this study is the first dedicated analysis of the role of food in presidential campaigns. For that reason this dissertation provides insights into the scholarship from which it draws. In sum, this dissertation argues that, in the Culture War context, food tastes are mobilized to make claims about who political figures are as individuals. This information, moreover, is contextualized within a broader discourse that organizes Americans according to personal tastes and practices. Finally, this study demonstrates that it is because food tastes can be mapped onto this perceived American demography that food tastes can be framed by political and media elites as providing relevant political information.



In addition to adding to both the food studies and political communications literatures, this dissertation provides a novel methodological approach to the study of culture and politics. By using textual analysis and interviews to research presidential campaigns this project brings a new perspective to a largely methodologically-homogenous body of work. My topically-unique methodology provides added value to the relevant bodies of literature both by applying a qualitative approach to a field largely defined as quantitative, as well as by drawing heavily on quantitative theory while engaging in qualitative research methods. This dissertation sought to put interdisciplinary theories into practice; specifically, I aspired to generate a more comprehensive and well-rounded assessment of behaviors that are both statistically measurable and immeasurably human. To that end, and in an effort to make claims about journalistic norms that go beyond what can be determined through coded content analysis, this dissertation engaged journalists and political elites about events in which they both participated. By interviewing journalists about incidents they covered, as well as by speaking with legislators and officials who were quoted in those articles, this dissertation contributes a new understanding of the human element involved in creating media content from presidential campaigns and legislative efforts.

Specifically, as I hope this dissertation makes clear, journalism is an incredibly personal enterprise. It is likely the case, moreover, that the role of the personal has become even more relevant as two seemingly contradictory factors have come into play in the electoral context: an increased interest in who candidates are as people, and a related tightening of the strings held by campaign staff. Tedium, stage-management, and

the desire to bring something new to the table are factors that contribute to the interrelated processes of presidential campaigning and political newsmaking. With that in mind, this dissertation is an attempt put surveys and salads in conversation as part of an effort to gain a better understanding of how small moments become big news stories.

*Chapter Summaries, Theoretical Contributions, and Methodological Limitations*

In the Introduction to this dissertation I outline how the intersection of Culture War rhetoric, the communicative capacity of food, and an increasing interest in candidates' authentic selves creates an environment in which food tastes could be mobilized as a form of political communication. Beginning in the mid-1950s presidential elections shifted from a focus on party to a concern with candidates, specifically their image and personality. Additionally, some scholars argue that since the 1970s the American electorate has become increasingly organized around tastes and values as opposed to class and economic interests. Although there is no consensus as to whether white working and middle class voters are less likely to support Democratic candidates than they were in the past, there is general agreement within the scholarly community that the political polarization narrative has become dominant within political discourse.

Accordingly tastes, like those in food, are framed as evidence of a candidate's relative connection to, or disconnection from, average American culture. Food is a particularly effective mode of communication in this way because food tastes reflect one's personal, class, and cultural history. Through their demonstrated tastes in food, political figures can express that they are part of a culinary culture that is understood as distinctly

America middle class. At the same time, however, by mistakenly revealing that their authentic tastes are more closely aligned with the rhetorical elite, candidates can render themselves vulnerable to the impression that they do not share a typically American culinary history.

Following from that point, in the first empirical chapter I investigate the way diner politics, or campaign appearances at local diners, bars, and ethnic restaurants, taps into the symbolic value of the local diner and retail politicking to demonstrate a candidate's connection with average American culture. I argue that diner politics is an effective strategy for two reasons, both of which stem from the status of the diner stop as a photo opportunity. In short, campaigns return to diners year after year because such appearances benefit from our understanding of the diner as a proxy for middle class culture. Additionally, because diner stops necessitate retail politicking, diner politics also provides campaigns with an opportunity to create imagery of their candidate engaging with voters in a casual, unscripted manner. However it is precisely because diner stops have become a conventionalized political routine that the practice is occasionally treated by the media as a moment that is demonstrably inauthentic. Indeed, journalists are acutely aware of the strategy that underlies diner politics and, consequently, some media coverage highlights the extent to which these appearances are tightly-managed stagecraft. As a result, when candidates err in their attempts to prove their middle class bona fides, some journalists respond by framing those mistakes as evidence of the candidate's performativity, inauthenticity, and elite tastes.

With these findings in mind, this chapter contributes to the relevant literature by making visible the interplay between image-based campaigning and taste-based elitism. Specifically, through an assessment of diner politics, this analysis demonstrates that it is only because there is an increased interest in candidate image that food tastes can be treated as relevant evaluative criteria. As I argue in this chapter, diner politics would operate simply as a vehicle for interpersonal communication if food tastes were not believed to possess relevant symbolic value. But as was made clear in interviews with political and media elites, food tastes are believed to possess relevant symbolic value. Indeed, the political value of diner appearances is intrinsically tied to the diner's middle class symbolism. This dissertation also provides a new perspective on both the persistence of media narratives as well as the viability of novel media tropes. Journalists clearly balk at the level of stage-management that accompanies diner stops; this frustration, however, does not preclude their professional obligation to cover events that have been established as campaign news. At the same time, however, many journalists who provide conventional media coverage of diner stops also contribute to new journalistic narratives that shed light on the inherent strategy of diner politics. In this way, this dissertation adds to the extant literature the finding that media tropes can develop not from the news content itself but from the conditions under which the content was produced.

The second empirical chapter looks at the flip side of diner politics and investigates the implications of the food faux pas as a media trope. Considering two instances of food faux pas as case studies I argue that since the emergence of the Culture

War narrative in the mid-1990s, and operating within a media environment that privileges conflict frames and stories about a candidate's authentic self, food faux pas have come to be treated by media and political elites as proof of the erring candidate's disconnection from average Americans. Consequently, unlike media coverage of Dukakis's 1988 endive snafu, Obama's mention of arugula in 2008 was treated by journalists as a mistake for which the electoral implications were politically important and self-evident. In addition to the influence of the Culture War narrative, the shift in the framing of food faux pas is also a consequence of, and reflected in, the media's adoption of microtargeting as sociological and electoral fact. Microtargeting provides analytic "proof" of the Culture War hypothesis, therefore when a candidate mentions an unusual sounding vegetable, or indicates a concern with healthy eating, the media and his or her political opponents frame that candidate as fundamentally (and quantitatively) different from everyday Americans. For this reason, in the diner politics and food faux pas contexts, political actors, their surrogates, and the press treat food as rhetorically valuable and strategically relevant.

As this chapter demonstrates, a mistake is only a mistake when voters, or at least journalists, believe the error committed provides access to a deeper truth about the candidate. What constitutes a candidate's authentic self, therefore, is determined according to the aspects of his or her personal life that are believed to be symbolic and not simply incidental. In a contribution to the relevant literature, therefore, this chapter illustrates that the idea of a political figure's true self, and the qualities by which the true self is defined, are largely determined by prevailing media narratives. As evidenced by

the different treatments of the Belgian endive and arugula moments, as well as the inconsistent appraisals of healthfulness as a campaign liability, this chapter makes clear that dominant media narratives dictate how non-political aspects of a candidate are framed and understood. This point goes beyond the notion of agenda setting and priming. It is not simply the case, as media effects research demonstrates, that the media tell us what is news; as this chapter argues, the media's conceptions of what constitutes relevant information is itself colored by the evolution of media tropes. As a result, it is only in a context in which food tastes are believed to reveal relevant political information that a food faux pas can be framed as contributing to a greater understanding of the erring candidate's authentic self. That is, it is only when food *matters* that *food* matters.

Once a political figure is elected, however, the role of food tastes as a communicative medium changes. In the third and final empirical chapter I argue that, in the legislative context, one's tastes in food are made visible not by what one eats but by what one believes others should eat. In this way a politician's support for or opposition to food a proposed food regulation functions as a proxy of his or her food tastes. In this context elite food tastes take the form of the food police narrative, which frames food policy advocates as "health nuts" who aspire to control the American diet. By and large the food police narrative is not native to the political figures actually involved in food policy legislation; indeed, legislators generally view food policy issues as strictly pragmatic concerns in which food plays a largely incidental role. Instead, the food police narrative emerges from oppositional voices, primarily those of industry lobbyists, attempting to squash regulatory efforts. Looking at three examples of food policy

legislation—trans fat bans and soda taxes in New York and California, as well as Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign—it is clear that certain conditions determine whether the food police narrative will be adopted in media coverage. In the trans fat ban and Let’s Move examples there was broad support for the underlying science and little pushback by industry forces. As a result journalists largely disregarded the voices of opponents and the food police narrative. Conversely, the proposed soda tax legislation had neither of those qualities. In this context, the media relied a conflict framework that included oppositional voices; as such, the food police narrative entered media coverage.

These findings contribute to a growing body of research addressing media coverage of anti-obesity regulations. Looking at newspaper coverage of anti-tobacco legislation as an informative model, this chapter presents a more nuanced set of conditions under which journalists give voice to regulations opponents and thereby present proposed legislation within a balanced (or conflict) narrative framework. Equally importantly, however, through consideration of three proposed regulations this chapter provides a clearer understanding of the conditions under which journalists operate *outside* the professional norm of balanced coverage and instead rely on a single, authoritative voice. Specifically, my analysis points to the central role of industry opposition in determining whether the balance frame will be employed. It also, moreover, highlights, the extent to which journalists privilege industry voices over those of legislators, even legislators who similarly oppose a particular food policy regulation. This is the case, as the chapter demonstrates, because lobbyists’ use of the food police narrative allows for a

more interesting point of conflict than is possible if the oppositional space is staked out by legislators' pragmatic concerns.

My research contributes to the extant scholarship, however it nonetheless is limited in the claims it can make. The primary limitation of my findings derives from my focus on national campaigns. The chapters that address diner politics and food faux pas deal exclusively with presidential elections at the exclusion of state and local races. Moreover, all of the journalists with whom I spoke are national reporters who therefore discussed a narrow set of experiences. Both these factors limit the scope of my findings. Even so, however, my research offers suggestions about the qualities that food politics possess when applied to non-national contexts. This is the case because, when considering the role of food as a form of political communication, it is not necessary accurate to describe national campaigns as fundamentally different than local and state races. Early primary races function essentially as state-level competitions, and my research suggests that in these cases diner politics serves a primarily retail function. Even so, however, I suspect a visit to the Versailles Restaurant during a presidential race is fundamentally different than a visit during a gubernatorial election. With those considerations (and potential contradictions) in mind, it is clear that more research is needed in this area.

And finally, and perhaps most critically, my analysis does not take into account the function of food politics for women candidates participating in a presidential general election. Considering the inherently gendered nature of the foods considered acceptable,



or unacceptable, for candidate consumption, it is almost certainly the case that a woman at the top of a presidential ticket would feel compelled to conform to a stereotypically masculine diet. Pressure to adopt stereotypically masculine culinary habits is evident in Hillary Clinton's 2008 primary campaign—most notably in her decision to have a shot and a beer at a bar in Indiana—as well as Sarah Palin's rhetoric about hunting and eating game meat during the 2008 general election. History has not permitted an analysis of this fascinating line of inquiry—hopefully an assessment of this theory will be possible in the near future.

### **What it Means**

Looking across my findings the extent to which political figures and the media jostle for territory comes into clearer focus. For example, a candidate will participate in highly managed diner appearances that leave the press feeling far removed from anything newsworthy. In response, journalists will report on a food faux pas committed by the candidate and position it as a counterfactual to the candidate's diner politics persona. And in an attempt to make the final move, the campaign will double-down on its diner politics strategy in an effort to regain control of the candidate's media narrative. This sort of messaging brinksmanship was evident in 2008, as Obama attempted to counteract his arugula persona through strategic references to down home foods like chicken thighs, pie, and biscuits and gravy. The media, however, not only contextualized these remarks within the candidate's dominant media narrative (namely, that Obama enjoyed a very health-conscious diet) but journalists framed Obama's comments as overt political

pandering. As this case demonstrates, efforts to present diner imagery as a counterpoint to unflattering media portrayals are met with skepticism by journalists who seek to vet their political leaders.

But even though attempting to disprove a healthy diet is a fool's errand, political elites have made few attempts to challenge the underlying narratives that give diner stops and food mistakes their political power. The Obama and Romney campaigns, for example, made no effort to argue that their candidate's interest in health and fitness might actually be beneficial leadership qualities. It is fairly easy to imagine a narrative either campaign could have deployed in such an endeavor, however neither camp pushed back against the "too fit to be President" media trope. Instead, and in spite of the fact that it was clear the press couldn't be convinced that either candidate had a typically American diet, both campaigns engaged in Quixotic attempts to prove that their candidate was not a notably healthy eater.

The reluctance to argue for the political value of a healthy diet is understandable, and it makes even more sense when considered in the context of what news coverage tells us is the ideal presidential specimen. Although the Obama and Romney cases illustrate that healthy eating is a potential electoral liability, early discourse around New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's potential run suggests that visibly overweight candidates also face criticism. Indeed, *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson suggested that, to demonstrate leadership, Christie should "eat a salad and take a walk." Taken in concert, these three presidential campaigns suggest that Americans, or at least political and media

elites, want a presidential candidate who eats a Main Street American diet without suffering from the visible repercussions of doing so; someone who can eat American food without developing American girth. In this sense, voters want a candidate who is better than they are but who, at the same time, is just like them. They want a Superman who thinks (and eats) like Clark Kent.

The image of an ideal candidate reflects the way American voters view themselves. For that reason, it is likely the case that changes to the way the American public looks—and eats—will result in a renegotiation of the symbolic values of foods mobilized in presidential campaigns. In this way, for example, the political liability attributed to healthy eating might shift and instead be attached to food produced using methods that are incommensurate with the myth of the American farmer: foods grown outside the United States, using agro-technologies like genetic modification, or on industrial farms. Conversely, and almost certainly more likely, accusations of elitism that are currently leveled against those concerned with ethical eating might expand, resulting in the privileging of foods that are produced in the most efficient—and least traditional—ways possible. Similarly, as changes to the American cultural landscape and diet occur, perceptions about what constitutes an average American diet will undoubtedly change. Research on the American diet suggests that what we eat is defined by technological innovation and the assimilation of immigrant dishes like pizza, hot dogs, and tortilla chips; consequently, over time, foods that were once considered foreign cease to carry with them a strong ethnic connotation. Therefore as the face of America changes and, most notably, becomes increasingly Hispanic, what we mean by diner politics and food

mistakes will likely change as well. Evidence of this shift is already apparent. In 1988 Democratic presidential candidate Bruce Babbitt's mention of his preference for Tecate beer was met with confusion. Twenty-four years later John Huntsman's campaign team produced a video, posted on YouTube and the candidate's website, titled "Jon's Favorite Foods," consisting of a two minute monologue in which Huntsman's describes his love for taco stands and Mexican street food. As a scholar of food in politics I am fascinated to see what message Mexican food will communicate in future elections since the size of the Hispanic population, coupled with the complexity of immigration reform, presently creates an opportunity for Mexican foods to be simultaneously central to Democratic presidential campaigns and off-limits to Republican candidates.

Finally, as the Huntsman example demonstrates, it is not simply the case that candidates will mobilize new cuisines in an effort to appeal to desirable demographics, it is also likely that they will use new technologies to do so. This move to new campaign messaging platforms is already evident in contemporary presidential campaigning. For example, Mitt Romney's heavy use of Twitter as a medium through which he could counter his health nut, Romney-bot image speaks directly to an effort to mobilize social technologies in an effort to connect with voters outside the political media loop. Indeed, building on a path largely broken by the 2008 Obama campaign team, my research also portends a broad shift away from retail politicking and towards an increased focus on the digitization of personal tastes.

## Looking Ahead

There is evidence that retail politics is viewed by contemporary political strategists as a site of diminishing returns. To that point, a number of the journalists I spoke with indicated that they observed a decrease in retail politicking by presidential candidates.

David Greene of National Public Radio explained that retail appearances leave candidate vulnerable to committing gaffes; consequently, diner politics carries with it a potentially high cost,

I would guess... the campaigns are thinking about that any unscripted moment can really get you in trouble. And I've heard from colleagues that the campaign now is very different than how I remember it. And even what we think would be retail politics is really scripted and really prepared and feels very staged, and I think to lose those moments is a shame, but you can understand why, within the current media environment when everything can turn into a story on its own.

This point was echoed by John McCormick, who in the midst of covering the 2012 Iowa Caucuses described the relative focus the campaign teams were placing on social media on retail politics,

I've covered this campaign and there's been a lot less of that [retail politicking] this time. As the campaign has gotten to be more of a social networking campaign, social media campaign, there's been a lot less retail campaigning in general including diner and... a pizza something or other, but there's been very few events this year at those places, at least among the top-tier candidates.

Diner politics, that is, might be replaced by dining online.

That presidential campaigns have begun to rely more heavily on social networking is clearly the case; however, it is not self-evident that the increase in social networking will be at the expense of retail politics, or that diner politics would migrate onto social

networking sites. However the reasons Greene and McCormick offered for the decrease in retail politics—namely the potential costs relative to the perceived value of social networking—may portend a broader shift away from retail politics. In this a scenario campaigns would undoubtedly attempt to capture the benefits achieved by appearing at diners through social media engagements and pre-packaged media products. As such, it would no longer be thought necessary for a candidate to stop at a diner, therefore, because she could instead release a video, like “Jon’s Favorite Foods,” in which she describes her favorite down home places to eat and provides imagery of meals enjoyed in those establishments.

Campaigns have reason to believe that videos such as Huntsman’s could be an effective enough substitute for images of a candidate interacting with patrons at a diner or bar. This is the case because the images and videos that a campaign produces would likely function, from a cognitive perspective, in much the same way as traditional television campaign advertisements. Research suggests that television advertisements, specifically those in which the candidate discusses his or her personal biography, creates a sense amongst voters that they know who the candidate is as a person (Just et al, 1996, p. 80). If campaigns believe they can capture those two factors—the presence of the candidate and a biographical narrative—in digital platforms, there is reason to think they might begin favoring socially networked engagement to everyday retail politics. More specifically, strategists might question the ultimate value of a photo opportunity in a diner if it is thought to pose undue risks and the resulting content is tied to a single news channel.

Although a reduction in diner appearances would limit the symbolic benefits of engaging in retail politics, such a cost might be one campaigns are willing to pay. This scenario, Todd Purdum suggests, would be “kind of sad” because,

It's bad enough that Iowa and New Hampshire, which are in no way representative the country the whole, either one, have such a disproportionate influence on the process. But at least they can be said to have had this thing which involves meeting the candidates face-to-face. If people are not going to meet the candidates face-to-face *and* it's going to have a disproportionate impact on the process, that's the worst-case scenario.

In such a context candidates would cease to rely on even the symbolic value of retail campaigning and would instead lean more heavily on a broader symbolic understanding of food cultures. This move would leave open the (potentially positive) possibility of candidates using food as a way to connect with communities that were previously ignored—after all, all diner politics is demographically motivated. However such a benefit would be at the expense of interpersonal engagement; in short, the retail aspect of diner politics could be replaced by a mobilization of food tastes that more closely resembles stump speeches and campaign branding.

Such an outcome would not be an unreasonable extension of the phenomena this dissertation demonstrates. Indeed, elected officials, political operatives, and members of the political press can and do treat food tastes as politically relevant information, and information that must be mined for any potentially negative connotations. In fact, this dissertation argues that the shift towards image-based campaigning and soft news makes food an even more valuable—and strategically manageable—topic of political discourse. In this way, the critical implication of this project is the understanding that not only are

food tastes increasingly mobilized in political discourse but that the ways in which food tastes are mobilized reflects broader trends in the political environment. As we move towards more curated digital campaign platforms, therefore, it is likely that campaigns will exchange the symbolic value (and electoral costs) of retail politics in favor of more reliable and controlled digital spaces. Although this shift will stretch the perceived relationship between food tastes and personal history to its limits, the control it affords campaigns will likely be too appealing to pass up. As a result, food tastes will become as highly managed and demographically targeted as a candidate's policy positions. After all, how beneficial would Jon Huntsman's proclaimed love of Mexican food have been in a general election determined in large part by the Hispanic vote? Tremendously, I suspect. With that in mind, I look forward to seeing whether we reach a point in which a candidate's food choices are understood by not only journalists but voters to be the obvious product of political pandering.



## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Solicitation

Dear [Insert Name],

Please permit me to introduce myself. My name is Alison Perelman and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg Public Policy Center suggested that I contact you about my dissertation research. In short, my dissertation looks at the way food is used in political campaigns.

*For journalists:* As someone who has covered presidential campaigns, I believe you could provide insight into some of the critical issues my project addresses. I'd like to hear your thoughts, both as a journalist and political observer, about why practices like diner politics and candidates' diets become news stories, and how those stories become part of broader media representations of presidential hopefuls. [I am particularly interested in your take on this matter, as you covered the fallout surrounding (e.g. Obama's mention of arugula in Iowa) during the (year) campaign.]

*For strategists:* As someone who has worked on X's presidential campaign, I believe you could provide insight into some of the critical issues my project addresses. I'd like to hear your thoughts, both as a [campaign title] and political observer, about why campaigns put such a focus on things like diner politics, and further how and why candidates' food tastes become facets of campaign strategy. [I am particularly interested in your take on this matter, as (Candidate's) diet was a reoccurring theme during the (year) election narrative.]

If you are willing to participate, please email me at [aperelman@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:aperelman@asc.upenn.edu) and we can set up a time to talk. Our conversation should take around 15 minutes. If you have any questions about this project please do not hesitate to contact me. I'll touch base with you again in a week or so to follow up on this email.

I greatly appreciate your help in this matter.

Best,

Alison Perelman  
Ph.D. Candidate  
University of Pennsylvania

## Appendix B: List of Informants

### Journalists

- Marion Burros, Columnist, *The New York Times*
- Paul Farhi, Reporter, *Washington Post*
- David Greene, Morning Programming Host/Correspondent, *National Public Radio*
- Toby Harnden, Former US Editor, *The Telegraph* (UK)
- Karen Heller, Columnist, *Philadelphia Inquirer*
- Karen Kaplan, Science and Medicine Editor, *Los Angeles Times*
- John McCormick, Reporter, Formerly of *Newsweek*, now *Bloomberg News*
- Todd Purdum, National Editor, *Vanity Fair*
- Sheryl Gay Stolberg, White House Correspondent, *The New York Times*
- Evan Thomas, Journalist, Former Editor-at-Large, *Newsweek*

### Political Strategists

- Reed Galen, Advance Team Member, Bush 2000, 2004; McCain 2008
- Jane Preston, Former Chief of Staff, New York State Senator Kemp Hannon (R)

### Public Health Advocates

- Off the Record, Major National Public Health Not-for Profit
- Brandie Banks-Bey, Communications Specialist, Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program
- Jeff Cronin, Communications Director, Center for Science in the Public Interest
- Harold Goldstein, Executive Director, California Center for Public Health Advocacy
- Andrea Miller, Former Director of Communication, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity

### Elected Officials

- Richard Gottfried, Assembly Member, New York State Assembly
- William Monning, Senator, California State Senate

### Appendix C: Sample Interview Schedule

- Presidential campaigns frequently stop at dinners, bars, and restaurants. Why do you think this is? And is their role as places where people eat and drink central to their repurposing as political settings, or is it incidental?
- Obama's mention of the price of arugula at Whole Foods became a point of reference for the rest of the campaign. So did John Kerry's cheesesteak faux pas in 2004. Why do you think stories about what and how candidates eat gets such play when they are, all things considered, pretty soft news?
- Media coverage of small moments in campaigns, like stops at a diner or bar, is fairly ubiquitous at this point. At the same time, cell phone technology means that anything a candidate does can be put online almost immediately. What affect does this have on media coverage of a campaign and campaign strategy?
- Why is being seen as elite or out of touch such a political liability?
- By pretty much any standard all legitimate presidential candidates are elite. How have Republicans, the party that is viewed for the most part as being more concerned with the wealthy than the middle class, become so adept at framing Democrats as out of touch elitists?

#### For Strategists:

- From the campaign's perspective, what is the goal of a campaign stop at a diner?
- How do campaigns prepare for stops at diners? How are diners and restaurants selected?
- Why is being seen as elite or out of touch such a political liability? From a campaign perspective, is attacking an opponent as an elitist a common and productive strategy?

#### For Journalists:

- What role has the press played a role in this construction of Democrats as elite and out of touch?
- Do you think the idea of an American Culture War plays a role in the way journalists cover presidential campaigns?

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