The left and right side of the table

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| The "left" and "right" we are talking about refer to the political-left and the political-right, and the table we are talking about is the dinner table. Food today is as political as welfare, guns, gay marriage, and abortion. | Talking points / quotes to display in this color |
| To demonstrate this, consider three quotes on food in the modern age. |  |
| From Maureen Ogle’s excellent book, In Meat We Trust, we find the following quote on the first page.  And we quote …  Although we Americans eat more meat than almost anyone else in the world, our meat-centric diets are killing us—or not, depending on whose opinion is consulted. The nation's slaughterhouses churn out tainted meat and contribute to outbreaks of bacteria-related illnesses. Or not...The only thing commentators might agree on is this: in the early twenty-first century, battles over the production and consumption of meat are nearly as ferocious as those over, say, gun control and gay marriage.  —Ogle, Maureen. 2013. In Meat We Trust. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: NY, NY. Page 1. | Although we Americans eat more meat than almost anyone else in the world, our meat-centric diets are killing us—or not, depending on whose opinion is consulted. The nation's slaughterhouses churn out tainted meat and contribute to outbreaks of bacteria-related illnesses. Or not...The only thing commentators might agree on is this: in the early twenty-first century, battles over the production and consumption of meat are nearly as ferocious as those over, say, gun control and gay marriage.  —Ogle, Maureen. 2013. In Meat We Trust. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: NY, NY. Page 1. |
| From an interview with Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, he remarks:  And we quote …  I've painted it as though it's conservatives that do all the purity stuff. Liberals do it too. It's commonly joked that conservatives are always moralizing sex and telling you what you can't do. But my God, just try to order breakfast with someone who is on the far left.  —Haidt, Jonathan [interviewee]. June 2013. "It's Hard to Gross Out a Libertarian." John Tierney [interviewer]. Reason magazine. Page 17. | I've painted it as though it's conservatives that do all the purity stuff. Liberals do it too. It's commonly joked that conservatives are always moralizing sex and telling you what you can't do. But my God, just try to order breakfast with someone who is on the far left.  —Haidt, Jonathan [interviewee]. June 2013. "It's Hard to Gross Out a Libertarian." John Tierney [interviewer]. Reason magazine. Page 17. |
| Haidt does not say that as a conservative. In fact, he is a moderate who leans left more than right. When I showed Haidt’s quote to a liberal friend of mine he laughed and said, |  |
| And we quote …  And conservatives don't care what they put in their bodies as long as it is quick, convenient, and cheap!  —An anonymous liberals' response to Haidt's quote. | And conservatives don't care what they put in their bodies as long as it is quick, convenient, and cheap!  —An anonymous liberals' response to Haidt's quote. |
| Food has always been political. What foods people eat and how they eat it reflects their social customs, their values, and their political order. To see this, let’s contrast the feasts of ancient Persia with that of Ancient Greece. | [Show Figure 1 with ancient Greece and Persia marked]    By Thomas Lessman (Contact!) (self-made (For reference information, see below)) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons |
| Ancient Persia was ruled by kings with complete and total power. Peace and political stability then depended on the strength of the king. A weak monarch risks a civil war that would ultimately lead to thousands of deaths and an economic wreck. Moreover, the outcome of the war would only be a different monarch. It was thus important that food and feasting clearly highlighted the king’s power and the pecking order of his subordinates. |  |
| During the First Persian Empire between 550 and 330 BC, grand feasts would be held where guests were seated according to their political rank. Those favored by the king were served better food and more lavish silverware and cups. One did not have to guess the rank of each individual. It was evident in what and how they ate. | Food was used to reinforce inequality in ancient Persia. |
| During this same period ancient Athens formed a culture that was staunchly opposed to monarchy. It was a direct democracy. Citizens didn’t bow to meet one another, as many other cultures at the time did, as bowing is what some do before a king. Among Athenian citizens, each man was the social and political equal to another, but many of its residents were slaves, not citizens, and the rights of women were harshly suppressed.  Still, as far as the ancient world goes, Athens was a leader in human equality, and this was reflected in their food. After Athenians defeated Persia in a major war they began building their own empire and spreading their democratic culture. Their social feasts contrasted sharply with their Persian counterparts, in that each citizen would receive the same food, in the same portion, as every other citizen. In their symposiums, where citizens reclined on coaches to philosophize and listen to music, they not only drank the same wine but made sure to drink at the same rate.[[1]](#footnote-1) | Food was used to reinforce inequality in ancient Persia.  Food reinforced equality among citizens in ancient Athens. |
| If you think about it, today we are conflicted between the Persian and Athenian food culture. On the one hand, the government provides vouchers where the poor can go into the same grocery store patroned by the rich, and buy food. On the other hand, the poor’s access to these stores is limited by their location and the dollar value of those vouchers. | Like Persia, there is an inequality of food between the rich and poor in America.  Following the lead of Athens, we take measures to reduce this inequality. |
| Food was political in the ancient world, and it is political now, but the nature of the politics has changed. In the readings for this topic I will argue that when it comes to food, politics tends to revolve largely around one’s feelings about “big government” or “big business”. Democrats / liberals in the U.S. tend to fear big business while Republicans / conservatives tend to fear big government. We will also see that arguments about controversial technologies like genetically modified organisms (GMOs) don’t just revolve around the technology itself, but the corporations who invent and use it. Both conservatives and liberals in the U.S. do express concern over GMOs, but liberals express a particularly intense concern over the corporations who patent the GMOs. | In the U.S.   * Democrats / liberals fear big business * Republicans / conservatives fear big government |
| To illustrate, the liberal magazine *The Rolling Stone* published an article in July of 2014 called *Lone Star Crazy*. The left-leaning author sought to caricaturize those on the far-right and make them seem a little nuts. What caught me was their reference to the right’s concern about GMOs, something usually associated with liberals. |  |
| [On the Tea Party in Texas.]  And we quote …  American patriots like Wolf, excited by concerns both real and obviously paranoid—revolving around gun rights, land rights, the surveillance state, genetically modified food and other assorted "liberty issues"—have come to this field to make their voices heard.  —Binelli, Mark. July 3-17, 2014. "Lone Star Crazy." The Rolling Stone. Page 53. | [On the Tea Party in Texas.] American patriots like Wolf, excited by concerns both real and obviously paranoid—revolving around gun rights, land rights, the surveillance state, genetically modified food and other assorted "liberty issues"—have come to this field to make their voices heard.  —Binelli, Mark. July 3-17, 2014. "Lone Star Crazy." The Rolling Stone. Page 53. |
| If the right is concerned about GMOs, why aren’t they joining with liberals on the west and east coast to try and ban them? The article suggests, rightly I believe, this is because that would require government regulation, and the right is more concerned with reducing regulation than they are preventing GMOs. | Debates about GMOs are as much about the role of government as it is the GMO technology itself. |
| Now, if you are like me, you are uncomfortable grouping all people into one of two political parties. We all know that people are more complex than that, that they disagree with some of their own political party’s platforms, and agree with some of their adversary’s platforms. Just remember we are not describing any one person, not even an average American, as being “Republican” or “Democrat”. Instead, we know that there is a spectrum of political attitudes, and some lean more towards one extreme than the other. So when we say “liberals / Democrats” we are not talking about all registered Democrats, we are talking about a particular political group which attracts some people more than others. We are talking about a political attitude, not a person.  It is hard to talk about the politics of those with moderate views because there is a considerable degree of ambiguity. It is easy, though, to talk about those with extreme political views, because those views are more stubborn, and thus have less ambiguous descriptions. We describe the politics of a people by the extremes of its political spectrum, because it makes communication easier. |  |
| This grouping of people as liberals versus conservatives is useful because some of the stereotypes are indeed true. Surveys by my colleague Jayson Lusk have shown that self-described liberals favor more government regulations on food than self-described conservatives.[[2]](#footnote-2) And that is exactly how they portray each other. | Political party affiliation matters because it is correlated with beliefs and attitudes about foods. |
| Grouping people as liberals or conservatives is important because political ideology has an enormous impact on beliefs about social issues, including food. A number of our topics in this course will be about the carbon footprint of food, where a larger footprint denotes greater global warming. Studies have shown that people’s belief about whether climate change is caused by humans depends far more on whether one is a Democrat or Republican, than it does one’s education.[[3]](#footnote-3) | Political party affiliation impacts attitudes about science, technology, and food.  Attitudes about global warming depend more on one’s political ideology than one’s education. |
| As we will see, surveys and voting behavior show Democrats and Republican have contrasting views on corporations and government. One side portrays big government as a bully, and the other side views big business as a bully. To illustrate, the liberal author and filmmaker Joel Bakan has written a book called *The Corporation* where he says, “The corporation is a pathological institution, a dangerous possessor of the great power it wields over people and societies.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In this book Baken diagnoses the corporation as pathological, a psychopath. | Liberals depict corporations as the villain.  For example, liberal author Joel Bakan diagnoses the corporation as pathological. |
| Yet some on political-right diagnose government in a similar fashion. When the right-leaning author P. J. O’Rourke was a guest on the *Stossel* show, he brought with him a copy of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and used it to diagnose politicians as possessing Narcissistic Personality Disorder.[[5]](#footnote-5) The idea was that politicians only care about themselves, so one shouldn’t give the government as much power as it wants. | Liberal author Joel Bakan diagnoses the corporation as pathological.  Conservatives depict big government as the villain.  Libertarian author P. J. O’Rourke diagnoses politicians as possessing Narcissistic Personality Disorder. |
| Now, most people do not have such strong aversions to either big corporations or big government, but most do fear one more than the other, and these differences keep agriculture controversial because many agricultural technologies are developed and first adopted by corporations. |  |
| Finally, I’d urge you to try and make yourself feel comfortable discussing the politics of food. It is my observation that two equally kind and smart people can adopt opposite political views. If you have made the same observation, you should feel neither shame nor pride in having a strong political affiliation, or a moderate view. If you are a citizen of a democracy, you are given the blessing of having a voice in food policy. If you belong to a market-based economy, you are given the blessing of being able to choose for yourself the food you eat. If your country allows free speech, you have the blessing of being able to talk openly about politics, including the politics of food. |  |
| It is then your ethical duty to participate in politics in the voting booth, in the grocery store, and even in casual conversation—and certainly in this course! |  |
| Know that even though this course will not shy from discussing food politics, there is no attempt to make you adopt one political position or another. It is my hope that by the end of this course you are still unsure if I am a registered Democrat, Republican, or neither. The goal of this course is not to tell you what you should think, but to help you think. I just want to help you form an *educated* opinion, whatever that opinion might be. |  |
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1. Lauden, Rachel. 2013. *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History.* University of California Press: Berkeley, CA (USA). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lusk, Jayson L. 2012. “The political ideology of food.” *Food Policy*. DOI: 10.1016/j.foodpol.2012.05.002. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lawrence C. Hamilton. 2012. “**Did the Arctic ice recover? Demographics of true and false climate facts**.” Weather, Climate, and Society. DOI: [10.1175/WCAS-D-12-00008.1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-12-00008.1) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bakan, Joel. 2005. *The Corporation*. Free Press: NY, NY. Page 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. O’Rourke, P. J. Personal correspondence on September 25, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)