**Toward a Theory of Food Politics**

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**Toward a Theory of Food Politics**

**Abstract:** Food politics are often spoken of, yet rarely conceptualized, making a thorough analysis of how food and eating have come to be a space of politics both difficult and concerning. Usage of “food politics” as a concept comes in a multitude of forms, genres, and disciplines, with little discussion on what we mean when we say food is political and what constitutes food politics. In this paper, we broadly ask—what are food politics and what makes food political? We survey existing usages of “food politics” in order to engage in a broader discussion on how food politics can be conceptualized and understood. In our consideration of ‘where is the politics?’ we divide “food politics” as a concept into three broad categories: Big P food politics, small p food politics, and political food, each of which corresponds to a common usage of “food politics.” We argue that food politics and a political understanding of food is underdeveloped and call on scholars, particularly political theorists, to engage more readily with food as a space of politics and an avenue for understanding changing political dynamics.

Keywords: food; politics; food politics; the political; new political spaces

**Introduction**

*Food is now politics and ethics as much as it is sustenance. People feel pressure to shop and eat responsibly, healthfully, sustainably. At least, that’s the impression you get from what’s written and said about food culture—that it’s a form of surrogate politics. To some, it’s not even surrogate politics; it’s the real deal, politics at its most urgent and consequential.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Among the existing discussion on the fate of the farm bill, the proliferation of urban, organic gardening, farmers markets, popular cooking shows, and rising hipster culture, food politics in the United States have become concept familiar not only in academic scholarship but also in everyday life. It is readily apparent that we are in the foodie era as new trends tied to “local,” “organic,” and “free-range,” hit the market each year and self-identified “foodies” and critiques of their practices grow in number. Yet, even as popular author and journalist Michael Pollan appears in a Netflix original[[2]](#footnote-2) urging people to get “back” in their kitchens to bake bread from scratch, and food journalist Mark Bittman argues, there is nothing wrong with a new era of food and the rise of “new-style epicures,”[[3]](#footnote-3) it is also helpful to move beyond caring about good food, toward paying attention to how food is produced and the impact it has.[[4]](#endnote-1) As such, there has been a proliferation of foodies moving beyond food truck festivals and the seemingly infinite lines that lead to the coveted “cronut”[[5]](#footnote-4) toward the acknowledgement that “the current food system means exploiting animals, people, and the environment.”[[6]](#footnote-5) It is this exploitation that is foundational for emergent foodie politics, but has also been part of scholarship and activism for years.

Concurrent, if separate from, this shift in foodie culture has come a wave of more serious and complex approaches to food, such as “food justice,” “food sovereignty,” and notably, “food politics,” which pre-dates the desires of *Portlandia* characters to eat chickens that led happy lives.[[7]](#footnote-6) While foodies seek to turn their love of food into altruistic practice, food scholars have sought to understand exactly what these concepts mean and how they are put into practice.[[8]](#footnote-7) Here, we are particularly interested in the rise and proliferation of discussions on food politics, which are often heralded, but rarely conceptualized. Unlike Lisa Heldke’s formidable task of bringing food into the discipline of philosophy, the political aspects of food are already broadly recognized, though not thoroughly explored.[[9]](#footnote-8) By examining existing usages of “food politics” we begin to parse out what food politics are, and are understood to be, among both scholars and practitioners. In this paper, we foremost ask the question—what are food politics? This question, broad as it is, lends itself to a number of additional questions—such as: what makes food political; and what aspects of “the political” are illuminated when we use food as a lens to understand broader social, economic and environmental issues? While these questions are intimately connected, we argue that there must be a broader discussion on the connection between politics and the political if we are to get to a clearer understanding of what “food politics” means.

To better understand what “food politics” are in theory and as a concept it is important to consider how food politics are mobilized in practice. In this paper, using U.S. food politics as our focal point, we offer an overview of different ways we might consider the where and how of the politics of food. To ground the conversation, we begin scaled out addressing “big P” food politics as they relate to the state and government. This usage of food politics includes a brief examination of both domestic and geopolitical approaches to food and food-related matters. However, food politics are not limited to formal political processes, but also extend to informal political spaces and places such as the farmers market, the neighborhood, the household, and the body. Following our discussion of “big P” food politics, we scale down to consider “small p” food politics. Scaling down allows us to analyze food politics as it relates to civil society and activism in order to broaden our understanding of how food politics is expressed as a response to big P politics and as a space of “the political” in its own right. These scalar examples of food politics assist with setting the foundation for thinking about food as political. Finally, we turn to considerations of how food and the action of eating can be understood as political. Taking a step back from the empirical understandings of food and eating as politics, we examine the ontological and epistemological tenets of food and eating. We conclude by highlighting and addressing a key puzzle—the common usage of “food politics” to describe food processes and food-related phenomena without a discussion of what it is that makes food political. We urge scholars, and more specifically political theorists, to take up this puzzle and consider where the politics in food politics comes from. We argue that by using food as a lens, we can rethink existing political concepts, along with illuminating new spaces to examine politics and the political.

**“Big P” Food Politics**

If food politics have become ubiquitous in modern culture and society, we must ask, what are food politics? This question can most simply be answered by defining what “politics” are, or commonly understood to be. “Politics” very simply refers to the activities associated with governance of a country. Thus, food politics, can be understood as how food is governed. More specifically, food politics are the means by which states and governments manage and regulate the consumption, production, distribution, marketing, and trade of food. Based on this understanding of food as political, we further narrow this larger-scale conversation into two categories, first, national food politics, with a focus on the United States, and the second, food geopolitics, with a focus on U.S. foreign policy. The sections that follow are not intended to be a comprehensive overview of food politics, rather to provide a platform for the discussion of a political theory of food.

*National Food Politics – The U.S. Example*

In thinking about big P food politics, we think of government. We think of the means by which our government intercedes in food systems to regulate and control production and consumption of what is deemed “safe” food. The executive branch runs campaigns or responds to crisis, congress passes legislation, which impacts food production and consumption practices (the Farm Bill for example) and two government agencies are largely responsible for regulation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). A starting point for contemporary food politics in the US, is the federal government’s enactment of the *1907 Meat Inspection Act* in immediate response to Upton Sinclair’s 1906 book, *The Jungle,* which exposed the dangerous and unsanitary conditions of meat production. Contemporary examples include the Nixon Administration’s response to food price spikes in the 1970s wherein the focus of federal policy was shifted from the supporting prices for farmers to boosting yields of a few commodity crops, or Michelle Obama’s healthy eating campaign, “Let’s Move” launched in 2010.

Though a controversial and complex subject, a central responsibility attributed to the federal government has been the maintenance of the welfare and well-being of its citizens. By this logic, the government has a vested interest in the maintenance of a “healthy” population. This mandate, while balanced against the American values of freedom and individuality, has resulted in government sponsored dietary advice and guidelines. Initially aimed at preventing the spread of infectious disease through increased nutrient and caloric intake, in the early twentieth century, dietary guidelines soon shifted from an “eat more” to an “eat less” focus as “overnutrition” became linked to obesity and chronic disease.[[10]](#footnote-9) This effort by the federal government to provide for the population’s well-being resulted in the publication and continuous revision of dietary guidelines nearly every five years since the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs began recommending dietary goals for the American people in 1980. Simultaneously the government supports the purchase of food for low-income populations in administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplementary Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). These programs provide ancillary support for the purchase of a set of pre-approved food items by eligible participants.

Conversely, if not paradoxically, while the US government lays out guidelines for citizens to pick and choose among, it simultaneously detracts from this freedom by controlling and limiting the number of choices available while also subsidizing particular crops. While the U.S. government instructs the population on what they *should* eat, the government also positions itself as an authority on what the population *should not* eat and consume. This covers a range of restrictions and production/processing practices from foods deemed unsafe (for example, raw milk) to acceptable levels of contaminants (for example, fecal matter or pesticide residue). After the widespread concern with food and food production that resulted from Sinclair’s exposé on the meat packing industry in the United States, the government responded with an increased focus on regulation and food responsibility.[[11]](#footnote-10) Obsessed with purity and cleanliness, the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, labor unions, and consumer groups banded together to produce the *Pure Food and Drug Act* and the *Meat Inspection Act* on the same day in 1907.[[12]](#footnote-11) Among a number of other provisions, these newly introduced laws granted the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to examine food specimens for possible adulteration and to report any violations directly to the Department of Justice.[[13]](#footnote-12) As new food scares popped up throughout history, Congress has been swift to take action. In cases such as the chemical contamination of cranberries in 1959 or the 2009 salmonella outbreak in peanut butter, the Food and Drug Administration, along with its counterpart, the US Department of Agriculture have continuously sought to adapt regulations and standards to protect the citizens from consuming adulterated food.

In examining the dynamics of dietary advice and food regulation, it is important to ask—who decides? It would be idealistic to assume that U.S. food politics are based exclusively on scientific expertise and technical standards alone. Rather, they can be understood most clearly as expressions of political values and interests. Food politics, in this context, are the process by which the food industry uses, “lobbying, lawsuits, financial contributions, public relations, advertising, partnerships and alliances, philanthropy, threats, and bias information to convince Congress, federal agencies, nutrition and health professionals, and the public,” to push and adhere to their self-interested, profit-driven bottom line.[[14]](#footnote-13) Thus, the current state of U.S. food (big P) politics can be characterized by conflict and negotiations between the government, the food industry, and the individual consumer as they operate within and against multiple economic systems (largely based in capitalist exchanges, but also extending to barter, trade, and unpaid labor). Politics, in this sense, are the actions of these players in the game of food politics and the policies established and influenced by these actors. Nestle articulates these politics as the way that:

…the food industry influences what we eat and, therefore our health...the ways in which food companies use political processes—entirely conventional and nearly always legal—to obtain government and professional support for the sale of their products.[[15]](#footnote-14)

This political process is the way that our food regulations, restrictions, and official advice are rarely driven by science, common sense, individualized knowledge, or health, but instead by economic and political interests.

This conceptualization of food politics has received increased attention as notable figures such as First Lady Michelle Obama entered the conversation, critiquing the political maneuvering involved in allocating money to school lunch programs[[16]](#footnote-15) and high-profile debates on the imposition of soda taxes in major metropolitan cities, such as Philadelphia.[[17]](#footnote-16) U.S. food politics, as they stand today, have become the process by which food industry lobbies with their wallets, government officials legislate with their bank accounts, and citizens “vote with their forks.”.[[18]](#footnote-17) While the nuanced politics of governing food take different shapes based on their place specific contexts, they are not contained by borders and are proliferated through an international geopolitics, to which we now turn.

*Food Geopolitics*

Not only do big P food politics pervade domestic politics, they also extend to the global realm. Though food has arguably been a global issue since the beginning of time, a global food politics can largely be traced to the colonial period. During the height of global territorial imperialism, colonies served as sites of resource and labor extraction, and exploitation, providing food and fuel for and industrializing Europe. After *de jure* colonialism began its decline following World War II, trade between imperial and former colonial states became more reciprocal, but not more equitable. Food became a geopolitical tool from the distribution of U.S. surplus as part of the Marshall Plan, to Eisenhower’s food for peace initiative (P.L. 480) and the imposition of Green Revolution technologies, food was a key site of global geopolitics, which emanated largely from a U.S. hegemon. In the heat of the Cold War, the United States began exporting surplus food and agricultural technologies to select countries in exchange for their loyalty and their admonishment of communism. Loyalty, in this context, was demonstrated by a commitment to and participation in capitalist markets and free trade. At the same time, agribusiness benefitted from global geopolitics that allowed for expansion of existing supply chains and lower operation costs.[[19]](#footnote-18) As the Cold War came to an end, these complex supply chains became even more dynamic as more and more countries became integrated into the global food web.[[20]](#footnote-19)

Within the context of the globalized food system, food politics characterizes the patterns of circulation of food in the world economy and the means by which these patterns are formed, used, and manipulated by global actors. Food thus becomes a tool of war, peace, and diplomacy. P.L. 480 was used as a way to discharge surplus grain and consequently it undercut local markets and exacerbated existing systemic issues related to hunger.[[21]](#footnote-20) Food aid, as a geopolitical tool, has been more often a reactionary measure to acute hunger, rather than a long-term solution focused on reducing vulnerability.[[22]](#footnote-21) Food and food aid are used as a bargaining chip and managed by a number of international organizations, such as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization or the World Food Program. These negotiations often reflect structural economic and political problems which create vulnerability, such as imbalances in global trade. Indeed, food has become the “hidden driver of world politics.”[[23]](#footnote-22) This hidden element is not only a concern for considering the geopolitics of hunger, but becomes of increasing concern as the global middle class grows and begins to consume more meat and hyper-processed foods.

Globalized, industrialized food systems provide the convenience of having cheap food and season-less food options throughout many post-industrial countries. However, while linked and interdependent food systems provide these conveniences, they also bring with them systems of inequality, and in the era of increasing natural and human-made crises, increased volatility. When food prices spiked in 2007 and again in 2011, the repercussions were not felt equally around the world. Speculation, disaster, and weather in one part of the world can drastically alter access to food in another part of the world, thousands of miles away. In 2008, when demand for grain hit an all-time high, exporting countries, in an effort to keep their domestic grain prices low, restricted their exports. For countries that exclusively import grain, this meant that individuals were either unable to access grain entirely or had to pay exorbitant prices. For the world’s poorest individuals, who spend an average of fifty to seventy percent of their income on food, these price hikes meant going from two small meals a day to only one,[[24]](#footnote-23) while traders in the futures market and commodity chain intermediaries saw astounding profit.[[25]](#footnote-24) The geopolitics of food here had a role to play in an activist politics as uprisings and riots dominated the response to the food price hikes.

While domestic food politics are intricate webs of producers, distributors, consumers, and policy makers, food politics at the global level further complicate this web. At the global level, food politics encompasses multifaceted questions of trade, security, hunger, and the environment, to name only a few. In an increasingly connected, interdependent world, food has become not only an area of great concern, but a central geopolitical bargaining chip. These power dynamics inherent in food production, distribution, and consumption have sparked vast responses both between and among states. In the following section, we further examine these power dynamics and the burgeoning civil society response to the corporatized, globalized food system.

**“Small p” Food Politics**

*“Eating is a political act, but in the way the ancient Greeks used the word ‘political’— not just to mean having to do with voting in an election, but to mean ‘of, or pertaining to, all our interactions with other people’ — from the family to the school, to the neighborhood, the nation, and the world. Every single choice we make about food matters, at every level.”[[26]](#footnote-25)*

In this quote, Alice Waters, the famed chef, restaurateur, activist, and author demonstrates the complexity and dynamics of “small p” food politics. When we use the word “politics,” we often make the cognitive connection to those things considered “traditionally” political—the legislature, elections, voting, and governance, this connection is one understanding of food politics—“big P” food politics. However, as Alice Waters explains, food is also political in the sense that it is personal, relational, and conflictual. Thus, “small p” food politics address relations outside and against formal governmental organizations. Goodman and DuPuis provide a jumping off point for considering a “small p” politics when they explain that a contemporary understanding of politics more generally “…comes from the Enlightenment notion of freedom as throwing off the yoke of a dominant authority.”[[27]](#footnote-26) By this conceptualization, food politics have come to mean the processes by which individuals and collectives exercise political power, which can be defined as the coercive relationship between a dominant actor and a dominated actor in which the dominated behaves according to the dominant actors will.[[28]](#footnote-27) Political power is not just challenging the dominant will of the state or government, but also the dominant will of powerful actors and structures in society (agribusiness for example). This form of politics includes the processes by which individuals and collectives challenge or resist overarching structures of power and marginalization. Scholarly literature on food politics, which spans disciplines, appears to take this idea of politics as the most common. This scaled-down food politics is understood as the efforts to change, challenge, and/or resist the overarching structure and institution of capitalism and the industrial-capitalist food system that has grown from it. “Small p politics” are, instead, situated at more localized centers of action from the community to the body. We understand these politics to be both performed as part of more organized politics and also as part of personal decision-making. In the sections that follow, we provide a portrait of ways that “small p” politics are activated as part of a larger pushback that is broadly described as “alternative.”[[29]](#footnote-28)

*Alternative Food Movements*

As we entered a global corporate food regime there was a noticeable shift not only in global capitalism, but also a massive shift in the global food system.[[30]](#footnote-29) The 1970s and 1980s marked a neoliberal turn in global food systems as industrialization was accompanied by a noticeable expansion of private agri-food corporations, the increased production and demand for animal proteins and commodity crops (corn, wheat, and soy), and the liberalization of food safety regulations.[[31]](#footnote-30) Some argue that this process of industrialization, capitalization, and globalization of food, essentially severed the connection between producer and consumer.[[32]](#footnote-31) Combined with a negative downward trend of farming in the United States this shift in global food systems sparked the attention of individuals and collectives alike.

Frustration and concern over food quality and origin soon prompted various mobilizations of food politics, which can loosely be connected under the umbrella of alternative food movements (AFMs). Though AFMs are linked by a shared mission of rejecting the conventional, industrialized, capitalist food system, they are heterogeneous. From community supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, local farmers markets, to urban and rooftop gardens, AFMs have traditionally been examined and analyzed as food politics by both scholars and members, alike. Individual choices and collective decisions to operate outside the conventional marketplace and food system are viewed as the means by which individuals exercise their political activism.[[33]](#footnote-32) As Chad Lavin explains, “If it is largely as consumers that Americans imagine politics, then food is ripe for politicization.”[[34]](#footnote-33) Small p food politics are thus not only the exclusive domain of formal political actors, but are both evident and pervasive among informal actors as part of everyday life.

Central to the rise and proliferation of various AFMs has been two powerful, but potentially competing sites of food activism, one associated with a foodie identity and the other with ending structural oppression. Foodies tend to be more consumption-focused, concerning themselves with rare, specialized, and healthy foods often found within AFM spaces such as farmers markets or boutique butcher shops. For those groups and individuals working against structural oppression, activism may take the form of boycotts and strikes, but may also be activated through food production practices, such as urban agriculture and occupying land.

*Foodie Politics*

The foodie movement gained traction in the 1980s as “new cosmopolitan identities” converged with new dietary trends and the disposable incomes of wealthy individuals.[[35]](#footnote-34) These foodies used their consumption practices as “privileged entry points for thinking about political and ethical responsibility.”[[36]](#footnote-35) For foodie actors, their politics were focused on gaining knowledge about their food. “Knowing where your food comes from” is thus viewed as a central means by which we encounter food politics.[[37]](#footnote-36) Under this assumption, knowledge about food production and origin are directly connected to making more conscious, ethical food choices, and these food choices are linked with a more holistic social transformation. The individual is seen as a powerful actor that has the potential to shape broader politics and food systems.[[38]](#footnote-37) Foodies enact this genre of politics at multiple scales from the site of the body (the politics of what they eat) to participation in regional CSAs and farmers markets (the politics of where their food comes from). While, most foodie action is focused on conscientious consumption, such politics are also tied to production practices, such as the purchase of fair trade certified goods, which are intended to inform consumers about production processes and labor conditions, while providing better realities for the individuals who grow, pick, and process the world’s agricultural goods. Here, foodie consumers seek to empower commodity producers through their politically motivated consumptive acts.[[39]](#footnote-38) By using their purchasing power at these sites, foodies participating in AFMs view their actions, both individually and collectively, as politically powerful. Food choices, which would otherwise seem inconsequential are narrated as having the potential not only to challenge the prevailing food system, but to transform it as well.

Yet, “voting with your fork” is a mode of privilege, and in many cases, those adopting a foodie identity may be doing so through dining at hip restaurants, which boast rooftop gardens that grow micro-greens and can devote labor hours to bake bread from scratch or attend to their gut microbiome through fermenting kombucha. At the same time, some are focused not on the search for the latest taco truck, but instead on pushing back against big P politics, whereby the state restricts what they can put in their bodies and how it is grown and processed. In discussions of local-scale food sovereignty, both Kurtz and Trauger note that rights to food are determined by a big P politics, failing to recognize a body-politics of individual decision making over what people may wish to put in their bodies (for example, raw milk).[[40]](#footnote-39)

A number of popular authors assisted with mobilizing these “eating-as-politics” movements, and while important for challenging the industrial-capitalist food system, many of these authors simultaneously demonize so-called bad food habits.[[41]](#footnote-40) As these authors chastise existing (conventional) food production and consumption, they similarly extol the economic, environmental, and existential virtues of organic and local diets.[[42]](#footnote-41) While these books can be credited with bringing more individuals into the collective consciousness of ethical and sustainable eating, their “what to eat” advice pays little attention to broader structures of inequality and the difficult, but necessary, conversations that must be had on how food relates to systems of racism, sexism, and poverty. As Julie Guthman critiques, “These authors seem to have given little thought to the efficacy of conversion attempts or their own subject positions as proselytizers of the gospel…nor have they given much thought to the implications of the local and/or organic in terms of social justice…”[[43]](#footnote-42) Knowing where your food comes from strikes a very different positionality than wondering where your next meal will come from. Not only must we be conscious of the inequalities and injustices that pervade conventional food and agriculture practices, but we must also be conscious of how these injustices make their way into seemingly “better” alternatives, as increasingly such alternatives are perceived as “white spaces” or as ways to create better food habits for marginalized populations.[[44]](#footnote-43) A host of scholars have raised such critiques, examining AFMs and food-related activism as a site for food justice.

*Just Food Politics*

Thus, while farmers markets and CSA schemes provide alternatives to the conventional food system in the form of local, seasonal, and organic produce, a number of AFMs seek to take these alternatives a step further to address structural oppression. These AFMs challenge not only globalized, industrialized food systems, but also the inequalities that accompany them in ways that are attentive to both production and consumption. As “new political spaces,” these initiatives employ policy advocacy and community-organizing methods to reframe issues so they are politically salient.[[45]](#footnote-44) AFM groups and individuals seek not only to address issues directly related to food, but to address broader issues such as poverty, gentrification, racism, and sexism that have led to inequitable and unjust systems of access, which may or may not be focused directly on food and that may extend to land, property, employment and more. These initiatives, movements, and organizations bring together people from diverse backgrounds in order to provide a comprehensive approach to structural change, which includes a multiplicity of voices.[[46]](#footnote-45) Within this site of politics there are large-scale mobilizations, such as boycotts and farmworker strikes (which have a long history that cannot be detailed here) and smaller-scale actions, such as community gardening. A just food politics has multiple spaces of action and actors ranging from anti-racism work through urban farming to farmworker hunger strikes targeting better working conditions and wages. Here there is a focus on groups that are considered marginalized, with attention to both consumers, who may be low-income or residing in a food desert/swamp and producers, for example, farmworkers.

Farmworkers are among the most economically disadvantaged and food insecure groups in the United States, however, within our current agricultural system, this group is virtually invisible.[[47]](#footnote-46) Language barriers, fear of deportation, frequent relocations, and lack of voting status make it incredibly difficult not only to retrieve reliable statistics on the needs of this population, but also address the social, political, and economic injustices that plague agricultural systems.[[48]](#footnote-47) Within AFMs, calls for fair wages, living and working conditions, and, more broadly, human rights for farm workers have been a central feature of efforts to resist and transform the industrial capitalist food system. Groups such as United Farm Workers and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers have sought to illuminate and eliminate the injustices and inequalities within the current food system. As Marion Nestle describes these food justice initiatives, “these movements are part of a long tradition of American grassroots democracy—of the people, by the people, for the people.”[[49]](#footnote-48) AFMs seeking to tackle pervasive social injustices, along with unequal food systems, can be considered as political as politics get.[[50]](#footnote-49)

As the above examinations demonstrate, food politics as they are understood in practice are the processes of governing food and the systematic push back against the exclusivity of governing food. Reminiscent of Polanyi’s “double movement,” empirical conceptualizations of food politics are dialectical processes of marketization, commodification, and globalization, and the corresponding response from civil society and individuals. While these existing examinations of food politics have been fruitful in contributing to our knowledge on the politicization of food, they do not get to the roots of what makes food a subject of politics and site for political examination. In the following section, we take a step back from the practice of food politics, and move toward a theoretical examination of food as political.[[51]](#footnote-50)

**Political Food**

While the above sections provide us with an overview of what food politics are and places and spaces that food politics can be identified, there is a noticeable deficit in the theorization of food politics. Why has food, the means of survival, become a central feature not only in governmental politics, but also in everyday, civil society politics? What is it about food that makes it a site for politics? What does an examination of food reveal about politics, political processes, and political science? These questions highlight the need for scholars to further interrogate the attachment of food to politics; to theorize food politics, not just empirically and critically observe them. If we are to accept the concept of food politics as a pervasive and formidable issue, then we need to understand not only the politics surrounding food, we need to also understand the political aspects *of* food. A holistic examination of food politics must move beyond empirically grounded questions of how or why we eat as we do, toward explanations of what it means to consume or produce food; how our consumption and production practices are relational; and how difference and position can change that relation.

This paper alone cannot fully theorize the anomalous role that food plays in politics, but we can begin out outline a framework for understanding food, and its accompanying processes, as a site of politics and an avenue for theorizing the political. In the remainder of this paper we outline a preliminary framework for theorizing food politics and briefly propose a few avenues for examining food as a political matter. We illuminate the notion that there is something about food, something unique, that makes it a political matter, and makes it simultaneously a site of contention, but also a vehicle for change. It is our hope that by proposing new paths for thinking and theorizing food politics, scholars will heed the call for a reexamination of food politics and how it is employed in broader food literatures.

*A Distaste for Food in Politics*

Despite the meaning and value of food to the lives of ordinary people, one of the foremost concerns of political theory, and political science more broadly, a theoretical understanding of food, is both rare and controversial. As Lisa Heldke explains, “if you are going to tell your colleagues you are a philosopher of food, you better be prepared to develop a thick skin.”[[52]](#footnote-51) The mundane practice of eating, as essential to human existence, has and is considered unworthy of serious theoretical dissection. Carolyn Korsmeyer explains, “Taste and eating are tied to the necessities of existence and are thus classified as lower functions...operating on a primitive, near instinctual level.”[[53]](#footnote-52) It reminds humans, who, based on the Enlightenment conceptualization of progress are seen to be striving toward rationality, reason, and control, that we continue to be beholden to our bodies, that concepts of hunger or starvation or nutrition are outside our control. Understood as an archetype of our animalistic past, eating, and thus food, is viewed as outside the purview of disciplines that concern themselves only with the highest forms of intellect and progress. With the advancement of civilization and society, it seems that political examinations of bodily or quotidian matters would be a setback or a reverberation to the past.

There is, however, a paradox here. Among those considered to be the foremost thinkers in political theory, those attributed with the highest form of reasoning, food and eating metaphors and references abound. As Heldke directs, “reread your favorite Platonic dialogue, keeping a weathered eye out for food references, and you’ll likely be astonished by the number of them you’ll find.”[[54]](#footnote-53) Ranging from Plato to Hobbes to Nietzsche, philosophers and political theorists alike have drawn heavily on food and food processes to bolster their arguments. For example, in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politic*s, Young explains, “the humane treatment of animals is used as a metaphor for a larger cosmopolitan narrative in which the consumption of healthy and happy animals is better for local communities, for the earth, and for the animals themselves, and thus integral to a good or happy life.”[[55]](#footnote-54) In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato famously and rigorously outlines what he deems to be the perfect diet. Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Marx weave allegories of food production and consumption throughout their most famous treatises.[[56]](#footnote-55) Thus, while food is examined in the context of control and mastery, it is considered a formidable and necessary topic of consideration by the “granddaddies” of political science.[[57]](#footnote-56)

More modern examples are also readily identifiable. Melanie DuPuis in her book outlining the connection between food and citizenship, explains how in the early days of the United States, the Founders knew what freedom was not, but struggled to understand what freedom was.[[58]](#footnote-57) Freedom, for the Founders, became based on a citizen that, “relied on an increasing separation and sacredness of human bodies.”[[59]](#footnote-58) The citizen thus came to be defined by the individual’s capacity to maintain boundaries between good and bad, pure and impure, self-control and self-indulgence. In this sense, Founders such as Benjamin Rush, used the body as a metaphor for society and argued that over-indulgence in luxury food such as meat and milk, would lead to an over-indulgent and unworthy citizen.[[60]](#footnote-59)

Thus, food, despite its foundation and seemingly monotonous role in human life, transgresses the border between what Ardent describes as “action” and “work.”[[61]](#footnote-60) Action, in this articulation, refers to the back and forth debate that has long been viewed as the ideal form of political debate.[[62]](#footnote-61) Conversely, work refers to the activities engaged in for the purpose of survival. It was Arendt’s belief that action or political debate should be shielded from the material realities of everyday life such that self-interested behavior was minimized as best as possible. In noting the frequent usage and acknowledgment of food and eating within historic political text, it becomes apparent that the distinction between material and rational realities are not only unlikely, but are not possible, especially when it comes to food. Food can thus be understood as a unique space to understand politics.

As Lisa Heldke points out, “The discipline that launched its career on Plato’s assertion that the unexamined life is not worth living has, all too often of late, taken “life” in some abstract, disembodied sense that didn’t involve dinner.”[[63]](#footnote-62) In their simplest form, politics, according to Aristotle, takes as its object the supreme good which man desires for his own sake. That supreme good is happiness. Politics, and thus, political science, at its inception, was about happiness, about studying what brings meaning and value to humans’ lives. In this sense, politics has been associated with meaningful topics such as sex, family, religion, or art, and political science has dedicated significant resources to explaining the political dynamics of these topics. Food, as we have increasingly seen, has a value in people’s lives beyond a means of survival. Young explains this in terms of gastronomy and political theory: “It seems, quite logically, that gastronomy, being the study of good eating, goes hand in hand with political theory, which concerns itself, quite readily with the study of the good life.”[[64]](#footnote-63) For food scholars, the broad reach of food as a means of understanding and rethinking concepts has been far reaching. Food is intertwined in matters as existentially serious as life and death, along with serious philosophical and altruistic topics. Food touches multiple aspects of human life and is thus meaningful in multiple, and overlapping ways.

Understanding food as a political matter forces us to examine important ontological and epistemological questions. As the theoretical study of food has been regarded as secondary to more “intellectual” pursuits, the pervasiveness of food, eating, and cuisine in both academic and non-academic discourses cannot be ignored. If food was merely a means of survival, a way for living beings to subsist, food blogs, food justice initiatives, cooking shows, restaurant reviews likely would not be as captivating as they have come to be. There is a certain value attached to food that moved beyond survival. Food, though physical and transient, is simultaneously a primary source of meaning and value in humans’ lives, and therefore must be examined by political scientists, and specifically political theorists. In the remainder of this paper, we outline three avenues for exploration of food and the new layers added to old ideas within political theory that are revealed by using food as a lens.[[65]](#footnote-64) We also note scholars who, though largely outside of the discipline, have begun to examine food and political matters. It is their work that will provide the foundation for a broader theorization of both big and small “p” food politics and food as a political matter.

*Challenging Binaries*

A hedonistic attitude toward food, is only one avenue that we might pursue in considering political food. Food becomes a political matter not only as a valuable resource for human life which must be regulated and controlled, but also in its anomalous role in transgressing the steadfast borders that have been so central to liberal democratic society. Despite this observation, the means by which food and eating challenge the fundamental ontological division between subject and object, is considerably undertheorized by philosophers, food scholars, and political theorists alike.

Those who have dared to dabble in this new territory have examined food as it violates the dichotomy of subject/object, self/other, or possessor/possessed. Chad Lavin explains, when we eat, we literally consume nature.[[66]](#footnote-65) Temporarily our bodies, the subject, is fused with objects that were once surrounding us and independent of our bodies. In the traditional liberal understanding of accumulation or acquisition, private property does not become us, it is an addition or an appendage to us.[[67]](#footnote-66) The mere act of eating bridges this gap as we, individuals, “autonomous” bodies, produce and consume the natural world. The natural world, “biochemically becomes part of the self.”[[68]](#footnote-67) Thus, according to Lavin, as a political concept, food challenges common binaries which have been foundational to what he articulates as a “global order based on limited, representative government and the authority of scientific truth.”[[69]](#footnote-68) Similarly, drawing on Buddhist and feminist thought, Deane Curtain examines the relationship between she who eats and that which she eats.[[70]](#footnote-69) Her relational approach to food and eating, like Lavin, demonstrates the means by which eating an object, makes that object a part of the subject. Food and an examination of food thus aids us in challenging problematic ontological binaries such as production and consumption, consumer and producer, edible and non-edible. It is through this challenge and deconstruction of binaries that we can make visible the problems inherent in existing conceptualizations of food politics, which continues to operate based on a binary understanding of the world.

*Civil Society and the Creation of a “We”*

Food brings people together. It would be a misnomer to suggest that food has not been an integral piece of bringing people from varying positions together for centuries. As Brillat-Savarin explains, “the fate of nations has often been sealed at a banquet.”[[71]](#footnote-70) Food is integral in the creation of a ‘we.’ According to evolutionary psychologists, the act of eating triggers the endorphin system in the brain, which is central to the social bonding.[[72]](#footnote-71) More broadly, food can be understood as a platform for bridging social difference and a means of carving out a space for a ‘we’ based politics centered on food in the unique and growing space of civil society.

Civil society is used to describe both the limits of the state wherein public interactions between strangers or private (non-state) contractual relations.[[73]](#footnote-72) Civil society is thus largely defined by voluntary associations of individuals aimed at common ends. It is within this space of civil society that Chantal Mouffe, among other post-structuralists, locates politics and the political. Politics are understood as situations where people collectively struggle toward a common end, whereas “political” is means by which those struggles occur.[[74]](#footnote-73) Simply put, politics can be understood as the what, while the political can be understood as the how. For Mouffe, an era of social movement activism forces us to rethink politics as limited to the confines of the state. It is within civil society and the grey areas between and overlapping public and private spaces that politics and the political can be expanded on and re-theorized. Mouffe explains that, “political life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a ‘we’ in a context of diversity and conflict.”[[75]](#footnote-74) The proliferation of food movements demonstrates this construction of a ‘we’ in a highly contentious and political sphere.

As is demonstrated in the earlier section on alternative food movements and food justice initiatives, food has been the vehicle by which both groups and individuals come together and challenge oppressive structures. Alternative food movements are thus not only about emphasizing “alternative” means of consumption and production, but about challenging the political, social, and economic inequalities with food as a vehicle.[[76]](#footnote-75) It must be acknowledged that within these alternative food movements, individuals are not coming together for mere socialization or ascetics, but joining together in groups that otherwise would not be formed, to work toward a common goal, whether that be injustice, poverty, health, or the like.

*Food and Identity*

You are what you eat,” is a common trope that has been used and reused largely to warn its target of the adverse effects of “bad” food. Adapted from Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are,” this popular saying also illuminates the means by which food, eating, and food discourses, along with the power relations embedded within them, all construct who we are.[[77]](#footnote-76) As Lupton writes, “food and eating…[as] intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings …central to individuals’ subjectivity and their sense of distinction from others.”[[78]](#footnote-77) The means by which food is intermingled with identity pushes scholars to question our understandings of knowing and being beyond merely cognitive concepts. Food pushes us to rethink knowing and being as temporal, emotional, and bodily. Theorizing identity through food emphasizes not just cognitive aspects, but human experiences. Heldke explains this relation, noting, “By exploring humans’ relations to food on the most elemental levels (for example, ingestion and elimination), we cannot but come to question received Western notions of being and knowing that conceive of an absolute separation of knower from known, self from other.”[[79]](#footnote-78) This acknowledgement, signals that we must examine a multiplicity of food politics from the scale of the global to the body.

DuPuis notes the intense intermingling to food and identity in the process of conceptualizing the citizen. Her connection between food and citizenship is based on the notion that Western understandings of freedom as the “purity of will” is a central feature of our political lives. As she explains, “free choice—political or dietary—is based on free will but also on control.” [[80]](#footnote-79) We, as individuals, have the freedom to choose what enters our bodies, but must also have the discipline to refrain from letting certain things enter our bodies. This discipline is intimately connected to our identities. Those individuals who do not have the discipline to refrain from eating certain food deemed “appropriate” or “pure,” are seen as unable reach their full potential as citizens because they are beholden to their vices and lack of discipline. There is an inherent tension in this freedom as articulated, which paints food choices as apolitical. Moving toward a theory of food politics requires attention to such tensions.

**Conclusion**

In the 1992 essay collection, *Cooking, Eating, and Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food,* Lisa Heldke explained the interesting puzzle of food politics. While editing a book on the philosophy of food, she was often met with bafflement and critique. She was questioned on how a philosophy of food could be conceptualized or even possible for that matter. Despite her contention that thinking about food, “raises important epistemological and ontological questions about the nature of the relation between theory and practice, or about personhood,” her critics never seemed to be satisfied.[[81]](#footnote-80) However, Heldke goes on to explain that when she refers to the political significance of food, she is rarely, if ever, met with similar confusion, critique, or bafflement. She argues that this acceptance that there is something political about food stems from some sort of personal experience that most people could draw upon that made food politics seem unquestioningly legitimate.

This puzzle is likewise evident within the broader study of food in academia and the overwhelming fascination with food in the 21st century. Food politics are accepted at face value and have come to be associated with varying modes of thought and theorizing. Just as the political has come to include anything and everything, food politics has become a seemingly totalitarian, all-encompassing concept.[[82]](#footnote-81) In the same vein that the political has been at the center of intense debates and conceptualization efforts, we urge political scientists to rethink the political in food politics and more readily conceptualize what constitutes politics in terms of food and eating.

Just as a discussion of food requires engagement with various realms of thought, so too do food politics. Theorization and conceptualization of “Food Politics” and “food politics” have thus emerged from a number of disciplines. Anthropology, geography, and sociology have been at the forefront of conceptualizing and defining food politics not only in the era of the foodie revolution, but even before food became a hot topic. Scholars from these disciplines have made invaluable contributions to the study of food, food processes, and food systems. However, there remains a lack of attention given to food politics by political scientists, and more specifically by political theorists. Food, within the discipline of political science, is examined only as one of many facets within broader research areas. For example, in examining civil conflict, political scientists consider food (in)security as one possible factor or in examining how the farm lobby gains access to the legislature.[[83]](#footnote-82) Food thus acts as one factor among many to examine conflict or legislative politics rather than being used as a lens to understand complex political issues. Furthermore, food politics as conceptualized outside the political science discipline, are intimately linked to concepts of the individual, the market, and conflict. As important topics in political science, political scientists should more readily engage not only with food as a political concept, but with how the political is conceptualized outside of the discipline. We argue that by using a food as a lens in political science, we can not only expand existing knowledge on food and food politics, but also heed the call for the discipline of political science to “redirect attention to critical and alternative approaches to the study of politics.”[[84]](#footnote-83) Using food as a lens and a topic of serious consideration within political science could enable the discipline to reground itself in matters of everyday life, where politics can and do occur. We are not arguing that placing food at the center of political inquiry will fundamentally disrupt disciplinary foundations. Rather we suggest that by using food as starting point we can delve into questions that have been central in political science, and more specifically, in political theory, for centuries. Following Mary Douglas’ (1982:124), claim that “we simply do not know the uses of food,” we argue thatusing food as a lens, we can understand new nooks and crannies of old questions, moving in unexpected directions and illuminating alternative connections not only between people, but between people and their environment.[[85]](#footnote-84)

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4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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6. Bittman, “Rethinking the Word ‘Foodie,’” np. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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11. Susanne Friedberg, *French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce in an Anxious Age*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. See Harvey Washington Wiley, *The History of a Crime Against the Food Law* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1929). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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64. Young, “Adorno, Gastronomic Authenticity, and the Politics of Eating Well,” p. 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
65. Lisa Heldke’s 2006 article, “An Unexamined Meal is Not Worth Eating,” takes a similar approach to theorizing eating within the discipline of philosophy. She examines avenues for philosophers to use food as a lens through the existing areas within the discipline—aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, and ontology. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
66. Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
67. While we find value in Lavin’s conceptualization of food as a vehicle of transgression and resistance, we interrogate his use of private property as an example. In the traditional liberal notion of property, it was white, heterosexual, western men who acquired and owned this property, ignoring those most marginalized in society. In examining food as a means, vehicle, and lens for understanding resistance, it is imperative that we not only look at the oppressed end of the binary, but those who have been systematically excluded. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
68. Ibid., p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
69. Ibid., p. xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
70. Deane W. Curtain and Lisa Heldke, *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
71. Jean-Antheleme Brillat-Savarin, *The Philosopher in the Kitchen,* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1970), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
72. Charles Spence, “Gastrodiplomacy: Assessing the Role of Food in Decision-Making,” *Flavour* 5:4 (2016), pp. 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
73. Keith Tester, *Civil Society,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014): Michael Brown, *Replacing Citizenship: AIDS Activism and Radical Democracy*, (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
74. Chantal Mouffe, “Citizenship and Political Identity,” in *Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity*, (ed.) John Rajchman (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 33-45; Brown, *Replacing Citizenship.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
75. Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Citizenship and Political Community” in *Community at Loose Ends*, (ed) Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 70-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
76. See Reynolds and Cohen, *Beyond the Kale*. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
77. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies, : Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self,* (Thousand Oaks, CA:Sage, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
78. Lupton, *Food, Body, and the Self,* p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
79. Heldke, “The Unexamined Meal,” p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
80. DuPuis, *Dangerous Digestion,* p. 2*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
81. Lisa Heldke, “Food Politics, Political Food,” in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, (eds.) Deane W. Curtin and Lisa Heldke (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
82. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Philosophical Chronicles,* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
83. See Cullen Hendrix and Henk-Jan Brinkman, “Food Insecurity and Conflict Dynamics: Causal Linkages and Complex Feedbacks.” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2:2 (2013), pp. 1-18; Halvard Buhaug, Tor A. Benjaminsen, Espen Sjaastad, and Ole Magnus Theisen, “Climate Variability, Food Production Shocks, and Violent Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Environmental Research Letters* 10:12 (2015), pp. 1-11; John Mark Hansen, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
84. Nancy S. Love and Mark Mattern, “Studying Politics Today: Critical Approaches to Political Science,” *New Political Science* 35:3 (2013), pp. 335–338. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
85. Mary Douglas, *In the Active Voice,* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1984), p. 124 as cited in Elsbeth Prosbyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)