

Gastropolitics: Understanding Politicians through their Food Habits

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Anthony Bourdain once said, “Nothing is more political than food. Nothing.”¹ It’s one of my favorite quotes related to what I write about. A second quote I think is germane to this conversation: “Perhaps you all know that hot dog is my favorite meat? I love hot dogs. I love them in buns. I love 'em outside of buns. I love them with baked beans. I just like hot dogs. It’s the best, you know, the best meat there is without question,” which is from Senator Mitt Romney, and you’ll soon understand its relevance.²

The question that arose as I thought about *Cookin' with Congress* over the years was, if nothing is more political than food, as Anthony Bourdain said, how political is the food of our politicians? To give a little bit of background on *Cookin' with Congress*: this project started randomly one day back in 2018 with the discovery of the *South Dakota Centennial Cookbook*.³ Since unearthing that hilarious gem, I've cooked more than 200 real recipes from politicians. Some recipes are their favorite foods, and some are those they've shared via campaigns, fundraisers, cookbooks, social media, and so on. I have eaten exactly like Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and four other U.S. Presidents for an entire day. Most recently, I ate like Eric Adams, the mayor of New York City, for a day. More on him later. I also have three dozen analog cookbooks in my house, which take up too much space in my office, but they're also where many of these recipes come from. So much of what I've found over the years can't be found online, which was strange to me as a person who grew up with the ubiquity of the internet.

Over time, what began as political satire turned into something more. My curiosity grew, and I wondered what I could learn about politicians from these recipes and daily diets. I started to categorize how to understand politicians through their food through three areas of opportunity where they interact with food. The first area is campaign stops. It's when a congressional candidate comes to your small town, and they visit the local joint and order the special, the one thing you simply must try there. These are all pre-planned, and while they're largely happening on campaign trails, we live in an eternal campaign cycle, so for sitting politicians, the stops are consistent. The second area of opportunity is approved content, or what the media team for any politician is going to send out into the world. Approved content

can include the favorite foods of an elected representative, which sometimes means actual recipes. The last place where politicians interact with food is behind the scenes. This is the information they potentially don't want you to know about, and what I was most interested in when I started digging into the topic. A recipe submitted to a community fundraiser cookbook is a recipe the politician's team wants people to see. What don't they want people to see? What are the actual daily diets of these famous officials?

First, however, the campaign stops. These stops serve a critical purpose in terms of boots on the ground, shaking hands, winning votes, and going out into the world. Campaign trails provide localized impact, so when a representative comes to your town or city, they must visit the right spots; they must avoid the tourist traps and hit the places locals know are worthy. If they come to Huntingdon, they visit Standing Stone Coffee Company to show they know the town and that someone did their research. These stops are great opportunities for a politician to appear relatable and talk to people. That's the main purpose. If a stop goes well, it's a great post on social media where it has the potential of other media companies running with the story — these outlets need content and will be all too happy to share. The last purpose campaign stops serve is a bit obvious: politicians need to eat food on the campaign trail. They don't always want to get takeout, and they don't have chefs cooking for them on the road. They need to eat, and campaign stops are a good way to feed your candidate.

When a stop goes swimmingly, the candidate looks human (they are human, after all). Perhaps they appear witty, clever, and engaged. Maybe the candidate gets a hug out of the situation, and they create shareable, memeable content perfectly built for social media. Every campaign stop is an opportunity for shareable content, critical for the algorithmic machines across platforms. Lastly, the politician might gain 150 votes in a small precinct. This sounds minuscule, but grassroots support matters significantly, and in-person events like these bolster that support. How do you win an election? Vote by vote.

There are several different ways that a campaign stop can go wrong when a candidate is interacting with food. The first is that they eat food, which sounds antithetical to the point of going to a restaurant. The problem arises when they're photographed actually eating something. Have you been photographed eating? Eating is not a pretty process when someone is candidly taking photos. When *Cookin' with Congress* was covered by the inimitable *Daily Mail*, they used screengrabs from videos of me with spaghetti falling out of my mouth.⁴ No one looks good when they're not expecting to have a photo taken of them eating food. Time after time, you hear media teams instructing candidates not to order hot dogs. Don't order corn dogs. Don't order sloppy food. Don't order soup or ribs or anything messy. This is why candidates order takeout so often.

Other food-related mishaps concern class on the campaign trail. Charges of elitism fly around quickly based on what a candidate orders, where they visit, or even what foods they reference. For example, “Arugulagate,” with Barack Obama.⁵ Simply knowing of arugula was not acceptable. People figured he consistently shopped at Whole Foods and ate fancy lettuce, even though the point of his reference was to talk about the chain’s exorbitant produce prices. The potential impact of being labeled elitist is that candidates could gain local disdain; vote loss is possible if the interaction goes poorly. If a candidate doesn’t know how to talk to a person in a store or in a restaurant, if they treat someone poorly, or if they make an error in local parlance (for example, calling a hero a sub or vice versa), there is a possibility of negative virality and vote loss.

This is probably hyperbolic, but Gerald Ford purportedly lost Texas in his presidential run because of a campaign stop tamale.⁶ He was running in 1976 against Jimmy Carter, a Southerner. The first thing you do when you eat a tamale is unwrap the inedible corn husk. Much like an artichoke, the exterior of the tamale is tough and not the part that is meant to be eaten. Ford was unaware and bit right into the husk and chewed on it for a while. He looked foolish eating the tamale, of course, and Texans felt he was not one of them. Ford, a Republican, lost Texas in part due to a photo of him eating a tamale wrapper. Food can be dangerous. Literally dangerous, yes, as Ford could have choked on the corn husk. Food can also be dangerous to the campaign and the politician’s image.

What we glean from a campaign stop is whether the candidate can have basic human conversations. That's all we really learn. Can they talk to someone in a controlled environment under the easiest circumstances for five to ten minutes? If the candidate can't do that, they might not be cut out for the position because it doesn't get much easier than talking to a service employee as a customer for five minutes. We probably don't have breakdowns whenever we go to Starbucks and interact with a barista. If your candidate can't do that, then it's not going to work out. Campaign stops say a lot more about that candidate's media team. How good are the team’s grassroots connections? Do they know the town they are visiting? Do they have boots on the ground in the cities, states, and townships they're going to? How well are they coaching their candidate? Are they staying on brand? That tells you they are savvy with social media usage. Media teams should know the places to go, what to say, and what to order at each restaurant.

I'm going to diverge and discuss a strange campaign, the most successful culinary campaign of all time, and it starts with the sitting president, Martin Van Buren, in 1840. Van Buren, elected after Andrew Jackson, was facing the Whig candidate, William Henry Harrison. Van Buren’s team levied a charge against Harrison, claiming that he was old and useless and proposing to give him a barrel of cider and let him sit by a fire for the rest of his days.⁷ Harrison and his team used that charge to their advantage

because hard cider has context; it was a drink of the common person. They immediately seized on this insult and proclaimed that Harrison did, in fact, love cider. Harrison pivoted so hard to cider that he became known as the hard cider candidate. The narrative became the fancy candidate with champagne and expensive clothing versus the hard cider, log cabin candidate.⁸ The storytelling happens right in front of you.

That campaign worked well for two reasons. First, it was easy to understand and came at a time when people were looking at the past and wanting to return to simpler times.⁹ Hard cider evoked those same feelings. Second, it worked because the Harrison campaign went from town to town and gave out hundreds of pounds of meat, hundreds of loaves of bread, and thousands of gallons of hard cider. On their campaign trail, they even had a log cabin. The campaign traveled on a steamship from town to town, and wherever they would go, they set up a real log cabin, cooked meals, served people, and got potential voters drunk. The ploy worked so well that Harrison became known as the president who won the office because of hard cider.

What did we actually learn about Harrison from this campaign? William Henry Harrison was not born in a log cabin. He was born on a plantation to wealthy elites.¹⁰ However, he could relate to people. We learned that he could talk to people, and he could shake their hands as they were very, very drunk and eating free meat. We didn't learn anything about his background or history. The people learned exactly what the campaign wanted them to learn: that Harrison was the hard cider fan, the log cabin candidate. He was a man of the people, while Van Buren was not.

The second area of opportunity where politicians interact with food, where *Cookin' with Congress* led me first, is approved content. Approved content is about image control. It is a well-thought-out, articulated story shared over and over in various forms and formats. This is the second layer, away from stilted restaurant conversations on the road; it's not a simple interaction where someone orders a burger. Usually, this content has been focus-grouped and embedded into the campaign in some fashion. Campaign teams know what's posted on social media, what's going out to journalists, and the talking points being introduced to the public. Approved food content must feel authentic, even if it's technically not. The campaign is explicitly saying, for example, that a candidate likes pork rinds.

George H. W. Bush, president in the late 1980s and early 1990s, loved pork rinds. He couldn't stop talking about pork rinds, especially with Tabasco sauce. He mentioned them time after time, to the point where the pork rind manufacturers named him "Skin Man of the Year".¹¹ Bush was the only person awarded Skin Man of the Year because the sale of pork rinds rose 11% — that's how much he talked about them in office. Going back to Mitt Romney, the man clearly likes hot dogs. Romney talks about how much he likes hot dogs on National Hot Dog Day and National Sandwich Day. When he's eating a

hot dog, they're playing it up, capturing it on social media, and putting it out there to be seen. His team knows the average person likes hot dogs, and this is a point of potential relatability.

Those are examples of approved content, and so much of it is determined by the politician's favorite foods and recipes. Recipe sharing is what I first dove into with *Cookin' with Congress*. I was fascinated that politicians were sharing their home-cooked recipes with the public.

I've noticed commonalities after looking at hundreds of recipes from politicians. The first is regionalism. If a politician is from Vermont, I guarantee there will be maple syrup in the recipe just about every time. I remember a recipe from a Washington state senator, and the first step was to catch a salmon. They're playing to their base, to people in their state. The candidate is showcasing trustworthiness and local chops, and sometimes they will cater to entire industries. A great example of this is Tim Walz's Turkey Trot Tater Tot Hotdish; Minnesota is the number one producer of turkeys in the United States.¹² That's why there's no beef in the dish. The recipe Walz is sharing is calculated and regional.

Narrative intent shapes many of these recipes as well. A good example of this is Hillary Clinton's chocolate chip cookie recipe.¹³ I know, when you think of Hillary Clinton, you think of chocolate chips. She was conducting an interview when Bill Clinton was running for president in 1992, and she said, "I suppose I could have stayed home, baked cookies, and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession."¹⁴ She caught a lot of heat for this partial quote at a time when gender politics were not favorable to women speaking their minds at all. Someone on her team convinced her to bow to the pressure and release a chocolate chip cookie recipe. The release didn't feel right, and pundits said she was doing it as a retort to the insult; perhaps that's true. Clinton neither confirmed nor denied, though she did admit asking all of her friends to get her the best recipe. In an odd twist of fate, Clinton entered a Family Circle bake-off with her cookies against Barbara Bush (George H.W. Bush's wife and First Lady for many years).¹⁵ Hillary Clinton won with her chocolate chip cookie recipe, and Barbara Bush admitted she had simply obtained hers from a friend.¹⁶ Narrative intent is important; politicians put a recipe out there for a reason. There was no world in which Clinton released a chocolate chip cookie recipe before that whole kerfuffle happened; it served a narrative purpose.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan loved French onion wine soup. He released a recipe for onion wine soup.¹⁷ However, he released that recipe at a time when America was beginning to build the French stereotype that remains prevalent now: snotty, elitist, un-American. There was backlash regarding his French onion soup recipe; thus, Reagan's hamburger soup recipe is the one that has lived on.¹⁸ Recipes also contain class signifiers. For example, in the recipe for hamburger soup, Reagan gives the option to use bullion or homemade stock, as well as canned tomatoes for those without access to fresh tomatoes throughout the year.

We see class signifiers with Vice President Kamala Harris and Senator Mark Warner on Kamala's cooking show, *Cooking with Kamala*.¹⁹ She had a back-and-forth with Warner, who made a tuna melt. He didn't drain his tuna, instead pouring the fish on some white bread with a half-cup of mayonnaise before throwing it in the microwave for 30 seconds. Kamala corrected him on how to make a tuna melt, using butter and alluding to her Whole Foods brand ingredients. Warner, a Democrat from Virginia, responds by saying her melt was fancy and he hoped that they were going to use expensive mustard. Their ingredients have an underlying class context, which is common. Politicians are always conscious of who they're speaking to and who they're trying not to offend when releasing recipes.

Tim Walz has had a successful recipe release. He's achieved virality. People have recreated his hotdishes (e.g., Evan Kleinman at KCRW), and numerous other publications have shared his recipe.²⁰ The recipe also displays the previously mentioned regionalism and narrative intent, with Minnesota being the number one producer of turkey. I even received a donation request on Instagram saying the campaign would send a free recipe for Tim's hotdish if I donated to the campaign. This tactic leverages something Tim Walz is good at: cooking is authentic to who he is. Walz won three hotdish contests when Al Franken used to run them in the Minnesota Congressional Delegation Hotdish Off.²¹

When a recipe release goes wrong, the politician appears unserious, as Michael Bloomberg did when his face appeared on a meatball in a recipe released on Twitter in 2020.²² The image went viral in all the wrong ways. Again, food is dangerous and risky, even with an entire team to approve a post or recipe release. A politician can alienate their target audience, their very own followers and supporters. An example is Tim Kaine's Family Creamed Onions, which isn't a phrase that generally excites people.²³ The picture of the dish is a gloppy mess. People on Twitter responded by saying "Keep that away from me," among many, many other harsh things. Now, Kaine is known for two things: being on the Democratic presidential ticket in 2016 and creamed onions. That's his political legacy. The recipe didn't knock him out of office, but it was negative online notoriety that has remained on the internet, where flubs are carved in stone.

What do we learn from approved content? Well, we learn that the politician probably genuinely likes the dish. Mitt Romney likes hot dogs. Tim Walz probably eats a hotdish occasionally. We also learn what parts of themselves they're comfortable mixing with their public image. Clearly, Romney is comfortable saying he likes hot dogs. He's comfortable saying that hot dogs are a part of him, and it's a part that he wants the public to know about. Like campaign stops, we also learn about the media team and staff; in addition to their savviness, we also learn the team's insecurities about their politicians. George H.W. Bush's pork rinds weren't just an offhand remark he made; there was a calculated effort to play up his love for the salty, working-class snack. People knew that he was actually a New Englander at heart,

and that yacht clubs and country clubs were his preferred fair. His campaign attempted to combat the narrative that Bush was a weak, coastal elite with a pampered background. They were insecure about him not looking tough enough. What makes you look tough? Eating fried pig skin slathered in hot sauce.

The last place politicians and food interact, and the place I thought I could get closer to knowing who they truly are, is behind the scenes. Uncovered by journalists, deep research, and anonymous sources, this area of opportunity is found through talking to restaurant workers, former caterers, in-house chefs, White House staff, former aides, and so on. This is the information that politicians don't want you to know, the information they don't publicize: for instance, daily eating habits. This is why I ate like Donald Trump and found myself eating two Filet-O-Fishes, a chocolate milkshake, and two Big Macs in twenty minutes.²⁴ When it goes right, the approved content, the behind-the-scenes, and the real daily eating habits are perfectly aligned.

Ronald Reagan truly loved jelly beans.²⁵ He snacked on hundreds of them and kept a jar of Jelly Belly brand jelly beans on his desk, ordering over 300,000 beans per month for him and the offices he frequented in Washington, D.C.²⁶ This habit built a myth around him as America's paternal grandfather, wise but humorous and lighthearted. The habit aligned with the messaging that Reagan's team promoted, yet happened to be the truth. To a degree, for many years of Joe Biden's career, the same strategy worked. A man with humble beginnings, a self-proclaimed champion of the middle class, and what does he enjoy? He likes ice cream. Biden likes sandwiches, cereal, angel hair pasta, and pomodoro sauce, all of which are simple, middle-class foods.²⁷ Spaghetti with red sauce built into a narrative, and it aligned with who Biden had already presented himself to the public.

When this strategy works, the public discovers something behind the scenes that does not contradict their preconceived notions. The hard-earned messaging is lost when the alternative happens, when something is discovered that completely tarnishes a legacy.

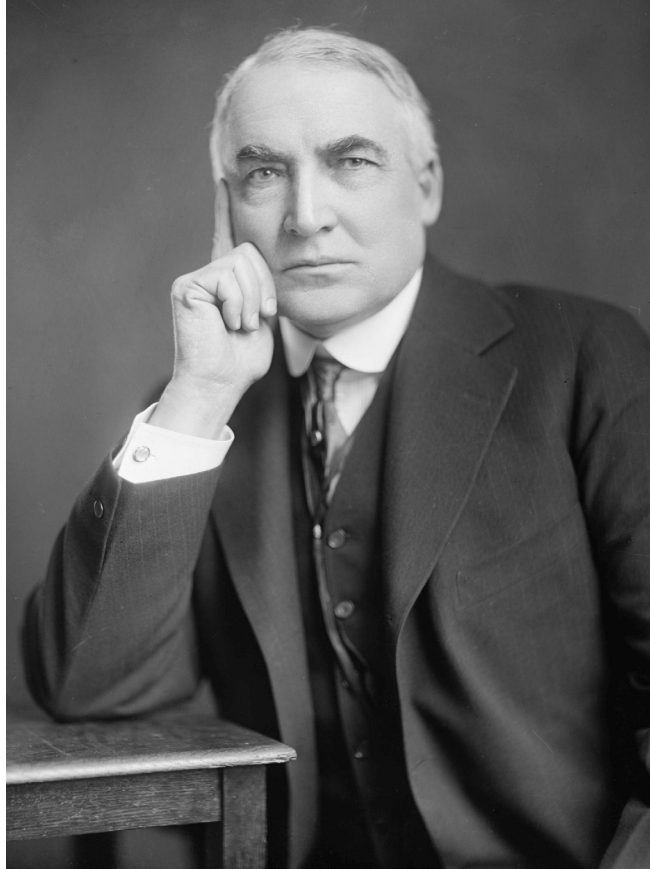


Figure 1. Warren G. Harding's Official Presidential Portrait. Photo Credit: Harris & Ewing.²⁸

An example of this is Warren G. Harding, known today as one of the worst presidents of all time. When he died in office, his approval ratings were incredibly high. Unfortunately, many secrets came out after his death. He was president during Prohibition in the United States when it was illegal to drink alcohol, and he never drank. At least that was what people thought. In reality, Harding was drinking martinis on the golf course. In 1922, he was drunk during a meeting with railroad workers negotiating the end of a strike.²⁹ This surfaced after he was dead, and it turned the public against him, thinking, "If Harding was lying about his drinking, what else was he lying about?" A great deal. His alcohol habit wasn't the only thing that tarnished his legacy, but it had a domino effect. We are seeing the same situation happen today with New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

What can we glean from these behind-the-scenes looks at what politicians consume daily? I thought it would be the unvarnished truth. However, there are levels of understanding. The campaign stops, the approved content, and the behind-the-scenes; all of these relay knowledge and qualitative data. What one really understands, respectively, are the campaign, the brand, and the person behind it all. It's the nexus of these three layers that is the most interesting and also the most dangerous. Everyone must

eat, and everyone has food opinions. If you want to become popular online, share a hot food take. For example, I ate like Joe Biden for a day, several million people watched it, and the thing that most people took issue with and commented on was that I said that Fig Newtons are not cookies. Everyone has opinions on food, which means a politician cannot avoid sparking other people's opinions with every single food interaction they have. In this way, gastropolitics is the ultimate highwire act.

When the highwire act is done deftly and with precision, there's a perfect combination of campaign, brand, and person. I would argue that George W. Bush did it beautifully post September 11th, 2001. There was a lot of tough talk on terrorism from his campaign and the culture at large; Bush had to appear tough and lean into that kind of "Texas talk." His campaign largely focused on winning the war on terror, and his brand had a cowboy aesthetic. People saw him on the ranch and saw him clearing brush and wearing actual cowboy boots. He was a tough, normal guy with simple tastes. Those simple tastes were cultivated for media appearances even prior to 2004.

In 2000, George W. Bush went on *Oprah*, and Oprah asked him what his favorite food was.³⁰ He responded with peanut butter and jelly, and people went wild. They loved it. The audience could relate to a president who liked peanut butter and jelly; people said that they could get a beer with him, and that image stuck for subsequent reelection efforts. Bush genuinely enjoyed Tex-Mex food and cheeseburger pizza (two of the most American words put together), fitting right in with the brush-clearing photo ops and tough talk on terror.³¹

The epitome of misalignment is New York City Mayor Eric Adams. Adams is currently under fire for fraud. He was elected as the first "blue-collar mayor," hardworking, with an emphasis on public safety. He'd been a New York City cop for over 20 years. Those are the main points Adams ran on in his campaign. His brand was strong and practical, including a vegan plant-based lifestyle that skewed unpretentious and pragmatic. He even released a cookbook with all plant-based recipes.³² He was a practitioner of veganism for years after he briefly went blind due to type 2 diabetes, which changed his life dramatically. That part of Adams's story was incredibly important in creating his brand, and it worked.

Adams' brand as a pragmatic, unpretentious vegan became an issue when journalists discovered that Adams was, in fact, not a pure vegan and that he enjoyed fish on numerous occasions.³³ Reporters spoke to some of the restaurants Adams frequented and learned that Adams was going in and ordering his "regular," branzino.³⁴ In an interview, Adams responded that he's an imperfect vegan.³⁵ That would be fine if he said he was a flexitarian or if Adams had originally stated he was mostly plant-based, but he said he was a vegan, and his brand was vegan, and here he was eating expensive fish.

Currently, we're watching Adams' downfall. Food is not why he may be going to jail, but this branzino slip made people think about him differently. Much like with Harding, if Adams is lying about being vegan, what else is he lying about? This lie was an entry to people not trusting him, because in politics, if you lie, you are a liar; there is no distinction between telling a lie and being a liar. A blue-collar vegan who isn't actually vegan, focused on campaign issues like ethics and crime? Ultimate misalignment.

Finally, I want to discuss one of my favorite examples of why food is such a highwire act and why it can be so dangerous to politicians: Republican Senator Larry Craig from Idaho. He was anti-marriage equality and LGBTQ+ and cared a lot about being fiscally conservative and balancing the budget. His brand aligned with "family values" back when that was a media buzzword for Republicans. Larry Craig's brand was clean, socially conservative morality.

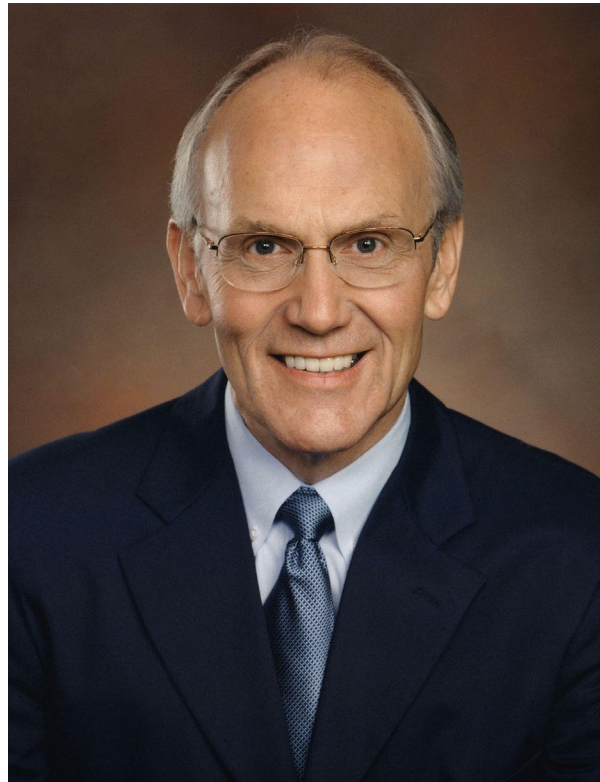


Figure 2. Official Senate portrait of Larry Craig. Image Credit: Larry Craig Wikipedia page.³⁶

However, the person ended up being a little different from the brand. Craig found himself in a sting in a Minnesota airport bathroom; it came out that he had solicited sex from a male undercover police officer.³⁷ Larry Craig's own published recipe perfectly undermines his brand and highlights the person he is, and I think it shows how misaligned Larry Craig was with his campaign. The recipe is for Super Tuber, a surreal dish shared by Larry Craig in a campaign cookbook.³⁸



Figure 3. Senator Larry Craig’s “Super Tuber.” Photo Credit: Bennett Rea³⁹

It is a greased-up Idaho potato with a hot dog shoved through the center, which Craig then microwaves for four minutes and eats. This is the ultimate misalignment with his brand, content, and campaign, and he did resign eventually. The Super Tuber does show you something about Larry Craig, and after I made it and ate it, I felt like it perfectly exemplified the man.

To close with the point that food is not without context. Food is not inherently one thing or the other. Arugula is one person’s fancy elitist lettuce, and to someone else, it’s what they grow in their backyard for salad. There’s no universality in food; it’s always understood in the context of class signifiers, social signifiers, gender signifiers, and society at large. A hot dog could be one senator’s revealing Super Tuber and another senator’s perfect method of connecting with ordinary folks.



Figure 4. Mitt Romney, Steve Jurvetson, and Meg Whitman eating together. Photo credit: Steve Jurvetson.⁴⁰

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