





Carry a Big Stick

If the South sets the nation's political table, **food policy** should be high on the menu.

by **ANGIE MAXWELL**

MOST OF THE TIME WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FOOD AND POLITICS, WE

talk about quirky events like the annual raccoon supper in Gillett, Arkansas, a college scholarship fundraiser that's a must-show political event for candidates, incumbents, and lobbyists. We laugh about campaign-trail blunders, such as the time President Gerald Ford bit into a tamale without unwrapping it. (Some still say the gaffe lost him the election to Jimmy Carter.) We get into fights on social media over mayonnaise brands. We decide whose recipe is more authentic or where a specific dish originated. I'm no different: I will fight you if you put tomatoes in a gumbo and still try to call it one. My family is Cajun, from Evangeline Parish. Food is religion there.

We use food to celebrate life, to mark death, to entertain ourselves and our loved ones, to bond across generations, to comfort the suffering, and to heal the sick. It is emotional. It should also be political.

I saw food very differently growing up. Born with severe food allergies back when nothing had labels, I was allergic to practically everything that my people cooked—all fish, all seafood, all the things. I'm not talking like it hurts my stomach. I'm talking like double-doors-to-the-ambulance kind of allergies.

When I started kindergarten, my mother said, "No one is going to watch this for you. You've got to do it for yourself." My school served fish patties for lunch on Fridays, and I couldn't breathe in the small cafeteria. On those days, I was allowed to eat outside by myself. I know it sounds sad, but I believe that's where I learned to think.

For me, as a political scientist, the answer to the question "where is the South?" is an easy one. The South is, and always has been, at the center of the political universe. Since our foodways are central to Southern identity, the question of food—who prepares it, who buys it, and who sets policy around it—should matter to every Southerner who casts a ballot.

This might seem counterintuitive to residents of most Southern states. For example, in Arkansas, the ruby-red state where I live, we know the results of elections immediately after the polls close. But the South is made up of purplish states such as Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, and Texas, with their combined 102 electoral votes. If a candidate sweeps just those four states, they'd be about 40 percent of the way to that magic Electoral College number.

If that's not enough to convince you of the South's political importance, look at how each party structures its presidential primary. You'll find that on both sides, Republican and Democrat, the South punches forcefully above its weight.

In terms of the Republican Party, three aspects

of the GOP's primary structure result in disproportionate Southern influence. First, the party distributes bonus delegates to states that went red in the previous cycle, resulting in an outsized number of Southern delegates relative to the region's population. A second, newer factor is an earlier primary calendar: Nearly every primary in the South will take place by March 23, 2024. By the time the polls close in Louisiana that day, 65 percent of the Republican delegates will have been chosen, and more than half will have come from the South. Third are the state-by-state rules for awarding delegates to the winning candidates. Most Republican primaries are winner-take-all or winner-take-most. This system can have a huge impact on a candidate's momentum, even if primary-voter turnout is low.

Now, let's look at the Democratic Party. If the two major parties had the same primary rules, we'd expect to see Southern Democrats at a relative disadvantage. But the structure is actually different in two important ways. First, Democrats don't award bonus delegates based on past outcomes, so the region is not penalized for not going blue in the last election cycle. Second, the Democratic Party primary system awards delegates proportionally to candidates rather than giving all or most of the delegates to the overall winner. Together, these factors tend to keep the South relevant in national party conversations until convention time.

The South has come to be seen as a foregone conclusion come Election Day. (There are those swing-state exceptions, of course—notably North Carolina and Georgia in recent cycles.) The irony, though, is that Southern voters have a disproportionate say in determining the names on both tickets.

So, what does that have to do with food? If you own a restaurant or other food business, the knowledge that you carry a big stick should influence you to be political. Not partisan—political. Call it civic participation if that is preferable.

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Foodways help define the South.
And the South is the center of
this nation's political universe.



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The food industry drives the economy in much of this region and has a great deal to do with its cultural richness. However, despite the major problems that afflict the region, it feels like too many Southerners avoid talking about politics. Consequently, the region continues to suffer in ways that could be eased by the very politics on which people in the South stay silent.

WHEN I WAS A CHILD AT FAMILY gatherings, sometimes the first thing people would tell me, even before hello, was where to find the homemade dessert that I wasn't allergic to. (The dessert table was actually the top of my grandmother's washer-dryer.) It was both a sweet gesture and a reminder that my allergies marked me as an outsider. And as I looked from the outside, I could see that sometimes food took the place of real conversations. Hard conversations. It wasn't polite to talk about politics, especially among women, because you might upset people. Historically, this is much bigger than my family: That silence of politeness is exactly what made Jim Crow's gravity so strong. It held the region in a suspended state. And the more polarized politics becomes, the quieter a lot of us get.

In 1949, the political scientist V. O. Key Jr. published *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. There's a quote from the introduction that still rings true. It reads, in part:

"When all the exceptions are considered, when all the justifications are made, and when all the invidious comparisons are drawn, those of the South and those who love the South are left with the cold, hard fact that the South as a whole has developed no system or practice of political organization and leadership adequate to cope with its problems.... Southern politics is no comic opera. It is a deadly serious business that is sometimes carried on behind a droll facade."

The droll facade of one-party politics, long the Southern norm, leads to a politics of entertainment. A real contest of ideas will require

confronting problems so deeply embedded that we can hardly fathom alternatives. For example, only thirteen states tax groceries. Why does Mississippi, the state with the highest poverty rate, also have the highest grocery tax in the nation? It isn't because the majority of people think a 7 percent grocery tax is a great idea. It's because everyday citizens don't even realize that most of the country does not have such a tax. Bad policies are normalized, and we become stagnant. Many of us try to help those who are suffering. We provide basic necessities to our family and neighbors to fill in the gaps, and we let government off the hook. And then that, too, becomes normal. At some point, we forget that change is possible.

I teach at the University of Arkansas, and most of my students work. They have to. Many of them work in the food industry. Restaurant owners can ask themselves: How many college students do I employ? How many of them are registered to vote? How many employees have I *taken* to vote?

People born in the twenty-first century are unaccustomed to showing up in person with physical documents and identification. It is not how their world works. If you have not shown young people how to vote by taking them with you to the polls, do not ask them to show you how to do something on your phone.

IS THERE AN AGENDA FOR THE Southern food industry for the next two decades? What is it? Who is crafting it? Too often, political engagement spikes as defense against a new policy, mandate, or—as we just experienced—pandemic. But in politics, if you are playing defense, you have already lost. Playing the long game on offense is the path to real change, and it requires vision. It requires leaders in this industry—restaurateurs, labor organizers, farm owners, chefs, and others—to imagine an ideal world in which foodways can thrive and then decide to fight for it one pragmatic step at a time at the local, state, and federal levels.

The planning for midcentury must start now, and that work is political, not polite. Food-industry stakeholders must ask complex questions. What kind of training would prepare restaurant workers and give them an economically mobile path? Can these young people get internship credit while working in the restaurant industry towards such a degree? What is the plan to eliminate the grocery tax? Should there be subsidies or incentives for sourcing food locally or implementing green policies? What red tape stands in the way of the food industry's success in your community? How many people in the food industry serve on your city council? How many are running for the state legislature?

Many of us watch politics for entertainment like a football game. We share hilarious memes. We poke fun at each other and ourselves. We play-fight over whether tomatoes are disqualifying in a gumbo. But both politics and food

are deadly serious business. Food is intellectual and primal. It's commerce. It's an art form. It is simultaneously a luxury good and a human right. So many political issues intersect with the food industry in some capacity: infrastructure, climate change, inflation, immigration, health care, education. Foodways help define the South. And the South is the center of this nation's political universe. The region decides the presidential nominees of both parties and the leaders of those parties. Individuals who care about Southern foodways have an opportunity to lead conversations and drive change. What is your vision for the way food is grown, distributed, used? What value do you put on food, work, and food workers? If you're playing defense, it's too late. Set the terms of the debate. You have a big stick. Use it. Because what food you put on the table absolutely matters, but who has a seat at that table matters more. 🍴

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