AS I WRITE THIS LETTER in August, here in the United States where I live and work, we are gearing up for our national elections, which will be held in early November. By the time this issue is published, the elections will be over and we will know the outcome. As I reflect on this election season, I am struck by the fact that food themes have been curiously absent. In the U.S., presidential candidates and other political leaders have long been connected to particular foods and food issues, as if those foods conveyed a particular set of qualities or values associated with those individuals. In the 1928 presidential elections, a local chapter of the Republican Party published an advertisement in The New York Times endorsing Herbert Hoover, promising that a Hoover presidency would ensure not just “a chicken in every pot,” but “a car in every backyard, to boot.” After Hoover won the presidency, rival campaigns during the 1932 presidential campaign held him accountable for not following through on this promise. Promises of food as a path to prosperity and social justice continued to color American presidential campaigns, with John F. Kennedy promoting a food stamp program that he then initiated after he was elected. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, subsequently pushed the U.S. Congress to pass legislation that made the food stamp program permanent. Johnson has since been credited with introducing measures to expand governmental programs to provide food assistance to low-income families, especially children.

Personal food preferences have also been part of presidential campaigns, as candidates have been associated with individual foods and observers have sought to link those foods to ideas about the character and personality of the candidates. President Jimmy Carter’s Southern heritage was associated with peanuts, whereas President Ronald Reagan was often remembered for his preference for jelly beans, a candy. President George H.W. Bush was remembered more for the food he disliked—broccoli—a dislike with which many Americans identified, particularly in a moment when debates about legislating health and healthy eating represented larger concerns with personal choice versus the intrusion of the “nanny state” in citizens’ ordinary lives.

President Bill Clinton’s folksiness was perhaps best represented by his indulgence in fast food—but then years later, his conversion to veganism and dramatic weight loss have been held up as evidence of his liberal eliteness, an association that his spouse Secretary Hillary Clinton has occasionally had to deflect during her own presidential campaign. The current American president, Barack Obama, has been especially criticized by opponents who have focused on his preference for organic and gourmet food as an indicator that he is out of touch with mainstream citizens. In one particularly memorable moment, when then-Senator Obama was talking with a group of farmers in Iowa, America’s farming heartland, during his first presidential
campaign, he tried to sympathize with their concerns over falling crop prizes. Yet even after noting that he was not a farming expert, he fumbled by referring to arugula prices in Whole Foods, an upscale organics supermarket chain that does not even have an outlet in the state of Iowa. In that attempt to be human, Obama inadvertently further marked himself as a member of the urban, socioeconomic elite.

This year, minimal attention had been paid to food as a symbol of candidates’ personal qualities or political values and programs, until a recent inflammatory comment reintroduced food as a marker of Americanness, its limits, and its possibilities. In a statement about the perceived dangers of uncontrolled immigration, candidate Donald Trump warned that there would be a taco truck on every corner. This claim then prompted a backlash from opponents who celebrated Americans’ love for Mexican cuisine and expressed enthusiasm for an even greater availability of tacos, burritos, and enchiladas. Enterprising voter rights groups even went so far as to turn taco trucks into mobile voter registration centers. Both the publicity and the protest moves were made possible to a great extent through the use of social media, which enabled a simultaneously political and culinary mobilization.

This particular instantiation of food and politics reveals much about American life and American political activity more generally—especially about domestic debates on multiculturalism, assimilation, and migration. At the same time, the role of social media was not incidental, as responses to Mr. Trump’s statement—both in favor and opposed—were facilitated by the circulation of information, opinions, and opportunities for social action through Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of digital media.

What is happening in terms of the food/politics/social media connection in the United States is not unique but something that is taking place throughout the world, as we see, for example, in the SOAS/Gastronomica Food Studies Centre Distinguished Lecture by anthropologist David Sutton that appears in this issue. In this lecture, Sutton explores the role of food in recent Greek politics, particularly those surrounding Greece’s austerity experience. Attacks on political figures and political policies were waged, literally and figuratively, through food. Social media played a significant role in these events, whether it was through online posting of political cartoons and information or through the galvanization of communities into action. In this fascinating lecture, Sutton takes us deep into the many creative ways that Greeks have used food imagery and objects to materialize their views about neoliberal austerity. In many ways, food itself becomes a medium—and even social media—through which political life emerges.

Food as a form of political media appears as a theme in several of the contributions to this issue. In research briefs, both Rebecca Feinberg and Jacob Bessen explore how nations and nation-states are rendered in images and experiences of food and then promoted globally as part of larger geopolitical efforts. In the case of Feinberg’s essay on Expo 2015 in Milan, she critically interrogates how the Expo’s theme of global food sustainability—captured in the phrase “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”—was far less egalitarian and socially just when experienced on the ground by hungry, ordinary people who balked at the exorbitant prices and long lines at most pavilions. As Feinberg pointed out, the mythology of sustainability butted up against the realities of disenfranchisement created by the Expo itself. In his essay on Israeli birthright tours, Bessen explores how tour providers appropriate food for nationalist sensibilities to promote a singular Israeli identity, even when the food that is mobilized for these sensibilities is culturally diverse and sometimes from Palestinian communities no less. In both cases, food is essential to the public media of political promotion.
The public media of food is even more pronounced in the essays by Michael Pennell, Nancy Stalker, and Perin Gurel. Pennell tackles a most contemporary issue—how social media evaluation systems like Yelp shape food experiences for both producers and consumers. Through fascinating interviews with Yelp aficionados, Pennell provides insights into both the expansionist and compressionist consequences of Yelp. At the same time that social media facilitates greater networks and larger communities of circulation, it also locks food producers and customers into smaller and smaller roles as they must specialize and perfect their products and experiences. From a very different vantage point, Nancy Stalker looks at Japanese food-themed television, with particular focus on serials and how gender norms, most notably those pertaining to maleness and masculinity, are formed and circulated through the media. In her essay on the gendered and racialized nature of yogurt, Perin Gurel examines how qualities of whiteness, vitality, and sexuality are associated with yogurt, as popular views are shaped by advertising, especially those associated with television programming. Through a fascinating comparison of American and Mediterranean television commercials, Gurel shows how yogurt shifts registers from being a food that is meant to discipline white, female, American bodies to a food that is meant to enhance male virility in Greece and Turkey.

The essays by Charlotte Biltekoff and Alexandra Lakind, Lihlani Skipper, and Alfonso Morales each focus more directly on the politicized aspects of food, even as the circulation of these food experiences is also deeply entangled with and made possible by media. Biltekoff compares two popular American school food curricula and reveals the ideologies about science and morality that are embedded in each. As she demonstrates, these competing curriculum modules, and presumably by extension most other curriculum modules being promoted to American schools, contain and convey competing facts about health, nutrition, and science. It is not that there are untruths, but that there are multiple truths, which are informed by different philosophies of choice, autonomy, and value. In the case of the article by Lakind, Skipper, and Morales, the authors focus on a specific farm-to-school program implemented in Wisconsin and how it reflects alternative possibilities for promoting local communities of both producers and consumers. Taken together, these two essays shed light on how American programs to teach and feed schoolchildren are never neutral but always shaped by stakeholders with needs and interests.

In the end, food is always political, not just because it becomes part of political campaigns but because it is always a medium through which socioeconomic differences are expressed and made manifest.

Correction:

Citations provided for the term “gastronationalism,” which appeared in the February 2016 article “The Hummus Wars Revisited: Israeli-Arab Food Politics and Gastromediation” (2016, 16(1): 19–30), were incorrect. The proper citation for the term “gastronationalism” and its definition as “the use of food production, distribution and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food” (p. 19 and p. 23), is p. 433 in Michaela DeSoucey’s 2010 article “Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union,” American Sociological Review 75(3): 432–55.