

1

WHAT I EAT IS YOUR BUSINESS

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who studies the different values held by liberals and conservatives. He writes in his 2012 book, *The Righteous Mind*, “Liberals sometimes say that religious conservatives are sexual prudes. . . . But conservatives can just as well make fun of liberal struggles to choose a balanced breakfast—balanced among moral concerns about free-range eggs, fair-trade coffee, naturalness, and a variety of toxins, some of which (such as genetically modified corn and soybeans) pose a greater threat spiritually than biologically” (13).

A friend of ours who is also a food activist remarked in response, “And conservatives don’t care what they put in their bodies as long as it is quick, convenient, and cheap!” Both comments were made in humor, as their authors are not political pundits, and neither of them wish to be affiliated with any one political party. Yet there is always some truth to humor, and food has indeed become a politically divisive topic.

People have always talked about food, but in the past it was largely in regard to personal health, religion, taste, and affordability. Now food is also a public issue in that what you eat impacts you and all of society, making agriculture an ethical issue. If you doubt this, go to Amazon Instant Video and search the term “food documentary.” There you will find more than eighteen documentaries questioning how our food is raised, with suggestions on how to make it more ethical.

How a crop is raised influences the amount of soil lost to erosion, whether lakes are polluted, emissions of greenhouse gases, and the ability of future generations to feed themselves. Livestock are sentient creatures, and consumers want to know their food is humanely raised. Because how you eat affects other humans and animals, your fellow citizens are keen to make sure you are eating what *they* consider to be ethical foods. Farmers want to produce ethical food as well. The problem is that there is considerable disagreement about what “ethical” food is. What you eat used to be your business; now it is everyone’s business—little surprise that agriculture has become such a controversial subject!

These food fights can get nasty, like when Jon Stossel called New York state representative Felix Ortiz a “cancer” for wanting to tax junk food (by the way, Ortiz responded that he is a “good cancer”), or when Robert F. Kennedy called hog farmers a bigger threat than Osama bin Laden. As the outlandish insults fly, so does the money, as each side seeks to lobby harder than the other. We wrote this book because we felt there was too much name-calling, and too many books and documentaries representing only one side of the debate. Our research in agricultural economics has given us the unique opportunity to interact with industry and interest groups, and we have learned that both sides consist of smart, kind people wishing to produce healthy, affordable food in an ethical manner.

Controversial subjects can be explored while paying respect to the character and intellect of both sides, and we seek to do so in this book. As we tour the gallery of agricultural controversies, we will try to illustrate why equally smart and kind people can form vastly different opinions about food, and then provide our perspectives on what the economic and scientific literature says about the issues. The idea is not to convince readers to adopt our perspectives, or to declare one side of a food debate as champion, but to help readers reach informed opinions, whatever those opinions may be.

For a preview of what divides people, consider a recent Gallup poll that asked Americans whether they have a positive or negative image of free enterprise. The vast majority (88–94%) of both Democrats and Republicans viewed it positively (see figure 1.1). Americans of both political camps apparently respect the pursuit of an honest buck. Of course, Republicans and Democrats do not agree on everything, and the Gallup poll discovered that Democrats and Republicans view large institutions, like big business and big government, differently. Whereas 75 percent of Republicans view big business positively, only 44 percent of Democrats feel likewise. When asked about the federal government, most (75%) of Democrats view it favorably, compared to only 27 percent of Republicans. The data are clear: Republicans dislike big government and Democrats dislike big business (or, at least, that is what they say), and as we will see, some controversies have just as much to do with attitudes towards large corporations as they do the science of farming. What isn't up for debate is

the free-enterprise system of food production—that should be made clear. People aren't debating capitalism versus socialism, but what type of regulated capitalism is best.

As the reader probably suspects, liberals prefer more government regulation when it comes to food health and food safety. Consumers of organic food and supporters of animal welfare legislation are also more likely to lean to the political left. It is not a stretch to say that food activists—by which we mean the most vocal individuals seeking changes in agriculture—are mostly liberals. (The term “food activist” is not meant as a euphemism, nor is it intended to suggest an extremist, but is used to reflect the passion with which some advocate for changes in agriculture.) Now combine two facts: (1) liberals have a negative view of big business, and (2) liberals comprise the majority of food activists, and you have a story that can explain the rise of many agricultural controversies. It is an overly simple story, as most people have more nuanced views than this story would suggest. For instance, views about genetically modified foods cannot be easily explained by political affiliation, and some evidence suggests that conservatives express greater disapproval of genetically modified foods than liberals.

Then again, basically every county in California that voted to reelect President Obama also voted in favor of labeling of genetically modified food, with the reverse being true in other counties, so when it comes to genetically modified foods, it is regulation that is controversial. You see, agricultural controversies are not just scientific controversies but have a political component as well. Most scientists would prefer to keep agricultural science and politics separate, but these days, politics and food go together like salt and pepper. This is evident in where we buy food. If you drive through a region populated with an unusually large number of Cracker Barrel restaurants, studies have shown that the region is probably dominated by Republicans. Likewise, Whole Foods grocery stores tend to prosper in Democratically controlled districts. However

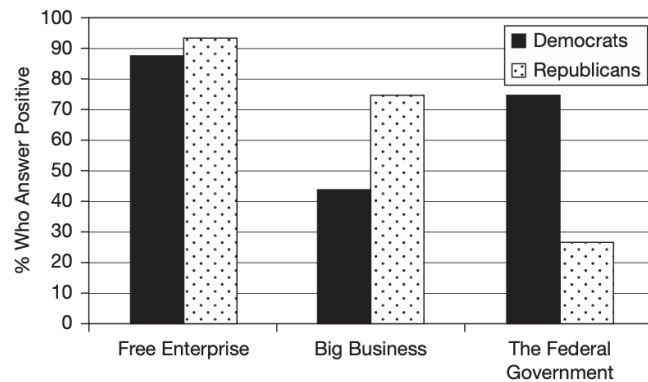


Figure 1.1 Political Ideologies in the United States

Note that “Democrats” refers both to people who call themselves Democrats and those who lean towards the Democrats. A similar statement can be made about the “Republicans.”

Source: Frank Newport, “Democrats, Republicans Diverge on Capitalism, Federal Gov’t,” *Gallup Politics*, November 29, 2012.

uncomfortable politics may be, agricultural debates cannot be discussed honestly without including politics. To ignore political issues about food is to dismiss as irrelevant those who make political arguments, and this book endeavors to take all arguments—and all people—seriously.

Don't worry, this is not a book about conservatives versus liberals. What is most important in explaining the political side of agricultural controversies is not one's political party, but one's attitude towards large corporations. It is striking how often the word "corporation" appears in books and documentaries by food activists. For this reason, the words "conservative" and "liberal" will not appear in subsequent chapters, but the term "corporation" will be used throughout.

It is interesting that liberals dislike big business and conservatives dislike big government, because agriculture in modern democracies consists of both. Agriculture used to consist mostly of small farmers, small craftsmen supplying their inputs, and small businesses distributing food to consumers. From the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century about 90 percent of the population labored on farms. Today that percentage is less than 2 percent. Agricultural production has not fallen, though. Amazingly, it has risen because the average farm has increased in size, and more importantly, soared in productivity. This rise in productivity is partially attributable to the dramatic increase in efficiency and innovative technology fostered in part by what we today call "agri-business." Chemical fertilizers, synthetic pesticides, synthetic growth hormones, and better crop and livestock genetics have increased the amount of food each farmer can produce.

The vast majority of our food has passed through at least one large corporation between the farm and the fork, and for those who distrust big business, this fact can create an atmosphere of suspicion. Why are large farms and corporations so dominant in food? One reason is economies of scale, whereby a firm can produce each unit at a lower cost the more of those units it produces. Studies have shown that large Illinois farms

of 900 soybean acres experience production costs 82 percent (per bushel) lower than 300-acre farms. Large corn farms produce at a 38 percent lower cost (per bushel) than small corn farms. Likewise, dairies with more than 2,000 head of cattle produce at a lower cost (per gallon of milk) than dairies with 30 cows or less. Large hog-slaughtering facilities can process hogs at a cost 11 percent lower (per lb.) than small facilities. A large brewery has half the costs (per ounce) of a small one.

Also, large corporations can afford the research and development costs necessary to invent and market scientific technologies like pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and genetically modified crops. It is largely because of economies of scale and new technologies that world food prices have steadily fallen in the last hundred years, even while the world population has risen and the number of farmers has fallen.

Food activists do not contest the numbers in figure 1.2, but they insist that the quality of food has also fallen, and that

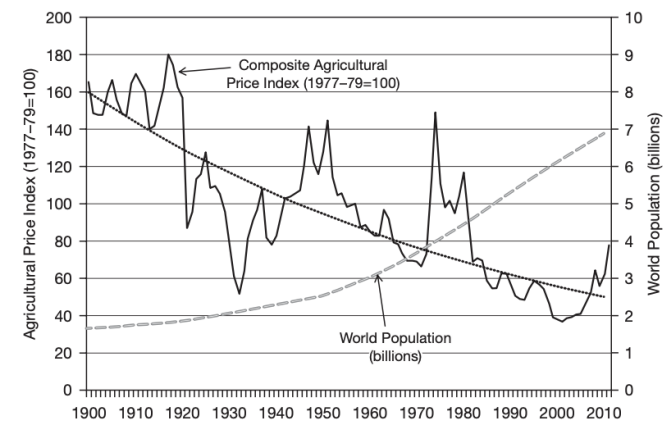


Figure 1.2 Agricultural Product Prices and Population Growth Since 1900

Source: Keith Fuglie and Sun Ling Wang, "New Evidence Points to Robust but Uneven Productivity Growth in Global Agriculture," *Amber Waves*, September 20, 2012. Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture. Data for chart provided by Keith Fuglie on August 15, 2013.

industrial agriculture externalizes some of its costs onto society, making the real cost of food higher than the price in the grocery store. For example, it may get away with polluting the water, leaving the cost of the cleanup to others.

Activists sometimes argue that corporations grow big not just to benefit from economies of scale, but to gain market power and political influence. They look at the endless varieties of food in the grocery store but see only a few corporations producing it all, making them feel like they are at the mercy of big business. Figure 1.3 depicts how a large number of food brands can be produced by only a few corporations, making it difficult to assess whether the food market is competitive or not. To counter the power of big business, modern democracies also evolved big government, manifested in the many regulations regarding farming and food processing. Food safety laws can be so onerous that they prohibit an individual from giving free food to the homeless. Regulations have their benefits also, and these regulations help to ensure that food is not adulterated, pesticides approved for sale are safe, lakes are protected from fertilizer runoff, meat does not contain traces of antibiotics, and livestock are slaughtered humanely.

The rise of big business and big government can be a good thing, simultaneously allowing economies of scale to lower the price of food and regulations to protect us from irresponsible corporate behavior. Food activists appear to take the opposite view though, believing that what has really resulted is big business corrupting big government, allowing corporations to write their own rules. When food activist and best-selling author Michael Pollan appeared on *The Colbert Report* in 2013, he suggested food cooked by a corporation is unhealthy. The Cornucopia Institute has published a diagram titled *Is the USDA a Wholly-Owned Subsidiary of Monsanto?* listing fifteen individuals who have held important positions in both the USDA and Monsanto. The organization Food Democracy Now! describes itself as being motivated by the fact that the US government cares more about the interests of corporate agribusiness than

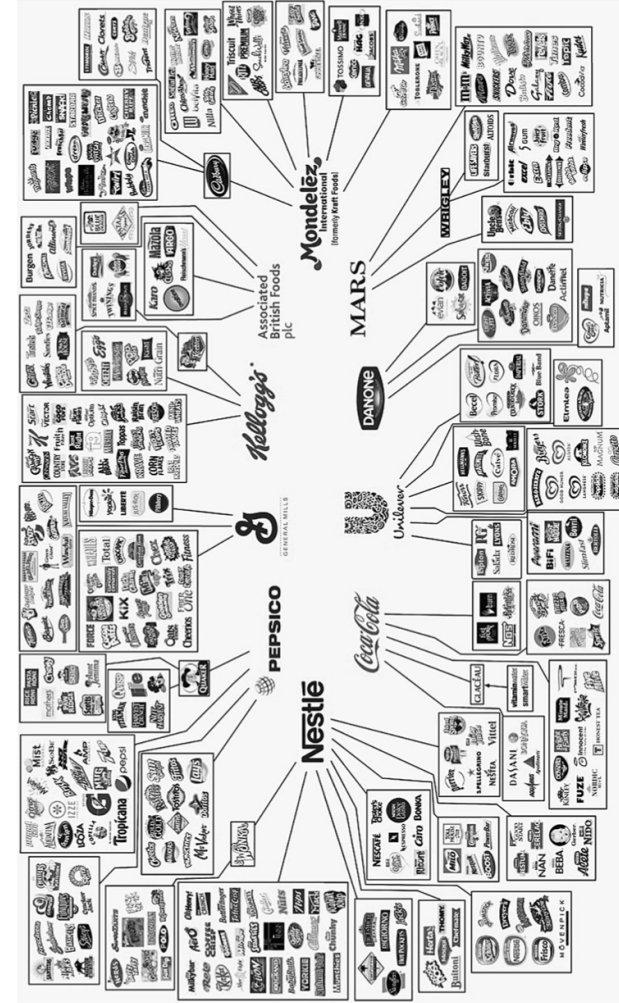


Figure 1.3 Is the Food Market Competitive?
 Source: Joki Desnommée-Gauthier, 2012. Figure created for Oxfam International. Accessed September 24, 2013, at <http://firstperson.oxfamamerica.org/files/2013/02/graphic-72dpi-800px-english.png>.

about farm families and consumers. Of course, this is no new claim, and is not specific to just agriculture.

Some activists believe the twin towers of big business and big government are unavoidable, and thus support an even larger government, hoping that it will exert more democratic control over food production. The Food Democracy Now! organization, mentioned earlier, believes that corporations dictate government policies, yet at the same time is asking government to make labeling of genetically modified food mandatory. Another example is the Humane Society of the United States, whose strategy assumes that large, confined animal-feeding operations are here to stay (yes, the Humane Society would like a worldwide conversion to veganism, but does not believe it likely) and thus pursues regulations to reduce the suffering it believes farm animals experience.

Unsatisfied with big business and big government, some are asking us to think smaller, suggesting we should obtain food from farms that are the antithesis of big business. Organic farming emerged as a desire to do without the fertilizers and pesticides produced in large factories, or the seeds produced in a laboratory. Organic food is partially a protest against the industrial style of production that is so prevalent in the modern economy, but thought by some to be incompatible with ethical food. Then Walmart started selling organic food, and for some, organic lost its allure. It “sold out” to big business, one might say.

Walmart is successful for many reasons, one being its large distribution system connecting farmers and consumers hundreds of miles away. That system is not equipped to sell local foods, it would seem, so when locavores began writing books and producing films, they considered local foods immune to competition from corporations. Never underestimate Walmart though, as it eventually figured out how to compete in this market as well. Modern food movements are akin to a game of catch, whereby food activists seek to distinguish themselves from big business, only to have corporations co-opt their cause.

Food controversies are as much about who sells the food as how the food is grown. This is evident in the genetically modified food controversy, where the groups leading the opposition seem to dislike the corporation Monsanto more than the technology itself. Type “Monsanto” into a Google search and it will sometimes suggest you add the word “evil,” because that is what many other users have done. Readers of NaturalNews.com in a 2011 online survey even voted Monsanto the “Most Evil Corporation of the Year.”

Food activists are not just leading a “small is beautiful” movement or a “more regulation” movement; they are pursuing a change in food culture. They are the Occupy Wall Street of food in that they wish to inject more democracy into food, not through a vertical top-down system of political power, but a horizontal, informal network of concerned citizens who ask at each point in the food channel, “How does this affect society at large, animals, and the environment?” They ask a lot of questions. They write books. They form organizations, and websites. They produce food documentaries. And when they feel it necessary, they will lobby for laws to oppose corporations—and when they do, they name their organization things like “Food Democracy Now!” They lobby because corporations lobby, and the arms race for political influence wages on.

The offspring of this new food movement are not just new products to buy at the grocery store, but new questions to ask about food. We are not just asked to buy organic food and support more regulations, but to think of the soil differently, to be more mindful of our carbon footprint, and to consider the emotions of farm animals. Consumers, food activists, farmers, and the food industry are asking profound questions about food, and the questions are worthy of our attention.

These controversies concern chemical fertilizers, pesticides, global warming, genetically modified organisms, farm subsidies, market power, local foods, and how we raise



livestock. Each controversy can be approached in a variety of ways. We as authors, choose to take on the issues as they are fought in developed nations, and mostly the United States, not because they are necessarily more important, but because they are what we are most familiar with. Much of the developing world just wants to feed its people and raise enough cash crops to help their economies grow out of subsistence and into the affluent world. The needy people of the developing world are likely puzzled as to why some Americans want to pay higher food prices. For some in the United States, western Europe, and a few other locations like Australia, food is not just the fuel of life—it is part of their identity. The foods they buy at the market and the restaurants they patronize signal their beliefs and values. We all wish to contribute to society in some fashion, and some choose food as their altruistic outlet. The affluent world has the luxury to pay more attention to the environment and animal welfare, and as the Third World follows, it may do the same. This means that the agricultural controversies we discuss are relevant to both the developed world today and the developing world tomorrow.