



PARTISAN WELLBEING IN AMERICA

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Partisan associations around nutrition & wellbeing in America

Our work in the US has given us a front-row seat to the diverse tapestry of American life. Our research regularly has us sitting at family dinner tables, joining social gatherings, and stepping into the personal worlds of people from all walks of life. We've explored the meticulous wellness habits of liberals in the bustling cities on the coasts and chatted about church, weight loss, and diabetes with conservatives in the heartland's small towns where the latest trends in nutrition and wellbeing are generally absent.

Since 2016, we've seen an increased use of partisan language in our conversations about wellness and nutrition in conservative leaning parts of the country. That trend had us pondering the extent to which partisan associations with everyday products and behaviors are starting to push people away from choices that are good for their wellbeing.

Earlier this year, we sponsored a study to take a more robust look at how partisanship may be shaping people's decisions around health, nutrition and wellbeing. We conducted a quantitative survey with 1,400 Americans across the country and further engaged 450 of those respondents in qualitative writing assignments. We then ran in-home ethnographies with eight participants who epitomized the perspectives we encountered to put that learning into context.

PARTISAN LANGUAGE IN NON PARTISAN PLACES

ACROSS OUR PROJECTS FOCUSED ON HEALTHIER FOOD, NUTRITION, AND OVERALL WELL-BEING, WE WATCHED A PATTERN EMERGE AFTER THE 2016 ELECTION. PEOPLE BEGAN TO INFUSE THE LANGUAGE AND DIVISIONS OF AMERICAN POLITICS INTO OUR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT TOPICS THAT, TO US, SEEMED INHERENTLY NON-PARTISAN. WE HEARD PEOPLE DESCRIBE HEALTHIER FOOD PRODUCTS AS “LIBERAL” OR “CONSERVATIVE,” LINK THEM TO CONTROVERSIAL POLITICAL ISSUES, OR EVEN ASSOCIATE THEM WITH THE LIFESTYLES OF PEOPLE ON ONE SIDE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM OR THE OTHER.



“Look at that guy. He doesn’t have any gender identity issues or any of that. That just says hard working American to me.”

ROBERT,
CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

“I hide the oat milk when he comes over. I just don’t want to have the conversation. You end up getting straight into it.”

JEFF,
CONSERVATIVE, UTAH



“This is a skinny city person who doesn’t need to wake up at 5am to work a shift. They can afford to look like this. That’s not me or anyone in this community.”

JEAN, 32,
CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

WHILE OUR STUDY PUT SOME ROBUST NUMBERS BEHIND THIS TREND, IT ALSO HELPED US SEE THAT THERE WAS MORE NUANCE TO THIS PHENOMENON THAN WE HAD ORIGINALLY OBSERVED

BETTER CHOICES AROUND PERSONAL WELLBEING ARE INCREASINGLY PAINTED IN A PARTISAN LIGHT

On an oat milk project, a respondent in Utah talked to us about how he hid his Oat Milk when his brother came over to avoid being chided as a liberal. A liberal man we met recently in a very conservative town in rural Pennsylvania talked to us about his decision to drive an hour and a half to a Trade Joe’s to avoid running into his neighbors while shopping for healthy food at his local supermarket.



“I drive an hour and a half to shop at Trader Joe’s so I don’t have to shop at the Giant here. I don’t want to have any of that conservatism. I don’t want any of that conflict. I can just shop in peace.”

JIM, LIBERAL, CONSERVATIVE
SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

In that same town, we asked a conservative man what he thought of Certified Organic products; he immediately raised his voice and steered our conversation into politics.



“This (Certified Organic Label) is just liberal trash. This is trying to convince the idiots of the world, who are mostly liberal, that they should buy organic and I just don't buy it. Now I remember the 1950s, when we grew things organic and we couldn't wait to get chemicals to kill the things, to kill all the weeds, and kill the bacteria and all of that. Now you wanna raise your vegetables in it. There’s just something wrong with that ideology to me.”

RON, (VERY) CONSERVATIVE,
CONSERVATIVE SMALL TOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

EXPLORING THE PARTISAN NATURE OF NUTRITION & WELLBEING CHOICES

We engaged 1,400 people from across the US in a projection exercise where they were asked to classify various images as conservative or liberal. We then asked a subset of those respondents (450) to explain each of their answers in a short writing assignment.

We saw more consistent partisan classification on some images than on others, however the rationales expressed in the writing assignments revealed a strikingly consistent mental framework used to determine the partisan affiliation (or lack thereof) of a product, service or activity.

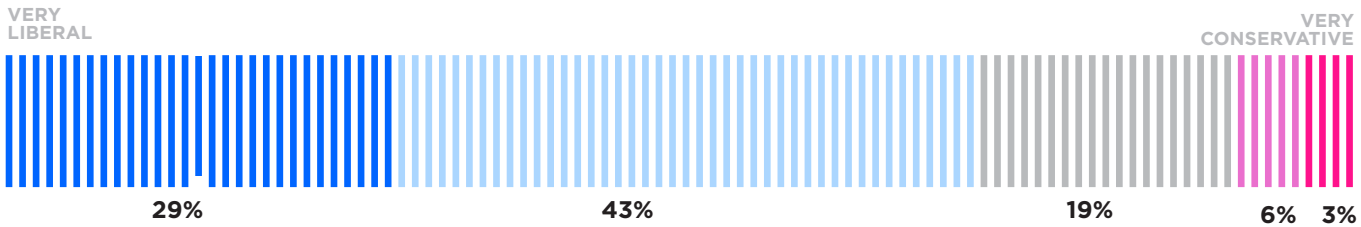


Certified Organic

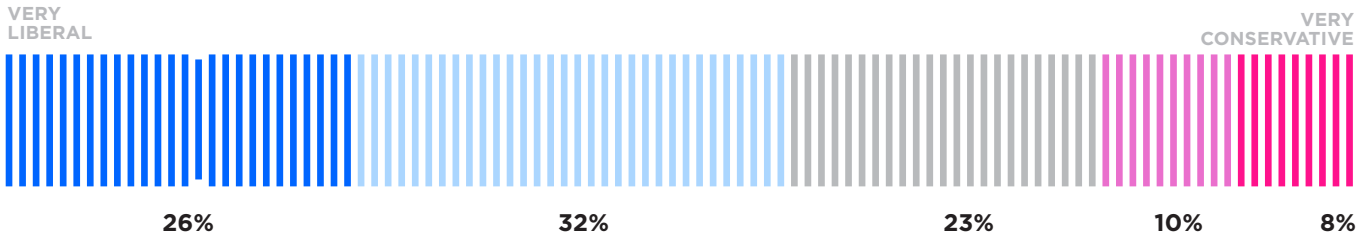
While some might disagree with Ron’s point above about “Certified Organic” being “Liberal trash”, 78% of people who identified as politically conservative in our study believe the label has partisan associations. Of those, 75% see “Certified Organic” as a liberal label. When asked to explain why in a short writing assignment, they described “Certified Organic” as “Woke sh*t” pushed by “Tree huggers” who “believe in no pesticides because it destroys the environment”. To these respondents, “Certified Organic” implied a whole host of associated beliefs. Other respondents tread more lightly saying liberals place a greater emphasis on what foods they choose to eat. One respondent wrote that “typically organic, healthy stuff is purchased more by liberals”. You can read a subset of these written responses from conservative respondents in small towns on the next page.



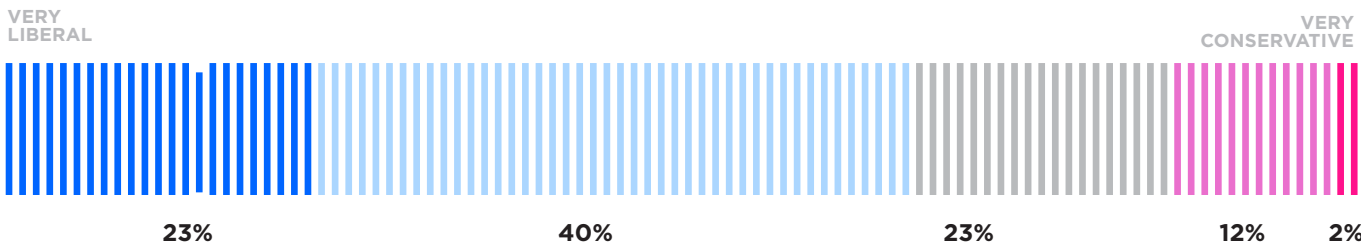
EVERYONE
VERY LIBERAL: 29%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 43%
NEUTRAL: 19%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 6%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 3%



CONSERVATIVES
VERY LIBERAL: 26%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 32%
NEUTRAL: 23%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 10%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 8%



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVE
VERY LIBERAL: 23%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 40%
NEUTRAL: 23%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 12%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 2%



“Liberals tend to be against anything involving chemicals.”

“More health conscious or “green” people are known to be liberal.”

“Others of us would like more natural stuff if it did not cost more.”

*“Woke sh*t.”*

“Liberals usually care more about organic foods and live in places where they are readily available”

“Organic seems liberal to me. New age and liberal”

“The word organic is like virtue signaling to me.”

“Seems more liberals are on the organic and watch what goes in their body. It’s more liberal because it’s a bandwagon healthy item.”

“It seems mostly liberals have bought in to the green washing. Most conservatives think its a load of crap.”

“I feel like the mainstream media and social media are trying to associate things like this to a liberal community. There are plenty of clean living conservatives out there.”

“Liberals care very much about what products they buy. They love showing off how organic, non-gmo food they consume.”

“I believe that Liberals believe more in Organic eating because it is a modern trend. Usually organic is portrayed from more liberal areas. I think the Pacific Northwest.”

“Liberals are often associated with organic, plant-based items. Conservatives are associated with meat.”

“This is a liberal stance. It is another environmental issue.”

“Republicans don’t care about organic. Liberals seem to be more into things like organic food. They seem to think it is healthier, even though it isn’t.”

“Conservatives seem to care more about what chemicals and antibiotics are in there foods and meats. Versus those hypnotized to believe almond and soy milk are healthy”

“This looks like something you would see in California and that state has been lost to the liberals.”

“Liberal types seem willing to waste money for these labels put on food.”

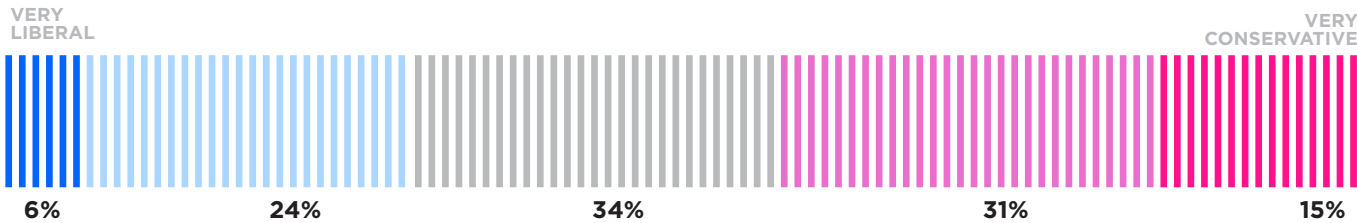
PARTISAN ASSOCIATIONS WITH THIS IMAGE OF

A Greasy Burger

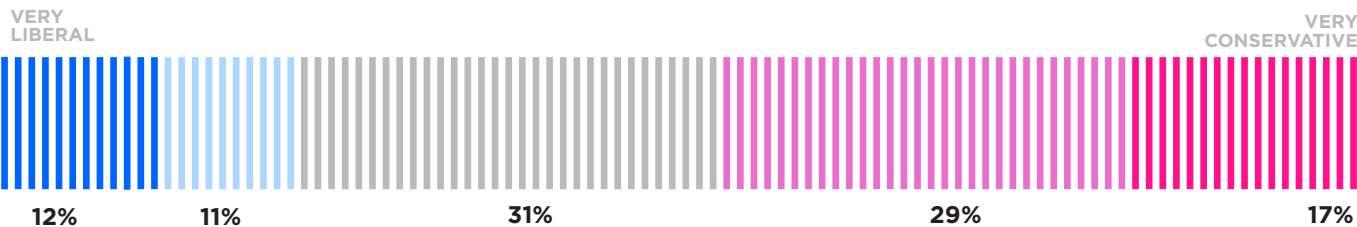
We found a similar correlation with less healthy products. 62.2% of our respondents felt that the indulgent burger pictured here had a partisan association. Of them, 72% felt it was Conservative. Among conservatives, 69% felt the burger was partisan and 64% of them felt the burger was conservative.



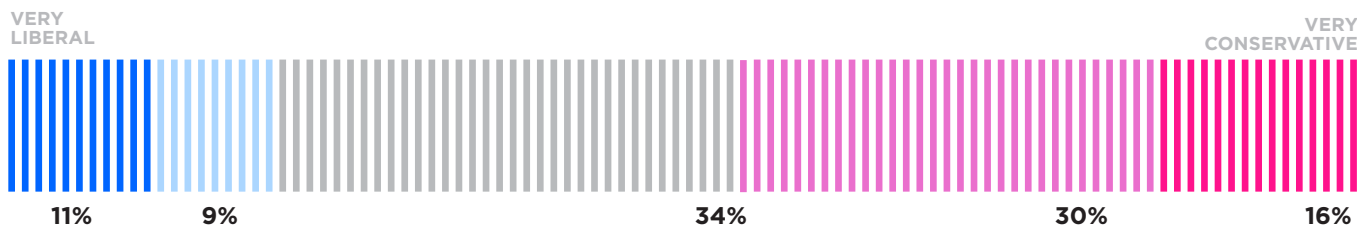
EVERYONE
VERY LIBERAL: 6%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 24%
NEUTRAL: 34%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 31%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 15%



CONSERVATIVES
VERY LIBERAL: 12%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 11%
NEUTRAL: 31%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 29%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 17%



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES
VERY LIBERAL: 11%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 9%
NEUTRAL: 34%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 30%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 16%



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES EXPLAIN THEIR ANSWERS

“Meat is something conservatives are good with. Eating less meat is a liberal notion to save the planet.”

“Liberals these days are more and more against meat because they now tie it to ‘climate change’.”

“I could see this being eaten at a county fair in the south where most of the people would be conservative.”

“The amount of fatty meat is more of a traditional food than that preferred by liberal types.”

“More conservatives eat meat. More liberals are vegan.”

“A lot of people who are very liberal don’t eat meat or kill animals. This is a all animal products.”

“It doesn’t look healthy at all and I’ve seen more unhealthy conservatives around me than unhealthy liberals.”

“It reminds me of something Texans would eat, and that is generally a conservative state.”

“I think that conservatives are usually less concerned about looks and weight.”

“It reminds me of down home food. People not too worried about health. Most liberal people are into being on diets”

“It would tick off liberal vegetarians.”

“The image is mainly meat. Conservatives like meat more than liberals.”

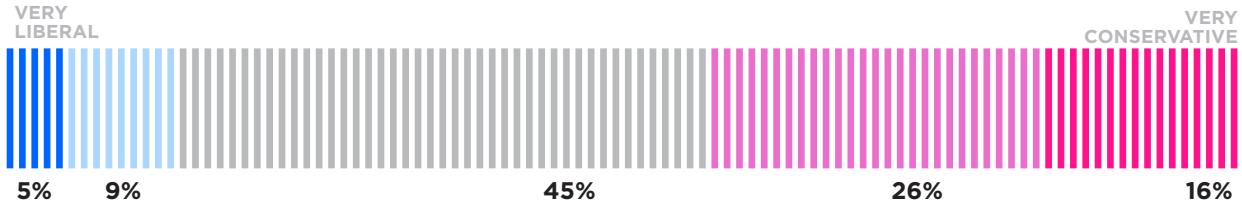
PARTISAN ASSOCIATIONS WITH THIS IMAGE OF

Cigarette Packs

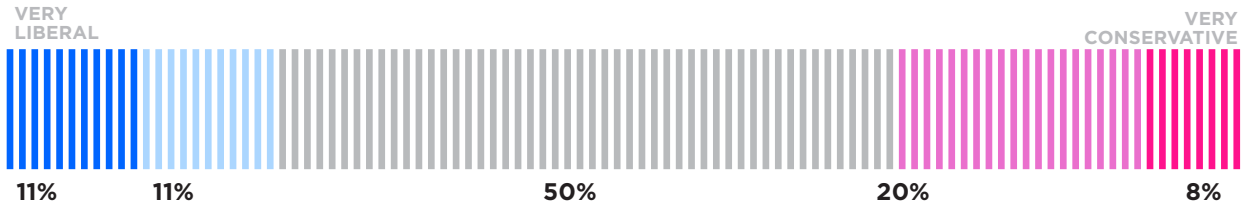
42% of our total sample of respondents classified this image of cigarette packs as conservative. As we narrow the sample to people who are conservative and then conservatives in smaller towns, people saw less of a partisan association with the image altogether. Even as the image became less partisan, twice as many conservative respondents in small towns classified Marlboro cigarettes as conservative.



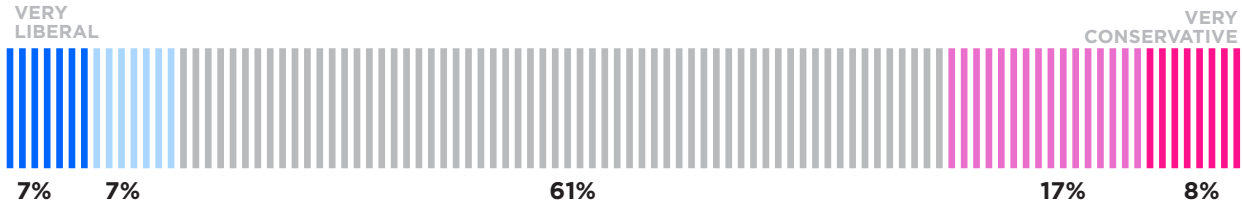
EVERYONE
VERY LIBERAL: 5%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 9%
NEUTRAL: 45%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 26%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 16%



CONSERVATIVES
VERY LIBERAL: 1%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 11%
NEUTRAL: 50%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 20%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 8%



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES
VERY LIBERAL: 7%
SOMEWHAT LIBERAL: 7%
NEUTRAL: 61%
SOMEWHAT CONSERVATIVE: 17%
VERY CONSERVATIVE: 8%



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES EXPLAIN THEIR ANSWERS

“Conservatives smoke more than liberals. Liberals are trying to ban these. Liberals are against smoking cigarettes”

“Marlboro’s have kind of a reputation as trashy and although I don’t agree with the stereotype a lot of conservatives are called white trash by liberals and Marlboros are more likely to be associated with conservatives”

“Because they can be something that would offend It’s mostly “good ol boys” that smoke Marlboro now. These are Marlboros.”

“Mostly working class and older people smoke cigarettes nowadays. And working class people are increasingly conservative.”

“Conservatives and liberals both smoke.

It doesn’t seem to be one more than the other”

“Smoking is now something that mostly older people do. “

“Makes me think of a very rural cowboy. Smoking Marlboro’s invokes images of a manly cowboy. A bit of nostalgia.”

“Most liberal people vape now”

“Seems like liberals and conservatives smoke about the same although more liberals on welfare I know smoke.”

“I feel like smoking is more of a conservative thing. I don’t see a lot of liberals smoking.”

WHAT MAKES SOME PRODUCTS LEAN RIGHT OR LEFT?

We reviewed 450 writing assignments written by people explaining their classification of images as either conservative or liberal. At the core of people's rationales were 5 consistent themes. Even when respondents were split in their ability to classify an image, their rationales were rooted in shared principles.

CONSERVATIVES WERE MORE LIKELY TO CLASSIFY AN IMAGE AS LIBERAL WHEN THE PRODUCT, SERVICE, OR CHOICE IN IT WAS PERCEIVED AS DOING ONE OF THE FOLLOWING 5 THINGS

01. SYMBOLIZES PRIVILEGE

Images that were perceived to signal an abundance of time, access or money that is not standard within a respondent's local community were more likely to be classified as liberal. While some conservatives felt liberals put more energy into making better decisions around food choices, most found food choices that flaunt a level of access others do not to be definitively liberal.

02. SIGNALS ENTITLEMENT

Images that were perceived to imply an exaggerated belief an individual's locus control or agency that our conservative small town respondents do not feel was met with hostility and more likely to be classified as liberal.

03. IS ASSOCIATED WITH LIBERAL CAUSES (E.G., CLIMATE CHANGE)

Our conservative respondents made leaps from topics like veganism, organics and vegetarianism to liberal political agendas such as climate change. This association put these choices beyond the realm of acceptance.

04. IS ASSOCIATED WITH A PREDOMINANTLY LIBERAL PLACE (E.G., CALIFORNIA)

When an image or product was associated with a place our conservative small town respondents associate with liberal lifestyles, it was quickly classified as liberal (and subsequently) not for them.

05. IS SEEN AS TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED

Products that are seen as being technologically more advanced were more likely to be associated as liberal.

THE REAL DIVIDE IS NOT CONSERVATIVE VS. LIBERAL BUT COASTAL CITY VS. HEARTLAND SMALL TOWN



THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT PROGRESS IN AMERICA ARE NOT STORIES IN WHICH PEOPLE IN AMERICA’S SMALL TOWNS CAN SEE THEIR LIVES REFLECTED

Increasingly, conservatives in America are failing to see themselves in the stories we tell about our nation’s progress. Our duelling worldviews are caricatured by, and not evenly represented in, the media. These stories, told by educated executives in predominantly liberal coastal cities, have left much of the country feeling they have no place in the story of American progress today. This is increasingly the case across industries and problematically true when it comes to the progress being made around better nutrition, health and wellbeing - areas of daily human life that should be neutral.

“I feel like the mainstream media and social media are trying to associate things like this (certified organic label) to a liberal community. There are plenty of clean living conservatives out there.”

CONSERVATIVE, 36, SMALL TOWN FLORIDA

“Well we don’t really turn on the TV too much, probably because we don’t see our community or ourselves represented in what we see. So more and more we got further away from watching what was in the media. It didn’t represent us and I didn’t really want that for my kids either.”

**JENNY, 30, CONSERVATIVE,
SMALL TOWN, RURAL PENNSYLVANIA**

AMERICAN DIVISIONS ARE ROOTED IN DISTINCT WORLD VIEWS

Over the past seven years, split elections and mass protests have underscored America's deepening divisions. While it's tempting to blame divisive politicians, the root cause of what divides Americans lies in fundamentally different worldviews that have been entrenched in daily life for generations.



CONSERVATIVES & LIBERALS HAVE DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES AROUND THE AMOUNT OF CONTROL INDIVIDUALS HAVE OVER THEIR LIVES



There is a tendency within businesses to think about Americans as being at one point or another along a spectrum of evolution towards a common destination. We have explored future focused opportunities with progressive consumers in coastal cities under the assumption that more traditionally minded Americans will eventually progress towards those lifestyles over time. However, what we've actually seen over the past 14 years of running projects in the US is different populations traveling in roughly similar directions but on very different roads, with different degrees of certainty and assertiveness around where they are heading.

COASTAL PROGRESSIVES HAVE AN EXAGGERATED SENSE OF CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES

The people we meet in coastal cities routinely demonstrate a greater sense of self determination than their conservative small town counterparts. They recount tales of personal agency—changing jobs, relocating across the country, transitioning genders, adopting healthier diets, resisting aging, and transforming their bodies—highlighting a profound belief in their ability to shape their lives, a sentiment less observed in conservative communities outside of these urban areas.

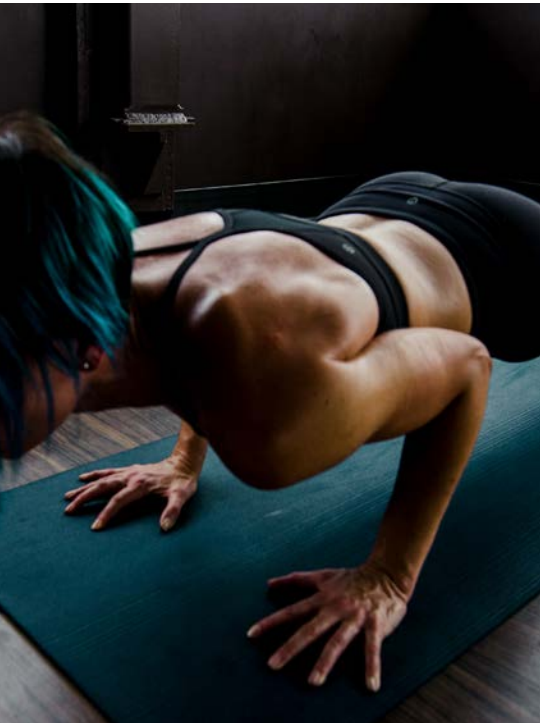
Even in their failure to achieve unrealistic outcomes, that same sense of agency translates into a sense of personal responsibility. The language people use around aspects of their lives that are not going well in coastal cities is more often a vocabulary that connotes a sense of ownership and responsibility.

As one overweight respondent living in the wellness capital of Santa Monica once told us “I love living here. I’m not exactly a beach body, but I’m also not exactly waking up at 5am for Yoga and eating Acai for breakfast either.”

MEET SARAH

A native of Northern California, Sarah lives on the West side of Los Angeles, which she describes as a place where “I’m around people who understand me.” While good health was on her radar growing up, thanks to physician and pharmacist family members, she started really focusing on her health, and her ability to improve it, after a period of ill health in 2011 that led to multiple ER visits for severe acid reflux.

“I’ve always eaten healthy,” she says, “but then I discovered there are some things that aren’t necessarily as healthy as we thought they were.” Around this time, she quit her career in forensic accounting, cancelled her upcoming wedding, and began exploring the world of functional medicine, first using elimination diets to alleviate her symptoms, and then expanding the practice into other consumables: “I stopped using anything that was not natural: chemicals in the house, makeup products, skincare products, shampoos. My body was telling me that the [breast] implants were creating [an] autoimmune response in the body and systemic inflammation because my body was constantly in fight or flight trying to attack the foreign invader. I moved to Santa Monica and was surrounded by Wellness people so it felt like I had a community that was more behind some of these choices. ... Ultimately, I’m just wanting to live as healthy as possible for as long as possible...my main goal is to remove all barriers and limitations that my body has to function optimally.”



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES UNDERESTIMATE THE AMOUNT OF CONTROL THEY HAVE OVER THEIR LIVES



“Whenever people ask me what I’d most like to change about the white working class, I say, ‘the feeling that our choices don’t matter’.”

JD VANCE,
HILLBILLY ELEGY

Over the past seven years, split elections and mass protests have underscored America’s deepening divisions. While it’s tempting to blame divisive politicians, the root cause of what divides Americans lies in fundamentally different worldviews that have been entrenched in daily life for generations. The vocabulary of personal agency we see in coastal cities is uniquely absent when we meet conservatives in small towns. When describing their lives, the language they use is comparatively passive while circumstances are depicted as largely beyond their control. These people routinely describe their hopes rather than their plans; they describe outcomes as being in the hands of God, and are more likely to defer to figures of authority when it comes to topics like health and nutrition.



These differences existed well before the 2016 election and have been studied by experts beyond our team at Propellerfish. Sociologists Dara Shifrer and April Sutton describe these differences in terms of locus of control:

“People with more internal control, at the high end of the scale, take responsibility for their successes and failures. The cultures of the West and particularly the Northeast seem to foster more internal control than do the cultures of the Midwest and particularly the South.”

SHIFRER, D., & SUTTON, A. (2014). REGION-URBANICITY DIFFERENCES IN LOCUS OF CONTROL: SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE, STRUCTURE, OR CULTURAL EXCEPTIONALISM? SOCIOLOGICAL ENQUIRY, 84(4)

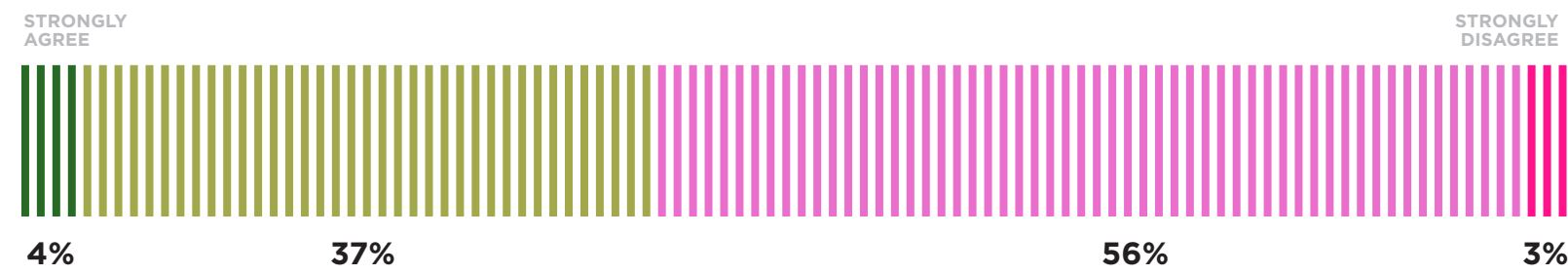
Meanwhile, psychologist Bob Altemeyer characterizes members of the political right as “right wing authoritarians”. He describes members of this group as possessing a high degree of “submission to the authorities who are perceived to be established and legitimate in society,” an aggressiveness towards persons perceived to be sanctioned by those authorities and “a high degree of adherence to the social conventions that are perceived to be endorsed by society and its authorities.”

RESPONDENTS IN CONSERVATIVE SMALL TOWNS WERE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO AGREE WITH SUGGESTIONS THAT LIFE IS LARGELY BEYOND THEIR CONTROL

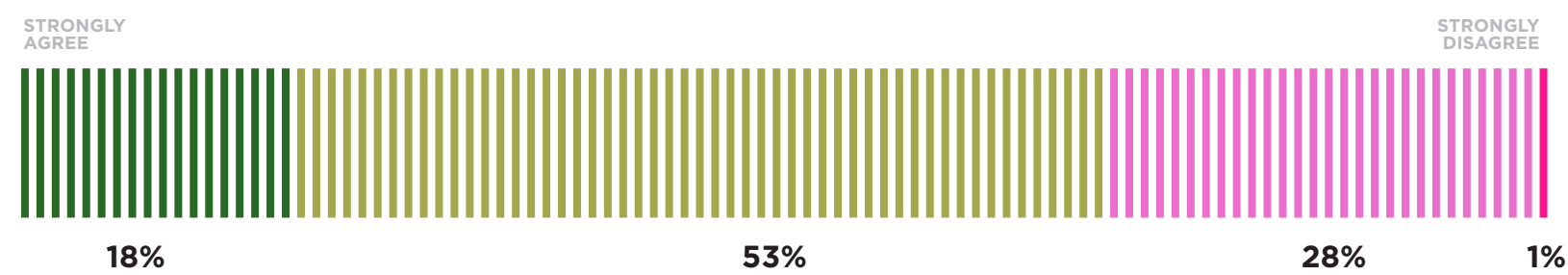
AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT

“The things that happen to me in life are largely beyond my control.”

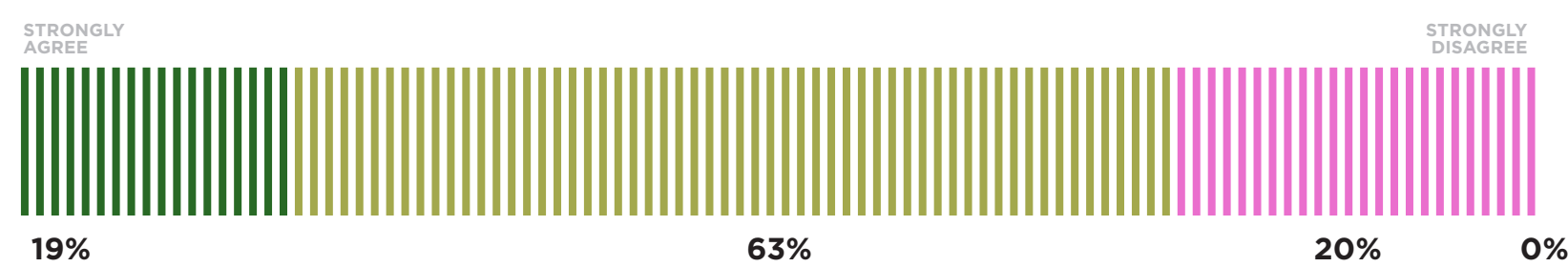
RESPONDENTS IN COASTAL CITIES



RESPONDENTS IN SMALL TOWNS



SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES



A respondent, who recently moved back to her conservative hometown after years in New York, had the following reflection on her community:

“I think people around here can make one small change (to their lifestyles) if a doctor told them that their life depended on it, but they’re not going to constantly live a life where they’re questioning and learning, removing and reintroducing. I just don’t think that that’s them. You don’t question certain things. This is the way it’s done. They may not believe they have that kind of power. And if they do, they’re told they’re getting too big for their britches. There is a lot of fatalism here.”

KATIE, 41, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

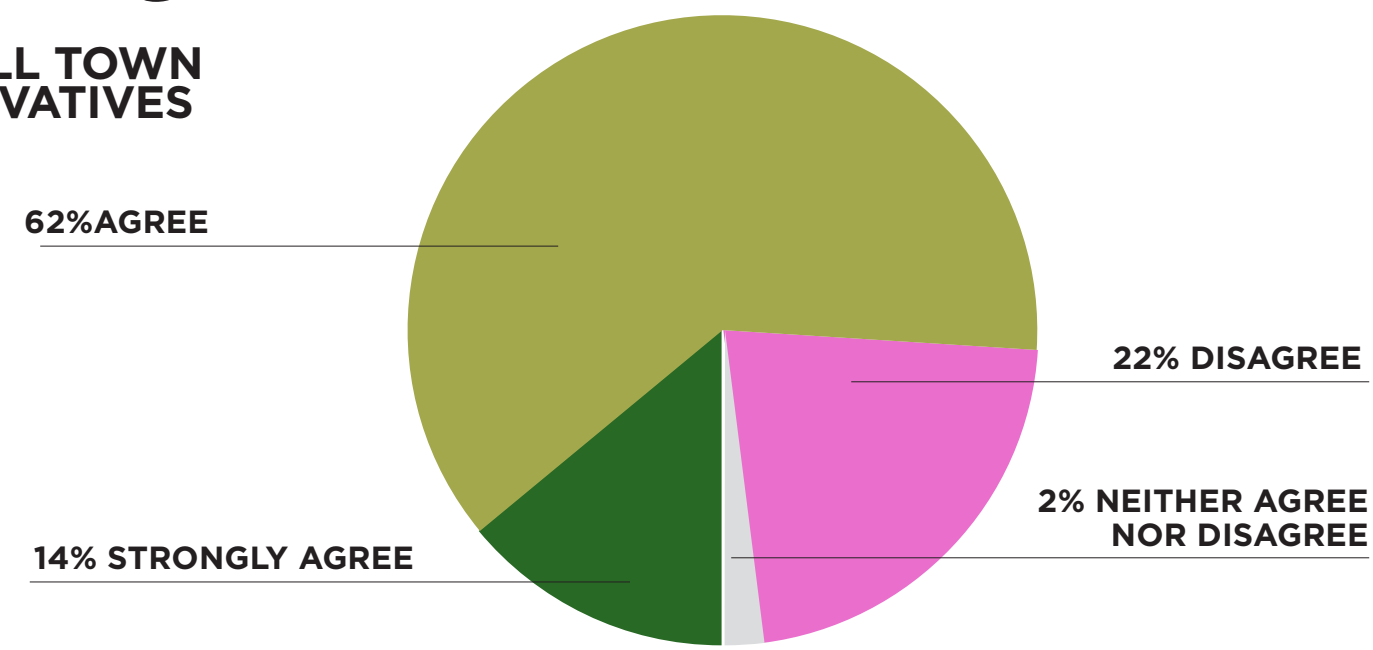
Our survey explored this woman’s observation with a broader sample of respondents across America. We asked participants to react to the following statement: “I am capable of making big lifestyle changes in order to become healthier.” People in conservative small towns were nearly three times as likely (24.4%) to disagree compared to people who responded to the survey in cities (8.3%).

OUR RESPONDENTS IN CONSERVATIVE SMALL TOWNS WERE SIGNIFICANTLY LESS EMPOWERED AROUND WELLBEING THAN THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN COASTAL CITIES

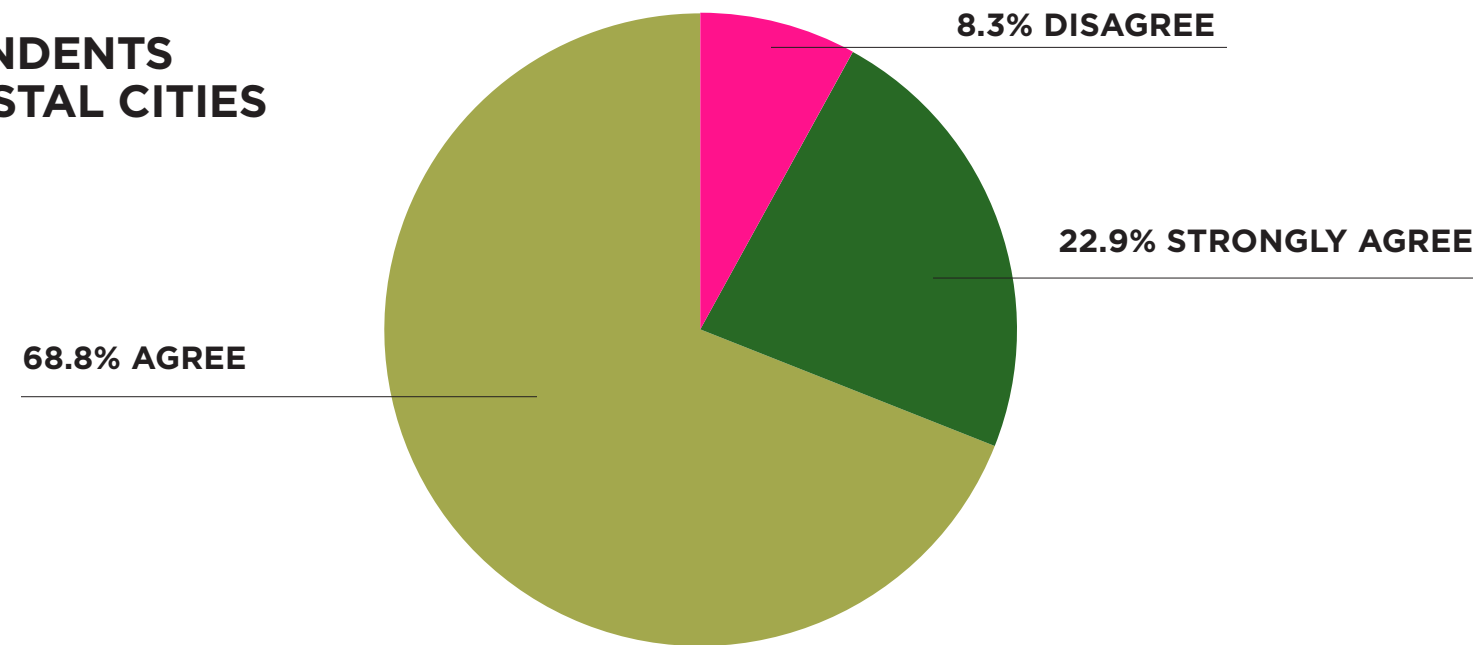
AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT

“I am the kind of person who is capable of making major lifestyle changes in order to become healthier.”

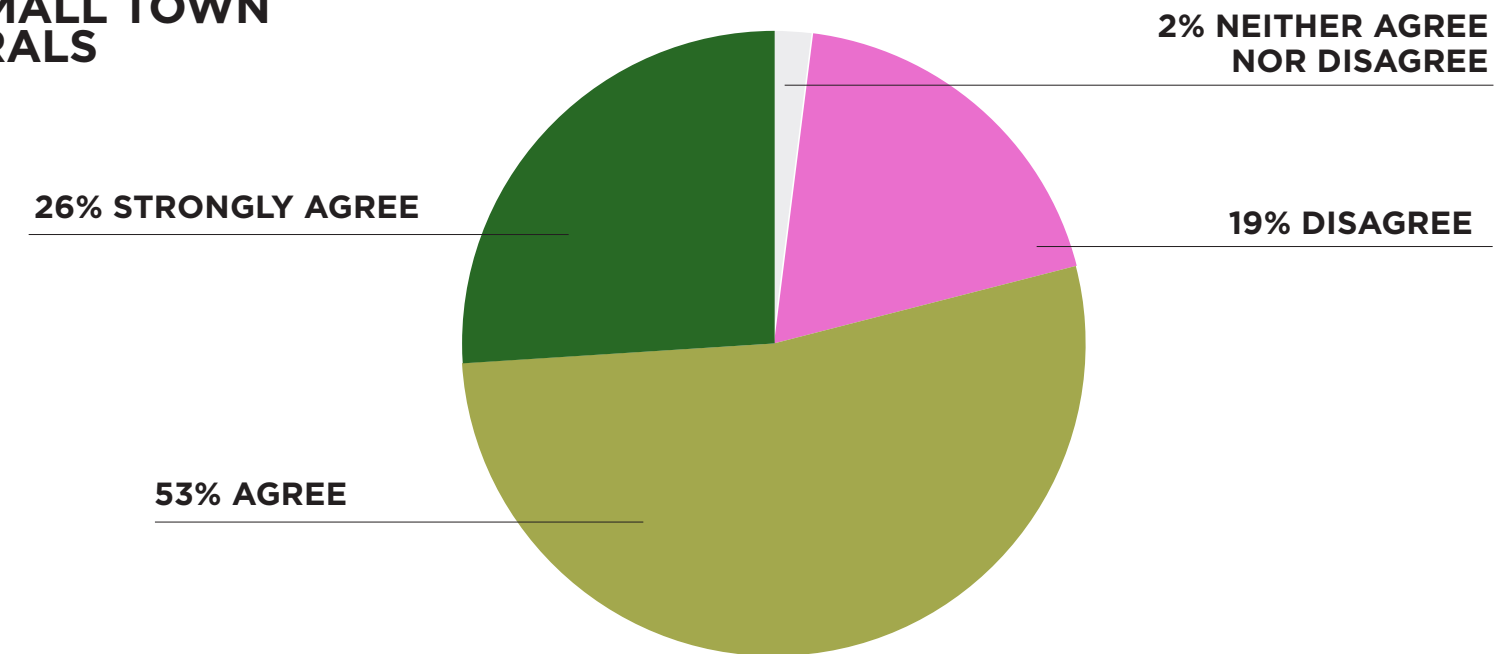
76%
OF SMALL TOWN
CONSERVATIVES



92%
RESPONDENTS
IN COASTAL CITIES



77%
OF SMALL TOWN
LIBERALS





*“The Liberals tend to always
get what they want, don’t they?”*

SANDY, CONSERVATIVE,
SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA

HAVING LESS ACCESS TO BETTER CHOICES REINFORCES A LESS EMPOWERED WORLDVIEW

While people in small towns might not realize that they underestimate their ability to influence key outcomes in their lives, they are aware of the fact that people in coastal cities (most of whom they believe to be liberal) have greater agency in life than they do. They attribute that to the fact that people in coastal cities have greater access to everything than they do.

Interviews about health and wellness topics with people across Small Town America reveal a lack of access and awareness to the more progressive end of nutrition and wellbeing. A review of search trends* suggests these things are gaining less traction in traditionally conservative states. The top ten states ranked by searches for Peloton are all blue, as are the top ten states ranked by searches for the terms “organic”, “vegetarian recipes” and “are seed oils bad for me?”. This compares to 9 out of the ten top states ranked by searches for the term “type 2 diabetes” were red and all 10 of the top states rank by search for the term “weight loss” were red and 18 / 20 of the top states ranked based on the searches for KFC.

At first glance, one might assume conservative communities are disinterested in wellbeing. A 2016 electoral map, for inverse obesity rates predominantly voted Democratic, while states with lower life expectancy, higher obesity rates, and less recreational physical activity often leaned Republican. While conservative geographies correlate to some disappointing stats around health outcomes, these communities do care about their health even if they aren’t as engaged in the latest trends around health fitness and wellbeing. We asked 1200 Americans to respond to the statement “My health is important to me.” Most Americans, across the political spectrum and geographies, agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

*Search rankings reflected in Google Trends on October 21, 2023



REGARDLESS OF POLITICAL AFFILIATION, SMALL TOWN ENVIRONMENTS DO NOT ALWAYS CONSPIRE TO FACILITATE BETTER DECISIONS AROUND WELLBEING & NUTRITION

Regardless of political affiliation, small town environments do not always conspire to facilitate better decisions around wellbeing & nutrition

When residents of small towns decide to make better choices, their environment does not always conspire in favor of better life choices. Among those who are interested in making better choices around their wellbeing, we often heard that cultural norms and access to better choices around diet and fitness were not always accessible.

“The options we have here in Chambersburg are very very slim. I mean, there’s not a whole lot. We have a couple what they call health food stores and we have the farmers markets, but not all of them carry organic products.”

CAROL,
CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA



LACK OF ACCESS TO BETTER CHOICES

When we speak to individuals living in small towns in America’s heartland who are trying to make better choices around nutrition and wellbeing, we routinely hear about the challenge of accessing the products and services that make those choices possible. We hear about distant and sometimes shuttered health food stores, and then, in contrast, the same respondents describe visits to cities where there's an abundance of wellness services and products.

“Liberal people might eat a little bit more expensive too because they usually seem to really get what they want now. But in the end, are they going to succeed? That remains to be seen.”

SANDY,
CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA



“Living in the smaller towns, we don't even take advantage of the foods that we do have. So I think I got frustrated with what the offerings are here.”

MARY ANNE,
CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN PENNSYLVANIA



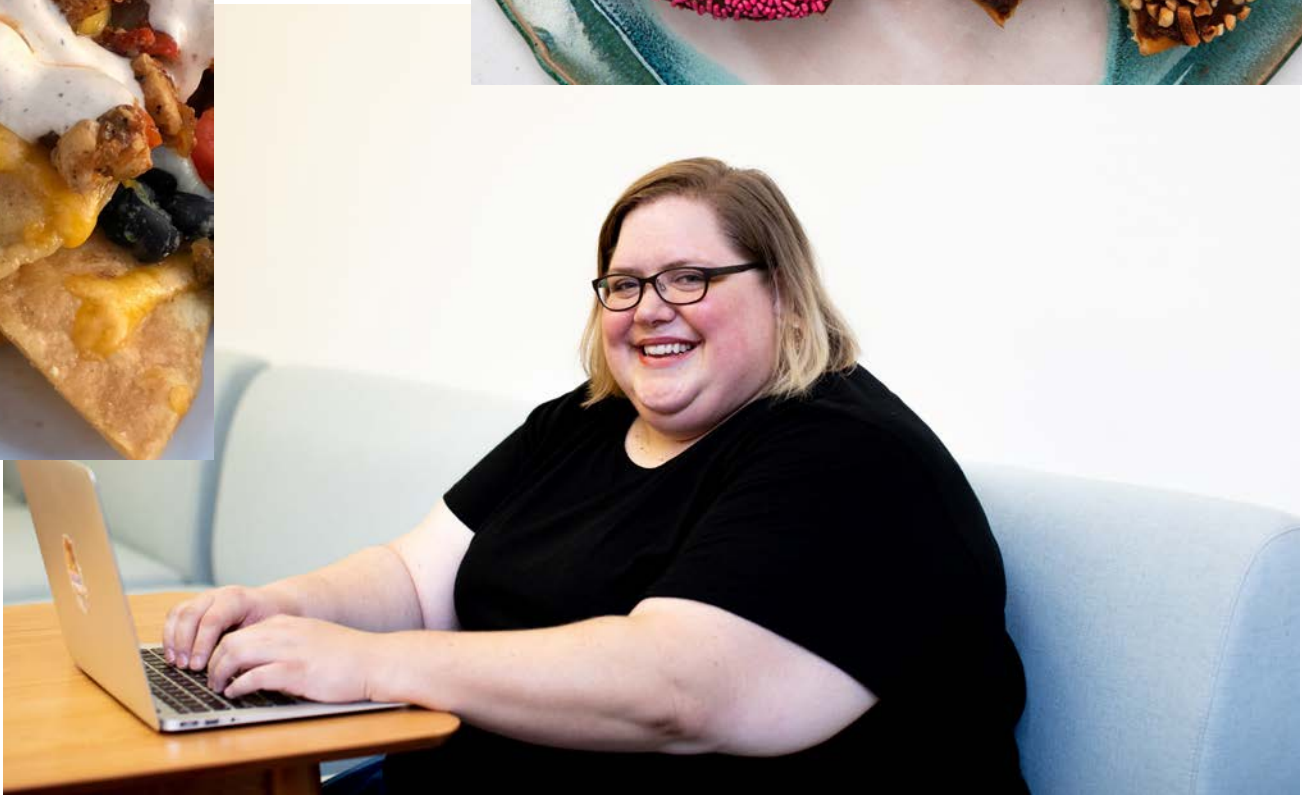
SOCIAL RITUALS ARE OFTEN AT ODDS WITH BETTER NUTRITIONAL DECISIONS



Other respondents talked to us about how social occasions revolve around dietary choices that do not align with the better nutritional choices they were looking to make.

“The past picnic, I chose not to go because last year, I had the hot dogs and the hamburgers. I had to eat the rolls. I didn’t have the chips. I had the cookies. I mean what am I doing here? So I chose not to go this year. Not to be anti-social or like I think I’m better than anybody. It’s just something else to avoid.”

**SANDY, 62,
CONSERVATIVE, CHAMBERSBURG, PA**



“I was being badgered because I was no longer eating what other people in my group ate. I said, very kindly, that since my cancer, I’m really trying to eat healthier. It’s fine if you all want to eat this, but for myself I’m going to choose not to. Maybe it’s how I put it out to them. Some of them respected that, but others looked down on me a bit because I was no longer just eating all the non nutritional so called food they were eating.”

REBECCA, CONSERVATIVE, SMALL TOWN KANSAS

SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES WORRY THAT MAKING BETTER DECISIONS WILL ALIENATE PEERS WHO DO NOT

In small, conservative communities outside of coastal cities, we've noticed that individuals who strive for healthier lifestyles often feel compelled to clarify their intentions. When discussing their wellness routines or dietary decisions, they frequently emphasize that they're not passing judgment on others' choices, nor do they see themselves as superior for their healthier lifestyle. Their main struggle is to pursue these positive changes without inadvertently coming across as critical of those around them who may not be making the same choices.

"I get the feeling that people think we're being pretentious because we don't let our kids have snacks all the time."

SANDY, 36, CONSERVATIVE, TEXAS



"There's a lot of social pressure to conform and unfortunately culture is designed to make you fat and the majority of Americans are overweight or obese. It's like 70% of the population and with the pandemic we've all stayed at home and gotten bigger and not smaller without moving around as much. My friends see me as somebody who doesn't eat as much. They say I never eat in front of them. They're obviously exaggerating. I obviously do. Most people don't know anything about nutrition and I'm not saying I'm smarter than anybody. It took years to figure out how to eat well and there's so much misinformation. I think there's a lot of peer pressure out there. It's just so much easier to be a bigger person in America. It's also your community. Where I live in Missouri, we have a lot of community events where people will look at you weird if you don't have the sweets and the candy. I think that's a common misunderstanding that I'm about vanity, maybe there's some truth to that, or maybe that I don't know how to have a good time. The truth is that I know what it's like to be obese myself and it's really not fun so I really don't want to go back so I try to do my due diligence so I can feel good. It's nice to be able to do difficult things with my body that I couldn't do before. I didn't do my first pullup until I was 20 years old. It's a sad thing, but it's the truth."

ANDY, 28, CONSERVATIVE, MISSOURI

THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MORE INCLUSIVE NARRATIVES AROUND NUTRITION & WELLBEING

THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO ALIGN BETTER CHOICES AROUND FOOD AND WELLBEING WITH THE VALUES AND PRIORITIES OF CONSERVATIVE MINDED INDIVIDUALS OUTSIDE OF CITIES.

Food choices are not inherently political, but they are increasingly associated with some of the deeper divisions in American society. And while these divisions are often framed as a political divide, they represent fundamentally different views of an individual's ability to exert influence over their life.

People in cities assume a greater amount of influence over every aspect of their lives while people in small towns generally see themselves as being on the receiving end of what life hands to them.

This lack of assumed agency shapes a passive approach to health and wellbeing and a hostility towards people in cities who feel comparatively more empowered and entitled.

MOST WELLBEING PRODUCTS & SERVICES ARE ROOTED IN A NARRATIVE OF EMPOWERMENT THAT IS NOT FELT EQUALLY BY CONSERVATIVES IN AMERICA'S HEARTLAND OF SMALL TOWNS

BETTER CHOICES THAT RESONATE WITH SMALL TOWN CONSERVATIVES HAVE 5 THINGS IN COMMON

01. UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY

Our conservative respondents see themselves as comparatively down to earth and connected to their communities relative to their liberal peers. Choices that reinforce this perception by being accessible to their peers were more likely to be seen as in harmony with their value systems.

02. AN ASSOCIATION WITH HARD WORK

Fuel for (or the fruits of) hard working Americans align with a worldview that prioritizes an ability to commit to hard work over entitlement to self care. Positioning wellbeing and nutritional decisions as fuel for hard work or outcomes of that work leaves makes better choices less alienating in a culture where hard work is prized even if not everyone is committed to it.

03. A CONNECTION TO CONSERVATIVE VALUES OR SOCIAL ISSUES

Even subtle alignment with issues conservatives care about makes better decisions more culturally palatable to small town conservatives. For example, we've seen a greater prevalence of Paleo diets in Small Town America where people are more likely to value hunting and the 2nd Amendment than they are vegan food and environmental causes.

04. A CONNECTION TO A PLACE ASSOCIATED WITH CONSERVATIVE BELIEFS (E.G., THE SOUTH)

Alignment with parts of the country that are traditionally conservative takes better choices far in being accepted with less scrutiny than if they are associated with more liberal parts of the United States.

05. AMERICAN RURAL PROVENANCE

Wholesome food from American Farms is a universally accepted source of good nutrition free from any coastal city pretense. While conservatives might scoff at a "Certified Organic" label at the supermarket, produce from a hard working American farm is an unquestionable better choice rooted in both their values and their communities.



CONCLUSION

A complex web of factors contribute to the well-being disparities observed across political lines in America. While the use of partisan language in discussions around nutrition and wellness is a relatively new phenomenon, the underlying divisions between progressives and conservatives in terms of worldviews, access to resources, and perceptions of personal agency have deep roots. These factors significantly impact the choices individuals make regarding their health and wellness, and contribute to the disparities we see today. Addressing these disparities requires a nuanced understanding of the intersections between politics, geography, access, and individual beliefs. It also calls for the food and wellbeing industry to invest in more inclusive narratives that ensure all Americans, regardless of their political leanings or geographical location, can see themselves reflected in better choices around their health and wellbeing.

