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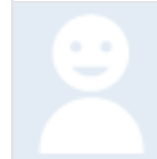
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# The kitchen table: Anatomy of a metaphor

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By Ted Anthony, AP National Writer



Enlarge by Al Grillo, AP

DENVER — The rooms of the modern American household have always crept into campaigns. Politics makes strange bedfellows, for one. The living-room war ended Lyndon Johnson's political career. And everyone keeps saying the economy's headed for the toilet.

Rarely, however, do you hear about a particular part of a particular room over and over -- until this past week. For the Democrats, suddenly it's all about the kitchen and its centerpiece, the kitchen table, which is claiming an extended moment in the spotlight.

In speech after speech, interview after interview, the nation's most powerful Democratic politicians invoked the commonplace kitchen table as the touchstone for modern politics -- the vantage point from which the ordinary American family watches, wonders and worries.

In short, the perfect opening for politicians to invite themselves in.

"Republican mismanagement has really hit home around the kitchen table," Democratic National Committee Treasurer Andrew Tobias said. "At kitchen tables across Ohio and the heartland, mothers and fathers are worried," Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland said. And from Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill: "Tonight, families are balancing checkbooks at kitchen tables, trying to stay on budget."

Joe Biden did it, accepting the vice presidential nomination Wednesday night. "I take the train home to Wilmington, sometimes very late. As I look out the window at the homes we pass, I can almost hear what they're talking about at the kitchen table after they put the kids to bed."

The question must be asked: What on Earth is up with the kitchen table?

"It's a wonderful image. It's an image that stays with you because it mirrors reality," says Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat. "In my kitchen, that's where I pay my bills," she says, and in a bad economy "it resonates with a lot of people."

It is a potent metaphor that evokes images of private time, nesting and the process of managing a household -- "the symbol of all things practical and all things comforting," as Cynthia Glozier, a Democratic delegate from Rhinebeck, N.Y., put it.

And consider what's percolating in American households in these troubled times. Bills need to be paid from checking accounts that contain too little money. Families are agonizing about what to do next. Anxiousness is causing a circling of the wagons.

Enter the kitchen. Once used for physical warmth because it contained the fireplace, today it offers metaphoric warmth. It is a place for family members to talk and eat (rather than dine), but guests and strangers are typically received elsewhere.

"You don't invite the stranger into the kitchen unless you really like them. The living room is preserved for that," says Susan Strasser, author of "Never Done: A History of American Housework."

In the republic's early days, when most houses had only a few rooms, the kitchen was an intimate gathering place. But many of the dominant images of postwar America, with its newfound prosperity, showed families gathering in the living room or den.

Now, though, demographics are shifting again. Many households have two working parents, and the kitchen table -- and its younger sibling, the kitchen island -- have become family meeting places. Some companies have even marketed kitchen-table computers.

"The kitchen table has evolved. It's become multifunctional," says Kristi Hoffman, who teaches about the American family at Roanoke College in Salem, Va. "Many people don't make as formal meals anymore. So the kitchen table becomes a place where a lot does happen."

Because of that, kitchens are getting bigger. In recent years, buyers of new homes have been looking for outsized kitchens and enormous tables for them that can function as both family eating station, workspace and storage area for paperwork or toys.

"If you're not in the kitchen, you're going to miss out," says Erich Gaukel, editor of Renovation Style magazine. "The kitchen itself is really becoming a living room in American homes."

That makes it the perfect terrain for a political battle in a country where the soul of the American family -- and who can lay claim to it -- is one of the parties' most enduring fights.

It was no coincidence that, in 1994, when interest groups wanted to sink the Clinton administration's health-care plan, its notorious "Harry and Louise" video took place at a kitchen table -- as does a new chapter with the same actors that was released earlier this month.

Finally, the kitchen table is an icon of regularness -- common ground we can all share. Well, most of us: Joe Biden hammered that home on his first appearance as Barack Obama's running mate, using the table as a launching pad for salvos against John McCain.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your kitchen table is like mine," Biden said. "You sit there at night ... after you put the kids to bed and you talk, you talk about what you need. You talk about how much you are worried about being able to pay the bills. Well, ladies and gentlemen, that's not a worry John McCain has to worry about. It's a pretty hard experience. He'll have to figure out which of the seven kitchen tables to sit at."

McCain scurried to "The Tonight Show" to shoot back. "I spent 5 1/2 years in a prison cell," he said. "I didn't have a house, I didn't have a kitchen table, I didn't have a table, I didn't have a chair."

The search for robust political metaphors is always a race. Parties troll fervently for that one image, that one entry point to get themselves in. And if you can access the kitchen table -- or at least make voters think of you when they're sitting at theirs, the political opportunities are tremendous. Because if you can get that far with voters, make that connection, heck -- you're practically family.

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