

Chapter 20

Political Consumption as Supplement to Conventional Political Participation in Promoting Social Change

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that individual consumers with food safety, environmental and ethical concerns regarding the provisioning of food may be motivated to use the marketplace as a site for political action to promote social change—a phenomenon known as political consumption (PC). Using data from Ohio 2007 Survey of Food, Farming and Environment, this research examined individual level attributes shaping engagement in PC and conventional political action. Findings based on logistic regression analyses, reveal that engagement in conventional political behavior is positively related to the likelihood of engagement in political consumption. This suggests that engagement in conventional political action and political consumption are not mutually exclusive. The main factors associated with engagement in political consumption are: knowledge about food production, environmental and food safety concerns. These findings suggest that consumers with concerns about the organization and character of food production believe they can create social changes via their consumptive decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence from survey research indicates that individual consumers with food safety, environmental and ethical concerns regarding the provisioning of food may be motivated to use the marketplace as a site for political action to promote social change (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). The use of the marketplace as a site for political action is a less studied form of political participation (Giddens, 1991; Galston 1991; Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2006) and reflects a recognition of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context (Micheletti, 2003).

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New forms of political participation such as buying or boycotting products based on political or ethical values may reflect consumer perception that existing political institutions are inadequate to address citizen concerns; and reveal that traditional forms of participation are increasingly inefficient and less suitable to the nature of political problems in post-industrial societies (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Norris, 2002). In that regard, buying certain products to support their sales, boycotts, the forwarding of political e-mails about the labor practices of companies, are emerging political action repertoires through which citizens circumvent traditional (conventional) channels for political participation to directly confront the companies and the market (Baek, 2010). This sort of politically motivated pattern of consumption is consistent with assertions by Inglehart (1997) and Norris (2002) that engagement in conventional forms of political behavior (contacting public officials, signing petitions etc) is declining whereas unconventional political behavior such as boycotting a product is on the rise.

The engagement in new forms of political participation such as boycotts and buying certain products to support their sale in order to address public concerns can be labeled as political consumption, which Micheletti (2003) defines as buying or boycotting of products or services based on political or ethical values and with a motive for change. Baek (2010, p.1066) defines political consumption as a consumer's decision to punish (i.e. boycott) or reward (i.e. buycott) private companies by making selective choices of products or brands, based on social, political or ethical considerations. Webster (1975) describes a political consumer as someone who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change. Political consumers use their knowledge, buying power and organizing power to demand certain changes (Dixon, 2003). Such changes could be with respect to food safety, environmental, labor and production practices.

Togeby (1993) offers another perspective regarding new forms of political participation. According to him, new kinds of political participation differ from conventional forms in terms of how they mobilize new social groups into politics. This view is called *the mobilization theory*. He also formulated the *supplement theory* which states that those who employ new modes of participation are already involved in traditional forms of political participation. In that regard, new forms of political participation are an extension of the conventional participation repertoire.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

While most researches focus on understanding the factors associated with conventional political behavior (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Peterson, 1990), few studies have examined engagement in political consumption compared with conventional political behavior (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Norris, 2002; Micheletti et al., 2006; Stromsnes, 2009; Sandovici & Davis, 2010). Similarly, although political consumers engage in conventional participation acts just as often as others, they are skeptical about the effectiveness of these methods, and this corresponds to the fact that, in general, they have less trust in established institutions (Stolle et al 2005, p.260). They noted further that these citizens (political consumers) are not alienated; they continue to engage in conventional forms of participation, although they are aware of their limitations (p. 263). In addition to that, Peterson (1990); Barnes and Kaase (1979); Stromsnes (2009); Sandovici and Davis (2010) reported that conventional and unconventional forms of political participation are combined by politically active citizens; and Tarrow (2000) argues that those engaging in political consumption are the same people who participate in conventional forms of political behavior. There are virtually no studies that explore the relationship between an individual's views of

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