

Locating the Politics in Political Consumption: A Conceptual Map of Four Types of Political Consumer Identities

LUCY ATKINSON¹

University of Texas at Austin, USA

Political consumption is widely assumed to have a positive relationship with civic and political engagement, and considerable scholarly work indicates marketplace-based politics align neatly with contemporary norms of engaged citizenship. However, few studies examine whether political consumers themselves think of their shopping choices as political. Using depth interviews, this study uses schema theory to understand how individuals think about their political consumer roles. I argue that political consumption represents a collection of orientations varying according to two dimensions: responsibilities and rights. The language political consumers use to talk about their behaviors serves to situate them within one of four types of political consumers, each adhering to a different orientation of rights and responsibilities.

Keywords: political consumption, conceptual map, depth interviews, discourses of citizenship, citizenship norms, schema

Political consumption is widely assumed to have a positive relationship with civic and political engagement (Baek, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005; Strømsnes, 2009; Ward & de Vreese, 2011; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini, 2006). That is, it is said to represent a salutary alternative form of political participation (Bennett, 2005; Dahlgren, 2007; Dalton, 2008) allowing citizens to express and enact their civic norms and ideals outside the traditional role of the dutiful citizen. Political consumption—the conscious decision to buy or avoid products and services for ethical, environmental, or political reasons (Stolle, et al., 2005)—is closely tied to political communication. On one hand, it is a vehicle for individuals to communicate their civic and political values and preferences (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). By selecting products that carry pro-social markers, such as Fair Trade coffee, consumers are able to signal their civic orientations and communicate their own pro-sociality. On the other hand, political consumption also offers individuals the means to challenge and protest what they see as uncivic or socially irresponsible brands.

Lucy Atkinson: lucyatkinson@austin.utexas.edu

Date submitted: 2014–10–17

¹ This project received funding from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and PR to support three undergraduate researchers. I would like to thank Iliana Flores, Amy Harrison, and Shannon Kahlden for their help with data collection.

Copyright © 2015 (Lucy Atkinson). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Through discursive political consumption, individuals can promote deliberation and communication about corporate political and social responsibility (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), thereby bringing the marketplace and consumer behavior squarely into the domain of politics.

However, there is insufficient research exploring whether and how political consumers actually view their consumption choices. Left out of most studies of political consumption is the question: Do political consumers *themselves* view their consumption as political? The question is an important one and is part of a larger discussion about the degree to which political consumption is, in fact, political (Micheletti & Stolle, 2010). The ways in which individuals understand their political and civic identities and obligations have considerable influence on their choices about how and when to be politically engaged (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Jones & Gaventa, 2002; Theiss-Morse, 1993; Thorson, 2012).

This is equally true of political consumption. Despite the growing number of studies arguing that political consumption is a form of alternative politics, very few studies have tried to understand the meaning of political consumption from the perspective of individuals. This article asks, What is political consumption? Similar to past studies that have sought to understand how citizens themselves understand citizenship (Almond & Verba, 1963; Conover et al., 1991; Lane, 1965; Theiss-Morse, 1993), this study takes the perspective of actual political consumers to explore how they understand their responsibilities and goals as consumers. Like Conover and colleagues (1991), I use schema theory as a framework for understanding how individuals think about their roles as political consumers. Drawing on depth interviews with a collection of self-identified political consumers, I argue that political consumption represents a collection of orientations varying according to two dimensions: responsibilities and rights. The language political consumers use to talk about their behaviors serves to situate them within one of four political consumer types, each adhering to a different orientation of rights and responsibilities.

Literature Review

Making Room for Consumption in Politics

Political consumption is an increasingly popular form of consumer behavior. It can be informed by a number of motivations that are simultaneously individual and private and community oriented and public (Atkinson, 2012). While not a new form of marketplace action (it dates back at least to the American Revolution and colonists' decision to boycott British goods [Breen, 2004]), it is seeing a resurgence in contemporary consumer culture. In terms of environmentally motivated consumption, for example, over the last four years the number of individuals who identify themselves as green consumers has tripled from 12% to 36%, and this number is expected to jump again to 55% by 2013 (Mintel, 2009). From buying Fair Trade chocolate and organic coffee to hybrid cars and American-made clothes, today's consumers have countless ways to signal their civic and political concerns through their purchases.

Although the last few decades have seen the study of consumption gain legitimacy and political theorists have started to account for the connections between consumption and citizenship (Bennett, 2005; Dalton, 2008; Dobson, 2006, 2007), until recently, consumption was held in low regard academically (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Early scholarship that did connect consumption with politics tended

to position the two as mutually exclusive orientations with the assumption that favoring consumer behavior necessarily means crowding out conventional means of political and civic engagement (Trentmann, 2007). More contemporary scholarship has started to unpack this assumption. Using survey data, Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) showed that political consumption does not replace traditional forms of engagement and that individuals who engage in political consumption are also likely to participate in other forms of political engagement, such as demonstrating or being a member of an association. More recent studies extend these findings, showing that in North America and Europe, political consumerism is one element of larger political participation practices (Baek, 2010; Copeland & Smith, 2014; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Strømsnes, 2009).

Political consumption also has clear connections to communication. Like other conventional forms of civic engagement, such as volunteering, political consumption is positively related to mass media use, particularly news consumption, and to interpersonal discussion, both online and offline (Baek, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2010; Shah et al., 2007). It is also conceptualized as a form of communication in its own right. As argued by Stolle and Micheletti (2013), political consumption takes on a communicative dimension in the form of discursive political consumption. With roots in antibranding efforts and culture jamming, discursive political consumption encompasses a range of activities that seek to raise awareness about corporate social responsibility or lack thereof, such as poor treatment of workers or weak environmental records (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). By harnessing the images and symbols of corporations and their brands, including logos, the "latent psychological, socioeconomic, and environmental implications of consumer choice" (Rumbo, 2002, p. 143) are made manifest.

Locating the "Political" in Consumption

Work on changing citizenship norms suggests political consumption is a growing form of alternative political engagement that aligns neatly with contemporary norms of citizenship emphasizing direct action, networked publics, and loose institutional affiliations (Bennett, 2005; Dahlgren, 2007; Dalton, 2008). This new citizenship model argues that, rather than declining, political participation is simply evolving to adopt different forms. One of these forms is political consumption, which encourages citizens to express and enact their civic values outside the traditional role of the dutiful citizen (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008). Unlike dutiful citizens, whose role conforms more closely with conventional means of political engagement and political party affiliation, engaged or self-actualizing citizens see political engagement in personal terms, motivated by a desire to enhance the quality of their personal lives rather than to support government institutions (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008).

Two parallel, related theories of evolving citizenship norms support the idea of consumption as a form of politics. Ecological citizenship (Dobson, 2006, 2007; Jagers, 2009) and sustainable citizenship (Micheletti, Stolle, & Berlin, 2012) both argue for a new kind of citizenship that challenges traditional models. Ecological and sustainable citizenship both present models of citizenship that are nonreciprocal, unconstrained by time or space, and centered on issues of social justice and fairness. Ecological and sustainable citizenship norms emphasize those behaviors and values that prioritize equality and sustainability for all people, including those beyond an individual's own state boundaries, and spanning current and future generations. As a nonreciprocal form of citizenship, it assumes individuals are

motivated to act because they feel an obligation and responsibility for others, not because of expected personal gains or claims to certain rights. As with actualized and engaged citizenship norms, ecological and sustainable citizenship expands beyond the public sphere to make room for private, personal issues to become both catalysts of political action and the means of engagement. This is made explicit in the forms of consumption and the expectation that individuals should seek to be responsible consumers by engaging in conscientious, sustainable consumption of goods and natural resources.

Are All Forms of Political Consumption Equally Political?

While extant literature might argue convincingly that political consumption is an important form of political participation (Bennett, 1998; Clarke, Barnett, Cloke, & Malpass, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Norris, 2002), these studies ignore the question of whether (and how) political consumers see their own consumption choices as civic and political acts. Much of the empirical work that demonstrates political consumption is close kin to other forms of civic engagement does so with quantitative studies, mostly surveys. And while regressions and factor analyses can demonstrate positive correlations and associations between citizenship and consumption, they cannot explain the processes underlying these relationships. This is not to say that quantitative studies are not useful. Surveys, for example, have shown political consumers are more likely than nonpolitical consumers to feel a personal responsibility to consume ethically and that these choices can influence society (Copeland & Smith, 2014).

Quantitative studies, however, tend to gloss over these differences by operationalizing the concept of political consumption in crude terms (Copeland, 2014). For example, some studies of political consumption begin by a priori classifying specific consumption behaviors, such as buying organic, as political. And while the decision to buy organic can certainly reflect the nonreciprocal justice-oriented norms outlined by models of ecological and sustainable citizenship, it can just as easily be motivated by private, noncivic goals, such as personal health. In other studies, political consumption is measured by just two items, asking if respondents had (a) bought or (b) not bought products for ethical, environmental, or political reasons. Not only do these two items conflate a variety of sometimes competing reasons for political consumption (Copeland, 2014), but in some cases, they are also too broad to generate meaningful data. In other instances, these operational decisions can elide the different, sometimes contradictory motives underlying a single consumption choice, such as the decision to be a vegetarian (Micheletti & Stolle, 2010). When Zukin and colleagues (2006) surveyed young adults about their boycotting and buycotting habits, many of them indicated they did so, but when asked to give examples, only a fraction could list examples relevant to politics.

Even these studies that take seriously the proposition that consumption is a form of politics tend to ignore any variance in the ways political consumers understand their own consumption practices and the ways in which they make meaning out of them. My own work (Atkinson, 2015) suggests that the ways that individuals understand consumer culture as an avenue for civic participation is more complicated than survey data suggest. Results of depth interviews with politically active young people suggest that political consumption is a way to enact a set of values and orientations, the particulars of which can vary from person to person, for example, along ideological, moral and religious lines, with the result being that the same act of political consumption—such as buying organic food or investing in socially responsible

stocks—can be motivated by different factors, can manifest in different ways, and can lead to different outcomes.

Whereas quantitative studies can mask or miss these nuances, qualitative approaches are better suited to exposing the thoughts and meanings individual consumers ascribe to their political consumption choices (Thorson, 2012). This distinction is not insignificant, given the variety of motives and reasons for people's political consumption choices, including issues of animal welfare, workers' rights, localist concerns, health-related matters, and environmental issues (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Crane, 2001). Simple surveys might reduce all these varied and conceptually different manifestations of political consumption to the same thing, when in reality they might represent different meanings and norms. To bring clarity to the sometimes muddy waters of political consumption, we need to understand what political consumers think of their political consumption habits.

Like Conover et al. (1991), I rely on schema theory as a framework to analyze and understand political consumers' thoughts about their political consumption roles. Schema theory suggests that individuals organize information mentally into structures called schemas. A schema is a representation of knowledge and a mechanism for information processing (DiMaggio, 1997). As a representation, a schema is a collection of objects and the relationships among them. People develop cognitive schema for everything from activities and social phenomena to concepts and self-identity (Fiske & Taylor, 1984). Of interest to this study is the fact that people develop self-schemas for the concept of citizenship. In their comparison of British and American citizens, Conover et al. (1991) showed that individuals' schemas varied depending on the kind of political norms they were socialized into. These self-schemas, in turn, informed a particular citizenship identity that was uncovered by studying the language and narratives individuals used to talk about citizenship. I employ the same approach here to uncover meanings of political consumption.

In terms of political consumption, past literature suggests individuals might draw on numerous vocabularies to describe their political consumption practices. In the broadest sense, citizenship discourse can be understood as either contractual citizenship or communal citizenship (Conover et al., 1991; Jones & Gaventa, 2002). The contractual view defines citizenship in terms of individual rights and sees political participation as instrumental, serving to further private interests rather than broader, shared social goals. As Conover et al. (1991) state, this conception prioritizes individuals' rights, which tend to be understood in terms of negative freedoms—e.g., protections from the state—and views duties as a burden because they limit individual freedoms. Conversely, the communal view describes citizenship as a product of shared identities, rather than individual autonomy, which in turn serves as the basis for the pursuit of common goals over private interests. Scholarship in ecological and sustainable citizenship also takes up the issue of rights and responsibilities as a component of citizenship (Dobson, 2006, 2007; Jagers, 2009; Micheletti, Stolle, & Berlin, 2012). Within this framework, an individual's schema might focus on responsibilities, as motivated by concerns for social justice and fairness. This responsibility is expressed in far-reaching terms, extending not only to individuals who are not within a specific state boundary but also to future citizens who have not yet been born and, in some cases, to nonhuman constituents such as animals and plants (Jagers & Matti, 2010).

Method

To understand how political consumers understand their political consumption choices, depth interviews were carried out with 22 self-identified political consumers. Qualitative approaches to data collection, particularly depth interviews, are well suited to the study of both politics and consumer behavior (Atkinson, 2012, 2015; Delli Carpini, 2013). In the case of political consumption, survey methods can be ineffective at getting at the nuance and detail of individual consumer beliefs, which often entail ethical and moral concerns and can be prone to social desirability effects (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Brunk, 2010). Qualitative techniques, on the other hand, allow the researcher to “explore complex behavior and to experience the consumer’s ‘eye view’ of the world” (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001, p. 567).

The interviews were carried out by the author and three trained undergraduate research assistants. Participants were recruited in two ways: first, through our social networks and via snowball sampling; and second, through a pool of undergraduate students at the author’s institution who joined the department’s Participant Pool and participate in studies for extra credit. The only criterion for inclusion in the study was that the participant be a political consumer. A screener question was asked to ensure informants engaged in at least two kinds of political consumption.² Informants ranged in age from 18 to 36, were equally split in terms of gender and political party affiliation, and represented diverse socioeconomic categories.

Interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes and were loosely guided by an interview protocol with questions structured around a few dominant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes focused on the norms and values underpinning the different traditions of citizenship discussed previously. Informants were asked about issues of social justice, fairness, rights, and responsibilities as they relate to citizenship more broadly and political consumption in particular. Analysis of the transcribed interviews followed the guidelines suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Thompson and colleagues (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The interviews were interpreted within a hermeneutical framework, with each informant’s story being understood in relation to the broader contextual backdrop of political consumption and citizenship norms. Analysis followed the three stages of intracase analysis, intercase analysis, and contextualization of the conceptual framework (Conover et al., 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1989). The findings discussed in the next section developed organically out of iterative readings of the transcripts and were not determined prior to analyzing the texts.

Findings

Initial analysis of the interviews shows considerable variation in the kinds of consumer choices

² Screener questions asked participants whether they did any of the following: bought organic food or other products (e.g., clothing); bought fair-trade food or other products (e.g., clothing); bought American-made products; bought GMO-free foods and products; ate a mainly vegetarian diet; deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons; and deliberately did *not* buy certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons.

informants made and the motives behind them. Political consumption covers considerable terrain (Micheletti et al., 2012), and in keeping with this breadth of options, informants in this study reported opting for different kinds. Some chose to engage in political consumption in limited ways, displaying narrow political consumption habits and motives. For example, Carlos³ meets the definition of a political consumer but limits his political consumption to buying organic food. Other informants wove their political consumption choices into almost all fabrics of their day-to-day lives. The data also revealed a cross-section of motives for engaging in political consumption. Ashley, who tries to avoid genetically modified (GM) foods and opts for organic when she can, is motivated first by personal health reasons and only second by environmental concerns. Samantha, on the other hand, understands her own consumption choices in terms of the impact they will have not only on her and her immediate family but also, and just as significantly, on the environment and living conditions of future generations.

Despite this variety, the examples of consumption choices revealed by the interviews would all be lumped together as “political” according to theories of changing citizenship norms (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Dobson, 2006, 2007; Jagers, 2009; Micheletti et al., 2012). Yet, this classification is crude and misleading, and it glosses over the important question of whether individuals themselves see these behaviors as political and, if so, how. As the data suggest, the concept of a “political consumer” is complex. This is apparent in the conceptual map (see Figure 1) of political consumption dimensions that developed from the interviews. As Thorson (2012) found with her informants’ narratives about what makes a good citizen, I found the informants in this study used particular words and phrases to talk about their political consumption habits. These narratives reflect individuals’ schemas and the ways they structure and organize the concept “political consumption.” Specifically, these vocabularies suggest political consumption is organized according to two dimensions of citizenship norms.

The first dimension, which I call the *language of rights*, describes the ways in which political consumers understand the positive outcomes of political consumption and the shape these benefits and rewards take. As explained more fully below, these rights extend across a continuum from negative rights to positive rights. Negative rights reflect an individual’s right to freedom from harm or oppression from the government (Jones & Gaventa, 2002). They are codified in the United States in those civil liberties—freedom of religion, the right to bear arms—that prevent the government from encroaching on an individual’s own freedom (Bradley, 2010). While negative rights guarantee an individual’s right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” they place no obligation on individuals to guarantee other people’s social welfare. Positive rights, on the other hand, do make this demand. Positive rights, often classified as social rights, put the onus on individuals to make sure other people are taken care of, not just by refraining from committing harm or injustice but by actively providing for others (Conover et al., 1991).

³ Informants are referred to by pseudonyms.

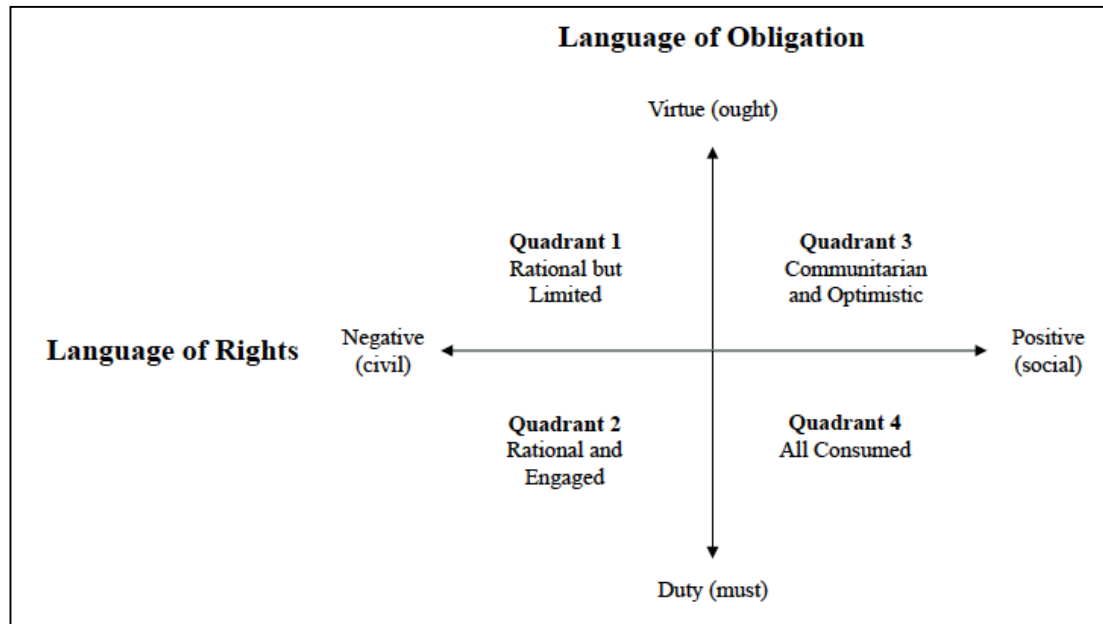


Figure 1. Conceptual map of political consumption dimensions.

The second dimension, which I call the *language of obligation*, describes the degree to which individuals feel a responsibility to engage in political consumption. At one end, the axis is anchored by a duty-bound obligation, the feeling that individuals are expected and required to engage in these political forms of consumer behavior. These are non-negotiable, fixed obligations that political consumers, as caring and concerned individuals, must engage in. At the other end, the axis is anchored by virtue responsibilities; that is, those obligations that, while ideal and good, are not absolutely required. These are the kinds of obligations that individuals ought to aspire to fulfill, those that we should seek to achieve but that are not necessary.

As a result of these differing degrees of felt rights and responsibilities, we see different conceptions of political consumption emerge. While all display some elements of the political, they do so in differing ways depending on where on the map individuals reside as a result of the language they use to describe their political consumption choices, motives, and goals.

In Quadrant 1, political consumption is framed as a social good, something that holds important promise as a means to influence meaningful change. However, the choice to buy organic or American-made products is most definitely thought of as a choice, an ideal, something that individuals should do if they are able to. It is not viewed as something individuals are obligated or duty bound to do. As well, the nature of the benefits of political consumption are situated in the tradition of negative rights or civil liberties (Currie, 1986; Donnelly, 2013); that is, the rights of individuals to be protected from harm or injury. Those who engage in this type of political consumption, for example, by buying fair-trade products,

speak of how their consumption choices help to guarantee workers' rights and protect them from mistreatment, especially at the hand of governments or multinational corporations. Likewise, individuals who reside in Quadrant 2 also speak about their political consumption choices in terms of negative rights or civil liberties, but in a way that frames the consumer behavior as an obligation, a moral duty that cannot be shirked when the costs are too high.

In Quadrants 3 and 4, the language of political consumption shifts the focus away from negative rights, or the rights of individuals to be protected from harm or mistreatment, and instead focuses on social rights or positive rights (Jones & Gaventa, 2002; Marshall, 1950). These kinds of political consumers view the outcome of their consumption choices in social welfare terms, as ways to improve the lives of individuals by providing better living conditions and reallocating resources to those in need. These two quadrants differ, however, in the ways they talk about responsibilities. Those in Quadrant 3 frame political consumption as a virtue; their political consumption choices are framed in idealized ways, as things that are advisable and good but not always achievable, for reasons of cost, availability, or taste. Conversely, those in Quadrant 4 view their political consumption as a moral obligation, a duty that must be met regardless of the sacrifices involved.

I discuss these quadrants in more detail in the following section, using a single exemplar for the sake of clarity and detail to illustrate each quadrant. Although I place these exemplars in specific quadrants, it should be noted that there is a degree of fluidity within each informant's story of political consumption. However, when an individual's narrative is taken *in toto*, the language coalesces around one or the other end of the two dimensions.

Quadrant 1: The Rational but Limited Political Consumer

Luis is a 25-year-old civil engineer who focuses most of his political consumption choices in the area of fair-trade and non-GM foods. He shops at his local farmers' market, tries to buy organic food when he can afford it, and avoids foods he thinks are unsafe, such as GM foods. But he is also a proponent of industrial farming and mass production if it means less well-off populations have access to affordable, safer food. He describes his consumer motives in terms of human rights and consumer protections. He favors stores that treat their employees well and pay them a living wage. He supports companies that provide good jobs for people in his community, rather than corporations that might take jobs overseas or be deceptive about working conditions. Shopping at farmers' markets, for example, is one way that Luis feels confident about the consumer decisions he makes: "I'll buy from the farmers' market because it gives a local person a job. You know, they go out to hire help to help them pick their crop or help them around their farm or garden."

The language he uses to describe these political consumption choices reflects a concern for other people's opportunities. He describes his role as a political consumer in terms of increasing the chances for other people to succeed. He does not talk about his political consumption as a means to directly improve welfare conditions of other people by guaranteeing a certain income or access to material benefits. Rather, it is up to others to grab the opportunities and make something of them.

We have a pretty good life, especially us. We're very lucky or as a lot of people would say, blessed. Not everyone is. And in that sense, everyone should have that opportunity to be as equally blessed or lucky or whatever you want to call it. Everybody should have a good standard of living or have the opportunity to have a good, safe standard of living.

This emphasis on opportunity and liberties places him squarely on the left side of the horizontal axis, in the realm of negative rights. His narrative describes political consumption as an effort to secure the civil liberties of others. It is about protecting individuals from being taken advantage of and about ensuring their right to pursue success and happiness. This is readily apparent in his views on consumer protection and product safety. Luis sees his consumption choices as a way to reward those companies that do not harm consumers.

It is important that there are standards that people have to meet out there if they are delivering to the masses. Not just anyone should be allowed to sell, you know, food product to the masses because if something goes wrong . . . I mean, you hear the news all the time, massive recall on this chicken, you know, or something like that. A lot of people could get sick and you have a lot of people's lives in your hands.

He sees many of his political consumption choices as the product of his socioeconomic status and the fact he can afford the price tag that comes with fair-trade or organic products. The flipside of this, however, is that there are built in limits to the lengths he will go to be a political consumer. Luis draws a boundary around what he is willing to do, and sacrifices that might compromise his own well-being fall outside that boundary.

I should not be making any decision that's bad for me for the benefit of others. Like I've said, no one should ever have to sacrifice anything of their own. I mean, it's very noble. I guess I'm not that noble.

His language clearly places him on the virtue end of the vertical axis in Figure 1. In his conception of political consumption, there is no room for self-sacrifice or choices that might hurt his own well-being. Instead, being a political consumer occupies an area of virtue, or "ought" behaviors. He recognizes that there are some choices he could be making as a political consumer that might be larger or more effective, but he is unwilling to venture into the territory of a self-sacrificing political consumer.

Quadrant 2: The Rational and Engaged Political Consumer

Emily is a 32-year-old graduate student who speaks about her political consumption choices in far-reaching, significant terms. Like Luis, she is concerned about product safety and consumer protections. She talks about political consumption in terms of avoiding chemicals and additives, particularly when it comes to personal-care products and makeup. She rewards companies that she thinks take consumer protection seriously, like St. Ives: "That company for me has kind of earned its quality mark, and so I trust them without reading labels."

Also like Luis, Emily sees the benefits of her political consumption choice in terms of the opportunities it gives to other people, especially individuals in faraway places who might manufacture the chocolate she eats or grow the coffee she drinks. Emily describes her decision to buy fair-trade products as an effort to give these unknown others a chance at meaningful, satisfactory lives.

Chiquita has these huge farms and people have to work for them, and they're not slaves, but it does enslave them into that lifestyle. . . . People lose the opportunity to have their own livelihood, and to own their own property and establish something for their families.

This focus on political consumption as, on the one hand, a means of protecting individuals from companies run amok and, on the other, as a way of opening the doors of opportunity for others places Emily's approach to political consumption on the left side of the horizontal axis, as concerned with civil liberties and ensuring that individuals remain free from government or corporate harm or mistreatment.

Unlike Luis, she sees her consumption choices as a personal obligation, a responsibility that cannot be ignored. Despite a lack of scientific clarity on some issues, such as the benefits of organic over conventional food, Emily still sees it as her duty to buy organic food.

I do understand that some organic practices are just as detrimental to our environment, but you just have to take it on faith because you know that as a consumer I don't have time to investigate all these different things. So if it's organic, it feels like there's a chance that they have better practices and that they're more interested in kind of a healthier environment and a healthier ecosystem, but it can't be guaranteed with that.

Despite the lack of "guarantee," Emily feels compelled to buy organic. She describes her choice in terms of a responsibility that she must live up to, and she feels conflicted when she cannot. Unlike Luis, who did not express the same kind of dissonance at being inconsistent in his political consumption choices, Emily seeks consistency in her shopping habits, even if she's unsure whether what she buys is actually superior or whether the people who cultivate the food she buys are better off.

It is important to me, but it's kind of weird because I know that I'm, like, disconnected from them, so, those people live really far away, they have this other life, and I know enough about the world that I know that there's always other steps, but somehow I feel like my consumer action will impact those people; I do.

Quadrant 3: The Communitarian and Optimistic Political Consumer

Samantha, 36, is a music therapist and mother of two children under the age of 3. She feels financially constrained in some respects, so her consumption choices are bound by these practical limits. As a result, unlike Emily, she talks about her political consumption as one of ideals, of "should," rather than one of fixed duties, of "must." This places her on the top end of the vertical axis, where her language of responsibility frames political consumption as a virtue, something to be aspired to, but it's not a deal-

breaker if she finds herself unable to in some situations.

One of the limiting factors for Samantha is the difficulty in becoming an informed political consumer. She talks about dealing with an information deficit when it comes to knowing everything she would need to for all of her consumption choices to be politically minded.

The thing is the knowledge, the knowledge of it; if it's something widely known, then I'm much more likely to adhere to it if I'm aware. But it's hard to get that awareness, unless you have time to research every single product, then it's just not feasible.

Those political consumption choices Samantha is able to make are strongly motivated by environmental and animal-welfare concerns. She talks about animals and plants, the natural inhabitants of the planet, almost like they are citizens that deserve the same kind of social welfare guarantees that others afford to people.

In consuming, we are affecting the world and the environment and other species, and it's our responsibility. There are people who say we're humans, this is our world. Yes, but if we exploit it, Mother Earth is gonna fight back. That's our responsibility, the responsibility of our species, to protect others. What kind of species are we to let other species perish?

Unlike Luis and Emily, Samantha sees the consequences of her political consumption choices in welfare terms. Her language suggests political consumption is a matter of social rights, of ensuring other people have what they need to prosper. Her motivations go beyond simply not harming others, a negative right, and instead incorporate the belief that she must, as a member of a community bound social ties, help other people to thrive. Her language reflects the norms suggested by communitarian citizenship and ecological and sustainable citizenship when she speaks about this obligation not being bound by spatial or temporal factors. She is beholden not only to her family and those currently living but also to people in other parts of the world and future generations.

And unlike Luis, Samantha talks about the sacrifices that we must be willing to make to help other species to thrive. In doing so, her language differentiates her from the negative rights perspective, which would argue that we are responsible for others only insofar as that responsibility does not impact our own welfare. Instead, Samantha speaks about sacrifices, compromises, hardships that we have to endure to make the planet more livable not only for us but for all other species.

The figures you see that the U.S. is, like, we consume the most on the planet, per capita, and knowing that, it just makes me sick. OK, like we're supposed to be this developed society, but we're so based in capitalism and making money, it's selling things, selling things, selling things, that I think we've lost sight of, what do you need to survive? It's about excess, always wanting more and not being happy with what we've got. . . . If it's all just about money, well, you can't take it with you when you go. What kind of legacy are you going to leave behind?

Quadrant 4: The All-Consumed Political Consumer

Lauren is a 32-year-old stay-at-home mother of two young children. She, more than the other three informants described so far, views her political consumption choices as a deeply held conviction, one that goes to the very core of her sense of self and her identity as a caring, concerned individual. Lauren approaches almost all of her consumption choices from the primary question of how it will affect not only herself and her immediate family but also other people and the environment. This perspective influences the food she buys, the car she drives, the cleaning products she uses, and the clothes she wears.

Lauren takes her commitment to political consumption further than Emily, in Quadrant 2. She sees it as something she is duty bound to engage in, even if it takes more effort and more money. Lauren, who used to be a vegetarian but decided several years ago to reintroduce meat into her diet, is very strict about the kinds of meat she will eat: It must be humanely raised and killed, free of antibiotics, organic, and, in the case of beef, grass fed. She doesn't veer from these self-imposed standards to the point that at restaurants, she won't eat meat if she can't tell where it came from and how it was raised. She acknowledges that it takes a lot of effort, but she explains it is important for her to stick with it.

Unlike Samantha, Lauren feels obliged to stay informed about her consumption choices. She follows the mainstream news media and reads blogs and Facebook pages on the topic of ethical food consumption. This information seeking extends to actual consumption moments.

Like, if I'm confronted with a new brand, I will try to research it online as much as I can, even if it's in the store with my phone.

Like Samantha, she sees her political consumption in terms of how it can help other people. The narrative she uses to describe her political consumption motives and choices speaks to a deeply held ethic of caring, a sense that she is morally obligated to help others to thrive. Lauren's language is even more pronounced than Samantha's when she talks about human beings' obligation to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. She speaks about her political consumption choices against the backdrop of her obligations as a citizen, which firmly place her on the right side of the rights axis in Figure 1.

Supporting a society in which most people have their basic needs met, is being a good citizen, because to me, having a society where people are cared for, and have homes and food, and can take a care of their children, it just makes for a better place to live. I would rather live in a society where everyone was supportive of each other's needs even if it meant maybe less money for me as an individual, versus a world where you're surrounded by want and need and inequality.

Lauren also sees government involvement through regulation as an important mechanism for bringing about the kind of social and environmental changes she would like to see. Rather than adopting a negative rights perspective, in which citizenship brings with it freedom from excessive government intervention, Lauren views regulation as something that will do what individuals are ill inclined to do on their own. She cites the example of a recent law passed by the city to ban plastic bags and describes the

ban as necessary to motivate residents to switch to reusable shopping bags rather than as a case of government overstepping its bounds.

Discussion

The way political consumers talk about their consumption choices reveals interesting patterns, particularly in the way individuals understand their rights and obligations. Before expanding on the implications of these findings, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. First, the sample is not representative of the broader population of political consumers. While this limits the generalizability of the findings, by design, the study was not intended to be representative but was meant to show variance across a single category. In addition, although the sample size is relatively small, it provides deep, rich insight into the lived experiences of political consumers, the very experiences that surveys tend to overlook or reduce. Last, the dimensions identified here are by no means exhaustive. It is likely that there are other elements that also contribute to individuals' consumption choices, for example, whether the action is state oriented or market oriented (Haydu & Kadanoff, 2010).

Despite these limitations, the conceptual map and these four exemplars give insight into the way political consumption schemas are structured and organized. As the conceptual map indicates, political consumption falls into two dimensions. The first concerns the degree of felt responsibility. Within this dimension, political consumers rely on the language of duty or virtue to describe their actions. The second dimension uncovers the kinds of rights political consumers see their actions upholding. These rights are discussed either in terms of negative freedoms, or ways that political consumption can protect other people's civil liberties, including freedom from government intervention, or in terms of positive freedoms, or those social rights that emphasize welfare and promote other people's rights to thrive.

The benefits of this conceptual mapping are several. First, it offers one of the first examinations of how political consumers themselves understand their political consumption choices. As previous studies have shown (Conover et al., 1991; Jones & Gaventa, 2002), the way in which individuals talk about their visions and meanings of citizenship holds important implications for the way they think of their day-to-day actions as political. The same is true of political consumption. In line with similar critiques made by others (Van Deth, 2010), for political consumption to be political, political consumers must understand the political shape and influence of their actions. According to Conover et al. (1991), "an essential part of understanding what citizens think about their rights, duties, and identities [as political consumers] is understanding how they think about these matters" (p. 804). While motives for political consumption are often focused on other people, this other-mindedness can take different forms. The data reveal that political consumers think about these motives as either issues of civil liberties or issues of social welfare. While both are concerned with maximizing the rights of others, one seems to entail more personal sacrifice on the part of the political consumer than the other and speaks to a different tradition of citizenship norms. These findings also suggest that participation in political consumption practices takes different forms. Echoing work by Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012), political consumers adopt different participatory styles, which in turn allow for different ways of interacting and engaging with politics in the marketplace. These different participatory styles become evident in the four quadrants depicted in the conceptual map. Future studies could use this mapping as a means to delineate which participatory styles

are more common than others and under what conditions. Studies could explore how political consumers draw from and rely on these various conceptions as resources for action in both the marketplace and in more formal political venues. Similarly, future studies could explore the extent to which this conceptual map applies in other countries and cultures. Participants in this study, all of whom are American, represent a specific national and cultural experience, having been inculcated into a set of values and norms that are arguably unique to U.S. society. Other studies could examine whether the language of rights and responsibilities applies to political consumers in other countries.

Second, these findings describe a more holistic and detailed picture of political consumption than previous studies. By focusing on the narratives political consumers use rather than a priori classifications of what constitutes political consumption, this study yields a granular look at political consumption. Instead of relying on imperfect measures of political consumption that conflate motives and choices into single, crude catch-alls, the conceptual map suggests political consumption can be represented by diverse and sometimes incompatible motives. For example, those political consumers on the side of negative rights who see benefits from a lack of government intervention would probably find little common ground with those on the positive rights side of the map who welcome government regulation as a means to guarantee the welfare of others and the health of the environment. Surveys would lump these two groups together when, in fact, they might have less in common in their beliefs about rights than a quantitative analysis would imply.

Third, it offers greater precision. The conceptual map helps to explain why two disparate groups might engage in the same kind of political consumption but for different reasons. Taking the example of organic food, some political consumers might be motivated by issues of personal health or the health of loved ones, whereas others might be concerned with the impact of pesticides on farm workers, plants and animals, and the environment. These motives do not necessarily share common ground, yet they yield the same behavioral outcomes. In both cases, the actions are easily classified as political consumption, yet they embody different motives and goals. Simple surveys would reduce these opposing motives into the same narrow measure. The conceptual map provided here clarifies these different motives by retaining variance and detail. This conceptual map would be a useful starting point for more detailed quantitative studies; for example, survey questions might be operationalized in more detail to parse out the different motives and goals that underlie common forms of political engagement.

References

- Almond, G., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.
- Atkinson, L. (2012, November). Buying in to social change: How private consumption choices engender concern for the collective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644, 191–205. doi:10.1177/0002716212448366

- Atkinson, L. (2015). Buying in or tuning out: The role of consumption in politically active young adults. In H. G. d. Zuniga & S. Reese (Eds.), *New technologies & civic engagement: New agendas in communication*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Auger, P., & Devinney, T. M. (2007). Do what consumers say matter? The misalignment of preferences with unconstrained ethical intentions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 76(4), 361–383. doi:10.1007/s10551-006-9287-y
- Baek, Y. M. (2010). To buy or not to buy: Who are political consumers? What do they think and how do they participate? *Political Studies*, 58(5), 1065–1086. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2010.00832.x
- Bennett, W. L. (1998). The uncivic culture: Communication, identity, and the rise of lifestyle politics. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 31(4), 741–761. doi:10.1017/S1049096500053270
- Bennett, W. L. (2005). *Civic learning in changing democracies: Challenges for citizenship and civic education*. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.
- Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bimber, B., Flanagin, A., & Stohl, C. (2012). *Collective action in organizations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bradley, A. (2010). Positive rights, negative rights, and health care. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 36(12), 838–841. doi:10.2307/25764330
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Breen, T. H. (2004). *The marketplace of revolution: How consumer politics shaped American independence*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Brunk, K. H. (2010). Exploring origins of ethical company/brand perceptions: A consumer perspective of corporate ethics. *Journal of Business Research*, 63(3), 255–262. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2009.03.011
- Carrigan, M., & Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer: Do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 560.
- Clarke, N., Barnett, C., Cloke, P., & Malpass, A. (2007). The political rationalities of fair-trade consumption in the United Kingdom. *Politics Society*, 35(4), 583–607. doi:10.1177/0032329207308178

- Conover, P. J., Crewe, I. M., & Searing, D. D. (1991). The nature of citizenship in the United States and Great Britain: Empirical comments on theoretical themes. *Journal of Politics, 53*(3), 800–832. doi:10.2307/2131580
- Copeland, L. (2014). Conceptualizing political consumerism: How citizenship norms differentiate boycotting from buycotting. *Political Studies, 62*(S1), 172–186. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12067
- Copeland, L., & Smith, E. R. A. N. (2014). Consumer political action on climate change. In Y. Wolinsky-Nahmias (Ed.), *Changing climate politics: U.S. policies and civic action* (pp. xv). Los Angeles, CA: CQ Press.
- Crane, A. (2001). Unpacking the ethical product. *Journal of Business Ethics, 30*(4), 361–373. doi:10.1023/A:1010793013027
- Currie, D. P. (1986). Positive and negative constitutional rights. *The University of Chicago Law Review, 864–890*.
- Dahlgren, P. (2007). Civic identity and net activism: The frame of radical democracy. In L. Dahlberg & E. Siapera (Eds.), *Radical democracy and the Internet: Interrogating theory and practice* (pp. 55–72). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies, 56*(1), 76–98. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x
- Delli Carpini, M. X. (2013). Breaking boundaries: Can we bridge the quantitative versus qualitative divide through the study of entertainment and politics? *International Journal of Communication, 7*, 531–551.
- DiMaggio, P. (1997). Culture and cognition. *Annual Review of Sociology, 23*(1), 263–287.
- Dobson, A. (2006). Ecological citizenship: A defence. *Environmental Politics, 15*(3), 447–451. doi:10.1080/09644010600627766
- Dobson, A. (2007). Environmental citizenship: Towards sustainable development. *Sustainable Development, 15*(5), 276–285. doi:10.1002/sd.344
- Donnelly, J. (2013). *Universal human rights in theory and practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). *Social cognition*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Copeland, L., & Bimber, B. (2014). Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection. *New Media & Society, 16*(3), 488–506. doi:10.1177/1461444813487960
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Valenzuela, S. (2010). The mediating path to a stronger citizenship: Online and offline networks, weak ties, and civic engagement. *Communication Research, 38*, 397–421. doi:10.1177/0093650210384984
- Haydu, J., & Kadanoff, D. (2010). Casing political consumerism. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly, 15*(2), 159–177.
- Jagers, S. C. (2009). In search of the ecological citizen. *Environmental Politics, 18*(1), 18–36. doi:10.1080/09644010802624751
- Jagers, S. C., & Matti, S. (2010). Ecological citizens: Identifying values and beliefs that support individual environmental responsibility among Swedes. *Sustainability, 2*, 1055–1079. doi:10.3390/su2041055
- Jones, E., & Gaventa, J. (2002). Concepts of citizenship: A review. *IDS Development Bibliography, 19*, 1–66.
- Lane, R. E. (1965). The tense citizen and the casual patriot: Role confusion in American politics. *Journal of Politics, 27*(04), 735–760.
- Marshall, T. H. (1950). *Citizenship and social class*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2010). Vegetarianism—a lifestyle politics? In M. Micheletti & A. S. McFarland (Eds.), *Creative participation: Responsibility-taking in the political world* (pp. 125–145). Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Micheletti, M., Stolle, D., & Berlin, D. (2012). Habits of sustainable citizenship: The example of political consumerism. In A. Warde & D. Southerton (Eds.), *The habits of consumption* (Vol. 12, pp. 141–163). Helsinki, Finland: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Mintel. (2009). *Mintel finds fewer Americans interested in going "green" during recession*. Mintel Oxygen Reports.

- Newman, B. J., & Bartels, B. L. (2011). Politics at the checkout line: Explaining political consumerism in the United States. *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(4), 803–817. doi:10.1177/1065912910379232
- Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rumbo, J. D. (2002). Consumer resistance in a world of advertising clutter: The case of Adbusters. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 127–148. doi:10.1002/mar.10006
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, D. M., Kim, E., Lee, S. Y., Gotlieb, M. R., Ho, S. S., & Breivik, H. (2007). Political consumerism: How communication and consumption orientations drive “lifestyle politics.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 217–235. doi:10.1177/0002716206298714
- Stolle, D., Hooghe, M., & Micheletti, M. (2005). Politics in the supermarket: Political consumerism as a form of political participation. *International Political Science Review/Revue internationale de science pol*, 26(3), 245–269. doi:10.1177/0192512105053784
- Stolle, D., & Micheletti, M. (2013). *Political consumerism: Global responsibility in action*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Strømsnes, K. (2009). Political consumerism: A substitute for or supplement to conventional political participation? *Journal of Civil Society*, 5(3), 303–314. doi:10.1080/17448680903351834
- Theiss-Morse, E. (1993). Conceptualizations of good citizenship and political participation. *Political Behavior*, 15(4), 355–380. doi:10.1007/BF00992103
- Thompson, C. J. (1997). Interpreting consumers: A hermeneutical framework for deriving marketing insights from the texts of consumers’ consumption stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(4), 438–455.
- Thompson, C. J., Locander, W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1989). Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(2), 133–146.
- Thorson, K. (2012). What does it mean to be a good citizen? Citizenship vocabularies as resources for action. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 70–85. doi:10.1177/0002716212453264

Trentmann, F. (2007). Introduction: Citizenship and consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7(2), 147–158. doi:10.1177/1469540507077667

Van Deth, J. W. (2010). Is creative participation good for democracy? In M. Micheletti & A. S. McFarland (Eds.), *Creative participation: Responsibility-taking in the political world* (pp. 145–172). Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Ward, J., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Political consumerism, young citizens, and the Internet. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(3), 399–413.

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Carpini, M. X. D. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zukin, S., & Maguire, J. S. (2004). Consumers and consumption. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30(1), 173–197. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110553