

“The Gender Gap Reversed: Political Consumerism as a Women-Friendly Form of Civic and Political Engagement”

An Exploratory Study in Canada, Belgium and Sweden^a

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W O R K I N P R O G R E S S

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Abstract

While some authors express concern about the decline of traditional forms of social capital and civic engagement in Western democracies, others are more sanguine about the rise of new forms of participation and social interaction, and about the challenge created by the emergence of a new generation of “critical citizens”. Still others argue that social capital and participation research has missed some important areas of civic engagement in which women have been traditionally very active. Thus far, these new or “undiscovered” forms of civic engagement have been mainly studied as cases and hardly ever utilized survey research. In this paper we focus on a phenomenon that we label “political consumerism”, i.e. the buying or boycotting of products and services based on political or ethical values. Using a pilot survey among 1,015 Canadian, Swedish and Belgian students and case study material we show that political consumerism is a form of civic engagement that is disproportionately utilized by women, historically as well as amongst young people and young women today. We examine how and why women engage in this form of civic engagement, exploring historical examples, the act of shopping as well as motivations behind this activity. In addition we probe into who these political consumers are. We find that postmaterialists, and those who view political institutions critically are more engaged in political consumer action. There is also a positive relation with generalised trust, and in general political consumers score high on feelings of political efficacy. We strongly suggest including measurements of political consumerism, and other emerging and “unobserved” forms of activism, in future surveys on civic engagement and political participation.

Assessing the State of Civic Engagement from a Gender Perspective

A number of scholars worry that our civic and social life is eroding. Particularly Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (1995, 2000, 2002) demonstrates that the loss of confidence and social ties does not remain limited to the political sphere but pervades all aspects of society. Citizens in many countries not only refrain from joining political parties, but they also tend to participate less actively in all kinds of voluntary associations and other social activities (Hooghe 2003b). However, several criticisms and arguments have emerged to counter the claims of this decline-thesis (Stolle and Hooghe 2003a). One of the fundamental lines of critique here is that the promoters of the decline thesis capture a one-sided social trend because they exclusively focus on the disappearance of traditional participation mechanisms while neglecting the new participation styles and methods which are rapidly replacing the old ones (Bang and Sørensen 1999; Bennett 1998; Eliasoph 1998; Gundelach 1984; Halkier 1999). These authors argue that the willingness and interest in participating in politics and societal affairs is still as strong as it has been a few decades ago but that it will no longer translate into membership in traditional political organisations (Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 1996). Rather, citizens today and especially women and younger generations prefer participation in loose, less hierarchical, informal networks and various life style related sporadic mobilisation efforts. Participation in informal local groups, political consumerism and involvement in advocacy networks, the regular signing and forwarding of e-mail petitions, and the spontaneous organisation of protests and rallies are just a few examples of this phenomenon (Wuthnow 1998; Norris 2002). In these examples, we see the impact of the processes of globalisation and individualisation on political participation.

Similarly, the doubts regarding the obsessive focus on formal memberships and organizations have been echoed by scholars who work on gender relations, who argue that the research on formal and informal socializing is misguided as it looks in the wrong places. By focusing exclusively on the decline of formal organizations, the mainstream literature fails to acknowledge the fact that women have always participated in “politics” and that women’s participation in political and social life has risen constantly during the past decades. In many Western societies, women have caught up with men with regard to education levels and are participating in increasing levels in the labor market, and since we know that both high education levels and integration into the labor force have positive “spill over” effects on voluntary participation and political interest (Andersen and Cook 1985; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995) we have every reason to believe that women’s participation has risen since World War II, despite the overall limited time budget that is available to working women. This fact is seldom acknowledged in the social capital literature, because of a one-sided orientation towards formal participation structures.

Research is starting to show that particularly women and young people prefer less bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations and favour participation in loose, informal, more egalitarian, and local networks (Castells 1997; De Hart et.al. 2002; Dekker & Hooghe 2003; Ferree and Martin 1995; Inglehart 1997; Lowndes 2000; Putnam 2002; Wuthnow 1998). Industrial society's formal umbrella structures are substituted by horizontal networks better adapted to the needs of

the postmodern information society. It is argued that true networks and forms of social engagement can be found in caring networks such as baby-sitting circles and other child-care networks (Lowndes 2000). Lowndes' point in particular urges us to consider how informal and small scale care networks actually contribute to the maintenance of social cohesion within a society. A typical example would be that young mothers in the suburbs jointly bring their children to and pick them up from school. These kinds of arrangements are mostly informal and ad hoc, and therefore they usually are not registered in survey research on participation. But nevertheless, they are likely to contribute significantly to the maintenance of social cohesion and the advancement of quality of life within these suburbs. Lowndes therefore launches an appeal to include these kind of activities in the research on participation and social cohesion: "In order to investigate the links between social capital, political engagement and 'good government', phenomena such as friendship, caring and neighborliness all have to be recast as legitimate objects of political enquiry" (Lowndes 2000, 537).

A number of these "female" participation patterns, which are often neglected in traditional participation and social capital research, have already been examined. Katzenstein (1998), for instance, develops the thesis that feminist activity does not necessarily translate into the formation of autonomous political organizations, but can express itself in feminist networks within larger institutions, like the military or the church. Political consumerism is another form of political engagement that can be cast in this light. A case study of contemporary green political consumerism in Sweden found, for instance, that women members of a large environmental association forged a network for green shopping that functions differently than other networks dominated by men (Micheletti 2003ab). Studies of consumer activism in the American Revolution also show that women at times organized gender-specific networks to support the independence movement (Breen 1999). Here it is particularly obvious that groups of the population that previously did not perform well on various scales of traditional participation, namely largely women and particularly housewives, were and are predominantly involved in this activity (Jensen 2001; Micheletti 2000; Orleck 1993; Young 1994; Bohstedt 1988). However, no extensive data sources have so far captured these new phenomena of social/political engagement.

In short, a gendered perspective urges us to broaden our view of what is relevant political and social participation. The overall critique of the decline thesis maintains that we might have missed recent developments in forms of participation that are not as easy to observe, to count and measure. These forms of engagement are more fluid, sporadic and less organized. In addition, we might have looked in the wrong places all along, because particularly women have been regularly involved on an everyday in social interactions that might have wider societal consequence.

Yet this critique does not come without problems. First, we do not really know how many people engage in these new or so far "unobserved" forms of civic engagement—how widespread are they and can they quantitatively truly substitute for the loss in conventional engagement? Second, if women are more drawn towards forms of engagement that we have not captured or measured, we need to ask why this is the case. Third, we need to consider to what extent these forms of engagement are truly political, i.e., that they target issues, values, and institutions that concern the authoritative allocation of values in society – to use an agreed-upon definition of politics (Easton 1965). Fourth, an assessment of the new forms of civic

engagement must also consider whether they are qualitative substitutes for traditional modes of participation. In other words, do they link citizens similarly to democratic government as traditional forms of involvement? Do citizens use these forms because they feel alienated from the political system, so that it becomes the “weapon” of the outsiders? Finally, and perhaps most importantly given the present concern about political outcomes, we would need to know how effective these forms of civic engagement are. Given these concerns, it seems necessary to combine case study material about new or “unobserved” forms of civic engagement with cross-national survey data.

In particular, we need to focus more research efforts on studying areas of citizen involvement that increasingly attract citizen interest and capture the processes of globalisation and individualisation that seem to be affecting how citizens participate in politics. Boycotts and other kinds of consumer actions offer a prime example of such an emerging area of new and hitherto “unobserved” citizen involvement. The limited survey research from different countries available to us shows an increase in the number of people participating in boycott actions (Inglehart 1997, 313, Petersson et al. 1998, 55, Goul Andersen and Tobiasen 2003, Norris 2002, 198). Scholars also maintain that the number of boycotts called in the world today is increasing (Friedman 1999). When people engage in boycotts they use the market as an arena for politics and engage in political consumerism, which can be defined as *consumer choice of producers and products based on a variety of ethical and political considerations*. Political consumers choose particular producers or products because they want to change objectionable institutional or market practices. They make their choices on the basis of attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or non-economic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favourable and unfavourable business and government practice. Regardless of whether political consumers act individually or collectively, their market choices reflect an understanding of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context which may be called the politics behind products (Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle 2003). This implies that it is not just sufficient that they buy or boycott certain products; they also must know the rationale behind any campaign or label, and thirdly we also expect that they participate in these kinds of acts regularly. Examples of political consumerism are boycott actions against transnational corporations like Shell, Microsoft, Nestlé, and Nike to name a few, as well as “buycotts” or the use of eco-labeling, organic food labelling, and fair trade labelling systems (for more information see Micheletti 2003a).

Theoretical and Practical Considerations for Surveying Political Consumerism

This paper explores political consumerism as a new form of civic engagement that seems particularly attractive to women. In political consumerism, people use the market as an arena for politics, which means defining political participation broader than a variety of “forms of activity in which there is the intent or consequence of influencing government action — either directly, by affecting the formulation or implementation of public policy, or indirectly, by affecting the selection of public officials” (Burns, Schlozman & Verba 2001, 21). Our study will examine how acts of political consumerism contribute to the challenge or even reformulation of conventional conceptions of political participation and civic engagement.

Political consumerism is an understudied phenomenon even in comparison to other new forms of civic engagement. It is an emerging new area of research that reflects trends towards globalisation, individualisation, and postmodernization (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2003).

A few case studies of political consumerism have already been conducted (see chapters in Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle 2003; Baetens 2002). Survey research is scarcer, although a few questions on boycotting and the use of labelling schemes have appeared in questionnaires in Denmark (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen 2001, 2003, Goul Andersen et al. 2000); the Swedish Study of Power and Democracy and Swedish Democratic Audit (Petersson et al. 1988; Petersson et al. 1998) and in the World Value Survey (see e.g., Inglehart 1997, 315), yet we do not have a systematic understanding of the entire phenomenon. With this paper, we want to take a first step toward the systematic study of political consumerism.

Given the newness of political consumerism as a focus for social science research, there is no given theoretical framework for its study, and additions need to be made to the operational theories on political participation in order to capture the phenomenon in survey research. Most researchers who study political consumerism use theories focusing on new forms of responsibility-taking in society to frame their work theoretically. Some of the theories and resulting hypotheses presented briefly in this section (e.g., social capital) consider the conditions that are necessary for citizens to be able to cooperate in order to take more responsibility for societal development and find new ways to participate in politics, i.e., to take political responsibility. Other theories (e.g., reflexive modernisation, governance) offer arguments for why and how citizens must assume more societal and political responsibility. They help us understand the motivations for new ways of participating in politics. Overall, we like to distinguish four large areas of inquiry that we will pursue in this paper.

First and foremost, how wide-spread is the phenomenon of political consumerism amongst young citizens and women? To answer this question we utilize case study material and survey data. The problem here of course is the quantitative measurement of an activity that has not been well-defined. How can we successfully distinguish those citizens who regularly purchase products on the basis of ethical and political values from those who do not? This is a critical issue for any further analysis of the phenomenon. Acts of political consumerism are less organised, less structured and possibly more spontaneous than conventional participation which makes any kind of standard measurements very difficult. Below we will illustrate such issues when we demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of various measurements that are supposed to capture the political consumerism syndrome.

The second area of inquiry follows from our first part of the analysis and addresses the fact that women are disproportionately drawn into political consumer activity, as shown in our case study materials and survey analyses. Political participation research and social capital research established a persistent gender gap in political interest, political knowledge and conventional forms of participation (Conway 1991, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Putnam 2000; van Deth 2000). Though despite some persistent gender differences, at the turn of the 21st century, women are just as likely to vote as their male counterparts, and they are more involved in social interactions that Putnam calls *schmoozing* (2000). However, women have been shown to join fewer clubs or groups, even though they invest more time in such group life than men (Putnam 2000). Only in rare cases have women been found to be politically more active than men (see Steger and Witt 1989; Petersson et al. 1998, 80). Our case study material below shows that women have frequently been involved in political consumer acts historically. If our data confirm that women are more involved in political consumerism than men, we need to ask why this is the case? Is this a consequence of the historical disproportionate involvement of women in shopping for their families? Are women motivated by different ideas and factors than men when they go out to make purchases? Or is our finding about the disproportionate involvement

of women only an artefact of our sample in which we include highly educated and generally mobilized women?

In order to establish that political consumerism is indeed a consistent concept that captures political and civic engagement, we need to answer several follow-up questions. Not only do we need to establish that political consumerism is indeed a *political* phenomenon with societal consequences, but we also need to understand the driving factors behind it.

So, the third area of inquiry is: Who are the political consumers? What are their values? What are their socio-demographic background and their attitudinal and behavioural correlates? Two theoretical frameworks help us here: the theory of postmodernization and social capital. Inglehart's theory of postmodernization argues that politics in affluent societies has become more value-oriented. A focus on post-materialist values (concerns for the environment, values of equality and personal integrity, inclusion of minorities, human rights, sustainable development, etc.) encourages to find new venues to express their private and public interests and identities and scholars to broaden their definition of politics. *Postmaterialist values* are also increasingly linked with demands for more individual autonomy, self-expression, choice among products and services, and political action (Inglehart 1997, Bennett 1998). A general hypothesis is that the shift to postmodernization and postmaterialist value orientations influences and motivates political consumerism.

Social capital theory is also relevant for this area of inquiry. Some proponents of the societal approach of social capital theory suggest that the embeddedness in voluntary associations makes it easier for citizens to learn to overcome collective action problems (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1993, 2000; Hooghe & Stolle 2003). The reason is that networks such as associations have a socialisation function through which members learn civic skills and generalised values and attitudes such as trust and they do get recruited for political participatory acts (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Such associations also have external effects in that they connect citizens and governments directly (Stolle and Hooghe 2003b). It seems therefore plausible to test whether political consumers are possibly better integrated and embedded in such networks. However, given the debate among social capital researchers (Putnam 2000; Wollebæk & Selle 2003; Hooghe 2003a), it is important to make a distinction here between the traditional face-to-face associations and those groups with predominantly check-book memberships. The attitudinal approach to social capital theory highlights the importance of generalised trust as an attitudinal orientation that works as a facilitator of various forms of co-operation (Stolle 2002). If we look at political consumerism as an individualised act of co-operation, generalised trust might be an important predictor.

The fourth issue under scrutiny is the question of the *political* and *societal* character of this kind of consumerism. Is political consumerism a form of civic engagement that has wider societal consequences? Two academic debates shape these kinds of questions. First, it is important to note that conceptions of social capital differ. Sociological accounts of social capital stress much more the individual character and benefits of a variety of social networks (Lin 2001). In contrast Putnam and other political scientists stress much more the *civic community* aspects of social capital (1993).¹ Civic community does not include all kinds of trust, e.g. between family members or friends, but explicitly *generalized* trust. There is no concern with any kind of reciprocity including the form of 'tit for tat,' but in *generalized* reciprocity. Moreover, there is no interest in any kind of networks, but those that might develop spill-over effects to a societal agenda and politics at large. This admittedly narrow approach to social capital has been

criticized, and shows the original division within the social capital camp between sociological (often network) accounts and political science (often attitudinal) accounts. Given this originally developed narrow approach to social capital within the political science framework, we need to ask whether the new or unobserved forms of civic engagement have similar effects that are assumed of conventional forms of engagement. In other words, does political consumerism spill-over to the political and societal realm (see link here to some questions in Lowndes' and Sapiro's papers in workshop 2003)? The second debate here takes place within the research on political participation. Some scholars argue that we must restrict our definitions of politics and political participation to activities that are directly and explicitly placed in the political realm. According to these authors, any other option entails the risk of evolving toward a "theory of everything" (van Deth 2000). Others, however, argue that political scientists must be open to the fact that people are leaving the traditional political realm and finding new ways of expressing themselves politically (Bang and Sørensen 1999; Gundelach 1984; Inglehart 1997; Sörbom 2001). We acknowledge both these claims, and in this paper we will carefully try to avoid both these traps, by closely examining the political character of these consumer acts. The challenge is to develop a concept of civic engagement and social capital that distinguishes the political sphere from other spheres of action and political and civic engagement from other forms of actions without narrowing down the definitions in such a way that they no longer reflect political reality and shut out ways in which women engage in politics and society. Yet the societal and political consequences of this form of action need to be examined. In order to get some answers to these issues we identify the motivations, political attitudes and behaviours of political consumers in our analysis below. We also examine which role political institutions play for political consumers, and whether political consumerism is perceived as an important tool in the political process.

Perhaps in contrast to more conventional forms of participation, some theoretical insights suggest that citizens increasingly develop a lack of trust in the capacity of government. The theory of *reflexive modernisation* takes the criticism of the governing ability of the state seriously by pointing to transboundary problems as evidence that the modern state has severe steering and governability problems. According to these theorists, what are needed are new problem-solving ideas, arenas, and tools to deal with political problems. Ulrich Beck (1997) uses the concept of *subpolitics* to capture the idea of a new way of doing politics – as politics emerging from below and in contexts not traditionally viewed as political ones. He argues that citizens engage in subpolitics because they lack trust in government, i.e., they fear that government either does not understand or cannot control the new uncertainties and risks in our modern societies. In our survey we ask questions to learn whether and how political consumerist acts are related to political trust and how people assess the ability of governments at different territorial levels to perform their tasks correctly. This is a first step in answering the question of whether or not political consumerism is sub-political participation.

These areas of inquiry are at the centre of the controversy over how political scientists should conceptualise politics and political participation. The questions we pose above are a good starting point towards our effort to study political consumerism as a form of political participation.

Surveying Political Consumerism

Besides case study material about historical and contemporary examples of political consumerism, we have conducted a pilot study in the form of a questionnaire that measures acts of political consumerism and other forms of political participation.² The survey was administered to students in the social sciences (and particularly political science) in three countries: Belgium, Canada, and Sweden.³ A total of 1,015 students answered the survey: 179 in Belgium (Brussels), 458 in Canada (Montréal), and 378 in Sweden (Stockholm). The surveys were either administered during class time or (in Canada) as a web-survey.⁴ Although participation was voluntary, few students declined to take part in this pilot study, thus reducing the risk of self-selection of respondents. The survey included 112 questions⁵ and took approximately 25 minutes to complete. It was administered in Dutch (Brussels), English (Montréal), and English or Swedish (Stockholm). It is important to note that the students were not explicitly taught about the concept of political consumerism before the study.

The samples selected for this pilot study are by no means representative of the populations in the three countries. We do not make any claims about the phenomenon of political consumerism in these three countries (see Goul Andersen and Tobiasen 2003 on this point). Rather we have used this exploratory study to ascertain whether consumerism can be considered as a consistent attitudinal and behavioural pattern and as a form of political participation. University students are an ideal sample for this purpose. The relatively high education level of the sample allows us to assume that our respondents are aware of a variety of political participation tools. Their young age also plays to our advantage, as research is showing that young people seem particularly attracted to this mode of political action (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen 2001; Andersen 2000, 213; Sörbom 2001). Young people are also aware of certain brand names since they have been the focus of several political consumerist campaigns and they have not yet developed an ingrained pattern of consumer choice (which makes them open to considering label campaigns, etc.). Higher educated young people, such as university students, should therefore be potentially more aware of the motivations of their consumer decisions. In short, we expect that the attitude and behaviour of political consumers can be distinguished better in a student sample. In addition, the fact that this pilot survey was conducted simultaneously in three different countries also allows us to single out any effects that might be the result of a purely national setting.

Measuring political consumerism

Like many new and hitherto “unobserved” forms of civic engagement, political consumerism has not been researched systematically in political and social science. How can we define political consumerism and how are we able to distinguish citizens who act as political consumers from those who do not? Since this paper represents some of the first empirical explorations of the concept of political consumerism, we take a gradual approach to show the variety and problems involved when attempting to measure political consumerism.

Before citizens can participate in any act of political consumerism, it is of course essential that they have the necessary information to do so, and that they are aware of the possible ethical and political repercussions of consumer behaviour. A good first step is to ascertain whether citizens actually are aware of this information. Those who do not even know that consumer choices beyond price and

conventional quality concerns are available and do not even pay any attention to political consumerist campaigns and labelling schemes can hardly be called political consumers. Even if the latter group would happen to buy products labelled by political consumer institutions, they cannot be considered as political consumers if their choices are made unconsciously. Awareness of labelling schemes, which is the signifier for the distinction between different types of products based on other values than price and aesthetic differences, seems to be a first good identification for those citizens who might be potential political consumers. Questions regarding several national and international labelling schemes were included in our survey and first results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Awareness of labelling schemes among university students by gender

Labelling schemes	Canada	Belgium	Sweden
Environmental schemes	Environmental choice	Groen Punt	Bra Miljöval
Female Male	25% 19%	97 % 95%	96% 90%
Fair trade	Fair trade	Fair trade certified	Rättvisemärkt
Female Male	36% 31%	58% 61%	69% 60%
Organic food labels	Organic Food	Biogarantie	Krav
Female Male	71% 70%	63% 63%	96% 93%
National labels	Made in Canada	n.a.	Swedish Institute Standards
Female Male	69% 67%		18% 23%
No sweat shop labels	No sweat shop	n.a.	No sweat shop
Female Male	47% 39%		15% 12%
‘Clean Clothes Campaign’	n.a.	Schone Kleren	Clean Clothes/Rena Kläder
Female Male		46% 30%	14 % 12%
Forest Stewardship	Forest Stewardship	n.a.	Forest Stewardship
Female Male	8% 7%		5% 4%
Union labels	Union label	n.a.	LO union logo
Female Male	16% 19%		94% 91%
Fair Trade Products (Max Havelaar)	n.a.	Max Havelaar	n.a.
Female Male		80% 88%	
Consumer Union Approved	n.a.	Test Aankoop	n.a.
Female Male		90% 98%	
Made by Religious Order	n.a.	Trappist Product	n.a.
Female Male		11 % 23%	

The survey questions asked whether the respondent recognised a named political consumerist label and whether she knew what it stands for. For test purposes, some label schemes were shown with a picture of the labels, whereas other labels were asked by name. Usually, more people claimed to know the label when it appeared with a picture. Entries are percentages of the number of respondents in that country by gender that claim to know or recognize the label.

Not surprisingly, there is quite some variation with regard to the knowledge of labelling schemes among the three countries, hinting at the fact that some labels are more popular in some contexts than others. Whereas organic and environmental food labelling schemes seem to be particularly known in Sweden, where over 90% of the students state that they are familiar with the schemes, this is not the case in Belgium. In Belgium, however, the 'Max Havelaar' fair trade label seems especially well known, as well as the 'Green Point' packaging recycling scheme. Similarly, certain labels such as forest stewardship certification are not known at all in the two countries where they are being used and supported by various civil society associations. It should be kept in mind however that students probably do not buy furniture or wood very often, but the finding is still interesting because, at least in the Swedish case, forest stewardship is a cause promoted and actively supported by environmental groups.

Table 1 also presents the gender differences when it comes to the sheer knowledge of labelling schemes. Gender differences here are negligible, indicating that the schemes are known both to male and female students alike. However, some trends are visible. Whereas in Belgium most schemes are a bit more known by male students in comparisons to their female counterparts, in Sweden and Canada it is the other way around. With the exception of traditional labels such as the union label or the Swedish Standards label, all labels are a bit more known by women in those countries. Even though this difference seems to be systematic, there is not a sustained statistically significant relationship here.

Overall, most students know only the two or three labels that are most often used in their country, while all the other ones are only known by a minority of our respondents. This by itself is an important finding in several ways. One interpretation would be that because of the proliferation of labelling schemes since the 1970s with each scheme using its own criteria and scope, the increasing number of schemes has become counterproductive. Consumers might just have the capacity to retain information about a limited number of labels. Another interpretation is that political consumerism has a national orientation, implying that it is embedded in national public debates, awareness, and needs (whether they focus on national self-interest or not) rather than representing a true form of transnational citizen action embedded in a global public discourse. A different interpretation could be that most people are not really political consumers and therefore do not keep, get, or seek information about labelling schemes. We will come back to these hypotheses below.

Still, awareness of labels and label content which is not heavily gendered might not be sufficient for using the labels in one's regular shopping experiences. Although we can assume that citizens who do not have any label awareness (about 6% in the Belgian and Canadian sample and only 1% in the Swedish sample) might not be potential political consumers, we still cannot be sure that all relevant labels have been included in the survey. Moreover, people should be classified as political consumers on the basis of their decision to boycott products and producers for political and ethical reasons. More direct questions about students' use of ethical, political or environmental values in their purchasing decisions should be asked.

Constructing an Index of Political Consumerism

One of the main goals of this pilot study is to explore the possibility of developing a reliable survey instrument for political consumerism. We should be aware, of course, that it will never be possible to measure this phenomenon with a single item question, the same way one can measure, e.g., party or union membership or voting. One can argue that at least three conditions have to be met if we want to use the concept of ‘political consumerism’ meaningfully (for a full discussion see Stolle & Hooghe 2003a). The first condition refers to *behaviour*: it is self-evident that political consumers actually buy, or boycott certain goods and services because of political or ethical considerations. This implies that people who never make any consumer decision, e.g., because they do not live independently; cannot actually participate in this form of behaviour. The second condition refers to *awareness and motivation*: it is possible that people buy fair-trade products simply because they like the taste of it, or because it is what they have on sale in the shop next door. Other people never go to American hamburger outlets, not as a protest against American hegemony, but simply because they don’t like hamburgers. It can be argued, however, that the label of political consumerism only applies if people are actually motivated by political or ethical considerations, or if they see responsible shopping as a form of citizenship. A third condition refers to *frequency and habit*: an isolated act of consumerism might be important by itself, but it can hardly be called a distinct behavioural pattern. These considerations elucidate that inevitably political consumerism should be considered as a multidimensional phenomenon, including attitudinal, behavioural and habitual elements which cannot be used as measurements on their own. Mere attitudes of supporting ethical considerations when shopping are not sufficient if they are not supported by the actual behaviour, and in turn the behaviour of making such purchases can only be considered political consumerism if undertaken with regularity.

Therefore, the index of political consumerism we propose here includes these different elements. The attitudinal measures capture whether respondents believe in the effectiveness of buying certain products and services, and whether citizens have a personal responsibility to choose the “right” company from which to buy products on ethical or political grounds. Again, a belief in the importance of political consumerism does not necessarily tell us whether respondents actually take part in it. Therefore we asked more directly how important ethical considerations (environment, trade, health) are on a scale from 1-10 for a variety of different purchases that are or could be important in a students’ life. In addition, we measured behaviour by asking whether students had boycotted or boycotted certain products based on ethical, political or environmental considerations within the last 12 months. Finally, we measured the regularity with which respondents got involved in these actions, determining a range between never to every purchase they undertake. These mixtures of questions gave us the following results:

Table 2: Measures of Political Consumerism Index by Gender

	Canada		Belgium		Sweden		All
Percentage of Respondents who believe in:							
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total
Effectiveness of buying goods and services	68	63	53	49	75	63	65
Personal responsibility to chose “right” company	75	61	57	46	79	66	69
Percentage of Respondents who use **:							
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total
Ethical considerations for purchasing groceries	60	49	66	53	76	63	63
Ethical considerations for purchasing soaps and detergent	46	37	51	33	79	56	53
Ethical considerations for choosing restaurants	50	49	56	40	43	35	45
Ethical considerations for choosing paper for school	36	30	51	44	63	39	44
Ethical considerations for purchasing clothes	51	47	39	32	37	30	41
Ethical considerations for purchasing shoes	44	35	33	23	31	26	34
Ethical considerations for choosing banks	32	35	44	49	30	27	34
Percentage of respondents who made purchases based on ethical or political considerations in the preceding twelve months							
	F	M	F	M	F	M	Total
Buying products based on ethical or political considerations	75	66	53	53	89	75	72
Boycotting products because of ethical or political considerations	71	52	40	46	80	60	63
Regularity of Political Consumerism (% saying that they do it every time or nearly every time they go shopping)	12	16	8	7	34	20	17

** The scales of 1-10 were collapsed to dichotomous variables, where 1-5=0, and 6-10=1. Entries are percentages of those scaling between 6-10.

Note: statistically significant gender differences are marked in **bold**.

Even though varied throughout our cases, a majority of undergraduate students surveyed state that (at least sometimes) they do purchase their products on the basis of ethical, political or environmental considerations. About 72% of all students in the overall sample state that they have chosen products based on ethical considerations in the last year, whereas 63% say that they have boycotted a product. Political consumerism seems particularly widespread in Sweden and least developed in Belgium when captured with these general questions.⁶ When specific areas for purchases were asked, specific country areas could be identified. Ethical considerations for grocery shopping are equally important in all three cases, most likely reflecting the presence of well-established labelling schemes in this consumer area. Here we also find the most substantial gender differences, with women being by far more concerned about ethical grocery shopping than men. The choice of paper for school is important mostly in the European cases, whereas in North America ethical considerations for clothes and shoes are more important than in Europe. Ethical considerations for soaps and detergent are most important in Sweden. Belgium stands out with regard to the choice of a bank, as indeed a Dutch-based ‘ethical bank’ has been visible in the country for a number of years. These results tend to give support to an earlier interpretation of our research findings that political consumerism is framed by national public debates and awareness. It may also give some support for the importance of network embeddedness as crucial for participation because the movement against sweatshops in the garment

industry is strong among younger people in North America but rather weak in Europe while green shopping is an important agenda item of environmental associations in Sweden.

Clearly Table 2 reveals strong gender differences on various dimensions of political consumerism which are strongest and most consistent in Sweden, where almost all aspects of consumerism show a reversed gender gap. Swedish female students are extremely more active in political consumerism, often these differences amount to 20 and more percentage points. Most consistently and clearly in all or most national samples, many more women than men think it's a responsibility of a citizen to choose the right company when making purchases, and many more women than men actually consider ethical and political issues when grocery shopping, buying soaps and detergents, and paper for school. Given the fact that the knowledge of labelling schemes was rather equally distributed on a gender basis, the strong differences here with regard to the pursuit of political consumer agenda are puzzling. Why is it that so many more women than men engage in these kinds of activities? Why is the gender difference most pronounced in the country where political consumerism is most evident? We will elucidate an answer to this question below.

In addition, the awareness of labelling schemes and the use of ethical considerations in purchasing products might be irrelevant if people are involved in such action as a one-time decision. Instead there has to be some regularity with which citizens need to go about this type of shopping for it to be considered as a form of "political consumerism" and, therefore, a full form of political participation. Indeed, Table 2 shows that only a minority of students really use political consumerism on a regular basis. 15% in Canada, 7% in Belgium and about 24% in Sweden claim that they use ethical and political considerations every time or nearly every time they make purchases. Gender differences only persist for Sweden here. Similarly, only a minority of 14% admits that they have actually never or only once used political consumerism when going shopping. How is the support for and past behaviour with regard to ethical shopping related to its frequency of use? For this purpose, we constructed a provisional index that consists of the addition of the first 11 items in Table 2 and related it to the frequency with which students shop based on ethical considerations.⁷

Figure 1

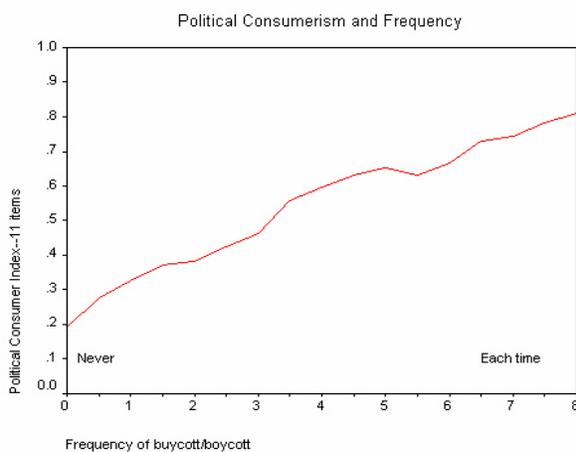


Figure 1 clearly demonstrates that support for and indications of ethical consumption are closely related to the frequency of using it. Those students who highly and consistently support and act as political consumers are also those who do it regularly when they go shopping ($r=.73$), and they do not just do it in a one-shot fashion, and this holds throughout all countries and gender groups. Since all three elements, attitudinal support, actual behaviour and regularity of undertaking the act of political consumerism are arguably important dimensions of the phenomenon, and since they are

clearly strongly related, we established a usable indicator of political consumerism based on these three dimensions for our further analyses.

Our final index therefore is a second-order variable, consisting of three dimensions, each receiving an equal weight:

1. *attitudinal support* for political consumerism (i.e., items 1-9 in Table 2)
2. *behaviour*: taking part in political consumerism (i.e., items 10-11 in Table 2)
3. *frequency* of taking part in political consumerism (two questions on frequency, item 12 in Table 2, and see Figure 1).

The distribution of this index is skewed however, and we therefore test our results in multivariate analysis utilizing a normally distributed version of this scale as well (see Appendix). The Cronbach's alpha of the equally weighted items is .72. In the remainder of this paper, we also use a division of our sample in three equal groups, based on their score on this consumerism index (low, middle and high on political consumerism index).

Why Women?

The previous results have opened up a puzzle to us. Even though female and male students seem to be similarly aware of labelling schemes, there is a difference as to the extent to which men and women utilize this knowledge in their shopping activities. Various arguments will be under scrutiny here. First, our results might be just an artefact of our special sample. Second, women have traditionally been involved in shopping and have historically used their consumer power. Third, women might continue to be more involved in shopping decisions today and are therefore more alert and open to aspects of ethical and political shopping. Fourth, women might use different or broader sources of motivation for ethical shopping. Fifth, and related to the last issue, as women have previously been found to be more postmaterialist and more attracted to looser forms of political involvement, they may be more inclined to view consumer choices as an important form of political and civic engagement. We examine these arguments in turn.

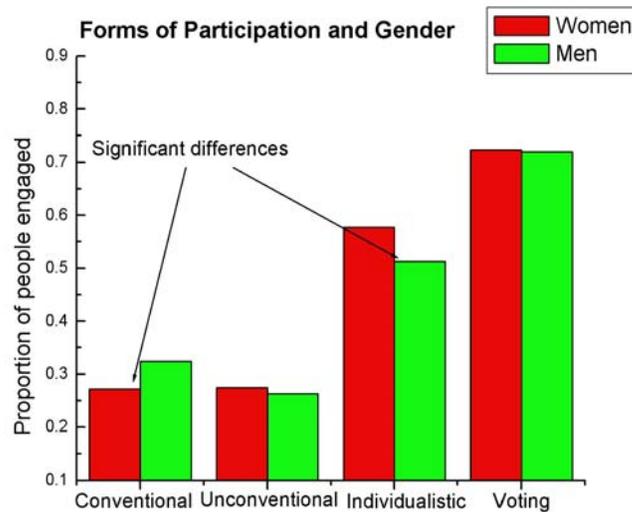
Are Young and Educated Women Different?

The argument could be simple. Obviously young and educated female students are highly mobilized. They might score high on a variety of political and civic engagements, including political consumerism. So, our finding that women are disproportionately drawn to this form of participation and engagement would be just an artefact of the select sample in which women just tend to be "hyper-active." According to this plausible view, we would expect that the female students in our sample score higher than men on a variety of political and civic engagements throughout our country samples, not just on this relatively under-researched activity of political consumerism (which we know is not the case in general population samples).

Interestingly, this is not the case (Figure 2). In our questionnaire, we included a variety of items that asked about the political participation and civic engagement in the last 12 months. We distinguish between voting, conventional participatory acts (voting at the university, contacting politicians, organizations or the media, joining a political party), unconventional acts (demonstrations, culture jamming, participated in an internet campaign or transnational advocacy network, and civil disobedience), and individualistic acts (signing a petition, wearing a button, etc.). As we would expect, voting is the most frequented activity and its gender distribution is equal, as it is with forms of unconventional engagements. Though only few engage in conventional participation, men are significantly more involved in those acts than

women. And women clearly outperform men with individualistic acts, a result also found in studies from the 1980s and 1990s in Sweden (Pettersson et al. 1989; Peterson et al. 1998). If our sample was so select that women outperformed men on a variety of forms of political and civic engagement, then the gender dominance in political consumerism in our survey could be easily explained. However, what we find does not solve the puzzle yet as women do not lead on all forms of engagement. There is something special about political consumerism, and possibly other forms of individualistic engagement.

Figure 2:



Gender and Shopping

In order to answer the question of why women seem to be more involved in political consumer acts, we might need to go on an excursion of historical and contemporary case studies. It may be the case that women are drawn to forms of civic engagement that involve activities in everyday spheres traditionally dominated by women and that do not involve high costs of collective action (see Micheletti 2003 for a discussion). Shopping in grocery and department stores is such a sphere. Historical studies from the United States and Europe show how the market has been frequently used by women as an arena for politics. This research area is still in its infancy, but we find in historical cases that women banded together in neighbourhood women consumer networks to fight socio-economic injustices (the inability to feed their families properly because of high food prices and poverty) in different countries (e.g., Orleck 1993; Young 1994, Hirdman 1983). Scholars of the American experience consider their activities "far more widespread and sustained, encompassing a far wider range of ethnic and racial groups than any tenant or consumer uprising before it" (Orleck 1993, 156). More moneyed women, i.e., middle-class women, have even used their purchasing power to help put an end to domestic sweatshop labour in the United States. In the early part of the 1900s the "white label campaign," an anti-sweatshop labelling scheme appealed to women to buy cotton underwear for themselves and their children that was certified as "sweatshop free" (Sklar 1998). The white label scheme can be said to have given women access to the political community: it gave them an arena for political action, and their purchasing choices became a tool to exercise moral and political power in a time when men dominated formal civil society and government settings. African-American women have also used the market as an arena for racial politics. They repeatedly boycotted

for civil rights, with the role played by women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the most well-known case (Goldberg 1999, King 1999, Friedman 1999).

Even with full suffrage rights, women continued to play a crucial role in political consumerism. The grape boycott in the 1960s, that started in the U.S. and spread to other countries, would probably not have been successful without women's involvement. The boycott really began to have an impact, when the United Farm Workers' Union decided to turn its struggle into an issue of shopping for food for the family. When consumers (who most probably were women shoppers) learned that the pesticides used on grapes were also hazardous to their families and not just to the health of the farm workers, they began to boycott grapes in great numbers (Benford & Valadez 1998, Micheletti 2003b). Also, an engendered reading of available historical materials show that the international boycott of Nestlé, for its marketing of infant formula in the Third World, most likely would neither have taken place nor been so successful and effective without the involvement of women health care professionals and women organized in a variety of civic networks (see Bromberg Bar-Yam 1995, Sikkink 1986).

In more recent years, we find that women initiated the 1995 boycott of French economic sensitive goods (wine and cheese) (Micheletti 2003a). They also, in the late 1980s, played a crucial role in establishing green political consumerism as a priority area for the Swedish Society for the Conservation of Nature. What is interesting here is that the association's interest in green political consumerism was sparked by a woman's concern about purchasing pesticide-free potatoes for her family (Micheletti 2003a).

The findings from historical examples and the contemporary case study of green political consumerism in Sweden are echoed in market studies from Sweden, Denmark, and the U.S. In these studies women stand out as users of organic food labels, the Max Havelaar fair trade label, and eco-labels for seafood respectively (LUI 1999: 3, Klint 1997: 28, Wessells, Donath, & Johnston 1999). LUI, a Swedish survey institute specializing in consumer research for the farming community, finds that women shoppers also stand out on awareness of such aspects as whether food is guaranteed free of salmonella, contains GMOs, growth hormones, medicines, chemical additives, and chemical pesticides (LRF/Ekologiska Lantbrukarna 2001: 21). The authors of the U.S. study on eco-labeled seafood report, that the "gender of the respondent has an impact on choice, with women more likely to choose certified products across all species," and that "variables representing age, income, education, and political affiliation are generally insignificant individually and jointly..." (Wessells, Donath, & Johnston 1999: 51f). Consumer political activists confirm the importance of women, and underscore that middle-class women are the focal group for all new consumerist efforts. They are seen as the people with the interest and means for this kind of political involvement (Dobson 2000). In short, historical and contemporary case studies confirm that women are predominantly active in this area of engagement. We will use our survey data in order to examine why this might be the case.

Today's young women and shopping

Given these insights of the case study literature, it is entirely possible that female students score higher on aspects of political consumerism because they are more involved in the actual task of shopping. As the historical examples show, women have traditionally taken on boycotts and buycotts because the purchase of products is one of the daily tasks in which women engage. Of course, the regularity of shopping itself does not successfully explain why women include ethical and political considerations to a higher degree in their shopping decisions than men, but it might explain the extent

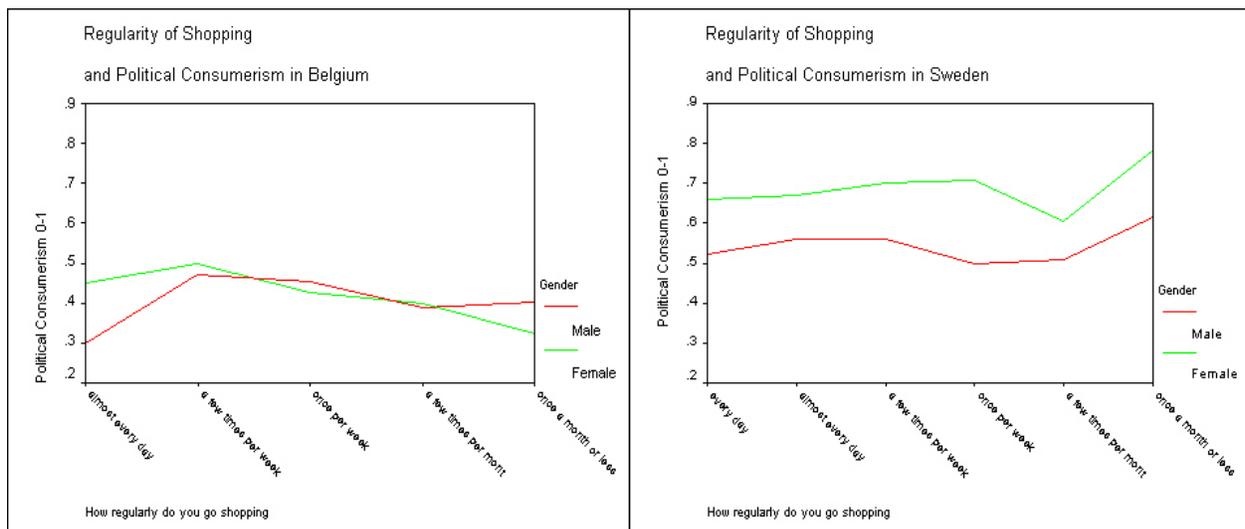
to which issues related to shopping are on people’s minds. So, are young educated modern women more involved in shopping? Our answer from our sample is no.

Table 3: Gender and Regularity of Shopping

	Belgium		Sweden	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Shops every day or almost every day	11	7	35	42
Shops a few times or once a week	66	70	60	49
Shops rarely	24	23	5	9

As results in table 3 make clear, there is no significant difference between male’s and female’s regularity in shopping, at least not within our homogeneous student sample. Even though Swedish students seem to shop much more regularly than their Belgian counterparts, this is entirely a national phenomenon and not an issue of gender. However, do women, who shop more regularly, involve themselves more in political consumer behaviour than men who shop regularly?

Figure 3:



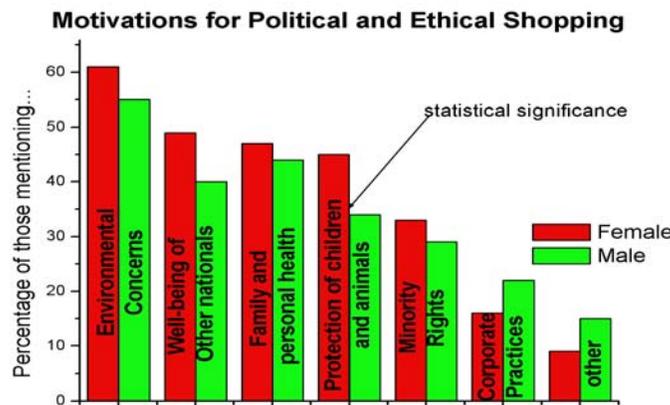
We only have data for the regularity of shopping in Sweden and Belgium (Figure 3). The graphs show the country differences in political consumerism, but also the fact that gender differences are most pertinent in Sweden. Interestingly, female students in Belgium who shop regularly seem more active as political consumers than their male counterparts, but this relationship does not hold in Sweden. The small minority that shops very rarely in Sweden, whether male or female is in fact more interested in practicing political consumerism than those who shop more frequently. A possible reason might be that political consumerism for them is part of a general anti-consumerist stance which questions the need to purchase large amounts of consumer goods. This stance may be ideologically embedded in global or Swedish environmental concerns about the negative impact of consumption on sustainable development or related ideologically to the anti-corporate movement and such transnational events as adbusters’ “buy nothing day.” However, the small numbers of respondents in this group does not allow for far-reaching conclusions. In sum, we have to dismiss the hypothesis that female

students are more interested in political consumerism than males because they are more frequent shoppers. Even though this has shaped women’s historical involvement in such campaigns, it does not successfully explain the varying behavioural and attitudinal patterns of today’s young generations. In fact frequency of shopping is not universally related to political consumer attitudes and behaviour in our samples.

Motivations for political consumerism and gender

In order to get at the puzzle of why more women are involved in ethical and political shopping, we examine the motivations behind political consumerism. What are some of the reasons and causes for which young citizens buy certain products over others, or boycott certain products? It is possible that the gender differences in political consumer engagement might result from the fact that women have either different or possibly a broader variety of motivational factors behind their shopping decisions and are therefore more actively involved. For this purpose, we analyze our question batteries in which respondents identified those reasons for which they act as political consumers, whereby students who did not think of themselves as political consumers did not fill in the question.⁸

Figure 4



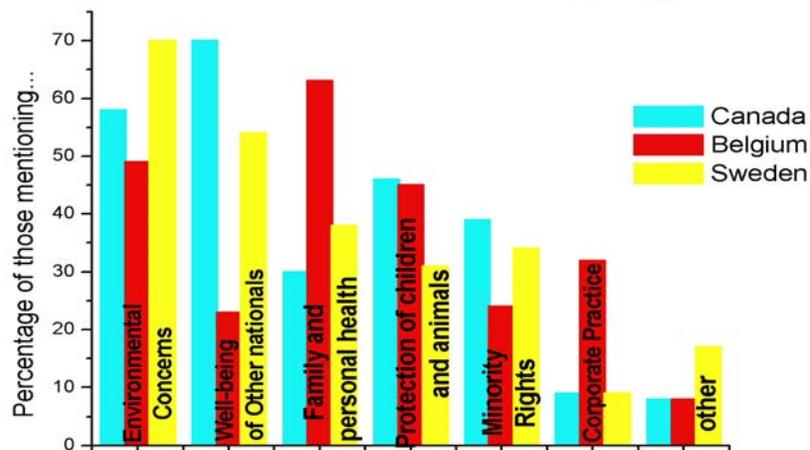
Surprisingly, the gender differences are minor, and country differences are much more apparent. We present results for gender differences in Figure 4 even though the graph hides some important national differences. Overall, our hypothesis that women might utilize a higher variety of motivations for political and ethical shopping, is correct. On all motivational sources, except corporate issues and other, women indicate more concern—even though this tendency is not statistically significant in all but one issue area: It is a universal fact that women in all three countries indicate to be more concerned about issues of animal and children’s rights than men, a gender difference particularly strong in Belgium.⁹ This result is confirmed by a separate analysis of a different question format with 25 answer choices for various motivations in Canada (results not shown).¹⁰ Out of 25 potential motivations for political shopping, the highest for women included environmental concerns, fight against animal testing and child labour, support for animal welfare, human rights, and only then followed personal health and fight the against pesticides in food. Significant differences between men’s and women’s motivations were found again on issues that concerned animals and child labour, with men being less interested. Clearly, animal and children’s rights offer women *additional* reasons to be involved in political consumerism. Interestingly, in nearly all instances of statistical significance, women

are more motivated by other-regarding issues beyond their personal well-being. On the other hand, one's own health and well-being— motivations that would be labelled as being located in the private realm in mainstream literature— do not show any gender differences. Finally, the critique of corporate practices are predominantly used by male students as motivations, significantly so in Sweden and to a lesser extent in Canada.

Luckily, our cross-national sample allows us the discovery of relatively overwhelming national variation in motivational sources for ethical and political shopping, giving evidence that political consumerism is still strongly embedded in and influenced by national opportunity structures, campaigns, institutions and regulations. Figure 5 indicates that the number 1 motivation is different in each country. Canadians utilize the well-being of other citizens in Canada as their main motivational source for political consumerism. Swedes are most strongly concerned about the environment, which can be explained by a political culture of environmental awareness that characterizes Swedish politics and everyday environmental practice among the general public. Belgians, whether male or female are strongly driven by personal and family concerns, but they show highest motivation between the three countries by critiques of corporate practices. National Belgian campaigns on children's exploitation, animal rights, against multinationals, and a number of specific campaigns against corporate practices, e.g., against the Campbell food company or the Renault car factory, might explain these results.

Figure 5

Motivations for Political and Ethical Shopping per Country



In sum, two points of this analysis matter here. More women than men mention a variety of other-regarding motivations for political consumer acts; particularly children and animal rights are significantly more important to women than to men in addition to a variety of common types of motivation that are of a postmaterialist nature. This could partially explain why women are more active as ethical and political consumers than men. The second point is an important lead-in to our next section: political consumerism is indeed a political and societal phenomenon. We showed that it is motivated by a variety of sources and issues, including very personal concerns about one's health and larger societal concerns about the environment, the well-being of others, and the protection of minorities, children and animals. Although very personal concerns and

benefits such as one's personal well-being, one's personal health and the family's health come up as important motivations for men and women in supporting and mobilizing acts of political consumerism, they are not the only motivations, and in two countries such personal concerns range in importance only behind a number of other-regarding issues. Yet as we know from case studies of political consumerism, private worries over wanting to feed one's family a nourishing meal can spill over into political action. Once women voice their concerns to others they may find that other people share the same private worries. As their discussions become more public, they slip into collective action and become involved in public agenda setting. Even so, the analysis of the motivations gives evidence that political consumerism goes beyond one's personal sphere and beyond one's personal concerns and seeks the influence on large-scale societal and political problems mostly based on postmaterialist value patterns.

Political Consumerism as a Political and Societal Form of Engagement

We started this paper with the question whether we could consider political consumerism as a form of political participation and civic engagement. The material we reviewed in the previous sections has shown that a certain group of young people indeed seems inclined to incorporate political and ethical considerations into their decision whether or not to buy certain products. However, communitarians and those who argue that civic engagement is in decline worry that the new phenomena of political and social involvement are unique, time-limited, too spontaneous, and single-issue oriented, inward-oriented and cannot, therefore, further develop democratic traditions. The fear is that political involvements such as consumerism are acts of political outsiders, of those not involved or integrated in the political system, and those who do not use other avenues of participation—in short the fear is that political consumerism is not a consistent form of involvement. Is this the case? Are political consumers increasingly involved in one type of activism to the exclusion of other forms of participation, or, as shown in the Danish study, is political consumerism yet another tool in a variety of forms of political participation? Do political consumers distrust traditional forms of interest mediation and traditional political institutions and therefore increasingly seek other forms of political influence? In this section then, we take a more systematic approach in order to identify the attitudinal and behavioural correlates of political consumerism.

Our first effort is to determine the background variables for this form of behaviour, which inevitably has to remain rather limited, given the fact that our sample is very homogeneous (see Table 4). Variables such as age are not significant, which is expected given the small variance within the sample. The explained variance, therefore, remains very small in Model I. As we can expect, gender is the dominating variable here, and it holds throughout, even when several other control variables are included.

Table 4: Consumerism as a Form of Political Participation

	I	II	III	IV	V Female only	VI Male only
Gender (0=male, 1=female)	.14***	.16***	.10**	.09**		
Age	.02	.05	.02	.01	.01	.00
Religion (0= none, 1= any)	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.01	.00	-.02
Country						
- Canada (0= not, 1= Canada)	.27***	.17***	.13**	.13**	.14**	.09
- Sweden (0= not, 1 = Sweden)	.38***	.31***	.27***	.25***	.29***	.20*
Education level parents (both parents combined)	.01	-.02	-.03	-.03	.00	-.09
Family income	-.10*	--	--	--	--	
Membership face-to-face organisations	--	-.01	-.02	.00	.00	-.01
Membership “check-book” organisations	--	.16***	.15***	.12***	.10*	.17**
Conventional participation	--	.02	.03	.06	.07	.08
Unconventional participation	--	.28***	.18***	.15***	.20***	.08
Individual participation	--	.08*	.05	.03	.02	.05
Political Interest	--	.08*	.08*	.06	.06	.03
Belief in Effectiveness of:						
- Conventional Participation	--	--	-.10**	-.09**	-.09*	-.09
- Unconventional Participation			.16***	.12**	.11**	.13*
- Individualised Participation			.16***	.16***	.14**	.18**
Trust in Institutions	--	--	-.12***	-.10***	-.07	-.14**
Generalised Trust	--	--	.09**	.06	.09*	.02
Postmaterialism	--	--	--	.24***	.19***	.30***
adj. r ²	.08	.27	.34	.41	.41	.39

Entries are standardised regression coefficients.

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Second, all models demonstrate that religion and educational status of the parents of our respondents do not seem to have any effect whatsoever on their propensity to engage in this form of participation. Our country variables are highly significant, and as we already saw in previous sections, interest for political consumerism is clearly higher among our Swedish respondents than among our Canadian and Belgian respondents. This result is dominated by the fact that Swedish women seem much more engaged in political consumerism particularly compared to their Belgian sisters. Of course these findings cannot be generalised: we cannot be certain that the student population of our three universities is in any way representative for the student population of the country, let alone of an entire age cohort. Furthermore, what interests us in this analysis is not the absolute level of participation (this would require a representative survey), but rather the underlying structure of this political consumerism syndrome. However, we must conclude that the national context, the nationally based consumer campaigns, label schemes, and national organizational embeddedness shape and mobilize political consumer

interest (see more in Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2003). Importantly, these campaigns seem to have gendered effects, mobilizing more women in Sweden, for example.

One of the most often mentioned forms of criticism concerning the democratic potential of political consumerism, is that this could be seen as a very elitist form of participation: not only does one need money to participate in it, the general rule is also that ‘politically correct’ products tend to be more expensive. The idea therefore, could be that political consumerism is only within reach for those who are well-off. University students of course are not a good population to test this argument. First of all, they are rather privileged, and second, since most of them do not earn their own money, we face various measurement problems. Nevertheless, we also included a question on family income. Only 706 respondents, however, answered this question, so a lot of cases are lost when including income. Model I shows that there is even a negative relation: the wealthier the parents are, the less likely students seem to be engaged in political consumerism. So we clearly do not find any support for the claim that consumerism is a distinct elitist form of participation. However, because given measurement problems and the high number of many missing cases, we decided to drop this variable from our further models.

In Model II we include various participation indicators, to test whether political consumerism crowds out other forms of engagement. It is important to note here that integrating these indicators as independent variables should not be taken to imply a causal structure: we do not wish to argue that, e.g., membership in a ‘check-book’ association, for example, ‘causes’ political consumerism. We use the regression models only to ascertain the structure of consumerism as a behavioural pattern, without trying to get at a causal explanation at this point. However, social capital theory would suggest that the integration into a variety of networks might positively foster political awareness and political acts.

The results when including these participation indicators are impressive. To start with, our explained variance rises considerably, while we also get a clearer view of what kind of people participate in consumerism. It is clear that ‘crowding out’ does not occur: there is not a single significant negative relation. So the fear that those who are no longer attracted to political and social life resort to this ‘convenient’ and individualistic form of behaviour is not warranted. We notice however, that the relation with conventional forms of participation is almost non-existent: membership of political parties, participating in student elections or contacting officials clearly is not a major activity that singles out political consumers. They don’t avoid these forms of participation, but they do not engage in them more often than other people do. It is striking however, that they participate more strongly in distant, check-book-like forms of associations, while they also have more experience with unconventional forms of participation (demonstrations, culture jamming, civil disobedience). The disproportionate use of unconventional participation is particularly practiced by women as opposed to men. In other words, some female students engage in both political consumerism and unconventional acts in significantly higher proportions. This seems a typical characteristic of a relatively new and emergent form of participation, distinct from traditional ways of trying to influence political decision making. Yet the fact that political consumers are not alienated from traditional forms of political involvement, but indeed are as politically active as their non-political consumer counterparts if not more, leads us to believe that these new acts of participation are not ‘crowding out’ the traditional ones. These insights confirm that consumerism too, should be seen as an integral part of a new political action and civic engagement.

In our next step (Model III), we also include additional attitudinal variables, and slowly the picture becomes more apparent. While political consumers participate in conventional participation acts just as often as other people, they do not believe as much in the effectiveness of these methods as we would expect them to given their background characteristics, and this corresponds to the fact that in general they have less trust in a variety of institutions. On the other hand, they do have a strong belief in the effectiveness of unconventional and even individualistic participation methods. It should be noted that, self-evidently, we did not include their belief in the effectiveness of political consumerism while constructing this effectiveness index. However, in a separate analysis we found that political consumers believe significantly more in the effectiveness of such acts than other respondents.

Do our results imply that consumers are alienated and distrusting? We do not think so: while they are highly critical and even distrusting toward institutions particularly businesses, at the same time they have a trusting and positive outlook toward other people. We observe a positive relation with generalised trust especially among women. Rather than distrusting, political consumers seem to be in a kind of ‘anti-institutional mood’: conventional institutions and institutionalised forms of political participation are rejected, controlling for all other factors (Zijderveld 2000).

Finally, there is still the question whether political consumerism can be seen as a phenomenon of postmaterialism. We have been a bit reluctant to include postmaterialism, first of all because it is clear that this concept is strongly related to a lot of the independent variables we already included, and second because in other analyses this has been shown to be such a strong factor, that it diminishes all other effects. Nevertheless, we have added postmaterialism to our Model IV, and consequently the explained variance increases to over 40 percent. Postmaterialism becomes almost the single most important variable particularly among male students, but is striking to note that most other independent variables continue to show significant influences.

Model IV, therefore, offers the most complete picture of the characteristics of political consumerism, and it is retested in female/male only samples. In sum, political consumerism appears to be a consistent form of behaviour that is strongly related to postmaterialism and a critical mood toward institutions. It also seems an integral part of a somewhat unconventional and sometimes even individualistic political action repertoire. Even with all these controls applied, it is obvious that the phenomenon is most developed in Sweden, while the Belgian students seem to have less interest in this form of engagement. And most importantly in the context of this paper, even controlling for a variety of variables, women participate in this form of political activity more strongly than men.

Conclusion

We believe that this project clearly demonstrates that political consumerism has become an integral part of the political action repertoire of young and critical citizens, and most importantly it is a form of engagement that is clearly more utilized by women. From case study research, we learn that political consumerism allows women to work on political issues in a way they find comfortable and natural from the perspective of their interests and roles in society. It makes politics tangible. Political consumerism is also characterized more by low threshold everyday involvement in a familiar sphere, which implies a more network oriented

and individualized form of political participation that seems to appeal to women. When compared to public decision-making arenas, the market is less distanced from our daily lives, and it allows women and other groups to use their creativity in a multitude of more individualized ways. This is the case, because the looseness and indeterminacy of consumption appeals to people who still tend to find themselves marginalized in formal, institutional political-system settings. These insights are important additions to conceptual formulations of political participation and civic engagement, and urge social scientists to open their frameworks to include such individualized political activities.

However, our pilot survey found that political consumers are not as marginalized as we might have expected. In fact, among students at least, political consumers are more or equally active in other forms of participation and group involvement, just they seem frustrated with the mainstream political institutions in which political activity takes place, and therefore value the efficiency of conventional forms of participation less than we would expect. In our samples, it appears that political consumers are highly motivated by a variety of personal and societal issues many of which are of a postmaterialist nature. These are findings that we maybe could expect as well when further analyzing other new unconventional forms of participation to which political consumerism is closely related. The difference to most other forms of participation is that this phenomenon appears to be more individualized in nature, it is closely related to every-day activities and life-style politics, and it is targeted less directly at the governments of democracies, but directly at corporations or international organizations. The latter point has not been examined in detail in this paper (but see Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2003).

Our findings confirm that political consumerism has, to integrate the findings from the Danish study, become a standard element of political participation repertoires in Western society today. As such we believe this phenomenon should receive more explicit attention in any future research on political participation and civic engagement. It is quite striking to observe that by now entire bookshelves have been filled with studies on the political use of internet, while political consumerism thus far has hardly been studied. We are of course fully aware of the limitations of this pilot survey: the fact that the survey involved a highly selective group of social science students at universities automatically implies that our findings cannot be generalised, and self-evidently, we did not have any intention to do so. What we have shown however, is that this phenomenon that we also found in historical and contemporary case studies can be examined in a meaningful way in quantitative research, a step that thus far had not been taken. The index we have constructed, of course, can be refined further and tailored toward the needs of a general population survey, but it does seem to be a promising instrument for future work in this area. We have to be aware of the fact that all these new and less-institutionalised forms of participation will be harder to measure than the conventional participation forms. One survey question is sufficient to ascertain whether someone is a member of a political party or not; but we do need a number of questions to ascertain whether a respondent can be considered as a political consumer or not. These kinds of questions therefore should be included in future representative surveys on political participation and social capital.

Table 5: Belief in Effectiveness of Various Participation Acts

Act	Canada	Belgium	Sweden	All	Low C.	Middle C.	High C.
Voting	7.2	7.2	6.8	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.0
Volunteering	6.9	6.2	6.4	6.6	5.8	6.4	7.4
Donate Money	6.5	5.9	5.9	6.1	5.4	6.2	6.7
Joining Party	5.6	4.9	6.4	5.8	5.6	5.7	6.1
Join Demonstration	5.8	5.3	5.5	5.6	4.9	5.5	6.4
Political Consumerism	5.7	5.3	5.7	5.6	4.0	5.6	7.0
Contact an Organisation	5.4	4.1	5.2	5.1	4.6	5.1	5.6
Signing Petition	4.8	5.0	4.5	4.7	4.0	4.7	5.4
Civil Disobedience	4.6	2.9	4.0	4.1	3.3	3.9	5.2
Culture Jamming	4.6	3.1	3.7	4.0	3.1	4.0	4.9
Internet Campaign	3.7	3.7	3.5	3.6	2.9	3.6	4.2

On the other hand, we are also aware of the limits of political consumerism as an instrument to bring about political and social change. Even those who are firmly into this kind of behaviour do not believe that political consumerism is the most effective way of bringing about political and social change: they too see voting and volunteering as equally effective ways to influence society (as the bivariate analysis in Table 5 shows). Thus, political consumers seem to be rather realistic about the potential effectiveness of this new participation instrument. The most striking element in Table 5, however, is that for each and every act, political consumers tend to give higher ratings with regard to effectiveness, again this is not controlling for other background factors. Resorting to political consumerism, therefore, might be considered as a manifestation of distrust toward institutions, but it certainly cannot be seen as a manifestation of a lack of internal or personal political efficacy. Political consumerism is not just a weapon of “critical citizens,” it also seems to be a weapon of rather self-confident and trusting citizens. This result is particularly interesting as it shows a divergence between the confidence that citizens have in their own abilities (internal political efficacy) and the ability of government to solve problems (trust in government or external political efficacy). It shows the creativity of citizens in finding new arenas for political action and illustrates well the theoretical discourse on new and active citizenship.

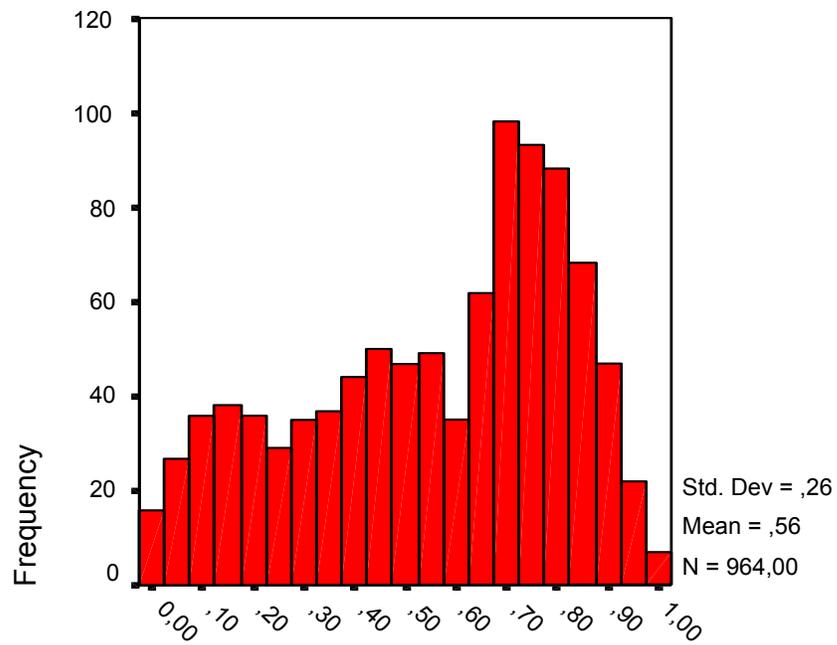
APPENDIX

List of Variables Used

Gender	Male=1 (n=392); Female=2 (n=593)
Age	Continuous, range 17-59 years
Religion	None=0 (n=427); Any religion=1 (n=554)
Country	Canada (n=458); Belgium (n=179); Sweden (n=378)
Education Parents	Combined 8 category education scales for education of mother and father
Income	Eight income groups
Face to Face organisations	Membership in Organisations “in which members meet regularly”, e.g. sports, music, student councils, etc.
Distant Organisations	Membership in Organisations, where your membership “might just consist of sending a check to the organisation”, e.g., humanitarian organisations, peace, consumer union, etc.
Conventional Participation	Did you take part in ... during the past 12 months: student voting, political party, contacting politician or organisations, appearing on media [No voting because of age of respondents]
Unconventional Participation	Did you take part in during the past 12 months: demonstration, culture jamming, internet campaign, civil disobedience, globalisation advocacy
Individualistic Participation	Did you take part in ... during the past 12 months: sign petition, ware t-shirt
Effectiveness scores	Rate the political effectiveness of: (scale 1-10) Conventional acts (voting, party membership, voluntary association) Unconventional (demonstration, culture jamming, civil disobedience, internet campaign) Individualistic (signing petition, giving money)
Trust in Institutions	Trust in politicians, police officers, business, national government and UN. one factor Eigen Value 2.5, 51 percent explained variance; cronbach’s α : .75
Generalised Trust	Two items: most people can be trusted, “If you are not always on your guard, other people will take advantage of you”
Postmaterialism	What two goals should be most important for your country (4 item)
Political Consumerism	Second-order variable, composed of a) participating in political consumerism; b) importance of ethical/political considerations, c) frequency of applying political consumerism

Distribution of Consumerism Index

Final scale one third each 0-1: attitude, behav



Final scale one third each 0-1: attitude, behavior, frequency

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Notes

¹ However, in his newer work, Putnam develops a less narrow view of the concept of social capital. In *Bowling Alone*, for example, Putnam applies a kitchen-sink approach to what constitutes social capital. His indicators are as far reaching as the common dinner at the table, playing cards (supposedly “alone”) to broad forms of political participation

² The Swedish and Canadian pilot studies are financed by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) through a project entitled *Political Consumption: Politics in a New Era and Arena* that involves Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle.

³ In Canada the survey was administered as a web-survey in an introductory political science course taught by Dietlind Stolle. Of 588 students in the class, 458 filled in the questionnaire (response rate 77.9 %). In Sweden the survey was administered in the classroom; of 493 students registered for the classes, 378 filled in the questionnaire (76.7 %). In Belgium too, the survey was administered in class, with 193 students present, resulting in 179 forms that could be used in analysis (92.7 %). We want to thank Dr. Jonas Nordqvist and Professors Tommy Möller, Nadia Molenaers and Patrick Stouthuysen for giving us the opportunity to administer the survey in their classes, Lisa Nevens for designing, formatting and coding the Canadian web-survey, Lucas Pettersson for formatting and coding the Swedish survey, and Susanna Lindberg for translating the questions into Swedish.

⁴ Access to the website was restricted to students taking an introductory course in comparative political science. Every student could fill in the questionnaire only once.

⁵ A slightly shorter version of the questionnaire with 104 questions was administered in the Canadian setting.

⁶ A possible explanation for this pattern could also be that Belgian students (mainly 2nd and 3rd year) are more dependent on their parents, and therefore make fewer consumer decision than their counterparts in Stockholm and Montréal.

⁷ All variables were recoded between 0-1 and added up to an index between the values of 0-1. We asked two frequency questions about the frequency of deliberately buying products, and the frequency of boycotts, which were added to a scale.

⁸ Unfortunately, we did not ask the same type of motivational questions for all students in all countries for testing purposes of questionnaire items. However, for most results in this section, only the one question has been examined in which the wording was the same in all countries. This reduces the number of respondents to less than a third in the Canadian sample (125), to less than a half in the Swedish sample (145), and to the full Belgian sample.

⁹ In the three country samples, the importance of the well-being of other nationals (Canadians Belgians, Swedes depending on the country) also makes some gender distinctions, particularly in the Canadian sample, whereas environmental concerns are significantly more on women’s minds in Sweden.

¹⁰ The following 25 motivations were listed: your family’s health; your health; protecting your country’s workforce; protecting your ethnic/racial/linguistic group; fighting poverty; sustainable development; preventing terrorism in Canada (other country where survey took place); environmental standards/concerns; animal welfare; animal testing; limiting the production or dealing with weapons; oppressive regimes; human rights; workers rights; fighting child labor; preference for local producers; working conditions; women’s rights; lesbian and gay rights; other issues of justice and fairness; genetic engineering; limiting power of multi-national firms; fighting corporate practices; use of pesticides in food; other.