

What drives political consumption in Europe? A multi-level analysis on individual characteristics, opportunity structures and globalization

Acta Sociologica
55(1) 37–57
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0001699311431594
asj.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Political consumption is an individualized form of collective action that varies considerably across Europe. Citizens as consumers participate in boycotts and ‘positive’ buying of goods based on ethical, political and environmental considerations. Overcoming the individualistic bias of past research, the comparative analysis extends actor-centred explanations by focusing on political, cultural and economic opportunity structures and on globalization as contextual factors. Economic opportunities for political consumption are provided by national affluence, retailing structures and the supply of environmental and fair-labelled goods. Political and cultural opportunities are facilitated by ‘statist’ institutions, social movement organizations as well as trust and post-materialist culture. The impact of globalization is measured by international economic exchange. Logistic multi-level models on the first wave of the European Social Survey for 19 countries reveal that economic opportunity structures and political institutions best explain variations, while globalization does not affect citizens’ decisions to voice their interest in consumption. Finally, the effect of individual value orientations is increased by a low-cost context.

Keywords

boycott, consumer, economic opportunity structure (EOS), globalization, international comparison, low-cost hypothesis, political consumption, political opportunity structure

The real bosses, in the capitalist system of market economy, are the consumers.

(Von Mises, 1944: 20)

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Introduction

Consumption of goods and services is one of the main economic activities of citizens. In recent decades, rising sales of environmental and fair-labelled goods, but also widespread boycotts of large corporations like Shell, Nestle or Nike, illustrate a shift in consumption patterns in Europe. Consumers increasingly use their purchasing power to voice their political, environmental or ethical interest (Beck, 2000; Bostrom et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2005; Micheletti et al., 2004). While the market has always been a place of political contention through riots, strikes and demonstrations, this kind of collective action, termed ethical, critical or political consumerism, is different, since it utilizes market transactions as a way of protesting. Political consumerism is manifested in 'actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices' (Micheletti, 2003: 2). As citizens deliberately abstain from buying certain goods (boycott), or purchase products with specific environmental, political or ethical qualities (positive buying or 'buycott'), they constitute a kind of social movement by engaging in 'individualised collective action' (Micheletti, 2003).

Such consumer behaviour can best be described as a 'cause-oriented' form of political action, different from traditional activities like voting or engaging with political parties (cf. Norris, 2007: 639). Yet, critical consumption practices also differ from demonstrating or campaigning, as they intermingle a prime economic activity – consumption – with public virtue (Micheletti, 2003). Thus, political consumer activism is not political in a narrow sense, but has to be understood as a form of 'lifestyle' politics or 'subpolitics' (Beck, 2000) targeting both public (political) and private (economic) actors (Norris, 2007).

Most sociological explanations of political consumerism focus on actors' motivations and resources. Hence, post-materialist value orientations, environmental or ethical attitudes, but also socio-economic characteristics like income, education and gender are important dimensions that drive political consumption (Ferrer and Fraile, 2006; Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2004; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2005). However, large country differences in organic and 'Fair Trade' (Krier, 2001; Richter and Padel, 2005) as well as in consumer boycotts (Inglehart, 1997; Stolle et al., 2005) challenge such a microscopic perspective. Critics point towards the importance of contextual, supra-individual factors like globalization, economic structures, political institutions and culture in explaining political consumption (Beck, 2000; Micheletti and Stolle, 2005; Neilson and Paxton, 2010; Terragni and Kjærnes, 2005). Since the social-structural context outlines opportunities, constraints and incentives for action, the embeddedness of consumption can be expected to have a crucial impact on individual decisions to boycott or buy politically.

The main aims of this study are threefold. First, I extend actor centred explanations of political consumption with social movement theories of political, economic and cultural opportunity structures, as well as a globalization hypothesis, to capture the contextual embeddedness of consumer activism. Second, drawing on these theories and existing research, I analyse both individual and contextual factors. Finally, I determine whether economic opportunities moderate the explanatory power of individual characteristics (low-cost hypothesis). Explanations are empirically tested using a multi-level approach of the European Social Survey (ESS), 2002/2003, covering for 19 European countries, and supplemented by indicators on political institutions, civic culture, economic structures and globalization. Hierarchical logistic regression models are estimated on self-reported positive buying and boycott participation. My analysis suggests that, controlling for individual characteristics, economic opportunities and political institutions are the prime drivers of political consumption.

Individual characteristics of political consumers

Explanations of political consumption mostly share two assumptions essential to many individualist sociological theories (Rössel, 2008: 233): First, individual action is understood as being purposeful; thus actors attribute meanings to their action. Therefore, decisions to consume are driven by motivations like values or attitudes. Second, the choice of actions is limited by resources and costs (Elster, 1989). Hence, the availability and price of goods, but also the resources of consumers, restrict their decisions.

Motivational aspects are decisive in understanding why citizens engage in political consumption. Generally, values are seen as vital in orienting and governing individual action (Hechter, 1994). Since values, understood as ‘conceptions of the desirable’, are socially shared and learned, they constitute a central part of an individual’s motivations (Schwartz, 1992). Post-materialist value orientations in particular have been identified as an important driver of alternative ways of political participation (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 2002). Stolle et al. (2005) find post-materialist values to be the strongest predictors of political consumption in a college student sample. Verba et al. (1995: 272) point to several other motivational factors, ranging from generalized trust to general interest in politics and the feeling of political efficacy. Generalized trust and trust in institutions have been strongly associated with civic engagement (Putnam, 1993). People that are more trusting have greater confidence that their civic activities will be effective, accepted and reciprocated (Nannestad, 2008). While people with a strong sense of generalized trust are likely to participate in protests, the reverse can be expected for trust in institutions (Stolle et al., 2005). Furthermore, political interest signals an individual’s concern for community governance and has been widely acknowledged as a valid indicator of the willingness to engage in political activism (Stolle et al., 2005; Verba et al., 1995). Finally, political efficacy increases the likelihood of political participation, as it reflects the subjective belief of a person that his or her engagement has an impact upon political outcomes (Milbrath, 1972). Expecting to make a difference, people with a strong sense of personal political efficacy are likely to get involved in unconventional forms of political participation (Stolle et al., 2005; Verba et al., 1995).

Yet, individual motivations for consuming politically are constrained by a wide array of resources. Monetary resources, like income, constitute a budget restriction for consumption (Baumol et al., 1979). Considering the price premium of ‘fair’ or environmentally friendly products, income should be a more decisive factor for positive buying than for boycotting. While Micheletti and Stolle (2005) find a statistically significant positive effect of household income on an index measure of political consumerism in Sweden, other studies report non-significant effects of monetary resources for Danish and Norwegian surveys (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2004; Strømsnes, 2005). Education has been identified as an important resource (civic skill) of political participation (Verba et al., 1995: 305). In regard to political consumption, education plays a critical role in empowering consumers to understand the underlying complexities and issues in the production and supply of goods through the market. Empirical studies uniformly confirm the effect of higher education on political consumption (Ferrer and Fraile, 2006; Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2004; Strømsnes, 2005). Finally, the social class position of citizens is suggested as an important resource for both political participation (Milbrath, 1972) and consumption decisions (Bourdieu, 1984). In contrast, individualization theory claims a dissolution of class-based patterns of political participation as well as of ‘distinct taste’ cultures (Beck, 1994). Yet, empirically, class proofs to have a significant effect on political consumption (Ferrer and Fraile, 2006).

An opportunity structure approach to political consumption

Political consumerism can be conceived as a social movement that renders the act of consumption a quasi political statement. Explanations of social movements have long emphasized the importance of opportunity structures for the rise and success of civic activism. While early studies mainly focused on political opportunities, this concept has been broadened to include dimensions of the economic and cultural environment (Wahlström and Peterson, 2006), which ‘either encourage or discourage people from using collective action’ (Tarrow, 1994: 18). To explain the mobilization of consumers from a structural perspective I distinguish economic, political and cultural opportunity structures and elaborate on the mechanisms that relate them to political consumption.

Economic opportunity structures

The economic opportunity structure (EOS) relates social movements to aspects of the economic system in which they act or which they target. Wahlström and Peterson (2006: 365) define economic

opportunities in a producer-related sense as the ‘meso- and micro structures of profit seeking institutions’, like the ‘vulnerability’ of movement targets or their ‘economic and cognitive resources’. Applying this concept to the mobilization of consumers shifts the focus to the market supply and demand structures that affect purchasing decisions (Wahlström and Peterson, 2006: 375, n. 5). Following a heuristic model by Thøgersen (2010: 173–176), demand-side explanations pertain to the available resources for consumption in a society (Baumol et al., 1979), while the supply of goods is conditioned by the size of the market, existing retailing structures (Clarke et al., 2002) and the availability of ‘cause related’ goods, such as ‘eco’, ‘organic’ or ‘Fair Trade’ products (Terragni and Kjærnes, 2005). These characteristics outline different economic opportunities for using the market as a vehicle for protest.

The affluence of a society determines the purchasing power of its consumers, but also the variety of goods supplied to meet consumer demand. In Western democracies, rising prosperity results in a relative increase of the resources of all citizens in a country. Thus, a low income household in an affluent country is likely to have higher financial degrees of freedom than a similar household in a poor country, which enables a larger share of people to consume politically in affluent societies. This reasoning is in line with the ‘luxury goods thesis’ for environmental protection: ‘(O)nly those who are in comfortable economic circumstances can devote a significant proportion of their incomes to the “luxury” of environmental improvement and assign lower priority to increases in material goods’ (Baumol et al., 1979: 175). Hence, high average income decreases the relative costs caused by the price surplus of ‘cause related’ goods. Furthermore, affluence indicates the selection of goods available within a country, as it can be argued that increasing prosperity results in a differentiation of product supply meeting rising demand.¹

Besides the size of markets, the availability of labelled products that suit economic, political or environmental concerns in particular and the retailing market structure determine the supply of goods and therefore the transaction costs of consumers (Terragni and Kjærnes, 2005). The rapid diffusion of ‘eco’, organic and ‘Fair Trade’ labels in recent decades (Kern et al., 2001) has led to widespread availability of goods produced in accordance with specific environmental and social standards. These standards are signalled to the consumer through official seals issued by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and states. European countries differ strongly in the production and import of organic, fair and sustainable products available to consumers for positive buying (Kern et al., 2001; Krier, 2001; Richter and Padel, 2005). These labels also evoke a moral frame in consumers, as they introduce a visible ethical aspect into the economic logic of consumption choices.

Moreover, the availability of normal as well as labelled products is influenced by the structure of the retailing sector, in particular the density, size and channels of sales for food and convenience goods (Grunert et al., 1996: 113 ff.). Large supermarkets, dominating in Northern European markets, offer a variety of brands and products enabling consumers to penalize or reward certain producers. On the contrary, independent corner-stores or market stalls, characteristic of Eastern and Southern Europe, often provide a very limited range of products. Fragmented retailing structures, by providing a selective supply of goods, constrain consumer decisions and thus raise the transaction cost for political consumption.

In sum, national affluence, a concentrated retailing sector and the availability of labelled products provide a facilitating economic opportunity structure for positive buying and boycotting.

Political opportunity structures

McAdam (1996: 27) suggests that, in general, political opportunities are provided by the ‘openness of the political system’, existing power constellations of political actors and potential state repression. Two of these dimensions seem crucial for consumer activism: first, the institutional openness of political governance to civil society (Jepperson, 2002) and, second, the countervailing organizational power of civil society in mobilizing consumers (Holzer, 2006).

Political systems provide opportunities for consumer activism by the institutions, rules and orientations they inhibit. The underlying mechanism relating political systems to activism is determined by the historically shaped institutional logics of a system. According to Meyer (2004: 128), political institutions

outline the 'rules of the game' that structure individual agency. Thus, the choice of political action, for instance, traditional versus unconventional political participation, is conditioned by the scripts and norms embodied in institutions and learned in political socialization.

In European democracies, different institutional configurations have evolved historically that shape the role of civil society in political governance (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). To specify these variations, Jepperson (2002) developed the concept of 'statism', which distinguishes modern polities by the locus of collective agency provided by either a dominant centrally organized state, such as in France or Germany, or by a strong civil society, as in Great Britain or Sweden. While the former represents a high level of 'statism' with the state as the sole legitimate authority, in the latter the state is subordinate to 'societal authority' (Jepperson, 2002: 67). Statist models can be expected to show low levels of consumer activism as 'civil society receives little institutional encouragement' (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001: 812). Yet, countries characterized by 'societal authority' have an institutionally imprinted climate of public responsibility and engagement, suggesting a higher level of political consumerism in such contexts. The 'Fair Trade' movement for instance was first established in The Netherlands and Great Britain (both having low levels of statism), while in centralist France Fair Trade lagged behind many of the neighbouring countries (Krier, 2001). In addition, Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001) find citizens in statist countries less likely to become members of both old and new social movement associations. Therefore, statist models of collective agency can be expected to decrease the likelihood of consumer activism.

Social movement organizations (SMOs) also form part of the political opportunity structure by mobilizing resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) and establishing frames for collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). According to the resource mobilization approach, 'movement entrepreneurs' are needed to gather resources, connect to the media, the authorities or corporations, and mobilize participants for protests (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In the case of political consumption this becomes especially important in organizations' efforts to provide information about corporate practices, negotiate standards of corporate responsibility and organize boycotts. In addition, SMOs engage in processes of framing or meaning construction, which are central for mobilizing consumers (Holzer, 2006). The framing concept assumes that social problems need to be understood and then venues for action need to be created to mobilize action. By gaining media attention, SMOs try to create 'diagnostic frames' of ecological or social issues, such as the ecological consequences of Shell's attempt to sink its oil storage Brent Spar, as well as 'agency frames' that provide citizens with information on how to act, e.g. boycott Shell's gas stations (Benford and Snow, 2000; Holzer, 2006). The mechanism by which SMOs impact on political consumption is mainly by providing consumers with information. Thus, the strength of SMOs can be critical, first, by balancing the information asymmetry between producers and consumers, and, second, in shaping collective frames for mobilizing consumer action.

Cultural opportunity structures

Finally, the cultural opportunity structure is embodied by the civic culture as the shared values and norms in a country. The concept of civic culture relates a society's 'system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values' to the political participation of its citizens (Verba, 1965: 513). Existing values, norms and beliefs constitute a 'mindset' that comprises the perception of issues, the involvement of citizens as well as legitimate forms of political action. Inglehart (1997) and Putnam (1993), for instance, emphasize the role of a post-materialist culture and generalized trust in the explanation of political participation. From a consumer culture perspective, Campbell (2006: 225) argues that the dissolution of traditional norms governing consumption and their replacement through the formation of the 'authority of the self' enable consumers to decide by their 'taste' rather than by given norms.

The underlying mechanism of how civic culture is likely to affect political consumption is by providing citizens with the motivation. If people trust in others and observe fellow citizens also to be trusting, they are more likely to believe that their altruistic behaviour will be reciprocated (Neilson and Paxton, 2010: 11). Such contexts provide shared norms of cooperation that discourage 'free riding'.

Furthermore, in post-materialist cultures, pro-social ideas and behaviours are highly valued. This reflects certain norms of participation, which leads citizens to consume politically not because of their individual values, but because such behaviour is externally valued. In a comparative study, Sønderskov (2009) finds national levels of post-materialism to be the most important determinant of organic food consumption. Additionally, political consumption has been shown to be strongly influenced by regional levels of generalized trust (Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Political consumption then seems more likely in cultures which emphasize individual responsibility, generalized trust and post-materialism.

The globalization hypothesis

A prominent hypothesis in the political consumerism literature suggests that globalization is the driving force behind using market exchange for protest (Beck, 2000; Harrison et al., 2005; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2004; Norris, 2002). Globalization can be understood as a transformation of flows in goods, services, information and people across national borders (Held et al., 1999). While these transactions encompass all social spheres, mainly its economic dimensions are associated with negative externalities for the state, civil society and the natural environment (Brady et al., 2007). Generally, the growth of multinational corporations, the internationalization of supply chains, financial flows and trade result in the 'global ungovernability' of international capitalism (Micheletti et al., 2004: xii). As 'footloose enterprises' choose the national regulatory framework that best fits their interests and thereby minimise taxation, labour costs, state control and trade union influence (Dossani and Kenney, 2007; Nissen, 2002; Spar, 1998), national regulations lose their impact in governing the economy. This denotes a shift in power away from the nation-state towards multinational enterprises and intergovernmental organizations, both lacking sufficient democratic legitimation (Norris, 2002: 193).

Due to globalization, citizens increasingly lose their long-standing political power as voters and organized stakeholders. According to Ulrich Beck (2000: 70) citizens seek to overcome this disempowerment by voting through the allocation of their purchasing power. Thus 'as globalization squeezes orthodox avenues for politics, through the state and organised labour so new ones are being prized open, in consumer power' (Scammell, 2000: 352). However, it could be argued that it is not the absolute level of globalization, but the relative increase of economic internationalization of a country that drives consumer activism.

The 'low-cost' hypothesis

By providing opportunities and constraints for individual action, structures also potentially mediate the explanatory power of individual characteristics. The low-cost hypothesis basically assumes an interaction of constraints and values, postulating that value-oriented decisions are not undertaken when costs are high. The underlying rationale is that action can be specified by two successive filter mechanisms (Rössel, 2008). The first decision filter structures available alternatives in regard to the costs of and resources for different actions and thus outlines actor's opportunity structures. In the second filter the actor's preferences take effect in deciding among the pre-structured alternatives (Elster, 1989). The analytical sequencing of these mechanisms allows differentiating between high and low-cost situations. According to the low-cost hypothesis, values only gain importance in situations characterized by low costs (Rössel, 2008: 233).

The economic opportunity structure, most prominently in its affluence dimension, constitutes low and high-cost situations for political consumption. With reference to positive buying, which is usually associated with a price premium, higher national affluence provides a low-cost situation. Yet, by indicating the variety of goods available in national markets, it also renders boycotting less costly, because substitutes are more readily available. According to the low-cost hypothesis, higher affluence by constituting a low-cost context increases the importance of values in consumption decisions. Diekmann and Preisendörfer (2003) confirm the low-cost hypothesis in regard to recycling and travel mode choices for work. Therefore, the effect of post-materialist values on political consumption decisions should be greater in societies that are more affluent.²

Data, variables and method

The individual level data set used for the analyses is the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) of 2002/2003. Considering the lack of large-scale comparative data sets on consumption and the validity of the measures in the ESS, as well as the multiple variables on personal resources and individual attitudes, the ESS of 2002/2003 is well suited to operationalize the concepts of interest. After cleaning the data, information on 26,981 individuals residing in 19 European countries remains for analysis.³

Measurement of political consumption

The concept of political consumption is measured by two dichotomous variables derived from the following questions in the ESS (2003: 10): ‘There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons’ and ‘(b)oycotted certain products’ (coded: yes=1; no=0).⁴ These questions have potential limitations. First, the frequency of activities is not asked for and therefore only the diffusion of political consumerism, not the overall magnitude, can be assessed. Second, the question on positive buying could generate biased answers by providing reasons that are rather open and subject to individual definitions and understandings. However, the provided reasons need to be sufficiently broad to capture the purchases of any kind of labelled or ‘cause related’ product. Furthermore, the introductory sentence is framing people to consider only acts directed towards general social, not personal, ends. Thus, the purchase of organic food for health reasons would not be classified as political consumerism.

Both questions have been widely used in empirical studies and have proved efficient and valid measures of political consumerism (Goul Andersen and Tobiasen, 2004: 207; Inglehart, 1997; Stolle et al., 2005: 254; Strømsnes, 2005). To validate the dependent measures, the mean country scores of both variables have been estimated and correlated to the per capita spending for organic food in 2003 for 14 overlapping countries (Richter and Padel, 2005: 108) and to self-reported boycotts in the European Value Study (EVS) of 1999/2000 for 17 overlapping countries. Both correlations are strong (Pearson’s $r = 0.804$ for positive buying and 0.689 for boycotting; $p < 0.05$) and lend some support to the validity of the political consumption measures used in the analyses.

Individual-level variables

The resource dimension outlined above presumes that people with a higher socio-economic position, as represented by income, social class and education, have a higher likelihood of consuming politically. Income is measured using the relative equivalence household income (new OECD scale) (Hagenaars et al., 1994). Since the income categories used in the ESS differed slightly between countries, the mid-point of each category was used to estimate the household equivalence income relative to the mean national income for each respondent. To arrive at a comparable measure, the resulting values were collapsed into five income groups comprising people who earn less than 50 percent, 50 to 80 percent, 80 to 120 percent and above 120 percent of the average national household income, plus one missing data category. Social class is based on the common European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) schema (Rose and Harrison, 2007). The ESeC classification in principal follows the Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) class schema. I distinguish service class (collapsing the higher and lower salaried occupations), higher grade white-collar workers, petit bourgeoisie (including farmers), higher grade blue-collar occupations, lower grade white-collar and non-skilled workers (Rose and Harrison, 2007: 464). Education is measured by the highest education level attended, coded in three categories as primary education or less, secondary and tertiary education (ISCED).

Motivations such as political interest, trust, political efficacy or post-materialist value orientations are expected to play a central role in explaining political consumption. I code interest in politics 1 if

respondents are 'very' or 'quite interested' in politics (0 = no interest). Generalized trust is measured by the factor score of the following two items (Eigenvalue 1.6, Cronbach's alpha 0.68), 'generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted (10), or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people (0)?'; and 'do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you (0) if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair (10)?' I recoded trust in institutions using three questions (Cronbach's alpha 0.82) asking for respondents' trust in a country's parliament, in its legal system and in politicians on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 equalled high trust. A principal component factor analysis returned one factor (Eigenvalue 2.2), the score of which has been used as the measure for institutional trust. Political efficacy is based on three questions (Cronbach's alpha 0.61), which have been recoded so that a high value indicates high efficacy. 'How often does politics seem so complicated that you can't really understand what is going on?' (Five-point scale from 'never' to 'frequently'); 'Do you think that you could take an active role in a group involved with political issues?' (Five-point scale from 'definitely' to 'definitely not'); 'How difficult or easy do you find it to make your mind up about political issues?' (Five-point scale from 'very difficult' to 'very easy'). A principal component factor analysis returned one factor (Eigenvalue 1.7), the score of which has been used as the measure for political efficacy.

The Schwartz Value Scale (Schwartz, 1992) is used to recode self-transcendence values, which are highly correlated to post-materialist values (Wilson, 2005). Self-transcendence has been operationalized by estimating the mean value of five questions in the ESS that ask for respondents' identification in regard to 'understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature' as well as, 'preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent contact' (Schwartz, 2007: 174). To arrive at the individuals' relative value priorities the mean of the five items has been centred by the mean of all the 21 Schwartz value scale items for each respondent (cf. Schwartz, 2007: 180).

Besides the motivational and resource variables, models control for sex and age. There is strong theoretical and empirical support that women shop politically more frequently than men (Micheletti, 2004; Stolle et al., 2005). Very young and old people consume less politically than people aged 26 to 55 (Strømsnes, 2005); therefore I included age in years as well as an age squared term to account for the expected curvilinear relationship.

Contextual level variables

All contextual variables were lagged to the ESS survey by at least one year, so it can be assumed that contextual structures existed prior to the decision to consume politically. The economic opportunity structure is operationalized by three constructs measuring national affluence, the availability of environmental and fair-trade labelled goods and the dominant retailing structures. I measure the affluence of a country by the share of household expenditure spent on food relative to all other expenditure, e.g. for housing, health, etc., as given by the 1999 Household Budget Survey provided by Eurostat (2009a). Shares have been subtracted by 100, so that a high value indicates high affluence. This variable is a more specific measure of the degrees of freedom in consumption decisions than the average income as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. However, all analyses were also estimated with GDP per capita (not reported) and results were consistent. The availability of environmental and fair-traded goods has been assessed by the national supply with eco, organic and Fair Trade labelled goods in the year 2001, measured as the share of organic farm land of all farm land (Willer and Toralf, 2004: 118–119), the number of products with an EU or national eco label (Eurostat, 2009b; GEN, 2003; Kern et al., 2001) and the number of retail outlets for Fair Trade products per country (Krier, 2001); the latter two standardized by GDP. All three indicators were transformed into z-scores (Cronbach's alpha 0.76) and the mean value of the three items used as a proxy for the national supply with labelled goods. I operationalized retailing structures as the average number of small retailers (that is less than 10 employees) for an average from 1999 to 2001 standardized by population size. This is a reliable indicator for concentration in retailing structures (Clarke et al., 2002: 49). The data have been taken from the

Structural Business Statistics Database (Eurostat, 2009c) and refer to the distributive trade of food, beverages, tobacco in specialized stores such as supermarkets (NACE G 52.11). A high score indicates a large density of small retailers and thus a fragmented retailing structure.

The political opportunity structure is measured by two variables. The level of statism is operationalized by a dummy variable, where 1 indicates 'statist' and 0 'societal authority'. Countries are classified following Jepperson (2002) as well as Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas (2001). The social movement variable is the share of people within a country who are members in a peace, human rights or environmental movement organization as reported in the European Value Study (EVS) of 1999/2000 (EVS, 2006).⁵ I measured the cultural opportunity structure by two variables: national levels of post-materialism and of generalized trust. Both variables are operationalized by the EVS 1999/2000; for the former using the Inglehart four-question index on post-materialism to estimate the share of post-materialists within a country and, for the latter, using the share of respondents per country who report that 'most people can be trusted' (EVS, 2006).

Economic globalization is measured by the international flows in trade and investment as percent of GDP provided by the KOF Index of Globalization (Dreher, 2007). The level of economic globalization refers to the year 2001. The relative increase in economic globalization is the difference in economic flows between 1991 and 2001, additionally controlling for the level of globalization in 1991. I generated a cross-level interaction between self-transcendence values on the individual level and affluence on the macro level to test the low-cost hypothesis.

Method

To test the proposed hypotheses, logistic multi-level models are estimated using STATA 10. These models allow simultaneous assessment of the effect of individual characteristics, contextual factors, as well as interaction effects between both on political consumption (Snijders and Bosker, 1999). The advantages of such models are that they correct for biases in parameter estimates and standard errors resulting from hierarchical data (individuals nested within countries) and allow a separation of the variances between individual and contextual level (Guo and Zhao, 2000: 444–445). In order to determine the proportion of the unexplained (residual) variance attributable to the contextual level (r_0^2), the so-called *residual intra-class correlation* ρ_1 is estimated.

The analysis proceeds in the following steps: first, models without any independent variables (empty models) are estimated to assess how much of the total unexplained variance in the dependent variables is attributable to the contextual level. Next, individual level and contextual variables are introduced into random intercept models.⁶ These models allow assessment of which variables at both levels have an effect on the outcome and how much of the variation in the dependent variables between countries can be explained by individual characteristics (composition effects) and country-specific factors. A context effect means that country characteristics, such as affluence, have an influence on the mean outcomes of the dependent variables. In a final step, cross-level interactions between contextual level variables (affluence) and respondent level variables (self-transcendence values) are introduced to assess whether the effect of an individual-level variable varies systematically with a contextual factor estimating random slopes for self-transcendence values. The individual and contextual variables used were all correlated below Pearson's $r = 0.6$, except for generalized trust and supply of labelled products, which therefore have not been included in any models simultaneously to avoid multicollinearity.

Results and discussion

Figure 1 presents country differences in both forms of critical consumption. In general, people tend to boycott less than buy positive. Large variations between countries can be observed for both dimensions. While in Greece only 8 percent of the respondents bought products for political ethical or environmental reasons, in Sweden 58 percent report such behaviour. Sweden and Switzerland have the largest share of people that boycotted goods (35%), contrary to Portugal with only 3 percent of the respondents reporting

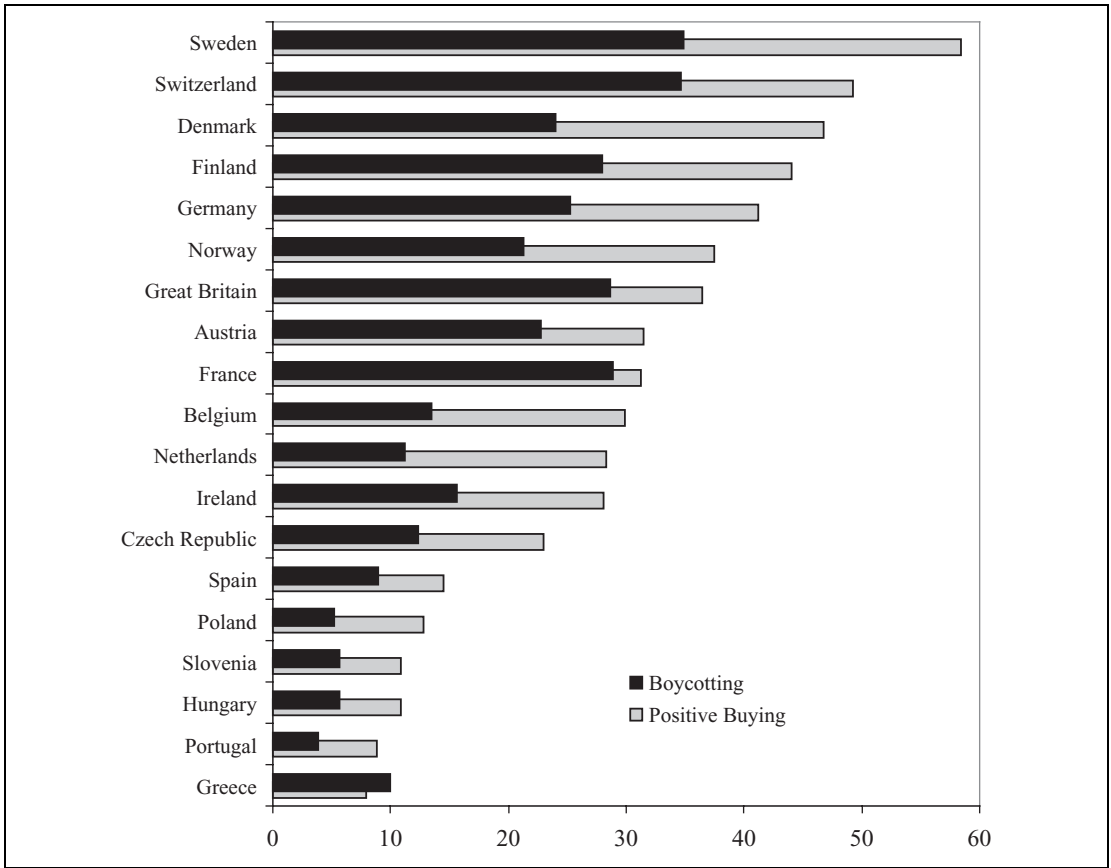


Figure 1. Respondents who participated in positive buying or boycotting of products in the past 12 months (% yes answers)

Source: ESS 2002/2003; own calculations.

boycott participation. Altogether, it seems quite common to buy products for ethical, political or environmental reasons in the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland, whereas in Southern and Eastern Europe only a few people report such action. Boycott participation in Europe reveals a similar pattern, although with the noticeable exception of France and Great Britain ranking third and fourth for mean boycotting behaviour (both 28%). Hence, there is some first evidence of systematic country differences that will be subject to more in-depth analysis by testing the established explanatory concepts using logistic multi-level regression models.

First, the residual intra-class correlation is calculated for the empty models (not shown). Since 17 percent (positive buying: $r_0^2 = 0.671, p < 0.001$) and 16 percent (boycotting: $r_0^2 = 0.637, p < 0.001$) of the total variance is linked to the contextual level it can be justified to estimate multi-level models (Snijders and Bosker, 1999). Table 1 shows the regression coefficients for the individual level variables for positive buying (model 1) and boycotting (model 2). I find that women report political consumption behaviour significantly more often than men. For both positive buying and boycotting, age shows the predicted curvilinear relationship. Thus, the propensity of political consumption increases with age until around 35 years and decreases again after that. For a lack of longitudinal data it cannot be assessed whether this effect is due to an age or cohort effect. Looking at the resource-based variables, the hypothesized relationships can be confirmed for most dimensions. A high relative equivalence income

Table 1. Unstandardized regression coefficients of logistic multi-level models (micro level)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Positive buying		Boycotting	
Constant	-2.70***	(0.21)	-3.31***	(0.23)
Female	0.51***	(0.03)	0.31***	(0.04)
Age	0.02**	(0.01)	0.02***	(0.01)
Age ²	-0.00***	(0.00)	-0.00***	(0.00)
Education level (ref.: primary education)				
Secondary education	0.45***	(0.04)	0.34***	(0.05)
Tertiary education	0.82***	(0.05)	0.58***	(0.06)
Social class (ref.: non-skilled workers)				
Service class	0.47***	(0.06)	0.35***	(0.06)
Higher-grade white collar occ.	0.44***	(0.06)	0.27***	(0.07)
Petit bourgeoisie and farmers	0.33***	(0.07)	0.31***	(0.08)
Higher-grade blue collar occ.	0.27***	(0.06)	0.15*	(0.07)
Lower-grade white collar occ.	0.25***	(0.06)	0.17*	(0.07)
Relative equivalence income (ref.: 80–120%)				
Less than 50%	-0.16**	(0.05)	-0.10	(0.06)
50–80%	-0.02	(0.04)	-0.08	(0.05)
More than 120%	0.16***	(0.04)	0.06	(0.05)
Missing value	-0.15**	(0.05)	-0.04	(0.06)
Interest in politics	0.50***	(0.04)	0.57***	(0.04)
Trust in political institutions	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.19***	(0.02)
Political efficacy	0.27***	(0.02)	0.32***	(0.02)
Generalized trust	0.13***	(0.02)	0.04 ⁺	(0.02)
Self-transcendence values	0.68***	(0.03)	0.55***	(0.03)
Intercept residual variance	0.462	(0.15)	0.554	(0.18)

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003, own estimations. N = 26,981; 19 countries.

enables people to buy certain goods for ethical, environmental or political reasons, while it does not affect the decision to boycott products. Analysing both dependent variables separately reveals why some studies that mix both concepts do not find a statistically significant impact of household income on political consumption. Respondents with high levels of education (secondary or tertiary education) are more likely to participate in both boycotts and positive buying. Contrary to the individualization hypothesis, social class has a consistent and significant effect on both dimensions of political consumption. Thus, people in higher-class positions use their purchasing power as a means of political voice more often than people in lower-class positions. This suggests that class boundaries still play a role in both consumption and political participation, even when controlling for income, education and value orientations.

In regard to the motivational variables, most hypotheses can be confirmed. Interest in politics, as well as a strong sense of political efficacy, has a significant positive effect on boycotting and positive buying. Respondents trusting national institutions have a lower likelihood of participating in boycotts; however, this effect is not statistically significant for political buying. Therefore, it might be argued that positive buying is less charged with a political meaning than boycotting. Individuals' generalized trust increases the likelihood of engagement in both forms of political consumption. Finally, respondents giving priority to self-transcendence values have a higher likelihood of consuming politically on either dimension. The individual level variables decrease the unexplained contextual variance of positive buying by 31 percent and of boycotting by 13 percent.

Table 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients of logistic multi-level models (macro level)

Variable	Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
	Positive buying	(0.16)	Boycotting	(0.19)	Positive buying	(0.21)	Boycotting	(0.26)	Positive buying	(0.34)	Boycotting	(0.36)
Constant	-2.70***	(0.16)	-3.31***	(0.19)	-2.42***	(0.21)	-3.09***	(0.26)	-3.00***	(0.34)	-3.46***	(0.36)
Economic opportunity structure												
Affluence	0.05**	(0.02)	0.08***	(0.02)	0.04*	(0.02)	0.08***	(0.02)	0.04 ⁺	(0.02)	0.07**	(0.03)
Fragmented retailing structure	-0.02 ⁺	(0.00)	-0.03 ⁺	(0.00)	-0.02	(0.00)	-0.02	(0.00)	-0.02 ⁺	(0.00)	-0.02	(0.00)
Supply labelled products	0.29*	(0.15)			0.26*	(0.14)			0.20	(0.17)		
Political opportunity structure												
Statism					-0.49*	(0.24)						
Social movement organizations					-0.39	(0.30)						
Cultural opportunity structure					-0.01	(0.02)						
Post-materialism (macro)									0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Generalized trust (macro)									0.01	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)
Intercept residual variance	0.158	(0.05)	0.237	(0.08)	0.129	(0.04)	0.209	(0.07)	0.150	(0.05)	0.234	(0.08)

Notes: Micro-level variables (see Table 1) are included, but coefficients are not reported. Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: ⁺ p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Source: European Social Survey 2002/2003, own estimations. N = 26,981; 19 countries.

Table 2 presents the macro-level coefficients for the contextual determinants of political consumption. The respondent-level variables are included in models 3 to 14, but not shown because no substantial changes are observable. First, the variables of the economic opportunity structure are introduced in models 3 and 4. Subsequently, the other explanatory variables are added (models 5 to 14). I find that national affluence raises the likelihood of people engaging as political consumers (on both dimensions). This finding supports the ‘luxury goods thesis’ (Baumol et al., 1979), as countries with a high level of financial autonomy of its citizens enable ‘cause related’ buying. Given the insignificant effect of individual income on boycotting, the positive effect of national affluence is likely to be driven by the differentiated selection of goods in more affluent societies. Increasing density of small retailers, and thus fragmented retailing structures, significantly decreases the likelihood of citizens buying positive or participating in boycotts. Hence, the increasing concentration of retailers and shopping outlets, as manifested in the spread of large supermarket chains, provokes a counter movement, as it enables the consumer to use market exchange as a political statement. Finally, greater supply with eco, organic and fair-traded goods significantly increases the chance of citizens buying positive. Since it could be claimed that the supply of labelled goods is the result of a preceding demand within a country, this finding is hardly surprising. Yet, in reality the supply of such goods is strongly driven by governmental programmes (Thøgersen, 2010: 176) and the organizational efforts of NGOs (Krier, 2001). Compared to models 1 and 2, economic opportunities account for 45 percent of the residual intercept variance of positive buying and 50 percent of boycotting.

In models 5 and 6 the variables for the political opportunities are added. Theoretically, it has been expected that higher levels of ‘statist authority’, as opposed to ‘societal authority’, discourage consumer activism. Controlling for the economic opportunity structure, the degree of statism in a country decreases the likelihood of positive buying (model 5) while not significantly affecting the decision to boycott (model 6). Since the hypothesis can only partially be confirmed, the non-significant effect of boycott participation needs some further consideration. In the descriptive results (Figure 1) it can be seen that, for instance, ‘statist’ France ranks only average (9th) for positive buying, but high (3rd) for boycott participation. The strong centralist authority in France is opposed by a fragmented civil society that draws on often violent protests to gain ‘voice’ (Jepperson, 2002). To some degree this might explain why in France in particular the negative form of political consumption is comparatively high. However, in recent years there has also been a ‘great expansion’ of civil society in most statist countries fostering a stronger ‘societal authority’ (Jepperson, 2002: 73).

The second dimension of the political opportunity structure, the strength of environmental, peace and humanitarian movement organizations, was expected to foster political consumerism by providing information and generating action frames for citizens. Yet, I find that the organizational power of SMOs does not significantly affect the decisions to boycott or buy positive (models 5 and 6). A reason for that might be that these NGOs are preoccupied with other types of activism, such as lobbying, petitioning or concrete measures of, for instance, environmental improvement. It has been argued that the cultural opportunity structure provides the motivation for citizens to act as political consumers, as such behaviour is more valued and more likely to be reciprocated in high trust and post-materialist cultures. Without controlling for the EOSs, both variables have a statistically significant effect in the expected direction (models not shown). Yet, after introducing the EOS variables, both coefficients become insignificant (models 7 and 8). This contradicts the findings of Neilson and Paxton (2010), which, however, do not control for economic opportunities.

Considering the effect of the individual-level variables, the joint models of economic and political opportunity structures together explain 81 percent of the country-level residual variance of positive buying (model 5) and 69 percent of boycotting (model 6).

In Table 3, models 9 to 12, the economic globalization variables are introduced separately. While globalization is often depicted as a driving force of political consumer movements in which civil society seeks to regain power in economic governance, neither the level of international flows in trade and finances in 2001 (models 9 and 10) nor the relative increase in economic globalization (models 11 and 12) yield

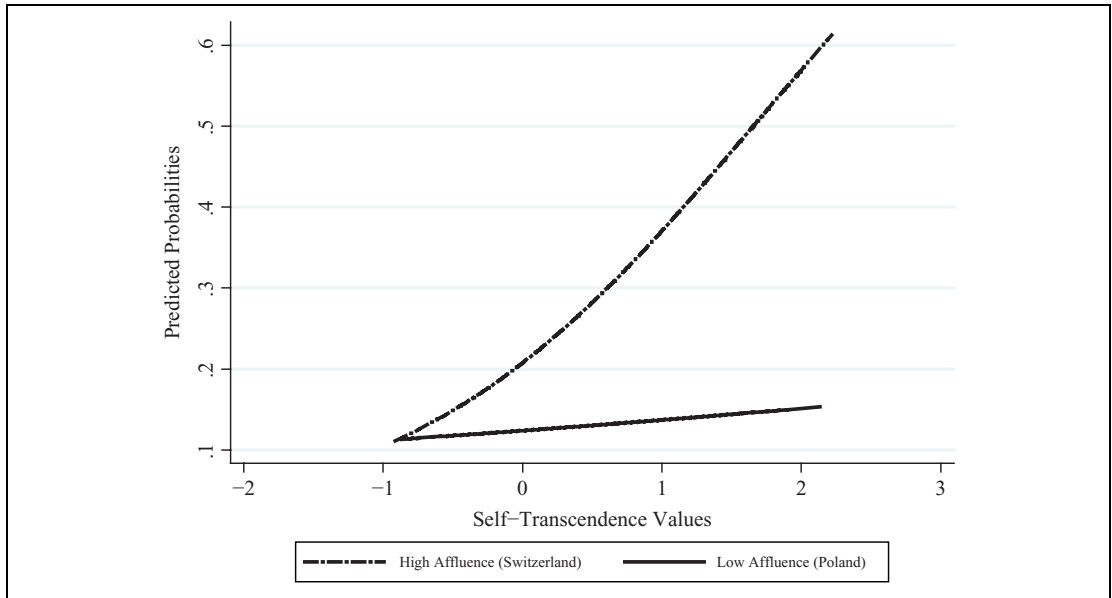


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of positive buying by self-transcendence values and national affluence
 Source: ESS 2002/2003; author calculations.

significant effects on either dimension of political consumption. In particular cases, transnational relocation or outsourcing strategies of corporations might prompt consumer activism, such as Nokia's decision to relocate mobile phone production from Germany to Romania. Yet, the overall level of economic globalization does not provide a general motivation to become a consumer activist. This finding contradicts the importance that has been attributed to globalization processes in the political consumption literature (Beck, 2000).

Finally, the low-cost hypothesis claims that value orientations are more likely to become effective if a decision is characterized by a low-cost differential of the alternatives. The last two models (13 and 14) test this by estimating a cross-level interaction between country-level affluence and individual-level self-transcendence values, computing random slopes for the latter. The variances of the random slopes for self-transcendence values are significant in both models (likelihood-ratio test: 'buycott' LR $\chi^2 = 29.16$; boycott LR $\chi^2 = 12.93$; both: $p < 0.01$). For both positive buying and boycotting a significant negative cross-level interaction is observable. In Figures 2 and 3, I plot these results as the predicted probability of a respondent buying positive or boycotting by self-transcendence values, differing between a low-cost (high affluence) and high-cost (low affluence) context and holding all other variables at their mean. The figures lend support to the low-cost hypothesis. Individual values have strong explanatory power in affluent countries. In countries where people have only a few financial degrees of freedom and a limited selection of goods, they lack the opportunity to draw on their values in consumption decisions. These findings underscore the importance of economic structural constraints for value-driven individual decisions.

Conclusions

This study sets out to establish the importance of opportunity structures for consumer activism. Political consumption is an individualized form of collective action manifested in boycott participation and 'positive' buying of goods with certain ethical, political or environmental qualities. To overcome 'the unfortunate individualistic and individualizing bias' of existing research (Thøgersen, 2010: 171), explanations relying on individuals' resources and motivations have been extended by social movement theories of

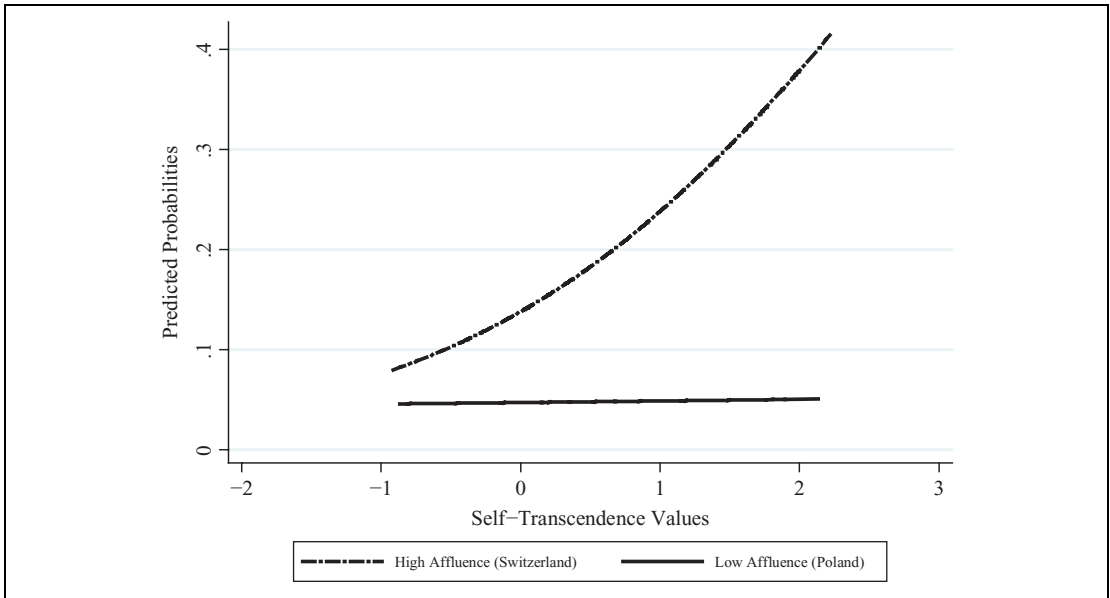


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of boycotting by self-transcendence values and national affluence
 Source: ESS 2002/2003; author calculations.

economic, political and cultural opportunities as well as a globalization hypothesis. On the actor level I find support for the impact of individual resources and motivations.

However, individual decisions to consume politically are embedded in economic structures and political institutions. Thus, as I show, more affluent countries, by providing higher financial degrees of freedom and a higher variety of products, enable political consumption behaviour. Fragmented retailing structures, by increasing citizens' transaction costs, constrain both positive buying and boycotting. Furthermore, the supply of labelled goods increases citizens' ability to engage in positive buying. The results lend strong support to the importance of economic opportunity structures in market-directed collective action (Wahlström and Peterson, 2006). Historically-shaped statist forms of collective agency, as one dimension of the political opportunity structure, decreases citizens' willingness to buy politically. Yet, contrary to an argument by Holzer (2006), I find that social movement organizations affect neither positive buying nor boycotting. In addition, neither the importance of post-materialism (Sønderskov, 2009) nor that of a civic culture of trust (Neilson and Paxton, 2010) has been confirmed after controlling for economic opportunities. Furthermore, neither national levels of economic globalization nor its increase drive critical consumption. Finally, the results lend support to the low-cost hypothesis showing that an affluent context provides the opportunity to draw on value orientations in consumption decisions.

In sum, economic opportunities and statist political institutions are the most central contextual determinants of political consumerism in Europe. These results provide important insights into the limitations of political consumerism as a way of economic governance, and help us understand the underlying economic and political structures that drive political consumption in some countries and constrain it in others. Furthermore, they shift the focus from the dominating cultural explanations to the underlying economic conditions which empower consumers to voice their interest through the market.

Future research needs to address certain restrictions: the measurement of political consumption has to be improved by considering its frequency and a broader set of indicators has to be used. More precise measures of the opportunity structures, potentially on the meso-level, would contribute to the validity of the findings. In regard to the globalization hypothesis, individual measures of global solidarity and subjective perceptions of economic globalization might yield different results. Additionally, some general

limitations of political consumerism need to be considered. First, voting at the check-out lacks democratic legitimation. Moreover, political consumption might even be utilized to pursue undemocratic goals, such as nationalism, racism or anti-Semitism, as in the boycott of Jewish shops in Nazi Germany. Finally, the scope of corporations sensitive to consumer activism is limited, because a great many are not visible on mass consumer markets. Nevertheless, as this study shows, consumers are by no means passive, but, depending on their structural opportunities, use their market power to push for corporate social responsibility in Europe.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments

Early versions of this article were presented at the 2008 interim conference of the Research Group of Economic Sociology of the European Sociological Association in Krakow, Poland, the 9th European Sociological Association conference 2009 in Lisbon, Portugal and at the economic sociology and sociology of consumption research group meeting 'Die Ökonomie des Konsums – der Konsum in der Ökonomie' of the German Sociological Association, November 2009 in Berlin. I thank the participants of the conferences for helpful comments. Furthermore, I am indebted to Bernhard Ebbinghaus, Claudia Göbel, Christian Hunkler, Nadine Reibling, Jörg Rössel, Patrick Sachweh and Christi Smith for valuable advice and suggestions on various drafts. Finally, I thank the two anonymous referees for their comments.

Notes

1. An additional resource-related dimension of the EOS that cannot be controlled for here is the country difference in the price of labelled goods. However, in a comparative study, Sønderkov (2009) reports a non-significant impact of price differences on organic food consumption.
2. This reasoning also applies to the relationship of income and post-materialist values on the micro level. Yet, additional analyses (not reported) do not reveal a significant effect of this interaction.
3. The data and extensive documentation can be downloaded from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) online at: <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/>. For countries included in analysis, consult Figure 1.
4. It could be claimed that positive buying includes a boycott of the substituted goods. While this is certainly true, harming other producers is not the main aim of a 'buycott' (Friedman, 1999: 201). Considering the different logics – reward versus punish – and costs between positive buying and boycotting, both are treated separately here.
5. Because Switzerland and Norway did not participate in the 1999/2000 EVS, information on these countries for all measures based on the EVS has been taken from the 1995 round of the EVS. Unfortunately, membership in consumer organizations has not been asked in the EVS of 1995 and 1999/2000 and therefore cannot be considered.
6. In random intercept models, the constant (intercept) is allowed to vary across countries, while the individual level effects (slopes) are constrained to be equal across countries. In addition, random slope models allow individual effects to vary across countries. The random intercept model denotes the log-odds of buying politically P_{ij} of a respondent i in a country j as a sum of a linear function of the variables x and a random country-specific residual U_{0j} (Snijders and Bosker, 1999: 215–16):

$$\log it(p_{ij}) = \gamma_0 + \sum_{h=1} \gamma_h x_{hij} + U_{0j}$$

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