Buying in or tuning out: The role of consumption in politically active young adults

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In a push to stem the decline in political participation among young people, political consumption is seen as a bright spot in otherwise muddy terrain. The potential salutary role of political consumption – the decision to purchase or not purchase products and services based on political, ethical and environmental factors – is important, given what many scholars see as a precipitous drop in America’s social capital and rates of political and civic engagement. The last few decades have seen a deleterious decline in those “features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam, 1995, p. 664). Today, fewer people volunteer their time, play in sports leagues or participate in church-related activities than did 40 years ago. The impact of this decline in social capital can be seen in the dwindling levels of civic engagement and political participation. Fewer people vote in national elections, work on community projects, or profess trust in their political leaders.

Political consumption may represent a new and growing form of alternative political engagement, one that aligns better with contemporary norms of citizenship emphasizing direct action, networked publics and loose institutional affiliations (Bennett, 2005; Dahlgren, 2007; Dalton, 2008). These engaged citizens or self-actualized citizens tend to be younger and more inclined to enact their political values and beliefs though alternative avenues, like the marketplace. This model of new citizenship argues that rather than facing a decline in
involvement, politics is simply changing and evolving to adopt different forms. Recent studies seem to support this model and confirm its pro-civic potential in the face of declining rates of conventional involvement.

And yet the literature is largely silent on how young voters themselves see these alternative forms of politics. Equally absent is an understanding of how these different norms of citizenship are developed. Do they result from the same mix of socializing agents as conventional forms of political engagement? Do the influences of parents, schools and mass media carry the same weight in the inculcation of engaged citizenship norms or is the balance a different combination of forces and weights? Drawing on depth interviews and survey data, I explore the connections between consumption and citizenship and argue for a better understanding of how political consumption relates to conventional means of political engagement and of the socializing factors that are part of that process. I am motivated by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do politically engaged young people understand consumption as a form of political engagement?

**RQ2:** What socializing agents influence the adoption of political consumption?

**RQ3:** How do these influences compare to the adoption of conventional measures of traditional civic and political engagement?

The data suggest that young voters themselves see political consumption
as distinct from other, more conventional forms of engagement. More problematic, however, at least for proponents of political consumption as a viable form of alternative political engagement, is the indication that these young otherwise politically engaged young adults do not view political consumption as an important means of political action. As well, while young voters can paint a rich description of the various forces that helped them become the political individuals they are, they provide considerably less insight into how the various socializing agents helped them become political consumers.

This chapter begins with an overview of political consumption and the ways in which it represents an increasingly popular form of alternative political engagement, particularly among young voters. Relying on depth interview data, I then explore how young voters think of their consumption choices in political terms and the various socializing agents that influenced them. Although past research indicates political consumption correlates highly with other forms of political engagement, my data suggest young voters themselves do not think of their marketplace behaviors in such explicitly distinct, political terms. In an effort to clarify this disconnect, I draw on survey data to analyze the various agents that socialize young people into politics, and demonstrate that political consumption is motivated by different factors than are conventional forms of civic and political engagement.
Consumption as politics/politics as consumption

Political consumption assumes multiple forms and encompasses a variety of consumer practices, including fair-trade purchasing, community-supported agriculture and ethical investing (for a comprehensive typology of socially conscious consumption practices see Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005). It can be informed by a number of motivations, simultaneously individual and private as well as community-oriented and public (Atkinson, 2012). It goes by a number of names, including responsible consumption (Fisk, 1973), ecologically concerned consumption (Henion, 1976; Kinnear, Taylor, & Ahmed, 1974), socially responsible consumption (Antil, 1984; Antil & Bennett, 1979), ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Carrigan, Szmigin, & Wright, 2004) and political consumption (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2008; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). Despite the variety in terminology, each one is concerned with the same larger construct, albeit in differing degrees (Antil & Bennett, 1979).

It is conceptualized in this study as the act of making consumer choices, either individually or collectively, among different products and producers based on political, ethical, civic and/or social considerations with the goal of effecting institutional, market and/or social change. This definition incorporates work by Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti (2005) and by Clarke, Barnett, Cloke and Malpass, who state that political consumption “seeks to embed altruistic, humanitarian,
solidaristic and environmental commitments into the rhythms and routines of everyday life – from drinking coffee, to buying clothes, to making the kids’ packed lunch” (2007a, p. 233).

Scholarship into political consumer behavior has its roots in studies of socially responsible behavior (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968), which revealed that individuals who score high on the social responsibility scale were more likely to be involved in their communities, not just in conventionally viewed civic ways, such as membership in PTAs, but also in more consumer-oriented ways, such as donating money to charity. This work was extended by Anderson and Cunningham (1972), who identified the typical political consumer as young, well-educated and of relatively high occupational attainment and socioeconomic status; these consumers are also more cosmopolitan, less conservative and less status conscious. Based on early studies, the overall picture of the political consumer is of a person who feels efficacious, confident and socially integrated. Webster (1975), for example, noted that the political consumer is well-adjusted to community norms, although not a conformist, and feels capable of influencing the community and wider world. Brooker (1976, p. 107) showed that political consumers are more likely to be self-actualizing individuals, concerned with actions that “will satisfy the needs of others at the same time that individual's own needs are satisfied.”

But not everyone agrees that the interlacing of politics and consumption is
beneficial. On the one side are critics who argue that reorienting political and civic concerns to the market only exacerbates the crisis of democratic disengagement. Equating consumer behavior with political behavior, critics say, breeds self-interest and submissiveness, individualizes civic culture by eclipsing collective elements of citizenship, fails to challenge the legitimacy of the capitalist system, and favors those with sufficient economic capital to participate while marginalizing those who do not (Bennett, 1998; Carter & Huby, 2005; Clarke, et al., 2007a; Clarke, Barnett, Cloke, & Malpass, 2007b; Schudson, 1991; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004). On the other side of the debate are less critical voices arguing that the merging of politics and consumption inspires solidarity and common purpose, empowers individuals in the market, offers people an easy and enjoyable way to enact their civic duties, and conforms to the norms and realities of a postmodern, rights-oriented society (Bennett, 1998; Clarke, et al., 2007b; Giddens, 1991; Norris, 2002, 2007).

At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether politics as a form of consumption is a healthy or pernicious force for democracy. If political consumption is inflected with the same attributes as conventional political engagement – selflessness, efficacy, community-mindedness – then perhaps market-based action can have healthy consequences for democracy, either by serving as a bridge to more conventional means of political engagement or by serving as an effective means of engagement in its own right. If, however,
political consumption is little more than an individualistic, status-driven and passive pursuit of the wealthy, then supplanting real political engagement with superficial market-oriented acts poses a grave risk to the democratic process.

Until recently, there has been little empirical work exploring this dichotomy, in part, because consumption was not viewed as a legitimate field of study and because consumer behavior and citizenship were viewed as a zero-sum game. Although the last few decades have seen the study of consumption gain legitimacy, until recently it was held in low regard academically (Poster, 2004; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). As Zukin and Maguire (2004) point out, classical sociologists of the nineteenth century either ignored or denigrated consumption. Marx saw consumption as a need induced by capitalism to sustain and legitimate the exploitation and alienation of labor. Durkheim suggested if consumers were allowed to fulfill their unlimited material desires, that moral social order would be threatened. Veblen’s (1899) study of the leisure class highlighted how social disparities were established and reinforced through conspicuous consumption. These critiques were taken up and extended by scholars in the last century.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) painted consumers as passive dupes of industry, which, driven by profit motives, produced a popular culture that was formulaic and superficial. Bourdieu (1979), building on Veblen’s ideas of conspicuous consumption, showed how the inequalities of social life are reproduced through consumption practices. And Galbraith (1958) argued that consumer desire is a
largely false need fueled by producers and that the privileging of private consumption over public goods leads to a crumbling of the public sphere.

In scholarship that does pursue the relationship between consumption and citizenship, the two are frequently positioned as mutually exclusive orientations with the assumption that “citizenship” is preferable to “consumption” and that marketplace-based politics necessarily means crowding out conventional means of political and civic engagement (Keum & Shah, 2005; Trentmann, 2007). Recent scholarship has started to unpack this assumption. Using survey data Keum and Shah (2005) have shown that political consumption is positively related to civic and political engagement. And based on focus group interviews with political consumers, Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson (2006) have demonstrated that this kind of consumer behavior entails community-minded goals and helps build social capital.

That consumption has become a means to enact citizenship should not be surprising. Scholars point to two trends – globalization and postmodernism – as explanation and theoretical underpinning for the rise in politically oriented consumer behavior. In an increasingly global and interconnected world, social problems are often too complex or transnational to be solved by individual governments or nation states. The environmental crisis, for example, transcends any single nation and requires such extensive international coordination to resolve it, that governments are left looking largely ineffectual and redundant (Micheletti,
2003). As states are becoming less effective, corporations are becoming more state-like (Scammell, 2000). Globalization has allowed individual companies to transcend the regulation and policing that comes from being embedded in a single country. But by loosening their ties to countries, corporations become more visible targets. Scammell says that when businesses were secondary to the state superstructure, then it was the nation that was considered the appropriate target of political activity. But when corporations untethered themselves from governments to become “supranational entities” then they became the natural targets of political activity and consumer behavior became politicized.

At the same time, increasing individualism and a concomitant rise in attention paid to values and lifestyles associated with late modernity (Giddens, 1991) has redirected focus away from larger welfare issues to personal interests and concerns. Issues such as abortion or gay rights are beyond the political will or desire of nation states to address or to address successfully. Whereas previously citizens would have looked to the state for resolution, today they look for “politics by other means” (Bennett, 1998, p. 749). This “other means” increasingly denotes the market and corporations. Scammell argues that “citizenship is not dead or dying, but is found in new places.” (p. 351). On the one hand, individuals are losing power and certainty in their working lives. On the other hand, individuals are gaining power and knowledge as consumers. That they should augment their civic and political playbook with market-oriented and consumer-focused
behavior, then, is a natural fit.

Early explications of the changing norms of contemporary citizenship indicate political consumption conforms nicely to the kind of engaged forms of citizenship that are increasingly found among younger voters. This is particularly true among younger citizens, whom Bang (2003) calls “everyday makers,” many of whom find greater enjoyment in defining their own political paths, for example through local volunteerism, support for causes like the environment or animal rights, joining in protest activities and consumer activism (Bennett, 2005). This shift is a sign of the emergence of new forms of engagement, a new politics typified by personalized rather than collective engagement and a stronger emphasis on single issues than on overarching visions of a different society (Dahlgren, 2007). In his conceptualization of citizenship, Dalton (2008) notes four dimensions: public participation in politics, autonomy generated through deliberation and awareness, commitment to social order, and ethical and moral responsibility to others, or what he calls social citizenship. He argues that as citizenship norms have changed so, too, have the public participation aspects of citizenship. Using survey data, Dalton identifies two citizenship norms: the dutiful citizen, who is oriented to law and order, and the engaged citizen, who aligns more with liberal or communitarian ideals. The two differ markedly in terms of participation, with dutiful citizens valuing electoral participation, such as voting, and engaged citizens turning away from these institutionalized expressions of
citizenship in favor of individualized, direct forms of action. There are also generational differences such that younger citizens identify with engaged citizenship norms, and older citizens identify with dutiful citizenship norms.

Dalton’s view echoes Bennett’s (2005) reconceptualization of citizenship norms, which he breaks down into the dutiful citizen and the actualizing citizen. His AC/DC model, like Dalton’s (2008), posits that the dutiful citizen is aligned more closely with conventional means of political engagement and is based on expectations of understanding the basic workings of government and becoming informed about issues. The actualizing citizen, on the other hand, sees political engagement in very personal terms, motivated by a desire to enhance the quality of their personal lives and social relations than to support government institutions.

Norris explains this shift in participation as one away from the “politics of loyalties” to the “politics of choice” (Norris, 2002). As institutional expressions of civic duty – voting, party identification – lose their appeal, individualized direct forms of action become more commonplace and political interest groups give way to new social movements. This transformation has “altered the agencies (collective organizations), repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression), and targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence)” (Norris, 2002, pp. 188, italics in original).

As these evolving norms of citizenship gain scholarly traction, scant attention has been paid to how these different norms are fostered and developed.
Specifically, there remains a lack of understanding regarding how the agents of political socialization vary in their development and nurturing of these different normative orientations.

**Agents of Political Socialization**

Political socialization refers to the ways the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs of U.S. democracy are effectively and efficiently transmitted from one generation to the next. It seeks to explain how young people are socialized into the patterns and expectations of politics. Dating back to at least the 1950s, early studies of youth political socialization viewed it as a unidirectional, hierarchical process. Youth were seen as naïve pre-citizens whose purpose was to be inculcated into a set of fixed predispositions, facts, and behaviors reflecting a unified political system (McLeod 2000) For example, Adoni (1979) defined political socialization as the “process of induction into the political culture, the end product of which is a set of attributes – cognitions, values and feelings – toward the various parts of the political system.” (p. 84) Some contemporary scholars take a similar route. (Gimple, Lay & Schuknecht, 2003)

Other scholars have argued that prevailing views of socialization were too narrow and failed to take into account questions about subcultural norms and behaviors; why and how some people may choose to reject or depart from established norms; and whose needs socialization is meant to satisfy, i.e. individual and interpersonal ones or institutional and social ones. (Jennings &
Other scholars have critiqued studies of socialization as being too timid. In these early approaches to understanding socialization processes, the system itself was unassailable and beyond criticism. Socialization, then, was seen as a largely replicating process. Buckingham (2000) has critiqued these views as being conservative and functionalist. Socialization, he argues, is all too often approached as a reinforcing process, one that repeats – and does not challenge – the institutions and social relationships that support them. He argues that views like this make socialization appear to be a fairly effortless process, one that only becomes visible when individuals deviate from it.

In most cases, socialization is measured by any or all of a host of attitudinal, cognitive and behavioral outcome variables, including trust, efficacy, interest, knowledge, involvement, activity, and discussion. In terms of underlying processes, socialization is alternatively viewed as advancing either smoothly or episodically. For example, Sears and Valentino (1997) have argued that socialization advances most effectively episodically when current events, such as elections, initiate a rapid increase in information and communication (both mass mediated and interpersonal) that expose individuals to the issues at hand and helps them to form and then crystallize political attitudes. Jennings and Niemi (1974) offer a number of alternate ways that young people can pick up political attitudes. The first one involves transmission of attitudes from the socializing agent to the
child through observational learning. The family or parents are often seen as a prime source of observational learning. This is essentially a form of modeling or imitation, in which young people take their cues from parents and internalize the attitude and behavior as their own. Another explanation of socialization takes a structural approach and looks at the resources available to a given child (Jennings & Niemi, 1974). Depending on the specific social space a child inhabits, she may have more or fewer opportunities and resources to acquire political skills and predispositions.

Just as there are a number of proposed ways that young people can acquire attitudes, there are also a number of socializing agents that serve as potential sources of socializing information. These primary agents are thought to be parents, schools, mass media, community and religion.

Initial research identified and tended to focus on parents and schools as the primary agents of socialization, with mass media and current events as secondary sources. Yet in their investigation into how and to what degree parents and education helped young people become political people, Jennings and Niemi (1974) found rather inconclusive results. For example, there is considerable consistency between parents and their children regarding political party identification, but much less consistency between parents and children in terms of public opinion, political knowledge, ideas about what it means to be a good citizen, and likelihood of participating.
They found that family structure mattered, with homogenous parents, or parents who shared the same political orientations, having more influence over their children than did heterogeneous parents, or parents who had contrasting political orientations. Jennings and Niemi suggested that when a child received consistent messages about, for example, what it means to be a good citizen, then these messages were more likely to be internalized. Still, the authors contended that when it comes to the influence of parents, they seem to be socializing their children despite themselves, since most of it is haphazard or weak.

After parents, educational settings are viewed as one of the most important socialization agents. Schools are seen as “preparatory institutions for democracy.” (Flanagan et al., 1998, p. 462) They can be viewed as mini-polities with their own rules and obligations that must be balanced and negotiated. But as with family, the influence of schools appears to be inconsistent, mixed and inconclusive. Despite the fact that school and civic engagement are highly correlated, the reason behind the relationship is unclear.

One line of research looks at the influence of civics learning that takes place in schools. For example, starting in elementary school, children are taught about the nuts and bolts of American democracy, about political process and civil rights. Yet Jennings and Niemi (1974) found very weak correlations between high school civics curricula and political knowledge, sophistication, interest, discourse, efficacy, trust, tolerance and participation. A second strain of research looks at
school-related extracurricular activities, like volunteer work and membership in school clubs. Volunteerism, in particular, is considered an important means of teaching young people about democratic values and attitudes. Using longitudinal data, Smith (1999) has shown that participation in school-related activities helps build social capital, which other scholars (Putnam 1995, 2000) have shown to be intimately related to civic and political engagement.

Unlike parents and schools, which are often seen as beneficial agents of socialization, the third primary agent, mass media, are often both criticized and praised. Attention to mass media as a primary agent of socialization didn’t become a focal area until the mid to late 1970s. Before that, it was thought of primarily as a secondary agent, one that reinforced pre-existing beliefs or attitudes. But as Chaffee, Ward and Tipton (1970) point out, when it comes to children, there are very few if any pre-existing beliefs and orientations to reinforce. Instead, mass media are a primary opportunity to develop and learn new political orientations. They demonstrated that mass media are thought of by young people as a powerful means of socialization. At the same time, because they had longitudinal data, they showed that mass media use is a causal agent, in that newspaper use leads to greater campaign activity and predicts future gains in knowledge.

Since their formative study, other scholars have shown the impact of mass media on socialization. For example, broadcast news use increases interpersonal
discussion (Garramone and Atkin 1986); newspaper use is related to political interest (Adoni 1979); children’s programming tends to portray politics and government officials in a negative light (Sandell and Ostroff 1981); and watching broadcast news is related to holding political opinions (Garramone, 1984).

In the case of religion, Tocqueville first observed that the effects of religion, particularly Christianity, represented a generally positive influence (de Tocqueville, 1969 [1835]). Past work on political socialization indicates youth involvement in their church and community helps foster greater civic engagement while developing trust and awareness (Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Churches hold as a central mandate a sense of responsibility and obligation to minister to others. Given this focus on community service, it is not surprising that involvement in church activities is associated with greater levels of volunteerism, charitable giving and civic participation (Perks & Haan, 2011; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

These patterns extend to community involvement, too. Community has an important and lasting influence on the development of young people’s political identities (Cho, Gimpel, & Dyck, 2006) and past work has shown how place-based identity is influential in vote choice and preference for certain policies, for example regarding language and education (Rico & Jennings, 2012). Young people who feel a sense of community connectedness and belonging are more likely adhere to democratic goals (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007).
while membership in a supportive and encouraging academic community has been shown to be positively associated with acquisition of political skills and commitments (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). “In the same way that adults are influenced by their workplaces, neighborhoods, and organizational affiliations, youth are enmeshed in a web of potential political and civic influences” (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008, p. 512).

**STUDY 1: HOW POLITICALLY ENGAGED YOUNG ADULTS UNDERSTAND THEIR POLITICAL CONSUMPTION CHOICES**

In discussions of engaged versus dutiful citizenship norms, conventional forms of political action are described as distinct from new and emerging forms of engagement, especially as they are carried out by young adults. Yet missing from the literature is an understanding from young consumers in their own words, of how consumption enters into their political thoughts and acts. Research has shown how political consumption correlates highly with other, more conventional forms of political engagement, but those statistically significant relationships do not indicate whether citizens themselves think of consumption choices as political, nor do they shed light on whether the two forms are learned in similar ways and develop out of shared orientations and experiences. This first study sought to understand how young politically engaged individuals thought of their political consumption choices and to uncover the various socializing forces that helped inculcate a sense of efficacious marketplace-based engagement.
Method and findings

Data were collected over a two week period in January 2012 via depth interviews with six young adults who self-identify as politically active. A market research firm was hired to recruit the informants, who ranged in age from 20 to 23 and were equally split among the Republican and Democratic party affiliations (see Table 1). To qualify, informants had to be politically active, both in the conventional sense by voting, donating money or signing a petition, as well as in the political consumer sense by making a concerted effort to buy fair trade items, organic food, or products made in the U.S. Informants were paid a $20 incentive for their participation. Interviews took place in the researcher’s office or in coffee shops and lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 10 minutes.

The interviews began with grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988) that asked informants to describe themselves, their daily routines and how they see themselves as political people. Questions then followed a loosely structured format that allowed the conversation to flow easily and smoothly. The interviews focused on two main topics: first, how did the informant become a politically active individual, and second, how did they become a political consumer. Within both topic areas, informants were encouraged to think about what aspects of their upbringings helped or hindered their becoming politically engaged. Each interview ended with the informant being asked how they thought their consumer choices related to their political sense of self. The interviews suggest political
consumption is commonplace among young voters, but that very rarely are these kind of marketplace-based actions thought of as political. As well, while political consumption was seen as important and viable, it was not considered to be as effective or meaningful as conventional forms of political engagement. Last, when thinking about the various influences that fostered their identities as political consumers, informants were generally hard-pressed to think of factors that paved the way for their politicized shopping choices. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

Interviews with informants indicated that political consumption is commonplace but only rarely is it thought of as “political.” Informants engaged in a number of different kinds of politicized consumption choices, for example, by buying locally grown food, by giving preference to products made in the U.S., and by boycotting certain brands and stores, like Nike and Wal-Mart, that they disagreed with politically or ethically.

And yet these consumption choices were largely thought of as conceptually distinct from conventional forms of political engagement. Buying American-made products, for example, was seen as a way to help ensure better working conditions for laborers and for helping make America an economically formidable country, but those end goals were not framed in political terms. It was thought of more as a way to fulfill societal obligations or reaffirm a national identity than to express a political orientation or perspective. Lillian, a 23-year-
old Republican, emphasized the importance of buying American-made products and strengthening the domestic economy, a belief that was reinforced by her experiences during a semester spent abroad in Hong Kong. In comparison to the U.S., Lillian saw Hong Kong as a powerful producer of goods that other countries, including the U.S., were eager to import and consume. She lamented what she saw as America’s lack of production and manufacturing and framed it as a fall from a once superior position during the post-war period when American production and manufacturing were booming.

“It’s so important that we keep production here, because I remember in World War II, during those wars, we were the head country. People wanted to be us. Now the tables have turned and we’re trying to be like everyone else. It just shows how many things we’ve outsourced, how many things…you know, all we do here is consume. We consume and we entertain and we’re a service country. That’s all we know how to do and that’s all we’re good at. Do we produce massive things like they do? No. Because we’re – I don’t know if we’re just lazy, I don’t know what’s going on.”

Other informants spoke about buying organic food or produce that was sold at local farmers’ markets. Again, though, these purchases were not framed in political terms, but were thought of in terms of the benefits directed at the individual consumer. For example, organic food is perceived as healthier, cleaner and less processed than conventional, mass-produced food. These personal, individual benefits took precedence over community or collective benefits.

Although it would be easy to interpret pro-social consumption choices in explicitly political terms, the informants themselves rarely did. Only one
informant viewed her decision to boycott as an overtly political act. Paige, a 22-year-old Democrat, explained her decision to boycott products manufactured by the Koch brothers as fundamentally political, saying she was motivated by a distaste for what the two conservatives have done to undermine democracy and bankroll the Republican party. However, she was also adamant that these consumer choices were not effective in and of themselves. Paige, who worked on President Barack Obama’s campaign in Ohio in 2008, firmly believes that effective political action involves voting, engaging with elected officials and seeking to change things through institutional means. In this sense she embodies a hybrid of the dutiful and engaged citizen.

When I buy the generic brand paper towels instead of Brawny, is that really going to limit their contribution to some whack job in Minnesota? Probably not. With the Koch brothers…I think that’s political for sure. I just don't think that it's a big statement for me. If you want to take on the Koch brothers, don't stop buying Brawny towels. I mean there’s other ways to take on the Koch brothers.

Rarely did informants identify consumption choices as a viable means of being politically engaged. This is not to say they viewed it as ineffective or useless in and of itself; rather informants did not think of its efficacy in terms of political action. When asked to describe a good citizen, informants universally mentioned responsibilities like voting and staying informed and some mentioned paying taxes, volunteering and looking out for their fellow citizens, but no one talked about citizenship in terms of consumption. This is telling, given that each of the
informants thought of themselves as politically engaged and also thought of themselves as political consumers. Rarely did the two overlap in their abstract assessment of what makes a good citizen.

Similarly, informants provided considerably different information with respect to the various socializing agents that helped them become politically active individuals in the conventional sense and in the marketplace sense. Across the board, informants hit on the usual suspects in explaining how they became political actors. Informants mentioned parents, teachers, mass media and occasionally their church or faith as important influences on their development as political individuals. This conforms to most research into political socialization that identify these aspects as formative influences. Yet in describing how they became the kinds of consumers they are, the only agent that was named as influential were parents. For these conscientious consumers, parental influence was the only one that came to mind in explaining how they came to view consumption choices as potentially political or pro-social.

Informants offered anecdotes of their childhood, in which their mother or father emphasized the health benefits of organic food over mass produced, highly processed food. Others talked of their parents emphasizing value for money and the advice to avoid foreign-made products, which were seen as cheap and inferior in quality. Ishani, a 23-year-old Republican, explained how her preference for American-made goods was influenced by watching her father shop.
**Informant:** I know my dad looks at the tag on clothing to see what country it's made in. And so, we avoid certain countries.

**Interviewer:** Which ones?

**Informant:** I know for sure we avoid India. I don’t even know why that is. I think they have bad child labor laws or something like that. And so that’s an example of one that I know my dad really avoids it and so I do sometimes, too. He’s always done that for as long as I can remember and I don’t even know really what the reason is. I don’t even know if it's because quality wise or because -- I don’t know why he does that actually.

As the quote indicates, however, the informant’s understanding of why her father tries to avoid products made in India is not made clear to Ishani, who herself is of Indian decent. So while Ishani can explain, in some sense, how she learned to be a political consumer, the context and background to this socializing is fairly superficial.

In sum, the depth interviews suggest politically engaged, young adults embody a mix of engaged and dutiful norms of citizenship. Rather than aligning more strongly with one over the other, these six informants argued that a good citizen should adopt institutional forms of engagement while also demonstrating through their consumption choices that they are also political consumers. However, they were less likely to view their marketplace choices as explicitly political and less likely to view these actions as meaningful forms of political engagement. As well, they provided a more narrowly circumscribed explanation of the various forces that inculcated them into the kinds of conscientious consumption choices they make as young adults. While they list multiple agents as influential in their development as conventional political actors, only parents
were identified as important influences on their growth as political consumers. To clarify these dramatically different socializing forces, survey data were analyzed to see if the patterns held in a larger sample size.

**STUDY 2: EXPLORING THE SOCIALIZING AGENTS THAT FOSTER POLITICAL CONSUMPTION**

**Method and measurement**

The second study relied on survey data from the 2006 National Civic and Political Health survey sponsored by CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement. The survey was carried out between April 27 and June 11 via telephone and online interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,232 people ages 15 and older living in the continental United States. The interviews included over-samples of African-Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans ages 15 to 25. Because this study was focused on political consumption among young people, analyses were limited to those participants aged 15 to 25; older participants were removed from the analysis for a final sample size of 1,674.

In an effort to gauge the validity of the findings from the depth interviews about socialization agents, a series of regressions were run to test how various forces differentially influence the learning and adoption of various forms of political engagement. Although the measures are not ideal, they represent useful proxies for the socialization forces and offer powerful generalizability given the
representative nature of the sample.

Independent variables. A series of demographic variables were entered into the regression first: age (M=19.79, SD=3.46), gender (48.3% female), income (modal response=between $20,000 and $30,000), race (42.2% white), education (modal response=enrolled in high school) and conservatism-liberalism (modal response=moderate). After entering demographic variables, a series of variables measuring political socialization forces were entered. Parental influence was tapped by two items asking respondents to indicate on a scale of 1 to 4 how often they talked about current events or things they had heard about in the news with friends and family and how often politics are discussed around the house. These two items were summed (M=5.77, SD=1.44) and correlated well with each other (r=.356, p<0.01). Community influence was tapped by a single measure asking respondents the rate on a 4-point scale their community as a place to live (M=3.07, SD=.71). Influence of religion was tapped with a single item asking respondents on a six-point scale how often they attended religious services (M=3.78, SD=1.62). School influence was tapped with a single measure asking respondents whether they are currently participating (or did participate) in clubs during high school (67.1% do/did participate in school clubs). Mass media influence was tapped with five individual items asking respondents to indicate the frequency, on an eight-point scale from never to every day, with which they relied on a particular medium for news (newspaper, M=2.67, SD=2.48; magazine,
M=1.2, SD=1.75; TV, M=3.4, SD=2.56; radio, M=2.57, SD=2.63; and the Internet, M=2.66, SD=2.63).

**Dependent variables.** Four kinds of political engagement were included as the dependent variables. Electoral engagement was gauged by respondents’ participation (yes or no) in four institutional forms of political involvement: talking to people during an election to persuade them why they should or should not vote for a particular candidate or party; wearing a campaign button, putting a bumper sticker on your car or placing a yard sign in front of your house; contributing money to a political candidate or party; frequency of voting in local and national elections. For high school students, this last item was framed as intended frequency of voting as an adult. The items were summed (M=1.3, SD=.95). The reliability was low ($\alpha=.51$) but Chronbach’s alpha is sensitive to dichotomous measures and to small number of items in a scale, indicating alpha might underestimate the reliability of the scale.

Civic engagement measured an individual’s involvement (yes or no) in four kinds of non-institutional forms of action, including working informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where they lived, participating in a community service or volunteer activity, personally walking, running or biking for a charitable cause, and done anything else besides donating money to raise money for a charitable cause. Respondents’ answers to the four items were summed and showed low but acceptable reliability (M=1.0, SD=1.17;
Expressive engagement measured an individual’s involvement (yes or no) in five forms of non-institutional, expressive kinds of engagement, including contacting or visiting a public official, contacting a newspaper or magazine, calling in to a radio or TV program, taking part in a protest, march or demonstration, and working as a canvasser going door to door for a political or social group or candidate. Answers were summed and showed low but acceptable reliability (M=.45, SD=.89; α=.62).

Lastly, political consumption is measured with two items asking respondents whether they have bought a particular product or service because they like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it and whether they have avoided purchasing a product because of the conditions under which it is made or because they dislike the conduct of the company. The items were summed (M=.58, SD=.78; r=.466, p<.01).

Results

Four multiple regressions were performed to examine the impact of various socializing agents on political participation outcomes (see Table 2). The results of the four regressions indicate different patterns in the socialization of young people depending on the different kind of civic outcome.

Electoral engagement. Electoral engagement was significantly predicted by this model F(15, 1092)=24.92, p<.001 and accounted for 24.2% of the
variance. The significant predictors were parents ($\beta = .272, p < .001$), church ($\beta = .068, p < .01$) and school ($\beta = .07, p < .01$). Of the media variables, newspapers ($\beta = .114, p < .001$), magazines ($\beta = .066, p < .05$) and online news ($\beta = .073, p < .01$) were positive predictors.

Civic engagement. The model significantly predicted civic engagement $F(15, 1093) = 18.1, p < .001$ and accounted for 18.8% of the variance. The significant predictors were community ($\beta = .096, p < .01$), parents ($\beta = .136, p < .001$), church ($\beta = .089, p < .01$) and school ($\beta = .154, p < .001$). Of the media variables, newspapers ($\beta = .061, p < .05$), magazines ($\beta = .106, p < .001$) and radio news ($\beta = .068, p < .05$) were positive predictors.

Expressive engagement. For expressive engagement, the model was a significant $F(15, 1093) = 11.37, p < .001$ and accounted for 12.3% of the variance. The significant predictors were parents ($\beta = .143, p < .001$), newspapers ($\beta = .072, p < .05$), magazines ($\beta = .241, p < .001$) and radio news ($\beta = .063, p < .05$).

Political consumption. Lastly, the model describing political consumption was also significant $F(15, 1091) = 9.753, p < .001$ and accounted for 10.6% of the variance. Parents ($\beta = .234, p < .001$) and online news ($\beta = .092, p < .01$), were the only significant predictors.

DISCUSSION

The two studies described in this chapter highlight important differences between conventional political participation and non-traditional forms of
engagement. The depth interviews suggest young voters supplement their more dutiful forms of civic participation, i.e. voting and volunteering, by engaging in political consumption, but they view these acts as apolitical or ineffectual. In the course of the six depth interviews, none of the informants volunteered political consumption as one of their preferred ways of being political nor did they mention it as one of the attributes of a good citizen. Whereas informants could readily identify those traditional practices and orientations that constitute the ideal citizen, it took a fair amount of probing and questioning for informants to turn to consumer behavior as a means of political participation. A simple assessment of this discrepancy might suggest that arguments about changing citizenship norms and increasing affinity for alternative forms of engagement among young voters are overstated.

Discounting these normative claims, however, would be premature. I would argue instead that the discrepancy lies not with the failure of these alternative forms of engagement to represent meaningful political participation, but rather with an inability of young people to vocalize their alternative practices as political. The picture of the ideal citizen embodying dutiful norms and expectations dominates our collective view of what it means to be political. Young people learn through civics lessons, news coverage and church teachings that being political and civic-minded means voting, volunteering, putting a yard sign out, donating money to charity or solving a problem in the community.
Rarely is the view of a politically engaged individual associated with their marketplace activities.

This disconnect is reinforced by the results of the regression analyses. The four models suggest that traditional measures of socialization are better at explaining the acquisition and development of established norms of political participation than the acquisition of emerging norms. For the more dutiful oriented behaviors – volunteering, voting and donating money to a political party – parents, schools, church and, in the case of civic engagement, community, all help inculcate young people into the expectations of citizenship; whereas for actualizing or engaged forms of political engagement – like boycotting, protesting and demonstrating – parents are the only significant, non-media socializing agent.

Among the mass media variables, this differential influence is even more pronounced when it comes to political consumption. Among the five media variables, TV news is not a significant predictor in any of the models. For conventional or dutiful means of engaging, newspapers and magazines are consistently influential socializing agents. For expressive engagement (contacting a newspaper, visiting a public official), newspapers and magazines are also significant predictors along with radio news. Given the informational component of expressive engagement, it is not surprising that it has more in common with traditional political outcomes than alternative outcomes insofar as media influences are concerned. For political consumption, however, the only media
variable that significantly predicts boycotting and boycotting is online news.

As with the other agents of socialization, the traditional mass media sources of influence (print news in the form of newspapers and magazines) dominate the relationship with conventional forms of engagement. For alternative means of engagement, the important media predictor is the more recent, less traditional format of online news.

As outcomes of political participation, then, traditional means are influenced by those agents that reflect the conventional model of political socialization agents. This model of socialization dating back to the 1950s remains applicable for mainstream forms of engagement but only accounts for a small part of the socialization processes related to unconventional engagement. As indicated by the amount of explained variance, traditional models of socialization work best for conventional forms of political engagement and become increasingly less powerful at predicting those measures of engagement that lie further away from the norm of traditional political participation.

The one consistently significant predictor across various kinds of engagement remains parents. Across all forms of political engagement, parents are important agents of socialization. This conforms to past studies into political socialization that identify parental influences as the most important and most enduring (Jennings & Niemi, 1974). The importance of parents as primary socializing agents is also echoed in studies of consumer socialization (John,
1999). For young people, while mass media and peers are important sources of consumer socialization, parents remain the most important in inculcating young people into the norms and expectations of a consumer society.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

The usefulness of traditional models of political socialization to explain conventional forms of engagement but to fall short where nontraditional forms are concerned raises a number of questions and avenues of future research.

First, if the primary agents of political socialization – schools, mass media, religion – are of only limited service in explaining new forms of political engagement, then what agents are missing? If young people are not learning about their opportunities as political actors in the marketplace from conventional sources, it raises questions about how they are becoming informed about their potential as political consumers. One possible source of socializing influence is peers. This study did not incorporate peers into the regression model, as the survey did not include appropriate measures of social influence.

However, the depth interviews did yield some suggestive insights into the potential of peers as a force. Several informants mentioned in passing that they had friends who make a concerted effort to buy fair trade or organic products. These friends were described in terms similar to the way market mavens are defined (Feick & Price, 1987). The market maven is a “marketplace influencer whose influence is based not on knowledge or expertise in particular product
categories, but rather on more general knowledge and experience with markets” (Feick & Price, 1987, p. 83). Market mavens display traits similar to those of opinion leaders and early adopters, but their expertise is more diffuse and information sharing is central to their role as experts. Information seeking and marketplace knowledge are key requirements for effective political consumption (Atkinson, forthcoming). And opinion leadership, which is tangentially related to market mavenism, is an important predictor of political engagement both directly and indirectly through information seeking (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Future studies ought to explore the role of peers, especially market mavens, in the socialization of young people into alternative norms of consumer-based political engagement.

Second, if parents and online media are the primary predictors of political consumption, what makes them distinct from those other socializing agents that are not useful predictors? Although schools and religion serve as important socializing agents for conventional forms of political engagement, they are not so meaningful when it comes to political consumption. Instead, parents and online media explain how young people become political in the marketplace.

Unanswered in the model is what makes parents and online media different from the other agents. We might begin to find an answer in the way parents and online media overlap. Unlike schools and religion, parents and online media might be conceptualized as being more personal and less institutional. This
is particularly true of online media that incorporate a social quality to it. Parents and online media might be seen as more responsive, more interactive, more organic than large institutions like schools and church. Indeed, past studies suggest that while parents are important agents of socialization for young people, young people are also important agents of socialization for parents, especially in the case of immigrant families where barriers from language or cultural expertise might give younger, more acculturated members of the family more influence (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008). This reciprocal quality might set parents and online media apart from less responsive socializing agents, particularly in the case of political consumption, which is inherently social and incorporates elements of information sharing and word of mouth (Kahle, forthcoming). Future investigations into parental and media influences of political consumption ought to explicate the reciprocal, responsive nature of these two socializing agents to understand how they operate differently from other socializing forces in the realm of political consumption.

Third, why do young people themselves see political consumption as apolitical and ineffective, even as they engage in these forms of civic-minded consumption? In describing the ideal, “good citizen,” informants rarely raised the issue of consumption or responsible marketplace choices. This is despite what studies into changing citizenship norms have to say about the salutary role of political consumption in the broader array of political engagement behaviors
While this could be interpreted as meaning consumption is not viewed by young people as a potential form or political participation, I believe the explanation has more to do with the political lexicon at young people’s disposal rather than political consumption’s lack of importance. As argued earlier, young people have been inculcated with a particular semantic understanding of what it means to be political. Consumption is rarely if ever folded into these definitions.

Understanding the limits to how young people think of their political capacity and abilities is vital (Thorson, 2012), given Jones and Gaventa’s (2002) point that the ways in which people understand themselves as citizens influences whether in and what way people participate in the political sphere. What, then, is preventing young people from conceiving of consumption as a form of politics? Why do they gloss over the potential of consumer choices to effect change in politics? These questions are not insignificant. If young people are unlikely to think of their consumer choices as political, then they are also unlikely to use these consumption choices for explicitly political ends. Any imagined limits to what it means to be political will manifest themselves in the way young people engage politically. If consumption is not thought of as a political tool, then it will be a lost resource and will not be called upon when young people are faced with moments of political meaning making.
Works Cited


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Table 2: Regression Analyses Predicting Different Forms of Political Engagement

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Note. Entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients
*** p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05