

# Political consumption, conventional politics, and high cultural capital

Shyon Baumann, Athena Engman and Josée Johnston

Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

## Keywords

Citizen, ethic, food, sustainable, shopping.

## Correspondence

Shyon Baumann, Department of Sociology,  
University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Avenue,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S2J4.  
E-mail: shyon.baumann@utoronto.ca

doi: 10.1111/ijcs.12223

## Abstract

This article advances our knowledge of how political consumption is related to conventional forms of politics. Using survey data collected in Toronto in 2011, we examine how different kinds of political consumption are related to a range of conventional political behaviours. We find that, contrary to pessimistic views, political consumption is strongly correlated with conventional political behaviours. We do not find evidence for a crowding out or substitution effect of political consumption on conventional political behaviours. However, our findings suggest that political consumption is an individualized and relatively exclusive form of consumption, with demographic correlates that resemble other forms of high status cultural consumption and potentially limit its breadth.

## Introduction

In recent decades, we have seen globally the growth of discourses of ‘political consumption’, succinctly defined by Shah *et al.* (2007, p. 217) as consumer ‘behaviors that are shaped by a desire to express and support political and ethical perspectives’. The core tenant of these discourses is that consumers can affect social, political, or environmental change through their consumption choices. By avoiding problematic options and selecting responsible options, consumers can ameliorate social problems. The kinds of problems often targeted include environmental degradation and climate change, worker exploitation and inequality, public health hazards, and issues of cultural heritage and preservation. Public discourses of political consumption encompass a number of consumption realms, such as clothing (e.g. the anti-sweatshop movement), automobiles (e.g. hybrids and electric), and food (e.g. organics and fair trade), to name a few.

Recent increases in political consumption have generated debates about their political implications (see e.g. Soper, 2007; Neilson and Paxton, 2010; Sassatelli and Daviolo, 2010; Willis and Schor, 2012; Carfagna *et al.*, 2014). The growth of political consumption is viewed optimistically by many – including some consumers, corporations, non-governmental organizations and scholars – as an effective mechanism for enacting positive social change and addressing social problems. Others (see e.g. Heath and Potter, 2004; Szasz, 2007; Johnston, 2008) point to potential contradictions with the idea that we can consume our way out of social problems, some of which are the result of high levels of consumption to begin with. In addition to this potential contradiction, some scholars have raised the concern that political consumption will lead to avoidance of traditional

forms of political engagement, such as voting, protesting, and signing pledges. At the centre of this critique is the identification of a disjuncture between consumption as an individualized action and conventional politics as collective action. Moreover, political consumption offers a particularly attractive way to be political, as it allows people to simultaneously pursue their consumption desires. Conventional politics cannot provide this dual purpose. The pessimistic view suggests that when people ‘do politics’ through shopping, there is a potential for conventional politics to be crowded out.

In this article, we examine relationships between measures of political consumption attitudes and behaviours on the one hand, and a range of measures of conventional political behaviours on the other. In so doing, we address the question of whether ‘voting with your dollar’ tends to crowd out conventional political activity. As Zhang (2015) notes, past research on this relationship has been contradictory. Our article adds to the body of evidence on this topic. In so doing, we can understand better the nature of the relationship and therefore begin to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations underlying political consumption.

We analyse intercept survey data of 1200 consumers regarding their political attitudes and behaviours as well as their consumption attitudes and behaviours. We find that, controlling for demographic variables usually implicated in consumption patterns, political consumption is strongly and positively associated with engaging in traditional political behaviours such as voting, attending protests, and signing petitions. In other words, we find that consumers’ political activities are not necessarily being crowded out by their political consumption. While not all people participate in conventional political activities, for those

who do, the individualized acts of political consumption are not at odds with collective forms of politics.

In what follows, we outline past research concerning the relationships between political consumption and conventional politics. We then introduce our data and method for investigating the central question we pose above, and then review and discuss our findings before concluding with an assessment of how our findings add to the literature. Importantly, our findings clarify the distinction between political consumption as an economic privilege vs. a cultural discourse, a distinction that has implications for how we interpret our finding that political consumption does not crowd out political activism. We also describe the limitations of our data and our analysis for addressing the totality of the debate about the cultural effects of political consumption discourse broadly.

## Political consumption and conventional politics

In the debates concerning political consumption are embedded different ways of understanding its transformative potential and limitations. On the one hand, more hopeful perspectives see political consumption as an expansion of the political realm, where political activities are supplemented by the opportunity to act politically through consumption (e.g. Micheletti, 2003). More critical perspectives, however, view political consumption as a potential distraction from real politics and the potential for real political change (e.g. Szasz, 2007), as political consumption affords only limited structural change and environmental protection. Indeed, given that many critics see consumer culture and markets as the root of many social problems, the hope of a market-based consumer solution is potentially contradictory. By focussing on political consumption as politics, traditional (and more meaningful) forms of political collective action will be crowded out. There is an important political context to these debates on political consumption: many Western societies are experiencing historically low rates of voter turn out and a reduction in the number and strength of broad-based social movements relative to past decades (see e.g. Putnam, 2001). Given that awareness of political consumption options is on the rise, the potential for political consumption to be crowding out traditional politics bears further scrutiny.

Those who critique the growing prominence of political consumption are concerned that the logics that underpin this discourse valorize the choices of individual, affluent consumers acting alone, and diminish the necessity for collective action oriented towards challenging power inequality and demanding structural change. Consonant with neoliberalizing tendencies globally, political consumption discourse deflects criticism of corporations and the state to adequately address social problems and puts the onus back on individuals to make responsible choices. Practically speaking, the framing of social problems as the responsibility of individuals to solve on their own in the marketplace is in tension with the framing of social problems as best addressed collectively through traditional political means. Discursively, consumers 'learn' to demand less of the state, and instead send messages to market actors through individual consumption signals. One of the implications of this critique is that consumers will increasingly engage with political consumption

instead of traditional politics. This perspective suggests that political consumption and conventional politics will experience a negative correlation that grows in magnitude over time. In the absence of longitudinal data on political consumption, we investigate whether there is cross-sectional evidence of such a substitution. Furthermore, we enhance our understanding of this relationship by scrutinizing how political consumption is conditioned by income vs. education. Whereas conventional political behaviours are not dependent on the availability of financial resources, political consumption is, in practical terms, facilitated by financial resources. We compare how education and income are differently related to political consumption vs. conventional political behaviours to better understand the nature of political consumption as a cultural practise.

## Data and methods

This article employs intercept survey data from a larger project on consumers' food shopping attitudes and behaviours as well as their political attitudes and behaviours. The survey was administered in Toronto by research assistants working in teams at grocery stores and farmers markets who approached shoppers and asked them to complete a paper copy of the survey, which required between 5 and 10 min to complete.<sup>1</sup> The times and days of survey administration were varied to ensure that respondents were reached across different times of day, different days of the week (both weekdays and weekends), and different kinds of grocery stores (mainstream and discount). The total number of surveys administered was 1200, while the models rely on between 908 and 1025 respondents. Descriptive statistics are presented in Appendix A. The sample matches well the general Toronto population in terms of racial minority status, household income, education levels, and age, with a slight underrepresentation of those over 60 years of age. Women are overrepresented relative to their proportion in the population, but not relative to their disproportionate role as food shoppers in the household (Nielsen, 2013).

Participants were offered a coffee-shop gift card or a high-quality chocolate bar as an incentive for participation. Data collection took place between June and September, 2011. Like many large North American cities, Toronto is a city where discourses of political consumption have received prominent media attention for many years, and so there is ample opportunity for broad consumer engagement with political consumption.

## Dependent variables

Because we are interested in the effect of political consumerism on conventional political behaviours, our first set of dependent variables are measures of political behaviours that have been investigated in prior studies. These dichotomous measures are based on the survey questions that asked whether respondents had, in the past year, (1) signed a petition, (2)

<sup>1</sup>These locations were chosen to satisfy the larger project's goal of understanding motivations underlying food shopping at alternative and conventional venues. For a comprehensive discussion of the advantages and disadvantages and data implications of intercept surveys, see Blair *et al.* (2014), especially chapters 4 and 5. A copy of the survey is available on request.

contacted an elected official by letter, email or phone, (3) participated in a protest or demonstration, (4) joined or renewed membership in a political party, (5) donated to a charity, or (6) devoted time to serve a community organization. In addition, we used the measure of (7) whether the respondent votes always/most of the time vs. rarely/never. Respondents who responded yes to these questions (or in the case of voting who reported voting always/most of the time) were given a value of '1' and '0' if they responded no (or who voted rarely or never). In addition to these individual measures, we also created a scale of political activism based on these measures in order to get a broader view of political behaviours. The scale ranges from 0 (score of 0 on all measures) to 7 (score of 1 on all measures). The scale is thus designed to measure diversity of conventional political engagement.

In our second set of models, we use three different measures of orientation towards consuming politically. The first dependent variable measures agreement with the statement 'Shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental change'. The original Likert scale for this question was recoded so that respondents who agreed with this statement were given a value of '1' while those who disagreed or were neutral were given a value of '0'. While this dependent variable measures a broader disposition towards the idea of political consumption, the second and third variables allow us to see if the results are different when political consumption is measured with respect to a consumption practise. Our second and third dependent variables are whether, within the last year, respondents report having participated in a consumer boycott (i.e. avoided purchasing consumer goods (including food) for political, environmental, or social reasons) or in a consumer buycott (i.e. consciously bought specific products to promote political, environmental, or social causes). These last two dependent variables are common in prior literature as ways to measure general engagement with political consumption. Respondents who answered yes were given a value of '1' and '0' if no.

### Independent variables

We employ a number of standard demographic measures. Income is a self-report of household income, grouped into ranges of less than \$20,000, \$20–40,000, \$40–60,000, \$60–100,000, and more than \$100,000. Education is a self-report of membership in the following categories: high school diploma or less, attendance at college or trade school, some university, bachelor's degree, and professional or graduate degree. Occupation was created from a question that asked respondents to write in their occupation; answers were coded afterward into one of the following five categories (based on the National Occupation Classification (NOC) used by Statistics Canada) (NOC, 2006): unskilled labour, skilled labour, paraprofessional, professional, and not working for pay (with 'retired' the most frequent response coded into this category). We also control for sex and race. Small numbers of racial groups other than White force us to compare Whites with all other groups.

Our models predicting conventional political behaviours rely on several measures of political consumption as independent variables, as that is the central relationship we are testing. In these models, we employ boycotting and boycotting (described above) as independent variables. We also constructed a contin-

uous measure of attitudes towards political consumption by generating a polychoric correlation matrix from a set of Likert-style questions and then applying factor analysis to the matrix. This procedure generates a series of factor loads which determine the relative weight placed on individual indicators that make up the variable. The underlying logic of this procedure is that there exists a nonmeasurable continuous variable (attitudes towards political consumption) that can be measured remotely via a series of discrete indicators. This attitudinal scale variable appears as 'Positive attitude index' in the models. The individual questions used to generate this scale appear in Appendix B.

### Models

Given that our first dependent variable is a count of the number of political behaviours respondents engage in, we begin our analysis with Poisson regression to analyse the influences of political consumption, net of controls. We then move on to examining each political behaviour separately, in order to determine whether political consumption has different kinds of relationships to different kinds of political behaviours. We measure these political behaviours dichotomously, and so we employ logistic regression. Finally, in order to better understand the relationships revealed in the first two analyses, we move on to examine the demographic correlates of political consumption attitudes and behaviours. We use dichotomous measures and so we employ logistic regression.

### Does political consumption crowd out conventional political activism?

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the proportion of the sample who reported engaging in the 7 activities that comprise our scale of political activism. Here we see a range of engagement with different forms of political activism, ranging from the most common practise of donating to charity, to the least common, and most onerous, practises of participating in a demonstration and direct involvement with a political party.

We are interested in understanding how political consumption is related to these political behaviours in total, but we are also interested in understanding whether political consumption has a different relationship to different kinds of political behaviours, given that they vary widely in their frequency.

We first analyse political behaviours as a group, asking which social groups are more likely to engage in these forms of political activism, and how is this activism affected by their political

**Table 1** Proportion of sample reporting participation in political activism

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Donated to charity	68	32
Vote often or most of the time	62	38
Signed a petition in the past year	47	53
Volunteered for an organization	45	55
Contacted an elected official in the past year	26	74
Participated in an organized demonstration of protest in the past year	15	85
Joined a political party, renewed membership or attended party activities in the past year	8	92

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sex				
Male (reference)				
Female	1.02	0.99	0.93	0.93
Race				
White (reference)				
Non-white	0.91	0.88**	0.88*	0.92
Income				
<20 (reference)				
20–40	1.14	1.3	1.13	1.10
40–60	1.22**	1.22**	1.15	1.13
60–100	1.14	1.15	1.1	1.11
>100	1.25**	1.28**	1.15	1.17*
Education				
High school or less (reference)				
Trade school or college diploma	1.31**	1.27**	1.27*	1.28*
Some university	1.45***	1.47***	1.47***	1.43***
Undergraduate degree	1.51***	1.50***	1.56***	1.48***
Professional or graduate degree	1.70***	1.67***	1.73***	1.64***
Political consumption				
Boycott	1.71***			1.50***
Buycott		1.72***		1.27**
Positive attitude index			1.13***	1.05
N	1038	1038	908	908

Coefficients represented in incidence-rate ratios.

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

**Table 2** Poisson regression of political activism on political consumption attitudes and behaviours

consumption beliefs and practises? Does political consumption replace or crowd out political activism? Table 2 reports the results of Poisson regressions of our political activism scale (values ranging from 0 to 7) on demographic control variables, two measures of political consumption practises, and one measure of attitudes toward political consumption.<sup>2</sup> Model one includes the measure of boycotting within the last year. In this model, gender and race are not significant, although there is evidence that income is somewhat related to conventional forms of political activism. The relationships with education are large and highly significant. The relationship with boycotting is also large and highly significant. Model 2 replaces the measure of boycotting with the measure of buycotting and produces results that are largely similar, although the incidence-rate ratio for race becomes significant. Model three replaces the measure of boycotting with the index we created about attitudes toward political consumption. In this model, there are no significant effects for race or income, although education continues to be highly related to conventional political activism. The ratio for the positive attitude index is highly significant, although smaller in magnitude than for our behavioural measures. Model four examines the relationship of the two behavioural measures alongside the attitudinal measure and reveals that conventional political behaviours are

more strongly correlated with political consumption behaviours than with political consumption attitudes. In this final model there is an attenuated relationship with income and the relationship with education remains strong.

Across the models, political consumption behaviours and attitudes are strongly related to conventional political activism. In other words, *there is no evidence that engaging in political consumption decreases one's likelihood of engaging in conventional political activism*. In fact, political consumption and conventional political activism are positively correlated.

To ensure that we understand the relationship between political consumption and conventional political activism, we also look at how each form of political activism is independently related to political consumption behaviours and attitudes. Table 3 reports the results from models that regress each measure of political activism on sex, race, income, education, and political consumption behaviours and attitudes. (The number of respondents who reported participating in a political party's activities was too small to run the regression with all the independent variables and so it is omitted from Table 3).

There are several important insights gained from Table 3. First, each form of conventional political activism is associated with either boycotting or buycotting or both. In other words, there is no particular kind of conventional political activism that strongly differs from the others in terms of its relationship to political consumption. Second, charitable donation stands out as being strongly and positively related to income, the only political behavioural measure that does so. In addition, this political behaviour is more strongly related to boycotting than any other. Buycotting (purchasing something

<sup>2</sup>In this table and elsewhere in the article, we refrain from reporting R2 statistics for model fit. Our purpose here is not to explain political consumption and political activism, nor to compare models to determine which explains most of the variation, but rather simply to investigate how demographic variables and consumption and activism are correlated. Information about model fit is available upon request.

**Table 3** Logistic regression of measures of political activism on political consumption attitudes and behaviours

	Petition	Contact	Protest	Charity	Volunteer	Vote
Sex						
Male (reference)						
Female	0.75	0.71*	0.74	1.20	1.15	0.75
Race						
White (reference)						
Non-white	0.76	0.69*	0.8	0.87	1.01	0.43***
Income						
<20 (reference)						
20–40	1.25	1.14	1.06	1.51	1.13	1.43
40–60	1.35	1.06	1.34	2.29**	1.07	1.34
60–100	1.05	1.13	0.56	3.26***	1.08	1.11
>100	1.2	1.07	0.44*	3.89***	1.53	3.05**
Education						
High school or less (reference)						
Trade school or college diploma	2.14**	1.5	1.45	1.76*	1.12	1.86*
Some university	2.93***	1.23	1.98	1.48	1.69*	3.04***
Undergraduate degree	3.22***	1.84*	1.37	2.39***	1.70*	5.01***
Professional or graduate degree	2.84***	2.88***	3.14**	2.42***	2.34***	3.07***
Political Consumption						
Boycott	4.51***	3.07***	6.58***	1.14	1.60*	2.02*
Buycott	2.46**	1.59	1.82*	2.71**	1.93*	1.41
Positive attitude index	1.11	1.17	1.13	1.11	0.99	1.31*
N	908	908	908	908	908	917

Table displays odds ratios.

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

specifically to support a political goal), relative to boycotting (refusing to purchase something in order to support a political goal), is facilitated by financial resources, and it appears that this relationship is founded on the availability of money. Third, each individual kind of conventional political activism is positively related to educational level. Although not all the coefficients are significant for all levels of education, they are all above 1 and in the expected direction. Given the sample size, we interpret this consistent pattern as evidence of a strong relationship. Fourth, for all measures, the relationship of political activism to political consumption behaviours is stronger than that for attitudes, and in fact, our positive attitude index is significantly related to only one measure of political activism. This is an important finding insofar as it highlights the fact that political consumption ideals alone do not translate into greater propensity for political activism. Those people who carry out acts of political consumption are the ones who are likely to engage in conventional political activism. This finding is particularly relevant to the debate about whether the individualized political consumption ideology ‘teaches’ people to be political in individualized ways. Our findings suggest that the practise dimension of political consumerism is more importantly related to political activism than is the abstract notion of politics as an individual responsibility. Fifth, we can see that the most onerous kind of activism – protesting – is the kind that is most strongly related to boycotting. Again, this reinforces the interpretation of our results regarding the significance of commitment to political practises in understanding the relationship between political consumption and political activism.

Our findings are very clear about the ways in which political consumption and activism are related. Both are strongly and positively related to education, net of other major factors. We also find that those who actually consume politically, rather than only have a positive attitude towards political consumption, are the people who are most likely to engage in political activism, and especially the most onerous kinds of political activism. For those people, political consumption does not substitute for their political activism, but rather political consumption is added to their political repertoires.

### Socioeconomic status and political consumption

Some of our findings raise questions about how to understand the relationship revealed between political consumption and conventional political activism. Specifically, it is interesting that conventional political activism is strongly predicted by education but not by income, and by political consumption practises but not attitudes. If political consumption practises are not substituting for conventional political activism, then why do they go together? We begin by examining how common orientations towards political consumption are. Table 4 provides descriptive statistics reporting the proportion of the sample reporting carrying out our two main measures of political consumption practises (boycotting and buycotting) and the proportion of the sample agreeing with a general measure of attitudinal support for political consumption ideals (‘shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental change’).

It is immediately clear that attitudinal support is drastically more common than actual political consumption behaviours. As with our

**Table 4** Proportion of sample agreeing/strongly agreeing with select political consumption statements

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental change	63	37
In the past year I participated in a consumer boycott	19	81
In the past year I participated in a consumer boycott	11	89

conventional political activism measures, the least onerous action is most common, while the most onerous actions are least common. Political consumption behaviours, at least among this sample, are relatively restricted, which leads us to question which segments of the population are practising political consumption.

Table 5 presents logistic regression models to best understand which social groups are more likely to be associated with our measures of orientation toward political consumption. The table reports odds ratios. The first model relies on our question about a general attitude toward the effectiveness of political consumption. It reveals that those of higher educational levels, Whites and more advantaged occupational categories (relative to unskilled labourers) are more likely to agree with the idea that shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental

change. Our final two models examine the predictors of boycotting and boycotting. For these variables, there is some evidence that they are more common among highly educated White consumers. Although the odds ratios for boycotting are not statistically significant, they are all in the expected direction and of a large magnitude. For boycotting, those with a professional or graduate degree are more than three times more likely to engage in this form of political consumption than the reference group of high school or less education.

Overall, *income is not significantly related to any of our measures of political consumption*. Education, however, has significant relationships to two of the measures, and the odds ratios are all in the direction of a positive relationship between education and political consumption. Occupation is related to agreement with the idea that shopping is a powerful force for change.

Although these findings are not strongly conclusive, they do suggest a general pattern. Similar to the findings of Carfagna *et al.* (2014), our overall interpretation of these findings is that the relationship between socioeconomic status and political consumption is founded on cultural values and ideals more common among some White, highly educated, white-collar workers. The lack of a relationship with income suggests that political consumption is not structured primarily according to economic constraints or resources. We discuss the significance of this overall interpretation in the final section of the article.

	Shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental change	In the past year I participated in a consumer boycott	In the past year I participated in a consumer boycott
Sex			
Male (reference)			
Female	1.3	0.97	1.37
Race			
White (reference)			
Non-white	0.58***	0.55***	0.83
Income in thousands of \$			
<20 (reference)			
20–40	0.94	0.94	0.98
40–60	0.95	0.79	0.83
60–100	1.07	0.79	0.62
>100	1.11	0.76	0.57
Education			
High school or less (reference)			
College or trade school	2.08	0.72	1.46
Some university	2.23**	1.49	1.71
Bachelor's degree	1.47***	1.48	2.33*
Professional or graduate	1.66	1.36	3.27**
Occupation			
Unskilled labour (reference)			
Skilled labour	1.66	0.92	0.79
Paraprofessional	2.52**	1.38	1.66
Professional	1.97**	1.41	0.94
Not working for pay	1.39	0.72	0.68
N	1025	1025	1025

**Table 5** Logistic regression of measures of political consumption on socioeconomic status, race and gender

Table displays odds ratios.

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

Most common status in 'Not Working for Pay' category is 'retired'.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study was inspired by a need to understand better how political consumption options influence the likelihood of engaging in conventional political activism. Somewhat contrary to the most pessimistic views (Heath and Potter, 2004; Szasz, 2007; Johnston, 2008), we do not see a wholesale substitution of conventional political activism among those who practise political consumption. Instead, we see that those who engage in political consumption practises are more likely to also engage in political activism. Importantly, support in the abstract for the idea of political consumption does not correlate with conventional political activism. Rather, it is the practises that correlate. This finding may be seen as analogous to the finding that social ties created and sustained over the internet do not crowd out in-person social ties (Ellison *et al.*, 2007). Instead, people who value having many in-person social ties turn to the internet as another way of having social ties. Similarly, politically active people appear to turn to consumption as an additional way to practise their political beliefs and values. Our findings support findings in other national contexts such as Neilson and Paxton's (2010) findings based on the European Social Survey, Micheletti's (2003) findings from Sweden, and Willis and Schor's (2012) findings from the United States. Like these other studies, our cross-sectional data cannot distinguish causal order, and so we cannot determine whether a tendency to engage in conventional political activism leads to political consumption practises or the reverse.

In addition to the connection of political consumption and conventional political behaviours as practises, how else can we conceptualize the nature of this relationship? Political consumption is correlated to an extent with being ethnically White, and with education and occupation, but not with income. These patterns suggest that political consumption is a cultural practise that might serve as cultural capital or as a dimension of political culture that is more common among some more highly educated paraprofessional and professional workers. In Bourdieusian (1984) terms, those most associated with political consumption orientations are the dominated fractions of the dominant classes – with high cultural capital but not the highest amounts of economic capital. For some people in these SES positions, political consumption may be a way of drawing moral boundaries and enacting a sense of self that distinguishes themselves (Lamont, 2000).

Our findings have important similarities to and differences from those of Carfagna *et al.* (2014) who argue that political consumption represents an emerging 'eco-habitus' among high cultural capital consumers. Like that study, we find that political consumption is associated with being ethnically 'White', and especially with being more highly educated and in higher status occupations. Unlike that study, we did not find a significant association between income and political consumption. Although Carfagna *et al.* (2014) interpret their findings as support for the idea that political consumption is structured similarly to other forms of high cultural capital, our findings are even more closely aligned with past work that links high cultural capital more closely to education than to income (e.g. DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Tambupolon, 2008). In this way, our results are in line with those of Johnston *et al.* (2011), who argue, in the case of food, that people who have more education

and other socially privileged characteristics (such as particular ethnic group memberships) are more likely to evince a cultural repertoire of ethical eating.

One interpretation of these data is that political consumption is a means by which individuals with relatively high amounts of cultural capital both demonstrate and generate further cultural capital through consumption. Thus, it is possible that political consumption is a venue where social and cultural boundaries are reinforced (see e.g. Elliott, 2013). Obviously, the ethos of political consumption runs counter to such an exclusionary outcome. Our argument differs from that of Carfagna *et al.* (2014) who argue that the 'eco-habitus' that they find among high cultural capital consumers is a new form of collective action that might eventually diffuse among a broader set of consumers and thereby come closer to achieving the political goals of political consumption. Although it is too soon to know, our interpretation of the patterns we find is that, just like with other forms of cultural consumption that are restricted to rather narrow segments of the population, political consumption may function as a marker of group boundaries. As we saw, the proportion of our sample reporting engaging in a boycott or a buycott in the last year is quite modest, drastically smaller than the proportion who support the idea of political consumption as a way to address social problems. There is a cultural analogy with the case of high culture – while high culture enjoys broad support as a worthy endeavour, participation in high culture is constrained to a small portion of the population (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004). Thus, contrary to Carfagna *et al.* (2014), we interpret our findings that political consumption looks less like collective action and more like a boundary marker, a view we share with Holzer (2006), although for somewhat different reasons.

Our data are also limited in their ability to identify the meanings of the patterns we find for consumers. To further investigate this interpretation of our findings, interview data with consumers should explore whether low-income consumers feel marginalized by a social standard for 'good' food consumption; there is some evidence to this effect amongst mothers (Cairns *et al.*, 2013). Further research is required to investigate meanings attached to political consumption, outside of a symbolic marker of cultural capital. Carey *et al.* (2008), for example, find in their interviews with new parents that ethical consumption can be motivated by a desire to model ethical behaviour for their children.

Although our findings corroborate those of Willis and Schor (2012) and Neilson and Paxton (2010), whose results likewise contradict the crowding-out thesis, we note several aspects of the data and the findings that force us to be cautious in our interpretations and that should be addressed in future research. First, arguments made by Johnston (2008) and Szasz (2007) regarding the conflict between consumerist and citizenship logics are made at the discursive level of the public sphere, not individual choice. Our data are individual level data and show that particular individuals are not substituting political consumption for conventional political activism. However, at a societal level, it is nonetheless true that certain measures of political activism show declines during the same time period when political consumption discourses have risen in visibility. Thus, while we find that individuals who are consuming politically are not less politically active in conventional ways, it could

be the case that overall levels of conventional political activism in society are suppressed due to a discursive shift in emphasis to political consumption. We also note that many of the conventional political activities we measure are not common among our respondents. A better test of arguments about the discursive ‘crowding out’ argument would examine changes in the relative predominance of consumerist and citizenship logics over time in the public sphere (e.g. MacKendrick, 2010). In addition, our data were collected as part of a larger project that is focussed on food shopping. Given that this focus may have cued respondents to think of boycotting and buycotting in terms of relatively minor food purchases (compared to, for example, the high-cost and high-involvement purchase of an automobile), future research should also attend to distinctions between political consumption practises across different kinds of products.

As Zhang (2015) astutely notes, the societal-level factors that influence consumers’ propensity toward political consumption vary with political regimes and economic conditions. Therefore, it is important for scholars to continue to study in depth how political consumption relates to conventional politics in different national contexts.

An important implication of the argument we make here is that efforts to broaden the practising of political consumption should pay attention to the current demographic correlates that suggest that political consumption is associated mostly with highly educated, White consumers. Firms that bring political consumption options to market may want to consider how to give this kind of consumption connotations that are more inclusive in order to appeal to more ethnically diverse consumers from all educational backgrounds.

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**Appendix A: Descriptive statistics**

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	461	39.1
Female	719	60.9
Age		
18–30	462	39.3
31–40	276	23.5
41–50	207	17.6
51–60	141	12.0
>60	89	7.6
Minority Status		
White	757	65.5
Visible minority	398	34.5
Income (× 1000)		
<20	207	19.0
20–30	122	11.2
30–40	119	10.9
40–60	173	15.8
60–100	233	21.3
>100	238	21.8
Education		
High school or less	227	19.4
College or trade diploma	128	11.0
Some university	229	19.6
Undergraduate degree	337	28.9
Professional or graduate degree	247	21.2

**Appendix B: Political consumption attitude variable**

Respondents indicated their agreement with each of the following statements on a Likert scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). The impact each individual question has in terms of its impact on the character of the political consumption attitude variable was determined by applying factor analysis to a polychoric correlation matrix generated from the responses to these variables.

1. Shopping is a powerful force for social and environmental change
2. Green companies are our best hope for protecting the environment
3. I trust the 'fair trade' label
4. I trust the 'organic' label
5. Fair-trade products are generally too expensive for my budget
6. Organic foods are too expensive for my budget
7. Even though it might be more expensive, it's important to buy local to support Ontario farmers
8. Buying local food is more important than buying organic food
9. I trust that foods with a 'local' label are grown nearby
10. I am exposed to fewer environmental toxins because of the food choices I make
11. When I last bought coffee and tea, I made an effort to buy a 'fair-trade' brand
12. I care about the environment, but this does not significantly influence my food choices
13. I care about the conditions of food workers, but this does not significantly influence my food choices
14. My food choices are making a positive difference to environmental quality