Boycott and Buycott as Emerging Modes of Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Citizens in post-industrialized societies such as the United States are becoming dissatisfied with some public policy decisions on the provisioning of food, prompting engagement in boycotts and buycotts as means to influence policy change. Such politically motivated consumptive behavior with social change motives is referred as political consumption. Using data from Ohio 2007 Survey of Food, Farming and the Environment, this research examines the attitudinal and demographic correlates of engagement in boycott and buycott. Findings reveal that engagement in boycott and buycott are shaped by food safety concern and knowledge of food production respectively. Both boycott and buycott behaviors are positively associated with conventional political action and organic labels. Those with greater political efficacy and high incomes are more likely to engage in buycott. These emerging forms of consumer-oriented political engagement may constitute an important force in setting the agenda for social change with respect to the issues targeted.

Keywords: Boycott, Buycott, Civic Engagement, Environmental Concern, Food Safety, Political Consumption

INTRODUCTION

In the United States and other parts of the industrialized world, there is a growing dissatisfaction within civil society regarding issues such as food safety, environmental degradation, social justice and corporate practices. Anecdotal and case study evidence suggest the inability of the conventional political system to deal effectively with citizens concerns, resulting in the emergence of new forms of political action such as boycotts—punishing businesses for unfavorable behavior (Neilson, 2010, p. 214) and buycotts—the deliberate act of purchasing a product to support specific ethical, moral, or political concerns (Sandovici & Davis, 2010, p. 329). This development may be motivating consumers to use the marketplace as a site for political action (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Such politically motivated consumptive behavior with societal and political change motives is referred as political consumption. According to Webster (1975), a political

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consumer is someone who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change. It includes the related acts of boycotting and boycotting (Neilson, 2010). It is an alternative mode of political/civic engagement (Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson & Shah, 2004; Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005).

The use of the marketplace as a site for political action is a relatively new (or at least less studied) form of political participation (Giddens, 1991; Galston, 1991; Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle, 2006). It reflects recognition of material products as embedded in a complex social and normative context (Micheletti, 2003). In that regard, scholars contend that citizens are refraining from engaging in established (conventional such as attending a political rally, and signing a petition) political participation and resort to unconventional forms (such as boycott and buycott) of political action due to distrust and inefficiency of conventional forms of political participation to address their concerns in post-industrialized societies (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Norris, 2002). The rise of buycotts and boycotts reflects a growing perception by consumers that the market is a viable medium through which to express their political and social concerns (Micheletti, 2010).

According to Togebey (1993), these emerging forms of political participation mobilize new social groups into politics and also extend the conventional political participation repertoire. Similarly, political consumption actions may supplement conventional forms of political participation (Stromes, 2009).

The changing nature of political engagement in industrialized nations such as the United States reveals that when people are made aware of affairs in their societies, coupled with the realization of the difference they can make, they may be motivated to take individual responsibility and agency to address their discontents. For example, buying is considered as a form civic engagement to force companies to change how they operate (Simon, 2011); and environmental concern may motivate boycotting of companies viewed as harmful to the environment or favoring brands or companies that reflect the ethical values of consumers. In general, policy orientations of political consumers do not cover traditional issues, but lean toward environmental or lifeworld-related issues that are not effectively influenced by conventional political engagement (Baek, 2010, p.1068). It is in that context emerging forms of consumer-oriented political action such as boycott and boycott reflect consumer attitudes and values regarding food safety, environmentally sustainable methods of production, fair business practices, social justice and non-economic issues that concern the welfare of society (Micheletti, 2010); and may constitute an important force in setting the agenda for social change.

**CONSUMPTION AND FOOD ACTIVISM**

In general, consumption includes activities of buying goods, social relations connected to the provision, allocation and use of goods and services and can also be viewed as part of the social space in which people participate in creating and reproducing meanings about the occurrences of everyday life (Luckmann, 1989). Food consumption in particular, is increasingly being understood as a social matter (Halkier, 2001). Therefore consumers’ experiences, concerns and attitudes may be very important in understanding the dynamics of the food system.

Some scholars view consumption as a meaningful form of civic engagement (Scammell, 2000; Hertz, 2001). The emerging focus on agency is viewed as critical in restructuring the food system. In fact, the exercise of agency is a process of reshaping the structure of the food system to varying degrees (Wright & Middendorf, 2007). Food purchasing decisions and related consumption preferences might empower individuals to create the changes or improvements in the food system they desire. In an overview of the political sociology of consumption, Humphrey (1998, p. 7-8) identifies consumption:
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