Attitudinal Measures of Political Consumption as a Form of Civic Engagement in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

The use of the marketplace as a site for political action with social change motives is referred as political consumption. The phenomenon of political consumption has been widely studied in post-industrialized nations such as the United States of America but less is written about such social change-oriented behaviors in developing countries. This paper aims at determining the attitudinal measures of political consumption in Ghana, a developing nation in West Africa. The study is based on data collected in August 2013 from a total of 356 Ghanaians sampled from higher institutions of learning. Findings suggest that influence over government (political efficacy) is a consistent predictor of the respective attitudinal measures of political consumption. To some extent this pattern of behavior of engagement in political consumption contradicts findings in post-industrialized nations where it is consistently linked to variables such as: sociodemographics, political interest, and trust in institutions.

Keywords: Developing Nation, Political Consumption, Political Efficacy, Post-Industrialized Nation, Social Change

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INTRODUCTION

When people are enlightened about affairs of their societies but feel disembedded from political life, they may be spurred to take individual responsibility and agency to address their concerns. This realization according to Baek (2010) changes people’s target of participation from the government to the market. In that context, citizens can do various things with the ultimate goal of changing the dynamics of society from “what is” to “what ought to be”—leading to improvements in society. This pattern of using the marketplace as a site for political action with social change motives is referred as political consumption (Stromsnes, 2009; Neilson & Paxton, 2010). The emergence of political consumption manifests in the growing recognition, potential power and agency of consumers to influence a fair and moral marketplace and ultimately social change.

Most scholarship on political consumption is primarily focused on post-industrialized consumers and corresponding organizational settings; and even where scholars turned their attention to the phenomenon in the Global South, they did so with respect to how the later is affected by environmental and human rights generated from consumption activities of post-industrialized nations (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). There is therefore the need to direct attention at determining whether consumers in developing nations also engage in political consumption.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF POLITICAL CONSUMPTION

For some scholars, the concept of political consumption in simple terms means the buying or boycotting of products and or services based on political or ethical values with a motive for change (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2005; Berlin, 2011). Political consumption implies intentionality (purposefulness) which differentiates it from habitual, routine or ordinary consumption (Halkier, 2004). Political consumption involves actions by individuals who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices (Sandovici & Davis, 2010, p.330). Thus through political consumption, consumers utilize their purchasing power to express their views about things such as ethical or fair business practices in the sphere of production (Lyon, 2006). It is in that vein that Webster (1975) conceptualizes a political consumer as 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.

The enlightenment notion of freedom and awareness of the capacity to act (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002) is also manifested in political consumption. For that reason, political consumers use their knowledge, buying and organizing power to demand change (Dixon, 2003). In essence, political consumption can be considered as a distinct form of political participation, dependent upon consumers making deliberate market choices.
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