

VOTING AT THE MARKETPLACE

Political Consumerism in Latin America

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Abstract: Politicized consumer choice among brands and products is increasingly accepted as a novel mode of nonconventional political participation. However, scholars often overlook developing societies and seldom discuss consumers' perception of the marketplace as a political arena. This study reviews evidence of political consumerism in Latin America, measuring individuals' perceptions of corporations as agents that affect public goods, examining feelings of political efficacy over corporations, and analyzing motivations behind market-based activism. Research is grounded on representative samples of urban adults from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Logistic regression confirms political consumerism as driven by distrust of government and concomitant engagement with politics, suggesting a diversified repertoire of individual political action in Latin America.

The scholarly debate on political participation has gradually shifted from mourning plummeting levels of civic engagement (Putnam 2000) to acknowledging a variety of nonconventional forms of participation used to influence the institutions that shape public goods (Stolle and Hooghe 2005). This transition requires adopting a wider notion of political activism and political agents, one that goes beyond electoral politics and government or party-centered entities (Dalton 2008).

Political consumerism—the act of influencing producers or choosing products on the basis of their ethical or socio-environmental credentials, to bring about change in power relations or in the distribution of public goods—is one such novel form of individual, unconventional participation (Beck 1997; Bennett 1998). Prevailing mistrust of conventional institutions, engagement in lifestyle politics and the political opportunities for involvement afforded by agents, like corporations and advocacy networks, epitomize the value change and institutional dynamics behind market-based activism, a form of action that imbues day-to-day activities like shopping, eating, and dressing with fundamental political meaning (Giddens 1991; Micheletti, Føllesdal, and Stolle 2003).

In academic literature, discussion of political consumerism has been primarily constrained to the context of developed democracies (Micheletti, Føllesdal, and Stolle 2003; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Cotte and Trudel 2009), where the practice of rewarding and penalizing influential market agents on the basis of social, environmental, and/or ethical concerns has become one of the leading modes of individual participation (Ferrer and Fraile 2013). Several conditions

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that have spurred politicized consumer activism elsewhere have been observed in Latin America, including widespread mistrust in political institutions (Power and Jamison 2005), a migration away from traditional channels and toward forms of unconventional action (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Torcal 2006), and a heightened salience of economic considerations with respect to political choice (Echegaray 2005).

This article extends the empirical debate on political consumerism to the context of three Latin American societies—Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico—in the 2008–2009 period, on the basis of commercial survey data of boycotting and “buycotting”; the latter is the act of purchasing from particular companies to reward favorable ethical or socio-environmental behavior. We begin by illustrating the magnitude and the stability of consumption politics in these countries and reviewing the conceptual and research context. Next, we submit four hypotheses. The first two aim to validate two critical assumptions for the rise of political consumption: a sense of consumer empowerment before market agents and an awareness that corporations have the ability to affect public goods as profoundly as political institutions do. The last two hypotheses explore expectations regarding how political perceptions affect the shift toward market-oriented activism and the extent to which consumer participation crowds out or supplements other modes of government-centered action. Following this, we discuss measures, data, and tests used for checking our hypotheses. In the final section, we provide empirical evidence regarding how consumers perceive the marketplace as a legitimate arena in which to express their political preferences, the extent to which they are driven by dissatisfaction with the current political structure, and whether this form of consumer activism involves an expression of alienation from politics.

CONSUMERS AS POLITICAL AGENTS

Evidence of declining rates of political interest, public confidence, party identification, and institutionalized activism—like voting or contacting politicians—in Latin America (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Power and Jamison 2005; Torcal 2006) has fueled the perception of democracy as a weakened political process, subject to authoritarian deviations (O’Donnell 1996). Paradoxically, although scholars concur that conventional civic involvement is key for democracy to succeed (Diamond 1999), few have debated nonconventional modes of action in terms of their potential to mitigate Latin Americans’ apparent desertion of the political sphere (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Ribeiro and Borba 2010).

Intriguingly, political consumerism has remained off the radar. Politically motivated boycotts and buycotts of brands and products have engaged a significant number of Argentineans, Brazilians, and Mexicans over the past decade (see table 1).¹ In fact, the number of citizens engaged in political consumerism has often

1. Data are sourced from an annual tracking study of consumers penalizing and rewarding companies or products for ethical, social, or environmental reasons. Questions were worded as follows: “In the past year, have you considered penalizing a company you see as not socially responsible by either refusing to buy their products or speaking critically about the company to others? Would you say you

Table 1 Evolution of political consumerism in Latin America, 1998–2010 (%)

Country	1998		2001		2003		2006		2008		2010	
	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott	Boycott
Argentina	28	22	43	24	20	12	21	18	12	7	10	11
Brazil	13	—	14	16	14	17	12	11	12	18	10	20
Mexico	18	17	28	17	22	20	21	18	17	20	21	16
Average	19.7	19.5	28.3	19.0	18.7	16.3	18.0	15.7	13.7	15.0	13.7	15.7

Note: A dash (—) indicates question was not asked.

exceeded those involved in other types of unconventional activities, like joining demonstrations, strikes, or riots.² Assumed antagonism between the notions of consumer and citizen has prevented scholars from considering non-state-oriented actions to be political. Hence, researchers have been reluctant to grant that political wants could be channeled through the marketplace, or that purchase behavior could be connected to the notion of civic duty and activism (Ianni 1997; Moulian 1998; Oxhorn 2010).

Other factors have also lessened the academic appeal of politicized consumer behavior in Latin America. Although a systematic history connecting consumer interests and actions to politically motivated goals remains largely unwritten, there are a few noteworthy exceptions. Portilho (2005) reviews two early incidents: the financially defensive consumer cooperatives and the product-labeling schemes created by workers in Buenos Aires during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the 1959 customers' rebellion against the military custody and poor service quality of the Rio-Niteroi ferry transportation system in Brazil. Eckstein (2006) looks at consumer protests against food and utilities price hikes across the region during the 1980–2005 period, held by a plurality of social segments including lower middle class, urban poor (mostly female), and organized labor. Rhodes (2006) recounts a 1986 example of consumer mobilization of the middle classes, when President Sarney called on citizens to act as his price watchdogs, in an attempt to curry public backing for his government and to defuse plummeting support for Brazil's stillborn democracy. More relevant, Rhodes appraises organized, predominately middle-class consumer protests against violations of consumers' rights by companies in charge of privatized assets in Brazil and Argentina during the 1990s. These actions included picketing at company sites, class-action civil suits, and mass "hang-ups"—a way of boycotting telecom services.

The effects of positive political consumerism, or boycotting, are apparent in the increases in consumption and market share of certified organic, eco-labeled, and fair-trade products (FiBL and IFOAM 2011; Fairtrade 2011). More important, research has consistently found that individuals shopping for such goods do so intentionally, to redress market imbalances, empower small-scale and local producers, or chastise companies for engaging in unsound environmental practices (Castañeda 2012; Portilho 2010).

Literature accounts of politicized consumer activism seem to stop there, overlooking other examples of boycotts and consumer actions with a clear political

have done so, considered doing so but did not, or did not consider doing so?" (boycott); "Over the past year, have you considered rewarding a socially responsible company by either buying their products or speaking positively about the company to others? Would you say you have done so, considered doing so but did not, or did not consider doing so?" (boycott). The study was conducted using a representative sample of adults from urban and suburban populations, through personal, in-home interviews of 800 to 1,200 cases (depending on country), during the months of November and December. We thank market research alliance GlobeScan for sharing these data.

2. Specific outbursts of consumer anger have occasionally boosted political consumerism. Peak boycott levels of late 2001 were heavily influenced by protests against the freezing of bank savings and assets in Argentina, leading to an all-time high of 43 percent of Argentinians who admitted having boycotted a company during that calendar year.

agenda. In 1963 and 1971, for example, Brazilian and Chilean upper-middle-class housewives staged public rallies centered on consumer issues (the self-named “marches of the empty pots”). These rallies defied the authority of elected governments and helped to raise public support for the ensuing coup d’état in each country (Valenzuela 1987). One may suspect that the undemocratic effects of that early consumer mobilization persuaded scholars to overlook consumerism as a topic likely to be connected with civism.

WHAT MOTIVATES POLITICAL CONSUMERISM IN LATIN AMERICA?

Value-change theories are paramount in making sense of unconventional political behavior, including market-based activism (Inglehart 1997; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). A culture shift toward postmaterialism paves the way to lifestyle and identity politics (Bennett 1998). However, the available data support the assumption that significant increases in numbers of individuals holding postmaterialist values occurred in Argentina only in the 1990s.³ Likewise, in this region, research has yet to prove an association between political consumerism and postmaterialism or other indicators of lifestyle politics (Barbosa et al. 2014; Mazzarino et al. 2011). If value change cannot be ruled out as an influence, especially among urban middle and upper middle classes, the constellation of factors behind documented episodes of political consumerism suggests that other forces should also be considered.

The embracing of lifestyle and identity politics presents another individual-level trigger of politicized consumption (Micheletti, Føllesdal, and Stolle 2003). This tenet resonates in García Canclini’s (2001, 5) account of how citizenship, particularly among youth, seems more effectively channelized through the private consumption of commodities and media offerings than through abstract rules of democracy or participation in discredited political organizations.⁴ In other words, when individuals are exposed daily to situations in which they perceive their interests, rights, and values as better served by endorsing certain product choices or by opposing corporate negative externalities, the intersection of consumption and citizenship becomes apparent. These actions ultimately render a civic effect on the public and validate the claim that consumerism educates people to be better citizens.

Politicized consumer issues extend beyond economic matters and personal affairs. Global justice issues like public health, food safety, environmental protection, animal welfare, and labor and human rights critically shaped recent consumer boycotts in Latin America.⁵ These motivations highlight a confidence gap

3. World Values Survey data for 2005–2006 (last wave available) show that, in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, a mere 14.7 percent of the population holds postmaterialist values—a decrease from percentages reported in previous waves. Retrieved from World Values Survey, <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSIIntegratedEVSWSVariables.jsp?Idioma=I>.

4. Few other works have shared this acknowledgment of consumerism as a mechanism for self-expression and identity building among Latin Americans (Elena 2001; O’Dougherty 2002; Baker 2009).

5. In Brazil, denunciations of milk contamination kindled a boycott of Parmalat in 2007, and in 2011, labor and human rights violations inspired protests and boycotts of Zara apparel. In Argentina, the

between conventional political institutions and market-oriented organizations, including companies and nongovernmental organizations trusted with political agency (Latinobarometro 2010). This confidence gap creates an environment in which values and interests look for alternative means of expression, thus providing another critical clue to understanding political consumerism. Nonetheless, the question of the extent to which Latin Americans replicate Western publics' migration in political problem-solving expectations and performance assessment away from traditional institutions remains to be answered empirically.

Studies of social movements attentive to the progress of democratic citizenship in nongovernmental arenas offer several insights into the broader context of expressions of unconventional participation: they assert that rights in society are not solely conferred by the state, emphasize the ability of identity issues to propel politically motivated choices in the private sphere, and acknowledge that an effect of a neoliberalism-induced shrinking state is that responsibilities that previously defaulted to government will likely be transferred to third parties (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). Other conditions, like the privatization of utilities (which led to price hikes along with a celebration of consumer sovereignty) and the rise of effective transnational alliances of labor, civil society leadership, and advocacy networks (which helped organize consumer protest actions like the anti-sweatshop movement) have also contributed to understanding consumer activism (Rodríguez-Garavito 2005; Eckstein 2006). Nevertheless, these studies have focused mainly on manifestations of collective, neighborhood, or labor counterpublics that aimed to redress subaltern conditions or social authoritarianism by targeting state agencies; in doing so, the studies have denied agency to publics engaged in individualized political actions, like political consumerism. In fact, such actions are deemed a symptom of weakened social movements, likely to disrupt effective languages of protest and to depoliticize individuals (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998, 22).

Studies recognize that articulated social leadership furnishes a *modus operandi*, organizational routine, and consumer-interest-centered language that place political consumerism beyond defensive, subsistence issues. Rhodes (2006) describes the politicized elite networks—composed of left-wing politicians, social-movement militants, and social-cause advocates—that founded consumer associations in predemocratic times in Brazil. These networks were instrumental in connecting private consumption issues to a political agenda. This vesting of products with a citizenship development purpose afforded a rare opportunity to Latin Americans who lived under authoritarian regimes between 1960 and 1990: although citizens could seldom exercise rights through elections or protests, they could easily exercise them through daily consumer activities and contacts with market agents.

defense of economic stability ignited the successful, government-directed boycotts against Shell Oil, in 2005, and environmental issues prompted action, from 2007 to 2010, against Botnia, a paper mill established in Uruguay, which ultimately led to the boycotting of Uruguayan tourist destinations. Earlier in the decade, consumers mobilized to protest sweatshop conditions in global apparel factories in Guatemala and Mexico (Rodríguez-Garavito 2005).

Political communication research contributes additional perspectives from which to consider the process of politicizing consumer issues in the region. The acknowledgment of rhetoric of consumption qua citizenship, ultimately internalized by elites and individuals, represents one such contribution. All too often, Latin American leaders have engaged in a political discourse that equates citizenship to individual access to material goods, improved living standards for middle classes, and market inclusion of the poor—a narrative that promotes a notion of participation in consumer society as an indication of civic involvement (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Elena 2001; Tinsman 2006). Although such rhetoric may weaken the notion of citizenship development and divert the demands for effective policy outcomes from government to market agents (Ianni 1997; Oxhorn 2010), it also grants to consumerism political effects and places it within the realm of politics. A second contribution derives from examining the rationalization of economic reforms through the usage of pro-consumer language (Rhodes 2006). Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and mid-2000s, Washington Consensus policies emphasized consumers' interests as the ultimate reason and goal for reforms. A language of undisputed consumer's rights sovereignty legitimized the connection of private interests served through consumption to a notion of democratic citizenship accomplishment. Criticism about reductionism also teemed here (Oxhorn 2010), yet there is evidence that this narrative was persuasive among the general public (Baker 2009).

CORPORATIONS AS TARGETS OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Research in Latin America may have overlooked the influence of consumers as agents of change, but it has certainly acknowledged the political role of large companies. The power wielded through their economic ascendancy and their ability to influence elected authorities through direct or indirect pressure have afforded companies a political role and, consequently, made them targets of political action (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1978). In the wake of regional processes of economic liberalization and privatization, corporations became further politicized as actors and targets, mostly because of their visibility as providers of public utilities services (Baer and Birch 1994; Baker 2009). Furthermore, corporate underperformance and governance opacity during and after privatizations ignited consumer activism and led to the institutionalization of legal protection for consumer rights (Rhodes 2006) through the enforcement of corporate social responsibility (CSR) regulations and policies (Stechhahn 2009) and codes of conduct (Rodríguez-Garavito 2005). In all likelihood, these processes educated Latin Americans to connect seemingly private consumer issues to wider public affairs and to vote with their wallets to influence corporate policies.

Public polls present the image of big business as too powerful and too influential over government, reinforcing early notions of companies as nonaccountable players with interests and values seemingly opposed to those of the larger public. Yet surveys in Brazil consistently reveal higher levels of trust for private companies than for traditional political institutions like government, Congress,

or political parties. These surveys also note that the perceived abilities of large corporations to induce effective change are on par with those of government and in excess of those of parties or Congress. Results are similar for most of Latin America (Latinobarometro 2010).

Critically, large companies' expansion of corporate citizenship and socio-environmental responsibility programs, along with numerous cases of firms filling the vacuum created by the neoliberal shrinking of the state (Peinado-Vara 2004), has yielded corporations with an inescapable political nature (Scherer and Palazzo 2010). The magnitude of public goods generated and distributed through CSR policies in Latin America suggests that corporations are, indeed, legitimate political targets.⁶ Moreover, consumers' sense of their ability to influence companies' policies, and thus achieve political goals, further spurs individual engagement in market-based activism (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006; Carvalho et al. 2010).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to ascertain the political character of consumerism and explore the dynamics behind boycott and boycott behaviors, using urban representative samples of adults in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Four hypotheses structure our empirical discussion. Two are intended to authenticate the implicit assumptions about consumers' self-perception as political agents and about corporations as targets for politically motivated behavior. Accordingly, the first hypotheses are rather descriptive in nature, modestly aiming to determine whether the presupposed conditions for political consumerism actually occur. The last two hypotheses test the validity of typical suppositions suggesting that political consumerism is a form of antipolitics and a substitute for habitual political involvement, consequently exploring relationships between those variables.

Hypothesis 1: Unlike views in which consumerism and citizenship are antagonists, we expect that individuals will recognize themselves as agents capable of influencing society through their relations with products and brands, and perceive their leverage as consumers as comparable to their leverage as voters or street protestors in the formal political arena.

Hypothesis 2: In line with contentions about the political role of corporations, we expect individuals to perceive corporations as agents responsible for policies affecting public goods, with abilities at least comparable to traditional political institutions.

Both propositions are key to validating the notion of consumerism as a potential mode of political engagement. Notions of internal and external political efficacy are inherent to these hypotheses. Internal efficacy indicates the confidence of the individual in his or her own abilities to understand politics and act politically, whereas external efficacy constitutes the individual's belief in the responsiveness

6. In 2012, the CSR programs of one major network of corporate philanthropic foundations in Brazil funded R\$2.35 billion in social and environmental public goods (GIFE 2012), whereas the state of São Paulo's (Brazil's wealthiest and most populous state) budget for comparable activities was less than R\$1.6 billion (Governo do Estado de São Paulo 2012).

of the political system (Balch 1974). Noticeably, the abundance of measures of individual efficacy in traditional politics contrasts with the paucity of indicators of self-confidence before market institutions. By way of these propositions, we test the hypotheses that individuals perceive themselves as agents of change when they make politically based purchasing decisions and that they clearly identify companies as responsive to consumers' political preferences or interests.

We test these assertions by comparing three measures: individuals' feelings of efficacy when engaging in consumption politics, relative to engaging in traditional actions, like voting and demonstrating; individuals' feelings of competence before market agents, compared to government agents; and perceptions of political institutions and big business in terms of accessibility and accountability to the general public. We expect to find similar levels of self-confidence when confronting government and corporations, similar assessments of transparency for both, and evidence of public acknowledgment of market-based political action repertoires.

Evidence confirming our expectations will allow us to move forward and explore the extent to which political consumerism can be considered a manifestation of political engagement. Beck's (1997) theory of politics reinvented, which resonates in simpler theories offered by a few Latin American scholars (Ianni 1997; García Canclini 2001), posits that distrust of established political institutions (particularly government) encourages individuals to switch to unconventional forms of civic involvement, such as political consumerism—a tenet largely supported by research findings (Newman and Bartels 2010; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Earlier work by Gamson (1968) understood that such a rise in mobilization would require another element in addition to political mistrust: a high sense of self-efficacy or cognitive mobilization in political matters. This is a combination that, ultimately, lies at the heart of lifestyle politics theories as well (Giddens 1991; Bennett 1998). However, scholars contesting the idea of consumerism as a basis for expanded civism depart from the opposite presupposition, which equates individual involvement in consumer action with political apathy (Moulian 1998; Oxhorn 2010). In which ways, then, do patterns of political trust and political interest promote consumer participation in Latin America?

Hypothesis 3: We expect political consumerism to be fueled by negative reactions to politics played within traditional institutions, given the associated distrust for government and political disinterest. However, we expect to find a positive relationship between market-based activism and interest in corporate programs for public goods, the latter being a proxy measure of individuals' attentiveness to corporate citizenship. This expected association is a logical derivation of politicized consumption as involving efforts to affect corporate behaviors through consumer choices (Dawkins and Lewis 2003).

Extant scholarship understands the emergence of new, unconventional forms of civic involvement as a transition from collective to individualized politics (Bennett 1998; Inglehart 1997). Yet empirical political participation research has dealt ambiguously with these modes of engagement. Norris (2007) interprets consumer politics as a cause-oriented form of action, comparable to other modes (e.g., demonstrations) despite their different complexities and requirements—the latter

mode requiring some form of organized, group-based action.⁷ In contrast, Teorell, Torcal, and Montero (2007) empirically contest the comparability of political consumerism and protest behavior, in that they find evidence that consumer participation is autonomous of other individualized modes of action, like political contacting. In any case, as political consumerism becomes a popular form of engagement (Ferrer and Fraile 2013) and the appeal of other alternative political repertoires weakens (Inglehart and Catterberg 2002), we hypothesize that consumer politics is more likely to replace than merely supplement the existing ways of action.

Hypothesis 4: We expect political consumerism to be negatively related to conventional modes of action, like contacting officials, given the dissatisfaction with the institutionalized political sphere. We also expect it to be connected to highly individualized forms of engagement, like persuading others and petition signing; and only mildly related to protesting, given the group-based mobilization that protesting requires.

In summary, considering Hypotheses 3 and 4, we expect to find that adherence to political consumerism is negatively correlated to confidence in government (the distrust effect), political interest (the political alienation effect), and engagement in conventional forms of individual participation (the substitution effect). Additionally, we expect that consumerism will be positively correlated to interest in CSR, as this constitutes a critical means for corporate shaping of public goods (the locus displacement effect). We also expect that political consumerism will be strongly and positively correlated to the individual practice of political persuasion and petitioning (a continuation of the word-of-mouth and horizontal communication typical of consumer relationships) and weakly correlated to nonconventional forms of action like public demonstrations, strikes, and rallies against government, as political consumers prefer individualized, rather than group-based, forms of expressing political interests and values (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005).

DATA AND METHODS

The study draws on data from quota samples of urban Argentinians, Brazilians, and Mexicans aged eighteen years or older, and interviewed between November 2008 and July 2009.⁸ Final samples in Argentina and Brazil were very close to preset quotas for gender, age group, and socioeconomic levels, yielding a representative cross section of adult urban populations in each country. The final Mexican sample was slightly biased toward poorer segments, which led to the application of corrective weights. In all three samples, cases were distributed proportional to population size across cities. The surveys were partially self-funded by the research agency, and at least 50 percent of content was of commercial nature; nonetheless, the research agency had latitude to accommodate the same

7. Moreover, unlike demonstrations or petitions, Norris (2007, 640) denies consumer participation a political nature because it does not address the formal sphere of politics.

8. Surveys were designed and conducted by the research agency Market Analysis.

subset of questions in all three countries. This situation limited the possibility of using extensive questionnaires, which restricted the number of total variables under examination and indicators per variable.

In Argentina, 410 adults were interviewed by telephone in the cities of Rosario and Córdoba, and in Greater Buenos Aires, using random digital dialing (RDD) and adjusting the final sample with interlocked quotas of gender, age groups, and social class. After removing respondents with no answers, the sample had 385 effective cases for analysis. Respondents from Brazil and Mexico were interviewed in person at home, with sampling following a stratified multistage probability approach down to the household level, with interlocked quotas of gender, age group, and social class. In Brazil, 402 adults were interviewed in nine major cities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Recife, Salvador, Porto Alegre, Curitiba, Goiânia, and Brasília); after omitting respondents with no answers, the final sample yielded 379 effective cases for analysis. In Mexico, the final sample used for analysis contained 320 effective cases (after removing respondents with no answers), all based in the largest urban centers of Mexico (each with a population of more than five hundred thousand per center).

An important methodological controversy for studies on political consumerism has revolved around its measurement. Scholars readily acknowledge that “acts of political consumerism are less organized, less structured, and more transient than conventional political participation, which makes any kind of standard measurement very difficult” (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005, 252). Surely, the dynamics of consumption politics accounts for part of the challenge, but there are more prosaic reasons; the data opportunities available to researchers, for example, are often constrained to single measures (e.g., boycotting) or to measures of intentions rather than actual behavior. In any case, by restricting consumption politics to boycotting and leaving buycotting unmeasured, we are likely to underestimate the ultimate effect of political consumerism in society (Neilson 2010). Conversely, whenever we use intentions, which involve cost-free prospective guesses and not actual behavior, we are likely to overestimate the effect (Auger and Devinney 2007). Further complicating matters is the proven social bias of political consumerism practices toward more affluent segments of the population (Ferrer and Fraile 2013). Thus, if we restrict indicators of boycotting and buycotting to monetary decisions, we exclude other influential expressions of political involvement at the marketplace, such as positive or negative word of mouth, demonstrations at company sites, and so on.

This study measures political consumerism during the twelve months preceding the survey, using two questions about rewarding or penalizing companies' behavior in regard to ethical or socio-environmental considerations. Rewarding actions include buying products or praising a company's behavior; penalizing actions include intentionally avoiding products or openly criticizing a company (see note 2 for question wording).

Following a traditional approach to the empirical analysis of political consumerism, we collapse both questions into a single additive index (Ferrer and Fraile 2013; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). This option is appropriate given the different incidences of boycotting and buycotting across the nations under study

and the relative symmetry between both actions in each country. Moreover, the patterns of consumption politics persuaded us to perform an aggregate analysis of those who actually took part in actions (political consumers) while maintaining a control group of nonpolitical consumers.⁹ Thus, even if it is clear that boycotts and buycotts involve singular dynamics of engagement (Baek 2010; Neilson 2010), we focus on the main differences that occur between those engaging in and refraining from market-centered politics (Baek 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political consumerism requires that individuals perceive the marketplace as an effective arena for resolving political issues and feel capable of shaping outcomes. That is, individuals must perceive valuable and impactful opportunities for action at the marketplace. Further, they must be able to connect their individual purchasing decisions to the large-scale repercussions such purchases have on groups or on society as a whole. Nevertheless, the literature has overlooked an empirical examination of these conditions, taking for granted that perceptions of opportunities and marketplace responsiveness occur by default.

Our first two hypotheses address these conditions in Latin America. To that end, we developed a few original measures tackling, first, the extent to which individuals perceive the marketplace as a legitimate arena for bringing forward political outcomes. This assumption was verified using a split-sample test design, which posed the question, “What is the most effective way for people like you to influence change in this country?” Half the sample could choose among the following response options: “voting to elect a candidate with positions and opinions similar to yours,” “taking part in protest movements to demand change,” and “there is no way to influence change in this country”—an abridged, albeit functional, version of conventional and nonconventional forms of engagement (see table 2, version 1). The other half of the sample was offered a fourth response option: “putting pressure, as a consumer, on companies to behave more responsibly to society and the environment” (see table 2, version 2).

Results reveal the public acceptance of consumer participation as a political activity. Between 15 percent and 29 percent of citizens opt for political consumption practices as a means for influencing the social and political order. The acknowledgment of political consumerism co-occurs with decreases in the appeal of conventional forms of political involvement like voting, and—except in the case of Mexico—it moderates the apparently high feelings of powerlessness.

9. In the Mexico sample, a net 12.7 percent of respondents fell within the political consumer category (respondents included 7.7 percent boycotters and 6.3 percent buycotters, with 1.3 percent reporting having engaged in both, as overlapping behaviors). In the Brazilian sample, the political consumer category gathered 21.1 percent of respondents (9.5 percent, boycotters and 17 percent buycotters, with a 5.4 percent overlap). Overall, these values are fairly in line with historical trends. However, in the Argentinean sample, 44.9 percent of respondents fell within the political consumer category (33.1 percent boycotters and 30.4 percent buycotters, with an overlap of 18.6 percent); this percentage—double the average historical level—may have been heavily influenced by major protest actions against the paper mill Botnia, which occurred concurrently with the fieldwork.

Table 2 Perceptions of effectiveness of political action modes (%)

Response options	Argentina		Brazil		Mexico	
	Version		Version		Version	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Voting to elect a candidate	69	43	53	42	57	44
defending positions and opinions similar to yours						
Joining protest movements to call for change	8	12	22	19	15	11
Putting pressure on companies as a consumer in order to behave more responsibly to society and the environment	—	29	—	19	—	15
Or would you say there is no way to influence changes in this country ^a	23	16	25	19	23	29

Note: A dash (—) indicates that the response option was not made available.

^aIncludes “do not know” and “no answer” responses.

This split-sample design illustrates the magnitude of political consumerism effects over usual repertoires of action. Thus, it provides a quantified sense of how incomplete the portrait of civic engagement might become if market-based political behavior is overlooked as a form of political participation. Furthermore, it anticipates a favorable prospect for our hypothesis 1. Because confidence in one’s ability to affect change in institutions is a critical requirement for political activity (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995), it is important to ascertain individuals’ comparative sense of efficacy to influence corporate and government behavior. To this end, respondents were asked, “Would you say that people like yourself have more influence over decisions made by government about policies than decisions made by large companies about products and services, or would you say that people like yourself have more influence over decisions taken by large companies about products and services than decisions made by government about policies?” Respondents could also volunteer other responses.

Results in table 3 suggest that respondents are more confident in their efficacy in influencing large companies (compared with government), which highlights the marketplace as a satisfying arena in which to pursue public goods. As Latin Americans understand that their ability to secure positive results from corporations matches (Mexico) or largely exceeds (Argentina and Brazil) those from government, political consumerism gains further legitimacy. This finding further endorses our hypothesis 1.

The performance of standard indicators of internal efficacy does not alter this picture; rather, it illustrates balanced feelings of subjective competence with political entities and market agents. Two paired sets of internal efficacy questions were administered, using a four-point, agree-disagree Likert scale. Each statement sought to measure the self-perceived level of influence over government (as

Table 3 Perceived outcome effectiveness of individual action before government and corporations (%)

Response options	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico
Would you say that people like yourself have more influence over decisions made by government about policies than decisions made by large companies about products and services	16	23	20
Or would you say that people like yourself have more influence over decisions made by large companies about products and services than decisions made by government about policies	39	41	23
Same level of influence before large companies and government (volunteered)	14	11	15
Does not have any type of influence at all (volunteered)	29	20	25
Don't know or no answer	2	6	17

a citizen) or companies (as a consumer) and the efficacy of voting and consumerism as a means to affect the performance of government and companies, respectively. (See table 4 for question wording.)

The top section of table 4 illustrates the cross-country heterogeneity regarding sentiments of internal efficacy. Argentineans and Brazilians exhibit high levels of self-competence in both spheres, with a slight advantage toward the marketplace. These similar expectations reveal individuals' confidence in their own ability to motivate change, whether by influencing market agents or the government. The exception is Mexico; however—as further illustrated in table 4—this by no means implies that Mexicans perceive their political system as more responsive to public needs than is the marketplace. Put succinctly, we found the results do not contradict the expectations stated in hypothesis 2.

One final assumption must be explored before political consumerism can be considered sufficiently grounded—the assumptions that market agents exceed traditional political institutions in terms of public accessibility and accountability. In other words, we need to gauge the sense of external efficacy—the individuals' perceptions of corporations and government as responsive and easy to reach. This entails a final test for our hypothesis 2.

Two paired sets of questions were applied, using a four-point, agree-disagree Likert scale. One measure tackled the perceived level of cognitive accessibility of each sphere in terms of its comprehensibility to the average individual. The other measure comprised the perceived level of accountability of market and political agents, exploring the tension between self-serving or public-oriented interests (see table 4 for question wording). Results are presented in table 4.

On average, Latin Americans believe that they can rely more on their relationships with corporations than with typical political institutions. Overall, the

Table 4 Measures of internal and external political efficacy before government and corporations (%)*

Response option	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico
Internal political efficacy**	+11	+2	-35
As a consumer I can influence the way companies perform so they behave more responsibly.	74	77	31
As a citizen I can influence the way the government performs so it behaves more responsibly.	73	75	46
The way people buy can help to change the way companies behave.	77	70	19
The way people vote can help to change the way government behaves.	67	70	39
External political efficacy (cognitive accessibility)**	-5	+17	+19
Politics seems so complicated that, often, a person like me can't really understand what's going on.	38	59	48
The corporate world seems so complicated that, often, a person like me can't really understand what's going on.	43	32	29
External political efficacy (accountability)**	+50	+65	+2
The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (vs. it is run for the benefit of all the people).	81	79	35
Large companies can ultimately take whatever decisions they want without having to pay heed to consumers (vs. large companies will be in serious trouble if they do not listen to consumers).	31	14	33

Note: *Percentage entries combine top two box results (strongly agree plus agree); **entries are net differences of summed outcomes for government minus summed outcomes for corporations.

marketplace is perceived as more open and transparent than the political system, a condition that paves the way for the practicing of political consumerism. Moreover, it helps to put in broader context the response pattern of Mexicans, the society displaying lower inclinations toward politicizing their relationships with market agents. Mexicans' faith in channeling their civic energy mostly through voting and in their influence over government seems ultimately challenged by their perception of political agents as unreachable. In summary, our expectations for hypothesis 2 are confirmed.

The results sustain that market agents are perceived as valuable and efficient targets for bringing about political change and, therefore, for stimulating the politicization of consumer-business relationships. The implicit suppositions in the literature—that there should be both a favorable context to motivate consumers

to use their influence over companies and a sense of political competence before market agents—are confirmed, which ratifies our first hypothesis. Likewise, the assumption is validated that corporate behavior should be perceived as interpretable and accountable, thus yielding support for our second hypothesis.

Is consumer participation in Latin America a way to exit politics, or is it a fresh manifestation of engagement through nontraditional channels of activism? To what extent do distrust of political institutions and lack of interest in politics drive individuals' choice for realizing political values and interests through the marketplace? Theorizations for the advent of political consumerism rely on an array of arguments. One critical interpretation holds that consumption politics is a reaction to a disappointing representation by traditional institutions and to the limited impact of conventional forms of action, a perspective that seems pertinent in light of the adverse public mood toward the established political sphere.

To test the rationales exposed in hypotheses 3 and 4, we developed a multivariate model. Given the categorical nature of political consumerism measurement, its uneven incidence among the countries surveyed, and the relatively low number of respondents engaged, we use binary logistic regression with robust standard errors. The model tests the effects of confidence in government, political interest, CSR attentiveness, individualized conventional modes of action (i.e., persuading, contacting, and petitioning), and nonconventional group action (protesting).¹⁰ To account for Gamson's (1968) hypothesis concerning the potential mobilizing effect of distrust among those cognitively mobilized, we included an interaction term of confidence in government and political interest. Control variables included gender and social class. Table 5 condenses the findings.¹¹

Consumer activism in Latin America is not an expression of antipolitics or political alienation. Rather than entailing disengagement from politics, political consumerism emerges as a manifestation of discontent with the performance of traditional political institutions. The absence of negative coefficients in the model (except for trust in government, as expected) suggests the normalization of market-based politics as an option for meaningful civic engagement.¹²

The model's goodness of fit (accounting for nearly 24–50 percent of the varia-

10. Questions regarding independent variables were as follows: (1) Trust in government: "Please tell me how much you trust each of the following institutions to operate in the best interest of our society. Would you say you have a lot of trust, some trust, not much trust, or no trust at all in . . . our national government?" (2) Political interest: "How often would you say you discuss about politics with friends, colleagues or relatives? Very frequently, somewhat frequently, slightly frequently, not frequently at all." (3) Interest in CSR: "Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements: I am very interested in learning more about the ways that some companies are trying to be socially responsible." (4) Political persuasion, contacting, petitioning, and protesting: "In the past year, have you considered . . . convincing other people like friends, colleagues or relatives how to think about politics? . . . Writing to a politician or mass media about public affairs? . . . Signing a petition or complain about political or economic decisions? . . . Joining public demonstrations in favor [or] against government? Would you say you have done so, considered doing so but did not, or did not consider doing so?"

11. Descriptive statistics for independent variables (not shown) are available from the author.

12. Supplementary dimensional analysis (not shown) reveals political consumerism clustering into a single factor together with the other modes of action examined, presenting positive coefficients, which contests the supposition that it embodies a separate dimension of engagement.

Table 5 Model of political consumerism for Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico

Predictors	Argentina			Brazil			Mexico		
	Coefficient	SE	Exp(B)	Coefficient	SE	Exp(B)	Coefficient	SE	Exp(B)
Trust in government (1 = low; 4 = high)	-0.258*	0.133	0.773	-0.076	0.166	0.927	-0.633**	.270	0.531
Political interest (1 = low; 4 = high)	0.094	0.127	1.098	0.245†	0.171	1.277	1.575***	.325	4.832
Interest in CSR (1 = low; 4 = high)	0.452***	0.129	1.572	-0.052	0.168	0.949	.557**	.260	1.745
Political persuasion (0 = no; 1 = yes)	0.854***	0.290	2.348	1.156***	0.360	3.178	.717	.977	2.048
Political contacting (0 = no; 1 = yes)	0.188	0.379	1.207	1.208	0.872	3.348	.817	.753	2.264
Political petition signing (0 = no; 1 = yes)	1.465***	0.309	4.327	1.071*	0.460	2.919	1.967***	.685	7.150
Political demonstrations (0 = no; 1 = yes)	0.647	0.455	1.911	1.918***	0.621	6.804	4.384***	.819	80.131
Gender (0 = female; 1 = male)	-0.223	0.239	0.800	0.083	0.293	1.087	-.232	.451	0.793
Social class (base = lower classes)									
Middle/middle-lower	0.555**	0.243	1.742	0.606†	0.403	1.834	2.152	1.993	8.598
Upper-middle	0.831†	0.550	2.296	1.301***	0.403	3.674	2.638	2.047	13.985
Intercept	-2.171***	0.610	0.114	-2.816***	0.731	0.060	-9.042***	2.315	.000
N	385			379			320		
-2 log likelihood	433.08			315.56			111.17		
Pseudo-R ²	.298			0.238			0.499		
Proportion correctly predicted	70.4%			83.1%			90.1%		
Proportional reduction in error	34.1%			19.9%			22.0%		

†p < .05; *p < .01; **p < .001; ***p < .0001 (two-tailed test)

tion in consumer political action) and its contribution to reduce uncertainty about what drives political consumerism (at least 70 percent of cases correctly predicted) are highly satisfactory—especially if benchmarked against results for developed societies. Furthermore, there are more similarities than differences among countries with regard to the forces behind the use of consumer power to leverage corporate-related public goods. Yet results warn against assuming the region as a homogeneous block, given the variation in how sources explain the development of political consumerism in each society.

Findings confirm our first expectation for hypothesis 3 about the existence of a distrust effect toward agents of formal politics, as indicated by the negative coefficient in confidence in government. Mirroring the rationale that the politicization of private domains embodies a reaction to a disappointing political arena (Beck 1997; García Canclini 2001), results show that the less trusted the government is, the more likely individuals are to turn away from formal political institutions, feeling impelled to politicize their relationships with market agents. This effect achieves statistical significance in Argentina and Mexico and is in line with findings elsewhere (Newman and Bartels 2010; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005).

Contrary to suspicions about the apolitical nature of market-based participation (Moulian 1998; Oxhom 2010), interest in politics is positively associated with politicized consumer behavior. This outcome, stronger for Mexico and Brazil, echoes what other studies have found (Newman and Bartels 2010); that is, activism at the marketplace can hardly be equated to apathy or alienation.¹³

Results tend to endorse the assumption that attention to corporate responsibility helps explain the preference for political shopping. Interest in CSR partially indicates the extent to which the political role of companies resonates in people's mind, thus bringing into the equation the usually overlooked influence of corporations' capability to shape public goods. Sensitivity to the new political role of business seems quite substantial in Argentina and Mexico, which leads to increase the odds of embracing market-based politics by 57 percent and 74 percent, respectively. The more attentive the public is to what firms do (favorably or unfavorably) for society and the environment, the more they feel inclined to politicize their relationships with companies as consumers.¹⁴

Paradoxically, things work differently in Brazil, which hosts the strongest CSR movement in Latin America. The negative coefficient indicates that greater claims of high interest translate to lower odds of practicing consumption politics, although this relationship does not attain statistical significance. A higher propensity among lower- and middle-class Brazilians to overstate their opinions about the importance, interest, and receptivity to new developments may account for

13. Interestingly, the consumer mobilization effects of political distrust and public attentiveness to politics occur independently of each other. Testing Gamson's hypothesis about the unequal effect of distrust at different levels of political interest on the outcome variable by using an interaction term impoverished the performance of each predictor and yielded nonsignificant coefficients for the multiplicative term. The exception was in Brazil, which rendered a negative coefficient, contrary to Gamson's expectations (tests not shown).

14. The Wald test of exogeneity, using a probit model with endogenous regressors, rejected a different interpretation (tests not shown).

these apparent inconsistencies (Fenton 2002). Economic and cognitive constraints (e.g., premium prices, information costs that come with boycotts and boycotts) may impede less affluent segments from acting in accordance with their interest in practicing consumption politics, thus creating a negative relation between dispositions and behavior.

Is political consumerism a new way of doing politics in addition to other, more consuetudinary forms, or does it entail a major review of how people seek to affect collective interests in society? This study finds no indication that long-established forms of action have been renounced or have been replaced by consumption politics; this refutes our first expectation in hypothesis 4. For all variables capturing customary measures of civic engagement, there is a positive association with the practice of political consumerism, which indicates its adoption as part of an expanded repertoire of action among Latin Americans. Previous involvement in politics is thus a favorable condition, rather than an obstacle, for the flourishing of political consumerism—a finding that replicates evidence from industrialized societies (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Baek 2010).

Particularly strong is the covariance between political shopping and petition signing (endorsing findings in Teorell, Torcal, and Montero 2007), with those engaged in the latter behavior showing twice the odds of embracing the former. Likewise, the effect of political persuasion and demonstration over consumption politics is in line with the second supposition of hypothesis 4. Cross-national differences indicate that, all things considered, it takes a simpler background of activism to politicize Argentine consumers than Mexicans and Brazilians. The habit of deliberating and persuading others about politics offers Argentineans enough cues to promptly connect their choices as consumers with corporate behavior that affects the public good. In contrast, the average Mexican needs a bolder experience of political activism (like group-based protest mobilization) to inoculate his or her shopping habits with political motivations.

Last, results rebut a gender effect—opposing evidence elsewhere (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; but see Baek 2010)—and substantiate class effects in Argentina and Brazil, suggesting that consumption politics increases with individuals' wealth (in line with Ferrer and Fraile 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzes political consumerism in Latin America as an unconventional way to bring about important political and social change. It looks at the conditions that favor it and the extent to which it can be considered a nuisance or a catalyst for broader civic engagement. Empirically exploring this issue enriches the debate about the quality of citizenship development and democratic governance in the region, as it uncovers mechanisms of political activism that scholars have often overlooked. Findings enlarge our knowledge about the practice of consumption politics beyond developed societies and highlight the need to consider politicized consumer behavior to better understand the actual repertoire of political action in Latin America.

Research reveals that consumption politics is rooted in a conviction that consumer pressure over companies may be as effective as challenging traditional institutions to safeguard or promote public goods. Furthermore, corporations are perceived as exhibiting a better record than governments when it comes to processing public demands and being accountable for the deliverance of public goods. This evidence sustains individuals' acknowledgment of the political role played by business—a fact singularly critical to developing societies featuring a withdrawal by the state from public responsibilities, along with persistent poverty, social inequality, and environmental degradation. Greater feelings of political efficacy at the marketplace and the recognition of corporations as political targets pave the road to politicized relationships with brands and products and makes room for a sustained reliance on boycotts and buycotts of companies.

Results refute the notion that individuals who engage in political consumerism are a by-product, or the expression itself, of political alienation—a notion that fed the scholarly dismissal of political consumerism as a subject of study. Thus, evidence that feelings of individual powerlessness decrease when considering consumption politics as a mode of participation—as well as proof that politicized consumer behavior is stronger among the most politically attentive and active—may help redress this notion.

In line with theories of politics reinvented and lifestyle politics (Beck 1997; Bennett 1998), this study also indicates that discontent with the way traditional institutions handle political matters motivates individuals to look for new venues and modes of political expression, such as market-based politics. Interestingly, this discontent does not necessarily discourage political consumers from also engaging in more traditional methods of influencing political matters. Thus, political consumerism emerges not as a denial of customary ways of getting involved in politics but as an extension and, to some extent, an intensification of civism for the average citizen.

There are some obvious limitations to the implications of this study. It covers only three countries of the region. It confines the analysis to the effect of a few variables, not exploring whether value changes or manifestations of lifestyle politics mold behaviors. Moreover, given the uneven incidence of our dependent variable, we opted to use a measure of political consumerism that overlooks possible differences between boycotters and buycotters. These are important research goals that, first, require a baseline assessment like the one we have pursued here.

Future research should seek to replicate the full set of determinants of political consumerism explored in developed democracies, including differences in value systems. Likewise, differences should be explored between individuals who actually undertook actions affecting their pocketbooks (e.g., buying or not buying) and those who engaged in reputation-related activities (e.g., praising or criticizing) or direct action (e.g., contacting company staff or demonstrating in front of headquarters).

This study lays the ground for overcoming views of political consumerism as merely a short-lived trend of politically apathetic individuals; an expression of in-

dividual conformism, unlikely to match the requirements of citizenship; or a defensive, self-serving individualistic outburst without stable connections to society's larger political agenda. Our study indicates that relationships with brands and products can have political meaning in the region and that Latin Americans perceive consumer activism as a valid and useful option for bringing about political change.

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