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On Consumed Democracy

*The Expansion of Consumer Choice, Its Causal
Effects on Political Engagement, and Its Implications
for Democracy*

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Abstract

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This is a thesis about expansions of consumer choice, their causal effects on political engagement, and the democratic implications that follow. For material and ideological reasons alike, consumer choices have expanded over the last decades and are likely to become even more present in citizens' lives in the future. Scholars' appraisal of this expansion of consumer choice ranges from, on the one hand, seeing it as a threat to active citizenship to, on the other hand, celebrating it as inherently democratic.

The thesis accepts the assumed democratic potential of consumer choice as a means for conveying legitimate political preferences and affecting political outcomes. Yet the introduction shows that, from the perspective of normative democratic theory, citizens' consumer choices are under most circumstances democratically inferior to civic engagement that addresses formal political decision-making. It is thus a pressing question whether there actually are elements in consumer choices that reduce citizens' inclination to engage in conventional forms of political participation. This empirical question is addressed in the three essays.

The essays tap the effects of consumer choices in different contexts, such as parents' school choices for their children (Essay I), consumer choices that interact with citizens' political motivations, i.e. "political consumption," (Essay II), and consumer choices regarding plainly private consumer goods (Essay III). All the three essays account for causality and do so by means of experimental designs. In addition, the essays are similar in that their results point in the same direction: expansions of consumer choice reduce citizens' willingness to conventional political participation.

Given the democratic significance of conventional participation and the pervasiveness of consumer choice, the results are important both from a scholarly perspective and from a broader societal perspective. The results cast new light on a wide range of issues about the extension of consumer choices and their presence in citizens' lives, including e.g. decisions about user choice in welfare services and advertising regulation. This thesis does by no means end the discussion about such policies, but demonstrates the significance of a certain outlook: issues about the extension of consumer choice are issues about democratic values.

Keywords: democracy, consumer choice, survey experiment, responsiveness, political equality, political participation, political engagement, marketization, political consumption, political consumerism, citizen-consumer.

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¹ “We are pleased to be able to hand over your Mercedes to you. You have a car in whose construction and production we have taken great pains. For this is our standpoint: Quality is not a coincidence” (translation by the author).

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Köksbordet en oktober natt 2018

List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

- I Wejryd, J. (2018) Pacified citizens with a marketized school system: Causal evidence of boomeranging effects of user choice. *Working paper, Department of Government, Uppsala University.*
- II Wejryd, J. (2018) Causal impact of political consumption on conventional political participation: Evidence from a survey experiment. *Working paper, Department of Government, Uppsala University.*
- III Wejryd, J. (2018) Road Signs to Serfdom? Emerging experimental evidence on demobilizing effects of consumer advertising. *Working paper, Department of Government, Uppsala University.*

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Introduction

When you vote daily in the supermarket, you get precisely what you voted for, and so does everyone else. The ballot box produces conformity without unanimity; the marketplace, unanimity without conformity (Friedman and Friedman 1980, 89–90).

[T]he juggernaut of shopping, advertising, branding and easy credit [is attacked] for turning active, virtuous citizens into passive, bored consumers. [...] ‘Consumerism’ to give it its unfriendly label, is a new kind of totalitarianism (Trentmann 2017, 5).

Consumer choices amass. And, for a number of reasons, they are likely to continue to amass. If consumer choices realize democratic values, there are increasing reasons to celebrate, and if it is true that consumer choices wear on democracy we have increasing reasons to worry.

The political potential of consumer culture and consumer choices has been debated since at least the Frankfurt school. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin expected that consumer culture with the help of technological development would turn into a vehicle for bottom-up politicization. However, Theodor Adorno dissented, and increasingly so after World War II, arguing that consumer culture and increasing technical sophistication rather has the potential for facilitating status quo, conformity, and obedience (Kurylo forthcoming). The Frankfurt school’s problematizing account on consumption gained popular prominence in the 1960s, with New Left social theorist Herbert Marcuse (1964) seeing in consumer culture the end of the political potential of the working class, as consumer goods supplanted social class as workers’ source of identity. John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (1958) was by then widely read and, though there were differences in presumptions and style, there were similarities in the conveyed message: the democratic state was vulnerable to the call-notes that consumer society sends its citizens, and to private consumption’s potential neglect of collective and public ambitions. Advertising critics such as Vance Packard (1957) and Stuart Ewen (1976) added to the picture of citizens being deeply influenced by a cultural apparatus in the hands of businesses.

Since then there have been much academic work, in particular within consumer culture theory, political sociology and neo-liberal political thought that has problematized and nuanced these notions. Nevertheless, ideas about a discomfort between consumption and democracy are commonplace today.

At the macro level, the resource curse theory explains the lack of democracy in countries rich on natural resources with reference to citizens being passive and willing to accept less influence over politics as long as material conditions improve, and to civic engagement being relatively less compelling the more other activities are economically possible (see e.g. Mahdavi 2017). At the micro-level, scholars have commented citizens' consumer-like relation to public services within New Public Management and the evolution of political engagement as consumer-choices has entered the popular repertoire of means for political influence. The citizen-consumer of New Public Management is often studied through the lens of Hirschman's (1970) notion that people in general give up communication or other kinds of involvement aimed at influencing their counterpart ("voice") once they have real possibilities to choose which relations to engage in ("exit") (Greener 2008, Winblad 2013). The same reasoning is applied also to people's use of consumer choices as means for avoiding toxins (Szasz 2007), and other scholars propose additional reasons why the use of consumer choices as a means for political aspirations may end up "crowding out" conventional political engagement (see e.g. Putnam 2000, Carrier 2008, Burgoon and Fransen 2017).

Expansions of consumer choice, contractions of democratic action

The zest for notions about a beef between consumer choice and an active citizenship may partly be attributed to two general shifts taking place in many Western countries: on the one hand, a backdown of conventional forms of citizens' involvement in politics, and, on the other hand, a growth of market-like political behavior and institutions.

Putnam noted already at the millennium (2000) that civic associations in the US had undergone a transformation such that the members, if they still were members, increasingly were confined the role of paying fees and receiving information. A similar transformation of Western political parties is reflected in the decrease of party membership, increasing numbers of policy professionals and also the proliferation of the academic sub-discipline of political marketing. Electoral turnout and participation in activities that are related to elections have fallen (Putnam 2000, Inglehart and Welzel 2005, Dalton 2017, Hooghe and Kern 2017).

Along with these changes, citizens' political preferences have increasingly been expressed through markets. In Sweden, the first organic labeling schemes (*Svanen* and *Bra Miljöval*) were introduced in 1989. In 2016 there were twelve different eco-labels controlled by third parties and in addition several controlled by retailers (such as *ICA I love eco* and *Änglamark*) (The Committee of Civil Affairs, Swedish Parliament 2016, see also Stolle and Micheletti 2013, 137). Making consumer choices based on political considerations—boycotting and "buycotting"—has grown increasingly common, to become the second most widespread form of political participation in many Western countries (van Deth 2011, see also Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

However, politicization of existing consumption is not the only factor behind markets' growing relevance as mediators of political preferences. When the communitarian philosopher Michael J. Sandel (2012, 8) lists markets that now allocate goods for money but for the most part were nonexistent 40 years ago he includes markets for goods such as health, education, public safety, recreation and procreation. Sandel also provides a list of commodities that were recently non-existent, including e.g. the carrying of a pregnancy, the right to emit carbon dioxide, admission to university, having a place held overnight in a lane, and the right to immigrate in USA (2012, 3–5). The list thus captures a combination of medical or technological development, entrepreneurial transgression of previous taboos, and governmental reorganization or retreat. Issues that earlier on were under the decisions of the representative political system—either directly through laws and prohibitions or, indirectly, through governmental bureaucracies' choices about allocation—are now under the control of markets and individual choice.

The crux here is the causal relation between marketization and expanded consumer choice, on the one hand, and citizens' withdrawal from traditional political activity, on the other. The understanding and appraisal of the current situation should differ depending on the causal relation between the two trends, and discerning causal effects of expanding consumer choice on conventional forms of political participation is the main focus of this thesis.

Some attribute the negative correlation between consumer choices and conventional forms of participation to one underlying attitudinal trend towards life-style politics and self-actualizing values (Atkinson 2012), while others take the expansions of consumer choice, including user choice in public services, to be a reaction to an exogenous decrease in the influence and capacity of formal politics (Baldock 2003, Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, Baek 2010, see also Phillip Elliot 1982 in Schudson 2007, 237). This withdrawal of politics has of course had ideological support worthy of being mentioned (for examples, see Friedman and Friedman 1980, Buchanan and Tullock 1999, Le Grand 2009b, for overviews, see Burgin 2012, Stedman Jones 2014).

The conditions and future of political engagement may however look different once we also include the possibilities mentioned first, that expansions of consumer choice shape political engagement. The ideological support for marketization may have waned for the time being, but, as I will show, expansions of consumer choice are likely to continue, for their own reasons.

Economic growth provides many citizens with more resources and more opportunities to make consumer choices. Furthermore, the lessening of economic constraint affects not only the economic demand but also the supply, and a person who enters a store today will have far more choices to make than if she or he had entered the same kind of store with an equivalent sum of money fifty years ago. One might, for instance, compare the shelves of dairy products of one's childhood and of today. As late as in the mid-1960s a

Swedish dairy counter could house as little as nine different products. In the mid-1980s the number had risen to around 80 while a medium sized store yet 20 years later accommodated more than 350 products differing in content and packaging. Most notable is perhaps that this rocketing development has taken place without any increase in the overall dairy consumption (Jönsson 2005, 44–48). Instead, advancing technical possibilities to produce in small scale at low cost, and to market and distribute increasingly specialized fractions of products and services allow for segmentation and customization. And beyond the limits of shelf space, the increased supply at the Internet is of course even more dramatic (Anderson 2009, see esp. 52–53). For material reasons, standards are replaced with choices.

As people spend more of their time with media, consumer choices are increasingly present during these citizens' leisure time, when they interact with friends in social media or even at study or work (as well as for many students attending lectures and seminars (and scholars alike)). Associated to both segmentation and rising media use is the increasing precision and supply of marketing, which not only raises the number of choices that citizens are presented with, but also sorts out alternatives that are increasingly relevant to each citizen, resulting in consumer choices that are more reliably call for consideration. To conclude, consumer choice is pervasive and expanding.

Aim and a spoiler on the results and the implications for democracy

In this thesis I focus on the causal effects that having consumer choice has on political engagement. There is no reason to deny the multitude of potential reasons for the negative correlations between consumer choice and political engagement listed above, but there are also reasons to take particular interest in the effects of expanding consumer choice on political engagement: these effects are potentially large, likely to be growing, and the amount of consumer choice that citizens are exposed to is at least to some extent possible to decide by means of political reforms. The scope of consumer choice and the scope of collective decision-making are potential matters for public discourse and policy making, and this thesis should provide a basis for such discussions and decisions. The aim of the thesis is thus to examine the relationship between democracy and markets in general, and in particular to test if citizens' market activities (consumer choices) have a causal effect on citizens' own political engagement. I will also address the implications of these potential effects for societies' possibilities to realize democratic values.

To preview the results of the thesis, all essays indicate that expanding consumer choice has demobilizing effects on political engagement, which, in turn, have serious implications as seen from the perspective of democracy.

Before reaching that conclusion I do however want to fend off some possible precipitous suppositions about the democratic implications of consumer choices' expansion. There are convincing arguments against some common

but superficial understandings of the relation between consumer choice and democracy. As I now will show, taking these arguments into account has consequences for how I should ask my questions and structure the thesis.

The concepts “consumption” and “consumer” easily invoke some pairs of purported oppositions including private/public, individual/collective and, most important, consumer/citizen (Willis and Schor 2012). Though this is a thesis about the democratic perils of expanding consumer choice, I want to make clear that consumption is not by definition associated with private motivation, neglect for collective and public interests or detachment from citizen values or duties (see Keum, et al. 2004, Schudson 2007). An old Swedish saying goes, “before voting, we dress up in Sunday suits”², but empirical evidence tells us that a lot of people manifest their better selves also when they go shopping (Schudson 2007, Stolle and Micheletti 2013, for a contrasting view see Johnston 2008). My studies do thus not assume differences in motivations behind peoples’ consumer choices, on the one hand, and their political participation, on the other. Instead I will expand on the normative backdrop of my studies in this introduction, and will take as a point of departure the differences that *necessarily* follow from either acting by consumer choice on the markets or acting in ways that aim at the formal political system. I will, so to speak, analyze the differences between directing our feet to the mall and to the city hall, assuming that we are dressed in our best suits (or at least dressed equally decently). Markets and formal political institutions differ as regards two unconditional differences: which issues they can address, and by which resources we as citizens can influence their workings. I will focus on these differences between markets and formal political institutions to assess the democratic implications that will follow if conventional political participation is substituted with consumer choice.

Disposition

The rest of the introduction is structured in the following way. First, I expand on the democratic significance of civic engagement. This aims at providing some reasoned responses to the question of how civic engagement contributes to democracy. The responses relate to different theoretical conceptions of democracy as rule by the people. This section will accordingly also respond to the question of what is lost for democracy if civic engagement erodes. By doing so, this section anchors the thesis in normative democratic theory. In a second section, I turn to the concepts of empirical research on political participation. Here, I aim at a conceptualization of different forms of civic engagement that relate them to their potential democratic significance. In particular, the conceptualization will allow for comparisons between consumer choices and traditional forms of political participation. That is, the resulting concepts differentiate dissimilar forms of civic en-

² “När vi röstar, tar vi på oss söndagskostymen”.

agement and consumer choices without filling the concepts with unsubstantiated assumptions about their driving motives. The second section emanates in a typology of consumer choices and modes of political participation. I synthesize the outcomes of the first and second sections in the third section. Here I compare consumer choices to three kinds of political participation as regards their respective potential for realizing democratic values. I conclude by summing up the democratic potential of consumer choices as well as the inbuilt incapacities of consumer choice as a means for democracy.

The conclusion of the third section warrants the empirical question that is common for the three essays of the thesis: as consumer choices cannot stand in for conventional forms of political participation and do their job to realize democratic values, can we be sure that the expansion of consumer choice at least does not impede conventional political participation? Or is it rather the case that consumer choices erode political engagement, without being able to make up for the damages that they do to democratic values? This question has not been addressed head-on in previous research, but there are studies of adjacent questions that I present in the fourth section. In the fifth section, I present my own research design. The aims and findings of the three essays are presented in the sixth section. In the seventh section I sum up and conclude the findings of the thesis and lay out a few directions for future research and implications for society.

Civic engagement and democratic values

Civic engagement is of immediate concern for the realization of democracy. Empirical researchers on citizens' political activity are keen to open their articles by establishing that political participation is indispensable for democracy, and therefore a relevant study object. However, there are reasons to be more elaborate than this on the relation between participation and democracy. First, while democracy without popular political participation is surely unthinkable, and participation thus is indispensable for democracy, it is not obvious why a formally democratic state in which some citizens participate in politics would be *more* democratic if political participation increased. Secondly, as the opening quote by Milton and Rose Friedman indicates, consumer choices may be taken as a realization of democratic values, and thus to be contributions to democracy in their own right. In order to assess the democratic implications of changing patterns of consumer choices and different kinds of political participation, the possible democratic significance of political participation (and, subsequently, consumer choice) must be spelled out in such detail that each of the forms of action can be assessed on their own democratic merits.

Which kinds of political activities may constitute significant parts of a rule by the people? Political and empirical academic debate on political par-

ticipation is dominated by four main conceptions of democracy: the liberal-pluralist model along the lines of Dahl, the minimal-elitist model centered on the work of Schumpeter, the deliberative model of e.g. Habermas, Estlund or Dryzek and the participatory model as conceived by e.g. Mill and Pateman (Teorell 2006, Mayne and Geißel 2018). According to all these theories, political participation by the citizens is required for democracy. However, with the possible exception of deliberative democrats, these theorists and theories say less about how *increased* participation would benefit democracy. There is thus a need to understand how the possible interplay between political activity and democratic values is conceived of, and to explore whether consumer choices can shoulder the same roles as conventional forms of political participation.³

It might seem obvious that political activities that are channeled against the majority decisions of formal political decision-making, contribute to democracy more than any consumer choices do. However, majority decisions are not the only decision-making procedures that could serve democracy. It has been shown that, at least in theory, other arrangements (such as certain lotteries) too could serve democracy and even political equality just as well or maybe even better than majority decisions (Saunders 2010). As democracy and political equality thus do not conceptually require majority decisions, an argument must be provided to establish why political activities should be directed at majority decisions to serve democracy. Likewise, we need to ask whether citizens' consumer choices contribute to the realization of democratic values, under which conditions they do, and which of the two

³ The simplest way to say that a state is a better democracy the more its citizens participate in democratic decision-making is perhaps to argue that the very participation in democratic processes expresses an approval to the procedures and their outcomes and thus legitimizes the decision-making. This reasoning is, however, flawed for two reasons. To begin with, it confuses normative legitimacy with sociological legitimacy. Good democracy, on the one hand, and democracy that is approved by citizens, on the other, may well coincide but are analytically distinct concepts. We might, however, well hold sociological legitimacy to be a source of normative legitimacy, but that does not solve the issue. Participation can reasonably not be taken to imply approval of the decision-making procedures or outcomes at hand. People may vote or contact officials or in other ways address formal political decision-making without necessarily intending to express approval of the system. Instead, some instances of political participation may rather be performed just in order to affect a situation, and consent cannot be implied, wherefore this notion simply does not provide a reasonable link between political participation and democratic legitimacy (Christiano 2015, 33).

An analogous argument is valid for consumer choices and the democratic quality of the market. Just as conventional political participation does not in itself authorize democratic decision-making, consumer choices do not confer authority to markets. I will illustrate this by two examples: a citizen may actively choose provider of welfare services such as schooling or elder care, while at the same time long for a welfare system in which user choice is replaced by decisions by politicians and bureaucrats. Furthermore, a Marxist may prefer a Fair Trade-labelled banana over a conventional one while still wishing that the entire commodity chain of production and distribution was replaced by something else. Neither of these actions should be interpreted as expressions of consent to the market's outcomes nor to the market as a procedure for decision-making).

kinds of activities—conventional political participation and consumer choices—can contribute the best.

I will now elucidate the democratic significance of conventional political participation, that is, of political participation that addresses formal political decision-making. After that I will turn from conventional political participation to consumer choice, in order to examine the possibilities for consumer choice to contribute to the realization of democratic values.

Participation and the realization of democratic values

In order to establish the function of political participation for democracy, we need to take the justifications of democracy into account. I.e., if we are to know whether and how participation is needed for the realization of democracy, we need to know the qualities that motivate and define democracy. There are, of course, many accounts on which the qualities are that motivate and define democracy, and these justifications imply different conceptions of democracy and different values to be realized by democracy.

The arguments for justifying democracy are either instrumental or non-instrumental (Beitz 1989, Christiano 2015). Instrumental justifications of democracy refer to ideas about consequences of democracy that are of such normative value that they justify democracy. Influential instrumental justifications of democracy take democracy (and participation) to create decisions of good quality or to improve the character of the citizens in certain ways (Saunders 2010, 153–155, Christiano 2015, 8–17, see also Beitz 1989, 20). According to non-instrumental justifications of democracy, democracy is justified by reference to qualities of the decision-making process itself, and not to the supposed outcomes of democracy. The non-instrumental justifications are typically based on each citizen's liberty, the value of a fair distribution of influence (typically equality between the citizens) or the need for public justification of laws and policies (Saunders 2010, 153, Christiano 2015, 8–17).

While I will draw a lot on Christiano's (2015) taxonomy of arguments for democracy in the following, the text is organized differently, to bridge the perspectives of normative democratic theorists and empirical researchers of political participation. Therefore, the text is arranged around four entry points for an empirical evaluation of the realization of democratic values: *improvement of citizens' character, responsiveness to citizens' interests, deliberation*, and, *other means for equal respect and concern*. Within these entry points I will take the justifications of democracy as points of departure and I will outline the basic argument for each justification before I elaborate on how the democratic values at hand can be contributed to by conventional political participation. I will also comment on the overlaps between these arguments for democracy and four broad conceptions of democracy mentioned above (participatory democracy, pluralist democracy, neoliberal democracy and deliberative democracy).

I will begin with giving some rather brief attention to the most marginal of my entry points for empirical evaluation, the idea that democracy is the only means for a certain set of beneficial effects on the citizens' character, and that the realization of such improvements is a central value for democracy.

Improvement of the citizens' character

Participatory democracy has its roots in the works of J.S. Mill and has been taken further most notably by Pateman (1970) and Barber (2003). This line of thought emphasizes citizens' involvement in direct decision-making for its potential support to citizens' self-development. That is, the participation in itself is a democratic value here, at least as long as it makes the citizens more autonomous, rational and moral (Christiano 2015, 5).

This argument has been influential in debates about complementing representative democracy with direct democratic decision-making at workplaces and in local institutions. However, this argument should not be taken as decisive in itself for evaluating the realization of democracy, the reason being that participatory democracy does not reject the significance of engagement in other forms of decision-making. The relevance of improving one's character lies at least partly in the improvements' potential to "feedback" into decision-making including also conventional representational politics (see Pateman 1970, 42–43, Christiano 2015, 5). It would thus not be reasonable to regard the improvements of citizens' character as the sole purpose of democracy. Rather, participatory democracy takes increasing involvement in direct political decision-making to be a realization of *one* kind of democratic value.⁴ According to this view, the realization of democratic values is benefitted from popular involvement in direct decision-making with the potential to foster autonomy, rationality or morality, while also participation directed at conventional representational politics is vital for democracy. Thus, the participatory democratic theorists who value the improvement of citizens' character seem themselves to take their proposed forms of direct decision-making to complement rather than substitute representational politics, and do show little support for some crowding out of representational politics.

I will now turn to the other instrumental arguments for democracy which focus on the quality of decisions such as laws and policies. There are two certain ways in which democracy can have uniquely beneficial effects on the laws and policies. First, democracy may give decision-makers incentives to adjust their decisions to the interests and preferences of the citizens; that is, democracy is taken as a means for *responsive* governance. Secondly, democracy may be beneficial for finding the right choices, if there are such; that is,

⁴ For the cultivation of autonomy it would be a loss if citizens limited themselves to very local issues and disregarded larger courses of events that shape their lives and morality could suffer if citizens confine themselves to close up-perspectives on politics.

democracy is taken as an *epistemic* measure for governance. I will go through both arguments and their implications for participation, beginning with the first one.

Responsiveness to citizens' interests

The responsiveness argument for democracy can be put in a simple utilitarian way: democracy is a desirable form of government since it fosters decision-making that strives to maximize the satisfaction of citizens' interests (Riley 1990, Mill and Ball 1992). From the perspective of responsiveness what counts for democracy is the fit between the citizens' interests and the political outcomes. Participation cannot guarantee that politicians successfully respond to the citizens' interests and will thus not be sufficient for responsiveness. However, it is reasonable to assume that increasing participation increases the likelihood of responsiveness (Teorell 2006, 794).

When democracy is understood as a means for outcomes aligned with citizens' interests, the realization of democratic values will in general terms include any arrangements and actions that are likely to increase the responsiveness to citizens' preferences. A qualification is to be made to this, however: responsiveness to citizens' preferences is desirable on the condition that the citizens are able to form preferences that actually serve their interests. As long as democracy is combined with some division of labor, citizens will have difficulties being informed about politics.⁵ According to the liberal-pluralist model, however, citizens and interest groups will be informed in *some* matters and competent to influence politics in these (Christiano 2015). Citizens can thus contribute to the democratic process not only by electing officials but also by commenting and attempting to influence the choices of those elected by means of communicative forms of participation. As such influence attempts can be channeled not only through elections, the importance of the informal sphere of democracy must be also acknowledged (Teorell 2006, 789).

⁵ Whether and how citizens are able to form political preferences in line with their interests is a dividing line between three major democratic theories, liberal-pluralist democracy, elitist democracy and neo-liberal democracy. With these differences come distinct understandings of how political participation can contribute to the realization of democratic values.

The elitist democracy should not be put under the heading of responsiveness, as it forcefully argues against the possibility to formulate any popular will to realize, and furthermore that, in the rare cases shared interests exist among large groups of citizens, the initiative will not be at the citizens but at the politicians. From this perspective, elections and democracy are means for citizens to respond to elites rather than the other way around (Schumpeter 1947, chapter XXII).

Liberal-pluralist and neoliberal democracy conceptions of democracy relate to responsiveness, but they differ in that neoliberals question the capacity of the citizens and therefore question also the significance of general responsiveness to citizens expressed preferences. Yet neoliberals accept certain conditions under which participation may contribute to the realization of democratic values by increasing the responsiveness between citizens' preferences and political outcomes.

The understanding of democracy that reigns in mainstream empirical participation research is close to that of liberal-pluralism. Mainstream research on political participation takes interest both in actions related to elections, such as voting and campaigning, and actions influencing the government, such as contacting of officials or media. Responsiveness is likely to be enhanced by participation “by which governing officials are informed of the preferences and the needs of the public and are induced to respond to those preferences and needs” (Verba 1996, 1).

The significance of responsiveness is an implicit assumption behind many calls for increased participation in general and increased electoral turnout in particular (Lijphart 1997). Increased participation in elections increases the likelihood that voters, and the image of the interests of the citizens they convey, are representative of the whole group of citizens (Tingsten 1937, 230, referenced in Lijphart 1997, 2). This function of electoral participation is more than a matter of mathematical relevance. Several studies of elections in industrialized countries have shown significant correlations between equality of participation (i.e., the size of the turnout), and election results when, for example, people with lower socioeconomic status participate to a lesser extent, and citizens’ socioeconomic status is associated with choice of party (Lijphart 1997, 1–5). The volume of participation may thus have substantive effects on the protection of the interests of citizens and, accordingly, the realization of the democratic value responsiveness.

The contribution of electoral turnout to responsiveness is a special case of the relations between participation and responsiveness by virtue of the upper limit that elections place on the individual’s influence in elections. For forms of participation that, as opposed to elections, have no upper limit but allow citizens to put major resources such as time or capital into influence attempts, an increase in overall participation may also reduce responsiveness (Lijphart 1997, 2). However, the representativeness of incentives as a whole benefits from participation that is equally exercised among different groups or, alternatively, exercised in such patterns that they outweigh or counteract other inequalities in political participation. An increase in the participation among citizens that already participate more than average makes the conveyed incentives less representative to the citizenry and is likely to make decisions less responsive to it. The participatory process is distorted (see Verba, et al. 1995, chapters 6–8 and 16), and the realization of the democratic value responsiveness is impeded.

In the empirical literature on political participation, the role for participation for the realization of democracy is generally conceived of as depending on its capacity for equal protection of interests (Verba, et al. 1995, Marien, et al. 2010). Equal protection of interest is also at play when some groups’ intense political participation is questioned in later influential research (see e.g. Lijphart 1997, Schlozman and Brady 2012, Dalton 2017). However, it would be a somewhat nearsighted view on political participation to expect

all causes and solutions for unequal influence or unresponsive outcomes to stem from the patterns of citizens' participation. Politics are of course shaped by a legion of factors and institutions that often conflict with citizens' preferences. Political conflict is not only to be found among citizens, but also between citizens and other actors. Consider the cases in which a majority of citizens want to change a regulation that some corporations and organized interests want to keep, and status quo is defended through direct monetary contributions or threats about capital flight. In such cases, responsiveness will benefit from an overall increase in citizens participation as long as this increase boosts the influence of citizens relative the influence of actors other than the citizens. And, what is more, the responsiveness can be benefitted even if the increase in participation takes place among the citizens who are already participating more than average. We can thus formulate the following exception from the rule that participation's contribution to responsiveness depends on the distribution of participation and influence *between* citizens: Increasing political activity among the already more politically active, and thus increasingly unequal participatory patterns, can benefit responsiveness in cases where this group of citizens are not in conflict with a larger group of citizens, but are held back by other kinds of factors or actors.

Summing up, increased political participation will increase responsiveness, and thus the realization of a democratic value, by providing decision-makers with information about citizens' preferences and incentives to pursue them. The information provided is assumed to get more complete the more citizens communicate and can thus be assumed to be benefitted from increased participation in general. The incentives provided to decision-makers by participation will benefit responsiveness to the extent that the incentives conveyed by participation are representative of the preferences of the citizenry. The incentives are expected to become more representative of citizens' interests the more citizens vote (or influence by other means that have a tight limit for maximum individual influence). For forms of participation that put no upper limit on the individual's influence, increasing participation has more ambiguous effects on the fit between the preferences of the citizenry and the conveyed set of incentives. When a group that participates more than the average citizen increases its participation and influence, responsiveness is likely to suffer. I argue, though, that increased participation of an already disproportionately participating group can contribute to responsiveness in certain cases, that is, if the group at hand conflicts with powers that have little support among the citizens.

Deliberation

Another means that is proposed to be indispensable for the realization of democratic values is deliberation. As indicated above, this can be based on an instrumental argument for democracy, but also in non-instrumental arguments that emphasize public justification and liberty. I will very briefly in-

roduce the arguments for democracy that can motivate deliberative democracy and then elucidate the relevance of civic engagement from this perspective. After this take on deliberation I will go through the remaining non-instrumental argument for democracy (equality) and how other forms of civic engagement than deliberation may play a role for democracy as non-instrumentally justified.

The instrumental justification of deliberative democracy is based on an understanding of democracy as an instrument for the discovery and identification of good policy choices (Christiano 2015, 5). Democracy is an *epistemic* device. Crucial for this discovery and identification is a reflective process that is to improve decision-making with not only information about citizens' interests but also an understanding of the applicable moral ideas and the empirical content of the issues at hand. This process is termed deliberation (Christiano 2015, 5).⁶

Deliberation can benefit the realization of democratic values also for those who argue for democracy on non-instrumental grounds. The non-instrumental arguments for democracy do not typically deny the relevance of outcomes of democracy, but add that democratic procedures themselves may be normatively desirable, as they provide citizens with public justifications of decisions or that the procedures realize liberty (Christiano 2015, 9). Deliberation can be a means both for ensuring public justifications of decisions and for liberty (in the republican sense, that is, self-rule). Deliberation gives citizens rational reasons to understand "the legal order as created by themselves" (Habermas 1996, 121). In this ideal, the state can legitimately act in the name of the citizens as its actions are based in a "shared sense of the world" that is constructed in deliberative processes open for all on equal terms (Holdo 2014, 6–7).

It is obvious that, from a deliberative democratic perspective, participation is crucial for the realization of democratic values. More participation should be expected to increase the quality of decisions as long as the increase in participation leads to further inclusion of information or perspectives (Habermas 1996, Young 2000). Nevertheless, levels of mass-participation should be of relevance for deliberative democrats only in case

⁶ Another take on how democracy may further good decisions is Condorcet's Jury Theorem. This could be mistaken as an argument for keeping political participation, or rather, electoral turnout, at high levels, as it shows how larger numbers of votes may benefit the accuracy of the decision-making. Condorcet showed that under certain assumptions correct decisions are more likely to result from a large body of voting citizens (even in case each individual citizen is only barely more prone to be right than wrong) than from a small group of experts. The theorem thus gives an instrumental argument against oligarchy and for democracy. However, it also shows that increasing the size of the electorate is not likely to improve its performance in any substantial way once the size of the electorate is about 100,000 persons (Hultin Rosenberg 2016, 112). Therefore, Condorcet's Jury Theorem provides no reason for taking changes in mass-participation in large polities to affect the realization of democratic values.

that the participating citizens involve in reason-giving and reflection. Do levels of mass participation actually express such involvement?

Some of the popular actions that have a long history in the surveys of political scientists involve communication and may thus denote instances of reason-giving and reflection. This goes not for voting, but for actions such as serving on a community board, contacting of officials, campaigning, and even protesting. As communication about political issues is a requirement for deliberation, the citizenry's engagement in such communication is of some deliberative relevance. However, each of the above actions are possible to perform without actually giving reasons or reflecting and can thus not without qualification be taken as benefiting the realization of democratic values, as understood from a deliberative democratic point of view. Though deliberation can be small-scale, as one event of reason-giving, the quality of the deliberative processes in a society is likely to be affected by how the society is structured in terms of transparency, inclusion and equal consideration of persons and arguments (Holdo 2014, 7–8).

The empirical research that relates to deliberative democracy does typically share this emphasis on equality, but not study how much or in which ways citizens in general participate in politics. Rather, the focus has been to test the feasibility of deliberative democracy, by testing whether its ideals of equal and inclusive discourse either are realized in certain events of deliberation (see e.g. Thompson 2008) or can be realized in society as a whole (Holdo 2014, 7). These studies indicate that participation in deliberation is not necessarily able to fully perform the functions by which it is supposed to realize democratic values. The deliberative value of participation is thus difficult to judge by the quantity of some form of participation, but must be assessed according to its qualities (reason-giving and the reflection and equal consideration of perspectives). However, as with deliberation for epistemic purposes, deliberation as public justification is *likely* to improve the more citizens engage in communicative forms of political participation.

The non-instrumental arguments for deliberative democracy differ from the instrumental, epistemic argument, yet the sources contribute to the realization of democratic values are similar in both cases. Justifying deliberation with reference to individual freedom should however place greater emphasis on inclusiveness and equality than when justifying deliberation instrumentally, and inclusion is taken as no more than a means for informing the decision.

Other means for equal respect and concern

The non-instrumental argument for democracy grounded in liberty can also motivate other forms of civic engagement than deliberation, which calls for highlighting a few other means for the realization of democracy. Furthermore, and in addition to the arguments based in liberty, democratic rule is also non-instrumentally motivated with reference to citizens' equality

(Christiano 2015, 9–17). Drawing on Christiano I will very briefly explain the arguments for grounding democracy in liberty and equality. After that, I will go over the implications these justifications of democracy have for the significance of civic engagement.

Equality and liberty are analytically distinct points of departure for democracy. However, both lead to similar ways to assess which forms of civic engagement are instrumental for the realization of democracy. The equality arguments for democracy have in common that not only the interests of the citizens should be given equal value, but also that citizens' judgements in some decisive way are to be treated equally. The reason for giving equal decision-making power to citizens is not that they are assumed to only make correct judgements, rather the opposite: diverse societies and individuals' cognitive biases will result in fallible and disagreeing citizens, who have reasons to believe that they are treated as inferior unless they are treated as equals in the decision making (Christiano 2015). The liberal basis for democracy is that democracy lets individuals apply their right to control their lives to their larger environment and collective decision-making (ibid.). The procedure for attaining maximum self-rule of each individual in collective decisions is majority decisions under equal influence (Barry 2003), so whether motivated by equality or liberty, the decisive value of democratic decision-making can be defined as paying equal concern and respect to the citizens (Christiano 2015, 17). The democratic significance of political participation should thus be assessed according to its consequences for paying equal concern and respect to citizens in the decision-making.

Demanding equal concern and respect has implications for the normative value of civic engagement in ways that are similar to the implications of responsiveness. They are similar as they may seem to imply that civic engagement is to serve equal protection of citizens' interests. However, equal concern and respect actually allow democracy to take decisions that go against the interests of its citizens.

If we are to pay equal concern and respect to the citizens the decisive factor for democracy is the *opportunities* to influence and not the protection of interests. However, there are reasons to care for actual levels of participation also from the perspective of liberty. When citizens abstain from participation, what might look like citizens' autonomous choices not to participate do, on the aggregate level, turn out to reflect a lack of resources for participation (such as money, time, education, social capital). That is, inequalities in participation (including low electoral turnout which, as indicated above, is presumably less equal than high turnout) may indicate obstacles to participation, and thus obstructions of citizens' liberty. Furthermore, the choice not to participate would be problematic also in other cases. In case someone does not participate as a result of irrational or misinformed evaluations of the situation, then the self-rule implied by the liberty argument is impaired.

Participation's potential implications for equality have been addressed by empirical political participation research. Here, the creed to equality is evident, *Voice and Equality* by Verba et al. (1995) being the most obvious example. Their inquiry into citizens' political participation is motivated partly by the significance of equal consideration of interests and thus the significance of equality in citizens' democratic participation (p. 1). But when aggregate measures of political participation are assessed from the perspective of political equality, it is however not necessarily a problem if some citizens do not engage in politics. If the lack of engagement in a group coincides with lack of resources, though, this might reflect that opportunities for influencing politics are not equal and hence can be a problem from the perspective of democracy conceived of as based in equal concern and respect (Teorell 2006, 797–798), especially if the less active groups are defined by traits that are beyond the control of the individual (Young 2000, 92–99).

It follows from this perspective that some forms of civic engagement are more important than others. The forms of civic engagement that are most beneficial for political equality are those that (besides giving *effective* opportunities to exert influence) can be exercised by means of resources that citizens have equal access to. The equality in concern and respect is benefitted when citizens increasingly influence decisions by means that are equally distributed, such as votes (or, in some cases, vouchers). Influence attempts that require time, social capital or money will be less equally distributed and are thus less beneficial for political equality. When outcomes are decided through forms of engagement that are fueled by relatively less equally distributed resources, political equality fares relatively worse. The larger the differences in citizens' access to the resources needed to have an influence, the less apt is the form of engagement as a means for equality (Marien, et al. 2010, see esp. 189–191).⁷

⁷ Theoretically, reducing economic inequalities offers another way to handle political inequality, but will solve the problem only for a limited set of political issues.

To begin with, we can dismiss the possibility of achieving political equality by combining consumer choices with complete economic equality. First, that strategy is irrelevant, as democracy or consumer choice are usually not discussed under the heading "How is society to be organized after the completion of economic equality?" but rather as parts of regular policies. To study the combination of political consumption and full economic equality would amount to answering a question that is never asked. Secondly, the combination of economic equality and politically effective consumption is inevitably unsustainable. Influencing outcomes by means of consumer choices ceases to be relevant as soon as there are no financial incentives for the individual. Eliminated economic equality implies that people's incomes are independent of e.g. the price and consumption of the things they produce. Trying to influence others through consumption in such a world would consequently not affect producers economically and therefore be futile.

A more promising solution is voucher systems. By means of vouchers, citizens can be given equal influence (or, rather, influence that is proportionate to their interests) over outcomes in certain sectors such as schooling or health care. However, as there still will exist political questions beyond the scope of vouchers' influence (including all questions about the design of voucher systems), the voucher solution has only limited potential to contribute to the realiza-

Furthermore, political equality is benefitted when citizens' opportunities to influence are independent of what preferences the citizens hold. For example, equal respect and concern are violated if a model for decision-making would accept Alternative A under the condition that it is supported by more than 40 percent of the citizens, while disregarding Alternative B unless it is supported by at least 60 percent. Hence, simple majority decisions are often taken as the best way to ensure equal concern and respect of preferences.

To sum up, democracy is non-instrumentally justified by reference to its ability to ensure that political decisions are given public justifications or to respect and realize citizens' liberty or equality. Public justification and liberty are taken to imply that citizens' engagement in deliberation is decisive for the realization of democracy. However, grounding democracy in liberty and equality implies that also other kinds of civic engagement can contribute to the realization of democratic values. According to these two justifications of democracy, civic engagement will contribute to the realization of democratic values to the extent that the engagement makes citizens treated with more equal respect and concern in decision-making.

Implications for the assessment of expanding consumer choice

In the first paragraphs of this introduction I showed that consumer choice is pervasive and expanding, so that if having consumer choices impairs civic engagement, these effects are potentially large and likely to be growing. I have now shown that civic engagement is instrumental for the realization of democratic values no matter whether we conceive of democracy as an arrangement for realizing citizens' interests, for epistemic qualities, public justification, liberty or equality (or for improving citizens' character). That is, if the expansion of consumer choice impairs civic engagement, the realization of the democratic core values is likely to suffer.

However, consumer choices communicate preferences and values, provide incentives and decide outcomes—so the making of consumer choices could be thought of as a kind of civic engagement. Before concluding that the realization of democracy would be impaired if consumer choices decrease (other) forms of civic engagement one question has to be answered: to what extent democratic values be realized through the very act of consumer choice?

To ask this question may seem overly generous to consumer choice, but a generous perspective on consumer choice is motivated. While democracy and the market are distinct ways to organize humans' coexistence, markets and consumer choices may nevertheless be instrumental for the realization of democratic values, for several reasons. To think of consumer choices as having democratic merits has been important within neo-liberal theory

tion of democratic values. That is, even in the presence of extensive voucher systems, some civic engagement in formal political decision-making will be democratically indispensable.

(Friedman and Friedman 1980, Buchanan and Tullock 1999), within the motivations of New Public Management (Clarke 2007, Le Grand 2009a) and the practice of political consumption (Sassatelli 2006). That is, outside of political science, democracy is a recurring metaphor for the functioning of consumer choice. The notion that people may “vote with their pocketbooks” has been a part of the scholarly understanding of politics under economic globalization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), picked up by communications researchers (Shah, et al. 2007), marketers (Shaw, et al. 2006) and sociologists (Jacobsen and Dulrud 2007). Some scholars express the idea that political consumption is not only a potential means or prop for democracy, but also democratic in itself (see examples in Jacobsen 2017) or that the current order is a *commercial democracy*, in which consumption together with the promises of corporations establishes a new social contract between those governing and those governed (Cronin 2018).

To simply rule out the democratic virtues of consumer choices with reference to them not being political or that markets are conceptually distinct from democracy would thus ignore central elements of the advocacy for expanding consumer choice. Furthermore, the critique that remains against consumer choice after taking consumer choice seriously as a potential means for democracy is of course far more afflicting than sweeping dismissals that refer to purported non-political, un-civic, private or self-regarding inherent qualities of consumer choices. That is, a generous understanding of consumer choice helps us to understand *in which ways* consumer choice is inferior, and not, to conventional political participation. I will therefore make a comparison between consumer choice and other ways in which citizens’ influence political outcomes. The first step for this comparison is a definitional undertaking aiming at operationalizing political participation and consumer choice.

Operationalizing political participation and consumer choice

The forms of participation that are most central for the realization of democratic values should be in focus for the assessment of how expanding consumer choice affects political participation. The most central ways in which citizens’ engagement may contribute to the realization of democratic values, I will argue, are actions aimed at influencing representative politics.

Political participation defined by four criteria

Actions aiming at representative politics may be directly channeled against the political and bureaucratic system, such as through voting, contacting of government officials, party work, or campaigning. Influencing representative politics may also be done indirectly, by influencing the discourse by means of taking part in media or political discussions in other fora outside of representative politics.

This list of forms of engagement goes beyond some definitions of political participation, but corresponds to the operational definition of Jan van Deth (2014) that centers on the *sphere*, the *target* and the *motivation* for actions.

The typology has the general advantage that it is applicable on any phenomena. More specifically it captures the important similarities and differences between consumer choice and the forms of political participation that are instrumental for the realization of different democratic values. The definition acknowledges the potential political nature of consumer choice, while still separating political consumption from other forms of political participation that are more closely related to collective binding decisions and thus more instrumental for the realization of democratic values.

Van Deth's definition of political participation is based on a minimalist definition according to which political participation denotes voluntary, non-professional activities somehow located within the formal political system, that is, the "sector directed by government under the jurisdiction of state power", including government and government agencies, public representatives and officials (van Deth 2014, 355–356). This minimalist definition has its roots in Verba's and Nie's (1972) understanding of political participation, which guided empirical participation research for decades (Teorell 2006, 789), and by which political participation refers to "activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba and Nie 1972, 2). This covers voting, campaign activities/party activity, and contacting of government officials (Teorell, et al. 2007, 342). I will, in line with Barnes and Kaase (1979), refer to this kind of political participation as "conventional modes of participation" or, simply, "conventional participation".

Influencing government may be done also with forms of participation that take place outside of elections, parties or other parts of the formal political system. That is, some activities may target the formal political system even though they take place beyond the formal governmental arenas for politics (van Deth 2014, 357, Teorell, et al. 2007, 340–341). This goes for e.g. petitions and demonstrations and what is sometimes labelled "contentious politics" or "elite-challenging politics" (Tilly 2008, Inglehart 1990, Inglehart and Catterberg 2002 in van Deth 2014, 357). These targeted modes of political participation are thus not taking place within the formal political system but channeled through it (Teorell, et al. 2007) and are in that way related to the making of collective binding decisions. Van Deth does not mention deliberation among the forms of political participation that targets the formal political system, and deliberation is typically seen as an attempt to reflect on politics rather than influence it. However, the democratic significance of deliberation presupposes that the discourse that is shaped by deliberation will eventually affect political decision-making. Thus, we have reasons to include deliberation among the activities that take place outside of formal politics

but are political by virtue of their indirect relation to the formal political system.

Activities that take place outside the formal political system and lack any explicit or implicit intention to impact on the formal political system may yet be defined as political participation if they meet one of two criteria. First, some researchers include activities that aim at solving community problems or other collective problems, such as volunteering and community participation (van Deth 2014, 358–61). This is obviously based in a comprehensive understanding of politics not confined to the formal political systems but rather of politics as “influencing the collective life of the polity” (Macedo et al. 2005, 6 in van Deth 2014, 358). Secondly, otherwise non-political activities may turn into political participation if they are guided by political motivations (van Deth 2014, 358–359). This kind of political participation will include many digitally mediated manifestations (Bennett 2012 cited in van Deth 2014, 359) and, more important here, political consumption (Stolle, et al. 2005). The motivations that turn otherwise non-political activities into political participation cover those that are *ethical, environmental, political*, or some such reasons (Stolle, et al. 2005, Willis and Schor 2012, 162). “Political” can here be understood as relating to something in line with the classic definition of David Easton, “the authoritative allocation of values for a society” (1953, 129), combined with an understanding that this authoritative allocation takes place not only in the formal political system but also through e.g. corporations (Teorell, et al. 2007, 336 see also Micheletti 2010, 5–6)⁸.

Please note that this discussion implies a certain perspective on consumption. Alan Warde has specified this definition of consumption as

[...] a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (Warde 2005, 137).

The concept consumption may thus denote both purchase and using-up (Warde 2005). This thesis concerns only the aspect of consumption that affects market exchange, i.e. purchasing. A purchase-decision with political motivation is a form of political participation while a purchase-decision without political motivation is not.⁹

⁸ An alternative understanding that is similar but more straightforward is that an acting citizen’s motivations are political if she or he intends to affect *many* people, beyond e.g. the family and work place (Adman 2004, 20).

⁹ Voluntary unprofessional activities are here defined as political participation regardless of the actor’s motivation as long as they take place within the formal political system, or are targeted against either the formal political system or against collective problems. Non-political motivations may well lay behind such activities. However, they are defined as political participation by virtue of their potential to affect political decision-making and collective life (see van Deth 2014, 359–360).

We thus have four kinds of political participation—1) political participation within the formal political system, political participation that 2) influences the formal political system or 3) aims at solving collective problems, and 4) political participation defined by the political motivation behind activities. Van Deth's operational definition is inclusive, but not infinitely so, and distinguishes political activities from non-political ones. Activities that are not covered by these four criteria are not defined as political participation and consumer choices are considered as political participation depending on the motivation behind them.

Voice and exit

Another peculiarity of consumer choice relates to Albert Hirschman's distinction of *exit-based* and *voice-based* mechanisms of influence (1970). Consumer choice works through the exit-based mechanism (Hirschman 1970, 86). That is, while a voice-based political participation entails engaging in adjusting some entity along one's preferences, consumer choice works by adding one's support for the given entity or not. Voting is another exit-based form of political participation, and has, as such, two features in common with consumer choice. These features are consequential for consumer choices' and votes' potential as contributors to the realization of democratic values. First, consumer choice and votes exercise pressure by numbers, and these are transmitted by self-regulatory processes (Teorell, et al. 2007, 342). From this follows that influence may be made anonymously and the weight of different persons' exit-choices are easy to gauge—very equal as regards votes and consumer choices made with vouchers, potentially very unequal when made with resources that are affected by income or wealth. In comparison, the weight of the influence-attempts by voice-based mechanisms will be difficult to gauge as it depends on e.g. the arguments as well as the intensity of threats and incentives. Secondly, consumer choice and votes send fairly vague messages as compared to the more specific information conveyed through voice-based mechanisms (Teorell, et al. 2007, 342).

When the four criteria for political participation and the voice/exit-dimension are combined, the following typology results:

	Arena for activity				
	Formal political system	Outside the formal political system			
		Related to the formal political system	Unrelated to the formal political system		
			Unspecified	Markets	
Influence by means of exit	Voting	N/A	N/A	Political consumption: Boycotting and buycotting	Consumer choices w/o political purposes
Influence by means of voice	Contacting politicians or government officials Party activity	Protesting Deliberation and other political discussions	Community work Solving collective problems	Contacting businesses for political purposes	Contacting businesses w/o political purposes
	Political participation				Non-political activities

Figure 1. Typology of consumer choices and modes of political participation. Based on the typology of Teorell, et al. (2007, 341).

Consumer choices as means for realization of democratic values

Democracy and markets are two analytically distinct ways to organize decision-making in society. Yet consumer choices may have democratic qualities analogous to (other) forms of civic engagement, and thus potential to contribute to the realization of democratic values.

To compare the democratic significance of consumer choices and civic engagement is not only possible but also called for, as indicated above, against the background of various scholarly works. It is reasonable to assume there is some currency in the idea that consumer choices and markets compose some kind of rule by the people, at least as long as rule by the people is understood only as something different than autocracy or oligarchy (see Saunders 2010). However, the question about democratic merits of the market is not conceptual, but rather normative. Instead of asking whether consumer choices *are democratic*, the democratic value of consumer choices hinges on whether a rule by consumer choices *is desirable from a democratic point of view*, or, put differently, if they in and of themselves contribute to the realization of democratic values. By means of the main arguments for desiring democracy presented above I will compare the democratic desirability of decision-making shaped by consumer choices to the democratic desirability of decision-making shaped other forms of civic engagement. I will compare consumer choices' potential to contribute to the realization of dem-

ocratic values to the potential of voting, different forms of communicative civic engagement, and involvement in direct decision-making.

Consumer choice and voting

To begin with a comparison to voting, making consumer choices has advantages as well as disadvantages from a democratic point of view.

Consumer choices have certain virtues as regards responsiveness and freedom. This goes especially if one assumes that people are rational egoists. While voting often implies that the choice of the majority is imposed on minorities, even miniscule shares of the population may pursue their way and their interests by means of consumer choice. Consumer choices give more opportunities for free choices and to fine-tune outcomes to preferences than elections do, as elections occur far more seldom than consumer choices of most products and services (welfare services such as schooling or elder care being possible important exceptions, where repeating new choices may be costly in terms of e.g. time and affection).

To the extent that one assumes that people are rational and guided by self-interest, consumer choices are superior to voting in a way that is stressed by neoliberal democrats. For self-interested citizens it would be irrational to inform themselves about decisions on which each one's individual impact is miniscule (Downs 1957). Therefore neoliberals expect a significant mismatch between citizens' actual interests and preferences in collective decision-making such as voting. Neoliberals expect more valid preferences to result from consumer choice, where the relevant outcome is one that the choosing individual has decisive impact on, than when individuals make political choices with miniscule impact on collective decisions. According to this argument, consumers differ from people involved in collective decision-making by having rational motives to actually understand the issues and the alternatives at hand before making a choice (Buchanan and Tullock 1999). The interests of rational self-interested citizens may thus be better served by consumer choices and markets than by votes and majority decisions.

However, this argument relies heavily on the empirical assumption that rational self-interest guides citizens' choices and whether they inform themselves or not. The assumed self-interest of citizens has long been questioned by researchers who expect voting to be *sociotropic*, i.e. guided by conceptions of public interest rather than self-interest (Lewin 1991, Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck 2011). Just as duty, public interest (or combinations of altruism and social pressure) may influence peoples' choices, these factors and other less "rational" factors that go beyond the assumptions of neoliberal thought may impel people to stay informed about politics and the issues they care for, regardless of the diminutive chances that someone's individual vote is decisive for the outcome of the election. And if people stay informed, their political preferences may be valid expressions of interest.

Furthermore, the neoliberal argument for consumer choices' superior validity will suffer also if people are guided by other considerations than self-interest when making consumer choices. While self-interest is reasonably present in most consumer choices, the consumer role is not in itself restricted to expressions of self-interest (Scammell 2000, Schudson 2007, Soper 2007). The literatures on concepts such as political consumption, ethical consumption, conscious consumption, and green conception bear witness to the range of motivations beyond self-interest. If consumer choices are to fulfill other-regarding preferences, consumer choice will no longer have a significant advantage to voting as regards people's incentives to stay informed about the alternatives. That is, for intended outcomes for *others*, the impact of individual consumer choice is not likely to be decisive (as when consumer choices are made for affecting outcomes for the individual consumer), but rather as miniscule as the impact of voting. This, in turn, leaves other-regarding consumers with the same lack of incentives for informing themselves which neoliberal democrats ascribe to voters. So, as long as consumers have authentic interests that regard other people, one cannot expect that peoples' interests will have more informed and valid expressions in their consumer choices than in their votes.

On the other hand, there are important drawbacks of consumer choices as compared to voting. The drawbacks relate to two features of consumer choices: consumer choices rely on unequally distributed resources and they give different weight to different kinds of preferences. These two features, I will show, render consumer choices inherently unequal in two ways, and thus incapable of spawning unbiased and responsive outcomes in relation to many political preferences. Both drawbacks put severe constraints on the potential of consumer choices as contributors to the realization of democratic values.

The drawback that pertains to resources for making influence is the most obvious. The resources that are needed for consumer choices are far less equally distributed than votes, and presumably also less equally distributed than time for engagement is. This inequality will obviously impinge on consumer choice as a means for equality and responsiveness. Unequal access to the means by which preferences can be expressed implies that the expressed preferences will be less representative of the preferences and interests of the citizenry, and outcomes thus less likely to be responsive to the citizens' interests.¹⁰

¹⁰ It should be mentioned, though, that in many issues, the inequalities that pertain to the opportunities to make consumer choices are smaller than inequalities in income or wealth. Just as voting places a ceiling on each individual's influence, there are limits to the consumption of most products and services even for the most well off. A billionaire may put a billion in organic food, but not in the consumption of it. And, as indicated above, there are also issues in which the resources for consumer choice may be exactly equal, such as when consumer choices are made through vouchers.

The drawback that relates to unequal consideration of different preferences may be less obvious, but not less harmful. Votes allow a group to govern the actions of everyone in a larger, pre-defined collective as long as their opponents comprise only smaller groups. A majority decision will be equally influential whether the votes are cast for or against a certain action. However, when consumer choices decide, preferences are treated differently depending on whether they are *for* or *against* actions. This deserves some clarification and I will expand a little on it. Contrary to formal politics, markets do not make binding collective decisions, i.e. while the outcomes of the market may affect many, its decisions are taken by only those individuals who consent to make a transaction, and bind only those. Therefore, under consumer choice, preferences for action need support from only a very few citizens to be realized. Theoretically, the preference of only one person may be realized given that there is supply that can meet this individual's demand. This has a problematic flip-side: preferences *against* actions (negative preferences) may need unanimous support for being realized. So, while voting allows the choice of the majority to be imposed on minorities, consumer choices allow the consequences of minorities' choices to be imposed on majorities.

Consumer choices difficulties with negative preferences imply that consumer choices are inferior to votes in majority decisions when it comes to treating preferences equally. Whether voting or consumer choices serve responsiveness the best on an issue is thus conditional to the nature of citizens' preferences on the issue. Consumer choices are likely to benefit responsiveness better than votes do on issues where citizens hold positive preferences, but be less beneficial to responsiveness than votes on issues where a plurality of citizens hold a negative preference. Votes and consumer choices can be assessed in an analogous way from the perspective of freedom: those citizens who hold positive preferences will be free to choose their own way through consumer choices, while those citizens with negative preferences are very likely to need collective binding decisions to pursue their own way.¹¹ On issues where a plurality of citizens holds a negative preference, votes rather than consumer choices make citizens free to choose outcomes.¹²

¹¹ It may be noted that negative preferences pertain by necessity to all matters in which the alternative actions are mutually exclusive or in which the alternatives regard restricting the acting space of others. This goes, for example, for issues about constitutional matters, allocation of common resources, and criminal law.

¹² In practice, the way to deal with issues of potential negative preferences may be taken care of by means of a majority decision about whether to regulate or delegate to markets. The assessment of the respective means for influence and forms of decisions seems to reflect a fairly conventional democratic argument for letting all delegation to markets be conditional on majority decisions.

Consumer choice and communication

Secondly, consumer choices may be compared to different forms of communication. Taking part in meetings, commenting in media, or contacting decision-makers are conventional communicative forms of civic engagement, and consumer choices may communicate too. Communication scholars have touched upon the relevance of consumer choices and consumer goods as signifiers for expression in political questions (Keum, et al. 2004, 376–377, Shah, et al. 2007). Consumer choices have proven effective as communicative means for putting new issues on the political agenda (Micheletti 2010) and boycotts sometimes aim at raising public awareness rather than changing outcomes by means of the market (Delacote 2009, 307). The language of consumer goods matters for how decision-makers are perceived (Barrling Hermansson 2004, see also Greider and Hedvall 2008), as well as for citizens' social identities, and may serve as bases for community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In many everyday settings people can observe each other for only a very limited time, or are in other ways constrained in their potential to interact. Then, goods may be a relatively well-appreciated and well-understood way of communicating.

However, the trustworthiness, readiness and *niceness* in this way of speaking of politics should be compared to its bluntness. The language of goods and consumer choices remains more imprecise than common language and it will be difficult to decode the aims of the consumer in a reliable way. I.e. one can be more certain about what people think when they *say* "I want trade to give priority to the conditions of poor producers", than when the same persons choose a type of coffee with the intention to signify the same thing. This marks the limit to how far consumption can be interpreted as communicating a position. While there is a theoretical possibility that consumer choice and the use or display of consumer goods may bring new policy goals or values to a social discussion or in other ways express political commitment, consumer choices suffer from further problems when it comes to communicating positions on political strategies, and communicating reasons for choices. Even if a citizen, with the aid of consumer goods, would succeed in communicating the wish to give priority to a certain consideration or topic, the goods will in many cases not convey any message about the means or strategies by which the citizen wants to achieve the change in question, and more importantly, neither about the arguments for the choice. To sum up, communication by means of consumer choices will be restricted to a limited agenda and fail to communicate reasons for choices. At best, it will enrich the political agenda with new standpoints without arguments.

If we take deliberation seriously, consumer choice fails as a means for the realization of democratic values. If the deliberative value of participation is assessed according to qualities such as reason-giving and reflection of perspectives, the language of consumer choices is too restricted and blunt. The

instances in which a decrease in communicative forms of conventional political participation could fully be compensated by political consumption consequently seem rare.

Consumer choice and direct decision-making

Lastly, consumer choices may be compared to involvement in direct democratic decision-making such as arrangements for democracy at workplaces or local bodies. Some scholars hold that consumer choices, when guided by political motives, have a similar potential to cultivate the citizens (Micheletti 2010, Barnett 2011, Atkinson 2012, Willis and Schor 2012). Consumer choices are obviously not part of those procedures for direct democratic decision-making that participatory democrats stress as means for improvement of citizens characters. Consumer choices are furthermore sometimes taken as inferior to formal political decision-making as consumer choices can be made without discussions that could laundry or filter the preferences (Sandel 2012). However, people may still choose to discuss their own and others' consumer choices just as they discuss politics, and especially the possibility to make morally or politically significant consumer choices may spur debate and stimulate responsibility-taking. Consumer choices would thus contribute to the improvement of citizens' character, that is, to the realization of a democratic value. However, as indicated above, participatory democrats take involvement in direct decision-making to be an important complement to conventional democratic politics, not a substitute for it. Thus, if consumer choices improve the character of citizens but at the same time harm responsiveness, public justification, political equality or liberty, the price seems unreasonable. To conclude, the assessment of any contribution to democratic values based in the improvement of citizens' character should be an assessment of the contributions to the realization of other, more conventional, democratic values.

Consumer choices cannot compensate for impairments on civic engagement

I have argued that the expansion of consumer choices may have two main kinds of implications for the realization of democratic values. First, consumer choices may in and of themselves contribute to the realization of these values. Secondly, the expansion of consumer choices may have empirical effects on the exercise of other activities that are instrumental for the realization of democratic values. The comparison of consumer choices and different forms of civic engagement above assesses the first kind of implications. The assessment can be summed up as follows: though there are instances in which the expansion of consumer choice may in itself benefit the realization of democratic values, the democratic significance of consumer choices is inferior to that of some conventional forms of participation, and that goes irrespective of which of the conventional arguments for democracy that we adopt. From a democratic point of view, consumer choices are inept to com-

pensate the impairment they may cause on civic engagement. That is, if the expansion of consumer choice impairs civic engagement in affecting political decisions, the realization of democratic values will suffer. Hence, the democratic implications of expanding consumer choice depend on consumer choice's effects on citizens' engagement in affecting political decisions. I will now turn to the empirical question about those effects.

Previous empirical research

To the best of my knowledge there are today no empirical studies of how expansions of consumer choice affect citizens' political participation. Yet, there are studies of neighboring issues, which have provided some hunches for the essays in this thesis. These are experiments that test effects of three concepts closely related to consumer choices, namely consumer-roles (vs. citizen-roles), money, and brands, on outcomes that can be related to political participation.

The study of consumer roles is probably the one most closely related to my research question. By merely prompting subjects to label themselves as either "American citizen" or "American consumer" in a fictional social dilemma, researchers instigated different responses, where "consumers" were relatively less prone to feelings of obligation, trust in other people or to see other people as partners (Bauer, et al. 2012). It should, however, be noted that the differences between "American consumer" and "American citizen" will be shaped also by the qualifier *American*. Thus, the recorded differences are not only the result of differences between the consumer-role and the citizen-role per se. Effects of exposure to money are tested in a much cited and replicated study by Vohs, et al. (2006). In this study subjects were primed (or not) with reminders of money in a series of tests, and the money-treated respondents were found to be relatively more self-sufficient, in the sense that they gave and requested less help than untreated subjects and also chose loneliness and distance to others to a larger extent. Similar reminders of money have also shown outright political effects, as in an experiment (Caruso, et al. 2013) in which exposure to images of \$100 bills made respondents more supportive of economic liberalism and social inequality. Effects of brands were tested by Cutright, et al. (2014) who studied the effect of choosing between brands on subjects' religious commitment, and observed effects with possible implications also for political participation. Based on a series of experiments, the authors conclude that attention to the brands made certain aspects of the respondents' identities more salient. This, in turn, disadvantaged conflicting aspects of the respondents' identities, in this case religious commitment. That is, when choosing between brands, respondents seem to have suppressed or disregarded some parts of their identity as a means to avoid cognitive dissonance. Therefore, the authors argue,

brands may have a general dampening effect on peoples' commitment also to values and convictions beyond religion, if these values or convictions are dissonant with the aspects of identity that brands stimulate.

The rather sketchy picture that emerges from this experimental research thus suggests that the inclination to act *for* others would be affected if (1) consumer choices direct citizens' urges and grievances away from the relations of society (towards individual and material change), or (2) consumer choices decrease either citizens' feelings of obligation and helpfulness, or (3) consumer choices decrease citizens' commitment to prior values and convictions. The inclination to act *with* others would be reduced if consumer choices reduce citizens' inclination to (1) come together, (2) see others as partners, (3) ask for others' help, or if consumer choices tend to (4) reduce citizens' trust. The inclination to act *for* others can be expected to affect political engagement generally, except for such instances in which politics is used as a vehicle solely for self-interest (which may be the case with political participation that aims at or takes place within the formal political system). The inclination to act *with* others can be expected to affect different modes of political participation differently, and generally affect voice-based participation more than exit-based participation.

Summing up in more general terms, there is a lack of empirical research on how expansions of consumer choice affect political engagement. It seems that a consumer role can be situationally activated, i.e. that the same persons may have more or less of a consumer-mindset depending on cues given in the situation. This substantiates the rationality behind the choice to study effects of expanded consumer choice, and particularly to expectations that the expansion of consumer choices may foster consumer-like behavior. Furthermore, previous research gives reason to expect that different forms of political participation may be differently affected by expansion of consumer choice. In particular, a differentiation between voice-based and exit-based forms of participation is warranted.

Research design

In order to test if expansions of consumer choice have causal effects on citizens' conventional political participation I will study consumer choice in different contexts with experimental designs. Before presenting the articles I will elaborate a little on the research design.

Three cases of expanding consumer choice

Different expansions of consumer choice may be expected to induce different effects in political participation. Social sciences, political science included, have devoted certain attention to the introduction of consumer choice in

issues previously determined by representative politics, such as provision of health-care and schooling (see e.g., Gilbert 2002, Clarke 2007, Greener 2008, Le Grand 2009b) and consumer choices as a part of citizens' repertoire for pursuing political ends (that is, political consumption) (see e.g. Micheletti 2010, Barnett 2011, Stolle and Micheletti 2013). The context for consumer choice and the baggage the choices come with differ significantly between these two cases. We may thus expect different effects when consumer choice supplants formal political decision-making and when new consumer choices are introduced that interact with political motivations. I test these two distinct kinds of expansions of consumer choice in Essay I and Essay II.

As was seen at the beginning of this introduction, there is also a large expansion of consumer choices going on that neither supplants formal political decision-making nor is likely to interact with political motivations. I test effects of expanding plainly private consumer choice in Essay III.

The essays thus provide tests of different mechanisms by which consumer choice may affect political participation. Besides testing *if* consumer choice affects political participation, the tests also give a wide-ranging exploration of possible answers to *how* consumer choice would affect political participation. In concert, the essays mark scope conditions for effects of consumer choice on political participation, and make it possible to discern effects that are driven by peculiarities of the respective cases from general effects of expanding consumer choice.

Survey experimental method

The extension of consumer choice in a given situation or society depends on numerous factors. Some factors that affect the citizens' exposure to consumer choices—such as the economic situation of individuals or societies, as well as their degree of collectivism and individualism—are likely to affect citizens' participation as well. Confounding factors such as these would therefore afflict any correlational study of the three cases. My empirical strategy through all studies has been to create randomized variation in exposure to consumer choices, i.e. making experiments.

All of the experiments have had the form of surveys which has made it possible to reach large and diverse samples that allow for generalizations of the recorded results to larger populations. The surveys have different experimental "treatments" embedded in them, and randomized assignment has allocated the treatments among the respondents. The choice to make survey experiments has given me considerable freedom to construct stylized and valid comparisons between having more or less consumer choices. The treatments have been embedded in a scenario that the respondents took a stand to (Essay I), in the instructions for a free text-task (Essay II) and in pictures that the respondents have rated (Essay III). Except for the treat-

ments, the surveys for within each study have been identical for all respondents. Thus, any systematical differences between the responses of groups that have been assigned different treatments should be derived to their different treatments.

Survey experiments have furthermore given me leeway to choose which outcomes to study and which potential causal mechanisms to probe. The survey experiments record individual short term effects on proposed mediating variables and attitudes to participation. To study attitudes to participation differs from the usual participation research that typically operationalizes participation as previous actual behavior. I do by no means assume that attitudes to participation are precise operationalizations of actual participation. However, it is not the aim of this research to gauge actual frequency of citizens' political participation. The crucial question in this thesis is instead whether there are causal effects of expansions of consumer choice on political participation. A good way to study situational effects on political participation is then to tap effects on a proxy for political participation that is likely to correlate with the probability that a studied respondent would participate in the situation being studied. Causal effects on attitudes to political participation are reasonable proxies for causal effects on political participation once assumes that political participation correlates positively with attitudes towards participation. I can see no reasons for not making that assumption.

Sampling with Mechanical Turk

The survey experiments have been administered online. The survey for Essay I was administered by the Laboratory of Opinion Research at the University of Gothenburg, and the sampling is thoroughly described in their technical report (Martinsson, et al. 2017). The samples for Essay II and Essay III were recruited by means of Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online micro-task labor market run by Amazon.com. This tool for sampling, as well as the reliability and validity of the resulting data, is presented below.

MTurk is widely used for recruiting samples for social science surveys, and survey experiments in particular.¹³ The name alludes to a chess-playing "machine" from the 18th century that toured Europe, but later turned out to hide a human chess-player inside. In a similar way, MTurk appears as an intelligent machine but its "intelligence" is actually resulting from active persons.

As with all experiments on non-probability samples, experiments with MTurk face the general worry that the probability of being sampled correlates with variables that moderate the effect of the treatment on the depend-

¹³ In October, 2011, Google Scholar listed 769 social sciences articles with the phrase "Mechanical Turk" (Berinsky, et al. 2012, 351). As of June, 2018, Google Scholar lists 37,200 articles with the same phrase.

ent variables. If so, the resulting treatment effects may misrepresent the treatment effects on larger populations. However, the known threats to internal validity that are associated with recruiting through MTurk attenuate true relationships, but do not produce spurious relationships (Chandler and Shapiro 2016).

Participants (“MTurkers”) are given small remunerations for assignments of often just a few minutes, to then, presumably, go on with other tasks, and researchers have voiced sound questions about the quality of the data and the MTurkers’ motivations and demographics. As a result, MTurk is today the most studied nonprobability sample available for researchers (Chandler and Shapiro 2016, 53).

As regards quality of data there is little evidence that MTurkers are insufficiently attentive or dishonest. As long as there are no financial incentives for deception, MTurkers are found to behave no less honestly than participants in other convenience samples. MTurkers give consistent demographic data over time and the scale-reliability of MTurk data has in numerous studies turned out identical or better than other convenience-samples (Chandler and Shapiro 2016 60). Random noise, that does not produce false effects but reduces statistical power, is somewhat worse or at similar levels in MTurk data to data from conventional survey methods (Berinsky, et al. 2012, Rouse 2015).

MTurkers’ choice to “work” for small remunerations has raised questions about their motivation and potential issues of biased self-selection to the sample. Monetary concerns seem to be the prime motivation for MTurkers’, but still only one of a few motivations. These also include opportunities to learn, and a view of MTurk as a “paid leisure” and a stimulating alternative to activities that would “kill time”. Furthermore, MTurkers are highly autonomous as regards which tasks to choose, and when and where to do them, and the activity may thus be worthwhile also with low compensation (Chandler and Shapiro 2016).

Compared to the general US population¹⁴, US MTurkers show higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Women are somewhat over-represented, as are young and well educated people. The ideological profile of MTurkers is somewhat more liberal than in the general US population, and levels of civic knowledge are higher. However, the pool of MTurkers is foremost markedly representative to the US population, and more representative than convenience samples drawing on students or communities, or the in-person samples typical to earlier experimental political science (Berinsky, et al. 2012, Huff and Tingley 2015, Chandler and Shapiro 2016).

¹⁴ MTurkers can work from many countries but most of them are Americans or Indians (Chandler and Shapiro 2016, 64). For the studies that employed MTurk in this thesis, only American respondents were recruited.

The MTurking itself may implicate on the respondents in two ways worth mentioning in this thesis. First MTurk-respondents tend to have experienced many experiments, usually resulting in attenuated treatment effects (Chandler and Shapiro 2016). Secondly, consumer choice and markets may be brought to MTurkers minds when they are recruited and economic incentives are presented. This implies that the control groups of Essay II and Essay III may not be as free from reminders of consumer choice as they would otherwise be, and that the difference lessens between the control conditions and treated conditions which treat respondents with reminders of consumer choice (for a similar case, see Ahlskog 2017, 120). The fact that respondents may be used to experiments and are reminded of money has implications that are similar to those of MTurkers' possibly higher rates of random noise. All three issues imply a risk that statistical power suffers, but implies no risk for establishing spurious relationships.

Presenting the articles: aims and key findings

Essay I—Pacified citizens with a marketized school system

In the first essay, I study effects of expanding consumer choice into situations in which citizens otherwise could affect their outcomes foremost by addressing public decision-makers. Of the three essays, this one studies the situation that is most intimately linked to formal political decision-making.

In many Western countries the introduction of user choice has given citizens additional means by which to influence their public services over the last 30 years. This expansion of consumer choice has been part of a marketization that, according to several scholars, has changed the relation between citizens and the state, in the sense that citizens have become more consumer-like (Baldock 2003, Clarke 2007, Angus 2015) and their ties to public decision-making potentially weaker (Clarke 2007, Simmons, et al. 2012, see also Hirschman 1970). Moreover, the marketization has been motivated by reference to democratic values such as to make service provision more responsive to citizens' interests and to increase citizens' opportunities to influence public services (Friedman and Friedman 1980, Gilbert 2002, Le Grand 2009b).

I test the effects of expanding consumer choice by means of a survey experiment with 2,708 Swedish respondents. The experiment is built around a fictional scenario where the respondents indicate how they would address the situation if they had a child that was being bullied in a malfunctioning school. The experimental component of the study is a randomized assignment of information about whether the school is private or public and whether or not the respondent has effective user choice. In all other respects, the presented situations were identical.

Throughout this essay, consumer choice equals user choice. It is thus a choice made by means of vouchers and not money, but should be regarded as an instance of consumer choice for at least two reasons. First, user choice is spoken about as consumer choice, by bureaucracies that themselves use the word “customers” (Baldock 2003) as well as by researchers’ whose analogies of user and consumer are legion. Pupils are described as potential “consumers of schooling” (Benson, et al. 2015) or “education consumers” (Angus 2015) and citizens in general as citizen-consumers (which was also an important part of the political rhetoric of New Labour) (Clarke 2007). Secondly, and more importantly, user choice shares important features with consumer choice of private goods (Greener 2008) and the proposed working of marketization relies on citizens taking their role in markets (Le Grand 2009b).

The measured outcomes are respondents’ intentions to act in certain ways that are closely related to the described situation. Some of the tapped intentions regard actions that would qualify as conventional participation as they take place within the formal political system. Other measured intentions regard actions that only target the school at hand. The actions that the respondents reflected on are relevant since they impinge on the same democratic values as conventional participation. This goes not only for actions within the formal political system, but also for the intended actions that only target the particular school at hand. Furthermore, there are reasons to consider some of these tapped intentions to be measures of intended political participation proper. Superficially, this might seem counterintuitive since trying to influence the schooling of one’s child does not qualify to the standard definition of political participation by Verba and Nie (1972) or alternative definitions that categorize participation based on the number of people who are affected by the issue at hand (see Adman 2004). However, it should be noted that in the scenario, most alternative actions to solve the situation are likely to affect policies at the school or beyond which, in turn, would affect more children than the respondents own. Furthermore, 95.7 percent of the respondents turned out to indicate that their actions would be partly motivated by the wish to avoid that other children were bullied at school. That is, the intended actions regarded trying to influence more than the schooling of one’s own child.

The results give statistically significant and robust support for the hypotheses that user choice decreases citizens’ inclination to address service providers and related public decision-making. The respondents’ willingness to influence service providers and related political and bureaucratic decision-making is substantively lower in a marketized situation than when schools are described as public and the choice of school described as made by the municipality. The results support general expectations about a negative relation between exit-strategies and voice-strategies (Hirschman 1970, Greener 2008). Thus, the study does not reflect good on the hope that marketization

would stimulate citizens' voice-based influence attempts by giving users leverage in relation to providers of public services (Le Grand 2009b), and the study points out risks that marketization decreases the responsiveness and problem solving capacity of welfare services.

The demobilizing effect of consumer choice can partly be attributed to perceptions that addressing public decision-makers is less important in case the school is not public but private, and may, to a small extent, be due to that public decision-makers are taken to less important once consumer choice is a present alternative channel for influence. However, it turns out that the lion's share of consumer choice's pacifying effect is driven by something else than whether or not formal political decision-making is exclusively decisive.

Essay II—

Causal impact of political consumption on political participation

It is thus motivated to ask how citizens' consumer choices in themselves affect citizens' willingness to political action. I approach this question in the second essay.

Making consumer choices based on political considerations has become a widespread form of political participation in many Western countries. While voting and many other forms of political participation relating to the formal political system has decreased in Europe and America (Putnam 2000, Inglehart and Welzel 2005, Dalton 2017, Hooghe and Kern 2017) *political consumption* has grown over the last decades to become the second most widespread form of political participation in many Western countries (van Deth 2011, see also Stolle and Micheletti 2013). Democratic values such as political equality and a broad representation of interests (Verba, et al. 1995, Lijphart 1997, Dalton 2017) are not likely to be realized by political consumption in itself and there is considerable scholarly debate about whether this political consumption “crowds out” conventional political participation. However, recent accounts on the issue have taken the opposite perspective and highlighted potential mobilizing effects of political consumption. The empirical studies to date are correlational in nature or case studies, though, and they cannot fully gauge whether the *causal* effect of political consumption is predominantly negative or positive.

In the study, I summarize previous research into two mutually non-exclusive hypotheses about the relationship and correlation between political consumption and conventional participation. According to the *politicizing-hypothesis*, political consumption will stimulate and increase conventional political participation by adding political considerations to consumer choice. According to the *consumerism-hypothesis*, political consumption will decrease conventional participation by adding consumer choice to political considerations. While both hypotheses are motivated by previous research

on political consumption, it is the consumerism-hypothesis that tests the overarching research question of the thesis at hand.

I test both hypotheses by means of a survey experiment carried out on 410 political consumers in the US. The treated respondents were given a task to recall, describe, and motivate prior instances of political consumption of food—that is, consumer choices based on political considerations. Two groups under baseline conditions were assigned analogous tasks (to recall, describe and motivate) regarding their previous apolitical consumption of food or their previous consideration of political issues connected to food production.

After the treatment the respondents indicated their intentions to participate in politics in different ways. Politicization of consumption had only weak and inconclusive stimulating effects on the willingness to participate in conventional forms. Instead, there were significant demobilizing effects of adding consumer-choice to the consideration of political issues. The negative consumerism-effects on conventional participation are substantive and robust as regards compliance and alternative specifications of the statistical model. These results give statistically significant support for the consumerism-hypothesis, i.e. that adding consumer choice to political considerations by means of political consumption decreases conventional participation. The experiment also allowed for exploring some proposed mediators from the literature, however, resulting in repudiation of a few and support for none. As in Essay I, the bulk of the demobilizing effect should be addressed to something else than decreased perceived salience of public decision-makers. That is, when adding consumer choice, the issues at hand continue to be perceived as being salient, and public decision-making continues to be perceived as being relevant. Yet, intended participation decreases.

The reader may be tempted to misunderstand the results, as the experiment mention negative effects on conventional participation among political consumers. At worst, this leaves an impression that peoples' ambitions to apply their political perspectives to everyday-choices are counterproductive. Actually, the results give no support for such conclusion. The study give only a very few significant indications about causal effects that stem from political ambitions and perspectives. And these results indicate mobilizing effects. What drives the negative effects on conventional participation in the study is not political considerations or political activity but expanded consumer choice.

While there certainly may be democratic qualities in the acts of political consumption, markets' potential to realize political equality and responsiveness to citizens' political interests is generally inferior to the potential of formal political decision-making. Thus, expansions of consumer choice into political issues—such as the introduction of new consumer choices or the highlighting of consumer choice as political strategy—are likely to have

implications that are at odds with democratic core values as responsiveness and equality.

Essay III—Road Signs to Serfdom?

In the third essay I test whether the demobilizing effects on political participation recorded in Essay I and II apply also when reminders of consumer choice are expanded in the most ubiquitous way: by consumer advertising. This is a hard test for the hypothesis that consumer choices demobilize. Moreover, it allows for giving both the treated group and the control group tasks that are dry of references to political issues or politics.

Consumer advertising has long been accused of reducing peoples' engagement for common causes and collective action. The worries come from various strands of social science and humanities, with claims that consumer advertising decreases citizens' civic engagement. Again there are potential implications for democratic qualities such as governments' responsiveness to citizens' interests. However, social effects of advertising are scarcely studied empirically (Kim, et al. 2014) and these claims about demobilization are yet untested by studies able to examine causal effects.

By means of a survey experiment, I test the effect of consumer advertising on anticipated political participation among 2,868 US respondents. Each respondent was allotted one of two conditions by randomized assignment. The treated group was exposed to a representative set of nine pictures of consumer advertisements from the nine most advertised brands in real-world settings, while the control group received identical pictures with ads re-touched away. After the treatment, the respondents indicated their attitudes to different forms of political participation and a few mediators.

The group exposed to advertising scores lower than the control group on all measures for anticipated participation. The effects are thus in line with the theoretical expectation that exposure to consumer advertising discourages citizens' political participation. The effects are stronger among those respondents who have been the most attentive during the test, as well as among those less exposed to advertising before the test. The statistical significance is robust only as regards anticipated participation channeled through formal politics, but not for other measured outcomes. The experiment thus results in suggestive but not conclusive evidence in support for the expectation that consumer advertising reduces political participation. Given the democratic significance of political participation and the pervasiveness of consumer advertising, the results motivate further empirical research. The suggested effects are potentially far-reaching and the potential implications of the effects are extensive.

Conclusion

This is a thesis about expansions of consumer choice and the democratic implications that follow. For material and ideological reasons alike, consumer choices have expanded and are likely to continue to expand. Various accounts of how expanding consumer choices affect political participation are brought together and tested empirically, and the normative significance of the effects is spelled out. The thesis makes three kinds of contributions: theoretical, methodological and empirical.

Theoretically, the thesis contributes with a specification of the democratic merits and limits of consumer choice. This contribution bridges normative democratic theory and empirical participation research and is of relevance for other studies that are to assess the democratic relevance of changing patterns of political participation. The thesis also contributes to descriptive theory. This contribution consists in the syntheses of a wide-ranging set of notions about effects of expanding consumer choices and realted politicization of consumption. It results in one hypothesis about mobilizing effects of consumer choice, and one about demobilizing effects. The hypothesis about mobilizing effects emphasizes possible stimulation of citizens' political awareness, interest, and efficacy. The hypothesis about demobilizing effects is somewhat differently phrased in the essays. However, a consistent set of hypothesized mechanisms behind demobilization emerges: a general turn of the mindset towards markets and away from formal politics, a change in the perceived stakes (including a turn towards self-regarding motives) and a shift in the perception of which the most relevant actors are.

Methodologically, the general experimental approach to participation contributes with much needed causal evidence on issues that have previously been studied theoretically or by case studies and cross-sectional data and in some rare cases panel data. The recall-treatment of Essay II provides an innovative way of studying attitudinal effects *of* citizens' own choices to participate. This kind of experiment may be swiftly applied to many forms of political participation, and all the more so as the results of Essay II challenge long standing consensus in the field. Similarly, the empirical strategy of Essay III should also be considered for future studies. Survey experiments that vary the presence of representative sets of advertisements in their authentic contexts can be valid and provide reliable results, and should be considered by researchers who are interested not only in political engagement but various proposed social effects of advertising.

The main take-away from the essays is however empirical: expansions of consumer choice hold back political engagement. This pattern is consistent through the studies and statistically significant except for a few specifications of the test of advertising-effects.

The demobilizing effect may apply to an array of different expansions of consumer choice. The results call for replicating studies that test effects of

expanding consumer choice in other policy areas, in other contexts than Sweden and USA, and by other operationalizations of expanding consumer choice. Future studies should also aim at the causal mechanism or mechanisms behind the effects. It seems that some of the effect may be mediated though citizens' perception that less is at stake in politics once they are endowed consumer choice. However, the demobilizing effects of consumer choice are not limited to cases in which consumer choice is likely to reduce the actual influence of politics.

Actually, none of the suspect mechanisms seems guilty in the sense that their effects could explain the harm that is caused to political participation. The results indicate no general turn towards markets or activation of consumer practices among respondents treated with expanded consumer choice. Neither do the results suggest that respondents with expanded consumer choice care less for collective outcomes or political issues. In concert, the effects on outcomes and mediators imply that expansions of consumer choice make no difference for peoples' inclinations to be concerned about politics or about each other's fate, but that expanding consumer choice decreases citizens' inclination to address their concerns. That is, citizens with expanded consumer choices care as much for political issues as before, but are less likely to realize their political preferences.

These effects should be evaluated through the lens of democratic theory. When consumer choices are expanded and impinge on political participation, issues are likely to be increasingly decided by a method that neither respects political equality (as the means for influence cannot be equally distributed in markets unless the markets are separated from the monetary economy) nor responsiveness (as consumer power is more efficacious in creating than preventing outcomes). That is, when consumer choices replace formal political decision-making on an issue, the realization of democratic values will suffer.

However, in times of ephemeral popular political engagement and worries for failing political reform capacity in Western states, there is also a more hopeful reading of the results. If we wish to improve societies' capacity to realize citizens' preferences through common decisions, improve political equality, or foster a vivid public discourse, the results suggest that we may consider ways to make consumer choices less intrusive, less absorbing, and simply less numerous in citizens' lives. This perspective should be borne in mind when trying to design responsive systems for welfare services, as well as when social movements consider advising their members and supporters to go for consumption as a strategy for change. The taming of consumer choice, however, does not necessarily imply that the range of actual consumable alternatives must be restricted. It could also aim at dealing with how citizens are presented with consumer choices or how they are able to keep away from them. Regulation of advertising is thus an obvious area of interest, as are policies that influence whether internet business models are built around seldom occurring but large transactions rather than constant advertis-

ing exposure or repeated micropayments. This thesis does by no means end the discussion about such policies, but demonstrates the significance of a certain outlook. Issues about the extension of consumer choice are issues about democratic values.

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