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# Political Consumerism: How Communication and Consumption Orientations Drive “Lifestyle Politics”

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Historians and cultural theorists have long asserted that a desire to express political concerns often guides consumer behavior, yet such political consumerism has received limited attention from social scientists. Here, the authors explore the relationship of political consumerism with dispositional factors, communication variables, and consumption orientations using data collected from a panel survey conducted in the United States between February 2002 and July 2005. The authors test a theorized model using both cross-sectional and auto-regressive panel analyses. The static and change models reveal that conventional and online news use encourage political consumerism indirectly through their influence on political talk and environmental concerns. However, media use may also have some suppressive effects by reducing the desire to protect others from harmful messages. Results demonstrate how communication practices and consumption orientations work together to influence political consumerism beyond previously delineated factors. Implications for declines in political and civic participation and youth socialization are discussed.

*Keywords:* antisweatshop; boycott; buycott; fair trade; lifestyle politics; political consumerism; socially conscious consumption

**T**he intersection of markets and politics has a long history. As Breen (2004) convincingly argued, consumer politics shaped the American Revolution and laid the groundwork for nationhood. The colonists, who differed in many respects, shared an identity as aggrieved consumers of British goods. It was through their behavior as consumers that the colonists developed their most innovative and potent form of political action: boycotts (Schudson 2007 [this volume]).

The act of boycotting remains a powerful form of political engagement, though it is now seen as part of a much broader array of consumer behaviors that are shaped by a desire to express and support political and ethical perspectives. Labeled *political consumerism* by some (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005) and *socially*

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*conscious consumption* by others (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Keum et al. 2004), it is puzzling that, considering their historical and contemporary relevance, these behaviors have been so rarely subjected to social science inquiry.

This is particularly surprising if one recognizes that the politics of consumption is central to a large number of modern social movements, including but not limited to World Trade Organization protests, fair-trade advocacy, antisweatshop

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activism, and the antiapartheid movement (Bennett and Lagos 2007 [this volume]; Micheletti and Stolle 2007 [this volume]). More important, perhaps, is the introduction of the agendas of these social movements into the daily practices of ordinary citizens. Such political consumerism deserves special attention because it involves a large cross-section of the citizenry and has come to structure a wide range of consumer decisions.

Defined as the act of selecting among products and producers based on social, political, or ethical considerations, political consumerism may provide people with an alternative mode to engage with public issues outside of conventional political and civic behaviors such as voting or volunteering (Bennett and Entman 2000). Consumers who engage in such behaviors seek to hold companies and governments responsible for the manner in which products are produced, as well as for the nature of social and environmental consequences of this production. In the process, they challenge narrow definitions of political participation.

In this article, we explore individual differences and change over time in levels of political consumerism as a function of dispositional factors, communication variables, and consumption orientations. To do so, we use data collected from a three-wave panel survey conducted in the United States between February 2002 and July 2005. A number of the variables we consider, such as conventional and online news consumption and political talk, have proven to be consistent predictors of conventional forms of participation. We do this to examine whether models of communication and participation can be extended to political consumerism, yet we also consider how orientations toward consumption may mediate the effect of communication on political consumerism in an effort to further specify the antecedents of this phenomenon.

### *Political consumerism and lifestyle politics*

By using the market as a venue to express political and moral concerns, political consumerism is a manifestation of what Bennett (1998) has termed “lifestyle politics.” It reflects the broader tendency to see political meaning in recreational experiences, entertainment choices, fashion decisions, and other personal happenings. As Sapiro (2000, 4) explained, political consumerism can be readily adopted because it involves the “use of repertoires or familiar languages of action and interaction” (see also Frank 1994; Traugott 1995). As “politics by other means,” it reflects a movement away from institutional and formal modes of engagement. Instead, it is grounded in the belief that day-to-day action might be a more effective way to achieve political ends by using the market to influence public policy (Sapiro 2000).

Past research indicates that women, young people, and more educated individuals are particularly likely to make consumption decisions based on political and ethical considerations. Political consumerism has been linked to factors known to explain political participation such as religiosity, partisanship, and government trust, but it is also associated with postmaterialism and a sense of moral obligation, orientations more closely tied with “lifestyle politics” (Bennett 1998; Inglehart 1997; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Notably, political consumers’ low regard for the political establishment may indicate a general skepticism of

institutionalized power and authority (Zijderveld 2000). Rather than relying on governmental institutions, these consumers have decided to take on this responsibility themselves through their economic behaviors (Beck 1997; Shapiro and Hacker-Cordon 1999).

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*As “politics by other means,” [political consumerism] reflects a movement away from institutional and formal modes of engagement.*

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These associations and what they indicate about the politicization of the day-to-day suggest how political consumerism “blurs the distinction between the public and the private realms” (Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005, 254). Indeed, political consumerism speaks to the fact that for many people civic engagement only makes sense when it is organized around their personal values (Shah, Domke, and Wackman 1996). People might prefer participating in informal, lifestyle-based mobilization as a way to avoid traditional politics (Eliasoph 1998; Putnam 2002). They see the link between personal consumption and the politics of “environmentalism, labor rights, human rights, and sustainable development” (Micheletti 2003, 2). Research finds that media use, particularly news consumption, plays an important role in predicting such socially conscious consumption (Holt 2000; Keum et al. 2004). If institutional forms of political participation are any indication, news consumption works through political talk to define concerns and help forge the connection between these issues and action.

### *Communication, participation, and environmentalism*

A particularly relevant theoretical framework for understanding how communication factors may encourage political consumerism is the O-S-O-R perspective, originally suggested by Markus and Zajonc (1985). The first O in this model represents “the set of structural, cultural, cognitive, and motivational characteristics the audience brings to the reception situation that affect the impact of messages (S),” whereas the second O represents “what is likely to happen between the reception of messages and the subsequent response (R)” (McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod 1994, 146-47). In sum, the O-S-O-R model provides a lens for explaining the causal ordering of relationships among structural sociodemographic factors, individual predispositions, messages obtained from media, and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

This perspective emphasizes that the effects of mass media on participatory behaviors are typically not direct but operate indirectly through factors such as

political talk and pro-civic attitudes. These insights have been summarized as a *communication mediation model* predicting participation, with political talk as an intervening variable (Sotirovic and McLeod 2001). Shah et al. (2005) found that the effect of both traditional and online news media use on civic participation is mediated by political talk among citizens. These findings illustrate the role news plays in prompting political talk and the implications of talk for political action.

Although most past research employing this model has focused on conventional models of civic and political participation (Shah et al. 2005; Sotirovic and McLeod 2001), a wider range of prosocial behaviors has been theorized. Of particular relevance for this study, the O-S-O-R framework has been used to study the relationship between media use and individual expression of environmental concerns (Holbert, Kwak, and Shah 2003). This is not true of most prior efforts to connect mass communication use to proenvironmental attitudes, which have generally relied on direct effects models of agenda setting (Atwater, Salwen, and Anderson 1985), news framing (Karlberg 1997), or cultivation (Shanahan, Morgan, and Stenbjerre 1997). These studies have generally offered a pessimistic or inconclusive view of media influence on environmental action.

These studies share the view that people mainly “learn about environmental issues through the news, rather than by direct experience” (Karlberg 1997, 22), understanding environmental threats such as global warming and pollution through secondhand media accounts (Shanahan, Morgan, and Stenbjerre 1997). In line with this, Atwater, Salwen, and Anderson (1985) provided evidence that news media heighten concern about the environment. Other work has observed a relationship between TV viewing and environmental concern, but it did not find that concern influenced environmental action (Shanahan, Morgan, and Stenbjerre 1997).

By contrast, Holbert, Kwak, and Shah (2003), who adopted an O-S-O-R framework, found that media can have a positive influence on proenvironmental behavior among individuals who consume factual media content. Individuals who express environmental concern tend to consume public affairs programming and nature documentaries at higher levels, with this viewing, in turn, positively predicting efforts to engage in proenvironmental behaviors such as recycling and making a special effort to purchase products that are energy efficient. The authors theorized that environmentally concerned individuals are perhaps motivated to seek out and attend to relevant information provided by the media and that the consumption of such information mediates the relationship between concern and actual behavior. However, they acknowledged that their reliance on cross-sectional data limits their claims concerning the causal order among these variables.

### *Consumption orientations and political consumerism*

Indeed, a sizeable body of research in the fields of political science, sociology, psychology, and marketing provides evidence of a direct association between environmental concern and environmentally friendly behavior (Bamberg 2003; Blake 2001; Mainieri et al. 1997; Roberts and Bacon 1997). This relationship

tends to be concentrated among those who are politically interested and civically engaged (Keum et al. 2004; Guerin, Crete, and Mercier 2001). Thus, it is likely that environmental concern is spurred by news use and correlated with other socially conscious consumption behaviors.

The impact of environmental concern on socially conscious behavior may include buying a product that is benign toward the environment, purchasing recyclable or recycled packaging, boycotting companies that are seen as harmful to the environment or society, or favoring companies and brands that support shared values. According to Kempton (1993), when public concern is high on an environmental issue, consumer actions are far more common than political actions. Corroborating evidence for this relationship is found by Minton and Rose (1997), who observed that the more concerned individuals are about the environment, the more likely they are to seek or purchase environmentally friendly products.

However, environmental concern may not be the only consumption orientation that is shaped by media exposure and that influences political consumerism. Of particular interest is the concept of advertising paternalism, the belief that certain types of commercial messages should be limited to protect sensitive populations from the perceived harm that they pose. Originally examined in the context of impersonal influence research (McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson 1997), the "practice of treating or governing others in a parental manner, sometimes limiting others' rights with a benign intention" (Chia, Lu, and McLeod 2004, 115), has its roots in exposure to objectionable media content. Studies have found that paternalism is linked to the third-person perception, where people believe that others are more vulnerable to undesirable media content than themselves, which in turn drives the desire to censor the content deemed harmful, such as pornography, TV violence, and rap music (McLeod, Eveland, and Nathanson 1997; Rojas, Shah, and Faber 1996).

When placed in context, advertising paternalism can therefore be seen as a manifestation of an individual's desire to restrict commercial messages and content perceived as harmful to others. A sensitivity to messages thought to be damaging to vulnerable populations, such as children, or containing unacceptable depictions, such as overly sexualized imagery, may reflect a deeper belief that the companies that engage in such targeting and messaging deserve economic countermeasures such as boycotts. Thus, we speculate that ad paternalism may encourage political consumption, as consumers express their concern about social issues and promote the protection of groups by avoiding certain products and patronizing others.

## Theorized Model

These insights regarding the range of factors that might contribute to political consumerism can be summarized in the following model (Figure 1). This model begins with demographics and predispositions ( $O_1$ ), the background factors that

likely structure all of the subsequent factors in the model. This block includes a range of factors previously found to influence differences in political consumerism, as well as predictors of communication practices and consumption orientations. The second block contains information-seeking variables via mass media (S), specifically, conventional and online news consumption. These stimuli are expected to influence the amount of political discussion and the degree of environmental concern, as found by much past research, as well as advertising paternalism (i.e., protectionist attitudes regarding commercial messages deemed harmful). These outcome orientations are then expected to most directly influence political consumerism, explaining both individual differences and change over time. Notably, consistent with models of communication mediation, we expect the effects of information-seeking variables in this dynamic to be indirect on political consumerism.

## Method

To test this model, we use panel survey data conducted in February 2002, November 2004, and July 2005. February 2002 data were collected by Synovate, a commercial survey research firm, for DDB-Chicago's annual mail survey, the "Life Style Study." The Life Style Study relies on a stratified quota sampling technique to recruit respondents. Although this method differs from probability sampling procedures, it produces highly comparable data (see Putnam 2000). For details on this procedure, see Shah et al. (2005).

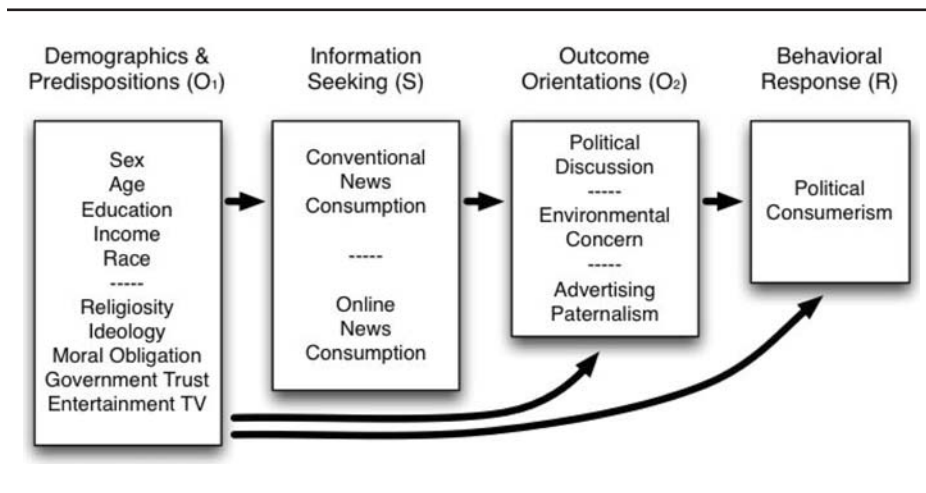
Of the 5,000 mail surveys distributed, 3,580 usable responses were received, which represents a response rate of 71.6 percent against the mailout for the February 2002 survey. For the November 2004 survey, we developed a custom questionnaire and recontacted the individuals who completed the February 2002 survey. Due to some panel erosion in the two years since the original survey, 2,450 questionnaires were mailed. We received 1,484 completed responses, for a panel retention rate of 41.4 percent and a response rate against the mailout of 60.1 percent. For the July 2005 recontact, another questionnaire was developed. Again, individuals who completed the prior survey were recontacted. Due to panel erosion, 1,446 questionnaires were mailed to November 2004 respondents. With 1,080 completed responses, the panel retention rate was 72.7 percent with a response rate against the mailout of 74.7 percent.

### Measures

The criterion variable of *political consumerism* was operationalized as an index of three indicators measured on a 6-point agree-disagree scale: (1) "I will not buy a product from a company whose values I do not share," (2) "I have boycotted products or companies in the past," and (3) "I make a special effort to buy from companies that support charitable causes" (first recontact:  $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $\alpha = .60$ ; second recontact:  $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ,  $\alpha = .63$ ).



FIGURE 1  
O-S-O-R MODEL OF POLITICAL CONSUMERISM



Demographic variables were measured in the baseline survey. Respondents' *age* was measured as a continuous variable ( $M = 47.46$  years,  $SD = 15.72$ ), and *gender* was a dichotomous variable (56.40 percent female). *Education* was assessed using an 18-point nonlinear scale ranging from "attended elementary school" to "attended grad school" ( $M = 14.04$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ). *Total household income* was assessed on a 13-point nonlinear scale ranging from \$5,000 to \$117,500 ( $M = \$50,120$ ,  $SD = \$33,785$ ). *Ethnicity* was measured as a dichotomous variable with white coded as 0 and nonwhite coded as 1 (10.40 percent nonwhite).

Predispositions including ideology, religiosity, and entertainment television viewing were also measured in the baseline survey. Moral obligation and trust in government were measured in the first recontact. *Ideology* was measured using five categories ranging from *very conservative* (coded 1) to *very liberal* (coded 5) ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). *Religiosity* was measured using a composite index of three 6-point agree-disagree items: (1) "Religion is an important part of my life," (2) "It's important to me to find spiritual fulfillment," and (3) "I believe in God" ( $M = 4.72$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ). *Moral obligation* was measured by indexing two 6-point agree-disagree items: (1) "I have an obligation to help others in need" and (2) "It is important to me to reach out to others who need help" ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ,  $r = .68$ ). *Trust in government* was an index of two 6-point agree-disagree items: (1) "An honest man cannot get elected to high office" and (2) "Elected officials don't tell us what they really think" ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $r = .55$ ). Habitual entertainment TV viewing was measured by summing viewership of twenty-three hour-long and twenty half-hour shows (weighted by .50) ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 3.60$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

Next, conventional news consumption, online news consumption, political talk, environmental concern, and advertising paternalism were created to tap

communication practices and consumption orientations. All of these variables, with the exception of advertising paternalism, were measured in the first and second recontact studies. In both studies, conventional news consumption was created by averaging across standardized measures of exposure and attention to newspapers and television news (first recontact:  $M = 0.001$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ; second recontact:  $M = 0.003$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ). Likewise, online news consumption was created by standardizing and averaging measures of exposure and attention (first recontact:  $M = 0.005$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ,  $\alpha = .93$ ; second recontact:  $M = 0.01$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $\alpha = .64$ ).

We measured *political talk* by using a composite index of six items in which respondents were asked to indicate how much they talked about politics with (1) "friends," (2) "family," (3) "coworkers," (4) "ethnic minorities," (5) "people who disagree with me," and (6) "people who agree with me" on an 8-point frequency scale (first recontact:  $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ; second recontact:  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ). *Environmental concern* was created by averaging responses to the following 6-point agree-disagree items: (1) "I would be willing to accept a lower standard of living to conserve energy," (2) "I'm very concerned about global warming," and (3) "I contributed to an environmental or conservation organization" (first recontact:  $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $\alpha = .45$ ; second recontact:  $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha = .43$ ). *Advertising paternalism* was an index containing the following 6-point agree-disagree items: (1) "Advertising for beer and wine should be taken off TV," (2) "Advertising directed to children should be taken off television," and (3) "TV commercials place too much emphasis on sex" (baseline:  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $\alpha = .57$ ; second recontact:  $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Analytic strategy

To examine the effects of communication practices and consumption orientations on political consumerism, we employed two different analytic strategies: (1) a cross-sectional model, which relates individual differences in these indicators based solely on data from the first recontact survey; and (2) an auto-regressive model, which relates aggregate change estimates generated by lagging baseline or first recontact variables on their second recontact counterparts.

Each approach has unique advantages and disadvantages (Finkel 1995). The cross-sectional model does not take advantage of the panel design; nonetheless, we include it here for three reasons: (1) it retains a larger and more representative sample; (2) it serves as a baseline against which we compare the auto-regressive model; and (3) it allows us to connect this research to previous scholarship that has mainly relied on cross-sectional analyses.

In the auto-regressive model, each  $T_2$  measure is regressed on its corresponding  $T_1$  measure, with the  $T_1$  measure retained as a common variance component. The shared variance between  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  measures represents temporal stability and effectively controls for prior levels of the variable, making the auto-regressive component interpretable as relating change among outcomes in a synchronous model. This approach aims to explain variance among endogenous  $T_2$  variables while accounting for stability in these variables over time.

Whether modeling the cross-sectional relationships or relating change over time, we employed a series of path analyses using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test the mediating role of the outcome orientations (political talk, environmental concern, and advertising paternalism) for the effects of information seeking on political consumerism. To do this, we first used the demographic, predispositional, and information-seeking variables to predict the outcome orientations before including these orientations in the models predicting the behavioral responses of political consumerism. This was done to observe the nature of the relationships among news consumption and the factors subsequent in our model.

## Results

### *The cross-sectional model*

We used the OLS regression model to test the outcome variables of political talk, environmental concern, and then political consumerism. Because there was no measure of advertising paternalism in the first recontact survey, that variable was not included in the cross-sectional analysis. The predictor variables were entered simultaneously but are presented in blocks according to their assumed causal order in the O-S-O-R framework.

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*Both conventional and online news  
consumption . . . were substantial  
predictors of political talk.*

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*Predicting political talk.* The regression model predicting political talk performed well, accounting for a total of 26.5 percent of the variance (see Table 1). Demographic and predispositional factors ( $O_1$ ) accounted for 12.0 percent of the variance in political talk. Among these predictors, age, gender, income, education, ideology, and moral obligation remained significant in the final model. Those who were more educated ( $\beta = .09, p < .001$ ), had higher incomes ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ), were more liberal ( $\beta = .08, p < .001$ ), and held stronger moral obligations ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ) were more likely to participate in political talk; while those who were female ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ) or older ( $\beta = -.13, p < .001$ ) were less likely to engage in political talk. Both conventional and online news consumption ( $S$ ) were substantial predictors of political talk, accounting for 14.5 percent of incremental variance. Both conventional ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ) and online news consumption ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ) were positively related to political talk.

TABLE 1  
 CROSS-SECTIONAL MODELS OF POLITICAL TALK,  
 ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN, AND POLITICAL CONSUMERISM

	Political Talk	Environmental Concern	Political Consumerism
Demographics			
Gender (female)	-.07°	.04	.03
Age	-.13***	.13***	.06°
Education	.09***	-.02	.08**
Income	.12***	-.08**	.01
Race (nonwhite)	-.02	-.03	-.07°
Predispositions (O <sub>1</sub> )			
Religiosity	.05	-.09**	.03
Ideology	.08***	.15***	-.04
Moral obligation	.08**	.25***	.20***
Trust in government	-.02	-.08**	-.03
Entertainment TV	.04	.03	-.02
News use (S)			
Conventional news use	.36***	.07°	.03
Online news use	.11***	-.01	.05
Orientations (O <sub>2</sub> )			
Political talk	—	—	.11***
Environmental concern	—	—	.13***
Total R <sup>2</sup> (percentage)	26.5	12.6	13.2

NOTE: Cell entries are final standardized regression coefficients.

° $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Predicting environmental concern.* A total of 12.6 percent of the variance in environmental concern was accounted for by the variables in the model. Demographics and predispositions (O<sub>1</sub>) accounted for 12.0 percent of the variance in environmental concern. Among the sociodemographic variables, age, income, religion, ideology, moral obligation, and trust in government remained significant in the final model. The older ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ) and the more liberal ( $\beta = .15, p < .001$ ) respondents showed higher levels of environmental concern, while those with higher incomes ( $\beta = -.08, p < .01$ ) and those who were more religious ( $\beta = -.09, p < .01$ ) were less likely to express environmental concern. Moral obligation ( $\beta = .25, p < .001$ ) was positively related to environmental concern, while trust in government ( $\beta = -.08, p < .01$ ) was negatively related to environmental concern, supportive of an antiestablishment morality. Consumption of news (S) also predicted environmental concern, accounting for an additional 0.6 percent of the variance, most explained by conventional news use ( $\beta = .07, p < .05$ ).

*Predicting political consumerism.* A total of 13.2 percent of the variance in political consumerism was accounted for by the variables in the model. Demographics and predispositions accounted for 9.8 percent of the variance.

Among the demographic factors, age, race, and education remained significant in the final model. The older ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ) and more educated ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ) respondents were more likely to take part in political consumerism, while nonwhites ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ) were less likely. Among the predispositions, only moral obligation ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ) was related to political consumerism, reinforcing the view that personal values and a sense of altruism underlie certain forms of political consumerism.

Conventional and online news consumption accounted for a significant 1.2 percent of the incremental variance in political consumerism, yet neither of these news consumption indicators was significantly related to political consumerism in the final model. Political talk and environmental concern, both of which were directly predicted by news consumption, accounted for an additional 2.3 percent of the variance in political consumerism. Political talk ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ) and environmental concern ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ) were positively related to political consumerism. This finding suggests that the effect of news consumption on political consumerism is mediated through political talk and environmental concern.

### *Change model*

In addition to the cross-sectional analysis, we also examined how change in news media consumption, political talk, environmental concern, and advertising paternalism directly or indirectly affects political consumerism. To examine this, we employed the following strategy: after accounting for the demographics and predispositions, stability and change estimates for the antecedent variables were regressed on changes in the mediating variables, after which stability and change in these antecedent and mediating variables were regressed on the criterion variable. Specifically, for each model, (1) a “stability factor” representing the value of the dependent variable at  $T_1$  was first entered into the equation to account for variance in this variable at  $T_2$  that could be explained by its own prior value, (2) time-invariant variables such as demographics and predispositions were entered, and (3) stability and change in key variables were included to explain the outcome orientations and behaviors. To do so, we included the value of these variables from  $T_1$ —essentially a stability estimate—and difference in these variables between  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ —an auto-regressive change estimate (see Cohen et al. 2002, 570-71). Using this approach, four synchronous change models were generated and tested with the panel data against political talk, environmental concern, advertising paternalism, and, ultimately, political consumerism to further specify the relationships between variables.

*Predicting political talk.* We first predicted change in political talk (see Table 2). All variables were entered simultaneously, accounting for 37.7 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. The stability factor representing the value of the dependent variable at  $T_1$  revealed considerable consistency in political talk ( $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ). In contrast to the cross-sectional model, only gender ( $\beta = -.08, p < .01$ ) remained a significant demographic predictor, while none of the predispositions

TABLE 2  
CHANGE MODELS OF POLITICAL TALK, ENVIRONMENTAL  
CONCERN, AND ADVERTISING PATERNALISM

	$\Delta$ Political Talk	$\Delta$ Environmental Concern	$\Delta$ Advertising Paternalism
Stability factor	.42***	.51***	.52***
Demographics			
Gender (female)	-.08**	.07°	.00
Age	.01	.05	.12***
Education	-.03	.01	-.01
Income	.04	-.06	-.04
Race (nonwhite)	.05	.01	-.03
Predispositions ( $O_1$ )			
Religiosity	-.02	-.01	.05
Ideology (liberal)	.02	.03	-.07**
Moral obligation	.04	.11***	.08**
Trust in government	.02	-.03	-.06°
Entertainment TV	.03	-.02	-.10***
News use ( $S T_1$ )			
Conventional news	.15***	-.02	.01
Web news	.05	.02	.03
$\Delta$ News use ( $\Delta S$ )			
$\Delta$ Conventional news	.14***	.00	-.06°
$\Delta$ Web news	.14***	.06°	.03
Total $R^2$ (percentage)	37.7***	33.8***	39.9***

NOTE: Cell entries are final standardized regression coefficients.

° $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

achieved statistical significance. Overall, the results show that only 1.2 percent of the variance in political talk at  $T_2$  can be explained by demographics and predispositions. The stability estimates, operationalized using media use measured from the first recontact survey, accounted for 1.4 percent of change in political talk, with only conventional news consumption achieving statistical significance ( $\beta = .15$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, change in media use between  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  (conventional and online news use) accounted for an additional 4.7 percent of change in political talk during this period. Change in both conventional and online news use were found to be significant predictors ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively).

*Predicting environmental concern.* We next predicted environmental concern at  $T_2$  (see Table 2). Again, all variables were entered simultaneously, explaining 33.8 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. The stability factor of the dependent variable at  $T_1$  revealed considerable constancy in environmental concern ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among the demographic factors, only gender was a significant predictor of change in environmental concern between  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Moral obligation also predicted change in environmental concern ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ). Among the media variables, only the change estimate in Web news consumption ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ) was a significant predictor of change in environmental concern.

*Predicting advertising paternalism.* The availability of the measures of advertising paternalism in the July 2005 data allowed us to add it as a factor in our broader analysis. Again, all predictors were entered simultaneously, explaining 39.9 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. The stability factor yielded a strong relationship ( $\beta = .52, p < .001$ ), indicating considerable overtime consistency in this attitude. Among the demographics, only age was a significant predictor ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ). A much wider range of predispositions contributed to change in this attitude: liberal ideology ( $\beta = -.07, p < .01$ ), moral obligation ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ), government trust ( $\beta = -.06, p < .05$ ), and habitual entertainment TV viewing ( $\beta = -.10, p < .001$ ). Only change in conventional news media use was a significant predictor among the information-seeking variables, though this variable yielded a negative relationship with change in advertising paternalism ( $\beta = -.06, p < .05$ ). In combination with entertainment TV viewing, these results suggest that conventional media use, especially entertainment television use, reduces advertising paternalism.

*Predicting political consumerism.* Our final model attempted to explain change in political consumerism (see Table 3). This model accounted for a total of 36.9 percent of the variance in the criterion variable. The stability factor performed as expected, yielding a strong positive relationship ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ). None of the demographic variables remained significant predictors of change in political consumerism. Among the predispositional variables, only religiosity ( $\beta = .09, p < .01$ ) was a positive predictor of the unexplained variance in political consumerism at  $T_2$ . The media use variables, which helped explain individual differences and over-time change in the three outcome orientations thought to encourage political consumerism, were not statistically significant predictors.

The outcome orientations, however, were significant predictors, consistent with the cross-sectional model and with the communication mediation framework. In addition to the stability estimate for advertising paternalism ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ), the change estimates for environmental concern ( $\beta = .07, p < .05$ ) and advertising paternalism ( $\beta = .11, p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of change in political consumerism. Change in political talk was also positively related to the criterion variables, though this relationship did not achieve significance.

## Discussion

Historians and cultural theorists have long asserted that consumer behavior is guided by a desire to express political concerns and social preferences, yet social scientists have only begun to explore the factors that contribute to political consumerism. This research observes direct and mediated relationships with

TABLE 3  
CHANGE MODEL OF POLITICAL CONSUMERISM

	Δ Political Consumerism
Stability factor	.50***
Demographics	
Gender (female)	-.05
Age	-.02
Education	.02
Income	.01
Race (nonwhite)	-.03
Predispositions (O <sub>1</sub> )	
Religiosity	.09**
Ideology (liberal)	.02
Moral obligation	.03
Trust in government	.02
Entertainment TV	.00
News Use (S T <sub>1</sub> ) and Orientations (O <sub>2</sub> T <sub>1</sub> )	
Conventional news use	.06
Web news use	.00
Political talk	.02
Environmental concern	.04
Advertising paternalism	.06*
Δ Media use (Δ S)	
Δ Conventional news	.01
Δ Web news	.02
Δ Orientations (Δ O <sub>2</sub> )	
Δ Political talk	.06
Δ Environmental concern	.07*
Δ Advertising paternalism	.11***
Total R <sup>2</sup> (percentage)	36.9***

NOTE: Cell entries are final standardized regression coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

dispositional factors, communication variables, and consumption orientations, confirming some of what is known about this practice while adding substantially to our understanding of the factors that drive “lifestyle politics.” The consistency seen across both static and change models, tested using cross-sectional and panel data, respectively, largely confirms our theoretical model of mediated effects of information-seeking variables on this economic form of political behavior. Both sets of models reveal that conventional and online news use encourage political consumerism indirectly through their influence on political talk and environmental concerns. However, media use may also have some suppressive effects by reducing the desire to protect others from harmful messages (i.e., advertising paternalism).



These results demonstrate how communication practices and consumption orientations work together to influence political consumerism beyond previously delineated factors. In particular, information seeking through conventional and online news sources appears to encourage orientations toward politics and society, namely, greater frequency of political talk and more pronounced concern about the environment. These two factors, in turn, encourage political consumerism, along with the sizable effects of advertising paternalism. The relationship between media consumption and advertising paternalism observed in the synchronous change models somewhat complicates this dynamic, with habitual entertainment television viewing and conventional news use both decreasing advertising paternalism and indirectly suppressing political consumerism. Thus, media use may both encourage and discourage political consumerism through its indirect effects on political talk and consumption orientations.

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*[C]ommunication practices and  
consumption orientations work together  
to influence political consumerism.*

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The results provide general support for the O-S-O-R framework that structures our analysis. For the most part, the results are consistent across cross-sectional and change models, with many of these models accounting for a large proportion of variance in political talk, environmental concern, advertising paternalism, and political consumerism. Notably, the role of predispositions is comparatively powerful in cross-sectional models but does much less to explain change. This lends support to the view that these predispositions help to set basic levels of attitudes and behaviors but do little to explain change. We suspect that predispositions may even suppress change, which would make the explanatory power of the other variables in our model more impressive. In fact, we found that over-time variation is explained by synchronous change in causally proximate communication practices and consumption orientations.

These findings have important implications for research on the intersection of consumer and civic culture. Consumer-citizens, who exercise their political values and concerns through their consumption patterns, view the economic realm as an efficient and meaningful sphere in which to advance their deeper moral and social concerns. This may reflect anti-institutionalism, as Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) asserted, though we find little evidence of that here. Instead, we find political consumerism to be a more dynamic behavioral response to contemporary information and the orientations that are a consequence of exposure

to news. This underscores the importance of communication factors in political consumerism and “lifestyle politics.”

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*Consumer-citizens, who exercise their political values and concerns through their consumption patterns, view the economic realm as an efficient and meaningful sphere in which to advance their deeper moral and social concerns.*

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The politics of consumption seems to occupy an increasingly central place in the daily activities of ordinary citizens, becoming an essential element in many people’s political repertoires. The decision to drive an extra two blocks to a BP gas station, a company that has received some praise for its environmental practices, rather than frequenting an Exxon-Mobil outlet, a corporation that has received much lower marks from activists, politicizes a day-to-day activity and reflects an orientation to “vote with one’s pocketbook” rather than only at the polling place. Moreover, political consumption may be a more expedient way of expressing dissatisfaction than protesting in the streets, especially since companies are increasingly responsive to such efforts. As such, this form of political action, whether buying fair-trade products, avoiding sweatshop clothing, or boycotting nations, is a viable and meaningful alternative to conventional modes of participation, and it merits further study by social scientists.

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