

# Voting with Their Feet and Wallet

September 14, 2015

The ANES traditionally asks about several forms of political participation and election involvement—such as wearing a campaign button and contacting an elected official. Nevertheless, new technologies and a polarized political climate present myriad ways for politically interested citizens to articulate and act on their preferences. One understudied modern form of political participation is political consumerism—or the practice of buying or boycotting certain goods or services for political reasons. In analysis of data from the 2014 CCES, we find that such behaviors are relatively common—approximately 40% of Americans engage in one or both activities. Given the prevalence of these activities, we propose to add to the 2016 Pilot Study questions that measure these behaviors as well as the attitudes and opinions that underlie these behaviors.

Though political consumerism is inherently political, boycotting and buycotting have received remarkably little attention from political scientists (exceptions include Newman and Bartels (2010); Copeland (2014)). As such, we know relatively little about what predicts consumer preferences with regards to politics. Furthermore, we have reason to expect that these acts are increasingly common: our estimate of the proportion of Americans that engage in one or both acts is 12 percentage points higher than the estimate from a 2005 national survey (Newman and Bartels 2010). Finally, we argue that the prevalence of these practices and the extent to which citizens can be mobilized to boycott and buycott have important consequences for voting, elections, and campaign finance. Especially in the post-*Citizens United* era, the intersection of the individual political behavior and the political preferences and political speech of corporations merits greater attention.

## Proposed items

- “In the last 12 months, have you boycotted a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company that provides it? [Yes; No]”
  - “[If yes] What was the name of the company or product that you boycotted? [Open ended]”
- “In the last 12 months, have you bought a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company that provides it? [Yes; No].”
  - “[If yes] What was the name of the company or product that you bought? [Open ended]”
- “When you are considering whether or not to buy a product or service, how important is the political leanings of the company that provides it? [Extremely important, Very important, Somewhat important, Slightly important, Not at all important]”
- “As you may know, companies sometimes take sides in political issues and elections. How appropriate or inappropriate do you think it is for companies to take sides in politics? [Very appropriate, Somewhat appropriate, Somewhat inappropriate, Very inappropriate]”
- “Some companies lean towards either the Democrats or the Republicans. To the best of your knowledge, do the following companies lean more towards the Democrats or the Republicans? [Democrats, Republicans, Neither, Don’t know]”
  - Costco
  - Coors
  - Domino’s Pizza
  - Marriott Hotels
  - Wendy’s
  - Hilton Hotels
  - Starbuck’s
  - Chick-Fil-A

In order for citizens to engaged in principled political consumerism, they must have an interest in and knowledge of the political leanings of corporations. The proposed battery has the obvious virtue of measuring the prevalence of both types of political consumerism activities—which is very rarely done among nationally representative surveys, but it also includes questions designed to measure the attitudes that may underlie such behaviors. Finally, the proposed battery of questions includes several items in a single grid designed to measure citizens’ knowledge about the political

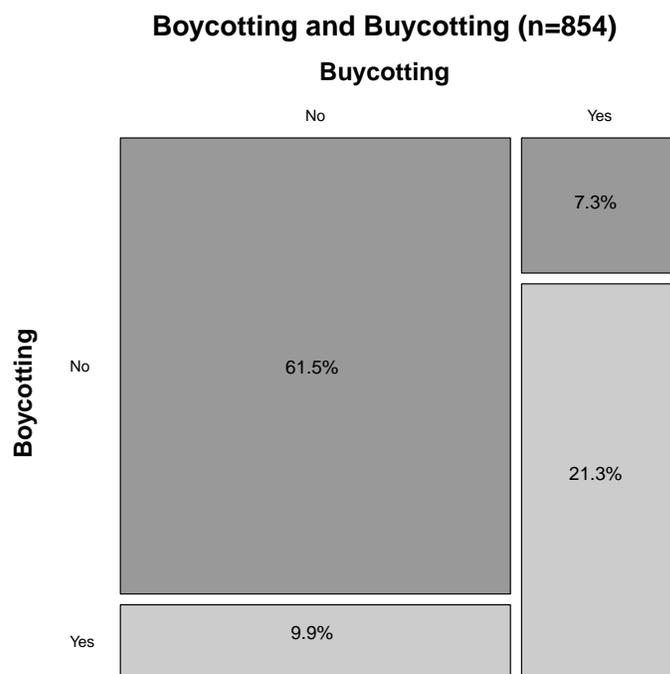


Figure 1: *Source:* 2014 CCES Post-Election Survey

leanings of corporations. While our preliminary work suggests that citizen knowledge in this domain is low, beliefs—correct and incorrect—correlate highly with behavior.

### **Insights from previous work**

On the post-election wave of the 2014 CCES, we asked respondents in one survey module if they had in the past year engaged in either political consumerism behavior. Figure 1 presents the weighted crosstab of boycotting and buycotting. As with most non-voting political acts, a majority of Americans do not engage in political consumerism, but a sizable minority, 39% engage in at least one of these behaviors. Furthermore, more than 20% say they performed both acts in the past year.

The figures are much higher than the analogous estimates in the 2005 United States Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID) Survey conducted by the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University, a high quality face-to-face interview (Newman and Bartels 2010).

While some of the difference may be attributable to survey mode,<sup>1</sup> we believe that the polarized information environment and advances in technology—including the availability of mobile phone apps designed to estimate the political leanings of corporations—facilitate greater levels of political consumerism.

Our initial study also reaffirms that political consumerism is indeed political. Table 1 presents the results of our boycott and buycott items by respondents’ 5-point political ideology. We find that ideologues engage in consumerism at higher rates than moderates and political liberals are especially likely to engage in political boycotts.

Table 1: Political Consumerism by Political Ideology

	% Boycott	% Buycott	n
Very liberal	54.9	38.0	63
Liberal	36.3	25.9	136
Moderate	27.1	28.8	331
Conservative	22.1	28.7	242
Very conservative	46.4	45.3	82
Total	31.1	28.5	856

*Source:* 2014 CCES Post-Election Survey

This relationship stands up to multivariate analyses—including demographic controls, income, and political interest—further suggesting that political consumerism is indeed a political phenomenon.

## Need for further research

Given the prevalence of these activities in a national sample, we propose that the ANES include our seven questions about political consumerism in the 2016 Pilot Study. We believe that the high quality, probability-based sample employed by the ANES will prove to be an important asset in forwarding this research. Furthermore, we hope that the inclusion of these items along the ANES’s wider battery of political participation and civic engagement activities will allow researchers to

<sup>1</sup>The 2005 survey was conducted face-to-face and the CCES survey is conducted solely online.

better assess the extent to which these new kinds of political participation are similar to traditional means of participation and any important ways in which they differ.

## References

- Copeland, L. (2014). Conceptualizing Political Consumerism: How Citizenship Norms Differentiate Boycotting from Buycotting. *Political Studies*, 62:172–186.
- Newman, B. J. and Bartels, B. L. (2010). Politics at the Checkout Line: Explaining Political Consumerism in the United States. *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(4):803–817.