

Summary

Choosing at the checkout An exploration of political consumerism in the Netherlands

S.1 Summary

Political consumerism in the Netherlands

When consumers consciously take environmental, ethical or political concerns into account in their purchasing behaviour, this is referred to as political consumerism (*'maatschappelijk bewust consumeren'*). In this conceptual and empirical exploration, we view political consumerism from a political science and sociological perspective, and present the available data for the Netherlands. What does political consumerism mean? How does it manifest itself in the Netherlands, more specifically: How widespread is it and what characterises political consumers? And how does the supply side of political consumerism manifest itself in the Netherlands? To answer this last question, we look at a number of small-scale sustainable urban food initiatives in the Netherlands.

In addition to the literature review, we draw on existing national and international survey material, monitors, and information put out by organisations and published on websites. To obtain a picture of the supply side, we interviewed initiators of small-scale sustainable food initiatives.

In addition to answering the substantive research questions above (§ S1), we also explore a number of reflective questions (§ S2): What are relevant questions for follow-up research? What can we learn from the bottom-up study of political consumers? And what role(s) can the government play in relation to this phenomenon?

S.1.1 What does political consumerism mean?

Political consumerism in practice

Political consumers, also referred to in the literature as ethical consumers or citizen-consumers, have several tools at their disposal, such as boycotting and boycotting (consciously buying or not buying certain products and services), or adapting their personal lifestyle to reflect ecological values (e.g. by becoming vegetarian, reducing their consumption (downshifting) or engaging in the sharing economy). A fourth manifestation – discursive political consumerism or creative cultural criticism – is slightly further removed from the act of consumption itself; the best-known example of this is 'culture jamming', which involves ironically exposing the politics behind the modern consumption culture, for example by manipulating advertising slogans or playing with images of multinationals in spoof adverts (fake adverts). This can be viewed more as a creative expression of responsible consumption. A well-known example is the email correspondence between an American student and Nike following his order for a sneaker with the word 'sweatshop' on it.

A bottom-up approach to political consumerism

By emphasising the conscious nature of this type of consumption, in which social (environmental, ethical or political) considerations are reflected in consumer choices, in this study we are choosing a different perspective than if we had chosen to look at sustainable consumption, for example. This latter term is also commonly found in the literature and in policy, but places the emphasis more on the effects of sustainable behaviour and how consumers can be persuaded to adopt it. In this study we adopt a bottom-up perspective, a relatively untapped empirical approach, and look at what citizen-consumers are doing themselves in the area of responsible consumption. This has also been described in terms of the 'energetic society' or 'participation society' (Hajer 2011; NSOB/PBL 2014).

Mainly individual and informal, but also variation

In the literature, political consumerism is mainly described as an individualised, informal form of political behaviour, which requires relatively little effort. However, this does not hold for all types of political consumerism: some demand significantly more effort (e.g. becoming a vegan or adopting an autarchic lifestyle), while others are more collective and/or institutionalised (e.g. traditional boycotts, culture jamming). Emphasising the non-institutionalised aspect can also cloud the fact that political consumerism is embedded in an institutionalised context (e.g. social and other media, action groups, use of quality marks and labels by NGOs and businesses).

Critical mass

Critical mass is key to the achievement of sustainability goals: a single individual refusing to eat factory-farmed chickens will not achieve much on their own. However, critical mass is not relevant for all forms of political consumerism: where the goals are small-scale and people mainly want to express their social awareness in their personal lives, for example, critical mass plays a subordinate role. The traditionally small percentage of the Dutch population who are vegetarians (3-4.5%) are for example unlikely to aspire to making the Netherlands a completely meat or fish-free zone.

Self-interest and public interest

Another interesting discussion within the literature is whether political consumerism can stem from self-interest. Opinions on this are divided. Some advocate the explicit inclusion of self-interest as a motive for responsible consumption, because otherwise only an elite group would consume in this way. Others argue that self-interest is not a political motivation and should therefore not be included as a motive. We have opted to apply the condition that something more than self-interest alone must play a role in the consumption decision. We are thus not denying the role of self-interest in responsible consumption, but do draw a dividing line between consumers who consume responsibly purely out of self-interest and citizen-consumers who as a minimum also take social considerations into account.

Political participation or not?

Political consumerism is seen mainly as a form of political participation. Its focus on the market and its individualised character mean it is a relatively new form of political participation, while the social (ecological, ethical or political) motivation makes it political.

S.1.2 How does the phenomenon manifest itself in the Netherlands?

Partly niche behaviour, but boycotting, buycotting and sharing are also growing

Political consumerism can to some extent be described as niche behaviour in the Netherlands. A small minority of people are active as culture jammers, consciously adopt a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, share products and services with others based on environmental concerns, or reduce their consumption (downshiffters) for the same reason. Boycotting products is one activity which has outgrown the label 'niche behaviour', being practised by 15% of Dutch people in 2014. Buycotters are also a relatively large group: in 2013 around a third of Dutch people said they consciously bought certain foods based on environmental or animal welfare concerns.

The percentage of Dutch people who boycott certain products has tripled since the 1970s (from 5% to 15%), but internationally the Netherlands scores low. The Dutch score higher when it comes to buycotting, but nowhere near as high as the Nordic countries, Switzerland or Germany. Sales of food with a quality mark are however growing significantly, suggesting an increase in buycotting. Finally, there are indications that consumer sharing is growing.

Citizen-consumers tend to be well educated, but there is variation by type

Political consumerism is predominantly practised by well-educated citizen-consumers; this is the main common denominator shared by the four types distinguished. There is however clear variation between the types: Dutch boycotters and buycotters are more often women, interested and active in left-wing politics and society, and display higher trust. Vegetarians are also more often women, tend to be members of smaller households and live in urban areas. Downshiffters tend to be younger, more often in part-time jobs and more environmentally aware. The characteristics of sharing economy consumers vary depending on whether they are on the giving or receiving side of the sharing activity: givers more often have a higher income and espouse altruistic values, while receivers tend to be lower down the economic scale. Sharing sites such as peerby (sharing products and services with neighbours) mainly attract younger users, but Thuisafgehaald.nl (sharing meals) attracts a diversity of younger and older users. This inventory of the different types of political consumerism has exploded at least one myth, namely that only more affluent consumers consume responsibly.

Perceived effectiveness varies

The perceived effectiveness of political consumerism varies depending on the form it takes. Consumers in the international literature ascribe little or only modest impact to boy-

cotting. By contrast, the Dutch take a reasonably positive view of the effect of buying food with quality marks or reducing the amount of meat in their daily diet: a (large) majority believe that these actions make a major contribution to a sustainable food system. Dutch consumers do however have difficulty keeping track of the more than 170 quality marks and labels with which they are now confronted.

Efforts of supply side of political consumerism directed mainly at raising consumer awareness

Finally, we looked at the supply side of political consumerism and considered four small-scale urban food initiatives. These initiatives offer consumers a framework for making socially responsible choices, enabling them to engage in boycotting, (partly) adapt their lifestyle, combat food waste, and strengthen their own awareness of sustainability (through workshops and courses).

All the initiatives have become more professional since their inception, which has also made their ideas and ideals more future-proof. They are also embedded in a network of collaborative partners – often similar initiatives, but also schools, local authorities, business partners such as supermarkets, manufacturers, care and welfare organisations, and sometimes the entire food chain. In the initiators' eyes, sharing ideas and manpower (transparency) delivers greater benefits than running a business in a traditional way (shielding it from competitors).

The four initiators tend to ascribe their own success mainly to having an original idea on a hot topic at the right time, often helped by the media and/or winning or almost winning a competition. They are realistic and critical about their own contribution to sustainability: they know that what they are doing is a drop in the ocean and that they do not or cannot always operate sustainably: smallness of scale is for example not always sustainable. However, as one initiator put it, they want to 'show that you can do things differently. Just DOING it. It's not always perfect, but at least you've made a start!' Their strength lies in their ability to raise awareness among their customers and in the influence that these consumers in turn exert on other consumers.

S.2 Discussion

S.2.1 Future research agenda

The conceptual exploration in chapter 2 of this report shows that political consumerism (and related concepts) receives attention from several scientific disciplines. The research focuses mainly on aspects such as the factors that influence sustainable consumption and how sustainable consumption can be promoted (Defila et al. 2014; Steg et al. 2012).

This fits in with a top-down approach, in which the consumer is regarded as a subject to be guided in their behaviour. The bottom-up perspective of what citizen-consumers are doing themselves has been relatively neglected in scientific research. Which follow-up questions

for future research can we formulate on the basis of this exploratory study from a bottom-up, citizen-consumer perspective?

Address lack of data on niche groups

One of the first conclusions of this study is that, partly because of the wide range of forms taken by political consumerism, the data is fragmented across highly diverse sources, is sometimes out of date (e.g. ESS 2002), sometimes based only on estimates, and is entirely absent for some groups. The summary at the end of chapter 3 highlights these data gaps. Follow-up exploratory research on niche groups who are (almost) absent from the picture but who are nonetheless leading the way in green behaviour, such as hard-core downshifters or vegans, would be a first step in gaining a better picture of the mosaic of different types of political consumerism.

Obtain a clearer picture of motives

Most of the available material also provides only a limited insight into what motivates consumption decisions. If people are merely asked about their actual behaviour without any link to motives, it is difficult to gauge whether or not they are consciously consuming responsibly. This more 'intent-oriented' approach sits alongside an 'impact-oriented' approach (Defila et al. 2014). In this study we explicitly opted for the former perspective, looking at citizen-consumers who make an ecological, ethical or political judgement before engaging in a certain kind of behaviour. Our aim in choosing this perspective is to identify which bottom-up choices – i.e. not enforced by personal circumstance or by government legislation and regulations – are made at the checkout. This provides an interesting addition to the second perspective, which looks from a more top-down perspective at the effects of sustainable consumption. Relevant questions for future research could be: What interests and motives play a role in political consumerism, and in which combinations? How are self-interest and public interest interwoven and how might they reinforce each other (Schuitema & De Groot 2015)?¹ Which non-intentional processes (habits, routines, social norms, identity formation) play a role in political consumerism?

Differences between 'dark-green' and 'light-green' consumers

Virtually no information is available on the intensity of consumption. Yet there is a difference between someone who buys an organic product a few times a year – a 'light-green' consumer – and someone who tries to live sustainably in every way, every day – a 'dark-green' consumer (see also Boström & Klintman 2009). How do dark-green consumers differ from light-green consumers (habits, values, norms, identity)? What persuades dark-green consumers to overcome all kinds of hurdles which are evidently too high for light-green consumers (Spaargaren 2011)?

The factor 'higher education'

The question of why political consumers tend to be mainly people with a higher education level also warrants attention. Why is it that they engage in responsible behaviour on aver-

age more than people with a lower or intermediate education level? Is it linked to a difference in knowledge, awareness, status or other factors? A recent study by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) (Bovens et al. 2014) showed that different education levels can lead to 'separate worlds'; does this also hold for political consumerism? And what implications does this have for the further spread of the phenomenon in society?

The role of the institutional context

Finally, it has become clear that the institutional context (choice architecture, product availability in shops, legislation and regulation, etc.) is an important factor in political consumerism. Consumers do not exist in a vacuum, but decide and act in an environment that imposes constraints and offers opportunities, and on which they as consumers also exert an influence. However, we know little about how political consumers use this socio-cultural and economic context and what opportunities and constraints they encounter (Akenji 2014). Ethnographic research on people's daily or social practices, with explicit attention for the institutional context, could shed light on these topics (see e.g. Bossy 2014; Evans 2011; Hall 2011; Spaargaren 2011).

S.2.2 What can we learn from the bottom-up perspective in general...?

The top-down and bottom-up perspectives

In contrast to the top-down perspective, which looks at how consumers can be encouraged (through legislation, nudging, information, facilitation, guidance, etc.) to display more sustainable behaviour, in this study we take a bottom-up approach to look both at what consumers are already doing themselves by way of political consumerism, and at initiators who have begun a sustainable food enterprise. This study ties in with the description of what has been called the 'energetic society' (Hajer 2011): assertive, autonomous citizens and innovative, small-scale businesses which emerge from within society itself in a bottom-up process. Related concepts include the 'participation society' or 'do-democracy', in which the focus is on citizen power from the bottom up, for example in the care sector or civic participation (Van Houwelingen et al. 2014; Mensink et al. 2013). What can we learn from the bottom-up perspective in relation to political consumerism?

Monitoring what is happening in society

Looking at consumers from this perspective gives us a better impression of what is happening in society, and enables us to capture this in figures and images. At present, several groups of political consumers and initiatives fall outside the radar of government and science. Monitoring what is happening in society, obtaining a picture of a highly diverse group of political consumers and getting a sense of developments within this group is important and is not yet happening, or at least only sporadically and on a small scale (NSOVB/PBL 2014: 13). This approach sheds light on a side of consumption which receives less attention from policymakers, and puts the image of the calculating consumer, who is more

interested in price and quantity than in sustainability, into perspective (see also Dagevos 2013; Dagevos & Sterrenburg 2003; Trentmann 2007).

...and from political consumers in particular?

Pioneers and initiatives: leading by example

These specific groups of consumers, who are often in the vanguard, may be able to serve as an example for other consumers. They have built (combinations of) sustainable behavioural repertoires into their daily lives which will be needed in the future in order to guarantee sustainable development (Van Gerwen et al. 2014; Westhoek et al. 2013).² Examples include drastically reducing or eliminating meat and fish from the diet (protein transition), buying local, biological or seasonal products, downshifting across the board, living more economically (e.g. energy transition, see Steenbekkers et al. 2014), sharing products rather than buying new ones, boycotting products in the hope of persuading companies to change their production process or working conditions, raising people's awareness about their consumer choices, and so on. These front-runners can also start others thinking about assumptions in relation to their own consumption behaviour, or change social norms (De Bakker & Dagevos 2010). In a certain sense, these intensely active niche groups show us in a microcosm what a more future-proof economy might look like in terms of consumption.

Caveats

A number of caveats must however be applied to this notion of setting an example for others, and indeed to the bottom-up perspective itself. The idea of setting an example encapsulates something of a contradiction: on the one hand, 'pioneers' can serve as an example for other consumers and (consciously and unconsciously) prompt changes in consumption behaviour. On the other hand, their front-runner position gives them a certain exclusivity, enabling them to set themselves apart from other mainstream consumers – political consumerism as a kind of status symbol and social identity (Gatersleben & Steg 2012).

Second, there are a number of barriers to overcome in influencing consumers. According to Rogers' innovation cycle (1983, 2003), new products reach the market first via innovators and early adopters, and only then reach the (early and late) majority (see e.g. the processes surrounding energy innovation in the Netherlands; Steenbekkers et al. 2014: 43). In our estimation, there is an important stumbling block here for Rogers' innovation cycle: the 'product' consumed by dark-green niche groups, in particular, is unlikely to be accepted unquestioningly by followers. We do not expect that people en masse will start downshifting, become vegan or move to an autarchic ecovillage. Most of them will simply be unable or unwilling to make the necessary investments and sacrifice things such as luxury, comfort, convenience or variety.

A third caveat that applies to the notion of leading others by example – and to a bottom-up approach more generally – is that it may tempt the government to withdraw and give

off tasks in the assumption that political consumerism will spread through society automatically (NSOB/PBL 2014). It is questionable whether this would be the case in practice. It is difficult at this juncture to predict the extent to which political consumerism will filter through to broader layers of the population. Our estimation is that any spread of political consumerism emanating from those leading the field will occur through small steps by consumers ('weak sustainability') (De Bakker et al. 2013). Consumers will for example increasingly boycott goods and services every now and then, participate in the sharing economy and in various types of sustainable initiatives.³ In addition, consumers will adopt 'light' variants of dark-green elements, such as flexitarians who are happy to eat less meat, but not to eliminate it from their diet altogether. If socially responsible behaviour does spread further throughout society, therefore, in our view this will come more from an increase in light-green behaviour than in dark-green behaviour.⁴

5.2.3 What role(s) can the government play in political consumerism?

A bottom-up perspective does not mean there is no role for the government in political consumerism, though it will be a different role from when the government is trying to promote sustainable consumption top down. There is a good chance that a top-down approach will meet resistance from consumers who are already consuming responsibly, and from initiators who are already pursuing their own ideas about sustainable food. Based on this conceptual and empirical exploration, two roles emerge for the government.

Monitoring the demand side of political consumerism in society

A first important role for the government is to use monitoring to keep in touch with what is happening among citizen-consumers in the various areas of political consumerism. There is currently virtually no structured monitoring of societal developments in these areas. Existing monitors which mainly cover the supply side of the market, such as the Sustainable Food Monitor (*Monitor Duurzaam Voedsel*) and the Netherlands Sustainability Monitor (*Monitor Duurzaam Nederland*), could be supplemented by a monitor focusing on the demand side of political consumerism.⁵ The government could also more systematically identify best practices in small-scale initiatives (on the supply side of the market) and learn from them which forms of government support work and which do not.⁶ This latter point ties in to a second potential role for the government in relation to sustainable initiatives.

Customised support for initiatives

One of the challenges for the government is how to keep up with spontaneous developments in society. Ultimately, the government will need to switch flexibly between roles, depending on what the situation demands at a given moment. This may mean that it sometimes stands apart and gives initiatives their head; that it facilitates when needed; that it acts as a flywheel to aid the further development of citizen power; and that it steps in when social problems arise and standardisation is called for.⁷ NSOB/PBL (2014) characterise this flexible role for the government in terms of the 'energetic government'.

The anthology of sustainable food initiatives in chapter 4 confirms the need for a customised approach by the government. There is no simple one-size-fits-all solution. The initiatives described require both the freedom to act as pioneers and to experiment, and facilitation (e.g. grants or information on regulations), as well as collaboration (e.g. cross-fertilisation through working groups) and the ability to take responsibility (e.g. when the government fails to act). This is supported by research on social enterprises in a broader sense, which points to regulation and government policy as the biggest obstacles to increasing their social impact (Social Enterprise NL 2015). The government will need to adapt its role to fit the situation and context if it wishes to provide relevant support for bottom-up initiatives (NSOB/PBL 2014). It will need to display some willingness to experiment, openness and the courage to ‘step into society’.

Some forms of political consumerism are (and may remain) small in scale, while other forms of consumption and food initiatives are showing clear growth. There is potential to make changes from the bottom up. The great variation in the types and intensity of behaviour encapsulated within political consumerism makes it appealing for consumers to join in in an ‘individualised’ way.

The urban food initiatives show what is currently happening on the supply side of the sustainable food movement: they are taking a stand on their own against existing, non-sustainable market structures, and are reaching an ever-growing group of consumers through their playful awareness-raising message. It is relevant for the government to keep track of these developments, to provide customised support where possible, and to see both political consumers and these initiatives as allies in a policy aimed at making consumption more sustainable. It would be a great pity if the government were to allow this energy emanating from society to remain untapped.

Notes

- 1 We are aware that it is empirically difficult to strictly separate conscious and unconscious behaviour. Psychological research shows that many choices are made unconsciously, stemming from routine or habit and much less from rational thought processes (Drijver & Broer 2013; Kahneman 2011); only 5-10% of behaviour is conscious, while 90-95% is unconscious (TK 2014/2015).
- 2 Most of these examples are described by the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency as forms of ‘different consumption’ (Van Gerwen et al. 2014; Westhoek et al. 2013).
- 3 Based on the literature, it is likely that both deliberate buying of products with quality labels (an estimated 30-40% of sustainable food in 2023; Korthals 2013: 34) and participation in the sharing economy are set to increase (Bouma 2015a; Van de Glind 2013; Janssen et al. 2015).
- 4 This begs the question of whether producers will be able to produce sufficiently sustainably to ensure that products and services are obtainable and affordable for a broad swathe of consumers.
- 5 The Netherlands Sustainability Monitor (*Monitor Duurzaam Nederland*) contains a chapter dedicated to citizens and consumers, but only one of the three research questions is asked from a bottom-up perspective (Steenbekkers et al. 2014).
- 6 See also the study by De Bakker et al. (2013) on small-scale farming and food initiatives.
- 7 Two topical examples are Airbnb and Uber; the government has stepped in to counter market distortion and unfair competition.