
Dan Welch¹

¹Sustainable Compostion Institution, University of Manchester, Manchester, England

The Market for Politics

This is a very American book. Two of the most iconic moments of American political history are surely the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the Montgomery bus boycott, sparked by the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955. Each inaugurated critical episodes in the modern political story of emancipation. In Protest Politics in the Marketplace, Caroline Heldman invites us to read these as acts of consumer activism, and to consider the market as an under-theorised vector for political change. Heldman, a US political scientist, is concerned with the potential of consumer activism for realising not just the specific objectives of market campaigns, but positive effects on democracy itself. Consumer activism, she concludes, “is an American tradition that has strengthened democracy at key points in U.S. history”.

Heldman extends the traditional definition of democracy into the marketplace. Her concern is both how corporate influence effects the democratic process and how consumer activism can both counter this influence and improve democratic “inputs” (such as “robust citizen participation”) and democratic “outputs” (such as “government accountability to citizens”). Protest Politics in the Marketplace offers a systematic assessment of both, in the US context. An unusual aspect of the book is to consider not only the progressive aspects of marketplace activism but its reactionary forms as well, such as, historically, campaigns to exclude Chinese immigrants in the 1800s, and contemporary mobilisations against LGBT rights and for “gun rights”.

The book first analyses seven distinct eras of consumer activism from the American Revolution to the Global Justice Movement of the 1990s: “the story of colonists, abolitionists, labor organizers, feminists, civil rights leaders, consumer safety advocates, economic justice advocates, xenophobes, and racists using market channels to achieve political change” (p.22). The account is compelling. Drawing on historians of consumption in the US such as Lawrence Glickman and Lizabeth Cohen, Heldman argues that consumer activism is an American political tradition that predates the Revolution, “an integral thread in the U.S. political tapestry, woven into our founding by the colonists conflation of freedom and consumption” (p.26).

This story, of course, speaks as much to American consumer and political culture in the round, as it does to marketplace activism—not least by casting “consumers as the primary moral actors of the burgeoning republic rather than producers” (p.31). The historian T.H. Breen goes so far as to argue that the American Revolution would not have been possible without a shared consumer identity to bring the 13 colonies together against the Empire—wrought both through consumption itself and the boycott of British goods. Similarly, in the Progressive Era (1880-1920), when marketplace activism was used to
challenge the encroachment of corporate power on politics, citizens—and particularly non-Anglo immigrants—transcended ethnic, class and regional identities as consumers in the newly national economy.

Heldman addresses the contemporary era, characterised uniquely by the development of social media, in detail. As Heldman notes, the intensity of consumer activism on both sides surrounding Donald Trump’s presidency signals the unprecedented mainstreaming of the consumer-activist mentality. About one in five Americans boycott each year; 40% of under ‘30s boycotted in the previous year. What is less clear is how this mainstreaming relates to the rise of the “consumer citizen” who views citizenship and community no longer in terms of civic participation and responsibility but in terms of the transactional relationships of the “entitled consumer” devoid of civic agency (p. 57).

Beyond admirable curation of existing scholarship, Heldman’s unique contribution is found in the four empirical chapters in which she assesses case studies of national US campaigns between 2004-14, focused on racial justice, environmental issues and animal rights, gender and sexuality, and conservative campaigns. As well as addressing overviews of their effectiveness in achieving their goals (58% succeeded), Heldman systematically assesses these different areas in terms of “democratic inputs and outputs”. With over 61 cases over 90 pages this is comprehensive (and excellent source material for teaching purposes), if not a particularly engrossing end-to-end read. But it is a significant contribution to scholarship in the area, and provides Heldman with authority to make her wider arguments, such as debunking criticisms of “slacktivism” (on an instrumental level, social media engagement increases campaign effectiveness of achieving goals to 68%).

The focus on the growing use of consumer activism by conservative groups is original. Aside from “gun rights” campaigns, these are largely the creatures of just two evangelical organisations—Focus on the Family and the American Family Association (the website of which offers “practical ways to get involved in the culture war”). Progressives, according to this worldview it seems, do not have families. Heldman is laudably balanced in acknowledging the contribution of these campaigns to the positive democratic virtues of improving political participation and corporate accountability, while censuring campaigns against LBGT rights. Cheeringly, success rates are considerably lower than those of progressive campaigns (though being increasingly social media savvy might change that).

Lastly, Heldman considers US consumer activism in the wider context of questions of whether business holds a privileged position in US politics, how consumer activism differs from traditional types of political participation and whether consumer activism improves democracy under different normative models of democracy—participatory, deliberative and economic. Opposition to the influence of business corporations is as old as the institutional form itself. In 1720 in England the corporation was actually banned, following the South Sea Bubble. As Heldman notes, prior to the twentieth century, US corporations were contracted to serve the public good (such as building roads) and had to regularly renew their charter to do so. US states resisted federal attempts to curtail their power to revoke corporate charters for much of the nineteenth century, until in 1886 the Supreme Court extended the 14th Amendment, established to grant rights to emancipated slaves, to the notorious concept of “corporate personhood”. In 1961 President (former General) Eisenhower could caution of the danger of the confusion of national and corporate interests in the emerging “military-industrial complex” (his term), without vilification. Today, Heldman argues, most citizens are unable to identify their own interests. In the words of John Garenta, “socialised into compliance [citizens] accept the definitions of political reality as offered by dominant groups” and are unable
to imagine alternative economic systems (even those in their own history). As well as offering a good review of the literature of corporate political influence in the US, the section on “economic democracy” rescues the account from the prevailing liberal approach, drawing on thinkers such as Robert Dahl, who recognise the inherent conflict of capitalism and democracy.

Where Heldman is critical of consumer activism is in its tendency to be reactive to business practice, and that it is “limited in its systematic critiques of … foundational systems of power” (p. 211). Furthermore, voting with your dollar, she argues, will always be a capitalist form of voting. Heldman ably demonstrates the democratic virtues of consumer activism, and emphasises how it has historically been a particularly important political tool for women, African Americans and other politically marginalised groups. I was surprised therefore to find her also concluding that consumer activism “quantifies and commodifies social justice in a neoliberal way” (p.212) and erodes civic identity “by casting citizens as economic [rather than] political actors” (p.215). “Popular sovereignty”, she argues, “becomes incoherent as individual activities in the marketplace eclipse participation and deliberation” (p.214)—it is not only an indicator of, but a contributing factor of, popular sovereignty’s erosion. But surely the question is to what extent does consumer activism eclipse participation and deliberation, rather than being an entry point and accompaniment to them? These conclusions seem at odds with her own historical account—in which consumer activism is more often than not just one tool in the repertoire of a wider political movement more than capable of systemic critique—from the Boston Tea Party, to the bus boycotts of the civil rights movement, to Occupy and Black Lives Matter. It is also at odds with her assessment that: “The contemporary era of consumer activism rewrites the decline in participation narrative…engaging citizens through the marketplace in ways that strengthen political equality, liberty and popular sovereignty” (p. 219). Furthermore, the aggregationist view of political consumerism as a demand signal in the market (voting with your dollar) is oddly out of step with an acknowledgment of the political power of the rhetorical figure of “the consumer” mobilised by collective actors, perhaps nowhere more so than in the US (see Barnett et al, 2011).

So as not to conclude on a negative, I’ll address as an aside a quick moan to the publisher here—there is no bibliography! And combined with historical-style endnotes offering a full reference only on the first citation, this reviewer pursued many irritated searches for sources (and from a university press no less!).

Protest Politics in the Marketplace makes an excellent contribution to consumption scholarship. Heldman provides a compelling curation of the role of consumer activism, and the consumer per se, in American history, and a thoughtful account of contemporary consumer activism in the age of Trump and social media. She offers a systematic empirical analysis of recent campaigns in the US, with an original focus on conservative movements, and a thorough analysis of the struggle between corporate political interests and market campaigns in US political culture.
References


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