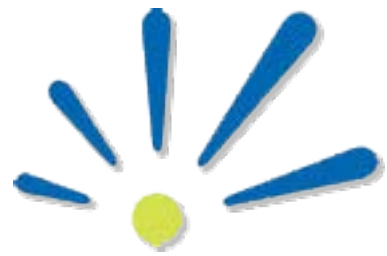


# Conscious Consumption

## Results from a survey of New Dream members

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Conscious consumption refers to choices to reduce or alter consumption that are conscientiously made and motivated by values such as social justice, sustainability, corporate behavior, or workers' rights. These choices take into account the larger context of production, distribution, or impacts of goods and services and may include foregoing or reducing consumption or choosing products that are organic, eco-friendly, fair trade, local, or cruelty-free. The following pages give a brief overview of current research on conscious consumption and some of the results from a survey of over 1800 affiliates of the Center for a New American Dream about conscious consumption, completed in August of 2008.

### Assumptions about **Consumption**

Conscious consumers seek to have a positive impact on the world – for their own families, for the environment, or for communities across the globe. But can changes in consumer culture and practices successfully effect these far-reaching changes? In public and scholarly discourse about sustainability and justice, these conscientious consumer decisions often are not taken seriously as an important part of larger efforts for change. Specifically, a number of themes appear in critics' claims about conscious consumption:

*The market co-opts consumer impulses*

Conscious consumers may believe that they are supporting a different way of living and consuming, but the market turns resistance into a new and profitable market niche<sup>1</sup>.

*It's all about status*

Conscious consumers are just concerned about what their consumption is saying to other people (that they have resources to afford green products, time to research the impact of products, or the moral wherewithal to live sustainably)<sup>2</sup>.

*Consumption is individualizing*

Consumption is private, not open to public scrutiny, and enmeshed in our personal identities, and therefore it is apolitical and individualizing<sup>3</sup>.

*It's a distraction within sustainability movements*

Consuming consciously makes people feel satisfied that they have done their part and displaces time and effort that could be spent on other actions<sup>4</sup>.

*Conscious consumption denies the importance of institutions and corporations*

Putting the onus of change on consumers absolves the government, corporations, and other institutions from making large-scale changes that are necessary<sup>5</sup>.

While each of the above raises important and serious considerations for conscious consumers, they also portray views of consumers that have long been assumed to be true<sup>6</sup>: consumers are manipulated by the market, acting out of self-interest, acting alone, inherently apolitical, and distracted from what is really important. But do these assumptions hold when we are talking about *conscious consumers*?

## Rethinking Consumption and Citizenship

Among those who make the claim that consumption is distracting and apolitical, citizenship is typically counter-posed to the consumer role as if they are in opposition: the public-minded citizen versus the self-interested consumer<sup>7</sup>. While there are good reasons not to equate consumption with citizenship, the construction of citizen and consumer as opposites is too simplistic. At the most basic level, civic or political action may be self-interested at times, and consumption may be public-minded<sup>8</sup>. More significantly, it assumes that practices from the public realm (e.g., activism, engagement, demand for environmental accountability) cannot be effectively brought into the marketplace. Research has shown, to the contrary, that bringing practices typically associated with one site (e.g., the public realm) into a different site (e.g., the marketplace) is highly effective in creating change<sup>9</sup>.

The relationship between consumption and the political realm becomes even more complicated with the consideration of the changing nature of political involvement over time. Various authors have documented declines in the rates of “traditional” political forms of activism in the US over the past several decades (e.g., participation in voluntary associations, activism)<sup>10</sup>. Newer forms of participation tend to be looser in structure, more focused on lifestyles, and more spontaneous and flexible— similar to conscious consumption<sup>11</sup>. Compared to traditional political participation, conscious consumption seems to require a variety of scarce or restricted-access resources in order to participate: time, money, information and “cultural capital”<sup>12</sup>. Conscious consumption, then, is often viewed as elitist. While the class-based dimensions of conscious consumption remain unresolved, access continues to be a pervasive and persistent issue for citizenship in general as well. Even the time needed to participate in public life presents problems of unequal access<sup>13</sup>.

## Conscious Consumption In Europe

In Europe, a sizeable amount of empirical research has been done on conscious consumption. Notably, researchers in the UK have found that:

- Conscious consumers tend to understand their practices as expressive of political orientations and as political actions in themselves<sup>14</sup>
- Many conscious consumers see the expansion of alternative and ethical options in the marketplace as a successful result of the efforts of conscious consumers like themselves<sup>15</sup>
- Conscious consumers tend to see themselves as part of a broader network of citizens and not as atomized consumers in the marketplace<sup>16</sup>

Italian researchers found that about 30% of Italians at the time of the survey (2002) participated in some of what they call “political consumption” in the previous year<sup>17</sup>. The most common motivations cited by these conscious consumers were the belief that consumption should have social aims and a desire to avoid contributing to injustice. Conscious consumers in their sample tended to be more socially and politically involved than the rest of the sample in a number of ways, such as joining environmental or human rights civic organizations and writing letters to politicians and newspapers. In a 2000 survey of Danish citizens, researchers similarly found that conscious consumption was strongly associated with political interest and other civic actions such as signing petitions and donating money to a cause.<sup>18</sup>

## ● Conscious Consumption in the US

There have also been several smaller-scale studies of conscious consumption in the US that have found that conscious consumers see their actions as politically expressive<sup>19</sup> and tend to be more interested in political issues<sup>20</sup>. There is some limited evidence to suggest that participation in a few initial alternative consumption practices might lead to even more alternative consumption practices as well as social and political activism<sup>21</sup>. It is not clear, however, if the relationship between political and social activism and conscious consumption that was found in European samples holds for the US.

Based on the empirical research, then, it seems reasonable to question some of the basic assumptions that consumers are apolitical and distracted. In the US, consumers have a substantial history as actors within the political sphere, playing a role in US culture and identity since the time of the Revolution and the Boston Tea Party<sup>22</sup>. Particularly in the post WWII era, the consumer marketplace has gone through a process of de-politicization, in contrast to its lively inclusion in labor struggles earlier in the century<sup>23</sup>. It may not be inevitable, then, that consumption is apolitical.

## ● A Survey of New Dream Affiliates

In order to add to the emerging research on conscious consumption in the US, the Center for a New American Dream and researchers at Boston College collaborated on a survey of New Dream affiliates. An invitation to participate in a detailed online survey was sent to over 18,000 members of the New Dream mailing list in August of 2008, and 2271 surveys were initiated. The survey asked respondents about a variety of conscious consumption practices in different sectors (food, goods, water, energy, transportation, and services), motivations and opinions about conscious consumption, as well as other forms of social and political involvement on the issues of sustainability and social justice.

**Table 1 Comparison of survey responses to May 2008 Harris Poll responses**

	CNAD Survey† %	Harris Poll‡ %
<b>Have you done anything to change your lifestyle to make it more environmentally sustainable?</b>		
Yes	87	53
No	2	25
Not sure	11	22
<b>Of those who answered yes to the above question, percent who:</b>		
Buy green household products	81	47
Discontinue purchases of plastic water bottles	88	30
Take fewer airplane flights	64	22
Commute to work in a way other than an automobile	44	16
Have considered / have become a vegetarian	78	10
Drive less (combine errands, walk more, etc)	90	5
Reduce utility use (energy efficient house / windows, unplug appliances, wood heat, etc)	93	4
Change light bulbs	97	3
Purchase a hybrid car	14	3
Conserve water	87	2

lifestyle changes

† Data for the first question (change in lifestyle) are based on 2164 responses. Data for subsequent questions are based on the 87% of respondents who answered “yes” to the first question, n=1890.

Percents for different consumption practices based on those who answered from 4 to 7 on a scale of “1=very inconsistently” and “7=very consistently” engage in the practice.

‡ Data for the first question (change in lifestyle) are based on full sample of n=2602. Data for subsequent questions are based on the 53% of respondents who answered “yes” to the first question, n=1379.

## Survey Results

Overall, respondents indicated a high level of consistent participation in conscious consumption. Fully 87% of respondents reported that they were making efforts to change their lifestyle to make it more sustainable. When compared to a 2008 Harris Poll<sup>24</sup> of a national sample of respondents, the participants in this survey overwhelmingly engaged at higher rates in conscious consumption. Specific practices are detailed in *Table 1*.

Respondents' ratings of various goals and motivations for making conscious consumer decisions are reported below in *Table 2*. Being true to one's values, reducing consumption, and addressing ecological degradation were among the most common goals and motives. A factor analysis showed that all motivations listed in *Table 2* – from “addressing climate change” to “enjoyment” – tended to hang together and did not appear to be measuring different concepts or clusters of motivations.

**Table 2 Percentage of those rating various motivations for consumer decisions as “very important”**

	%†	N
Living life in accordance with their values	64	2195
Reusing, recycling, secondhand	57	2201
Reducing overall consumption	56	2202
Addressing ecological issues	51	2233
Promoting personal health and product safety	50	2196
Seeking quality products, craftsmanship	47	2205
Addressing climate change	45	2222
Promoting the well-being of the next generation	43	2223
Supporting the local economy	43	2225
Supporting alternatives to the dominant consumer culture	43	2184
Living simply	41	2208
Promoting fair wages and incomes for workers and producers	38	2225
Enjoyment	30	1796
Serving as a model for other people to see	25	2197
Being avant-garde	6	1730

motivations

† Percent includes those who answered 7 on a scale from 1= “Not very important” to 7= “Very important”

Respondents were also actively involved in various forms of political activities in support of conscious consumption causes, such as sustainability, health, and justice (*Table 3*). For example, 78% of respondents had contacted politicians or agencies at least once in the past two years, and only 3% said that these issues never affect how they vote. In comparison to national levels of contacting politicians and participation in civic organizations<sup>25</sup>, rates of participation among these respondents were on average higher.

# political action

**Table 3** The number of times in the past two years that respondents have done the following

	Never %	1-5 times %	6 + times %	N
Contacted politicians or agencies	22	25	53	1757
Been involved in government hearings	77	18	5	1730
Written letters to the editor	61	29	10	1744
	Never %	1-3 times %	4 + times %	N
Been a member of consumption-related organizations	39	51	10	1744
Donated money to consumption-related projects or causes	28	50	22	1734
	Never %	Sometimes %	Often %	N
Does conscious consuming affect how you vote†	3	12	38	1725

†Measured on a scale of 1 (Never) to 7(Often). Only responses for 1=never, 4=sometimes, and 7=often presented.

On a more local level, respondents were also talking frequently to friends, family, and even strangers about conscious consumption, sending emails, and participating in community events and projects (*Table 4*).

# social involvement

**Table 4** Responses to “How often do you...” for the following social involvement items:

	Never %	Monthly/a few times a year %	Almost weekly %	Almost daily %	N
Talk to friends about cc	5	47	35	13	1752
Talk to family about cc	5	42	32	20	1721
Talk to others I know about cc	15	52	26	7	1703
Talk to strangers about cc	45	44	10	2	1714
Forward emails / news articles about cc	13	56	23	9	1755
Write a personal email or letter about cc	40	44	13	3	1735
	Range	Mean (SD)	% often†		
Participate in festivals or symbolic actions related to conscious consumption	1-7	3.43 (1.9)	16		1818
Get involved in projects about conscious consumption issues	1-7	2.78 (1.9)	10		1719

† Percent answering 6 or 7 on a scale of 1(never) to 7(often)

A regression analysis revealed that higher levels of consistency in conscious consumption practices across sectors were significantly associated with higher levels of political participation (as measured using the items in Table 3) even after controlling for age, education, income, the amount of information one seeks out about these issues, whether other people in one's social circles are conscious consumers, whether one lives in a city, suburb, small town, or the country, and other control variables ( $p < .001$ ,  $n=1746$ ). Using the same control variables, higher levels of consistency in conscious consumption practices were also significantly associated with higher levels of social participation (as measured using the items in Table 4,  $p < .001$ ,  $n=1711$ ).

## Conscious Consumption **Conclusions**

Overall, among the affiliates of the Center for a New American dream who participated in this project, many of the common assumptions about atomized, apolitical, and distracted consumers do not seem to apply. For many, conscious consumption appears to be part of a lifestyle of broader social and political involvement.

Even with the limitations of this study<sup>†</sup>, the findings for this group of active conscious consumers strongly suggest the need to rethink fundamental assumptions about consumption that run deep in our culture. The assumption of a lack of political potential at the mall, so to speak, has been naturalized – that is, seen as something immutable and inherent in the site of the market rather than a contingent historical outcome. This has led to a potential underestimation of the political possibilities of people mobilizing through their roles as consumers. Among these conscious consumers, consumption is not associated with greater individualization and does not distract from political activism. To the contrary, more consistent conscious consumption practices are related to and perhaps predictive of greater informal social activism and formal political activism. The implication of these findings for public discourses about conscious consumption is that criticisms that rely on appeals to these long-standing assumptions about individualized, apolitical consumption do not seem to hold. Rather, it is time to take consumption practices seriously as a potentially political, mobilizing force for a broader social movement for ecological sustainability and human rights.

<sup>†</sup>Namely, the sample cannot be assumed to be representative of all members of the Center for a New American Dream, nor is it representative of conscious consumers more broadly. Additional research would be needed to make generalizations about conscious consumers in general.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Holt, Douglas B. 2002. "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29: 70-90.

Heath, Joseph, and Andrew Potter. 2004. *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*. New York: Harper-Collins.

<sup>2</sup> See Tierney, John. 2009. "Message in What We Buy, but Nobody's Listening." *New York Times*, May 18. Available online at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/19/science/19tier.html?\\_r=2&em](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/19/science/19tier.html?_r=2&em)

<sup>3</sup> See Szasz, Andrew. 2007. "Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves." Minneapolis, MN: U Minnesota Press.

<sup>4</sup> See Williams, Alex. 2007. "Buying into the Green Movement." *The New York Times*, July 1. Available online at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/01/fashion/01green.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=Williams%20buying%20into%20the%20green%20movement&st=cse&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/01/fashion/01green.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Williams%20buying%20into%20the%20green%20movement&st=cse&oref=slogin).

<sup>5</sup> See Maniates, Michael. 2002. "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" Pp. 43-66 in *Confronting Consumption*, edited by T. Princen, M. Maniates, and K. Conca. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Smith, Toby M. 1998. *The Myth of Green Marketing: Tending Our Goats at the Edge of Apocalypse*. Toronto: U Toronto Press.

<sup>6</sup> Many of these assumptions seem to hold in one form or another whether one's political views on the left, right, or center – see Soper, Kate. 2004. "Rethinking the 'Good Life': The Consumer as Citizen." *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 15:111-116.

<sup>7</sup> For a review and critique of this perspective see Schudson, Michael. 2007. "Citizens, Consumers, and the Good Society." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611: 236-249.

<sup>8</sup> Schudson 2007

<sup>9</sup> For example, the analysis of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in the 1980s on the transportation of democratic practices from the state to the workplace argued that the demands of workers for democracy in the factory were highly disruptive of normalized power relations (Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. 1983. "The Heterogeneity of Power." *Das Argument*, 25(140): 494-507.)

<sup>10</sup> See Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sampson, Robert J., Doug McAdam, Heather MacIndoe, and Simón Weffer-Elizondo. 2005. "Civil Society Reconsidered: The Durable Nature and Community Structure of Collective Civic Action." *American Journal of Sociology*, 111: 673-714.

<sup>11</sup> See Stolle, Dietlind, and Marc Hooghe. 2004. "Consumers as Political Participants? Shifts in Political Action Repertoires in Western Societies." Pp.265-288 in *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, edited by M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal, and D. Stolle. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>12</sup> See Stolle and Hooghe 2004.

<sup>13</sup> See Stolle and Hooghe 2004

Verba, Sidney, Kay L. Schlozman, Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press.

<sup>14</sup> See Seyfang, Gill. 2006. "Ecological Citizenship and Sustainable Consumption: Examining Local Organic Food Networks." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 22:283-305.

Shaw, Deirdre. 2007. "Consumer Voters in Imagined Communities." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 27: 135-150.

<sup>15</sup> See Shaw 2007

<sup>16</sup> See Clarke, Nick, Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, and Alice Malpass. 2007. "The Political Rationalities of Fair-Trade Consumption in the United Kingdom." *Politics and Society*, 35:583-607.

Webb, Janette. 2007. "Seduced or Sceptical Consumers? Organised Action and the Case of Fair Trade Coffee." *Sociological Research Online*, 12(3). Available online at: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/5.html>).

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<sup>17</sup> See Forno, Francesca, and Luigi Ceccarini. 2006. "From the Street to the Shops: The Rise of New Forms of Political Actions in Italy." *South European Society & Politics*, 11:197-222.

<sup>18</sup> See Andersen, Jorgen G. and Mette Tobiasen. 2004. "Who are These Political Consumers Anyway? Survey Evidence from Denmark." Pp.203-221 in *Politics, Products, and Markets: Exploring Political Consumerism Past and Present*, edited by M. Micheletti, A. Follesdal, and D. Stolle. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>19</sup> See Crockett, David, and Melanie Wallendorf. 2004. "The Role of Normative Political Ideology in Consumer Behavior." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31:511-528.

<sup>20</sup> See Shah, Dhavan V., Douglas M. McLeod, Eunhyung Kim, Sun Young Lee, Melissa R. Gotlieb, Shirley S. Ho, and Hilde Breivik. 2007. "Political Consumerism: How Communication and Consumption Orientations Drive 'Lifestyle Politics.'" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611: 217-234.

Keum, Heejo, Narayan Devanathan, Sameer Deshpande, Michelle R. Nelson, and Dhavan V. Shah. 2004. "The Citizen-Consumer: Media Effects at the Intersection of Consumer and Civic Culture." *Political Communication*, 21: 369-391.

<sup>21</sup> See Williams 2007

Thompson, Craig J, and Gokcen Coskuner-Balli. 2007. "Enchanting Ethical Consumerism: The Case of Community Supported Agriculture." *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7: 275-303.

<sup>22</sup> See Glickman, Lawrence B. 2001. "The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century American Political Culture." *The Journal of American History*, 88: 99-128.

<sup>23</sup> See Glickman 2001

Cohen, Lizbeth. 2003. *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Hilton, Matthew. 2007. "Consumers and the State since the Second World War." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611: 66-81.

<sup>24</sup> Harris Poll. 2008. "The Environment... Are We Doing All We Can?" The Harris Poll #63, published June 19. Available online at: ([http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=917](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=917)).

<sup>25</sup> As assessed by the 2004 General Social Survey