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Political Consumerism as a Neoliberal Response to Youth Political Disengagement

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Abstract: Recent trends indicate diminishing public engagement with formal electoral politics in many advanced liberal democracies, especially among the younger generations. However, evidence also suggests that there has been a simultaneous interest by many young citizens in political consumerism. In large part, this interest is shaped as a response to the individualisation and strict ‘economism’ driven by the underlying forces of neoliberalism. Disenfranchised and disillusioned by the seeming incapacity of the purely political sphere to respond to their individualised claims, and having internalised the neoliberal critique of democracy, these young empowered citizen-consumers often search for the ‘political’ within the bounds of the marketplace and are increasingly attracted to consumerist methods of political participation, such as boycotting and buycotting. Given the susceptibility of political consumerism to a neoliberal modus operandi, the lack of available literature problematising its emergence as a response to neoliberal principles is somewhat surprising. The present article will address this gap by connecting the declining levels of electoral participation among younger generations in post-crisis Europe to the rise of political consumerism within the neoliberal ideological hegemony of the ‘marketopoly’. We distinguish between two antithetical, but complimentary effects. Firstly, the internalised neoliberal critique of democracy emphasises the ‘push’ out of the public into the commercial sphere. Secondly, the emerging individualisation of modern ‘liquid’ politics advanced by the postmaterialist sensitivities of young people’s previously affluent socialisation call attention to the existence of a parallel ‘pull’ effect into the ‘marketopoly’, as a habitus of youth political participation. In both cases, the reorganisation of political participation as consumption, and the re-styling of young citizens as ‘empowered’ consumers, delineates political consumerism as an efficacious response to their political disengagement in an increasingly marketised world.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; Political Participation; Postmaterialism; Political Consumerism; Young people

1. Introduction

Youth politics has gained momentum as an academic field across several social sciences disciplines since the turn of the new millennium [1–8]. Prominent within this field is the controversy over the term ‘youth political apathy’ [9–12], especially since the declining electoral participation of young people is being perceived as a continuous hindrance for the future and proper functioning of several democracies around the globe. Moreover, political scientists point out that the perceived loss of confidence and social ties, especially for the young generations, does not remain limited to the political arena but permeates all aspects of civil-society [13]. While it is easy to accuse the young of being part of a selfish, apathetic, and predominately materialistic generation, recent research has instead indicated that young people continue to demonstrate a strong desire to partake in democratic life, but this desire is met with social and contextual obstacles [10]. Hence, a significant part of recent academic research has been oriented towards identifying the individual and collective factors which may be constituting the social

characteristics of political youth (dis)engagement [1,10,14,15]. The term political (dis)engagement indicates the engagement—or lack thereof—of citizens with political institutions [16], processes, and decision-making [17]. Political participation stands as one particular expression of political engagement, which is defined as “those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take” [18] (p. 1). Political participation may be expressed in several ways, both conventional and non-conventional. Conventional political participation includes voting, election campaigning, or donating to a political party. Alternatively, non-conventional political participation occurs primarily outside of the electoral arena, and varies from signing petitions and participating in protests to daubing political graffiti [16].

The decline of trust in traditional political institutions [13] has often been identified as a primary factor behind the corresponding emergence of alternative socio-political arenas, within which political consumerism holds a central position. Research across different disciplines and theoretical traditions has identified a process of ‘politicisation of consumption’ [19], according to which, consumption patterns are increasingly related to civic values, pointing to a possible levelling out of the dividing lines between citizens and consumers. Inglehart’s postmaterialism thesis [20–22] provides an influential and complimentary interpretation, placing emphasis on the reorientation of individual and civic values which has led in turn to a widening of the available repertoire of political action. In such a context, political consumerism (which consists of boycotting and boycotting products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons) has been proposed as a relatively new form of political participation [23], which moves away from the traditional definitions of electoral participation by harnessing individual consumer power and directing it towards collective public issues. In this way, it blurs the boundaries between the conventional notions of citizen and consumer.

A sizeable body of work has been dedicated to the study of the determinants of political consumerism in the last decade, much of which focuses on the individual level, within a single country [24–27]. However, another strand of literature draws on comparative research that stresses the significance of the existing socio-structural contexts both as opportunities for, and hindrances to, political consumerism [28–32]. The common ground of this strand is that the individual and collective motivations underpinning political consumerist decisions do not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, they are determined by the prevailing characteristics of the societies in which they take place [33]. Working within this tradition and drawing on Anthony Downs’ ‘*An Economic Theory of Democracy*’ [34], scholars [35] proceed to emphasise the role of the hegemonic ideology in each society as a determinant of political consumerism, and present evidence which suggests that political consumerist behaviour has been significantly affected by the spread of neoliberalism and neoliberal politics, both on ideological [36] and social policy grounds [37].

The present paper seeks to disentangle these dynamics by distinguishing between two antithetical, but complimentary effects in post-crisis Europe. Drawing from Crouch’s ‘*Post-Democracy*’ [38], we propose that on the one hand, the emergence of neoliberal economics has significantly contributed to the political disengagement of young people, enabling us to identify a series of ‘push’ factors away from traditional political domains. Indeed, Hay [39] correlates neoliberalism with an increased rejection of institutional politics. The spread of neoliberalism has socialised the young generations in a socio-political context where electoral democracy loses prominence and politicians are faced with increased scepticism [36]. Whereas Crouch [38] stresses the ‘push’ out of the public and into the commercial sphere, we will call attention to the ‘pull’ factors activated primarily by the tenacity of the neoliberal doctrine with regard to the power of the free market. The neoliberal emphasis on consumerist principles, coupled with the increased individualisation of late modernity [40,41], has instigated a consumer-based approach to politics, especially among the younger generations; this has fostered the emergence of alternative forms of political engagement which use the market as an arena of socio-political fermentation. Prominent among these new types of individualistic and consumer-based participatory forms stands the notion of political consumerism. Through the practice of politicising the personal, political consumerism constitutes a form of political participation whereby individuals harness the power of

their personal choices to trigger collective political change [42,43]. By doing so, it manages to reconcile the individualistic tendencies of the neoliberal market-based economy with the collective appeal of the empowered citizen-consumer [10,44], which neoliberalism itself has brought forward.

This being the case, political consumerism, demonstrating acute reflexivity to the spirit of the times, contests the neoliberal market-based democratic paradigm that brought it into existence, and may thus be considered as a response to the apathy and individualisation effects of neoliberalism itself. We will commence our analysis in the following section by laying out the grounds for the emergence of the neoliberal rationale, and how by shaping the convergence of the previously distant notions of citizen and consumer, it gave rise to a set of 'push' factors away from traditional political engagement.

2. The Neoliberal Rationale

The term neoliberalism was first coined during a meeting in Paris in 1938. Among the attendees were Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, who came to be two of the most prominent representatives of the ideology [45]. Due to its historical multilinearity, there is no consensus with respect to a single working definition of neoliberalism. Existing understandings, however, present the concept by focusing on the degree of state intervention within the classical, laissez-faire liberal paradigm [46]. Harvey thus defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" [46] (p. 18). The range of available definitions stress a process of reconstitution of the power of the state through, and interplay between, the tools of privatisation, finance, and market forces. State interventions in the economy are diminished, while the onus of the state as the primary caretaker of its citizens' welfare is similarly reduced [46].

The neoliberal principles were initially delineated in Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, first published in 1944 [47]. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on affirming free markets, is remodelling "every human need or desire in a profitable enterprise" [48] (p. 28) and thus is "... reducing all forms of life to economic ones" [49] (p. 11). It perceives competition as the distinctive property of human relations, and therefore it defines citizens primarily as consumers, whose democratic resolution is best exercised by buying and selling within a deregulated global market. Any attempt to limit market competition is thus perceived as detrimental to liberty, and therefore taxing or any kind of government regulations should be minimised. Collective bargaining and trade unions are deemed as market distortions which hamper the restoration of a natural hierarchy. In turn, inequality is considered as a virtuous premium for the generation of wealth, which is destined to trickle-down to all members of the economy. In contrast, any egalitarian effort is not only counter-productive, but also morally repugnant, since the free market will grant everyone what they deserve according to their individual contribution to the economy.

Peck [50] distinguishes between the 'roll-back' and the 'roll-out' effects of neoliberalism. The former refers to the institutional, laissez-faire economic principles of neoliberal reasoning, such as the deregulation and privatisation of the state. The latter, however, refers to the attempt of neoliberalism to harness the existing social forces and to remould them around its own objectives, either by accentuating competition as an inherent force of human nature, or by the marketisation of previously non-market social domains. This double assault of neoliberal rationality on both the existing institutional and social constructs has been exemplified in the work of Foucault [51], who describes neoliberalism not as an externally-induced form of ideological control, but instead as a highly internalised form of self-regulation and self-discipline. Likewise, Hayek [47] accepts that the competitive rationality of neoliberalism does not reflect any inherent nature of the individual. Instead, he asserts the need of market rationality to be instilled in individuals through an active and conscious adjustment process of their social experiences [47]. Therefore, the society as a whole has to undergo a process of internalisation of the neoliberal values. As a result, entrepreneurship, consumerism, the scarcity hypothesis, and the corresponding competition of resources that follows it have been

internalised to such an extent by neoliberal subjects that these processes and phenomena combine to define people's political identity and behaviour [52]. Moreover, the adoption of the neoliberal rationale by think-tanks, academia, and political parties across the ideological spectrum further intensifies its internalisation by individuals who become increasingly competitive for scarce employment and insecure jobs, falling wages and increasing price levels [53]. So ubiquitous has the roll-out process of neoliberalism been that it is hardly recognised as a distinct ideology. Instead it is often portrayed as merely descriptive of a natural force, similar to gravity or a biological law reflecting the intrinsic human nature, neglecting to recall that we are referring to a "philosophy that arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power" [45] (p. 3).

Neoliberalism and Political (Dis)Engagement

The present and ongoing global economic crisis, with its detrimental residue in the purely economic sphere, has revealed the deceptive paradoxes behind the dominant neoliberal economic order [54]. However, for the first time in many years, it has also opened the discussion on tracing realistic alternatives that do not genuflect to a hegemonic free-market ethic. Perhaps the most negative effect of this neoliberal hegemony is not the economic impact it has instigated, but the political one. As the responsive power of the state is significantly diminished, so is the capacity of the citizens to influence their livelihoods through electoral participation. The neoliberal doctrine proposes the market as an alternative arena in which citizens may exercise individual choice through their spending behaviour. However, just as wealth and income are not equally distributed among the constituents of a democracy [55], neither is the citizen's ability to influence the decisions pertaining to their community [49].

Such is the ideological hegemony that neoliberalism has achieved, that global political leaders often accede to neoliberal technocratic solutions for addressing economic and social problems [49]. A prominent example is the reliance of European Union (EU) leaders on the strict enforcement of austerity measures as a response to the ongoing economic crisis in several European democracies; this is despite evidence that the crisis itself was brought forward by neoliberal policies, and that the impact of austerity programmes seems to be aggravating it [56]. Furthermore, these decisions are usually determined not by the EU's democratic institutions, but by technocrats operating behind closed doors [49], pointing towards what Habermas would refer to as "a dismantling of democracy" within the EU [57]. Consequently, the resulting disempowerment, especially among the lower- and middle-income cohorts and the young, turns into disenfranchisement, as more parties of the traditional right—but progressively also of the former left—accede to the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism.

Published work in the area has identified three distinct paths through which neoliberalism may negatively affect the propensity of young people to engage with formal politics, 'pushing' them away from participating in traditional democratic deliberation processes [38]. Firstly, the neoliberal insistence on the importance of economic policies over purely political responses has rendered political actors unable to respond to the demands of their constituency [37]. Secondly, and as a consequence of the above, the neoliberal critique of democracy itself has made the constituents highly suspicious of the motives of politicians [39]. Finally, the electoral inequality that has resulted from the proliferation of the neoliberal ideology has acted as an additional barrier to the franchise and the subjective understanding of citizenship [58], limiting both young people's capacity, as well as their motivation, to engage with electoral politics.

Hart and Henn [36] discern an interconnectedness of these strands, which, when combined and reinforced by its roll-out process, form a neoliberal matrix that discourages young people's electoral participation. More specifically, the rules that safeguard the free-market principles should be untouched by democratic deliberation. As such, technocratic limitations should be enforced on democracy, especially when it comes to market interventions, since only through the free market is social emancipation possible. It follows, therefore, that politicians are increasingly bound to the technocratic parameters of a free-market logic, irrespective of the mandate of their constituency.

Building upon this logic, James Buchanan [59] expanded the neoliberal critique of democracy. Armed with the assumption of rational, utility-maximising agents, Buchanan claims that politicians are bound to govern in favour of their own narrow interests rather than those of their constituents. Buchanan's critique of the capacity of democracy itself to respond to social problems is threefold. Firstly, collective decision-making is unable to satisfy individual preferences. Secondly, and following from the previous argument, the same politicians are likely to support increased state control, in order to maintain their own power, and to increase their influence and salaries. These criticisms point back to a principal-agent problem: "Agents are supposed to represent the interests of their principals, but in fact they tend to put their own interests ahead of the interests of those whom they are supposed to represent" [60]. Thirdly, profit-maximising politicians are likely to favour certain social groups in return for votes. The political parties are therefore prone to converge towards the ideological centre [34], in search of maximising their share of the constituency by ideologically approaching the median voter, making these parties especially inelastic to the demands of the underrepresented youth [61,62]. This last argument may also explain why young people tend to refrain from voting, even though they may exhibit a deep awareness about political issues [63], they may believe that voting is important [64], and they are persevering supporters of democracy in principle [65]. It is therefore only when the salient issues on the political agenda particularly pertain to them that they will exhibit a significantly higher predisposition to voting. This is evidenced by the recent surge in young voters' turnout in Britain (at the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2016 UK European Union (EU) referendum, and the 2017 General Election [66–68]) and across the EU [69], when the prevailing political agenda could no longer afford to exclude them from the debate.

The above critique portrays politicians as not only unable to influence political outcomes within a technocratic economic environment, but also as inherently selfish (and as such, untrustworthy) and thus unable to represent the mandate of their constituency. In the contemporary European political context, this is reflected in recent empirical research [65] which suggests that young people are disengaged with electoral politics because the latter is "... hierarchical and remote, the province of self-serving elitists with little interest in their lives" [70]. The consumer logic that has permeated the neoliberal subject allows for expressing their support or rejection of the available options by deliberately 'purchasing' among the available options of politicians and political parties [34]. However, this will inevitably be expressed by increased disengagement from electoral politics if the interests of the young voters continue to be underrepresented in the political debate, in favour of the median voter.

As the neoliberal critique of democracy continues, only the existence of a free market permits individual preferences to be adequately expressed and satisfied, undistorted by a collective decision-making process. The adoption of free-market principles as a response to the failures of democracy to reflect individual preferences via a majoritarian decision-making system calls for the conviction that our understanding of citizenship as represented by the sovereign citizen should be replaced by a shift towards the sovereign consumer. This consumer-oriented democracy, or 'marketopoly' as Lekakis [35] terms it, may more adequately reflect the individual preferences within the market as a highly decentralised framework of political action, and thus increasingly 'pull' the underrepresented young people to operate within it. Political expression becomes in this way a commercialised product, and the widespread diffusion of the neoliberal creed heralds the birth of the 'citizen-consumer', and the end of traditional understandings of citizenship [71].

The limitations imposed by neoliberalism on civic life stem from the concession that "traditional domains of civic activity are marginalised by uncontrolled market forces" [72] (p. 61). However, these same market forces allow for the expression of the 'political' within the domain of the marketplace. The following sections will attempt to trace these 'pull' factors exerted by the marketplace which make it conducive to market-oriented means of political participation.

3. Consumption and Citizenship: Towards an Empowered Citizen-Consumer

In the previous section, we examined how the neoliberal paradigm has shaped the convergence of the previously distant notions of citizen and consumer. Cohen [73] emphasises the dichotomous role between the identities of citizens and consumers. The former are defined as individuals who have the obligation to fulfil certain civil duties in connection to the government, in order to guarantee their rights and privileges. By way of contrast, consumers are instead perceived as merely preoccupied with satisfying their private material needs and desires. Schudson [74], however, emphasises the complementarity of the roles of the citizen and the consumer, since, as he argues, consumer choices have the potential to be political, and have often historically been so. As such, consumer choices are no less an “inferior form of human activity compared to voting at the polling place or otherwise exercising citizenship” [74] (p. 237). A recent position has identified the consumer as a moral agent, with specific consumption patterns intended as a means to a political end [75] (p. 240). With the numerous boycotting campaigns organised by the people of the Puerta del Sol and Sydagma Square in 2011, and of activists for animal rights, ecosystems, fair and solidarity trade, among others, civic values such as citizens’ rights, equity, ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility have been related with increasing frequency to consumerism. This signals the possibility of an eventual collapse of the borders between the previously unrelated notions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘consumerism’ [76].

Having thus established the emergence of the neoliberal citizen-consumer above, we will proceed by identifying the ‘pull’ factors that may allure young neoliberal subjects into alternative forms of political participation within the market context. In doing so, we will consider the arrival of the ‘empowered citizen-consumer’ by reinventing the role of the consumer as no longer a mere passive appeaser of one’s material needs, but as an integral agent of political responsibility within a neoliberal socio-political context. Central within this assertion stands the neoliberal axiom that democracy would be more efficient if it was organised according to consumerist and free-market guidelines [36,50], which in turn is based on the neoliberal emphasis of economic over political freedom as the foundation of liberty [77]. In fact, Friedman [78] posed that economic freedom is indispensable in achieving political freedom, whereas Hayek [47] considered economic freedom essential in creating and preserving liberty.

The supporting literature in this area may be derived from several previously unrelated academic disciplines. Emerging Marketing theories have started to emphasise the weight of competition and consumer choice in a digital, global, and de-regulated market economy, thereby shifting the power balance in favour of consumers. Kotler et al. [79] identify overcapacity as the main problem for businesses: “Customers are scarce, not products. Demand, not supply, is the problem. Overcapacity leads to hyper competition, with too many goods chasing too few customers. And most goods and services lack differentiation. The result: dog-eat-dog pricing and mounting business failures” [79] (p. ix).

Dickinson and Svenson [80] argue that in modern affluent societies most people have what they need and much of what they want. Hence, people will demonstrate a finite willingness to consume, and so the old economic tools of price and volume manipulation will no longer suffice to ensure sustainable profits to the producer. For a number of years, producers relied almost exclusively on increasing the production volumes and cutting down prices, based on the assumption of infinite consumer needs and wants. However, the more the markets satisfy consumers’ materialist needs and the more they appease their postmaterialist wants, the more ethical and even aesthetical considerations of sustainable consumption will come into play.

This ‘*Beautiful Corporations*’ thesis [80] is rooted in the premise of “... empowered consumers investing citizenship considerations into their everyday purchase decisions” [81] (p. 119). The argument, therefore, is that consumers have become more empowered in relation to the producers, and thus their consumption patterns will demonstrate a wider social awareness with regard to their impact on the public sphere [81], a position which in turn closely aligns with Inglehart’s [20,22] postmaterialist thesis. The shift from materialism to postmaterialism in young people’s value orientations has been a widely influential and empirically supported determinant of the rise of non-electoral politics [82].

Inglehart's [20–22] postmaterialist thesis posits that increasing material security has resulted in a shift in people's value orientations which enables them to place more emphasis on concerns related to self-expression, human rights, and environmental issues [83]. Moreover, previous research indicates that political consumerism is primarily a tool of young postmaterialists, who are distrustful of political institutions [84]. The relevance of postmaterialist value preferences to political consumerism thus becomes pertinent. Firstly, boycotting and boycotting, as an expression of political action, are consistent with the lifestyle and the non-conventional participation methods that are popular among the postmaterialist cohorts [83]. Secondly, instead of consuming merely to satisfy one's material needs, the political consumer adds ethical, social, environmental, and political—hence, postmaterialist—considerations to the product of choice. Thirdly, the historical shift from materialist to postmaterialist preferences may justify the perceived increase of political consumerism in recent decades.

Hence, postmaterialist consumers, having satisfied their purely materialist needs and being empowered with a plethora of consumer choices, will become less susceptible to simple advertisement wiles and sales promotions. Instead, they will seek to position themselves within a postmaterialist political field which draws heavily from the principles of the marketplace. Given the shift from the scarcity of goods to the scarcity of consumers, the customer is placed “at the beginning rather than the end of the production-consumption cycle” [85] (p. 7), and will be empowered to such an extent that, for Kotler et al. [79] (pp. 36–37), he or she will be transformed to a ‘prosumer’—able to influence the production process itself. The prosumer is now able to afford consumption patterns which place “... emphasis on liberation, the freedom to construct identities, and the ability of consumers to empower themselves through the deliberate orchestration of commodity meanings” [86] (p. 8). Consequently, the emergence of a postmaterialist critical mass has only recently rendered possible what Kotler describes as a “democracy of goods” [79] (p. 9).

Despite the robust theoretical evidence in favour of postmaterialist value preferences as a defining factor behind political consumerism, the available empirical evidence remains inconclusive, if not contradictory. Copeland [82] finds that there is a strong causal link between postmaterialist values and engagement with political consumerism. In contrast, Baek [87] finds that although political consumers place more emphasis on environmental issues and education, there exist no significant correlations with respect to abortion, racial discrimination, or taxation. Conversely, Andersen and Tobiasen [88] find no evidence of correlation between postmaterialism and political consumerism.

The inconclusive nature of the postmaterialist thesis with respect to its application to the emergence of political consumerism calls for a shift of focus from value preferences to more contextual factors, such as neoliberalism. Political consumerism may indeed be understood as an expression of the value preferences of young postmaterialists. However, political consumerism has the potential to traverse the use of the market as merely a commercial arena, and to transform it into a habitus instilled with political meaning, where everyday consumption practices can be interpreted as a direct result of a more general shift of participatory processes towards identity-based pursuits, lifestyle participation, and individualism, and therefore as expressions of citizenship of late modernity. The following section will thus define political consumerism, and trace the ‘pull’ factors behind it, in the postmodernist literature.

3.1. Political Consumerism

Political consumerism is formally defined as the “... consumer choice of producers and products on the basis of attitudes and values of personal and family well-being as well as ethical or political assessment of business and government practice” [89] (p. xiv), and is expressed by two types of activities: consumer boycotts and buycotts. By engaging in boycotts, people “challenge companies to change objectionable or undesirable business practices by tarnishing their reputation or bottom lines” [90] (p. 174). Correspondingly, by engaging in buycotts, people “purchase specific products or brands deliberately to reward companies for desirable behaviour” [90] (p. 174). Even though boycotts

and boycotts lead to contrasting business outcomes, the literature on political consumerism has often examined them as analogous, both on theoretical and empirical grounds. Nevertheless, they have each gained momentum as forms of political engagement in the last decades, especially among the young.

Even after the outbreak of the financial crisis, political consumerism remains at the forefront of political action. Latest figures for the value of all ethical purchases in the UK recorded an 8.5% growth during 2015 to an impressive £38 billion of overall value, whereas consumers' ethical spending in their local community surged by 11.7% [91]. These figures exhibit a continuous growth trend for the thirteenth consecutive year, reflecting the persisting appeal of political consumerism, despite the outbreak of the crisis. Similarly, and as a result of these increasing consumption trends, on the production side several corporations are responding by developing corporate social responsibility schemes which seek to monetise the increasing demand for political agency and moral responsibility of the production [92].

Newman and Bartels [42] find that young people from 16 to 30 years of age are particularly more likely than their older contemporaries to partake in political consumerism, and that unlike conventional political participation such as voting in elections, political consumerism is likely to decrease with age. Elsewhere, Gotlieb and Wells [93] find a strong positive relationship between engagement in political consumerism at a young age and the development of those civic competencies necessary for the engagement in institutional politics as adults. However, Wicks, Morimoto, and Maxwell [94] demonstrate that the predictors of adult political consumerism do not necessarily coincide with those of youth political consumerism. Despite these findings, studies on youth political consumerism remain somewhat limited [95].

In any case, the perceived rise of political consumerism offers an example of the changing political practices of citizens in late modernity. Scholars of late-modernity posit that the perceived growth of political consumerist practices follows as a direct result of a more general shift of participatory processes towards identity-based pursuits, lifestyle participation, individualism, and postmaterialist value orientations [22,41,96]. The following section will therefore trace the 'pull' factors of political consumerism considered within the relevant postmodern literature.

3.1.1. Political Consumerism and Postmodernism

As Nonomura [95] has suggested, scholars of late modernity contend that the traditional sociodemographic indicators of participation, such as social class, are progressively losing prominence in favour of a wider motivational shift towards what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim [97] have referred to as 'self-politics', or what Giddens [96] has termed 'life-politics'. Attempting to respond to the increasingly restrained options for democratic agency in the face of neoliberal capitalism, it is argued that the postmodern citizen-consumer will resort to the politicisation of leisure and consumption as a means to assert their political agency and self-actualisation [95]. Referring to the work of Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti [89], Nonomura suggests that "the growth of political consumerism reflects the growing understanding among citizens—especially young people—of 'the politics behind products' and the 'complex social and normative context' (i.e., late capitalism, neoliberalism, economic globalisation) in which production and day-to-day consumption occurs" [95] (p. 236). Consequently, political consumerism becomes a neoliberal response of political participation based on 'individualised responsibility taking' [31] (p. 2).

Political consumerism therefore has been proposed as an emerging form of political participation [31] which departs from the traditional definitions of citizenship, by inserting the individual consumer power into collective public issues, blurring the boundaries between the conventional notions of citizen and consumer. Political consumerism, through the practice of politicising the personal, constitutes a form of individualised lifestyle politics, whereby individuals harness the power of their personal choices to achieve political change [42,43]. In doing so, it conflates the political and economic sphere to the point that to separate them serves less of a purpose than to actually assume that they affect each other.

Findings from Stolle et al. [84] indicate that political consumerism is primarily a tool of those who are distrustful of political institutions, and expresses an essentially individualistic form of civic

action, reiterating the 'push' element of the neoliberal critique of democracy. But despite its essentially individualistic nature, political consumerism has also a dormant collective appeal. Micheletti [98], building on the works of Beck and of Giddens [96,97] on reflexive modernity, interprets this interplay between the individual and the collective appeal of political consumerism on the grounds of the increasing interconnectedness of the private and public arenas of postmodern societies. The political consumers therefore, are convinced that their individual consumer choices will have collective political consequences, so that each person partakes in "global responsibility taking" [98] (p. 2). From a postmodern perspective, "... individuals can feel themselves to be authors of global political acts" [98] (p. 2). The proximity of the individual and the collective interplay therefore render political consumerism especially appealing to the postmodern citizen-consumer.

For these postmodern citizen-consumers, the market becomes a political arena in which their individual values are reflected in the contents of their shopping basket, whilst their 'votes' are 'cast' at the checkout [99] (p. 46). Consequently, the consumer becomes a political agent and a carrier of political responsibility. Although the demands of political consumerists are still contingent on institutional political deliberation spaces, "when aggregated, these individual choices have the potential to transcend the actions of individuals to form political movements that may, in turn, challenge political and economic powers" [33] (p. 471). By capturing the public imagination, they may put new items on the institutional political agendas and thus deliberate on a significantly more far-reaching range of policy-issues and concerns than they might otherwise have done. Consequently, policies that might have previously been unthinkable may become a reality [82].

Therefore, political consumerism qualifies as a response to the individualisation of the neoliberal creed, since it obscures the distinctions between the private and public realms [82] and is explicitly directed to the market instead of the state. Moreover, political consumerist practices are to a large extent self-directed, and information is disseminated through informal peer-to-peer networks [100] instead of being coordinated by formal political institutions, or driven by large-scale elite communication [82]. Sassatelli [75] (p. 188) stresses that, in the words of Beck [41], "If modernity is a democracy oriented to producers, late modernity is a democracy oriented to consumers: a pragmatic and cosmopolitan democracy where the sleepy giant of the 'sovereign citizen-consumer' is becoming a counterweight to big transnational corporations". Borrowing from a Marxist critique of capitalism, the question of whether neoliberalism contains the seeds of its own destruction by nurturing the emergence of the 'sovereign citizen-consumer' is yet to be answered.

Political consumerism has been widely examined as a market-oriented form of political participation within a postmodern context. It is exactly this postmodern appeal of political consumerism that renders it especially appealing to the young citizen-consumers of late modernity. However, given the susceptibility of political consumerism to a neoliberal modus operandi, the lack of available literature problematising its emergence as a response to neoliberal principles is somewhat surprising. The following section will thus address this gap, by establishing political consumerism as a form of economic voting within a neoliberal economic context.

3.1.2. Political Consumerism as Economic Voting

To the political consumer, the marketplace is being approximated to a democracy in which the citizen-consumers vote according to their purchasing power, each time they engage in the purchasing of a product or a service. In a similar vein, Nava [101] stipulates that political consumerism offers people access to an alternative form of democratic participation. Contrary to the typical model of electoral politics in which citizens' participation opportunities are restricted to periodical contests involving voting for candidates/representatives, engaging in acts of political consumerism presents additional benefits of frequency and immediacy. On the one hand, people register and reiterate their political support or opposition to a certain production process on a daily basis via their daily purchasing decisions. On the other hand, consistent with the notion of the prosumer introduced above,

they will support certain production processes (and penalise others) directly through the facilitation of the marketplace rather than through the mediation of their elected representatives.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that the politics of consumption are inextricably dependent on neoliberal doctrines. With its emphasis on rationality, competition, and striving for burgeoning economic expansion, neoliberalism ceases to be yet another position on the ideological spectrum. Instead, it has been described as a form of non-politics [102], the only rational and viable way forward. Neoliberalism thus has accelerated an unequivocal shift from the power of the state to that of the market. Political consumerism therefore poses as a contentious alternative to the neoliberal hegemony by augmenting its individualistic contestations with ethical, political, and collective considerations. The present section will thus investigate the appeal of political consumerism in relation to the market-based ideology of the neoliberal paradigm. The concept of the ‘marketopoly’ [56] (p. 57) is indispensable for such an analysis.

‘Marketopoly’ indicates the market itself as the *par excellence* habitus of political participation. As Lekakis states, “Marketopoly marks the reign of the market in presenting an opportunity for the capture of citizenship in its facilitation in the Marketplace” [35] (p. 57), and as such necessitates and presupposes a market-based ideology as the foundation of its politics of consumption. Neoliberalism provides the perfect ideological narrative for its emergence, by casting the shadow of the economic over political citizenship. The guiding elements of the marketopoly, namely, capacity and rationality, have been internalised by individuals to such a degree that they became the regulating principles of society as a whole. Similarly, the prevalent notion of freedom is equated to freedom of the market, devoid of any social, environmental, or ethical considerations. As a result, the classical notions of citizenship as participation are therefore re-forged into a commodified interpretation of citizenship.

In light of the above, the assumption that economic voting may substitute for political voting has been heavily contested. Bauman [103] diagnosed the ‘consumerist syndrome’ as an illness of liquid modernity, whereas Root [104] (p. 71) positions consumer-citizenship as the ‘soft focus of kitsch’, offering a poor imitation of formal electoral political participation. Instead, the emergence of consumer-citizenship has been heralded by the proponents of political consumerism as an oppositional force positioned against the marketisation of political life, by comparing consumers to economic voters. The ‘new consumer’, socialised in market choice, poses as the democratic response to the commercialisation of civic action. However, such choice is restricted by the prevalence of economic over political freedom as dictated by their internalisation of the principles of the marketopoly.

This realisation renders political consumerism a form of political participation which is inescapably bound by the rationality of the marketopoly. It denotes the penetration of the neoliberal rationale in the contemporary forms of civic participation, resulting in turn in the commodification of participation itself. Although the ability to resist commodification should be salient within the various forms of activism and political action [105], political consumerism is particularly susceptible to it since, by definition, it adheres to the doctrines of the marketopoly. For Barber, “Commodification is the mode by which a consumer society reproduces itself, working overtime to create uniform monopolies of taste and behaviour (. . .) To commodify is thus to colonise” [106] (p. 247). The process of commodification for Barber is therefore reminiscent of Peck’s [50] ‘roll-out’ effects of neoliberalism, which in a similar way seek to colonise all domains of social life by reducing them to their economic counterparts and remoulding them in its image [107]. The roll-out effect of neoliberalism therefore becomes especially intrusive, as it does not merely presuppose the existence of an economism in every domain of social life, but instead assumes as its primary aim the establishment, propagation, and institutionalisation of such economism. In doing so, it commodifies—and thus colonises—citizenship by transposing its enactment from the political arena to that of the marketopoly.

These criticisms tend to present individual citizen-consumers as unavoidably shaped by the neoliberal dictum, as this has taken form in the marketopoly. As such, they tend to neglect on the one hand the collective precondition of political consumerism introduced above, and on the other, the capacity of the empowered citizen-consumer (prosumer) to influence the production process

and the environment where this takes place. Consequently, they tend to understate the elements of resistance in the practice of political consumption. Contrary to the increased concern about diminishing political participation rates—especially among young people—political consumerism provides the platform to resist, or at least to offset, the impact of the burgeoning doctrines of neoliberalism [107]. In a romanticized metaphor, the ancient Athenian Agora—literally ‘the Market’—finds its postmodern equivalent as a locus of political fermentation.

4. Conclusions

As voting turnout demonstrates declining trends, scholars of political participation have started to examine the increased prevalence of political participation beyond the vote as a significant potential avenue for alternative civic and political engagement [108]. The present article draws from the assertion of the existence of a neoliberal ideological hegemony of the marketopoly, so as to associate the declining levels of electoral engagement among younger generations in post-crisis Europe with the rise of political consumerism. We discern two contrasting—albeit complimentary—effects: On the one hand, the internalised neoliberal critique of democracy stresses the ‘push’ effect of the public into the commercial sphere. In parallel to the ‘push’ effect, which effectively disengages young people from the traditional political field, the emerging individualisation of modern ‘liquid’ politics advanced by the post-materialist sensitivities of their previously affluent socialisation call attention to the existence of a simultaneous ‘pull’ effect into the marketopoly, as a habitus of youth political participation in post-crisis Europe.

We have considered the ways through which neoliberalism has ‘pushed’ young citizens away from politics. The neoliberal critique of democracy portrays politicians as not only unable to influence political outcomes within a technocratic economic environment, but also as inherently selfish and, as such, not sufficiently trustworthy to represent the mandate of their constituency. Henn and Oldfield [109] trace the reasons behind young people’s electoral disengagement in contemporary Britain and locate these as significantly centred on the remote and hierarchical formal democratic institutions and on the self-serving approach of elitist politicians. Nevertheless, the same research reveals that contrary to popular belief, young people are not apathetic, and would in fact be interested in participating in decisions that pertain to them should they be able to shape political discussion in ways that address their concerns and hopes. Instead, they have found themselves in a marginalised position within the traditional political sphere, and feel disillusioned and incapacitated to actualise their interests within the existing political arena. Consequently, many young people have sought and found the ‘political’ within the context of the marketopoly, and have thus adopted it as the *par excellence* domain where they may express their postmaterialist and postmodern concerns as citizen-consumers.

In such a context [110], we have identified and problematised four separate but interconnected ‘pull’ factors that render political consumerism particularly appealing. Firstly, the ability of the citizen-consumer to customise the products to fit their individual requirements; secondly, the ability to tailor the prices according to their budget; thirdly, the availability of information and ease of communication with regard to their purchasing decisions; and finally, the trust in the market environment. The first two factors are related to the consumer’s ability to influence the production process, reflecting the argument of Kotler et al. [79] set out above in relation to the emergence of the prosumer. The third is linked to the collective appeal of political consumerism [33], which harnesses the individual consumer’s power into collective public issues. Despite its essentially individualistic nature, political consumerism conveys strong collective underpinnings. For instance, Zukin et al. [100] (p. 79) report that citizens participate in acts of political consumerism “because it’s a good thing to do”, emphasising an ethical individualistic tendency. However, Micheletti and Stolle [111] also identify ‘social solidarity’ as a determinant for political consumerism, drawing political consumerism as a form of ‘individualised-collective action’, which does not perpetuate the cleavage between individualistic and collective action, but rather reconciles the two. In any case, both determinants draw a picture of an empowered, primarily postmaterialist [90,103] citizen-consumer who, having been socialised under

material conditions of relative affluence, will place emphasis on ethical and solidarity considerations behind their purchasing behaviour. Finally, the fourth factor of trust in the market environment reiterates the internalised neoliberal doctrines of the neoliberal subject in line with the discussion above, as these have been consolidated by its roll-out process.

The decline of electoral participation does not designate the end of citizenship, but merely its transformation and diffusion into alternative fields. As a form of political participation that operates within the marketopolis, political consumerism is susceptible to the neoliberal mentality. Yet, as the definitions of political participation are expanding to include individualised or lifestyle forms of engagement, so is the concept of citizenship. Armed with postmaterialist considerations, the emergence of the empowered citizen-consumer as a by-product of the neoliberal roll-out process provides consumerism with the necessary elements of citizenship, and enables citizen-consumers to appraise or penalise market forces.

We posit that, contrary to the increased concern about diminishing political engagement, especially among the younger generations, political consumerism provides a framework for responding to the individualisation and strict 'economism' of the neoliberal tenets. Disenfranchised and disillusioned by the capacity of the purely political sphere to respond to their individualised claims, and having internalised the neoliberal critique of democracy, the young empowered citizen-consumers demonstrate noteworthy reflexivity to the spirit of the times. It is thus not surprising that the citizen-consumer, equipped with the freedom provided by postmodern liquid politics, driven by postmaterialist sensitivities but simultaneously instilled with the internalised conviction in favour of the seemingly ubiquitous market, will inevitably seek the 'political' within the bounds of the marketplace. It may therefore be argued that if neoliberalism perceives competition as the primary characteristic of human interaction and as such it reinvents citizens as consumers, political consumerism responds by redefining consumers as citizens.

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