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# Political Consumerism as a Means in Influencing Energy Policy and Solving Environmental Problems the Case of Finland in 2007-2016

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**Abstract:** Purpose of this study was to analyse, the extent to which political consumerism functioned in Finland as a mode of citizens' political participation in the energy policy-making and in solving environmental problems caused by energy production and consumption. Political consumerism, that is, the consumption choices based on political, ethical, or environmental discretion, may be a substitute for conventional political participation, which is increasingly perceived as less efficient for solving societal problems. Finland and energy policy are particularly suitable venues for testing the role of political consumerism as a mode of political involvement for several reasons. For instance, popular support for political consumerism has been in Finland one of the highest by international standards together with other Nordic countries, Switzerland, and Germany, while energy has been a policy sector where citizens' involvement is more limited than in the case of most other policy domains. The study focused on the period 2007-2016 which was characterized by the decreasing economic development and weakening legitimacy of the political system. Methodologically, the study was based on postal surveys conducted in 2007 and 2016 among a random sample representing 18 - 75-year old citizens. The findings of the study indicate that the citizenry ranked the conventional political participation (voting in elections) as well as collective modes of political consumerism (participatory political consumerism, discursive political consumerism) clearly less useful devices to influence energy policy than all individual forms of political consumerism (lifestyle politics, boycotting, boycotting). On the other hand, making use of various forms of political participation in energy policy-making accumulated for the same people. Despite the fact that political consumers were more dissatisfied with citizens' involvement in energy policy-making than non-political consumers, they perceived voting in elections as a more useful device in influencing energy policy than non-political consumers. Moreover, the effects of prolonged recession and the election funding scandal on the endorsement of political consumerism in the context of energy policy have remained minor. This can be explained by that as the recession reduced citizens' economic resources their consumption choices have based likely more on the economic consumerism than political consumerism that stresses more post-materialistic values. This was seen especially in that the endorsement of all devices in influencing energy policy decreased after 2007, excluding those that may provide economic benefits, such as asking for competitive tenders from electricity companies.

**Keywords:** Political Consumerism, Civic Involvement, Environmental Problems, Energy Policy, Consumption Choices

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## 1. Introduction

Citizens' changing attitudes and expectations towards government are stimulating a search for different democratic processes which move away from traditional models of representative democracy [1]. Traditionally, political

participation has involved the link between citizens and their government, which in turn regulates the market. Political consumerism adds to this notion in that citizens turn directly to the market with variety of political concerns [2]. Political consumerism may substitute for conventional forms of participation that are increasingly perceived as less efficient

and less suitable for the domestic and global nature of political problems [3].

In social sciences, consumption has increasingly been studied as part of identity formation and the politics of identity, which belongs or does not belong to various social groups [4]. Many studies on political consumerism have focused on food, textiles and other types of everyday consumption [5] but energy issues in connection to environmental concerns have seldom been addressed. In fact, consumer-citizens opportunities to make consumption choices in the energy sector have increased as a result of that many countries, including Finland, have discharged their energy monopolies or deregulated their energy policies which has strengthened the role of market mechanisms.

According to Stolle and Micheletti, political consumerism can be defined as “actions taken by those who make choices among producers, products and services with the aim of changing objectionable institutional or market practices.” Their choices are based on attitudes and values concerning issues of justice and fairness, or noneconomic issues regarding personal or family well-being, as well as ethical assessments of favorable business and governmental practices. Consumption can be a venue for people to express themselves politically or set the political agenda of other actors and institutions, such as government and business. Political consumers differ from economic consumers, who are simply looking for a satisfactory relationship between material quality and economic costs [5, see also 6].

The purpose of this study is to analyse, whether political consumerism is functioning in Finland as a mode of citizen involvement in the energy policy. Finland and energy policy are particularly suitable venues for testing the role of political consumerism as a mode of political involvement for four reasons which are related to the citizens’ attitudes on political decision-makers.

First, in Finland popular support for political consumerism has been one of the highest by international standards together with other Nordic countries, Switzerland, and Germany, with Southern and Eastern Europe lagging behind [5]. Second, economic development and the legitimacy of the political system have declined markedly in the country from 2007 to 2016 which may have decreased citizens’ trust in government and interest in conventional political participation through general elections.

Third, energy has been characterized as a policy sector where citizens’ involvement is more limited than in the case of most other policy domains [7]. Firms, especially state-owned and more generally, those operating in the energy supply, have had a privileged access to decision-making arenas, which have remained mostly opaque for the citizens [8]. Identical findings have also been reported in Finland. Despite the new rules of the game – from monopolies and extensive regulation via competition and deregulation to re-regulation – and the Europeanization of the Finnish energy sector, the composition of the energy elite has been fairly stable from the end of 1980s until the end of the first decade of the 2000s. The energy elite has been dominated by energy producers, even if the voice of

large energy-consuming firms has grown. Civic associations and consumer-citizens have had difficulties in gaining access to the decision-making of energy policy [9].

Fourth, even if the Finns have preferred nuclear power less than renewable energy in the energy production [10] the Finnish energy policy has relied strongly on nuclear power. While construction of new nuclear power plants has been prohibited in many countries, the Parliament of Finland, by contrast, licensed the construction of two nuclear power plants in 2010. Moreover, Finland is the first country in which the process for the final disposal of spent nuclear fuel in the bedrock has been authorized both at the national (Parliament in 2001) and local (municipal council in 2000) levels [11]. On the hand, the Finnish policies of science, technology, and energy (e.g., nuclear power, information technology, biotechnology) have rested in international comparison on exceptionally high trust in technology, technological development and government among the citizenry [12, 13]. Thus, the Finnish nuclear power policy has rested on citizens’ confidence in technology. In fact, Finns prioritize the experts more than politicians as energy policy-makers [10].

Energy policy will be defined here as political steering conducted by political decision-makers and public authorities focusing on energy management. In other words, energy policy covers research, planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation pertaining to the goals and measures of political decision-makers and public authorities focusing on the production, purchase, storage, transfer, delivery, and consumption of energy [14].

Little research has been undertaken to compare the effectiveness of various conventional and emerging forms of political participation [5, 3]. Thus, the first research question (Q1) of this study is whether Finnish citizens perceive that they can influence energy policy more efficiently by the means of conventional political participation, e.g., voting in elections than by political consumerism, i.e., consumption choices.

The second research question (Q2) asks whether citizens themselves behold that their possibilities to influence have changed from 2007 to 2016, the period characterized by important social changes in terms of the economic development and the legitimacy of the political system. Although surges in support for government sometimes seem to occur during strong economic times, systematic analyses invariably question the role of economic conditions [15]. However, it has been observed that citizens’ perceptions of national economy affect more their voting decisions than changes in macro-economic conditions [16].

The study proceeds as follows. First, social changes, mainly deep economic fluctuations and a major political scandal which effected on the citizens’ attitudes in 2007-2016 are outlined. Second, the theoretical starting points dealing with the political consumerism as a form of political participation are defined based on previous studies. The hypotheses which direct the empirical analysis will be derived from this theoretical reflection. Fourth, research methods, data and research questions are imposed. Fifth, the analysis is composed of three sections where 1) the citizens’

adherence to various form of political consumerism, 2) the effects of social background on the endorsement of political consumerism, and 3) the role of various activities in solving of environmental problems caused by energy production and consumption are analysed. Finally, the research questions are answered, and the findings discussed in the light of the theoretical starting points.

## 2. Societal Changes in Finland from 2007 to 2016

Countries with high levels of political consumerism are usually the ones in which there has been little decline in voter turnout. Furthermore, political consumerism is more frequently practiced in established democracies with relatively high levels of economic development. These are also predominantly countries with higher levels of post-materialism, green parties, and various forms of political participation as well as countries with legacies of neo-corporatism and strong and expansive welfare state [15]. Next will be considered the extent to which these characteristics fit to Finland.

A substantial body of scholarly literature indicates that many post-industrial societies have experienced a withdrawal from the channels of conventional political activism. This transformation also applies to Finland, with some important exceptions. The voter turnout in Finland (67.9% in general election of 2007; 70.5% in 2011; and 70.1% in 2015) was within the lowest third of all Western democracies and has decreased more sharply than in many other countries, especially within Scandinavia [17]. Membership in political parties and trade unions has declined significantly throughout Europe and the US. However, the corporatism is still going strong in Finland. In 2010, the proportion of employees belonging to trade unions was highest in Finland by international comparison [18]. Even today the Finnish labor market organizations continue to have significant influence in many social reforms that concern not only their membership, but the whole population, and the ultimate decisions on that are made by Parliament.

On the other hand, trust in Parliament, political parties, and the democratic process in general are high in Finland by international standards. According to the 2008 European Social Survey, Finns participated in civic associations more than any of the other 24 countries in the study. However, Finnish people's subjective civil efficacy — the sense that one can understand political processes and participate in them meaningfully — has been at a much lower level than in Europe on average. In 2008, it was the third-lowest among 23 European countries [19]. A sense of civic efficacy has been seen as an important individual attribute for political consumerism [5].

As far as the economic development is concerned, the national economy collapsed in Finland more drastically in the early 1990s than in any other developed market economy after the Second World War [20] and the country plunged

into the deepest recession in its history. Social services were cut, and the welfare state began to disintegrate as a result of the cuts in government expenditures. This “great recession” was followed by rapid economic growth based mainly on governmental investments in research and development and the expansion of the electronics industry, especially Nokia Ltd. However, Finland's economic boom was halted by the international financial crisis and the crisis of euro zone since 2008. Although this recession was only about half as severe as the recession of the 1990s, GDP still decreased in Finland more than in other euro area countries and in those EU member states that had joined the Union prior to 2004 [21]. The recession emanating from 2008 has so far lasted longer than the recession of the early 1990s. According to a forecast of Bank of Finland, the 2008 GDP will be exceeded not until 2019 [22]. Paradoxically, due to decreased GDP the public social spending-to-GDP among OECD countries in 2016 was highest at just over 30 percent in Finland together with France [23]. However, the new government that was formed after the general election of 2015 started to increase employers' benefits and to cut citizens' benefits and welfare services in order to boost economic growth.

As far as political changes are concerned, several scandals have loomed large in the media during the period under study, and all of these scandals have focused on the elites in politics, administration, and business and their activities since the 1970s. In particular, the political elite was shaken by the electoral campaign funding scandal of 2008, which was the most serious political scandal in Finland to date as measured by publicity surrounding the events [24].

This scandal together with the international financial crisis, the crisis of the euro zone and the Greek and Portuguese bail-outs dominated the public debate in 2008-2011 and undermined the legitimacy of the major political parties affecting the results of the 2011 general election, with the electoral support of the populist Finns' Party increasing from 4.1% in 2007 to 19.1% in 2011 [25]. In the next general election of 2015 the support of the party decreased somewhat (17.7%) but it ascended to the inner core of power, the government. While the Finns' Party's values can be characterized as nationalistic and conservative, the Greens represent liberal and post-materialist values. The Green's electoral support was 6.5% – 8.5% between 1995 and 2015, and the party was represented in the government in 1995-2003 and 2007-2015.

## 3. Political Consumerism as a Mode of Political Participation

Previous studies on political consumerism have shown that citizens' involvement in political consumerism depends on their socio-economic background. Political consumerism has been found to be connected to the citizen agency of higher education, of young people and of women. Political consumerism requires more resources and skills from the participants to compensate for the missing institutional

framework. Education, especially tertiary education, can contribute in at least three ways. First, it gives individuals the skills they need if they are to effectively participate in politics. Second, political consumers necessarily must have high levels of political interest and political information in order to find out about and act upon issues in the marketplace. Generally, levels of political interest and political information rise with education. Third, education is positively associated with income and, as political consumerism involves selectively purchasing goods, it also requires significant expenditures [5].

Thus, with regard to influencing the Finnish energy policy, it can be hypothesized (H1), that the higher the individual's level of education is, the more she or he endorses political consumerism. The level of education can be analysed directly through the completed degrees and indirectly through occupational positions that reflect both education and incomes [26]. In most countries, with very few exceptions, the highest-income citizens are significantly more likely to be political consumers than people from lower income groups [5]. As the survey respondents were not asked about their incomes, it is hypothesized (H2) that the higher the individual's occupational position is, the more she or he endorses political consumerism.

The attractiveness of political consumerism for young people is not well researched, but it would appear that an important explanation is the appeal of life-style politics among the young, trends towards individualization, and their tendency to find the formal political sphere alienating [6]. It seems, however, plausible that the youngest, although inclined to Internet activism and other protest activities, might not be as susceptible to political consumerism because of lack of resources. In fact, the middle-age cohort, who face mobilizational life-cycle effects such as children, careers, and a general peak of involvement might be more active in political consumerism [5]. According to the third hypothesis (H3), the middle cohorts endorse more political consumerism than the youngest and the oldest cohorts.

Three factors explain the role of women in political consumerism. First, women are assumed to have responsibility for shopping for the family on a daily basis. They are thus more involved with consumer issues than men or children. Second, studies show that women have a lower risk perception threshold than men. Third, because women have historically been excluded from institutions in the public sphere and their issues have been seen as non-political, they have been forced to create other sites to express their political concerns and work for their political interests [6, 27]. Hence, it is hypothesized (H4) that women endorse more actively political consumerism than men do.

Moreover, previous studies have indicated that political consumerism is more an urban than a rural phenomenon. People living in large metropolitan areas, in large cities, or even smaller cities are significantly more engaged in political consumerism than people in rural areas and villages [5]. The fifth hypothesis (H5) presupposes that the more individual's living area is urbanized the stronger she or he endorses

political consumerism.

In terms of political views, political consumers are not seen as left-wing extremists. The fact that about one-third of all citizens in Europe and the United States and even up to half of Nordic and Swiss citizens engage this activity, indicate that this phenomenon is much more widespread. However, previous studies indicate that political consumers self-identify more often to the left on a common left-right scale than to the political centre or to the right [5]. Thus, it is hypothesized (H6), that the more leftist the individual's political orientation is the more she or he endorses political consumerism.

These hypotheses do not include presumptions of change from 2007 to 2016 because the changes on the individual level cannot be derived directly from the changes in the national economy. However, the hypotheses will be tested in this study on the basis of the Finns attitudes on energy policy in 2007 and 2016. The analysis focuses on Finns' attitudes on five forms of political consumerism: boycotts; buycotts; discursive political consumerism; lifestyle politics; and participatory political consumerism alongside voting in elections as devices to influence energy policy.

Consumer boycotts encourage people to disengage with corporate actors by refusing to buy their products. Their aim is to force change in corporate or government policy and behavior by directly rejecting a harmful product or a product produced by a corporation that engages in harmful practices. Conversely, buycotters prefer certain products over others for political, ethical, or environmental reasons [5].

The third form of political consumerism is lifestyle commitments, a form of lifestyle politics, which is exemplified by vegetarianism, veganism, voluntary simplicity and downsizing consumption. Individuals organize increasingly social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them. This form of political consumerism can be defined as the choice to use an individual's private life sphere to take responsibility for the allocation of common values and resources, in other words, for politics. Discursive political consumerism, in turn, engages citizens who worry about the politics of products by seeking and relaying information on corporate policy or practices. It can be defined as the expression of opinions about corporate policy and practice in communicative efforts directed at business, the public at large, family and friends, and various political institutions [5, 28].

The fifth form of political consumerism will be termed here as participatory political consumerism, which can be seen as an enlargement of life-style politics in private life to the public or corporate sphere. This form of political consumerism may raise a worrisome product or producer to the political, administrative or corporate agenda by utilizing the existing formal organizations (e.g., NGOs), formally unorganized actions (e.g., demonstrations), and individual contacts to MPs, civil servants, or business managers.

The first three of the five forms represent the individualized political consumerism, while the latter two mirror more collective political consumerism, which are oriented more to influence through interaction with other people [c.f. 6].

Citizens fear that governments either does not understand or cannot control new uncertainties and risks that characterize modern societies. Hence, they search for new ideas, arenas, and methods to work these important political problems. In other words, political consumers might be more disaffected from mainstream political institutions and have developed distrust in electoral political institutions and parliamentary politics. These theoretical insights suggest that political consumers trust more in their own activities and international institutions than nonpolitical consumers [5]. Thus, the seventh hypothesis (H7) presupposes that political consumers stress the role of consumer-citizens and international institutions at the expense of national political solutions more than non-political consumers in tackling environmental problems caused by the production and use of energy.

#### 4. Method and Data

Methodologically, this study was based on a postal survey (and Internet survey in 2016) conducted among a random sample representing 18-75-year old Finns. The field work, covering one reminder round, was carried out in May-October 2007 and August-October 2016. Thus, the study continues to previous research [14] in a changed economic and political context. Even if the rate of response was rather low, (30.0% in 2007 and 33.6% in 2016), the large size of the sample (N=4000) in both surveys ensures that the data well enough represent the Finnish population at large. As the questionnaires were identical in both surveys it can be examined the extent to which citizens' attitudes on energy policy have changed in 2007-2016, the period when the Finnish society underwent major changes.

Nonetheless, the data deviate in minor respects from the whole population. People living in small municipalities (4,000-8,000 inhabitants) were somewhat overrepresented, while those living in large municipalities (more than 80,000 inhabitants) were underrepresented. However, the respondents represented the various regions of the country with a very even distribution. Individuals living in detached houses were clearly overrepresented but those living in apartment houses or terraced houses were underrepresented. Similarly, people living in their own flats were overrepresented, while those living in rented flats are underrepresented. Compared to the population at large, the highly educated (individuals who have M.A. degree) were overrepresented. In terms of education fields, people educated in technics and service branch were somewhat underrepresented. With regard to occupational groups, lower functionaries were underrepresented, while blue-collar workers and pensioners were somewhat overrepresented [29, 30]. Moreover, it was possible that the respondents were somewhat more interested in energy issues than the general Finnish population. In 2007, 26% had changed their electricity supplier, while in 2016 the share was as high as 52%.

#### 5. The Endorsement of Various Modes of Political Consumerism

The respondents on surveys conducted in 2007 and 2016 were inquired, how useful they perceived various devices in influencing energy policy. The response options were very useful; fairly useful; fairly useless; totally useless; and can't say (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Usefulness (very or fairly useful) of various devices in influencing the Finnish energy policy in 2007 and 2016 (%).

Device	2007	2016
Instructing children on energy issues	94	88
Choosing scantily spending/"energy-pinching" appliances	92	88
Choosing eco-friendly products	90	87
Walking or cycling instead of driving	90	85
Dropping or supervision of dwelling temperature	84	79
Using so-called green electricity (produced by renewable energy)	77	79
Supervision of the use of electricity in the household	*	79
Reducing private driving by favoring public transport	86	77
Lowering personal consumption level in general	86	77
Asking for competitive tenders from electricity companies	65	74
Reducing heating in leisure residence	*	64
Reducing the use of sauna heated by electricity	63	62
Reducing air travels	68	61
Reducing the use of consumer electronics	67	58
Voting in elections	57	56
Discussion on energy issues with other people/friends	56	48
Acting in civic associations	41	30
Contacts with representatives of energy producing firms	25	27
Writing letters about energy issues to the editors of newspapers	39	24
Writing about energy issues on Internet discussion sites	30	23
Contacts with members of parliament	28	23
Contacts with public authorities	23	20
Participation in demonstration	13	10
Radical environmental activism	13	10
N=	1157	1308

\*= not inquired

Citizens' attitudes regarding their possibilities to influence energy policy by the means of consumption choices were very positive. The most useful devices in 2007 and 2016 were instructing children on energy issues and choosing energy-pinching appliances. The first one represents the discursive form of political consumerism. The other forms of discursive political consumerism (discussion on energy issues with other people/friends, writing letters about energy issues to the editors of newspapers, writing letters about energy issues on Internet discussion sites) were clearly less popular. Choosing scantily spending appliances as well as the third one, choosing eco-friendly products represent boycotting as a form of political consumerism. The other boycotting devices, i.e., using so-called green electricity, was ranked sixth, and asking for comparative tenders from electricity companies ranked tenth in 2016.

The most well-known form of political consumerism, boycotting, was represented by walking or cycling instead of driving, reducing private driving by favouring public transport, reducing heating in leisure residence, reducing the use of sauna heated by electricity, reducing air travels and reducing the use of consumer electronics. The lifestyle politics as a form of political consumerism was represented by dropping or supervision of dwelling temperature, supervision of the use of electricity in the household, and lowering general personal consumption level. However, many forms of boycotting come close to the lifestyle politics in character.

In sum, the endorsement of almost all single forms of political consumerism has decreased in 2007-2016. The endorsement increased only in three cases, i.e., asking for competitive tenders from electricity companies, contacts with representatives of energy producing firms, and using so-called green energy. The common denominator for these devices is making use of the released competition in the electricity market with regard to households in 1998 [9].

The most interesting finding was that both voting in elections and the participatory political consumerism, i.e., contacts with the members of parliament, acting in civic associations, contacts with representatives of energy producing firms, as well as contacts with public authorities were ranked as clearly less useful devices in influencing energy policy than all traditional forms of political consumerism.

Putting together above mentioned individual devices of political consumerism (i.e., the means from Table 1), most popular form of political consumerism in 2007 was lifestyle politics followed in order by boycotting, boycotting, discursive political consumerism, and participatory political consumerism. In 2016 the order was the same but boycotting was more popular than lifestyle politics. Thus, the individualized forms of political consumerism were more popular than their collective counterparts throughout the period under study.

In total, 69% of political consumers perceived in 2007 and 2016 voting in elections as a very or fairly useful device in

influencing energy policy, while the share of non-political consumers was only 47% in 2007 and 43%, respectively. The difference was statistically significant both in 2007 and 2016 ( $p < .001$ ). These findings indicate that making use of various forms of political participation in energy policy-making accumulated for the same people. This is congruent with the findings of previous studies which show that conventionally active people use additional means to express their voices. However, the findings of this study differ from the previous research results that the emerging forms seem to do little to empower larger groups of people formerly excluded from the political participation [5]. In fact, as the unemployed Finns perceived consumption choices more useful and voting in elections less useful devices in influencing the energy policy than the employed, political consumerism may have compensated for conventional participation and empower the unprivileged.

## 6. The Effect of Social Background on the Endorsement of Political Consumerism

In terms of social background, the endorsement of political consumerism depended statistically only on gender and political party affiliation (Pearson Chi-Square  $< .05$ ) (Table 2). Women experienced all devices listed in Table 1 as more useful than men in influencing energy policy. Thus, the hypothesis (H4) whereby women endorse more political consumerism than men do, was verified. However, the difference between women and men has decreased since 2007. This can be displayed by diving citizens into two dichotomous groups on the basis of their attitudes on various devices listed in Table 1: the supporters (responding with very or fairly useful) and non-supporters (fairly or total useless, or can't say) of political consumerism, and by constructing a sum variable comprising all devices inquired in 2007 and 2016 (excluding "voting in elections" which represents the conventional political participation). This dichotomous grouping of respondents and the sum variable will be used also in the following analyses.

On the basis of previous studies it was hypothesized (H6) that the more leftist the individual's political orientation, the more she or he endorses political consumerism. This hypothesis was verified. This finding was congruent with the Finnish ideological cleavages in general. According to election studies of 2003-2015, supporters of the Left Alliance, the Social Democrats, and the Greens identified with the political left while the adherents of other political parties had more or less right-wing political orientation. For instance, 69% of the supporters of the Greens identified with the left [31]. However, the findings of present study deviated remarkably from the European Social Survey conducted in 2002/2003, whereby the share of adherents of political consumerism in Finland was about the same in the political left (49%), centre (49%) and right (47%) [5].

**Table 2.** The share of supporters of political consumerism among various socio-economic groups in 2007 and 2016 (%)

	2007	2016
Gender		
Men	35	43
Women	55	53
	p<.001	p<.001
Age group		
18-29	43	46
30-44	45	48
45-59	46	49
50-75	45	47
	p>.05	p>.05
Basic education		
Primary school	48	45
Elementary school	41	45
High school	46	51
	p>.05	p>.05
Vocational education		
No vocational education	52	42
Vocational course	49	54
Vocational school	44	43
Polytechnic	39	50
University	47	49
	p>.05	p>.05
Occupational position		
Leading position	46	45
Upper functionary	34	44
Lower functionary	46	53
Blue-collar worker	48	48
Entrepreneur	48	53
Farmer	29	53
Student	41	51
Pensioner	46	44
Homemaker	54	55
Unemployed	52	57
Other	57	46
	p>.05	p>.05
Size of the municipality (population)		
less than 4,000	51	43
4,001 – 8,000	50	50
8,001 – 30,000	44	46
30,001 – 80,000	40	47
more than 80,000	44	50
	p>.05	p>.05
Type of residential area		
Downtown	49	53
Suburb	44	46
Countryside population centre	40	47
Rural sparsely populated area	47	45
	p>.05	p>.05
Political party affiliation		
Centre Party	49	41
National Coalition Party (the Conservatives)	28	40
Social Democrats	45	46
Left Alliance	70	71
Swedish People's Party	39	38
The Greens	72	74
Christian Democrats	63	75
The Finns' Party	43	47
Would not vote at all	30	35
Can't say	43	44
Do not want to disclose	39	38
	p<.001	p<.001

However, the endorsement of political consumerism did not depend statistically on age, basic education, vocational education, occupational position, size of the municipality, type of residential area. Thus, the hypothesis (H3) whereby the middle cohorts endorse political consumerism more than the youngest and oldest cohorts, was verified in 2016 but only partly in 2007. The hypotheses according to which the higher the individual's professional position is, the more she or he endorses political consumerism (H2), and the more individual's living area is urbanized the stronger she or he endorses political consumerism (H5) were not verified.

The hypothesis (H1) whereby the higher the individual's level of education is, the higher is her or his endorsement on political consumerism, was not either verified. However, the endorsement of political consumerism depended statistically ( $p<.05$ ) on the field of vocational education. The share of adherents of political consumerism in 2016 was highest among individuals who had taken education in pedagogic/teacher training (62%), social sciences (62%), and natural sciences (60%) while it was lowest among those educated in engineering (42%), service branch (42%), and agriculture and forestry (47%). Compared to the year 2007, the endorsement of political consumerism increased most among citizens educated in natural sciences (+23 percentage points) and social sciences (+18) while it decreased most among those with education in the service branch (-17). The last hypothesis (H7) will be tested later on.

## 7. How to Solve Environmental Problems

Subjective civic efficacy — the sense that one can understand political processes and participate in them meaningfully — is an important individual attribute for political consumerism [5]. In fact, the endorsement of political consumerism had statistically significant connection to experienced civic efficacy ( $p<.001$  in 2007 and 2016). The share of political consumers who totally or fairly agreed with the statement, “I can influence the Finnish energy policy by my own action” was 37% in 2007 and 35% in 2016, while respectively 15% and 13% of non-supporters of political consumerism was of the same opinion.

Finally, it was hypothesized (H7) that political consumers stress the role of consumer-citizens and international institutions at the expense of national political solutions more than non-political consumers in tackling environmental problems caused by the production and use of energy. The hypothesis will be again tested by dividing citizens into supporters and non-supporters of political consumerism (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The proportion of supporters and non-supporters of political consumerism who perceived specified activities very or fairly important in solving environmental problems caused by energy production and consumption in 2007 and 2016 (%)

Activity	2007		2016	
	Supporters	Non-supporters	Supporters	Non-supporters
New technology/innovations (e.g.in energy production)	95	91	95	83
Finland's domestic activities and political decisions	93	77	95	77
Decisions of large developing countries such as China and India	92	84	92	81
Activities of multinational big firms	92	82	95	77
EU's decisions and climate policy	90	78	91	73
Extensive, international mandatory environmental agreements	93	80	92	75
Activities of firms/market/economic life in general	92	77	92	72
USA's decisions and climate policy	86	78	86	68
Activities and choices of individual consumers	91	62	87	61
Decisions of local energy firms	*	*	86	59
Activities and choices of individual citizens	87	52	82	44
National educational campaigns	83	47	74	39
Activities of environmental civic associations	76	33	70	30
Activities of civic movements	66	21	57	19
N=	499	610	588	649

\*= not inquired

The actors or activities are listed in Table 3 in the order the respondents ranked them as very or fairly important in solving environmental problems. The respondents evaluated all of them in 2016 as slightly less important than in 2007. Only the importance of Finland's domestic activities and political decisions were stressed a little bit more. Second, the political consumers stressed the importance of all actors/activities clearly more than non-political consumers throughout the period under study. The dependence between the endorsement of political consumerism and the perceived important role of various actors/activities in solving environmental problems was statistically significant ( $p < .001$  in 2007 and 2016).

In accordance with the hypothesis the political consumers prioritized clearly more the role of individual consumers and citizens in solving environmental problems than non-political consumers. In terms of individual consumers, the difference was 29 percentage points in 2007 and 26 percentage points in 2016, while in the case of individual citizens it was 35 and 38 percentage points, respectively. More generally, the significance of political consumerism was underscored by the fact that all respondents experienced in 2007-2016 the activities and choices of individual consumers more important in solving environmental problems than that of individual citizens.

However, in terms of international institutions, such as decisions and climate policy of the European Union, the US, large developing countries, and international environmental agreements as well as Finland's domestic decisions the difference between political and non-political consumers was lesser. In fact, the biggest difference between supporters and non-supporters of political consumerism concerned collective civic involvement, that is, activities of civic movements and environmental civic associations as well as national educational campaigns. Political consumers stressed the importance of all these actors/activities clearly more than non-political consumers. In contrast to the hypothesis, political consumers gave the top priority to Finland's domestic activities and political decisions in 2007-2016. All

in all, the hypothesis was verified only in terms of the activities and choices of individual citizens and consumers.

## 8. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to analyse, whether political consumerism was functioning in Finland as a mode of citizen involvement in the energy policy which has been characterized as a policy sector where citizens' involvement is more limited than in the case of most other policy domains.

The first research question (Q1) was whether Finnish citizens perceive that they can influence energy policy more efficiently by the means of conventional political participation, e.g., voting in elections than by political consumerism, i.e., consumption choices. The study assessed, second (Q2), whether citizens themselves behold that their possibilities to influence have changed from 2007 to 2016, the period characterized by important social changes in terms of the economic development and the legitimacy of the political system.

The first finding of this study was that the endorsement of almost all single devices of political consumerism has decreased between 2007 and 2016. However, measured by a sum variable that comprised all individual devices, the endorsement of political consumerism has increased slightly: the share of adherents increased from 45% to 48% in 2007-2016.

The endorsement of political consumerism was statistically dependent only on gender and political party affiliation but not on age, basic education, vocational education, occupational position, the size of the municipality, or the type of residential area. Thus, only the hypotheses whereby women endorse more political consumerism than men do, and the more leftist the individual's political orientation, the more she or he endorses political consumerism, were verified.

As regards to the resources such as higher education and high professional status that have traditionally been seen to increase the endorsement of political consumerism, the findings of present study are unexpected in the light of



previous studies. This may indicate that the energy sector is a special policy area in the sense that issues are technical and complex in character which means that actual possibilities to influence energy policy depends more on motivation to find out about things than formal resources per se.

Moreover, it was hypothesized that Finnish political consumers stress the role of consumer-citizens and international institutions at the expense of national political solutions more than non-political consumers in tackling environmental problems caused by the production and use of energy. The political consumers have stressed the importance of all actors/activities clearly more than non-political consumers throughout the period under study. Unlike the hypothesis, political consumers gave the top priority to Finland's domestic activities and political decisions in 2007-2016. In short, this hypothesis was verified only in terms of the activities and choices of individual citizens and consumers.

It is striking that the unemployed perceived political consumerism as a more useful device but voting in elections as a less useful one than all occupational groups in influencing energy policy. This finding indicates that political consumerism and representative democracy may be alternative channels in influencing energy policy. The fact is, that the voting turnout of the unemployed has been significantly lower than that of the employed in the Finnish general elections [25]. Hence, political consumerism may have compensated conventional participation and empowered the unprivileged. With respect to the first research question (Q1), the conventional political participation (voting in elections) as well as more collective modes of political consumerism (participatory political consumerism, discursive political consumerism) were ranked clearly less useful devices to influence energy policy than all individual forms of political consumerism (lifestyle politics, boycotting, boycotting).

On the other hand, this study indicated that making use of various forms of political participation in energy policy-making accumulated for the same people. Despite the fact that political consumers were more dissatisfied with citizens' involvement in energy policy-making than non-political consumers, they perceived voting in elections as a more useful device in influencing energy policy than non-political consumers. Political consumers had a higher sense of civil efficacy than non-political consumers.

As regards to the second research question (Q2), the effects of prolonged recession and the election funding scandal on the endorsement of political consumerism in the context of energy policy have remained minor. This can be explained by the fact direct effects of the recession and the political scandal did not focus on the energy sector. However, as the recession reduced citizens' economic resources their consumption choices have based likely more on the economic consumerism than political consumerism that stresses more post-materialistic values. This was seen especially in that the endorsement of all devices in influencing energy policy decreased after 2007, excluding those that may provide economic benefits, such as asking for

competitive tenders from electricity companies.

The endorsement of consumption choices as well as voting in elections in influencing energy policy have accumulated for the same people, who are political consumers with a strong sense of their own civic efficacy. In fact, Finns have perceived political institutions (the government, Parliament) to be the most powerful actors in energy-policy-making [32] and their attitudes on general elections as a channel of influencing have been mainly positive since 2007. However, the experts representing business, public administration, and environmental NGOs have been seen as more legitimate decision-makers than politicians [10]. Moreover, citizens have trusted most in the technology for solving the environmental problems caused by energy production and consumption.

This kind of attitudes refer to the endorsement of "stealth democracy". According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse [33], rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a large number of people want what they call stealth democracy. Their claim is that the people do not routinely play an active role in decision-making, or in providing input for or monitoring decision-makers. The goal in stealth democracy is for decisions to be made efficiently, objectively, and without commotion and disagreement. Elites are not what the citizens fear; rather, it is self-serving elites who are feared. The stealth democracy claims that the experts representing, for example business and public administration are legitimate policy-makers equal to the elected officials,

Finns' adherence to political consumerism has been much lower (45% in 2007, 48% in 2016) than to stealth democracy (71% in 2007, 72% in 2016). Finns' preference for stealth democracy at the expense of political consumerism can be at least partly be explained by the characteristics of the Finnish political culture where high trust, by international standards, in political and legal systems, firms, and technology is associated with low civic efficacy and half-hearted appreciation of democracy [10, 17]. The fact that citizens endorse stealth democracy more than representative democracy and political consumerism can account for the exceptional characteristics of Finnish energy policy in international comparison; while the construction and use of nuclear power have been prohibited in many countries, in Finland two nuclear power plants and a repository for final disposal of spent nuclear fuel are under construction. In fact, the concern for climate change has spoken effectively for nuclear power.

Thus, citizens' ambivalent attitudes towards the political decisions-makers (they are seen to be the most powerful actors in energy-policy-making but not an effective channel for the citizenry to influence) and confidence in the experts refer to "politics of suspicion". The finding that citizens' support for stealth democracy exceeds that of representative democracy suggest that they prefer an open and expertise-based decision-making process rather than its outcomes. This attitude can be accounted for by the fact expectations with regard to representation have changed. Rather than working to push interests through and demonstrating ideological camaraderie, elected officials are first and foremost expected

to show empathy and presence. Several studies have shown that citizens remain sensitive, or are even more sensitive than before, to the behavior, empathy, or the lack of empathy shown by rulers than they are to the actual content of their decisions [34]. Evidently, there is a need for international comparative studies of citizens' complex and ambivalent conceptions of politics, political consumerism and expert power between various societal sectors.

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