The fair-trade citizen-consumer is frequently mobilised by various actors to use his/her purchasing power to alleviate poverty in the developing world. Unlike government aid and charitable donations, it is claimed that the trading partnership between the fair-trade consumer and the fair-trade producer has a unique power to reach the people who need it most and make a difference – the frequently invoked ‘Trade is better than Aid’ slogan. Indeed, recent growth in fair-trade sales in the USA have been linked to the declining prevalence of charitable giving in order to suggest that consumers are seeking alternative ways to make a difference (FTUSA, 2010). Yet almost no academic attention has been paid to how individuals evaluate the effectiveness of fair-trade consumption as an individual action relative to other individual actions, such as paying taxes, donating to charity and campaigning for change. This is quite surprising given the claims that consumers in a late-modern, risk-society are looking beyond ‘traditional’ politics in order to enact their citizenly duties.

This chapter explores how individuals in the UK evaluated the effectiveness of fair-trade consumption as a ‘political’ action relative to the other actions open to them that aim to achieve a similar end-result (i.e. the reduction of poverty in developing countries). It begins by highlighting why this is a relevant question for exploration, and then uses data from the UK National Omnibus Survey (conducted between 2002 and 2005), Module 236, ‘Public Attitudes to Development’, commissioned by the government department DFID (ONS, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005), to demonstrate who is most likely to believe that buying fair-trade is an effective action. Supporting the conclusions of previous chapters, we will see that those who prioritise fair-trade over other actions tend to have high levels of concern for poverty in the developing world, as
well as distinctive socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Returning to the residents of Chelmsford, I then examine how fair-trade supporters and non-fair-trade supporters responded to a similar question to that asked in the Omnibus Survey, providing insights into how those with differing levels of commitment to fair-trade evaluated the effectiveness of individual consumer power.

Individual consumer activism

It has been argued that ‘new’ forms of ethical consumerism, such as fair-trade, can be understood as forms of individual political participation (Dickinson & Carsky, 2005; Follesdal, 2006; Goodman, 2004; Lyon, 2006; Micheletti, 2003; Murray & Raynolds, 2007; Scammell, 2003; Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006). As we saw in Chapter 2, the writings of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994) have been employed to suggest that people’s decisions to consume ethically ought to be understood as arising from the conditions of late modernity in which everyday life decisions take on political significance. As citizens lose faith in the power of national governments to pass laws that will improve the situation of global workers, it has been suggested that they search for alternative ways to challenge global inequalities; they ‘take politics into their own hands’ when they recognise that their role as consumers can offer a ‘new arena for responsibility-taking’ (Micheletti, 2003: 5). However, a study of Danish consumers found that those who boycott or ‘buycott’ consumer goods do not generally distrust political institutions and politicians, but instead regard all forms of political participation as more efficient than individuals who do not engage in political consumerism (Andersen & Tobiasen, 2006: 213–14). Similarly, we have seen that committed fair-trade supporters, particularly in the UK, are often engaged in a whole range of ‘political’ activities through their membership in Fairtrade Town groups and related social networks. So it is not necessarily the case, as life-politics-inspired accounts would have it, that those who consume fair-trade products do so because they are disillusioned and distrustful of traditional political modes of engagements or political institutions.

Indeed, it is likely that conceptualisations of consumer power will vary between different countries given their different institutional configurations of responsibility between state and market actors. While much of the scholarship on political consumerism is drawn from the Scandinavian context (Follesdal, 2006; Micheletti, 2010), comparative studies reveal that this phenomenon varies greatly between countries, especially given the distinctive nature of political society within Scandinavia. In their