A Study of Political Consumerism Today: The Case of Good Environmental Choice in Sweden

Why Study Sweden?

This chapter looks closely at why people engage in political consumerism. What motivates them to get involved and who are they? How are current forms of political consumerism similar and different from the past? My answers to these questions come from a case study of green political consumerist activities in Sweden. Sweden was chosen because it is an unlikely place for political consumerism to take root. It is a hard case for political activism in the marketplace because the Swedish state is strong with a good record on environmental policymaking. We are, therefore, inclined to assume that governability problems do not characterize Sweden. The country is also characterized as a strong social democratic welfare state that is proactive and problem-oriented, which would lead us to believe that citizens do not need to turn to the marketplace to solve political problems. Even the strong political presence of the social democratic workers’ movement, which as discussed in chapter 2 implies that production-oriented solutions are preferred over consumption-oriented solutions, adds to the argument that Sweden is an unlikely place for political consumerism. Swedes increasingly believe that they can influence the political system. Sweden rates high on most measures of social capital, and the more collectivist and corporatist political culture that characterizes Sweden does not point in the direction of individualized collective action. Research results from chapter 2 show that the market becomes an arena for politics when the traditional political sphere is closed to groups and issues or when there are governability problems. This has not been the case in Sweden, which ranks high on most benchmarks of democracy.
The puzzle is that four highly well-respected market-based labeling schemes—the Nordic Swan, TCO Development, KRAV, and Good Environmental Choice—are present in Sweden today. Government and particularly the Swedish state with the urging of environmental organizations played an important role in the establishment of the Nordic Council’s Swan eco-label. It is noteworthy that government played a minimal role in the establishment of KRAV, TCO Development, and Good Environmental Choice, whose initiatives came from civil society. Why did environment-oriented civil society associations choose to use market-based tools to promote sustainable development? Why does it seem that Sweden against a well-grounded assumption is a likely place for political consumerism? Answers to these questions take their point of departure in the importance of civil society as a mobilizing force for political consumerism and the role played by the green movement in political consumerist endeavors. This chapter investigates how the political landscape changes of postmodernization, ecological modernization, individualized collective action, and even governance (see chapter 1) have turned Sweden into a likely place for political consumerism. It offers a case study of the eco-label Good Environmental Choice (Bra miljöval) established by the largest Swedish environmental association, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Svenska Naturskyddsföreningen, SNF).

This case has been chosen for closer study because of its grassroots character. Consumer pressure and dissatisfaction motivated the SNF to engage in political consumerism. Good Environmental Choice is a type 1 labeling scheme whose base is citizen and consumer mobilization that is channeled by an environmental organization. It is a scheme that relies highly on responsibility-taking on the part of citizen-consumers. The issues involved are environmentally friendly shopping and local responsibility for global environmental problems. It is a scheme that requires the involvement of a variety of market actors and that takes government regulation and public policy as its point of departure for its more ambitious voluntary compliance criteria. It is genuinely Swedish and does not imitate an institutional design that has developed in other countries. International visitors come to Sweden to understand its workings.

In Comparison with the Past

Contemporary Swedish political consumerism demonstrates how globalization, individualization, and the values of postmodernization