

Article

## Food Activism and Citizens' Democratic Engagements: What Can We Learn from Market-Based Political Participation?

Jasmine Lorenzini

Institute of Citizenship Studies, University of Geneva, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland; E-Mail: jasmine.lorenzini@unige.ch

Submitted: 13 March 2019 | Accepted: 12 July 2019 | Published: 28 October 2019

### Abstract

Food democracy calls for a democratization of the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Researchers and lay citizens are showing a growing interest for initiatives associated with food democracy, yet the specific democratic ideals and involvements that make up food democracy have gained limited attention. Many forms of participation associated with food democracy are market-based, such as buying organic food or joining community-supported agricultural projects. Research shows that market-based logics influence multiple spheres of life and threaten democratic ideals. However, scholars working on political participation have not yet analyzed the influence of market-based logics across forms of participation. This article analyses the action repertoire of food democracy to assess the influence of market-based logics on different forms of food activism. It builds on four critiques of market-based politics to question the relationship between different forms of participation and the market. It addresses three research questions: Which forms of political participation do citizens use to democratize the food regime? Which conceptions of democracy relate to these different forms of food activism? Which critiques of market-based politics apply to different forms of food activism? The article highlights the widespread risk of unequal participation, crowding out, commodification, and state retreat across forms of participation used to democratize food regimes. This study provides insights into the types of democratic renewal being experimented with in the framework of food democracy as well as their limits.

### Keywords

food activism; food democracy; institutional politics; political participation; protest politics

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “New Perspectives on Food Democracy” edited by Basil Bornemann (University of Basel, Switzerland) and Sabine Weiland (Université Catholique de Lille, France).

© 2019 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

In the global west, a growing share of citizens buy fair trade coffee, sign up for community-supported agricultural projects, engage in community gardens, or go vegan. Some do it to transform food regimes, others to express their political views or to change their relationship to the prevailing modes of food production, distribution, and consumption. In existing food regimes, power is highly concentrated in the hands of the food agro-industry (Friedmann, 2005; Lang, 1999). Nevertheless, citizens engage in political struggles to make claims about social justice, environmental protection, sustainability, health, and other political issues associated with

food. These actions contribute to food democracy, which refers to citizens' attempts to democratize the food system or, in other words, to reinforce their political voices in processes related to the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

Among the different forms of action used to democratize food regimes, political consumerism is the most studied (Koo, 2012; Micheletti, 2003; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). This attention triggered important critiques which point to the far-reaching influence of market-based logics and how they influence prevailing conceptions of citizens' engagements (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Lewis & Potter, 2011; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). These critiques focus on specific forms of par-

ticipation, namely political consumerism. Similarly, research on food democracy tends to centre on single action forms, for instance, food consumerism (Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011), food cooperatives (Zitcer, 2017), or solidarity purchase groups (Forno, Grasseni, & Signori, 2015). Two collective volumes (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2013) bring these research strands together and highlight the links between different action forms. However, to the best of my knowledge, no study underscores the specific kind of democracy that is called for and implemented in different food initiatives.

In recent debates, a key question has been how to scale up attempts at democratizing food regimes (see for instance Mount, 2012). However, it is important to understand the kind of democratic conceptions that shape projects of food democracy before they expand. In this article, I discuss the different conceptions of democracy that form food democracy. This study shows that market-based logics often prevail across different modes and forms of political participation used to democratize the food regime. In so doing, it complements research in different fields that have analyzed how neoliberal capitalism jeopardizes democracies (Crouch, 2004; Merkel, 2014a), how marketization threatens voluntary non-profit organizations (Eikenberry, 2009; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004), and how corporate food regimes commodify political demands (Guthman, 2002). Here, the goal is to assess to what extent processes of marketization and neoliberal threats to democracies apply to different forms of food activism. Three research questions are addressed: Which forms of political participation do citizens use to democratize the food regime? Which conceptions of democracy relate to these different forms of food activism? Which critiques of market-based politics apply to different forms of food activism?

First, I define food activism and present the different forms of action that it takes. I link these different forms of action to three modes of participation and three conceptions of democracy. Second, I introduce four critiques of market-based forms of participation. Going back to the different forms of action presented in Section 1, I discuss whether and to what extent these critiques apply to all of them. In the discussion, I draw attention to similarities across action forms and create the foundations for a reflection on citizens' democratic involvement. This comparison shows that market-based logics shape market-based modes of action, but also institutional and protest logics. Hence, they question the underlying conceptions of democracy and the prevailing relationships to the market of different forms of food activism.

## 2. Food Activism: An Action Repertoire with Specific Modes of Participation and Conceptions of Democracy

Food democracy is "the demand for greater access and collective benefit from the food system" (Lang, 1999, p. 218). It requires that "citizens hav[e] the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, region-

ally, nationally, and globally" (Hassanein, 2003, p. 79). This means that citizens engage in institutional and protest politics that allow shaping policies, but also practice the changes they are calling for. Citizens use different forms of political participation to democratize food regimes. They constitute the action repertoire of food activism which can be defined, following Reichman (2014, p. 159), as "political action, encompassing a variety of individual and collective efforts to change the world by changing how food is produced, distributed, and consumed." This definition: a) points at the *individual* and the *collective* dimensions of political participation; b) specifies a multidimensional *political goal* (related to food production, distribution, and consumption); and c) is not tied to specific forms of action. This means that food activism is an action repertoire covering actions used to democratize the food regime.

An action repertoire includes different action modes (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Action modes, in turn, include several forms of participation which share some specific features. I distinguish three modes of participation presented on the horizontal axis of Table 1: market-based, institutional, and protest. Action forms that correspond to a market-based mode of action are associated with commercial relations: buying, refusing to buy, or seeking alternatives to monetary exchanges. Institutional modes of participation relate to elected representatives and political parties, while protest modes of participation cover collective contentious forms of action. The choice of an action mode provides information about conceptions of democracy: Citizens direct actions on the market, deference to democratic institutions, or protest to express political views and influence political institutions.

Furthermore, democratic ideals rest on different conceptions of the 'right' level of citizens' involvement (Merkel, 2014b). These conceptions shape citizens' democratic involvements. Here, I use them to differentiate food activism according to three conceptions of democracy: representative, participatory, and prefigurative. In Table 1, the vertical axis distinguishes action forms according to these conceptions. In a *representative democracy*, citizens are mostly expected to cast a vote occasionally—the basic idea being that some rule all the time while others are ruled (Barber, 1984/2003). Those who embrace an elitist conception of democracy consider this an ideal democracy (Schumpeter, 1942/2010). On the contrary, *participatory democracy* calls for citizens' sustained engagement in decision-making through deliberative processes (Polletta, 2002). In its republican form, following Aristotle's idea of men as political animals, democracy insists on citizens' devotion to politics. In a more contemporary radical understanding, democracy encourages citizens to experiment with the changes they would like to see happen on a larger scale (Purcell, 2013)—*prefigurative democracy*.

The first column of Table 1 presents the specific forms of food activism that correspond to a market-based mode of participation. *Political consumerism* in-

**Table 1.** Forms of food activism organized according to action modes and conceptions of democracy.

Conceptions of democracy	Action modes		
	Market-based politics	Institutional politics	Protest politics
<b>Representative democracy</b>	<i>Political consumerism</i> Boycott and buycott	<i>Electoral politics</i> Voting	<i>Everyday politics</i> Donating money Signing petitions
<b>Participatory democracy</b>	<i>Food collectives</i> Food baskets Food cooperatives Participatory supermarkets	<i>Party politics</i> Party membership	<i>Group activism</i> Street protest Group activism
<b>Prefigurative democracy</b>	<i>Lifestyle politics</i> Vegetarianism or veganism Voluntary simplicity Urban gardening	<i>Political careers</i> Party staff & elected representatives <sup>1</sup>	<i>Committed activism</i> Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) staff <sup>1</sup> Squatting

Notes: <sup>1</sup> These forms of participation involve a professionalization of political activities; these are borderline cases since they are not the action of ordinary citizens which is a key element in the definition of political participation (see Brady, 1999). Furthermore, in the case of professional political actors, they are not prefiguring a form of participation with the aim that it would apply to the whole society. Instead, they correspond to the republican ideal of (a selected elite of) men who live for politics.

cludes “individualized collective action” which seeks to change the market by buying or refusing to buy products for political reasons (Micheletti, 2003). Political consumerism is the ideal-type of market-based activism. It corresponds to a representative ideal of democracy where citizens use their money to make political choices; in the case of food democracy, the choice is to defend values related to food production, distribution, and consumption. In so doing, they delegate their political voices to firms who make a profit while claiming to defend political values. *Food collectives* take the form of food cooperatives (Zitcer, 2017), food networks (Forno et al., 2015), or community-supported agriculture (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2004). They involve consumers, food distributors, and food producers. Food collectives often require sustained involvement over time, some, even demand participation in fieldwork or at the supermarket. They correspond to participatory democracy because consumers and producers participate in general assemblies and other deliberative forums where they collaboratively make decisions for the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Finally, *lifestyle politics* constitute a form of prefigurative politics—citizens engage in transformative behaviors in their everyday life, they adapt their lifestyle to enact the changes they would like to see happening in the broader society (Epstein, 1991). It can take the form of vegetarianism (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012), reduced consumption in compliance with voluntary simplicity (Lorenzen, 2012), or gardening for food production (Glowa, 2017). These forms of lifestyle politics require high involvement in terms of time and coherence across life spheres.

Turning to institutional politics, Table 1 presents action forms that can be used to advance food democracy but that are not specific to it, therefore, the forms of actions presented in this case are more general and reach

beyond food activism. *Electoral politics* refers to voting to elect representatives and constitutes the ideal-typical form of representative democracy in institutional politics. Citizens select their representative once every four/five years at the national level. Voting can be based on socialization and habits (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009), a sense of duty (Blais, Young, & Lapp, 2000), on heuristic shortcuts (Nai, 2014), or on an (overall) assessment of the economy (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). Citizens can also vote to defend a specific political agenda, such as agroecology or food sovereignty. *Party activism*—for instance being an active party member—can be used to push food-related issues on the political agenda of a party. In this case, participation corresponds to a participatory conception of democracy. Party members meet regularly to discuss the political agenda and the goals of the party. In many countries, institutional participation in its prefigurative form becomes a professional activity and corresponds to a *political career*. This includes elected representatives and party staff. Brady (1999) defines political participation as “actions by ordinary citizens [my emphasis] who pursue some political outcome.” Hence, strictly speaking, professional political actors are not engaged in political participation. The wages that they receive for their political engagements change the nature of their political behavior. Furthermore, elected representatives and party staff correspond to the idea of political animals, however, in this case, it is not clear whether they truly experiment with a model that they would like to see implemented in society, often they only call for a limited engagement of other citizens. One example of an elected representative engaged in food democracy is the French farmer Josée Bové elected for the European elections in 2009.

Similarly, the actions presented under protest politics can be used to advance food democracy or other po-

litical goals. In this mode of participation, the form or participation corresponding to a representative conception of democracy is *everyday activism* such as donating money to CSOs or signing petitions. These activities require limited commitment in terms of money or time, the most time demanding part of it is the identification of the group or the cause that one wants to defend. As in the case of political consumerism, they correspond to the idea of voting with one's money (donation in this case). Citizens delegate their political voice to specific CSOs that they support financially. Forms of protest politics that correspond to a participatory conception of democracy relate to *group activism*, for instance being active in political groups or participating in demonstrations<sup>1</sup>. Some citizens engage in trade unions active in the food production or service sector (Sbicca, 2012), in anti-pesticide movements (Guthman & Brown, 2016), or movements against genetic engineering (Schurman, 2004). Similar to institutional politics, some actions that correspond to prefigurative conceptions of democracy face a change in nature. A process of activism professionalization is at play with active members becoming paid staff. Table 1 presents squatters as a non-professionalized form of prefigurative participation. Squatters, like vegans, engage in political actions that call for overall changes in their lives. They adapt everyday behaviors across different life spheres (work life, household organization, leisure activities, etc.) to their political values. In so doing, they are prefiguring some of the changes they want to see happening in society.

### 3. Critiques of Market-Based Politics and Their Relevance for Food Democracy

Reichman's (2014) definition of food activism also points at a transformative goal, "changing the world by changing how food is produced, distributed, and consumed." However, this carries little information about the kind of transformation proposed. In a world where markets reach new segments of society every day, it is difficult to imagine social transformations that reach beyond the market (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In fact, there is a growing literature highlighting the influence of market-based logics on different dimensions of democracy: on CSOs (Eikenberry, 2009), social movements (Purcell, 2008), and democratic core principles (Merkel, 2014a). In relation to food democracy, scholars have analyzed the influence of market-based logics. For instance, José Johnston and Kate Cairns (2012) point to the inequalities that shape citizens' ability to take part. Julianne Busa and Rebekah Garder (2015) emphasize the narrow political goals and understanding of local food consumers. Julie Guthman (2002) and Harriet Friedmann (2005) show that the corporate food regime commodifies the demands raised by food movements. And Jo Littler (2012) questions the role of the state.

This section builds on this research and discusses four critiques of market-based activism, sometimes called "ethical consumption" (Lewis & Potter, 2011), "commodity activism" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012), or "politics of consumption" (Alkon & Guthman, 2017). I refer to these critiques as the inequality, the crowding out, the commodification, and the state retreat critique. For each critique, I first discuss their relevance for the study of market-based forms of food activism the first mode of action, as presented in Table 1. Then, I examine to what extent they apply to institutional and protest politics. Finally, I highlight what is at stake for food democracy.

#### 3.1. Inequality Critique

The first critique points to the *inequalities* associated with market-based political participation. Citizens with more limited resources have fewer opportunities to vote with their dollars (Alkon et al., 2013) or to *eat for change* (Johnston & Cairns, 2012) and prevailing prescriptions about food consumption impose white middle-class preferences (such as eating healthy, fresh, light, organic, etc.) onto other social groups (Guthman, 2008; Johnston et al., 2011). Yet, depending on available time, mobility practices, and social networks citizens have varying degrees of difficulty in dealing with these prescriptions (Godin & Sahakian, 2018). There are structural inequalities related to food availability in specific neighborhoods or in specific shops that are unequally established over the city (Block, Chávez, Allen, & Ramirez, 2012). Research shows that political consumerism is more widespread where large supermarkets prevail (Koos, 2012). Similarly, food collectives that correspond to the idea of participatory democracy tend to be a privilege of citizens with high cultural, social, and economic capital. Often food cooperatives do not exist in the less well-off neighborhoods or cities (Figueroa & Alkon, 2017). Unless the community supported agricultural project or the food cooperative is set up explicitly to reduce unequal access to quality food (Gross, 2014) or is able to reduce the cost of food thanks to direct sales (Forno et al., 2015). Finally, for action forms that correspond to prefigurative democracy, inequalities relate to both socioeconomic dimensions and cultural ones. For urban gardeners, the main inequality relates to access to land (Glowa, 2017). However, for voluntary simplifiers, it stems from the social and cultural capital that facilitates access to the narratives and ideals behind voluntary simplicity (Carfagna et al., 2014). Voluntary simplicity requires a radical exit from a work-life model demanding individuals' efforts to earn a lot and spend on social status markers (Schor, 1998). Since these social norms (working hard, earning well, and displaying wealth through consumption) are strongly embedded in society, it requires cultural capital to question them, to resist, and to build alternatives. Furthermore,

<sup>1</sup> Street protest requires more commitment and rests on stronger convictions because it involves an investment in time and implies visibility. Similarly, active membership in a CSOs or a grassroots movement calls for more demanding commitment. Active members meet regularly, organize events, seek to promote alternative political frames and to mobilize others.

social capital provides opportunities to discuss these ideas with like-minded citizens (Lorenzen, 2012).

Turning to the second column of Table 1, I consider the relevance of the inequality critique for institutional politics. In representative democracies, ideally, all citizens have equal opportunities to have their voices heard (Dahl, 2006). Nevertheless, the main tool of representative democracy is prone to important inequalities. Citizens with fewer resources are less likely to vote. They abstain due to limited political resources (Solt, 2008) but also because the political offer does not respond to their main demands, it fails to represent their interests (Offe, 2013). Inequalities create a vicious circle in electoral participation. Offe (2013) argues that poor and vulnerable citizens do not participate because they understand that their interests are not taken into account, not because they lack political understanding. Moreover, policy designs targeting specific groups of citizens interacting with the state contribute to political learning (Schneider & Ingram, 2005). Citizens learn how the state views them and their passive role in the state-citizen relation. Finally, low and decreasing numbers of party members (van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012) contribute to a limited heterogeneity within political parties. This means that forms of institutional participation that correspond to participatory democracy are also prone to inequalities. As they professionalize and reduce mass membership, parties offer less equal access to citizens drawn from various social classes. This limits their ability to represent a wide variety of political interests and preferences. For political careers, the action form that corresponds to prefigurative democracy, inequalities are even more important because they require high levels of qualification.

When parties are not representative of a wide variety of citizens, CSOs might be able to represent the interests and preferences of many citizens. A rich and vivid civil society contributes to a well-functioning democracy (Hadenius, 2001). However, the influence of money is also important within CSOs. Citizens with little resources have limited opportunities to support a cause financially. If they do, they only give little money and they are unlikely to have an influence on the direction taken. On the contrary, important donors (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates) have a major impact on CSOs. When some private interests have a high influence on CSOs, the directions they take, and their capacity to raise demands of the state, it creates important challenges for democracy. With regard to participation in forms of action that correspond to participatory or prefigurative democracy, such as street protest and group activism, these action forms require time but also specific civic skills (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). All resources that are more limited among social groups with low socioeconomic status.

Across the three action modes, the more demanding the democratic ideal, the more inequality shapes participation. Economic, social, and cultural capital set important barriers to participation. Representative democracy is prone to inequality. People with limited resources

tend to participate less and, when they do, they have a limited influence on agenda-setting and policy decisions. Participatory and prefigurative democracy do not reduce inequality. On the contrary, they increase inequality by further restricting the set of engaged citizens. Participatory, and even more so prefigurative, democracy requires adapting ones' life across multiple spheres. Economic capital is not necessarily the main vector of inequality. Citizens need cultural capital (to make sense of their political engagement across life spheres) and social capital (supportive networks) to engage in participatory and prefigurative actions. This means that access to initiatives that attempt to democratize the food regime is often limited to resourceful citizens. The inequality critique questions the ability of food democracy to advance inclusive democratic ideals.

### 3.2. Crowding Out Critique

The second critique highlights the *crowding-out* effect. The idea is that small everyday engagement with politics—such as recycling, riding a bike, or eating organic—prevents citizens from engaging in institutional or protest politics (Kenis, 2016). Citizens only have a limited amount of time they can dedicate to politics so when they engage in alternative (easy) forms of participation, they do not participate in electoral or party politics (Simon, 2011). This critique points to a hierarchy of political participation—implicitly prioritizing some forms of participation—and assumes that citizens' participation in one form does not support participation in others. Research shows that citizens who engage in political consumerism also tend to engage through other means (Gotlieb & Wells, 2012; Willis & Schor, 2012; Zhang, 2015). Nevertheless, some point to a core contradiction between consumerism and citizenship (Johnston, 2008). Being a consumer or a citizen appears as irreconcilable ends of a continuum that ranges from maximizing individuals' interests (consumption from the market) to seeking to achieve collective changes (citizenship). Yet, as noted by Schudson (2006), everyone is at the same time a consumer *and* a citizen. People who engage in food activism might withdraw from other forms of engagement. However, it is more likely that interactions within food collectives sustain engagements through other means. For instance, Lorenzen (2014) shows that voluntary simplifiers engage in political discussions to promote their political values.

What is at stake with the crowding out critique is the amount and type(s) of democratic involvement expected from citizens. Dutiful citizens are only expected to cast a vote, pay taxes, and comply with the law (Dalton, 2009). This corresponds to a representative conception of democracy. Yet, Dalton also identifies a younger generation of engaged citizens who value participation in CSOs and commitment in politics beyond voting corresponding to a participatory conception of democracy. The comparison of different levels of commitment shows that the

crowding out critique applies only to forms of participation that correspond to representative democracy. As citizens increasingly engage in market-based, institutional, or protest politics, they tend to participate through multiple means. Party members vote and, eventually, participate in some protest events associated with their parties (e.g., left parties and May Day, Green parties and anti-nuclear marches). Similarly, it is likely that CSOs staff are engaged in politics through other means such as donating money and participating in demonstrations.

The crowding-out effect might take place for action forms that correspond to the ideals of representative democracy in the three action modes. In this case, the action forms share an occasional nature, limited choices offered to citizens, and limited capacity to influence politics. Voting is constrained by a party's offer as well as their political agenda. Donating money depends on existing CSOs and the activities they promote. The existing offer of products constrains boycotts and buycotts. The prevailing challenge is not the risk of crowding out but the limited political influence that citizens have when their engagements correspond to representative democratic conceptions. Action forms that correspond to participatory and prefigurative democratic ideals tend to bring multi-engagement. In this case, the challenge is commodification. The fact that political engagements become career paths. Few forms of action that correspond to prefigurative democracy, such as voluntary simplicity or squatting, experiment with alternatives to market-based logics. In these rare instances, citizens are not acting for a financial return, they are not influencing politics through financial power, and they are not selling goods or services. For food democracy, this means that radical transformations of food regimes require changes at different levels of citizens' life—not only in relation to food but also in relation to paid work and consumption more generally.

### 3.3. *Commodification Critique*

The third critique emphasizes processes of *commodification*—a commodification process takes place when something that was not for sale becomes a marketable good. When citizens call on the market to adopt new standards in the production or distribution of food (e.g., organic, fair, local) they open up new avenues for profit (Guthman, 2004/2014). This does not alter core business principles (reducing costs and making profit) and serves the image of the brand (marketing strategy publicizing their [limited] good deeds). Food collectives promote products corresponding to specific social and political goals, be they social justice, environmental protection, or supporting the local economy. They are small niche markets and, like other food distributors, they commodify political values. On the contrary, voluntary simplifiers oppose the commodification of goods and services and, as much as possible, they rely on alternative networks and non-market economies to sustain their

lifestyle (Lorenzen, 2012; Schor, 1998). It is worth mentioning a counter-example as well. Vegan or vegetarians do not (necessarily) oppose the commodification of food. It is important to note here, as well, that not all vegetarians and vegans adopt this practice for political reasons. Some do it for health reasons, others because it is trendy, and still others because they do not like the taste of meat. Whatever the reasons for becoming vegetarian or vegan, they refuse to eat meat or to consume any animal products but they (often) rely on the market to offer alternatives to animal products. They contribute to the commodification of new products which comply with their specific political values.

The commodification critique points to the influence of money in politics and its relative importance compared to other political resources. As political parties become electoral machines, they need funds to support their electoral campaigns and rely on donors to finance such campaigns. Donors use this fact as leverage to lobby the parties which contributes to a commodification of political influence—donations determine policies more than votes do (Bartels, 2009). When they move away from the mass party model, parties serve less as aggregators of various social groups' demands, representing their interests or voicing their grievances and demands (Hutter, Kriesi, & Lorenzini, 2018). As noted above, professional party members constitute an interesting borderline case of citizens' political engagements. Parties offer career opportunities and comply with career-related requirements—elected representatives are their main constituencies and they serve their interests (Green, 1993). Not all party members are paid, those engaged in party politics (corresponding to a participatory conception of democracy) are not, while party staff (prefigurative conception) are. They earn a living from their political commitment. Professionalization of political activities embodies the commodification of representative functions. Rotation among representatives allows non-professional representatives to take up specific civic duties for a certain duration (Sintomer, 2014). These citizens might be paid during their service, but they only serve the community temporarily. They take up civic duties without embracing a career; this shapes a different understanding of democracy.

Commodification also appears in protest politics, increasingly professional CSOs are seeking citizens' financial support. In order to distinguish themselves, CSOs develop new services for sale in the marketplace of charity, humanitarian action, or political activism (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). Importantly, they transform the idea of civic duty. Donating money replaces citizens' engagement in the life of their community by donating time, contributing ideas, or offering specific skills. As calls to donate money replace calls for civic activism, CSOs compete in an expanding market. The professionalization of CSOs forces them to find new lines of financing to remain active (Gross, 2014). As they seek stable funds, public-private partnerships offer opportunities to stabilize their

resources. This, in turn, contributes to the retreat of the state as discussed below. However, depending on their goals and the targets of their action they may or may not contribute to commodification processes and state retreat. Some CSOs offer services to their members (self-help) that complement the state. When citizens have to pay to access these services, they are commodified. Other CSOs call for state involvement; they lobby the state to maintain or develop services—they oppose commodification processes. Sometimes combining service provision and lobbying, they provide services as a last resort while waiting for the state to step in. Nevertheless, many CSOs exist thanks to the state's limited engagement, they provide services instead of public authorities. Quite on the contrary, squatters oppose commodification processes, they occupy a house refusing to pay rent, questioning the norms of private property and the gain of profit from the housing market.

Commodification processes appear in the three modes of action. Buying for political reasons and donating money to parties or CSOs are clear examples of commodified political values—values defended through financial payments. For voting, commodification also appears when considering the relative influence of voters and large donors. Furthermore, political professionalization is a specific case of commodification—civic duties become paid employment. Increases in the number of professional CSOs' staff attest to such processes. The more professional and the more stable the CSOs become the more means at their disposal for action. However, depending on the types of donor, they can become less prone to support or seek radical change (Jacques, Biermann, & Young, 2016). Similarly, Green (1993) argues that political careers hinder democratic ideals. Political actors engaged in professional careers aim to maintain their income and advancement of their own career by continually performing the functions of an elected representative. Green (1993) maintains that professional representatives are no longer able to represent the interests of different social groups. The commodification of food activism as well as institutional and protest participation pose an important challenge for the democratization of the food regime. When successful, the ideals and projects of food activism become profitable commercial goods. Although social movements are able to raise awareness related to food, their ability to transform the food regime through institutional participation and protest are limited due to the unresponsiveness of professional political actors and political parties. Democratizing the food regime calls for a transformation of existing democratic institutions.

### 3.4. State Retreat Critique

The fourth critique emphasizes the processes of *state retreat*. Political actions targeting the market alone contribute to a diminishing of the state's regulatory function and a greater level of responsibility being passed to indi-

viduals. Some food activists seek changes directly to the market thanks to consumers' economic power, as they call on individual responsibility the state appears useless. As the market steps in, in the form of CSOs offering state-financed services, the state retreats. Privatization processes—another form of state retreat—result in the opening of new services within the market. Political consumerism often bypasses the state and calls for changes directly to the markets. Similarly, food collectives offer alternatives to the dominant model but seldom call on the state to regulate the market. They correspond to an exit strategy that does not involve the state and, therefore, they contribute to its retreat. Vegans are more likely to call on the state to regulate the production of food such as to avoid hidden animal components for instance.

For institutional politics, what is at stake is the state's role in a democracy, which can be limited to core functions or called on to reduce inequalities, redistribute wealth, and provide core public services. Mair (2013) notes that mainstream parties prioritize their responsibility (compliance with supranational rules) over their representative functions (citizens' demands). The more a party is committed to its governing function, the more it aims to comply with supranational agreement (responsibility) and the more limited the importance given to representative functions—aggregating and supporting citizens' demands. In supporting this state of affairs, the political parties themselves contribute to state retreat; limiting the role of the state to its sovereign functions and compliance with supranational rules. Citizens support state retreat when they vote for parties that confine the state's role to its sovereign function (i.e., international relations, border control, law and order) with little or no emphasis on redistributive functions. The state retreat critique partially applies to professional political actors. Representative functions require democratic and public institutions for these professional political actors to pursue their political careers, but the state can be a minimal regulator (limited to sovereign state functions).

Protest politics may target the state, the market, or public opinion. CSOs and protesters calling for new rights or supporting existing rights demand state action (more rights) or oppose state retreat (defending existing rights). In both cases, they value the state's regulatory and redistributive functions. However, protests can also target the market directly (Soule, 2009) or supranational institutions (Imig & Tarrow, 2001). When protests call directly on other institutions, they acknowledge the state's limited power and contribute its weakening. For squatting, the state's role is less clear; the perceived role of the state varies depending on the motives and political ideals defended by the squatters—which often tend to be related to anarchist or anti-capitalist movements.

All forms of action contribute to state retreat when the state is not (one of) the targets of their action. Commodification and state retreat are related processes—action forms contributing to commodification also foster state retreat. Citizens engaged in lifestyle

politics sometimes demand state regulation to support or facilitate their alternative lifestyles but they also directly enact the changes they want to see happening. Food initiatives that experiment with radical changes across life spheres (vegetarianism, urban gardening, or voluntary simplicity) contribute to enriching our democratic imagination (Perrin, 2009). They promote alternatives to the market, they test alternative forms of political participation, and they develop counter-cultural systems of values and norms. They set into practice radical ideals for the democratization of food regimes. However, the envisioned role of the state is not clear.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has presented different forms of political participation used to democratize food regimes. Action forms have been organized according to their links to market-based, institutional, and protest modes of action, as well as the underlying conceptions of democracy. Then, the article highlighted four critiques of market-based politics: the importance of inequality in political participation, the prevalence of low-cost political action and the crowding-out effect of more demanding ones, the commodification of political values, and, as a corollary the state retreat. These critiques were used to discuss (food) democracy and citizens' democratic role.

This analysis shows that prevailing forms of food activism correspond to the idea that "citizens vote with their forks" (Pollan, 2006). In many initiatives associated with food democracy, citizens engage through consumption choices (i.e., political consumerism, food collectives, and veganism). The prevailing conception of democracy relates to representative democracy—an aggregative understanding of citizens' action, their power relates to their number and their financial capacity. The main difference is that the authoritative figure shifts from the state to the market. Market-based logics constrain attempts to democratize the food regime. Importantly, attempts to democratize the food system through institutional and protest politics are also constrained by market-based logics. Political parties have a limited capacity to represent citizens' voices due to supranational responsibilities, ties to large financial donors, and professional careers. CSOs embrace market-based logics to gain money and finance their activities. The influence of money pervades across forms and modes of action and represents a major challenge for the democratization of food regimes.

Some food initiatives experiment with prefigurative democracy, enacting changes that aim to promote alternatives to market-based logics. In addition to offering alternative venues for consumption, some food collectives question the producer-consumer distinction and engage consumers in the production of food. Urban gardeners produce their own local food. Vegans problematize the commercial relationship with non-human animals and try to set limits on commodification. These movements highlight the limits and failures of the corporate food

regime. They experiment with more inclusive and participatory alternative modes of food production, distribution, and consumption. In institutional and protest politics, most of the proposed examples of prefigurative democracy are professional careers or borderline cases of citizen engagement that are subject to commodification. This study shows that it is difficult to advance alternative democratic ideals that seek to empower citizens and to exit market-based logics.

#### Acknowledgments

This publication is part of the project "Political consumerism in Switzerland: Linking food consumption, conceptions of citizenship, and political engagements" funded by the Swiss National Fund under the Ambizione research grant. This article has benefitted from the comments of colleagues who have discussed earlier versions of this article. I would like to thank Gian-Andrea Monsch, Cécile Péchu, Pascal Sciarini, Sabine Weiland, and Basile Bornemann for the detailed comments and feedback, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments which have helped me clarify the ideas presented in this article.

#### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

#### References

- Alkon, A. H., Block, D., Moore, K., Gillis, C., DiNuccio, N., & Chavez, N. (2013). Foodways of the urban poor. *Geoforum*, 48(Supplement C), 126–135.
- Alkon, A. H., & Guthman, J. (2017). *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Barber, B. (2003). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (Original work published 1984)
- Bartels, L. M. (2009). *Unequal democracy: The political economy of the new gilded age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Blais, A., Young, R., & Lapp, M. (2000). The calculus of voting: An empirical test. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37(2), 181–201.
- Block, D. R., Chávez, N., Allen, E., & Ramirez, D. (2012). Food sovereignty, urban food access, and food activism: Contemplating the connections through examples from Chicago. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 29(2), 203–215.
- Brady, H. E. (1999). Political participation. In J. P. Robinson, P. R. Shaver, & L. S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of political attitudes*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Busa, J. H., & Garder, R. (2015). Champions of the movement or fair-weather heroes? Individualization and the (a)politics of local food. *Antipode*, 47(2), 323–341.



- Carfagna, L. B., Dubois, E. A., Fitzmaurice, C., Ouimette, M. Y., Schor, J. B., Willis, M., & Laidley, T. (2014). An emerging eco-habitus: The reconfiguration of high cultural capital practices among ethical consumers. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2), 158–178.
- Counihan, C., & Siniscalchi, V. (Eds.). (2013). *Food activism: Agency, democracy and economy*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Dahl, R. A. (2006). *On political equality*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Dalton, R. J. (2009). *The good citizen: How a younger generation is reshaping American politics*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Dubuisson-Quellier, S., & Lamine, C. (2004). Faire le marché autrement: L'abonnement à un panier de fruits et de légumes comme forme d'engagement politique des consommateurs [Shopping differently: Community supported agriculture as a form of consumers' political engagement]. *Sciences de la Société*, 62, 144–167.
- Eikenberry, A. M. (2009). Refusing the market: A democratic discourse for voluntary and nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(4), 582–596.
- Eikenberry, A. M., & Kluver, J. D. (2004). The marketization of the nonprofit sector: Civil society at risk? *Public Administration Review*, 64(2), 132–140.
- Epstein, B. (1991). *Political protest and cultural revolution: Nonviolent direct action in the 1970s and 1980s*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Figueroa, M., & Alkon, A. H. (2017). Cooperative social practices, self-determination, and the struggle for food justice in Oakland and Chicago. In A. H. Alkon & J. Guthman (Eds.), *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action* (pp. 206–231). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Forno, F., Grasseni, C., & Signori, S. (2015). Italy's solidarity purchase groups as 'citizenship labs'. In E. H. Kennedy, M. J. Cohen, & N. T. Krogman (Eds.), *Putting sustainability into practice: Advances and applications of social practice theories* (pp. 67–88). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Friedmann, H. (2005). From colonialism to green capitalism: Social movements and emergence of food regimes. In F. H. Buttel & P. McMichael (Eds.), *New directions in the sociology of global development* (pp. 227–264). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006). *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Glowa, M. (2017). Urban agriculture, food justice, and neoliberal urbanization: Rebuilding the institution of property. In A. H. Alkon & J. Guthman (Eds.), *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action* (pp. 232–256). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Godin, L., & Sahakian, M. (2018). Cutting through conflicting prescriptions: How guidelines inform “healthy and sustainable” diets in Switzerland. *Appetite*, 130, 123–133.
- Gotlieb, M. R., & Wells, C. (2012). From concerned shopper to dutiful citizen: Implications of individual and collective orientations toward political consumerism. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 207–219.
- Green, P. (1993). *Democracy: Key concepts in critical theory*. New York, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Gross, J. (2014). Food activism in western Oregon. In C. Counihan & V. Siniscalchi (Eds.), *Food activism: Agency, democracy and economy* (pp. 15–30). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Guthman, J. (2002). Commodified meanings, meaningful commodities: Re-thinking production–consumption links through the organic system of provision. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42(4), 295–311.
- Guthman, J. (2008). Bringing good food to others: Investigating the subjects of alternative food practice. *Cultural Geographies*, 15(4), 431–447.
- Guthman, J. (2014). *Agrarian dreams: The paradox of organic farming in California*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. (Original work published 2004)
- Guthman, J., & Brown, S. (2016). Midas' not-so-golden touch: On the demise of methyl iodide as a soil fumigant in California. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 18(3), 324–341.
- Hadenius, A. (2001). *Institutions and democratic citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hassanein, N. (2003). Practicing food democracy: A pragmatic politics of transformation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 77–86.
- Hutter, S., Kriesi, H., & Lorenzini, J. (2018). Social movements in interaction with political parties. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. McCammon (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 322–337). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Imig, D., & Tarrow, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Contentious Europeans: Protest and politics in an emerging polity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jacques, P. J., Biermann, F., & Young, O. R. (2016). Autonomy and activism in civil society. In S. Nicholson & S. Jinnah (Eds.), *New Earth Politics* (pp. 221–246). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jennings, M. K., Stoker, L., & Bowers, J. (2009). Politics across generations: Family transmission reexamined. *The Journal of Politics*, 71(3), 782–799.
- Johnston, J. (2008). The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of whole foods market. *Theory and Society*, 37(3), 229–270.
- Johnston, J., & Cairns, K. (2012). Eating for change. Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times. In R. Mukherjee & S. Banet-Weiser (Eds.), *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times* (pp. 219–239). New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Johnston, J., Szabo, M., & Rodney, A. (2011). Good food, good people: Understanding the cultural repertoire

- of ethical eating. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(3), 293–318.
- Kenis, A. (2016). Ecological citizenship and democracy: Communitarian versus agonistic perspectives. *Environmental Politics*, 25(6), 949–970.
- Koos, S. (2012). What drives political consumption in Europe? A multi-level analysis on individual characteristics, opportunity structures and globalization. *Acta Sociologica*, 55(1), 37–57.
- Lang, T. (1999). Food policy for the 21st century: Can it be both radical and reasonable? In M. Koc, R. MacRae, L. J. A. Mougeot, & J. Welsh (Eds.), *For hunger-proof cities: Sustainable urban food systems* (pp. 216–224). Ottawa: IDRC.
- Lewis, T., & Potter, E. (Eds.). (2011). *Ethical consumption: A critical introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, T., & Potter, E. (Eds.). (2011). *Ethical consumption: A critical introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis-Beck, M. S., & Stegmaier, M. (2000). Economic determinants of electoral outcomes. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3(1), 183–219.
- Littler, J. (2012). Good housekeeping: Green products and consumer activism. In R. Mukherjee & S. Banet-Weiser (Eds.), *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times* (pp. 76–92). New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Lorenzen, J. A. (2012). Going green: The process of lifestyle change. *Sociological Forum*, 27(1), 94–116.
- Lorenzen, J. A. (2014). Convincing people to go green: Managing strategic action by minimising political talk. *Environmental Politics*, 23(3), 454–472.
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing of western democracy*. London: Verso.
- Merkel, W. (2014a). Is capitalism compatible with democracy? *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 8(2), 109–128.
- Merkel, W. (2014b). Is there a crisis of democracy? *Democratic Theory*, 1(2), 11–25.
- Micheletti, M. (2003). *Political virtue and shopping: Individuals, consumerism, and collective action*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2012). Vegetarianism: A lifestyle politics? In M. Micheletti & A. S. McFarland (Eds.), *Creative participation: Responsibility-taking in the political world* (pp. 127–147). Boulder, CO and London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Mount, P. (2012). Growing local food: Scale and local food systems governance. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 29(1), 107–121.
- Mukherjee, R., & Banet-Weiser, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Nai, A. (2014). *Choisir avec l'esprit/esprit, voter avec le cœur: Causes et conséquences des processus cognitifs de formation de l'opinion/opinion en suisse lors des votations fédérales* [Choosing with the mind, voting with the heart: Causes and consequences of cognitive processes in opinion formation during federal votes in Switzerland]. Zurich: Seismo.
- Offe, C. (2013). Participatory inequality in the austerity state: A supply-side approach. In A. Schäfer & W. Streeck (Eds.), *Politics in the age of austerity* (pp. 196–218). Cambridge: Polity.
- Perrin, A. J. (2009). *Citizen speak: The democratic imagination in American life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pollan, M. (2006). Voting with your fork. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://pollan.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/05/07/voting-with-your-fork>
- Polletta, F. (2002). *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Purcell, M. (2008). *Recapturing democracy: Neoliberalization and the struggle for alternative urban futures*. London: Routledge.
- Purcell, M. (2013). *The down-deep delight of democracy*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Reichman, D. (2014). Information and democracy in the global coffee trade. In C. Counihan & V. Siniscalchi (Eds.), *Food activism: Agency, democracy, and economy* (pp. 159–173). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sbicca, J. (2012). Growing food justice by planting an anti-oppression foundation: Opportunities and obstacles for a budding social movement. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 29(4), 455–466.
- Schneider, A. L., & Ingram, H. M. (2005). *Deserving and entitled: Social constructions and public policy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Schor, J. B. (1998). *The overspent American: Why we want what we don't need*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schudson, M. (2006). The troubling equivalence of citizen and consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 193–204.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (2010). The classical doctrine of democracy. In J. A. Schumpeter (Ed.), *Capitalism, socialism and democracy* (pp. 225–240). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1942)
- Schurman, R. (2004). Fighting Frankenfoods: Industry opportunity structures and the efficacy of the anti-biotech movement in western Europe. *Social Problems*, 51(2), 243–268.
- Simon, B. (2011). Not going to Starbucks: Boycotts and the out-scouring of politics in the branded world. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(2), 145–167.
- Sintomer, Y. (2014). *Petite histoire de l'expérimentation démocratique: Tirage au sort et politique d'Athènes à nos jours*. [Between radical and deliberative democracy: Random selection in politics from Athens to contemporary experiments]. Paris: La Découverte.
- Solt, F. (2008). Economic inequality and democratic political engagement. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 48–60.
- Soule, S. A. (2009). *Contention and corporate social responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stolle, D., & Micheletti, M. (2013). *Political consumerism:*

- Global responsibility in action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Theocharis, Y., & Van Deth, J. W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review*, 10(1), 139–163.
- van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,....gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24–56.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willis, M. M., & Schor, J. B. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 160–190.
- Zhang, X. (2015). ‘Voting with dollars’: A cross-polity and multilevel analysis of political consumerism. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(5), 422–436.
- Zitcer, A. (2017). Collective purchase: Food cooperatives and their pursuit of justice. In A. H. Alkon & J. Guthman (Eds.), *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action* (pp. 181–205). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

### About the Author



**Jasmine Lorenzini** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Citizenship Studies at the University of Geneva. She works on inequalities, political participation, and citizenship. During her PhD thesis, she studied the impact of long-term unemployment on youth political engagements. In her post-doctoral research, she analyzed the interplay between economic and political crises and their joint effects on protest events across Europe. Jasmine currently works on food democracy and citizens’ engagements against climate change.