

# Can political cookies leave a bad taste in one's mouth?

## Political ideology influences taste

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to examine whether companies' donations to political parties can impact product experience, specifically taste.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Research design consists of four studies; three online, one in person. Participants were shown a cookie (Studies 1-3) or cereal (Study 4) and told that the producing company donated to either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party (Studies 1-3) or an unspecified party (Study 4).

**Findings** – Participants rated food products as less tasty if told they came from a company that donated to a party they object to. These effects were shown to be mediated by moral disgust (Study 3). Effects were restricted to taste and willingness to buy (Study 4), with no effects on other positive product dimensions.

**Research limitations/implications** – The studies provide a first piece of evidence that political donations by companies can negatively impact product experience. This can translate to purchase decisions through an emotional, rather than calculated, route.

**Practical implications** – Companies should be careful about making donations some of their consumers may find objectionable. This might impact both purchase and consumption decisions, as well as post-consumption word-of-mouth.

**Originality/value** – Companies' political involvement can negatively impact subjective product experience, even though such information has no bearing on product quality. The current findings demonstrate that alterations in subjective product quality may underlie alterations in consumer decision-making because of ideologically tinged information, and reveals moral disgust as the mechanism underlying these effects. In this, it provides a first demonstration that even mild ideological information that is not globally bad or inherently immoral can generate moral disgust, and that such effects depend on consumers' own attitudes.

**Keywords** Evaluation, Food, Politics, Taste, Moral, Disgust

**Paper type** Research paper



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In 2011, the American fast-food chain, Chick-fil-A, found itself in the middle of a media storm following disclosure of approximately \$1 million donations to The Marriage and Family Foundation, an organization perceived as hostile to the LGBT community. This was accompanied by the chief executive officer's statements opposing gay marriage. A nationwide backlash followed, leading Chick-fil-A to stop the controversial donations (O'Connor, 2014).

Political associations of food are far from rare. Many companies are widely known to be politically involved, including Ben & Jerry's, Newman's Own and Starbucks (Chasmar, 2016; Diaz, 2016). Companies spend fortunes on lobbying and donations. Food companies in particular are heavy spenders. For example, in 2013, the American food industry spent \$70,550,408 on political lobbying and donated \$48,266,140 to politicians for the 2012 elections (Center for Responsive Politics, 2015a, 2015b). Top spenders include Coca-Cola, Nestle, PepsiCo and McDonald's.

Consumers learn about corporate political donations in a number of ways (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). First, disclosure is often mandated by law (Hodgson, 2016). Second, both private and federal agencies routinely collect this information and make it freely accessible (e.g. Center for Responsive Politics, Federal Election Commission). For example, the recent app BuyPartisan allows consumers to learn about company donations by scanning product barcodes (Calo, 2015; Itzkowitz, 2014).

Though the intent behind political donations varies (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2012; Fisher, 1994; Liu, 2013), such donations may be taken as a signal to companies' ideological and moral values (Hond *et al.*, 2014; Neustadt and Clawson, 1988) such that consumers may associate donating companies with political ideologies.

### **Political ideology in consumer choice**

Political ideology is defined as a "set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved" (Erikson and Tedin, 2003, p. 64). It is often conceptualized as a unidimensional construct with liberals on the left and conservatives the right (Jost *et al.*, 2009). Given the central place political ideology fills in many consumers' worldviews, it may arouse strong reactions (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004).

Where the political ideology conveyed by a marketer (i.e. "the seller") conflicts with consumers' values, consumers may experience moral conflict that alters consumption decisions (Carrington *et al.*, 2015). Political associations of products affect how the firm and its products are perceived (Ding and Tseng, 2015) and may lead to brand rejection (Henry, 2010; Sandikci and Ekici, 2009).

Politically based brand rejection is typically seen as based on a conscious, deliberate decision (Micheletti *et al.*, 2004; Shaw *et al.*, 2006; Stolle *et al.*, 2005). The effects of donations on consumer choice are typically regarded as extraneous and additive to considerations of product quality (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). One may acknowledge that a product is good and still avoid it because they disagree with a company's politics.

In the food context, consumers know taste is unrelated to political actions, and believe donations would not affect taste experience. In an online survey, participants anticipated that political donations by companies would *not* affect product experience. Only 11 per cent ( $n = 6$  of  $N = 52$  Mechanical Turk participants) answered yes to the question "Would knowing that a cookie company donated to a political party you oppose make their cookies taste worse?" despite leading phrasing hinting at the correct answer (yes).

Contrary to both consumers' intuition and current research, which treat politics as separate from product experience, we argue that political associations can influence not just product choices but also product *experience*. This might indicate that people steer away

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from morally objectionable products not through a cold reasoned process, but because the quality of such products is *subjectively lower*.

The present research contributes to existing literature by providing a theory-grounded explanation for ideology-based brand rejection: moral-disgust driven attenuation of consumer experience. Consumer experience is shown to be predicted by ideational elements dissociated from quality expectations and sensory inputs. We also contribute to the disgust literature by showing how even mild information that is not globally bad or inherently immoral can lead to moral disgust and, in turn, affect taste, and supporting the moral disgust in sensory experience. Finally, the research contributes to the morality-oriented food consumption literature, as well as to the anti-consumption literature (Cherrier *et al.*, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2009).

### **Moral disgust and product avoidance**

Disgust evolved as a physical and emotional reaction to aid in the rejection of potentially harmful foods and minimize potential contamination (Chapman *et al.*, 2009; Curtis and Biran, 2001; Curtis *et al.*, 2004; Frijda, 2007; Rozin and Fallon, 1987; Rozin *et al.*, 2009). Disgust induces object rejection by causing people to experience physical revulsion (Rozin *et al.*, 2008). The natural tendency to avoid unpleasant experience encourages avoidance of disgust-generating foods (Al-Shawaf *et al.*, 2015).

The tendency to reject disgust-generating products by avoiding purchase has been shown to lead to powerful adverse marketing effects (Ariely and Norton, 2009). Disgust can hurt consumers' judgments, reduce evaluations, purchase intent and willingness-to-pay (Argo *et al.*, 2006; Lerner *et al.*, 2004; Morales and Fitzsimons, 2007). Further, marketing communication that invokes disgust can hurt attitude toward the brand (Dens *et al.*, 2008). Here, we explore how moral disgust can affect not just choice but product experience itself.

### **Moral disgust, food rejection and consumption experience**

Disgust-based rejection occurs because of ideational, rather than just physical, disgust. Moral disgust, a feeling of disgust generated by moral issues, can be aroused by ideation of socio-moral violations (Haidt *et al.*, 1994, 1997). Moral violations, in turn, lead consumers to reject brands that conflict with their ideologies (Luedicke *et al.*, 2010; Rindell *et al.*, 2013; Wheeler *et al.*, 2013).

Food experience is particularly susceptible to moral disgust because of the moral overtones of food (Rozin, 1999). Moral issues surrounding food have become a central consideration in food choice (Askegaard *et al.*, 2014; Coveney, 2006; De Solier, 2013). Consider the popularity of fair trade, organic or animal cruelty-free food (Arvola *et al.*, 2008; Comstock, 2012; Jones *et al.*, 2003; Loureiro and Lotade, 2005). Accordingly, morally generated disgust has been found to specifically reduce food consumption (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Kubberød *et al.*, 2006).

Taste is inherently tied to the rejection mechanism of disgust, which has developed in the food domain. Consequently, the evocation of disgust may affect taste experience (Chapman and Anderson, 2012; Chapman *et al.*, 2009; Eskine *et al.*, 2011; Rolls, 2015; Rozin and Fallon, 1987; Rozin *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, people's gustatory experiences are linked to harmfulness evaluations (Ding *et al.*, 2017; Sagioglou and Greitemeyer, 2014). Thus, the potential harm of revulsion can alter taste experience. Further, taste sensitivity is related to avoidance behavior (Herbert *et al.*, 2014) and moral disgust (Herz, 2014), such that avoidance of disgust-arousing objects may generate increased sensitivity to food unpleasantness.

In sum, once evoked, moral disgust would lead to the more general experience of disgust, which would result in a deterioration of taste experience. Consequently, if political associations can indeed evoke moral disgust, this may, in turn, affect taste experience because of the association of disgust and taste (Eskine *et al.*, 2012; Skarlicki *et al.*, 2013).

### Politics and moral disgust

Research shows that moral disgust can be generated by perceived moral violations of varying severity, ranging from moderate behaviors such as unfair treatment in a game (Chapman *et al.*, 2009) to extreme behaviors, including incest or violent crimes. Ideology and beliefs, as well, can evoke moral disgust (Ritter and Preston, 2011).

In the consumer domain, moral disgust can be elicited in response to consumers' perception of socially irresponsible behavior by corporations (Grappi *et al.*, 2013), by moral concerns regarding society at large (Haidt *et al.*, 1997), or even by a violation of social expectations (Haidt *et al.*, 1993; Shweder *et al.*, 1997).

Given that ideologically objectionable ideas can generate moral disgust (Ritter and Preston, 2011), and given peoples' strong feelings about politics (Crockett and Wallendorf, 2004), objectionable political attitudes might suffice to arouse moral disgust. Indeed, people refer to political attitudes they oppose as disgusting (Haidt *et al.*, 1997).

Disgust works on an anticipatory level that precedes actual experience. Avoidance without consumption is functional in that it reduces contamination risk (Curtis and Biran, 2001; Rozin *et al.*, 1986; Rozin and Fallon, 1987). Hence, evaluations of food taste should be affected *even without actual experience*. Accordingly, we hypothesize that objectionable political associations would reduce taste evaluations for those who hold opposing political ideologies, for both projected and actual experience.

Formally stated:

*H1.* Consumers' political attitudes would have an interaction effect with political donations in reducing taste experience. In other words, political donations would lead to reduced taste evaluations for consumers who oppose the beneficiary political party.

Further, we predicted that these effects would be mediated by moral disgust:

*H2.* The effects of political donations on taste would be mediated by moral disgust.

### Study 1: when politics tastes bad

The first study aimed to obtain initial evidence that donations can harm expected taste evaluations if one opposes the political party to which the donation is made.

#### Methods

Sixty-two US adult participants were recruited online on Mechanical Turk. They were randomly assigned to either a Republican or Democratic donation condition. The experiment was run online on Qualtrics, with no signup restrictions.

Both participant groups were shown a picture of a cookie and asked to rate what they think the cookie would taste like. Republican (Democratic) donation condition participants were told that they know a cookie producing company has donated heavily to the Republican (Democratic) party. This information was embedded within a paragraph containing different unrelated information concerning the company, including the

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company's history and expertise. All information except for the party to which the company donated was identical between conditions.

After reading the information, participants saw a picture of a chocolate-chip cookie ostensibly made by the company and asked to imagine tasting the cookie. We then asked participants to rate how tasty they thought the cookies would be. Specifically, they rated their agreement to two statements: "I would find the cookie tasty" and "I would enjoy the cookie". Participants rated their agreement to the statements on nine-point Likert scales anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree. Items were added up to create our dependent variable for analysis. We used multiple measures and analyzed whether items converged by analyzing items' reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

The measures were devised in accordance with published research on tastiness. Though tastiness measures vary in the literature, using simple single or dual Likert scales such as those used in the current research is widespread and has been found to produce reliable results (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Michel *et al.*, 2014; Piqueras-Fiszman *et al.*, 2012).

Political position was measured by asking participants to rate their agreement to an item stating "I support the Republican Party." Agreement was rated on a nine-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (9).

To argue against a halo effect, which would affect all positive or negative attributes, and to mask the purpose of the study, we also asked participants to rate the cookie on other dimensions: The cookie is easy to make, the cookie is nutritious, the cookie is filling and the cookie is fresh. As we believed the effects of political donations would be unique to taste because of disgust, we expected no effects on these items.

### *Results and discussion*

We tested the effects of donation and political attitudes on taste experience using a general linear model controlling for donation, support for the Republican Party and the interaction of the two. The interaction of donation and support for the Republican Party was significant at a 0.05 level:  $F(1, 59) = 4$ , supporting *H1*. Participants rated cookies from a company which donated to the Republican (Democratic) party lower the less (more) they supported the Republican Party. In other words, expected cookie taste was attenuated by donations to a party one opposes.

No cell means are reported because the effects were based on a continuous variable (support for the Republican Party). There were no differences in taste rating for Republican donation (14.27) vs the control condition (14.49),  $p > 0.1$ . For illustration of the pattern of results, we conducted a binary split of results at the five points of the scale of support for the Republican Party, with those above 4 being categorized as supporting the Republican Party. For those opposing the Republican Party, donation to the Republican Party reduced taste rating (13.75) compared to donation to the Democratic Party (14.72). For those supporting the Republican Party, donation to the Republican Party increased ratings (15.38) compared to donation to the Democratic Party (13.8).

There were no effects of political donations on ratings of the cookies on dimensions other than taste. This argues against demand and halo effects. If participants thought we expected donations to the Republican Party induced more positive or negative evaluations, those should have been reflected in some of these measures rather than merely in taste ratings. Similarly, if halo effects were responsible for our effects, other positive attributes of the cookie should also have been hurt. Our effect appears to be taste specific, which indicates that it is not because of a general halo or demand.

The next study attempted to replicate the results with actual, rather than just projected, taste. In addition, the study worked with a different study population, shoppers at a mall in

the Northeastern USA. Finally, because of its large sample, we used the next study to explore a moderating condition of our effects, level of political involvement. The more involved one felt with politics, the stronger their reaction to political donations would be.

### **Study 2: actual taste experience and moderation by political involvement**

Imagined experiences tend to correspond to actual taste experience (Raghunathan *et al.*, 2006; Szczesniak and Ilker, 1988; Westcombe and Wardle, 1997). Actual experience would normally parallel anticipatory experience (Hurling and Shepherd, 2003; Levin, 1987; Schifferstein *et al.*, 1999). Accordingly, measurement of anticipated experience can stand in for actual experience and provide a valid indication of what actual taste experience would be like (Tuorila *et al.*, 1994). However, in some cases, anticipated taste may be affected differently than actual taste (Morewedge *et al.*, 2010). We, therefore, wanted to measure actual, vs anticipated, taste in the current study.

#### *Methods*

In total, 187 adult participants were recruited at a shopping mall at the Northeastern USA, for payment. The study was advertised as a food study, but no particular details were divulged. No restrictions were placed on participation. Participants were paid for half an hour of their time, where they completed this as well as other, unrelated studies. The study was completed as pen and paper questionnaires.

Sample size was larger than for the other studies reported in this paper because participants completed other unrelated studies within the same session that required larger sample sizes. Participants were presented with the same scenarios used in Study 1. They were randomly assigned to either a Republican or a Democratic donation condition. After reading the information, participants tasted an unmarked commercial chocolate chip cookie. They then rated its taste as well as their support for the Republican Party. Taste was measured using the same measures as before (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

We continued to examine the specificity of effects of political donations on taste by including measures of other taste dimensions. If the effects of donations on taste are due to disgust, and not halo effects, we should see no effects of donations on taste ratings along dimensions that are not directly related to pleasantness. Additional measures asked participants to report on bitterness, aftertaste, quality and sweetness, as well as unrelated characteristics of the manufacturer (makes high-quality products, is innovative, produces junk food, etc.). Participants also reported on their liking for the company, feeling that the company was good, expectations and desire to like the product. All these were rated on nine-point Likert scales, ranging from not at all (1) to very much (9). We expected no effects on any of these variables, as taste should be specifically affected by disgust.

We also added a measure of participants' involvement with politics (agreement rating to the statement "Politics are important to me" on a nine-point Likert scale). The stronger a person's involvement with politics, the stronger their moral reaction to political information should be, and the stronger the effect of donation on taste.

#### *Results and discussion*

We ran a general linear model similar to that used in Study 1. The model in this case included donation, political position and involvement with politics, as well as their interactions. Similar to Study 1, there was an interaction between the party to which the company donated and support for the Republican Party, such that taste evaluations were reduced when donations were opposed to participants' own political positions:  $F(1, 173) = 5.31, p = 0.02$ . These results were stronger for those who expressed greater involvement

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with politics, yielding a significant three way interaction between donation, political position and self-reported importance of politics:  $F(1, 173) = 4.65, p = 0.03$ , supporting  $H2$ . For those people who are more politically involved, donations to a party they oppose would likely arouse stronger reactions, generating increased effects on taste. This presents a boundary condition for the phenomenon.

Again, because the interactive effects relied on a continuous measure, we could not report cell means. However, once again we conducted a binary split at the middle of the scale (5). For those opposing the Republican Party, donation to the Republican Party reduced taste ratings (11.24) relative to donation to the Democratic Party (13.06). For those supporting the Republican Party, donation did not have an effect (13.36 for donation to the Republican Party vs 13.58 for donation to the Democratic Party).

There were no effects of political donations on any of the other taste variables. We also found no effects of support for the Republican Party, donation to the Republican Party or their interaction on expectations of liking, indicating that effects were not expected by participants, consistent with our pilot study. This further argues against the likelihood of demand effects.

Liking for the company and evaluation of the company as good were also not affected, indicating that taste was not affected through misattribution of negative feelings induced toward the company to its food and further arguing against a halo effect. Had the effect been due to halos, liking for the company should have been affected, with overall positive feelings toward the company affecting specific judgments such as taste.

### Study 3: the role of disgust

The current study offered a replication and exploration of the process underlying the effects. Specifically, we wished to measure the disgust evoked by donations to parties one opposes, to examine whether moral disgust does indeed mediate the effects of political donations on taste, providing direct evidence for our claimed mechanism.

#### *Methods*

Sixty-two adults participated in a study similar to Study 1. Participants were recruited via Mechanical Turk and completed the study online for payment. Participants were adult US participants, with no restrictions placed on participation. They viewed pictures of cookies and rated their anticipated taste. They were randomly assigned to a Republican or Democratic Party donation condition and presented with a picture of a cookie ostensibly from the donating company.

The dependent measures were the same as those used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.97$  for DVs). Additional questions measured disgust via several self-report (“I morally object to the company’s donation”, “I morally oppose the Republican Party”, “I am disgusted by the Republican Party” and “I am disgusted by the company’s donation”,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). All these were measured on nine-point Likert scales anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (9). Disgust measures were based on [Schnall et al. \(2008\)](#), adjusting for current context.

#### *Results and discussion*

We ran a similar model to that used in Study 1, a general linear model examining the effects of party the person supports, party to which the company donated and their interaction on taste. Replicating Study 1, we found an interaction between the party to which the company donated and people’s political positions:  $F(1, 79) = 7.88, p = 0.01$ . Similar to the first study, donations to the Republican (Democratic) Party led to reduced taste evaluations the less (more) one supported the Republican Party. We dichotomized support for the Republican

Party in the same way as before. For those who did not support the Republican Party, donation to the Republican Party reduced taste evaluations (13.96) relative to donations to the Democratic Party (15.39). For those supporting the Republican Party, donations to the Republican Party increased taste evaluations (16.82) relative to donations to the Democratic Party (12.94).

As across prior studies reactions appeared stronger to donations to the Republican Party, and given that one could not examine mediation of the interaction, we chose to examine disgust mediation in the Republican donation condition ( $n = 41$ ). The results showed a significant effect of support for the Republican Party on taste ratings given donations to the Republican Party,  $F(1, 40) = 4.49, p = 0.04$ .

Mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrapping bias-corrected confidence interval procedure (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The analysis revealed that moral disgust fully mediates the effect of donations on taste. Objection to the Republican Party produced moral disgust ( $a = -0.63, SE = 0.12, t = -5.51, p < 0.01$ ), which in turn reduced taste ratings ( $b = -0.47, SE = 0.16, t = -2.99, p < 0.01$ ). Further, there was a significant direct effect of support for the Republican Party on taste ( $c = 0.26, SE = 0.12, t = 2.11, p < 0.05$ ). However, when the indirect effect of moral disgust on taste was accounted for, this direct effect became non-significant ( $c' = -0.03, SE = 0.15, t = -0.21, p > 0.83$ ).

Bootstrap analysis with 1,000 resamples revealed that the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the significant indirect effect excluded zero (from 0.07 to 0.72,  $B = 0.30, p < 0.01$ ), when controlling for moral disgust (the mediator), indicating that disgust mediates the effects of donation on taste. In addition, the Sobel test was significant ( $z = 2.63, p < 0.01$ ), supporting *H1*. Results are presented in Figure 1.

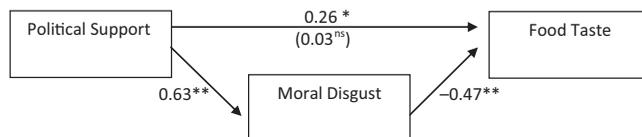
A replication study using an ideology opposed by all or most participants (support for the KKK) obtained similar mediation of taste effects by disgust. Participants who viewed cupcakes that could be seen as either ghost Halloween cupcakes or KKK said the cupcakes tasted less good if told they were designed to resemble Klansmen.

The current study provides evidence that the effects demonstrated in our previous studies were ostensibly because of moral disgust. Disgust evoked at company donations to a political party one opposes lead to attenuated ratings of the taste of its products.

In our next study, we wished to generalize our results to the following:

- a real-world company; and
- a different product domain for healthier food.

Further, we wished to see whether effects of politics generalize to purchase intentions. Finally, we wished to provide a cleaner control condition where there was no specified political party for donations.



**Figure 1.**  
Mediation analysis  
for the relations  
between political  
support, moral  
disgust and food taste

**Notes:** The coefficient in parenthesis is the value of the total effect of political support on food taste, without controlling for moral disgust; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

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#### Study 4: generalizing the effects

##### *Methods*

Paid participants ( $N = 114$ ) were recruited online at Mechanical Turk. There were no restrictions on participation. The procedure was similar to that used in the previous studies, but this time, a different product was used: cereal. In addition, the product displayed was an actual product offered by a real company (Nestle), which has, in fact, made donations to both Republican and Democratic candidates.

Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. They viewed a picture of a muesli cereal box, and read: "Below are pictures of Nestle muesli cereal. Nestle has been actively supporting causes it believes in. Among other things, it has donated considerable funds to Republican (Democratic) Party candidates". A third, new control condition stated that Nestle has donated funds to political candidates without specifying which.

After reading this information, participants were asked to rate the cereal on a number of dimensions. Each dimension was rated on a 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agree) scale. For masking, some of the attributes rated were deliberately unrelated to the purpose of the study. Specifically, participants rated their agreement to the following statements: "The cereal is healthy", "The cereal is nutritious", "This cereal is tasty", "The cereal would taste good", "I would enjoy the cereal", "The cereal is crunchy", "The cereal package is well designed" and "I would consider buying this cereal". Note that all attributes were positive attributes, such that general halo effects should lead to effects on other items such as quality of design and nutritiousness, whereas an effect reliant on disgust should produce results that are specific to taste.

For a manipulation check, we asked participants whether Nestle has donated, and if so, to whom. We excluded participants who failed this manipulation check by answering that Nestle had not donated when told that it did in the Democratic or Republican conditions, or participants who had specified the wrong party ( $n = 18$ ).

As before, we asked participants to rate their support for the Republican Party by rating their agreement to the statement "I support the Republican Party", on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 9 (= strongly agree). Finally, as the product at hand was a less familiar product than chocolate chip cookies, we asked participants to indicate whether they know what muesli cereal is or not (Yes or No).

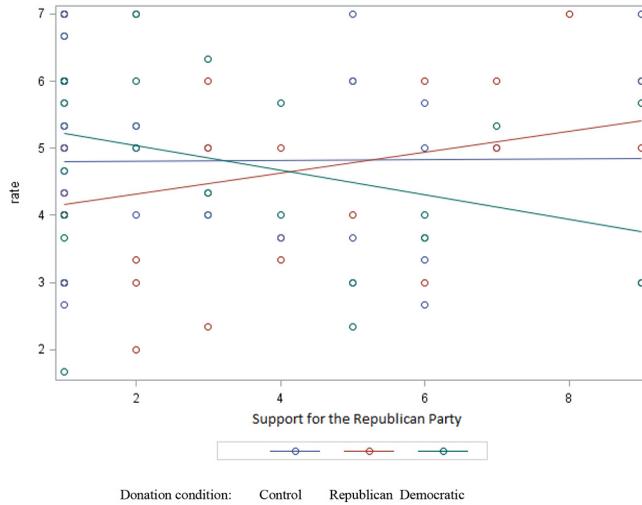
##### *Results*

The three tastiness measures were averaged for the analysis (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.92$ ). As before, we analyzed the effects of condition and its interaction with support of the Republican Party on tastiness. Familiarity with muesli (binary) was used as a covariate in the model, given that the taste evaluations of participants who have no experience of the product might be different than the evaluations of those who do.

There was a significant interaction between donation condition and support for the Republican Party:  $F(2, 88) = 3.15, p < 0.05$ . There was no main effect of donation on taste. The pattern of the interaction including the three conditions can be seen in [Figure 2](#). As seen in the figure, donations to the Republican Party led to higher ratings the more one supported the Republican Party, while donations to the Democratic Party led to lower ratings the more one supported the Republican Party. For the neutral/unspecified donation condition, support for the Republican Party had no effect.

There were no effects for any of the other rating dimensions measured, with all interactions having a significance level higher than 0.10. The only variable for which donation produced significant results was purchase intentions. This was analyzed with the exact same model used to analyze effects of donation on taste. Here, the interaction between

**Figure 2.**  
Donation to the  
Republican  
(Democratic) Party  
enhances (reduces)  
taste the more you  
support the  
Republican Party



donation and support for the Republican Party was as follows:  $F(2, 89) = 3.75, p = 0.03$ , indicating that purchase intentions are also harmed by donations to parties one opposes.

### Discussion

Donations to a political party led to reduced evaluation of the taste of the muesli cereal for those who opposed the party, while donations to unspecified political parties did not affect taste *vis-à-vis* one's own political attitude. The results complement those of previous studies in showing that the effects of political donations on evaluations occur for products from actual companies (Nestle) and for healthier foods.

In addition, the results show that the impact of political donations and attitudes translate to purchase intentions. This supports the practical importance of the findings beyond taste experience. Finally, the study shows that the effects do not occur for other positive product dimensions, confirming that the effect is not because of a general halo of donations.

### General discussion

Across four studies, we demonstrated that political donations generate reduce taste evaluations for consumers who oppose the recipient political parties. We demonstrated the effect with both projected and actual taste, and across two product types, one indulgent and one healthy. The effect was mediated by moral disgust.

### Contributions, theoretical and practical implications

The studies provide a first demonstration that ideologies conflicting with one's own may hurt consumption experience, in effect reducing subjective product quality. Opposing political views may influence not just brand *rejection*, which might be based on cognitive reasons regardless of quality ("It's a good product but wrong to buy"), but actual product experience. This provides a potential explanation for politically based brand rejection (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). Brand rejection can occur not just because of conscious decision. Rather, it can be driven by emotional reactions, reflected in product experience.

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This contributes to the literature on taste experience, demonstrating that product beliefs can affect taste even when completely dissociated from quality. Taste appears to incorporate ideational elements divorced from taste expectations. Specifically, the studies show that ideologies one opposes can harm taste evaluation. Adding to prior related research, the current studies show that information does not need to be globally good or bad to influence taste. Rather, its effects depend on consumers' own attitudes.

Further, the studies contribute to current knowledge by showing effects with relatively mild information rather than severe ethical infractions. Political donations are not inherently a moral violation such as environmental practices, theft or violence.

We demonstrate that the mechanism of this effect is moral disgust. Even mild actions such as political donations may generate sufficient moral disgust to affect taste. In this, our findings contribute to the ongoing debate on whether moral offenses can generate core disgust (Chapman *et al.*, 2009; Rozin *et al.*, 2009).

The findings also contribute to the disgust literature by enhancing our understanding of and the empirical demonstration of the impact of moral disgust on food experience. Prior research on the subject has mostly operated in a hypothetical lab setting, whereas our research shows the effect expands to a concrete, real-world context.

The findings provide a contribution to the literature about country-of-origin effects. Some countries may be associated with particular political ideologies (e.g. Democratic or Fascist values, Communism and Human Rights). Country of origin may thus impact consumption experience through political associations of the country.

In addition, our findings contribute to the literature on moralities in food. Morality has been shown to play a central and expanding role in food consumption decisions (Askegaard *et al.*, 2014; Coveney, 2006; De Solier, 2013). Consideration of moral values around food has arisen in diverse areas such as fair trade (Jones *et al.*, 2003; Loureiro and Lotade, 2005), organic growing practices (Arvola *et al.*, 2008) and genetically modified organisms (Comstock, 2012). Our research contributes to this literature by demonstrating that food associated with objectionable political values is experienced as less tasty, and hence may constitute "bad" food according to the gastronomical view of food, (Askegaard *et al.*, 2014). In contrast with the nutritional view of food, the gastronomical perspective acknowledges that consumers qualify food based upon its impact on their quality of life, and the pleasure (or discomfort) food provides, rather than merely on its objective properties. A politically "tainted" food may therefore be perceived as "bad" relative to food of identical nutritional value (Rozin *et al.*, 1996).

Our findings also support the clear distinction between visceral and Epicurean pleasure (Cornil and Chandon, 2016; Cornil and Chandon, 2017). The cultural-symbolic meaning of food, associated with distasteful politics, may reduce taste evaluation, and consequently negatively affect consumers' Epicurean pleasure.

Finally, the current research contributes to the expanding anti-consumption and consumer resistance literature (Cherrier *et al.*, 2011). The anti-consumption literature shows that conflicts with one's ideology may lead to brand avoidance (Iyer and Muncy, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2009). Here we see that some of what is perceived as anti-consumerism may be driven by subjective reductions in product quality.

#### *Practical contributions*

The current study also offers several practical implications. First, given that level of involvement in politics moderates the effect of firms' political donation on taste expectations, companies should be particularly careful with more politicized target audiences. For example, consider targeting viewers on C-SPAN, political shows or

subscribers of political blogs. Consumers on such media channels are likely to be more politically involved than viewers of entertainment channels (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; Prior, 2005), and so more susceptible to the effect of objectionable political associations.

Though these effects may be most prevalent at times of high political awareness, such as elections, the impact of political donations on taste is likely to be extensive more generally, given constant public interest in political donations (Google, 2016). Further, the effects of political associations may last over time beyond times of particular political interest or of acute events demonstrating a company's politics. Some evidence for this is given in Study 4, where knowing of old political donations impacted product evaluation.

In general, companies may wish to be careful in their political involvement, as any political involvement is likely to upset some segment of consumers, particularly if it becomes widely known, and consequently harm subjective product quality. Companies may wish to support causes that are in the consensus. Companies can also research causes supported by their target population, ensuring information is aligned with their views, potentially generating improvement in subjective product quality.

Companies may also wish to be careful around company decisions that implicitly, rather than explicitly, support a particular political agenda, for instance, hiring practices, sourcing and production practices or product claims that might signal particular political leanings. While for many consumers, fair-trade or ecological practices may be a positive attributes, for others, it may signal a conflicting ideology that arouses negative reactions.

On a broader societal level, if the negative effects of political involvement are widely known, businesses may realize the potential negative impact of their donation on their product. This would reduce the economic desirability of donations and, in the long term, contribute to clearing the political system of some of its business involvement.

For consumers, awareness of the effect may help avoid undue influence of ideological associations and help empower more optimal decision-making.

#### *Limitations and future research*

The current studies are limited in that they present effects of particular ideological attitudes (political) on particular product experience (taste of cookies and cereal). Future studies should extend the generalizability of results to other products as well as other ideological associations. These effects may exist in contexts beyond food, such as art, fashion and vacation resorts. It may be that the effects of moral disgust extend beyond taste, to other physiological, or even non-physiological, product dimensions. For example, the recent controversy with New Balance expressing support for newly elected US president Donald Trump (Maheshwari, 2016) may affect customer experience with their shoes.

One particular limitation of the study was that it assumed individuals had positions toward specific political parties. Some people hold negative attitudes toward politics in general (Ram, 2006). For such individuals, any political donation may suffice to sabotage product experience. Future research can specifically explore the impact of general opposition to politics on the product experience.

Future research should also extend exploration of similar effects to ideologies that are not political. For example, a company's practices in regards to the environment, animal rights or employee welfare may all affect product experience. Similarly, company stances on ideologically tinged subjects such as sexism and racism can also affect consumers' experience of its products. Further, associations of companies with politics may also arise because of reasons other than donations.

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## Conclusion

Companies provide extensive backing to political candidates (Mandle, 2013). Our findings suggest that managers should note that even such fairly innocuous expressions of ideology may hurt subjective product quality.

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