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The Entangled Consumer: Rethinking the Rise of the Consumer after 1945

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ABSTRACT

Just as the social categories of class, gender, and religion became unstable during the “age of fracture” (Daniel Rodgers), the idea that we are all consumers was consolidated. The emergence of societies in which the consumer became a pivotal figure during the second half of the twentieth century constitutes a distinct phase in the history of consumption, which impacted the politics of consumption. This article expands the view of political consumption by looking at the institutionalization of the consumer in Dutch political system. In the course of the postwar period, an abstract notion of the consumer became widely accepted. This view was emancipatory, negating existing differences through unifying consumer policies. Focusing on the entanglement of the consumer with other social roles and categories in these negotiations, the article demonstrates that political consumption is not an anomaly, but the result of such entanglements.

KEYWORDS

Consumer policy; consumer movement; consumer society; civil society; consumption

1. Introduction: the politics of consumption

Political consumption is not just a matter of individual choice. Civic organizations, policymakers, producers, and marketing professionals all play a role in shaping the way in which practices of consumption unfold. How consumers are envisioned, who represents them, and which policies are developed as a result are crucial to the politics of consumption. In this regard, the consumer societies which emerged across the globe in the course of the 20th century were marked by a fundamental tension. Everyone within these societies had become conscious of being a consumer. At the same time, differences in social and economic status, gender, religion, age, and ethnicity continued to inform diverging interests among them.

Civic organizations and policymakers were aware of the many restraints and partialities produced by the entanglement of the role of the consumer, but they did not give up on their hope of creating more able consumers. On the contrary, the emphasis on the uniform qualities of an idealized consumer gradually increased among policy makers as well as consumer representatives in the course of the postwar period. The rise of the consumer is thus tied to an

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attempt to overcome existing differences. At the same time, people naturally continued to connect their roles as consumers to other roles and social categories. As political consumers, they related their role as consumers to notions of citizenship. If we regard this as an instance of the entanglement of the consumer, political consumption appears not as an anomaly (Stehr, 2007), but the result of a web of roles and categories in which people situate themselves as consumers.

The social imagination of Western societies in the postwar era has been dominated by notions of fracture and disaggregation (Rodgers, 2011; Van Dam, 2015). Particularly since the 1960s, observers came to doubt the continued stability of social divisions based on traditional categories like religion, class, and gender. The consumer provided a stable figure in this “age of fracture”. To explain how an awareness of entanglement was displaced, this article analyses how the consumer was represented in a dialogue between civic organizations, employers’ representatives and government-appointed experts from 1951 until 2011 in the Sociaal-Economische Raad (SER). This central institution in the Dutch postwar political system was created in 1950 to coordinate the efforts of the government, employers, and trade unions on socioeconomic issues (Camphuis, 2009; Klamer, 1990; Van Bavel et al., 2010). The negotiations conducted in the SER can be regarded as a close-up of a broader transnational conversation, just as the debates about the fracture of society and the rise of consumer society were transnational phenomena.

Political consumption can be understood as the result of negotiations over “regimes of consumption” (Jacobs, 2011) by a shifting range of actors. In the case of the Netherlands, a new regime was signaled by the institutionalization of the consumer in the SER. The importance of consumer policy within this institution is surprising at first sight, as the main parties involved appear related to labor relations. As a result, it has mostly been overlooked. Yet the importance of consumption as an independent economic factor had been established in the course of the crisis of 1930s and was integral to the issues discussed within this institution. Moreover, the representatives of the employers’ associations also represented the interests of the retail industry, whilst trade unions had claimed to speak for consumers at least since the state had involved itself with the distribution of consumer goods around the First World War (Hilton, 2003; Nath, 2015; Stovall, 2012).

The politics of consumption have a long history. Prevailing explanations for the rise of the consumer have pointed toward increasing levels of mass production and consumption, which created more homogeneous patterns of consumption (Trentmann, 2009, pp. 107–109). This image of growing transnational homogeneity has been challenged by accounts which stress the continued relevance of notions of citizenship, class, and gender to the way people have positioned themselves as consumers (Albert de la Bruhèze & Oldenziel, 2009; Glickman, 2009; Haupt & Torp, 2009; Oldenziel & Hård,

2013; Trentmann, 2016). The way in which the figure of the consumer and its societal position were mediated has thus become a crucial question (Hilton, 2009; Kroen, 2004; Trentmann, 2006; Trumbull, 2006).

Civic organizations had been at the forefront of attempts to shape patterns of consumption and the underlying image of the consumer since the second half of the 19th century (Chatriot et al., 2006; Glickman, 1997, 2009; Oldenziel & Hård, 2013; Trentmann, 2008, 2016). Governments regulated issues such as opening hours for shops, public health regulations, and product quality well before the Second World War (Cohen, 2003; Jacobs, 2005; Torp, 2012). The emergence of welfare states in which the consumer was a decisive figure, however, produced a new regime of consumption since the 1950s. “Prosperity for all” emerged as an essential goal of politics (Prinz, 2004), as talk of a “consumer society” emerged to criticize the growing importance of mass consumption (Trentmann, 2009, 2010; Wirsching, 2010). The new position was underlined by the establishment of consumer associations which explicitly aimed to represent anyone who identified as a consumer (Hilton, 2009; Nath, 2015; Rick, 2018).

The following analysis traces the convergence concerning the acceptance of a key position of the consumer in the Netherlands. The institutionalization of the consumer in Dutch political landscape was part of a broader trend. Across Western Europe, the consumer was integrated into the mechanisms of political deliberation. This entailed negotiating “material politics” (Daunton & Hilton, 2001), but crucially also who could speak for consumers, who a good consumer had to be, and corresponding policies (Kroen, 2004, pp. 728–731). Focusing on the entanglement with other roles and categories, it becomes clear that an inclusive and abstract notion of the consumer was accepted just as other social categories became tentative. The dissolution of categories pertaining to gender, class, and religion left a void in the social imaginary which a shared ideal of the consumer could partially fill. The ideal of a rational, articulated, and self-sufficient consumer came to dominate the views about consumer representation, preferred conduct, and corresponding policies. It was widely accepted, because it comprised an emancipatory agenda aimed at overcoming existing differences.

2. Methodology: the entangled consumer

To assess the rise of the consumer, this article builds on a content analysis of the negotiations over consumer policy which took place in the SER. The SER is a particularly interesting site of investigation, because it necessitated negotiations between independent experts appointed by the government, business and civil society representatives. Its history thus sheds light on a potentially broad spectrum of societal views. The SER’s board installed an ad hoc commission for consumer interests in 1953. This was followed by the installation of an official Commission for Consumer Affairs (CCA) in

1965. This commission was mandated to advise independently on a series of consumer issues since 1973, whilst it also continued to serve in an advisory role on other issues which were deemed relevant to consumers (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1991b, pp. 21–23). As was the true for the SER, the CCA was envisioned as a tripartite assembly in which experts appointed by the government were joined by employers' representatives and delegates of several civic associations deemed to represent consumers (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1991b, p. 3).

The analysis of the negotiations over the consumer in the SER consists of four stages:

1. Content analysis of the SER-reports regarding consumer representation, ideal and policies
2. Categorization of the consumer policies advocated in these reports
3. Analysis of the entanglements of the role of the consumer around the issues of consumer representation, ideal, and policies
4. Contextualization of these results with source material to explain the developments observed

The content analysis was conducted on the basis of 68 reports relating to consumer policy published by the SER between 1951 and 2011. The CCA was primarily responsible for 41 of these. For other relevant SER-publications which appeared since the CCA was established in 1965, the commission was usually consulted. The overarching objective of the SER was to define socio-economic policies acceptable to all stakeholders and a broad political spectrum. Therefore, these reports have first been analyzed to establish the participants' views on who consumers ideally were, who represented them, and what policies they needed (see [Figure 1](#)). The following paragraphs reflect this approach by foregrounding the representation (§3.1), the ideal consumer (§3.2), and the policies (§3.3) advocated within the SER and the CCA.

A crucial underlying assumption of postwar consumer policy was the notion that consumers could not be left to their own devices. Consumer policies were formulated cognizant of consumer's limitations, emphasizing protection, information, or negotiation according to political scientist Gunnar Trumbull (2006). The second stage of the analysis thus translated these categories into five policy fields, according to which the selected reports have been classified ([Appendix](#)):

- Representation: Who represents the consumer in the field of consumer policy?
- Information: What kind of information has to be provided to consumers?
- Protection: What is the consumer's legal status and what sales conditions should be formalised?

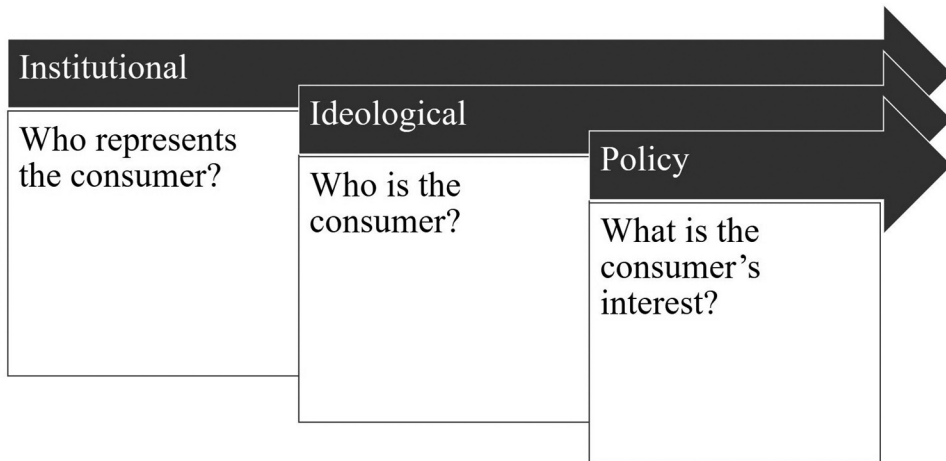


Figure 1. Negotiations about the consumer: analytical dimensions.

- Education: About what and by whom should people be educated to become able consumers?
- Regulation: To what extent should wages and prices be regulated and shopping hours stipulated? What general socioeconomic policies are relevant to the position of consumers?

The shifting emphases in negotiations about the consumer conducted by civic actors, business representatives, and government-appointed experts are thirdly analyzed by applying the framework of the “entangled consumer” to explain the discrepancy between the growing importance of the figure of the consumer and the continued relevance of different roles and categories to the way in which people consume and are perceived (Van Dam, 2017). This framework proposes to regard the figure of the consumer as an essentially entangled figure, who should not be studied in isolation, but rather as someone who is constructed in relation to analytical categories – class, gender, ethnicity, religion, age – and consciously adopted roles – the citizen, employee, believer, etc. – (see Figure 2). Rather than regarding the consumer in isolation, then, this leads to the question which categories and roles are most impactful at a given time for the way people act as consumers? Which have faded over time? Which have become more important?

Finally, the emerging policy emphases have been contextualized to analyze which actors promoted specific policies as well as to understand how policies became accepted. The SER-reports expressed the extent to which compromise was possible around the figure of the consumer. Their format left room for expressing the most severe disagreements by allowing for dissenting opinions to be articulated. Moreover, the additional material assembled in these reports unintentionally provide alternative viewpoints (Stoler, 2009, pp. 141–178). They

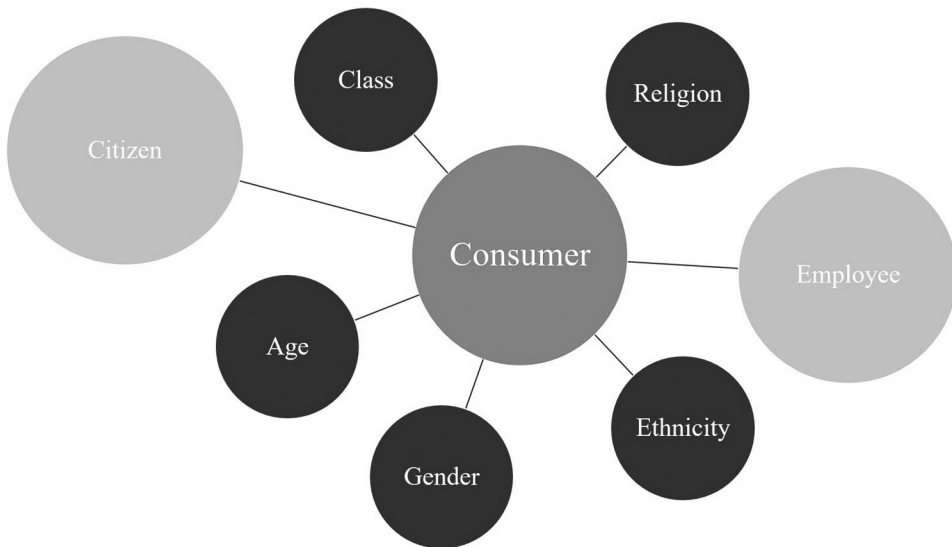


Figure 2. The entangled consumer.

therefore provide a useful point of departure in explaining the rise of the consumer. This material has been supplemented with published and archival sources which primarily serve to highlight the position of the civic organizations which claimed to represent consumers.

3.1 Representation: one for all

On the level of representation, the voice of the consumer became more uniform in the course of the postwar period. Similar to the development in other Western European countries, a heterogeneous field of women's associations, consumer co-operatives and new consumer associations presented themselves as consumers' representatives during the early years of postwar reconstruction (Hilton, 2003, pp. 219–241; Nath, 2017; Rick, 2015). In the case of the SER, these actors were joined by the trade unions, which were already part of the tripartite set-up of the institution and had come to regard issues of consumption fundamental to their own work during the first half of the 20th century, as unions across the globe campaigned for a “living wage” and for working hours which allowed for leisure time (Glickman, 1997; Rosenzweig, 1983).

The evolution of the CCA shows an increasingly exclusive view of who represented the consumer. As consumer representatives gained solid footing in the circles of national policymakers, the number of organizations which claimed to represent consumers within these circles gradually shrank. By 1996 one organization – the Consumentenbond – could claim to speak for all consumers. This process was mirrored by an expansion of the scope of this association, which became more inclusive regarding the people it claimed to represent.

As politicians and civil servants developed their plans for postwar recovery, the consumer became a pivotal figure. In debates about early ventures into European cooperation, members of parliament frequently demanded that consumer interests would be considered (*Handelingen II, 1951/52 (1951)*, pp. 160–194). But who represented the consumer? Whereas some parties argued that the general interest of consumers was in good hands with the government, others pointed out that consumers could be represented by the women's associations, consumer cooperatives and the newly established consumer association Consumentenbond (*Handelingen II, 1955/56 (1955)*, pp. 3021–3036). The position of consumers in the SER was similarly precarious. In 1953, a separate commission had been established to discuss their interests, but it did not have an official status.

Within civil society, who represented the consumer became more pressing as government agencies and politicians paid increasing attention to the consumer. To coordinate representation, the federation of women's associations Nationale Huishoudraad initiated a cooperation with the consumer cooperatives, the trade unions and the Consumentenbond. The latter had been founded in 1953 after the example of the Consumers Union in the United States (Hilton, 2009, pp. 21–26; Van Merriënboer, 1998). This led to the installation of the Consumenten Contact Orgaan in 1957. Even though it had initiated the partnership, the Huishoudraad did not participate. It felt the Consumentenbond was too activist in its outlook, whilst it deemed the trade unions too little committed to representing consumers (“Huishoudraad niet in Consumenten Contactorgaan”, 1957). Despite the representation of female consumers by women's associations, gender hardly played a role in the deliberations around consumer policy, as the next sections will reiterate. Religious divisions were just as conspicuous in their absence. The representation of consumers by the 1950s was dominated by associations which explicitly transcended religious difference (Mellink, 2017; Van Dam, 2011).

The representation of the consumer continued to be contested as the CCA was established in the SER as an official body to deliberate consumer issues. The awkward position of the trade unions became apparent: they had not been counted as consumers' representatives within a set-up which aimed at numerical parity between different interest groups. The trade unions took up three out of a total of 22 seats, with seven employers' representatives, five independent members and seven representatives from consumer organizations. This last group was a strange amalgam: three members were delegated by the Consumentenbond, three by the Consumenten Contact Orgaan (in which the Consumentenbond also participated), and one seat was reserved for an appointee by the women's association Nederlandse Vereniging van Huisvrouwen (see Table 1).

Table 1. The composition of representatives in the Commissie Consumenten Aangelegenheden, 1965–1996.

Year	Affiliation	Number
1965	Independent	5
	Employer organization	7
	Trade union	3
1983	Consumer association	7 (3 Consumentenbond, 3 Consumenten Contact Orgaan, 1 Nederlandse Vereniging van Huisvrouwen)
	Independent	5
	Employer organization	11
	Trade union	2
	Consumer association	9 (6 Consumentenbond, 3 Konsumenten Kontakt)
1996	Independent	5
	Employer organization	6
	Consumer association	6 (Consumentenbond)

*Based on Sociaal-Economische Raad (2015, pp. 33–64).

The formation of the CCA evidently was not guided by a consistent view of who represented consumers. The tensions between the Consumentenbond and other associations culminated during the 1970s. As the Dutch federation of consumer cooperatives collapsed during the early 1970s, an important counterpart to the Consumentenbond left the stage (Oosterhuis, 2000, pp. 188–193). Around the same time, attempts to attain a more effective partnership between different consumer organizations faltered. The Consumentenbond had grown into a large and well-connected organization. Its relationship with the trade unions became particularly strained (*Notitie over de structuur van de consumentenbeweging in Nederland*, 1985, p. 2). Around issues such as the opening hours of shops, the Consumentenbond stressed the importance of putting the consumer first, whereas trade unions advocated an approach which took into account that consumers were also employees (*Notitie vakbeweging en consumentenvraagstukken*, 1975, p. 3).

These tensions eventually made the Consumentenbond decide to terminate their official cooperation with other consumer organizations in the Consumenten Contact Orgaan in 1971. The latter subsequently repositioned itself as a counterpart to the Consumentenbond, as it was transformed from a platform of organizations to a membership-based association called Konsumenten Kontakt, which presented itself as an outlet for consumers of moderate means. The balance of power within the CCA changed as a result of these struggles among consumer organizations. Previously, the Consumentenbond had held three seats of its own, whilst it also exerted influence through the three seats held by the federation of consumer organizations. After the split in 1971, Konsumenten Kontakt acquired the latter.

The Consumentenbond's discontent over a lack of influence was reinforced by a perceived lack of political clout of the CCA as a whole. After years of negotiations had not resulted in a satisfying solution, it suspended its participation in 1982 ("Consumentenbond doet niet meer mee in de SER", 1982). This put the SER in an awkward position. Consumer issues were considered important in policy circles, but the SER's consumer commission now lacked the support of the most influential consumer association. The Consumentenbond's powerplay payed off, as a new version of the CCA was installed in 1983, equipped with a notably expanded mandate. The CCA was enabled to report autonomously on a broadened range of subjects and would initiate coordination between consumers and commercial actors around product information and the conditions of transaction. The new composition of the commission was much more favorable to the Consumentenbond: out of a total of twenty-seven seats it obtained six (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2015, p. 37) (see Table 1, Figure 3). Women's associations had turned away from representing consumers in this institutional setting. Apparently, as the consumer came to be regarded as an inclusive figure, their focus on household consumption and on women was deemed too limited to participate in this context.

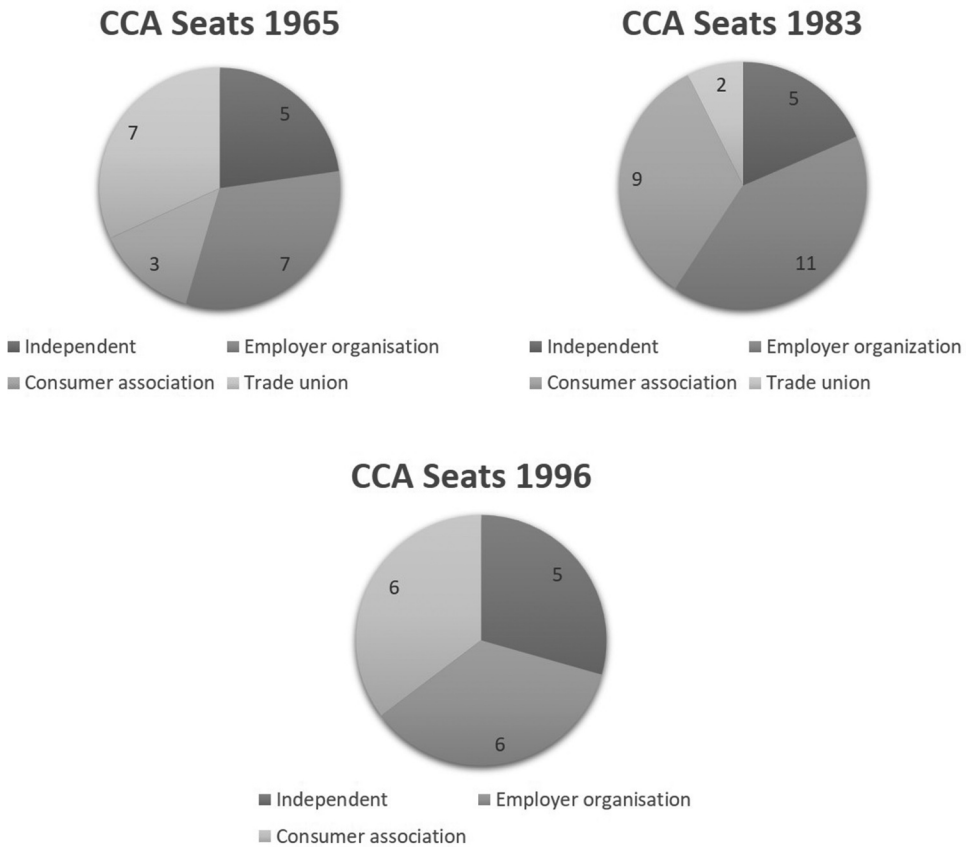


Figure 3. Proportionality of representation in the CCA, 1965–1996.

During the 1980s, the trade unions reconsidered their involvement with the consumer movement, as they feared organizational overstretch and attempted to define their political agenda more concisely (Groen, 1992). The fact that the positions of trade unions, Konsumenten Kontakt and Consumentenbond had become more similar in the course of the 1980s had considerable impact on this disengagement on behalf of the trade unions. Earlier differences between Konsumenten Kontakt and Consumentenbond regarding the middle class-orientation of the latter had diminished as the latter had notably broadened its outlook (Stekelenburg, 1986).

Konsumenten Kontakt was officially dissolved in 1994. Because it could no longer delegate members, another restructuring of the CCA became necessary. In 1996, an equal number of six representatives were assigned to the employers and the Consumentenbond (see Table 1, Figure 3). Just as had been the case in other Western European countries, the women’s associations, consumer co-operatives and trade unions gradually stepped down from the stage of political representation, whilst consumer associations such as the Consumentenbond remained committed to represent consumers in the realm of political institutions (Nath, 2015). Rather

than being marginalized, as had been the case in the United States since the 1970s (Glickman, 2009, pp. 275–303), the Consumentenbond gained firm footing within the political landscape nationally and transnationally through its involvement in the Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs at the European and the International Organization of Consumer Unions at the global level. While the other organizations vacated the institutional stage willingly or out of necessity, the Consumentenbond expanded its scope gradually to include those who could not afford the best products available. The consumer it came to represent appeared to be less explicitly tied to other roles and categories, even though the relevance of differences between them was recognized both conceptually and in practice.

3.2 Ideology: disentangling the consumer

Even as the parties involved in the CCA regarded the consumer as a figure of great promise, they also continuously noted the daunting divide between this ideal consumer and the actual ways in which consumers were seen to behave. In a perfect world, the consumer played a central role in creating a better society, but in practice, the person who rationally decided according to his best interests and matched up equally with the providers of goods and services was hardly to be found.

The consumer was crucial to the postwar economic recovery and a democratic order based in individual rights, even though there is considerable debate about the ideological foundations of these assumptions (Hilton, 2011; Kroen, 2004; Olsen, 2019; Schiller, 2019). The reports issued by the SER and CCA since 1951 reflect the prevalence of the figure of the consumer, but they also demonstrate the much less regarded limits of this development. Analyzed within the framework of the entangled consumer, it becomes evident that those involved in the CCA continued to acknowledge many relevant differences and the limited extent to which people adhered to the ideal of the consumer. As was clear around the issue of representation, a gradual disentanglement expedited the rise of the consumer. Just as they were eventually only represented by one organization claiming to represent all, consumers became disentangled from other roles and categories, with the abstract ideal of an able consumer remaining as a common denominator.

Even before the CCA was officially established, reports about the position of the consumer were concerned with the divide between an abstract consumer and the ways in which people actually acted. A 1951 report sponsored by the SER warned that Dutch citizens continued to consume as if the scarcity of the 1930s and 1940s had not been overcome. This had to change in order for the postwar economy to fully recover. “It is now more important than ever that the consumer changes his habits of consumption in the direction of an expenditure which is as rational as possible”, its author Van der Wal, a representative of the retail industry, stated (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1951, p. 23). Van der

Wal warned against price regulation, because the ability to differentiate the prices of products allowed the retail industry to cater to different groups of consumers. People with low incomes would be particularly disadvantaged, because they could not buy the cheaper products they preferred. Which worker would benefit from buying a three-piece suit for a set price if it prevented him from being able to buy more leisurely clothes for less (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1951, p. 12)?

The relation of the consumer to class returned in the first report issued by the CCA after its installation in 1965. It concerned the question whether the government should subsidize product testing. In considering this a crucial question, the CCA immediately affirmed the ideal of the consumer as a rationally choosing actor, who should be trusted to make the right decisions once provided with sufficient information. The report did explicitly limit the relevance of product testing to products for which differences in quality were more important than people's individual preferences. Even though all consumer representatives regarded such testing as a vital way of promoting consumer interest, it was costly. The report supported subsidies for product testing, but it went on to note that funding would impact what should be tested and how the results would have to be circulated. Current testing practice was geared toward the constituency of consumer organizations, who tended to be "a fairly limited group of consumers strongly interested in price and quality". Should the government fund product testing, their results would also have to be made available beyond the current membership of consumer organizations (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1966, pp. 14, 22).

Consumers were thus presented as ideally informed, rational, and free to choose. This notion proved remarkably stable throughout the postwar period. Practical instances of difference were acknowledged but juxtaposed with this inclusive ideal. In this sense, the prevalent ideal of the consumer was emancipatory, going beyond associations with a specific class (Black 2004). Rather, it could be linked to the ideal of the able citizen, who is also idealized as an autonomous, articulate figure in postwar history (Mellink, 2014). Practical limitations of the ideal did continue to be tied primarily to differences in socioeconomic background. These came to the fore especially around issues which involved weighing the interests of consumers with those connected to other roles.

Shopping hours were a point in case. Seen from the perspective of the employees and small shop owners, a liberalization of opening regulations was objectionable. "The obligation to close shops at 18:00 'o'clock is a social achievement which should not be sacrificed to questionable economic motives", the SER advised in 1972. Whilst the working hours of most other people had decreased, those employed in this sector continued to work on Saturdays, recently aggravated by the permission to open shops after six a day a week too. Next to creating unequal working conditions among employees in different sectors, liberalization of shopping hours would exclude

entrepreneurs and their personnel from social and cultural life. However, the report also found that the aim of retail trade was to serve consumers, and that the demands of consumers had considerably diversified since the current legislation had been passed in 1951. The participation of women in the labor force had increased, which was presented as a reason for extending opening hours, so that these women had an opportunity to go to shops too (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1972, pp. 6–8).

Those compiling the report about shopping hours had not been able to reach a consensual position on the matter. The Consumentenbond in particular made no secret of its standpoint that shopping hours had to conform to the wishes of the consumer first and foremost (“Effect onduidelijk van zaterdagse winkelsluiting”, 1975). New legislation would have to accommodate the different rhythms of consumers in different places, granting exceptions for train stations and hospitals, as well as convenience stores, for instance, (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1972, p. 13). The trade unions, on the other hand, considered this a prime example of the importance of their integral approach to consumer representation, because determining the interests of consumers should also take their role as employees and community members into account (*Notitie over de structuur van de consumentenbeweging in Nederland*, 1985, p. 2).

Even though the specific interests of women as consumers did play a role around the issue of shopping hours, the lack of attention to their perspective was remarkable. All the more so, as women’s associations had been important drivers in establishing cooperation around consumer representation and participated in the deliberations within the CCA. Apparently, the shared ideal of the able consumer subsumed the specific interests of women’s associations. The doubts about the implications of gender differences as well as the emancipatory aim of consumer policy to overcome these differences help explain this development. This was particularly striking as the CCA advised on the future of household education in 1978. The advisory report concluded that most consumer education at the time aimed at reaching as many consumers as possible at once. This was legitimate to some extent, as any consumer had to care about information, safety, health and environmental issues. On the other hand, education could only be effective if it was catered to specific groups. Age, social status, economic position and cultural background were all deemed relevant variables. Gender, on the other hand, was not, because gender roles were considered to be changing too rapidly. Reliable categories of people who should be targeted separately, however, were to be established by new research. A core objective of future education would have to be the protection of economically weak groups and cultural minorities, which were deemed most vulnerable to deceptive sales practices (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1978a, pp. 13–20)

The sense that the landscape of consumption was rapidly changing regarding both suppliers and consumers permeated many reports issued by the SER in the 1970s. These continued to acknowledge the importance of educating

and protecting socioeconomically weak groups in particular, whilst also noting that consumers were generally losing their standing in relation to business (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1976). Increased buying power had brought many durable goods and new services within the reach of a large group of people, but this entailed a host of new choices, whereas the rise of self-service stores had reduced opportunities to inform customers. Consumer education would have to become an integral part of primary and secondary education as a result. Traditionally, consumer education had been part of household education for girls, but this was deemed outdated in a society in which gender roles were transforming (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1977). During the 1980s, an ambitious research effort was launched to establish which groups could be differentiated and how these could be educated, but its results were fragmented, inconclusive, and contested (Willenborg & Muhs, 1989).

The disaggregation of social categories, then, reinforced the idea that everyone was a consumer. All alike were in need of consumer education. The diversification of consumer groups did not produce diverging ideals of the consumer. Rather, it reinforced the emphasis on a shared, inclusive and abstract ideal, as the fragmentation of other roles and categories provided no basis for alternative versions. The ideal was to create “empowered” consumers (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1986a, p. 11). If anything, the responsibility of people to become able consumers was articulated more emphatically by the end of the century. “The primary responsibility for consumer education lies with the consumer himself by using the existing opportunities for consumer education to equip himself to be able to optimally play the role of consumer in practice”, another report on consumer education from 2000 stated firmly (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2000, p. 6). Because the gap between ideal and practice was habitually observed, the idea that the government and civic organizations had to step up in order to help consumers play their role was equally consistent.

3.3 Policy: molding good consumers

How to mold good consumers? The abstract ideal of the able consumer remained stable, but the ways in which this consumer should be brought about varied. In the Dutch case, there was constant attention to the need for education and regulation, but the main policy focus was on providing information and protection (see Table 2, Figure 2). Previous studies on consumer policies have established a shift of emphasis toward providing protection and information in countries such as West-Germany and the United States since the 1970s (Gasteiger, 2008; Jacobs, 2011, p. 570). Historians such as Elizabeth Cohen (2003) and Sheryl Kroen (2004) have argued that a shift from policies providing access to those promoting choice has been the most important transformation of regimes of consumption in the global North in the second half of the twentieth century (Cohen, 2003). Matthew Hilton (2009) observed

Table 2. Policy emphasis in selected reports by the Sociaal-Economische Raad concerning consumer policy 1951–2011 (see [Appendix](#)).

Category	Number of reports
Representation	11
Information	24
Protection	30
Education	9
Regulation	22

*68 SER reports, 1951–2011, double counts allowed (see [Appendix](#)).

a similar emphasis on consumer choice in the ranks of the transnational consumer movement. Looking closely at consumer policy in the Netherlands, the opposition between access and choice appears somewhat misleading. Whereas price regulation became superfluous, wage policies remained beyond the reach of consumer policy during the entire postwar era. On the other hand, policies relating to providing information and protection were deemed integral to providing access by those involved. Making good choices could increase people's budget, whilst better protection would also improve their bargaining position.

Information and protection of consumers were the preeminent policy issues between 1951 and 2011 in the reviewed SER-reports, followed by market regulation (see [Table 2](#)). Until the 1960s, the possibility of government interventions to regulate prices was regularly considered as a way to impact buying power, particularly because successive governing coalitions were committed to wage restraint during the 1950s. However, price regulation did not have to be implemented in favor of consumers. Government representatives and experts agreed that moderate consumption would be most beneficial to the international trading position and would allow to reduce spending deficits by raising sales taxes (Camphuis, 2009, pp. 103–103).

During the 1960s, an unlikely coalition of employers' and consumers' representatives opposed price regulation. They expected unimpeded price formation to result in lower prices on average, whilst also allowing providers of goods and services to differentiate between consumers seeking different trade-offs between price and quality (Camphuis, 2009, pp. 317–323). Illustrative of the massive change in the availability and cost of consumer goods, by the early 1970s, price regulation by the government was regarded as a last resort, most likely to be used in cases of price dumping (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1971, pp. 20–22). Nonetheless, officially, for most products other than foodstuffs regulations remained in place until 1982, as successive governments were not willing to abandon their ability to intervene in markets if necessary (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2015, pp. 85–86).

The aforementioned debates about the opening hours of shops highlight how the position of the consumer was considered essential. “The view that consumers have to conform to the wishes of the shopkeeper and his personnel, is opposed to the social responsibility of the private sector”, the SER report on the existing regulation stated in 1951 (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1972, p. 11). Another report from 1986 reiterated that the consumer had a right to “sufficient buying opportunities”. Changing views about the status of Sundays also had to be accommodated through exemptions and facilitating local regulation (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1986b, pp. 11–15). By the middle of the 1990s, the SER cited the growing assertiveness and variety of consumers as reasons to further deregulate shopping hour regulations (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1995, p. 45). Consumer representatives in the CCA agreed that shopping hours should be as little regulated as possible to obtain an optimal alignment between supply and demand. The fact that consumers were potentially also employees was only considered from an abstract economic point of view: the expansion of opening hours might generate more employment opportunities (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1995, pp. 35–36).

By the end of the 1970s, consumer policy had moved into the center of socio-economic deliberation. In the wake of the economic crises of the decade, it was invoked to counteract people’s stagnating earnings (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1978b, p. 84). A 1978 report by the SER noted how consumer policy had expanded to include the economic position of consumers, their legal and political representation by consumer organizations, and the environmental effects of consumers (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1978b, p. 74).

Paradoxically, as consumption was recognized as important to ever more issues, the issues deliberated by the CCA as pertaining specifically to consumers became more clearly delineated. The commission continued to advise on product information, legal protection and the education of consumers (see Figure 4). Driven by the Consumentenbond, an important goal was to allow consumers to be represented collectively. The massive increase in the availability of products and services, the internationalization of markets, and the unprecedented standards of living confronted consumers with new problems. Their position vis-à-vis vendors had deteriorated as a result. The impairments of consumers could best be overcome by making sure they were provided with adequate information and education, as well as a firm legal status which would deter their counterparts from trying to exploit them (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1991b, pp. 30–61).

In theory, consumer education was uniquely suited as a means to mold good consumers. In 1971, the Council of Europe adopted a resolution on consumer education in schools recommending governments to introduce consumer training in primary and secondary schools. The CCA took up this call in a report issued in 1977, in which it developed the goals of such education. It would have to help children understand how their consumer

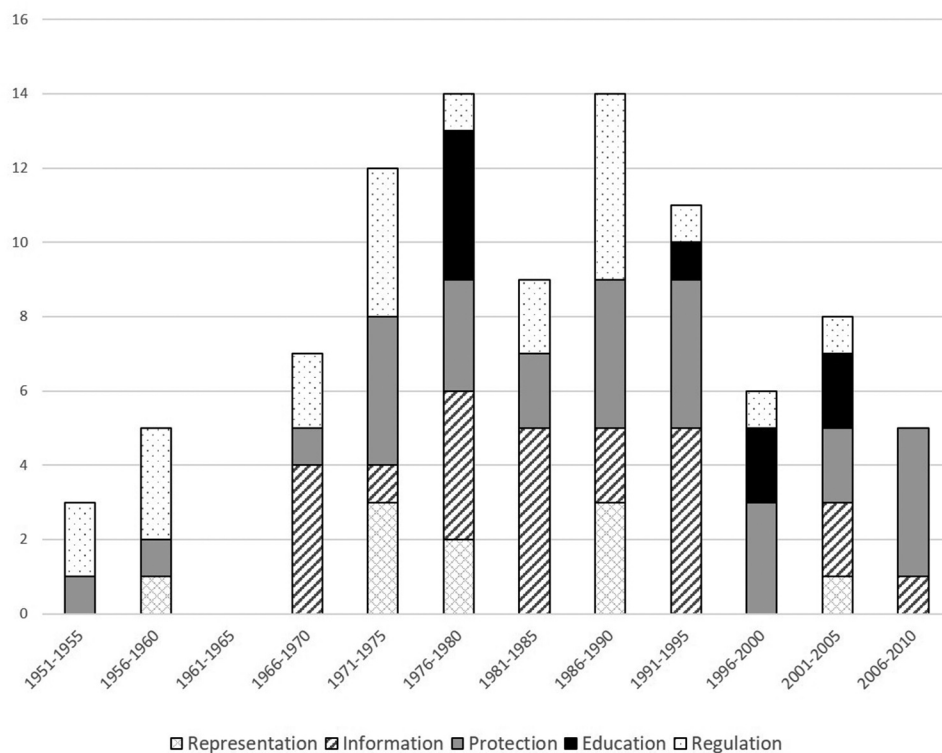


Figure 4. Subjects addressed in selected reports by the Sociaal-Economische Raad concerning consumer policy, 1951–2010 (intervals of 5 years).

needs were shaped, which criteria they had to take into account in deciding what to consume. They also had to learn to think about health and safety, and to think of the environmental and social consequences of their consumer behavior. Lastly, children should be educated about their rights and duties as consumers and about the ways in which they could obtain relevant information (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1977).

The ambition and the practical limitations of consumer education did not really change over the course of the following decades. In 2000, a new report noted that it would be desirable to cater consumer education to the needs and interests of specific groups. The general level of education provided the necessary conditions for consumers to be reasonably informed, but “vulnerable” groups in particular remained hard to reach (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2000, pp. 5–7). This same report resolutely placed the primary responsibility for education with consumers themselves. It also repeatedly described the role of the government and consumer organizations as providing the conditions for them to play their role (“voorwaardenscheppend”) rather than becoming actively involved.

In practice, the Dutch government and the consumer organizations had been reluctant to go beyond creating the right conditions for consumers.

Before the 1980s, however, this reluctance had regularly been questioned. Even the Consumentenbond did not wholeheartedly support it, as it pleaded for the right of legal action on behalf of consumers through the CCA in 1990 (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1990). Just as had been the case around shopping hours, however, the general trend was toward deregulation. This was also evident as the environmental consequences of consumption gained more attention among policy makers. The SER had already remarked on this during the 1970s and 1980s in publications concerning consumer policy in general, but came back to the issue specifically in a report on the possibility of an environmental label for products. The report noted that people were partly responsible for acting conscious of the environmental consequences of their consumer behavior. A label would enable them to do this more adequately. However, such measures would only have an effect if they were part of a broader program of consumer education. What good would it do someone if she bought an energy-saving lightbulb only to have it burning longer because it was less expensive (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 1991a)?

The half-hearted emphasis on “self-regulation” of market actors was also evident in the main task the CCA adopted during the 1980s. In the course of a broader program of stimulating economic sectors to regulate themselves, the CCA became the facilitator of direct negotiations between producer and consumer representatives. These negotiations between consumer and producer representatives aimed to establish uniform standards for product information and commercial terms (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2015, pp. 37–38, 54–59). In this sense, they were an important building block in the attempts by consumer representatives to guarantee better protection and information for consumers.

The envisioned emancipatory character of the consumer to which the participants in the CCA subscribed in one way or another thus also comes out in the analysis of the policies pursued by the commission. The perceived differences between consumers were not regarded as a reason to differentiate policies, because these differences were increasingly hard to define, whilst the goal of molding able consumers was the common denominator. Rather than cementing differences, consumer policies aimed to overcome them.

4. Conclusion

The emergence of the consumer in postwar Western Europe cannot be reduced to new economic circumstances or the rise of a neoliberal perspective blindly favoring free markets. Not only was there ample attention for the relevant differences between consumers and their imperfections. They were also represented by associations which were notably critical of unregulated markets. As the preceding sections have demonstrated, this development can be explained by approaching the consumer as an entangled figure. Rather than supplanting other roles and categories, the consumer was the last one

standing. As observers increasingly doubted the stability of religious allegiance, class structures, and gender roles, they continued to agree on the ideal of a consumer who was rational, articulate and autonomous. As a result of this disentanglement, consumers were increasingly regarded in terms of an abstract ideal which had to be promoted through the constant involvement of the government and civic organizations. This emergence of societies in which the consumer became an essential figure in the social imaginary constitutes a distinct phase in the history of the consumer.

Political consumption did not just play out in individual choices. Civic organizations articulated competing claims about representing consumers, whilst they negotiated with government and business representatives about their institutionalization through consumer policy. On the level of representation, the disentanglement of the consumer spurred a process of inclusion. The cooperative associations, women's organizations, and finally the trade unions abandoned their claim to represent consumers institutionally, relinquishing their attempts to present consumer interests as fundamentally intertwined with their roles as co-operators, women, and employees. As a result, the Consumentenbond remained as the consumers' single representative. It successfully articulated this assertion through a conscious expansion of the consumers it claimed to represent. This process was mirrored on the level of the envisioned ideal consumer. Here, relations to categories of religion, class, and gender were seen to dissolve. The perceived dissolution of such traditional categories produced a shared focus on the abstract ideal of the able consumer, which subsumed the differences between consumer and business representatives, and bridged the gap between the ideal and practical limitations of consumers.

Consequently, the increasing centrality of consumer policies which could be observed in the postwar era went along with a more one-dimensional view of consumers, focused on qualities they had yet to acquire. The pull of this emancipatory view was widely shared across the political and civic spectrum. Although the resulting policies had a similarly emancipatory intent, they assumed that the actual differences between people could be overcome by focusing on the uniform qualities of good consumers. As the analysis of consumer policies has demonstrated, the development of these negotiations did not leave the daily lives of ordinary citizens untouched, as they impacted the ways in which prices, consumer rights and obligations, and shopping hours were regulated.

This analysis also implicates the way in which the postwar politics of consumption were framed. References to the importance of consumer demand and purchasing power did not assume that people fulfilled a civic obligation by simply consuming (Cohen, 2003). Rather, the government and civic organizations had to ensure that people would become able consumers first. In the case of the Netherlands, this entailed protecting, educating, and informing citizens adequately. Neither was this perspective on the citizen as a consumer an early foreboding of the rise of a neoliberal agenda (Nath, 2017; Olsen, 2019, p. 72).

The consumer was envisioned as an emancipatory project across the political spectrum. The ideal of the autonomous consumer who emerged in these negotiations is not the passive, calculating citizen who has been criticized as a threat to a vibrant democracy. Rather, there is a considerable – if uneasy – overlap between ideal consumers and citizens regarding qualities such as autonomy and rationality.

Recognizing the emancipatory intent of consumer policy is an important step toward a better understanding of the history of the rise of consumers to their current prominence in public policy and the social imagination. Because of the fragmentation of other roles and categories in the social imaginary, this rise has unintendedly promoted a one-sided account of citizens. In recent scholarship, this perspective has been successfully challenged by analyses which have highlighted the ways in which the consumer and the citizen are entangled. In this light, political consumption is not an anomaly, but rather the result of the fundamental entanglement of the role people play as consumers. This entanglement, moreover, did not just play out in the lives of individual consumers, but also impacted how consumers were represented and how their place in society was negotiated. The abstract ideal type of the consumer is thus confronted with the reality of people who have never been just consumers.

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Appendix. SER-reports assessed (1951–2011), categorized for policy issues

Commission	Title	Year	Representation	Information	Protection	Education	Regulation
SER	Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de spanning tussen lonen en prijzen	1951	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake het voorontwerp van wet op het cadeaustelsel	1953	N	N	Y	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake consumentenbelangen in het kader van de publiekrechtelijke bedrijfsorganisatie	1956	Y	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake de prijsvorming van melk	1956	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake de wettelijke regeling van het afbetalingsbedrijf	1956	N	N	Y	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies met betrekking tot de problematiek van het door de overheid te subsidiëren vergelijkende warenonderzoek	1966	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies over het vraagstuk van de prijsinformatie aan de consument	1967	N	Y	N	N	N
SER	Advies inzake het vraagstuk van de bescherming tegen agressieve verkoopmethoden	1968	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies met betrekking tot de uitvoering van de ijkwet in het belang van de Nederlandse consument	1970	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/Commissie uitvoeringsmaatregelen warenwet	Advies inzake berekening en aanduiding van kredietkosten	1970	N	Y	N	N	Y
SER/Commissie uitvoeringsmaatregelen warenwet	Advies inzake wijziging van het uitvoeringsbesluit wet op het afbetalingsstelsel	1961	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake verticale prijsbinding	1971	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake wettelijke maatregelen ter bevordering van het ordelijk economisch verkeer	1971	Y	N	Y	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies inzake hoeveelhedaanduiding, standaardisatie van verpakte hoeveelheden en prijsaanduiding per standaardhoeveelheid	1972	N	Y	N	N	N
SER	Advies inzake wijziging winkelsluitingswet 1951	1972	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies inzake herziening van de wet economische mededinging en versterking van het mededingingsbeleid	1973	N	N	N	N	Y

(Continued)



(Continued).

Commission	Title	Year	Representation	Information	Protection	Education	Regulation
SER/CCA	Advies inzake de behandeling van consumentenklachten door branchegeschillencommissies	1973	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies met betrekking tot de consumentenvoorwaarden, geïntroduceerd door de Consumentenbond	1974	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies inzake methoden ter verbetering van de behandeling van consumentenklachten	1975	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies inzake de huishoudelijke voorlichting in verband met de voortzetting van de subsidiering van de Stichting voor Huishoudelijke Voorlichting ten Plattelande	1976	Y	N	N	Y	N
SER/Commissie uitvoerings- maatregelen warenwet	Advies inzake het ontwerp-hoeveelheidsaanduidingenbesluit (Warenwet)	1976	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Interimadvies over de voorlichting van de consument via radio- en televisie-uitzendingen	1976	N	N	N	Y	N
SER/CCA	Advies inzake consumentenopvoeding op scholen	1977	N	N	N	Y	N
SER/Commissie Prijsbekendmaking	Advies inzake de prijsaanduidingsvoorschriften en de prijsaanduiding per standaardhoeveelheid	1977	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Rapport inzake demografische ontwikkelingen en particuliere consumptie	1978	N	N	N	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies inzake de huishoudelijke en consumentenvoorlichting	1978	N	N	N	Y	N
SER/Commissie uitvoerings- maatregelen warenwet	Advies inzake een ontwerp-hoeveelheidsaanduidingenbesluit (Warenwet) ter uitvoering van enkele EEG-richtlijnen met betrekking tot de aanduiding van de hoeveelheid op bepaalde voorverpakkingen	1979	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies over wet consumentenkoop	1979	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/Commissie Wijziging Warenwet	Advies inzake wijziging van de warenwet	1979	N	Y	Y	N	N
SER/Commissie Productenaan- sprakelijkheid SER	Advies productenaansprakelijkheid	1980	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER	Advies consumentiebeleid	1981	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies cadeau-acties	1982	N	N	Y	N	Y
SER/Commissie Prijsbekendmaking	Advies prijsaanduiding ambachtelijke dienstverlening	1982	N	Y	N	N	N

(Continued)

(Continued).

Commission	Title	Year	Representation	Information	Protection	Education	Regulation
SER/CCA	Advies misleidende prijsvergelijking	1983	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/Commissie Prijsbekendmaking	Advies inzake prijsaanduiding en prijsaanduiding per standaardhoeveelheid (pps) van levensmiddelen	1983	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies produktinformatiebeleid	1983	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/Commissie Prijsbekendmaking	Advies regeling prijsaanduiding en specificatie rekeningen verblijfsrecreatiesector	1983	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies voortwerp-Wet op het consumentenkrediet	1985	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies Wet beperking cadeaustelsel	1986	N	N	Y	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies informatieve waarde van reclame	1986	N	Y	N	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies consumentenbeleid	1986	N	N	N	N	Y
SER	Advies wijziging Winkelsluitingswet	1986	N	N	N	N	Y
SER/Werkgroep Demografie	Sociaal-economische aspecten van demografische ontwikkelingen	1987	N	N	N	N	Y
SER/CCA	Rapport wettelijke ondersteuning zelfreguleringsafspraken	1989	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Protocol zelfreguleringsoverleg	1989	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies aanduiding prijs per standaardhoeveelheid	1990	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies vorderingsrecht belangenorganisaties	1990	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies oneerlijke bedingen in consumentenovereenkomsten	1991	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies milieukeur	1991	N	Y	N	Y	N
SER/CCA	Advies produktinformatiebeleid	1992	N	Y	N	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies over het voorstel van de Europese Commissie voor een richtlijn inzake vergelijkende reclame en tot wijziging van richtlijn 84/450/EEG inzake misleidende reclame	1992	N	Y	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies over het voorstel van de Europese Commissie voor een richtlijn betreffende de bescherming van de consument bij op afstand gesloten overeenkomsten	1993	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies Ontwerp EG-richtlijn werken van edelmetaal	1994	N	Y	N	N	N
SER	Advies dereguleren winkelsluitingswet	1995	N	N	N	N	Y
SER/CCA	Advies Grensoverschrijdende creditbetalingen	1995	N	Y	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies grensoverschrijdende verbodsacties	1996	N	N	Y	N	N

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Commission	Title	Year	Representation	Information	Protection	Education	Regulation
SER/CCA	Advies de consument op nieuwe markten	1997	N	N	Y	Y	Y
SER/CCA	Advies verkoop van en waarborgen voor consumptiegoederen	1998	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Rapport consumenteneducatie	2000	N	N	N	Y	N
SER	Advies duurzaamheid vraagt om openheid: Op weg naar duurzame consumptie	2003	N	Y	N	Y	Y
SER/CCA	Advies Europese samenwerking bij handhaving consumentenwetgeving	2004	Y	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies keurmerken en duurzame ontwikkeling	2004	N	Y	N	Y	N
SER/CCA	Advies oneerlijke handelspraktijken op consumentterrein in de EU	2004	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Small claims procedure	2006	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies eenvoudige procedure voor eenvoudige civiele zaken	2007	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies Groenboek Herziening van het consumentenacquis	2007	N	Y	Y	N	N
SER	Advies consumentenrechten in de interne markt	2009	N	N	Y	N	N
SER/CCA	Advies toegang tot het recht voor de consument en de ondernemer	2011	Y	N	Y	N	N