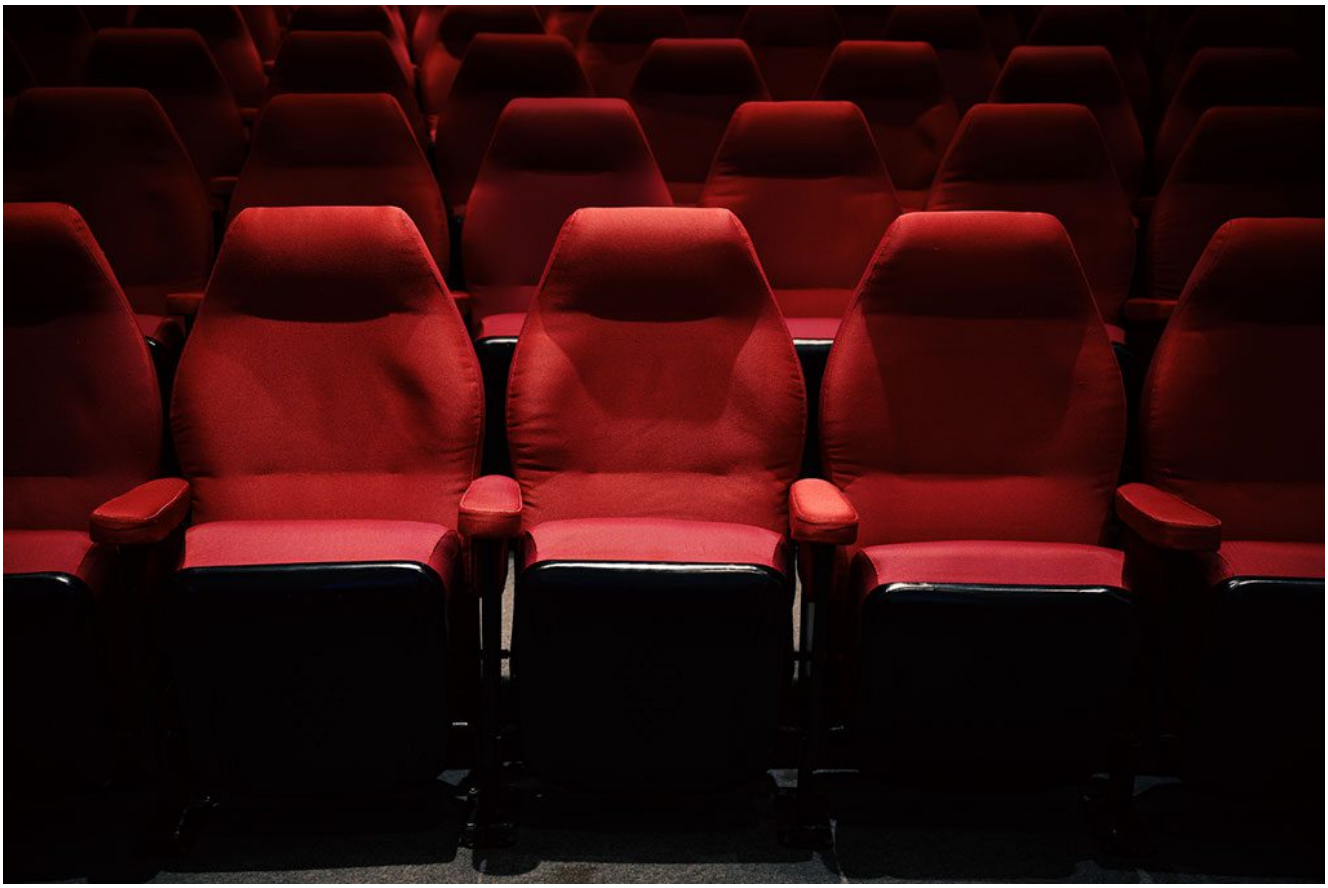
Eyes on Eurovision: Cultural boycotts can send powerful political signals

From French wine to French cinema — and calls to boycott Eurovision 2024 — voting with your wallet has always sent a message.



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When it comes to how you spend your money, convenience often overrides ethical concerns, but not always. From corporations such as Amazon to products containing palm oil, many

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people have something they resolutely refuse to buy or someone they refuse to buy from.

Ricard Gil, a visiting professor at IESE and an expert on organizational economics with a focus on strategy, sat down to tell us about his research, forthcoming in the *Canadian Journal of Economics*, into cultural boycotts, a topic that is making headlines again.

In a nutshell, what does your research examine?

We're interested in how demand for cultural products can reflect political sentiment, particularly where there may be a political backlash.

Consumer boycotts, or voting with your wallet, have a long history as a response to political dissatisfaction, from the Anti-Apartheid boycotts of South African products in the 1980s, to notorious examples like the French wine boycott in the U.S. after France refused to take part in the Iraq War.

The other side of the coin is political backlash to policies, where consumer actions can be an early indicator of shifts in opinion, which will often eventually come out in polling or election results.

For example, more casualties in each U.S. state during the Iraq War decreased the popularity of then-president George W. Bush, and similar results are seen across other wars. The current rise in populism around the world has been seen as a backlash against globalization.

We examine the intersection: voting with your wallet as an early indicator of dissatisfaction that can eventually manifest in more overt political protest.

In this case, you look at a seemingly innocuous cultural policy in Canada.

Yes, so in this case, the policy has national identity implications. We look at the decision, in 1952, to relocate the headquarters of the National Film Board (NFB) from Ottawa to Montreal. The reasoning behind the decision to move the NFB headquarters was pragmatic rather than political, but the backlash was political.

Ottawa is the capital city of Canada and is located in the primarily English-speaking province

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of Ontario. Montreal is in Quebec, and is Canada's largest French-majority city. Between the two cities, which are only a few hours apart, people speak different mother tongues, often follow different religions and have different cultural values. While Canada is officially bilingual and multicultural, French Canada has always been very protective of its heritage amid the growing demographic and cultural dominance of English in North America.

The pushback to the move was immediate. The National Film Board was seen as a propaganda tool of the Canadian government, as not aligning with the cultural preferences of French Canadians, and as a threat to independent Quebec cinema.

We then look at what happened next via a decade's worth of movie-viewing numbers in both Toronto (English Canada) and Montreal, of different kinds of movies: Anglophile, U.S., Canadian or French. We found that, following the announced move, demand for Anglophile movies (those made in an English-speaking country or region) dropped 27% in Montreal as compared with Toronto, and demand for U.S. movies dropped 18%.

This tied in with political trends in the same period. We examined polling data regarding governmental institutions and Americanization across all Canadian provinces. We found that residents of Quebec were 7% more likely to oppose the Canadian government and Americanization after the move was announced, and an additional 11% more likely once the relocation had actually occurred, four years later.

This means that movie demand, in the form of a cultural boycott, was a good predictor for larger changes in public opinion.

Why the focus on movies?

Cultural products, whether movies, songs, books or website visits, are perfect for signaling reactions to policies. When you can measure demand for a given product over time and across geographical areas, it can give a good indication of which way the political winds are blowing.

One up-and-coming example is Eurovision 2024. The song contest claims to be apolitical, but reality is more complex. The U.K. famously placed last in 2019, the year Brexit went into effect. Russia was banned following its invasion of Ukraine. This year, all eyes may be on the stage as a proxy for public opinion of world events.

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