

Voting Advice Applications

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of elections the Internet opens up new and promising possibilities for parties and candidates wanting to present themselves and their political programme, to organise the election campaign, to gather funds, to mobilise support and to enter into a direct dialogue with the electorate. Of particular importance are the so-called Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) that have proliferated all over the world. VAAs are web applications that offer help in deciding how to vote in elections by comparing the preferences of parties or candidates with respect to different political issues with the preferences of the specific voters and indicate those parties or candidates who are politically close. Nowadays, one or several VAAs are on offer at practically all national elections in Europe and they are used by millions of voters. VAAs are found to not only affect the way people vote but also influence people in their decision to go to the polls. As such, these online applications and their widespread use are highly relevant since they exert an impact on election outcomes. Once viewed as simple tools, they have meanwhile become respected campaign features. With these developments, VAAs are increasingly scrutinized, facing challenges both in terms of their design and their management. In this contribution we present both the establishment and the functioning of VAAs and discuss their advantages and disadvantages in a domain of life where the infiltration of modern information technologies is highly debated.

BACKGROUND

What are Voting Advice Applications?

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) are web-based applications which provide information about parties or candidates running in elections. They help voters to find out which party or candidate they should vote for. In order to do so they match the voters' political preferences to those of parties and candidates running in elections. The matching procedure is generally based on the logic of proximity voting (Downs, 1957), which views the voting act as a selection of those representatives that are closest to one's own political standpoints. Political issue positions are thus at the core of every VAA. The notion of policy congruence usually builds the foundation of representative democracies, where public interests are represented through a body of elected officials towards a common good (Powell, 2000). Hence, a close connection between the policy positions of voters and those of representatives is seen as a detrimental attribute for representative democracies to function properly (Powell, 2004). VAAs aim at converting this democratic ideal into a real-world application that helps voters to figure out which parties or candidates share their political preferences in a cognitively easy and accessible way.

VAAs have so far mostly been designed by political scientists and are open-access tools for the public at large. Anyone who is interested in matching one's political issue position with those of the electoral offer can use a VAA and receives a voting recommendation from it, presented in a ranking-list of best-matching parties and/or candidates.

How Do They Function?

The issue-matching module is common to all VAAs that are operating nowadays in election campaigns worldwide (Garzia & Marschall, 2012; Ladner & Fivaz, 2012). The matching function and the specific designs of VAAs, however, differ substantially among different providers (Ladner & Fivaz, 2012). Before elaborating on the peculiarities of different VAAs across Europe, we first outline the commonalities of all VAAs.

A voter interested in using a VAA prior to casting her vote can go to the specific VAA website, choose an election of interest and fill in the questionnaire or catalogue of issues that has been created by the designers of the application for that particular election context. The questionnaires consist of statements or questions related to the current political discourse or political values in general to which the user can indicate her preferences, usually on a set of up to five answer options. The amount of questions or statements usually ranges from 30 to about 75, and the user can generally choose how many of these she wants to answer. The same set of questions is answered from the side of the electoral offer. Either parties or politicians themselves fill in the identical questionnaire on the website or experts place parties on the various positions based on party manifestos or media content. These questionnaires and their respective answers then serve as the baseline for the matching procedure. Based on a specified algorithm, the computer calculates the overlap of issue positions between the voter and the electoral offer on the questionnaire, identifying the most suitable vote options for a specific user in terms of policy congruence. The result is then presented in a ranking-list to the user, with the best matching party or candidate on top of the list, followed by a decreasing order of available matches. Besides the ranking order of most VAA outputs, further visualization options are usually available. Users can view their own political position vis-à-vis the electoral offer in a one- or multi-dimensional space, often marked by the political left-right or the liberal-conservative distinction. Furthermore, so called spider web graphs are often available that present various political positions along several pre-defined policy fields and allow for comparing one's own political profile with that of selected parties or candidates. All of these features have

the same purpose in common: to visualize an abstract political landscape in a simple-to-understand manner, to reveal those political options that best match one's own values and interests and to allow for systematic comparisons between vote alternatives. Such concise access to political information in election campaigns is unprecedented and offers up new opportunities to voters to learn about their choices (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006).

Although the core of most VAAs is the same, variations in the design of the application exist (cf. Ladner & Fivaz, 2012). A first distinct feature is the scaling of the answer options in the questionnaire. Some VAAs simply allow for "Yes" or "No" answers, others expand this by allowing for neutral answers ("no answer" or "don't know"), while others allow for a more fine grained scaling that includes "agree," "somehow agree," "neutral," "somehow disagree" and "disagree." Moreover, some VAAs allow for weighing certain questions in order to indicate their importance to the voter. Such distinctions are relevant for the matching procedure since more answer options also allow for more complex matching procedures. As already outlined before, VAAs also differ in how the position of parties or candidates is identified. Either parties or candidates position themselves on the various issues or an expert team does so through analyzing respective election programs of parties. The methods used for calculating the policy congruence also differ substantially between VAAs. While some use Euclidian distance to find the closest match, others use the City Block model. These two distinct mathematical formulas for calculating distances between objects of interest (see Louwerse & Rosema, 2011) as it has been shown, affect the results of the matching procedure and therefore the voting recommendation of the VAA. VAA designs are currently under intense scientific scrutiny, especially in terms of the matching algorithms they employ (Gemenis, 2012). Last but not least, the presentation of results varies between VAAs, with various different procedures for how to visualize several issue positions in a reduced form. VAAs are increasingly used in election campaigns worldwide, thus their design and methodology deserve closer attention, especially because the outputs they produce seem to affect those who use them.

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