

How new information technologies affect voters' decisions and elections

During the last couple of years so-called online Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), which help voters in their decision making prior to elections, have become increasingly popular in many countries all over Europe. There are hardly any elections without one or even several VAAs offering their services. The impact VAAs have on political participation and opinion formation, however, is under-researched. The NCCR project "Smart voting 2.0" is one of the few that have been analyzing the challenges and opportunities VAAs bring for democracy.

By Jan Fivaz and Joëlle Pianzola

In the last few years, VAAs and the number of voters using them have spread enormously. For example, in the Netherlands, the use of VAAs exploded from 250,000 voting advices, generated by one VAA during the campaign for the 1998 elections, to more than 6.3 million voting advices generated by two competing VAAs in 2006. In Germany, the VAA *Wahl-O-Mat* delivered 3.6 million voting advices in 2002, a number which increased to 6.7 million for the 2009 elections. Despite the fact of their growing popularity, VAAs are still widely neglected as a research topic by political scientists, and only very few scientific projects are dealing with them. One is the NCCR project "Smart-voting 2.0". Based on data generated from the Swiss VAA *smartvote* (www.smartvote.ch), it analyzes both the challenges and opportunities the emergence and widespread use of VAAs imply for democracy. VAAs are built on the premise of matching voters and candidates on the basis of their issue congruence, and might therefore affect the decision making of its users and influence the notion of political representation. Representation as a main pillar of democracy is generated through the act of voting, and if both aspects are affected by the use of VAAs their impact deserves closer attention.

Evidence from the Swiss VAA "smartvote"

Smartvote was introduced to Swiss voters in the run up to the elections for the Swiss parliament in 2003. Back then a modest number of 255,000 voting advices were generated. Four years later, the use of *smartvote* had increased almost fourfold, with about 963,000 voting advices issued. Measured in absolute numbers the extent of this use is not very impressive compared with figures from VAAs in other countries. It can be assumed that the figures also contain double counts due to the fact that people visited the website several times and also generated more than just one voting advice. Therefore the web server statistics and the data provided by the *smartvote* database were thoroughly analyzed in order to delete the double counts and estimate the number of real voters using the application. At the end of this process, we estimated that in 2007 about 375,000 voters had used *smartvote*. In relation to the only 2.4 million voters who had cast a ballot, this means that more than 15% or one out of six voters had used *smartvote* before they went to the polls. The number was crosschecked with, and confirmed by, data from the representative phone-based survey con-

ducted by the *Swiss Electoral Study* (Selects), which also included the question of whether a voter had used *smartvote* or not. Thus our estimate of the number of effective users can be regarded as very reliable.

What kind of impact does *smartvote* have on voters? First results indicate that there is a positive correlation between the use of *smartvote* and political participation: *Smartvote* users show a higher voter turnout than non-users. About 40% of the *smartvote* users asked in the post-electoral surveys conducted by the NCCR project say that the use of *smartvote* had a slightly positive or even decisive effect on their decision to go to the polls. Based on the same survey data we could show that the use of *smartvote* led its users to look for additional information about the candidates as well as about the policy issues under question.

Finally, we found the first evidence that indicated that *smartvote* also had a direct impact on their electoral choice: 67% of the users stated that the voting advice provided had influenced their actual voting decision.

Besides the impact of *smartvote* on voters' decisions, a further crucial question – which, from the point of view of the users, is one of the shortcomings of VAAs – was analyzed. Once candidates are elected members of parliaments, do they really stick to the policy positions they have put forward in the VAA? In order to answer this, we compared candidates' policy positions before elections based on their answers in the *smartvote* questionnaire with the legislative behavior of the elected candidates/MPs after elections based on roll-call data. We



The Smart-voting team (from left): Stefani Gerber, Jan Fivaz, Joëlle Pianzola and Andreas Ladner.

could not find any sign of widespread use of strategic behavior of candidates. On the contrary, an overwhelming majority of about 85% of Swiss MPs acted according to their policy positions revealed on *smartvote*. Based on the study we could also show that a positional change once a candidate is elected is more likely if he or she is a first-time MP, the individual voting behavior is not made visible to the public, the MPs electoral district magnitude is a large one, the vote is not about a party's core issue, the MP belongs to a party of the political centre, or if the pre-election statement dissents from the majority position of his legislative party group. Of these factors, the last one is paramount.

Smartvote and the Swiss federal elections 2011

In the coming three years, the project will continue researching the impact of the received voting advice on the actual voting behavior of *smartvote* users on the basis of data collected in the upcoming Swiss elections. A second line of research will address the impact of institutions like electoral systems, party systems or patterns of party competition. The need to include such aspects can be shown with the following example. A compari-

son of several studies indicates that Swiss voters follow the advice of VAAs to a much higher degree than voters in other countries. The reason for doing so is most probably the specific Swiss electoral system, which is much more demanding and complex than those in other countries.

The data-collecting framework for the Swiss federal elections in October 2011 will be very similar to the one applied in 2007: besides the data gathered from the *smartvote* database, the project team will conduct a survey among candidates – together with Selects – as well as a pre- and a post-electoral survey among voters using the VAA. Moreover, we are considering whether it will be feasible to conduct a low-scale experiment on how the VAA *smartvote* affects the voting decisions of its users in order to gain additional data for crosschecking the empirical findings from the surveys. Finally, data generation will follow a format that allows international comparison.

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What are VAAs?

VAAs are websites providing voters with information about which political party or which candidate comes closest to their own political values and policy preferences. In order to do that they proceed in three steps: first, the voters are asked to create their political profile by filling in a questionnaire on different political issues; second, the VAA compares their answers with the positions of parties or candidates on these issues; and finally, voters are provided with a voting recommendation in the form of a list ranking parties or candidates according to the degree of their issue congruence with the particular voter.

Publications

Ladner, Andreas, Jan Fivaz and Gabriela Felder. "More than toys? A first assessment of voting advice applications in Switzerland." In Cedroni, Lorella and Diego Garzia (eds.): *Voting Advice Applications in Europe – The State of the Art*. Napoli: CIVIS/Scriptaweb, 2010, 91–123.

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