ANDREAS LADNER, JAN FIVAZ AND GIORGIO NADIG

3. VOTING ASSISTANCE APPLICATIONS AS TOOLS TO INCREASE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND IMPROVE CIVIC EDUCATION

In Switzerland, like in many other countries, low voting participation and a lack of political interest and knowledge have been a major concern for quite some time. Starting with some facts about the actual situation this article will present a promising way to enhance political interest, political knowledge and voting participation especially among younger people. At the core of these endeavours is a voting assistance application called *smartvote*.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SWITZERLAND

At the last Swiss parliamentary elections in October 2007 only slightly more than 48% of the Swiss citizens went to the polls (see Lutz 2008). Low voter turnout is, of course, not only a Swiss problem, but compared with other advanced democracies voter turnout in Switzerland is particularly low. According to the IDEA database on voter turnout since 1945, Switzerland ranks 138th of 172 countries.

As far as socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes of voters and non-voters are concerned, Switzerland shows a pattern which is well known to electoral researchers (see e.g. Bühlmann et al., 2003): voter turnout is lower among younger voters and higher among male voters, better educated voters and voters with higher income. Further it seems that citizens with a clear political orientation to the left or to the right are also more likely to participate in elections (see Table 1).

Switzerland is not only low in voter turnout but is also often regarded as low in political knowledge (see Linder, 1999: 272-275 and Kriesi, 1995: 111). Like low voter turnout – insufficient political knowledge is not exclusively a problem of younger citizens, but it is concentrated among them, an IEA study of political knowledge, political participation, politics and democracy among students ranked Switzerland near the bottom of the 27 countries included in the study (see Oser/Biedermann, 2003).

One reason that the situation in Switzerland is not very encouraging is that civic education is not very well developed. In several cantons it is not even mentioned in the curriculum, and in others there are no specific civic education classes. Instead, it is expected that civic education is taught in history or geography classes. And textbooks and other teaching materials for civic education are often inadequate.

Table 1. Voter Turnout by Specific Groups at Elections in Switzerland, 1995-2007 (in percent)

	1995	1999	2003	2007
Overall voter turnout	42	44	45	48
Gender				
Men	46	51	52	55
Women	39	37	40	43
Age				
18-24 years old	21	28	33	35
25-34 years old	30	29	31	34
35-44 years old	43	40	37	39
45-54 years old	51	52	50	53
55-64 years old	52	52	55	60
65-74 years old	61	57	61	58
75+ years old	58	56	53	62
Level of education				
Low	39	31	33	38
Medium	37	39	43	43
High	53	59	56	61
Household income (in Swiss Francs)				
-3,000	39	33	34	35
3,001-5,000	36	39	41	44
5,001-9,000	45	44	48	47
9,001+	52	59	55	58
Political orientation				
Left wing	52	52	55	57
Centre	41	42	41	44
Right wing	57	51	59	58

Source: Swiss Electoral Studies (SELECTS), Lutz (2008: 8ff.)

Nevertheless, there are also some signs of improvement: First, as we can see in Table 1, the over-all voter turnout in Switzerland has been steadily increasing since 1995 from 42 to 48 percent, and it is more specifically the turnout among 18 and 24 years old voters, which has increased more than twice as much as the general voter turnout, from 21 to 35 percent. In addition, there have been several recent attempts to increase the quality of civic education.

National and cantonal governments have recently been moving to define the main content of political education in the curricula and to develop new materials such as textbooks, e-learning tools, etc. in collaboration with textbook publishers, research networks and others.

A related nongovernmental effort was the development of *smartvote*[1]. *smartvote* is a new type of *voting assistance application (VAA)*, which has become more and more popular in Western Europe and the United States (see Walgrave et al., 2008). The first one of these tools was the *Stemwijzer,*[2] a website which was introduced during the 1998 election campaign in the Netherlands to help undecided voters.

Since 1998 a steadily growing number of VAAs has been implemented in the run-up to many elections in Western Europe and the United States.[3]

smartvote shares the basic design and related features of other VAAs, though there are some differences to reflect the specificities of the electoral system. They all share the same key function: the issue-matching system. VAAs like *smartvote* provide each voter an individualized comparison between her or his policy preferences and those of the candidates or parties. To achieve this, the voters are asked to answer a questionnaire on the VAA website of typically 20 to 30 questions on policy issues and preferred solutions to particular political problems. The VAA then compares these answers with the corresponding answers of political parties and/or candidates and calculates the congruence between the particular voter and the parties or candidates. The result is returned to the voter in form of a list ranking candidates or parties according to how closely they match the voter's preferences.

smartvote first offered its service during the 2003 Swiss parliamentary election campaign and since then on the occasion of about twenty-five national, regional and local level elections. Originally *smartvote* was not designed for use as a tool of civic education in schools nor targeted at young voters. However, it soon became obvious that this on-line tool has a great potential to boost attentiveness to politics among students and young citizens by providing information about political parties and candidates in a modern and convenient way. Therefore between 2005 and 2007 two versions of *smartvote* were developed oriented to the specific needs of students, young voters and for civic education purposes.[4]

There were three websites available for use during the 2007 election campaign for the Swiss parliament and these websites seemed to respond to the needs of many voters. During the election campaign, from June to October 2007, *smartvote* and its civic education versions were used about 940'000 times. Since about 2.3 million voters cast a ballot, this is an impressive level of usage.

Given an increasing but still very low voter turnout and an insufficient level of political knowledge the widespread use of *smartvote* leads us to ask if the use of *smartvote* increased interest in politics and, thus, higher voter turnout? To be clear we do not encourage anyone to vote solely based on a computer generated voting recommendation. Therefore we are especially interested in determining whether the use of *smartvote* encouraged voters to look for additional information or to discuss the outcome of the "smart-voting" process with friends or the family. In other words, did *smartvote* contribute to an active political citizenship or did it result only to "couch potato voters"?

Before we address these questions, we first describe *smartvote* as well as its two civic education versions and their functions in greater detail.

SMARTVOTE – FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS

The *smartvote* website was developed for the specific needs of voters in Swiss elections. Due to the rather complex Swiss electoral system *smartvote* is also rather complex, at least compared to other VAAs. The *smartvote* website consists of

three main elements: the *smartvote* module with the issue-matching system, a comprehensive database providing information on all candidates running for office, and a module allowing for a graphic visualisation of political positions.

The core of the *smartvote* website is the issue-matching module. The first step consists of all candidates completing the questionnaire consisting of up to 70 questions about the most important actual political issues. Only complete answer sets by candidates are included into the subsequent calculation of voting recommendations.

About six weeks before the election day the second, operational phase starts. The *smartvote* website is made accessible to voters in the form of the three steps arrive at their individual voting recommendation:

1. *Voters have to specify their political profile:* To do so they are asked to answer the same questionnaire as the candidates – except that they can choose either version: the "deluxe version" which includes all the questions, or the "rapid version", which consists of only 24 to 36 questions.

2. *Voters customize their voting recommendation:* After specifying their political profile voters have to indicate in which constituency (electoral district) they live and for which constituency they want to receive a voting recommendation. Due to the Swiss electoral system they have also to decide whether they wish to receive a voting recommendation for lists/parties or for individual candidates.[5]

3. *Calculation and presentation of the voting recommendation:* Based on this information *smartvote* generates an individual voting recommendation in the form of a list ranking of the candidates or parties for each voter.

If a voter wishes to receive a voting recommendation for lists/parties the procedure is the same with the exception that instead of the answers of single candidates the answers of lists or parties are used.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES

Apart from the *smartvote* module the website features offers additional services. The most important additional services are:

- The website contains a database with all candidates, including extensive portraits with a political and personal profile.
- The website provides tools for visual analysis of political preferences: the so-called *smartspider* and *smartmap* charts (see Figure 1). Both analytical graphs are based on the candidates' answers to the *smartvote* questionnaire. The *smartspider* shows the degree of agreement or disagreement on eight major political issue areas formulated as political goals in a spider net graph. The *smartmap* is based on a system of coordinates with two major ideological cleavages serving as axes – the "north-south axis" for the cleavage between liberal and conservative position and the "east-west axis" for the left-right cleavage.[6]
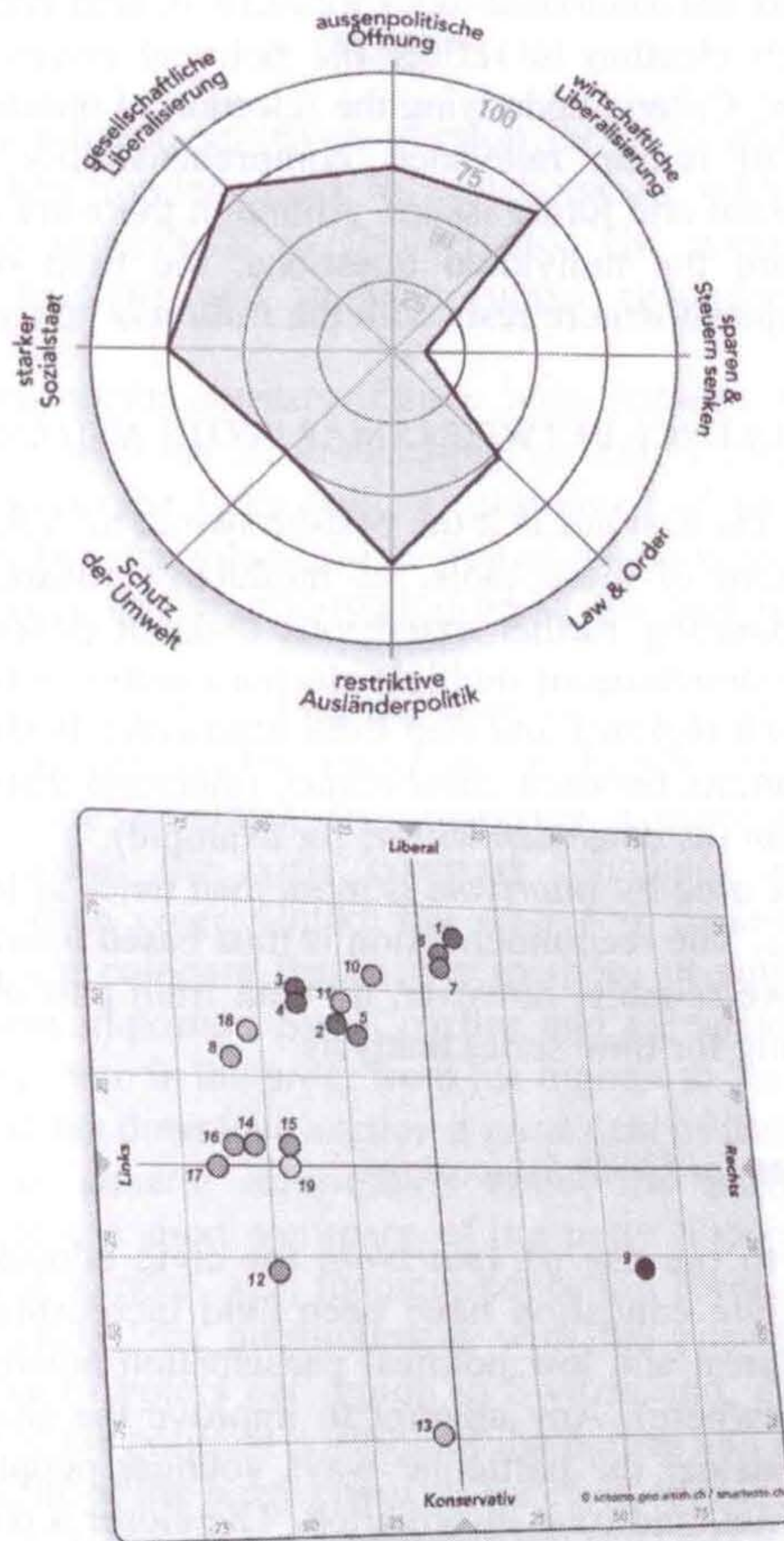
Figure 1. Examples of Smartspider (on the left) and Smartmap (on the right)

RUNNING SMARTVOTE – QUALITY CONTROL AND CREDIBILITY

The quality and credibility of the offered services is the key to successfully running a website like *smartvote*. This rests on a number of factors, in particular, the fact that *smartvote* was developed by *Politools,* a non-partisan network of researchers and computer scientists from different Swiss universities. It is responsible for running the website and also for the further development of the tool. No interest group or private corporation provides financial support; no political actor is directly engaged in the project. Hence there is wide confidence the methods used to calculate the voting recommendations.

The credibility of the *smartvote* questionnaire is also reinforced by its being updated before each election to reflect the political issues of the day and the regional/local context. Criteria underlying the selection of questions include coverage of a broad range of issues, relevance, comprehensibility, and an appropriate mixture of past, present and future issues. Although there are different sources that provide input toward the individual questions, the final responsibility for the composition of the questionnaire rests with the *Politools* network alone.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SMARTVOTE AND OTHER VAAS

smartvote is neither the first nor is it the best-known of all VAAs, but it is probably the most sophisticated of these tools. Its modular software architecture and its potential for incorporating further extensions make it possible for *smartvote* to offer its services for simultaneous multiple elections with overlapping constituencies (i.e. one national, one regional and two local elections). It also calculates specific voting recommendations for each constituency (electoral district) and not just one for the whole election (as does *Stemwijzer,* for example).

The questionnaire used by *smartvote* is more than twice as long as questionnaires used by other VAAs. The recommendation is thus based upon more empirical data and is therefore more reliable; however, all data from past elections are stored in the database, allowing for time series analysis.

The Use of smartvote *for Civic Education*

We can now turn to the use of *smartvote* for civic education. In the last few years, deficits in civic education have been held increasingly responsible for a lack of political interest and low political participation among younger citizens in Switzerland (as elsewhere). Any attempt to improve the situation however – we believe – has to consider the particular ways younger people these days use the media, i.e. the internet, and treat information. The closer a teaching tool reflects a real life situation – in our case the act of voting – the more likely is it to attract young people.

This is where VAAs like *smartvote* step in. These tools can help citizens to make up their minds, they are internet based and correspond to the way younger people gather and use information. Moreover, they are not simply games but touch upon a real life situation.

For of the Swiss parliamentary Elections in 2007 two projects, the *Parteienkompass* (*party compass*) and the VAA *myVote* were developed. Their aim was to increase the level of information about political parties, candidates and their political programs as well as to increase participation of young voters.

PARTEIENKOMPASS.CH (PARTY COMPASS): THE SCHOOL VERSION
OF SMARTVOTE

In summer 2006, an adapted *smartvote* version for civic education, the so called *"party compass"*[7] was implemented in collaboration with one of the largest educational textbook publishers[8] in Switzerland. The *party compass* addresses itself primarily to teachers and students (upper secondary level) throughout Switzerland.

The *party compass* website consists of three main elements: an adapted version of the *smartvote* module with the issue-matching system, a comprehensive database providing information on the basic political positions and values of the five most important political parties in Switzerland as well as the party system in general and a download section where further information about the tool itself and the political parties is provided.

The issue-matching system used for the *party compass* has the same design and operates similarly to the one used by *smartvote*. A shorter questionnaire is used and the questions cannot be weighted. By answering a questionnaire on the most important political issues the *party compass* calculates an individual voting recommendation for each voter. Unlike the *smartvote* issue-matching system the *party compass* does not compare the answer to those of single candidates but to those of the five most important Swiss parties and calculates the congruence to each of them, ranking them in the order from the highest to the lowest.

In the database and the download section a great deal of background information is provided, such as general information about the party (name, president, secretary, website, etc.), a short summary of the party history, information about the voters profile (e.g. gender, age, income, education level etc.), statistics about the strength of the party, the questionnaire with the answers by party, a map indicating the number of voters per region in Switzerland, the *smartmap* and the *smartspider* portrait of the political position of the parties and the users.

What are the benefits of the *party compass* for civic education? The primary aim of the *"party compass"* is to give insights in the political positions and values of the Swiss political parties and into the party system in general in a non-partisan manner. Furthermore, by answering the questionnaire the student discovers his or her political position and the party which represents this position best. He or she can then compare the result with those of the political parties that match less and find out why. By discussing the results and presenting their own position to the rest of the class the future voters become more familiar with the basic political positions of the main Swiss political parties, and develop their capacity to arrive at a partisan political position.

For teachers the *party compass* is an additional instrument of civic education. The teacher can discuss and explain the most important political issues by presenting the questionnaire to his class. All the questions are accompanied by some background information and explanations including pros and cons. Discussing the pros and cons in class helps the future voters learn to come to a decision in an active and enjoyable way.

MYVOTE.CH

Electoral abstention, higher issue complexity and the lack of transparency in election campaigns were the main reasons why the project *myVote* was initiated. The primary aim of project *myVote* is to further interest in this democratic act, to inform young voters objectively and neutrally about the elections, and to help them identify preferred candidates in order to induce them to participate.

Young people aged 16 to 30 years have a different understanding and knowledge of the Swiss political landscape. Most are unaware of their own political position and this is a big obstacle to their choosing among the various candidates running for office. The first step is for voters to locate themselves in the political landscape and recognize that they have a political opinion. The second step is for the voters to be shown that there are candidates running for office who represent their opinion better than others.

The Swiss parliamentary election in October 2007 was the perfect opportunity to point out the importance of elections to future voters and to motivate them to participate. To take advantage of it, *Politools* initiated a civic education project group to establish the *myVote*[9] project. The main objective was to develop a specific website for the 2007 elections with the *smartvote* website as a model.

Though the *myVote* website consists of the same basic elements, it is specifically designed for young people and first time voters, offering an uncomplicated introduction to the themes "policy" and "elections". It seeks not only to provide guidance and stimulates thinking about politics, but is also designed to help to put the available political knowledge into action. By using *myVote* he or she should be able to answer: Where do I stand politically and which politicians or party running for office best represent my interests best?

The main differences distinguishing the *myVote* from smartvote website were:
- A new design;
- Only the short version of the questionnaire;
- Texts with a more common and understandable language;
- The program run of the *smartvote* module with the issue-matching system was changed. After the user has responded the questionnaire he first gets his own *smartspider* displaying his own political position so that he can locate himself in the political landscape. Only as a second step does the user get a voting recommendation for the candidates or lists/parties of a chosen constituency.

Even the best and most developed VAAs cannot contribute to civic education when they are not known by their target public. Developers have to collaborate with textbook publishers, teachers' associations, youth organisations and media partners in order to allow for the fact.

Collaboration with a media partner makes it possible to reach new and first time voters who do not attend an institution of learning offering courses in civic education. With "20 Minuten"[10] an ideal media partner was found for the project. "20 Minuten" is Switzerland's most popular free daily newspaper with a combined print run in German and a French of almost 650,000 copies and over 1,500,000 readers each day.[11] Moreover, "20 Minuten" runs the largest online community

information platform in Switzerland and most of its readers and users are in the target age group, 14 to 34 years old.

Political websites should provide citizens with a wide variety of information about political issues, parties and candidates; and online forums, blogs and chats should foster deliberative discussions among citizens as well as between citizens and the political elite. In the run up to the Swiss parliamentary election such an online platform and the plan for its use was elaborated in collaboration with "20 Minuten".

Before the *myVote* website went online the civic education group of *Politools* organised together with Lernetz[12], another developer of e-learning tools, an advanced training course on the subject "politics in class". The primary aim of the course was to give the teachers an overview of the latest e-tools for civic education. After a short lecture about *smartvote* the project *myVote* was presented by explaining how it could be used for civic education. The teachers also had the opportunity to test the website and to give their feedback.

Two and a half months before the election the platform went online and the campaign started. During this period in the German print edition, a complete page was dedicated to the upcoming elections twice a week. In terms of content the printed articles and those posted on the Internet were similar. Among the items on the platform were:

- an inline-frame of the *smartvote* module with the issue-matching system;
- a problem-barometer where users can indicate their concerns;
- portraits of famous Swiss and their *smartspider* graphs;
- two kind of blogs, one by candidates running for office, the second by an ex-politician and an ex-editor-in-chief on which the user had the possibility to comment;
- e-talk section. Two candidates from opposing parties were invited to a discussion and the users could ask them questions online in real time;
- a public opinion poll (the results were also published in the print edition);
- a political quiz, where users could test their political know-how;
- a wide variety of information about political parties and the political and voting system in Switzerland.

During the campaign period flyers were distributed at chosen youth events and advertisements were placed to promote the "20 Minuten" online platform and the *myVote* website. The impact of the campaign and the promotion was remarkable. Slightly over 50,000 recommendations were generated on the "20 Minuten" platform and 27,000 on the *myVote* website which constituted 8% of all the recommendations generated in the lead time before the Swiss parliamentary elections by *smartvote*. After SRG SSR idée Suisse – the main media partner of *smartvote*[13] – "20 Minuten" was the media partner that generated the most recommendations.

USE AND IMPACT OF *SMARTVOTE*

The increasing popularity of *smartvote* convinces us believe of the vast potential of such tools to make politics more accessible and attractive to a younger and wider public.

INCREASE AND BREAKTHROUGH – THE USE OF SMARTVOTE IN RECENT YEARS

When *smartvote* was offered for the first time during the campaign for the 2003 parliament elections in Switzerland, it was used about 255,000 times by voters. Of course this does not mean that *smartvote* was used by 255,000 voters, because some used it more than once. The actual number of users can only be estimated. A realistic approach based on server statistics and post electoral surveys shows that the average user generates between two and four voting recommendations. Thus the effective number of voters using *smartvote* was 2003 between 60,000 and 125,000. In the 2007 elections *smartvote* and the *myVote* website were used about 940,000 times,[14] therefore the effective number of users can be estimated as between 250,000 and 450,000 voters. That means that about 15–20 percent of the voters were *smartvote* users. Initial findings from the 2007 Selects survey, which asked the voters if they had used *smartvote* or not lend credence to back up this estimate with between twelve and 15 percent of voters responding affirmatively.

Eliminating double counts out of the user statistics is very time consuming; instead we developed a very simple benchmarking method to compare the intensity of the use of *smartvote* between elections, namely to express the number of voting recommendations as a percentage of the number of votes cast. Note that this calculation does not reveal the actual number of *smartvote* users, but only of the increase or decrease over time.

Table 2 compares the use of *smartvote* over several parliamentarian elections in Switzerland between 2003 and 2007 and shows a clear increase. As we can see, the use of *smartvote* in national elections was almost four times as high in 2007 as in 2003.

During its first years the *smartvote* website was seen as an interesting innovation in election campaigns. But with its growing use, *smartvote*'s reputation grew, the

Table 2. Use of Smartvote by Voters, 2003-2007

Elections	*smartvote* use (number of voting recommendations)	*smartvote* use/voter turnout (in percent)
National level		
Swiss parliament 2003	255,000	11.7
Swiss parliament 2007	938,403	39.5
Regional parliaments		
Canton of St. Gall 2004	16,000	16.2
Canton of Thurgau 2004	7,750	13.7
Canton of Berne 2006	35,900	16.7
Canton of Zurich 2007	30,465	10.4

Canton of Lucerne 2007	9,864	9.1
Local parliaments		
City of St. Gall 2004	4,000	23.4
City of Berne 2004	9,500	28.9
City of Geneva 2005	22,900	24.9
City of Zurich 2006	15,100	22.8

Source: Ladner et al. (2008); Fivaz and Schwarz (2007)

run-up to the 2007 elections were a breakthrough with *smartvote* becoming seen as an essential component of every Swiss electoral campaign. A clear indicator of this change is the participation rate of candidates. In 2003 only 50% of the candidates running for a seat in the national parliament participated in *smartvote* and answered the questionnaire. In 2007 85% of the candidates participated.

This high rate of participation among candidates can be explained by risk non-participation in *smartvote* has come to constitute for the candidates; but what explains the rather impressive increase of use by voters? There are probably three answers to this question:

- First, the complexity of the Swiss electoral system. Swiss voters have the possibility to put together an individual ballot. In a constituency with 20 seats, each voter gets 20 votes. The voter can give all votes to just one party list or can split the votes and select specific candidates from different parties and put them together on his ballot. In the Canton of Zurich voters can thus choose among up to 1,000 candidates. Therefore a tool like *smartvote* offers a very useful service to voters by providing them an efficient means of scanning the political preferences of all candidates. Neither the media nor any other website is able to offer such a service.
- Second, *smartvote* seems to meet a real demand on the part of the voters by offering an individualized service. Every voter gets her or his individual voting recommendation based on her or his own political preferences.
- Third, *smartvote* is an instrument developed by the *Politools* network – a non-profit and non-partisan organisation. This fact lies at the base of the high level of trust voters have in *smartvote*.

IMPACT ON VOTER TURNOUT

The *smartvote* website is not only a popular instrument for informing potential voters in the run-up to elections in Switzerland. It is also the object of scientific research. As a part of a research framework at the University of Zurich[15] in 2005 a project was initiated to analyse the impact of the *smartvote* website on political participation, on voters' decision-making processes and on the strategies of candidates and party elites.[16] Before and after the 2007 elections this research project conducted several surveys among candidates and voters that used the *smartvote* website.

A first question which can be posed with the available data is what the typical *smartvote* user looks like. The findings are not really surprising and correspond to the findings of other research regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of Internet users. The typical *smartvote* user is young (average age of 37.5 years), male, with a higher level of education and income.

Table 3 shows some characteristics of *smartvote* users corresponding to categories from the Selects survey mentioned in Table 1. The Selects survey revealed that women, young citizens and citizens with a low or medium level of education and income have a below average turnout rate. The data displayed in Table 4 indicates that in itself providing *smartvote* does not appear likely to substantially boost voter turnout, since the groups with a below average turnout rate are clearly under represented among the *smartvote* users. This would mean that *smartvote* is inadequately addressing the "target groups", i.e. those among which the problem of insufficient political participation is most pressing. But there is one important exception: *smartvote* users are young. This means that for this group at least there is a real potential for a considerable impact on the level of political participation.

Table 3. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Smartvote Users, 2007

	Smartvote users
Gender	
Men	67
Women	33
Age	
18-24 years old	21
25-34 years old	28
35-44 years old	21
45-54 years old	15
55-64 years old	10
65-74 years old	4
75+ years old	1
Level of education	
Low	3
Medium	54
High	43
Household income (in Swiss Francs)	
-3'000	5
3'001-5'000	11
5'001-9'000	40
9'001+	44
Political orientation	
Left wing	31
Centre	55
Right wing	14

Source: NCCR "Democracy", IP16 "smart-voting", post electoral survey among voters.

Table 4 presents a somewhat different picture from the conclusions drawn above. It is based on responses to our survey, in which we asked the *smartvote* users if use of the tool had an influence on their decision to go to the polls. Just under 40% reported that the use of *smartvote* had a decisive or at least slight influence on their decision to vote. Based on the estimate of a total of about 300,000 *smartvote* users,

that would mean that about 120,000 or 5% of Swiss voters were positively influenced by *smartvote* in their decision to participate at the 2007 elections. Of course these numbers should be treated with caution, but they indicate that *smartvote* does have an identifiable positive impact on voter turnout. More importantly, this impact is even clearer among the groups with a below average turnout rate: women and young voters seem to be more strongly influenced to vote by *smartvote* than are other groups (see Table 4). In sum, then, we arrive at an ambivalent response to the question of the impact of *smartvote* use on political participation. The socio-demographic characteristics of *smartvote* users are such as to indicate that it is used largely by those in groups likely to vote; but, on the other hand, when surveyed, these *smartvote* users themselves indicate a meaningful positive impact on their decision to vote. This suggests that *smartvote* has at least the potential for a significant effect on voter turnout.

Table 4. Impact of Using Smartvote on the Decision to Vote or Not

	Decisively motivated to vote	Slightly motivated to vote	No influence	Slightly detained to vote	Decisively detained to vote	N
Total	15.4	23.6	60.3	0.5	0.2	17,147
Gender						
Men	12.5	23.8	63.1	0.5	0.2	11,890
Women	22.0	23.3	54.0	0.6	0.1	5,226
Age Groups						
18-24	20.3	25.4	53.6	0.5	0.1	3,600
25-34	17.4	24.1	57.7	0.6	0.2	5,043
35-44	13.6	23.3	62.4	0.5	0.2	3,602
45-54	11.9	22.7	64.7	0.6	0.1	2,500
55-64	10.1	21.8	67.4	0.4	0.2	1,667
65-74	8.7	20.5	70.3	0.3	0.2	644
75+	15.4	19.8	63.7	1.1	0.0	91

Source: NCCR "Democracy", IP16 "smart-voting", post electoral survey among voters.

IMPACT ON OPINION FORMATION

The findings about the impact of *smartvote* on the voting decisions themselves are much clearer. Two thirds of *smartvote* users say that the *smartvote* voting recommendation had a clear impact on their decision for which parties and/or candidates they voted. And, again, this impact is strongest among women and younger voters (see Table 5).

Table 5. Impact of Using Smartvote on the Voting Decision

Did the *smartvote* voting recommendation have an impact on your voting decision?			
	Yes	No	N
Total	66.4	33.6	16,335
Gender			
Men	65.0	35.0	11,354
Women	69.9	30.1	4,949
Age Groups			

18-24	71.1	28.9	3,352
25-34	73.3	26.7	4,764
35-44	68.0	32.0	3,462
45-54	58.6	41.4	2,408
55-64	53.2	46.8	1,638
65-74	48.8	51.2	625
75+	41.9	58.1	86

Source: NCCR "Democracy", IP16 "smart-voting", post electoral survey among voters.

Table 6. Impact of Using Smartvote on Different Aspects of Opinion Formation

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	74+	Average
Using smartvote helped to vote for candidates/parties on an improved information basis.								
Agree	56.4	57.5	56.6	49.8	47.6	42.9	46.4	54.5
Rather agree	31.4	30.3	28.9	30.5	28.6	30.9	23.8	30.1
Rather disagree	7.3	7.4	7.5	8.3	10.8	13.2	22.6	8.1
Disagree	4.8	4.8	7.0	11.5	12.9	13	22.6	7.4
Using smartvote motivated me to look for additional information about particular issues.								
Agree	18.4	14.8	14.6	16.3	16.4	16.1	17.6	15.9
Rather agree	33.1	30.8	32.0	32.2	34.4	36.1	31.8	32.3
Rather disagree	29.3	32.0	29.6	29.2	27.0	27.6	23.5	29.8
Disagree	19.2	22.5	23.8	22.3	22.2	20.2	27.1	22.0
Using smartvote motivated me to look for additional information about particular candidates/parties.								
Agree	23.9	21.8	19.9	17.7	16.5	13.2	15.3	20.4
Rather agree	37.2	36.4	36.4	34.6	31.4	33.0	24.7	35.6
Rather disagree	23.1	23.5	22.9	25.4	28.2	31.4	28.2	24.3
Disagree	15.9	18.3	20.8	22.3	23.9	22.4	31.8	19.7
Using smartvote motivated me to engage in discussions about particular issues with other people.								
Agree	35.1	30.5	24.8	23.3	20.8	16.9	16.9	27.7
Rather agree	35.6	38.0	37.3	38.5	37.5	36.8	28.9	37.3
Rather disagree	17.6	18.0	21.3	20.4	21.4	24.2	28.9	19.6
Disagree	11.7	13.6	16.6	17.7	20.2	22.1	25.3	15.4
Using smartvote motivated me to engage in discussions about particular candidates/parties.								
Agree	38.0	34.2	28.4	25.7	21.7	18.8	15.9	30.7
Rather agree	35.2	37.1	37.7	38.6	36.6	37.8	39.0	37.0
Rather disagree	15.2	17.0	18.0	19.6	21.7	20.8	19.5	17.8
Disagree	11.5	11.7	15.8	16.2	19.9	22.6	25.6	14.4

Source: NCCR "Democracy", IP16 "smart-voting", post electoral survey among voters; N = 16'683-16'731.

In order to get more information about the impact of *smartvote* on decision-making processes the *smartvote* users were asked to fill in a small battery of questions on different ways *smartvote* could have influenced their decision making (see Table 6).

The goal is not to have voters simply follow the computer generated voting recommendation, but rather to aid them in their decision. Therefore it is important to know just how *smartvote* impacts on voters' decision making processes. In Table 6 some of the ways the *smartvote* website influences voters are displayed. From it, we see

– First, *smartvote* seems to have had more impact on information about candidates or parties than about policy issues. Fifty-six percent of the users said that they

were looking for additional information about parties and/or candidates as a consequence of their *smartvote* voting recommendation.

- Second, *smartvote* seems to have a clear impact on the number of discussions about policy issues as well as about parties and candidates that its users had with their families and friends. About two thirds of the users said that the main impetus for such discussions was the use of *smartvote*.

The table also confirms the pattern already in the tables above: younger citizens are using the *smartvote* website more intensively than older ones.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Civic education cannot only be limited to school-based activities seeking to promote democratic involvement by young people (see Milner et al., 2008). It must be seen in a wider context. Of course civic education of voters has to start at school but it should not only focus on young people and first time voters. Low political participation and insufficient political knowledge are not exclusive to younger citizens; they constitute a wider challenge for most modern democracies. Therefore civic education programs should be such as to also reach vulnerable older citizens.

The above presented Swiss website *smartvote* is one possible way to do so. It offers a real service to voters by preparing information (reduction of complexity and shrinking of the amount of available information) and assisting them in their decision making process. The website proved to be extremely popular among Swiss voters in the five years of its existence. Based on data from surveys among the *smartvote* users it is possible to do an initial evaluation. Our findings indicate that although *smartvote* will not boost voter turnout considerably, it does have positive effects on political interest, knowledge and participation of voters of every age – though by far strongest effects appear to be among the young voters.

The development of the supplementary *smartvote*-related e-tools, *party compass* and *myVote*, have been attempts to tap its potential for the civic education of students and young voters. Both *party compass* as well as the *myVote* website were pilot projects. All the project partners (Politools as the owner of *smartvote*, the text book publisher, the newspapers and universities) came to the same conclusion: they judged both projects as promising enough to invest more time and money in further development. Both projects received numerous very useful feedbacks from teachers (and students).

The feedbacks showed clearly that there is still room for improvement, especially in two areas. First, some of the questions of the *smartvote* questionnaire were too complex or otherwise not well suited for use in school classes. There is a need to further simplify the language of the questionnaire and to provide more background information about the policy issues mentioned (e.g. by an FAQ section or glossary). Secondly, teachers were critical of the lack of complementing didactic tools like text books, handouts and practical advice on how to integrate these new online tools into their curriculum.

Combined with the findings from the user surveys, the feedback from teachers confirmed that *smartvote* and its civic education applications were opening a door toward bringing Swiss politics closer to the citizens.

NOTES

[1] See http://www.smarvote.ch (also partly available in English)

[2] See http://www.stemwijzer.nl

[3] The "Stemwijzer" was also implemented in Switzerland (http://www.politarena.ch) and Germany (http://www.wah-lo-mat.de). In Austria a similar website was developed (http://www.wahlkabine.at) as well as in the United Kingdom (http://www.whodoivotefor.co.uk), the United States (http://www.project-vote-smart.org; http://www.ontheissues.org), and one may find also a VAA for non-electoral comparisons with historical political figures from Stalin to Nelson Mandela (http://www.politicalcompass.org).

[4] See http://www.parteienkompass.ch and http://www.my-vote.ch

[5] The Swiss electoral system offers voters several options to express their preferences: they can vote for whole party lists or they can put together an individual ballot by choosing the candidates from different parties or lists they want to vote for.

[6] Of course, the two axes are designed for the Swiss – or European at most – political context and would need to be adapted in other countries.

[7] See http://www.parteienkompass.ch (only available in German)

[8] See http://www.hep-verlag.ch

[9] See http://www.my-vote.ch (only available in German, French and Italian)

[10] See http://www.20min.ch

[11] See (http://www.schweizerpresse.ch/fileadmin/schweizerpresse/brancheninfos/allgemein/15_gr.Tageszeit._Aufl_Le ser_08_1.pdf)

[12] See http://www.lernetz.ch

[13] See all media partners http://www.smartvote.ch/side_menu/partner/partners.php?who=v

[14] About seven percent of the users were attracted by the *myVote* website.

[15] This research network is the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) "Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century" (short NCCR "Democracy"; www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch).

[16] The project is called IP16 "smart-voting" (www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/nccr/knowledge_transfer/ip16) and is run by the Institut de hautes etudes en administration publique (IDHEAP) at the University of Lausanne, at the Universities of Zurich and Berne and at the European University Institute (EUI) at Florence, Italy.

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