

CHAPTER FIVE

More than toys? A first assessment of voting advice applications in Switzerland¹

ANDREAS LADNER, GABRIELA FELDER, JAN FIVAZ

To what extent are Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) more than toys and should political scientists be held accountable for the VAAs they produce? A toy is basically an object to play with, but toys are also important tools for learning about the real world and promoting the process of socialisation. If VAAs are toys they are meant to playfully attract people to politics, provide them with information, increase their interest in politics and motivate them to participate in elections. If they are more than toys they additionally have a direct impact on the votes of their users and therefore on the outcome of elections. In this sense it is no longer the aspect of ‘learning by playing’ but much more the aspect of being an important element in the course of elections which has to be addressed. And: If we have to admit that VAAs have an impact on the outcome of elections then the second question becomes important. If VAAs are to be taken seriously to what extent can their providers be held accountable? Should they only be accountable for the quality of the tool itself or also for a possible influence on the outcome of elections? Can a clear distinction be made between offering a new form of sup-

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “Voting Advice Applications (VAAs): between charlatanism and political science” conference at the University of Antwerp, May 16, 2008.

port for decision-making and influencing electoral behaviour?

Based on the experience with the increasingly popular Swiss VAA *smartvote*² and the results of a major research project analysing the use and impact of *smartvote* on the Swiss national elections in 2007³ we shall – although tentatively at this stage – try to answer these two questions.

For a better understanding of the functioning and the importance of *smartvote* (section 5.2) we will start by looking at some characteristics of the Swiss electoral system (section 5.1). In sections 5.3 and 5.4 we will present empirical evidence about the use of *smartvote* and the role and the importance attached to it by voters and candidates. Section 5.5 will focus on the accountability question and the possibilities and limits of VAAs within the Swiss legal framework. The final section 5.6 offers a short conclusion and an outlook on further developments and challenges likely to occur in the years to come.

5.1. Elections and the Electoral System in Switzerland

Design and set-up of a VAA as well as its use by parties, candidates and voters depend largely on country-specific characteristics of the electoral system and the way citizens elect parties or candidates. Both the electoral system and the low turnout in elections make VAAs in Switzerland especially useful and important.

Politics in Switzerland take place in a very fragmented social context. The country is divided into 26 cantons, which

² <<http://www.smartvote.ch>>.

³ The research project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It is part of a large research programme called “Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century” (NCCR Democracy).

also form the electoral constituencies for the elections of the national parliament. The Swiss parliament consists of two symmetric and non-congruent chambers (Lijphart, 1999): the National Council (*Nationalrat*) and the Council of States (*Ständerat*). The National Council has 200 seats and is elected by means of a proportional system; the Council of States has 46 seats and is elected by a majority system⁴. Thus elections for the National Council are generally considered as more party-oriented and the elections for the Council of States as candidate-oriented.

The seats for the National Council are assigned to the cantons according to their population size: the six smallest cantons have only one seat whereas the canton of Zurich, the largest canton, has 34 seats. Accordingly, the number of candidates running for office varies between one candidate in the canton of Uri and 804 in the canton of Zurich (Fivaz, 2007; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2007). The cantons differ also in various other aspects: language, religion and economic structure. Subsequently, cantonal party systems differ widely for example with regard to the number of parties and the degree of party competition (Ladner 2004a; 2004b).

A further aspect of the social and political heterogeneity of Switzerland is the fragmentation of the political parties (Ladner, 2002). Switzerland has a large number of parties with a relatively low share of votes, parties are decentralised and the cantonal and local sections have far-reaching autonomy. Furthermore, it is not unusual that there are diverse political positions within a single party. Even individ-

⁴ There are some exceptions to these rules: In cantons with just one seat in the National Council the effects of PR disappear and the canton of Jura uses the proportional counting procedure for the election of the Council of States as well.

ual candidates may take autonomous positions (see table 5.10) and resist the dictate of their party leaders.

While electing their members of parliament Swiss voters have the possibility to express their specific preferences for parties as well as for single candidates. First, every voter has as many votes as his constituency has seats (e.g., in the canton of Uri with one seat, voters have one vote and in the canton of Zurich with 34 seats they have 34 votes). Secondly, voters can split their votes among different parties (e.g., in the canton of Zurich a voter can give four votes to party A, ten to party B and 20 to party C). Thirdly, voters can support their favourite candidates by giving them two votes instead of one (so-called cumulative voting; e.g., in the canton of Zurich a voter could vote for 17 candidates with two votes for each). These rules make it possible to compose a customized ballot according to one's personal political preferences.

Due to the fragmentation of the political and the party system Swiss voters can choose among a big number of parties and political positions, and quite often it is rather difficult to get to know all parties and candidates (particularly in a canton like Zurich with over 800 candidates). Compared to voters confronted with a two-party system it is definitely more time-consuming for Swiss voters to gather the necessary information about parties and candidates. Nevertheless, Swiss voters seem to appreciate these possibilities increasingly. The share of swing voters has increased in the last years (Linder, 2005) as well as the share of those using the possibilities offered by the electoral system to compose their customized ballots according to their individual preferences (Burger, 2001). Here, candidate-based VAAs like *smartvote* step in and offer the much needed information for choosing appropriate parties and candidates.

Despite the far-reaching possibilities to express one's preferences, electoral turnout in Switzerland is very low compared to other countries and this is not an entirely new phenomenon. Since 1975 electoral participation has never been higher than 50 percent. The lowest score up to now was in the 1995 elections when only 42.2 percent of those entitled to vote participated. Since then turnout has increased again: 43.3 percent in 1999, 45.2 percent in 2003 and 48.3 percent in 2007⁵. In contrast to countries with turnout rates around 80 percent, a large proportion of Swiss voters are waiting to be mobilized, which is a welcome challenge for VAAs trying to increase political participation.

5.2. Differences between *smartvote* and other VAAs

There are two major VAAs in Switzerland. The smaller one, which is called *Politarena*, is based on the concept of the pioneer platform *StemWjzger*, very much like the German *Wahl-O-Mat*. The bigger one, *smartvote*, takes a different approach which adapts much better to the specific characteristics of the Swiss electoral system and the needs of the voters. The concept of *smartvote* has been the basis for other applications such as *Politikkabine*, *Koimipasva* and *Holyrood*.

Compared to other VAAs *smartvote* is more comprehensive as regards its additional features as well as its extensibility. The main differences between *smartvote* and its competitors are the following (for a better discussion, see: Fivaz and Schwarz, 2007: 6f):

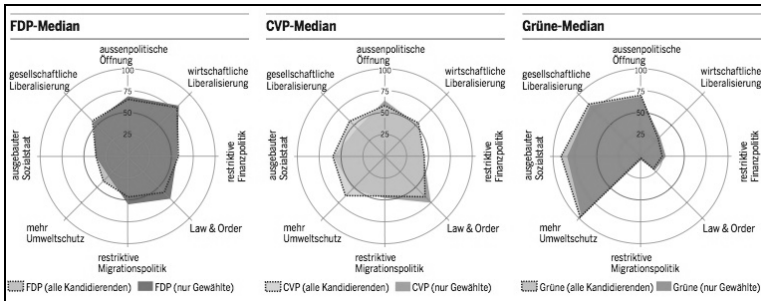
- *smartvote* is capable of managing multiple elections with

⁵ <http://www.politik-stat.ch/nrw2007CHwb_de.html>; accessed 27/11/2009.

overlapping constituencies at the same time (e.g., one national, one cantonal and two local elections).

- *smartvote* calculates voting recommendations according to the electoral system and constituency (electoral district)⁶ at the level of single candidates as well as at the level of lists/parties.
- The *smartvote*-questionnaire – which contains more than 70 questions – is more than twice as long as questionnaires used by other tools. Hence the recommendation is based on more empirical data and therefore more reliable.
- Besides *Kieskompas*, *smartvote* is the only VAA which includes additional visual analytical tools like the *smartspider* and the *smartmap* graphs (see figure 5.1 and figure 5.2).
- Finally, time series analyses are possible as all the data of past elections are stored.

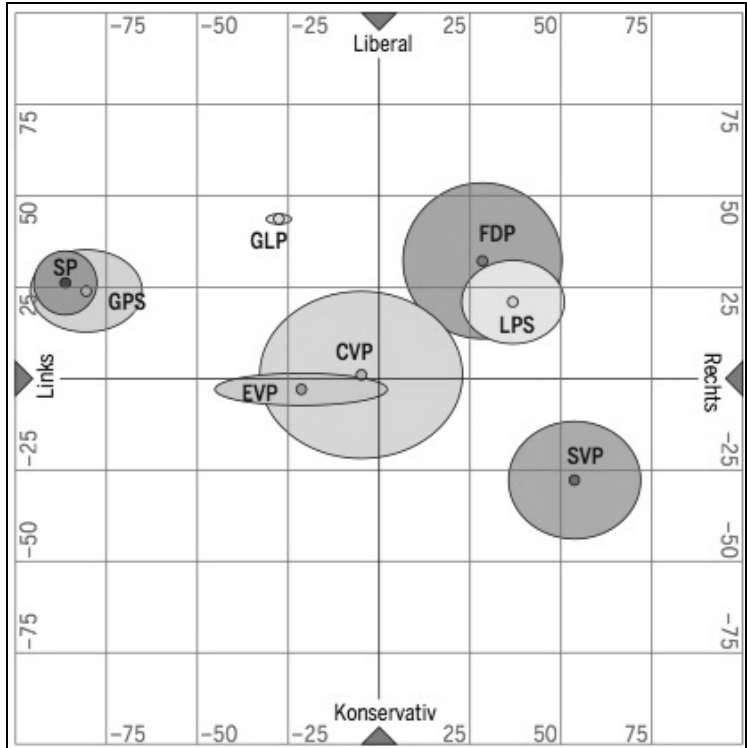
Figure 5.1 – *smartspiders* of Liberals, Christian Democrats and Green Party



Source: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 24th October 2007

⁶ *StemWijzer* for instance provides one recommendation for the whole election. In Switzerland not every party necessarily runs for election in every constituency and local and regional party sections might vary in their political positions, hence a meaningful voting recommendation has to account for these specific circumstances.

Figure 5.2 – *smartmap* of Swiss parties in the National Council



Source: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 24th October 2007

5.3. The Use of *smartvote*

When *smartvote* was first presented to the voters in 2003 a modest number of 255.000 ‘voting recommendations’⁷ were made, while *Politarena* reached 135,000 users. Since then, VAAs have become increasingly popular. During the run-up to the elections for the Swiss parliament in October

⁷ In Switzerland this is a prevalent term which may be different in other countries where VAAs have come into use.

2007 *smartvote* issued about 963.000 recommendations. Compared to 2003 the use of *smartvote* had increased almost fourfold in 2007.

The increasing use of VAAs can certainly be explained by technical progress and the increase of Internet access. In 2006 over 75 percent of the Swiss population had access to the Internet⁸. Besides the high rate of Internet access there are additional factors that are fostering the popularity of VAAs. Political parties are facing severe challenges: Within the last 20 to 30 years traditional ties between voters and parties are loosening (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Walgrave *et al.*, 2008a), the number of party members is decreasing and the volatility rate and the number of swing votes is rising. Dalton, for example, draws quite a pessimistic picture of representative, party-centred democracies with more and more citizens growing distrustful of politicians and disillusioned about the functioning of the democratic processes (Dalton, 2002; 2007). Although it is still an open question to which degree this pessimistic picture of today's representative democracies meets reality we assume that these developments – at least in their tendency – foster the use of VAAs, which are offering a customized and transparent new form of decision-making beyond the usual ways of selecting candidates and parties.

Some further figures about the use of *smartvote* on both sides – the one of the voters as well as the one of the parties and candidates running for office – will document the growing importance of such tools.

⁸ See <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/16/04/key/approche_globale.tables.30106.html>; accessed 28/04/2008.

5.3.1. Use by Candidates

Since *smartvote* does not code party positions but asks the candidates to position themselves and also takes into account the positions of every single candidate, the participation of all parties and candidates is an essential precondition for the additional value *smartvote* offers to the voters. Unless all relevant candidates are in the database the additional value for the voters is rather low. To what extent do the candidates answer the *smartvote* questionnaire? And what are the incentives to take part?

The percentage of candidates answering the 73 questions is a first indication for the seriousness of the VAA *smartvote*. Table 5.1 highlights a sharp increase of interest in *smartvote* in the National Council elections of 2007. In 2003, only about 50 percent of the almost 3000 candidates participated and answered the questions. Four years later, about 85 percent of the 3100 candidates took part in *smartvote* and answered the questions. If we look at the candidates elected in the course of the elections, the figures are even more impressive. In 2003 about 70 percent of the candidates elected participated in *smartvote*, and in 2007 more than 90 percent did so. This extraordinary coverage also holds for elections at lower level, which are also depicted in table 5.1. Such high percentages make it possible to calculate and issue meaningful voting recommendations for the public.

Thanks to media partnerships with relevant Swiss media (from *SF DRS*, *NZZ Online* to *20Minuten*)⁹ *smartvote* managed to extend its reach far beyond the Internet community. The media published articles and portrayed the candidates with the aid of the political profiles generated by *smartvote*; they broadcast telecasts or radio transmissions re-

⁹ See all media partners <http://www.smartvote.ch/side_menu/partner/partners.php?who=v>; accessed 28/04/2008.

ferring to the VAA *smartvote*; and the print media used the visual analytical tools such as the *smartspider* (see figure 5.1). Media and candidates depend on each other. On the one hand, candidates have a greater motivation to publish their political preferences in the VAA when they know that large media partners will spread their political profiles also in the press and, on the other hand, the media themselves have an obvious interest in having a well-populated database at their disposal.

Table 5.1 – *smartvote*-participation by candidates, 2003-2008

Elections	Participation by candidates (%)	Participation of elected MPs (%)
Swiss parliament 2003	50.3	69.5
Swiss parliament 2007	85.3	93.5
<i>Regional parliaments</i>		
Canton of Thurgau 2004	62.9	77.7
Canton of St. Gallen 2004	72.9	78.9
Canton of Geneva 2005	75.1	91.0
Canton of Berne 2006	63.0	83.4
Canton of Zurich 2007	61.7	85.6
Canton of Lucerne 2007	59.7	70.0
Canton of St. Gallen 2008	85.0	91.7
<i>Local parliaments</i>		
City of Berne 2004	70.1	83.8
City of St. Gallen 2004	80.6	98.4
City of Zurich 2006	57.4	93.6
City of Winterthur 2006	50.4	78.3

Source: <<http://www.smartvote.ch>>

Given the growing popularity of *smartvote*, there remain only a few candidates who do not present their political positions on *smartvote*. If they are not present they risk losing media coverage and even votes.

The remarkable participation of candidates and the high interest of the media in publishing contributions based on *smartvote* supports the idea that *smartvote* is more than a toy. Before we search for more evidence in this regard, we will address the response to *smartvote* on the user side. Even the most sophisticated VAA remains unsuccessful when voters ignore it. How did the voters respond to the VAA services in Switzerland?

5.3.2. Use by Voters

To what extent do voters turn their attention to *smartvote*? The absolute figures in table 5.2 are not very impressive at first sight. Switzerland, however, is a small country with an electorate of only about 4.9 million voters (2007). This changes the first impression considerably. The index, which relates *smartvote* users to the number of people voting (absolute number of voting recommendations per election in relation to voter turnout), amounts to about 40 percent in 2007¹⁰. The use at national level has increased almost four-fold between 2003 and 2007. This evolution can partly also be attributed to the repeated use at other levels (cantonal or local) and to the intense media coverage in 2007 already mentioned.

¹⁰ This figure allows a comparison across constituencies and time. It does not, however, represent the actual number of people using *smartvote*, which is considerably lower. If we control for users who have received a voting recommendation more than once, the number of different users amounts to about 350,000-375,000 or 12-15 percent of the citizens taking part in the elections.

Table 5.2 – Use of *smartvote* 2003-2007 (selected elections)

Elections	<i>smartvote</i> use (absolute)	<i>smartvote</i> use index ¹¹
Swiss parliament 2003	255,000	11.7
Swiss parliament 2007	963,000	40.6
<i>Regional parliaments</i>		
Canton of St. Gallen 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
<i>Local parliaments</i>		
City of St. Gallen 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: <<http://www.smartvote.ch>>

Outstanding and rather unexpected are the participation rates at the various local city elections. With an average of 25 percent the *smartvote* use index reaches a higher degree than at cantonal (state) level. This is somehow unexpected as local elections have generally smaller numbers of candidates and the value added by *smartvote* could be assumed to be smaller.

What do candidates and users/potential voters really think of *smartvote* and how seriously do they take it? The next section tries to answer these questions on the basis of

¹¹ *smartvote* use in absolute numbers of recommendations issued relative to the voter turnout.

different surveys among candidates as well as among voters or users.

5.4. *Role and importance of smartvote for candidates and users*

In order to judge the role a VAA plays in the course of elections and the importance attached to such a tool by parties, candidates and users we will look at surveys to gain a first impression. We will examine whether the candidates considered *smartvote* useful for their campaign, how important they thought it was for them personally and for their party and on what basis they answered the various questions on political issues. We shall then turn to the voters and ask to what extent they think *smartvote* influenced their voting behaviour.

5.4.1. *The perceptions of the candidates*

Some questions of the post-electoral survey among Swiss candidates¹² running for election for the National Council in 2007 were dedicated to the use and perception of *smartvote*. These questions will give us some idea as to how the candidates judge the role and importance of VAAs.

A large majority of respondents insisted on the usefulness of *smartvote* for their election campaign. About 70 percent considered their participation rather useful and nearly one-fourth believed *smartvote* to be definitely advantageous. Hardly anybody perceived the VAA as damaging for their personal election outcome.

¹² Of the 1.700 survey respondents around 95 per cent did (N=1.660) participate on *smartvote*. This survey has been realized in cooperation between the Universities of Berne, Geneva, Zurich and the IDHEAP in Lausanne.

Table 5.3 – Advantage / damage by *smartvote*

Advantage / damage estimation	Responses by candidates (%)
Definitely advantageous	23.7
Rather advantageous	45.8
Neither nor	28.9
Rather damaging	1.4
Definitely damaging	0.2
N = 1579	100.0

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

It is interesting to note that the use of *smartvote* was seen as even more advantageous by those who were not elected. Presumably these candidates were less prominent and had fewer possibilities to make their political positions public. In any case they blame factors other than the VAA for their electoral failure.

Do the views regarding the added value through *smartvote* vary according to the size of the different voting districts (cantons)? As already mentioned, voters in the canton of Zurich have to make their choice out of a much larger number of candidates than voters in the canton of Jura (804 as opposed to 16). To get a voting recommendation for 34 seats out of 804 candidates in Zurich might thus be seen as a greater help than for two seats out of 16 candidates in Jura. Such expectations, however, cannot be confirmed. In the eyes of the candidates there are no striking differences among the different cantons (see table 5.4). However, there is a difference in awareness between the language regions. Up to 27 percent of the German-speaking region speaks of a definite advantage, compared to only 12 percent in the French-speaking region, where

smartvote is still less known. This effect is even more pronounced in the Italian-speaking part, where *smartvote* has been launched as late as 2007.

Table 5.4 – Advantage / damage by *smartvote* according to size of canton and language region (in percent)

Size of canton ¹³ Number of seats	Definitel y adv.	Rather adv.	Neither nor	Rather dam.	Definitel y dam.	(N)
1.00 / 16 +	24.2	45.8	27.8	1.9	0.3	677
2.00 / 10 to 15	24.9	47.1	27.1	.8	0.0	361
3.00 / 5 to 9	22.1	45.3	31.4	1.0	0.2	408
4.00 / 1 to 4	21.3	42.7	34.7	1.3	0.0	75
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1,521

Language	Definitel y adv.	Rather adv.	Neither nor	Rather dam.	Definitel y dam.	(N)
German	27.0	46.1	25.2	1.5	0.2	1199
French	12.1	47.0	39.9	.7	0.4	281
Italian	4.9	29.3	63.4	2.4	0.0	41
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1,521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

¹³ '1' corresponds to >900,000 inhabitants; '2' corresponds to 400,000 – 899,999; '3' corresponds to 200,000 – 399,999; '4' corresponds to <199,999; see <<http://www.badac.ch/DE/news/typologies.html>>; accessed 28/04/2008.

Table 5.5 – Advantage/damage by *smartvote* participation according to party (in percent)

Parties	Definit. adv.	Rather adv.	Neither nor	Rather dam.	Definit. dam.	(N)
Christian Democrats	14.4	45.9	37.6	2.1	-	194
Radicals	25.1	38.4	34.0	2.5	-	203
Swiss People's Party	24.2	40.3	33.3	1.6	0.5	186
Social Democrats	25.0	53.3	21.3	0.4	-	244
Green Party	27.9	44.7	26.6	0.8	-	244
Green Liberal Party	33.3	55.6	11.1	-	-	27
Liberal Party	21.7	52.2	26.1	-	-	23
Evangelical People's P.	30.6	56.1	12.1	1.3	-	157
Fed. Democratic Union	19.7	46.1	31.6	2.6	-	76
Others	8.8	45.6	42.1	1.8	1.8	57
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1,521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

Seen through the eyes of the candidates, the expectation that small parties – Green Liberal Party, Evangelical People's Party, and Swiss Democrats – believe more strongly in the use of *smartvote* can be confirmed. *smartvote* offers smaller and larger parties equal opportunities to present their candidates. There is no party which does not consider its participation on *smartvote* to be at least 'rather advantageous' (table 5.5). There appears to be a parallel to the findings of Walgrave *et al.* (2008a) regarding a Belgian survey of a VAA in the form of a TV show called 'Do the Vote Test', where VAAs were taken rather seriously by political parties (or rather members of parliament). This finding led Wal-

grave *et al.* to the conclusion that VAAs have to be taken seriously by political scientists as well.

Importance of smartvote in the eyes of the candidates. How do the candidates evaluate the importance of *smartvote* for themselves as compared to its importance for their party, the media and the voters? On a scale from 0 ('no importance') to 10 ('great importance') the average importance for the candidates amounts to 5.8 (see table 5.6). *smartvote* is probably not decisive for the candidates but at least perceived as meaningful. Interesting to note are the rather small differences between the parties. In the eyes of the candidates *smartvote* is more important for the media and the voters.

Table 5.6 – Importance attributed to *smartvote* by parties (aggregated candidate answers)

Parties		Estimation of importance of <i>smartvote</i> for:			
		You personally?	Your party?	Media?	The voter?
Christian Democrats	Mean	5.68	5.55	6.59	5.83
	N	181	179	180	181
Radicals	Mean	5.76	5.49	6.26	5.77
	N	197	189	192	193
Swiss People's Party	Mean	5.79	5.55	6.53	6.37
	N	178	177	179	176
Social Democrats	Mean	6.08	6.02	6.02	6.17
	N	226	221	224	223
Green Party	Mean	5.71	5.99	6.30	6.22
	N	234	220	225	229
Total	Mean	5.77	5.77	6.25	6.02
	N	1453	1412	1416	1423

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

If we split up the answers among the language regions within Switzerland the differences become more salient (table 5.7). In the German-speaking part candidates attach a greater importance to *smartvote* (6.2 to 6.4) than in the French-speaking part (3.8 to 5.8).

In the German-speaking part the VAA *smartvote* seems to be perceived as being more important, but perhaps the lower importance is mainly due to the fact that *smartvote* is not as well established in the French-speaking part yet. The more broadly VAA tools are used the bigger their importance.

Table 5.7 – Importance attributed to *smartvote* according to language region

Language		Estimation of importance of <i>smartvote</i> for:			
		You personally?	Your party?	Media?	The voter?
German	Mean	6.36	6.20	6.40	6.29
	<i>N</i>	1133	1109	1107	1115
French	Mean	3.76	4.36	5.84	5.19
	<i>N</i>	283	266	271	271
Italian	Mean	2.92	3.03	4.76	4.24
	<i>N</i>	37	37	38	37
Total	Mean	5.77	5.77	6.25	6.02
	<i>N</i>	1453	1412	1416	1423

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

Party influence on candidates answering the questionnaire. Do the candidates answer the 73 questions of the VAA on their own or do they follow party instructions? According to their own account slightly more than one-third of the respondents received instructions from their parties (table 5.8). Among the five biggest parties the candidates of the

left-wing Social Democrats received instructions far more often (56.6 percent of the respondents) compared to only 20.5 percent of the candidates of the right-wing Swiss People's Party.

Table 5.8 – Guidance / direction by the party (in percent)

Parties	Guidance/direction by the party:		N
	Obtained	Not obtained	
Christian Democrats	37.9	62.1	190
Radicals	41.6	58.4	202
Swiss People's Party	20.5	79.5	185
Social Democrats	56.6	43.4	242
Green Party	17.0	83.0	247
CH	35.4	64.6	1,521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

Receiving instructions does not necessarily mean that candidates followed them when answering the 73 *smartvote* questions. Approximately 45 percent followed the instructions at least partially and some 10 percent totally. If the candidates received instructions the extent to which they followed them does not vary strongly between the different parties.

What influenced the candidates most while answering the 73 questions? Table 5.9 reveals interesting results. Most important with an average of 9.1 (0: no importance; 10: most important) is the candidate's own political position, followed by the position of the party. The assumed political positions of the electorate are on average not seen as very important (average of 3.6 only), which seems to negate the assumption of a strategic self-positioning of the candidates. The parties or in this case the candidates do not follow the

public as it is depicted in other studies (Walgrave *et al.*, 2008a). Once more there are no important differences between the candidates of the different parties.

Table 5.9 – Points of reference for answering the *smartvote* questionnaire

Parties		Points of reference attributed to:				
		Party program	Party colleagues	Other parties	Own political position	Assumed position of electorate
Christian Democrats	Mean	5.24	3.45	2.58	9.02	3.99
	N	184	185	183	184	183
Radicals	Mean	4.66	3.21	2.01	9.10	3.73
	N	199	199	197	198	196
Swiss People's Party	Mean	5.84	3.49	2.15	9.09	3.84
	N	179	177	177	181	178
Social Democrats	Mean	5.41	3.51	2.20	9.44	3.30
	N	242	241	240	240	238
Green Party	Mean	4.68	3.40	2.03	9.44	2.70
	N	231	229	230	233	230
Total	Mean	5.32	3.64	2.27	9.09	3.57
	N	1473	1466	1460	1475	1460

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of candidates 2007

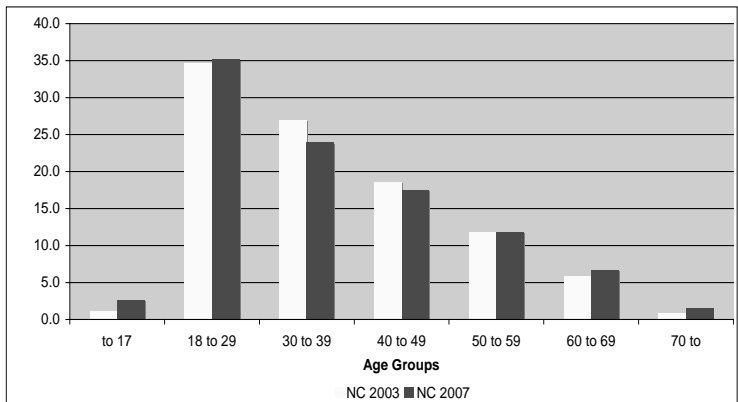
What about the perception of *smartvote* by the voters? Evidently it is not enough to have media partners and candidates participating, the voting advice tool also needs to be used by the citizens.

5.4.2. *The Perceptions of the Voters*

In the NCCR Democracy research project ‘*smart voting*’ we not only take a closer look at the candidates using *smartvote* but also at the users and potential voters. This can either be done through the information the users reveal once they have entered the website or it can be done through additional surveys.

The users of *smartvote* are left-wing computer literates: i.e., they are young, predominantly male, better-educated and they most likely vote for the Social Democrats. Between 2003 and 2007 the percentage of female users increased from 24.1 (N=1297) to 32.5 (N=27,222) percent. Likewise, *smartvote* has become a little more popular among people above fifty years of age (see figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3 – The age of the users: national elections 2003 & 2007 (%)



Source: *smartvote* and NCCR user surveys 2003 and 2007
(N 2003 = 1,279; N 2007 = 13,277)

That *smartvote* is especially attractive for voters from the left-wing side of the political spectrum is revealed by the

question which party they voted for in the last national elections. Table 5.10 reveals a strong bias towards the Social Democrats. More than forty percent of the users in 2007 voted for the Social Democrats in 2003. In the 2003 elections the Social Democrats only scored around 23 percent. This table, which is based on a pre-election survey, also reveals the loss the Social Democrats suffered in 2007 but it does not reveal the gains of the Swiss People's Party. By combining such survey results with the information the users leave on the website, however, we may be able to gather information which could help to predict and understand the results ahead.

Table 5.10 – Users' party preferences and results of national elections 2007

Parties	Voted for in 2003	Voted for in 2007	Diff.	Results 2007
Christian Democrats	8.7	10.1	1.4	14.5
Radicals	17.2	14.4	-2.8	15.8
Swiss People's Party	14.2	9.4	-4.8	28.9
Social Democrats	42.1	28.7	-13.4	19.5
Greens	11.4	17.8	6.4	9.6
Green Liberal Party	0	7.2	7.2	1.4
N	8,506	16,611	-	-

Source: NCCR Democracy,
pre-post electoral survey of *smartvote* users 2007

What is the effect of *smartvote* on the users? Almost 55 percent of users claimed that *smartvote* improved their sources of information and for an additional 30 percent this was at least partially true (54.3% true, 30.4% rather true, N=17,331). Significant numbers of users were particularly motivated to search for more information about specific

political issues (16.4% true, 32.6% rather true, N=17,382) and about specific candidates or parties (20.7% true, 35.9% rather true, N=17,376). And more than half the users claimed that *smartvote* motivated them somewhat to discuss politics (28.4.3% true, 37.2% rather true, N=17,410) or parties and candidates (31.2% true, 36.9% rather true, N=17,364) with other citizens.

Did *smartvote* matter? About two thirds of the *smartvote* users who also participated in the survey claimed that *smartvote* made an impact on their voting decision (see table 5.11). Not astonishingly, those who claimed that *smartvote* motivated them to take part in the elections are also those who stated that *smartvote* made an impact on their decision. About 90 percent of those who were motivated to take part were also influenced by the recommendation whereas only 50 percent of those who would have participated anyway claimed that *smartvote* made an impact on their voting decision.

If we look at the different age groups, the influence of *smartvote* was much bigger among younger citizens: Among those under 30 years of age, more than 70 percent claimed that *smartvote* influenced their decision; among those over 50, only 50 percent claimed a similar effect. Obviously, *smartvote* plays a more important role for the younger and not traditionally participating citizens.

However, only a small minority of those who claimed that *smartvote* had an influence on their voting decision copied the recommendation given by *smartvote* directly onto the ballot list (15.0%, N=10,650). This is not astonishing since such a vote only makes sense in some smaller cantons. In the larger cantons the percentage of candidates who are very likely not to get elected or who belong to parties which will not play an important role in parliament is much higher.

smartvote increased cross-list voting (*Panaschieren*) and turned the users' attention to other candidates and parties. About 60 percent state that they elected candidates from different lists and two thirds claimed that they voted for candidates and parties they usually did not vote for. Finally, one third did not vote for candidates or parties they usually voted for after having consulted the matching list provided by *smartvote*.

Table 5.11 – Agreement with the following sentences (in percent)

Answer option	In percent	N
Did the <i>smartvote</i> recommendation influence which parties or which candidates you voted for?	66.5	16,385
Did you copy the <i>smartvote</i> recommendation without any changes onto your voting list?	15.0	10,650
Based on the <i>smartvote</i> recommendation, did you prefer to vote for candidates from different lists?	61.0	10,580
Based on the <i>smartvote</i> recommendation, did you vote for parties and candidates you would otherwise not have voted for?	66.6	10,559
Based on the <i>smartvote</i> recommendation, did you abstain from voting for parties and candidates you would have voted for otherwise?	34.9	10,372

An overwhelming majority also claims that *smartvote* helped them make their decisions and that it was the most important information source (57 percent) among other sources like newspapers, political events, party/candidate advertisements received by mail, and so on (see table 5.12).

Table 4.12 – How important was the following election campaign instrument for getting information about parties and candidates for you?

Instrument	Important	Rather imp.	Rather unimp.	Unimp.	N
The VAA <i>smartvote</i>	57.3%	29.2%	9.0%	4.5%	17,760
Newspaper advertisement of parties and candidates	4.2%	20.9%	31.9%	43.0%	17,367
Political event of their parties	4.2%	12.2%	21.2%	62.4%	17,191
Stand of parties and candidates on the street	2.1%	7.6%	23.1%	67.3%	17,287
Election Internet pages of parties and candidates	12.9%	27.9%	23.3%	36.0%	17,444
Posters in the streets	3.1%	13.7%	32.3%	50.8%	17,468
Advertisement of parties and candidates in the letterbox	4.9%	14.6%	25.5%	55.0%	17,506
Online media	38.1%	30.3%	15.5%	16.1%	17,039
Supraregional and national TV channel respectively	27.0%	34.4%	16.7%	21.9%	17,105
Local TV channel	6.9%	13.9%	20.8%	58.3%	16,423
Supraregional and national radio channel respectively	14.9%	24.8%	23.9%	36.4%	16,805
Local radio channel	4.8%	12.3%	23.0%	59.9%	16,650

Instrument	Important	Rather imp.	Rather unimp.	Unimp.	N
Supraregional and national newspapers respectively	26.9%	34.3%	20.8%	18.0%	17,194
Local newspapers	20.6%	26.7%	24.3%	28.5%	17,302

Source: NCCR Democracy, post-electoral survey of *smartvote* users 2007

5.4.3. Conclusion

The Swiss experiences with *smartvote*, the participation of an overwhelming majority of the candidates and our survey results led us to the conclusion that VAAs – contrary to the findings for Belgium (Walgrave *et al.*, 2008a) – are more than tools for checking voters’ existing preferences without influence on their voting behaviour. Of course, our survey results are somewhat biased since they stem to the greater part from younger, better educated male citizens from the left wing side of the political spectrum. Nevertheless we dare to say – and will focus on that issue in later analyses – that VAAs in Switzerland tend to lead to an increase of split voting and may in the long run even bring other candidates and parties into office.

There are probably different reasons for the bigger impact of VAAs in Switzerland. First of all, the Swiss (multi-party) electoral system, where voters cannot only vote for a party but can also express their preferences for particular candidates, makes a VAA a very useful source of political information. It provides a real service for voters who have to choose among quite a few and sometimes up to several hundred candidates and more than a dozen parties (see details in section 5.1). Secondly, the participation rate of over 85 percent in the *smartvote* database entices the media to use

smartvote as a new source of information – particularly the eye-catching visual analysis of the *smartspider* and *smartmap*. Finally, the media interest in the VAA further amplifies interest and even produces some sort of pressure to be represented in such a tool as candidate or party.

Because VAAs can be more than toys, political scientists should not stay away from them. It is their responsibility too that such tools are set up as transparently as possible on the grounds of scientific knowledge about political issues and the political space. In order to prevent possible distortions these tools have to be researched continuously. In this respect, scientists could be held accountable. In the following section we will now focus in greater detail on this normative question.

5.5. Should providers of VAAs be held accountable for what they offer?

On the basis of a legal study (Rütsche, 2008), which was also part of our research project, we are able to address the accountability problem. According to Rütsche's findings for the case of Switzerland, the use of VAAs has first of all to be reviewed in the light of the right to free and undistorted opinion formation, guaranteed by Article 34 (section 2) of the Federal Constitution. According to this constitutional principle it is mainly a question of potential dangers of distortion of democratic opinion formation and decision-making by VAAs. In a worst-case scenario VAAs become an instrument for political manipulation by particular interests. If VAA providers are members of (or affiliated to) pressure groups, for instance, the potential abuse increases enormously. Even if there is no worry of real manipulation, VAAs could distort the voter's will solely by means of the composition of their content. However, in principle this right to free and undistorted opinion forma-

tion does not totally prohibit private propaganda or even false information in the run-up to elections. The constitutional limits are only transgressed if private actors propagate what is obviously false information to influence the electoral opinion formation one-sidedly. The basic idea of VAAs is to inform the voter about political positions of candidates and/or parties. The aim of that information is to influence the opinion formation of the voters. As long as this influence is based on objective political information it is not only allowed but also desirable. But having the power to form opinions implies a risk of abuse. VAA providers holding this power could systematically abuse it for certain political purposes. The issue of accountability is therefore a crucial one.

In a first step Rüttsche (*ibid.*: 17f.) focuses on abuse by (private) providers before he then highlights the responsibility of another actor, the state in this context. According to the author, systematic forgery by VAA providers happens in cases where:

- a) *Tendentious questionnaires occur.* Certain political orientations and parties are favoured or discriminated against. However, putting this argument into perspective, it can be argued that political issues receiving too much one-sided emphasis would be noticed by the candidates and voters and therefore the danger is a rather minor one.
- b) *Single candidates are replaced before the user sees his voting recommendation.* For a voter the accuracy of a voting recommendation – except amateurish forgery – is difficult to identify. However, this real danger can be diminished by having several VAAs (with comparable methods) on the ‘election market’. This is a risk that has not yet been dealt with in Switzerland, as the VAAs *Politarena* and

smartvote cannot be easily compared due to their methodological differences.

- c) *The VAA discriminates against a single candidate or party.* For instance, not all candidates or parties have the same access to the tool. Or the answers provided by the candidates are treated differently. Real one-sided influencing, however, exists only in case of ‘hidden’ discrimination. Unacceptable under constitutional law are so-called politically neutral VAAs, which do not give access to all candidates and parties. Nevertheless, a VAA may include only certain candidates and parties as long as this is made clear.

Even if there is never a purely objective method of constructing a VAA, systematic forgery does not need to arise. A VAA should translate political preferences of voters into a concrete voting decision, like any traditional instrument of opinion formation. These are normally no more accurate than any VAA. In general, many voters arrive at a decision without knowing exactly their own political preferences and that of the candidates and yet nobody speaks of distortion of opinion formation. Hence, using VAAs for identifying political preferences as precisely as possible has nothing to do with manipulating opinion formation.

However, there is a claim for certain (scientific) VAA quality standards. Fading out or inadequate weighting of particular political issues – even in a standardised questionnaire – provokes a bias in the opinion formation. Also, a lack of questions for important political issues can be tendentious. Finally, any inexact calculation method of the matching of voter and candidate responses entail the very same problem.

According to Rütscbe (2008) all these risks can be reduced through a competitive VAA ‘election market’ with

several competing VAAs, which would still need to fulfil certain minimal standards:

- Transparency regarding sponsoring, financing and methodology.
- Quality and operation standards implementation.

To what extent must the state be accountable in Switzerland? According to the court, incumbent authorities are not allowed to advise the voter in any way. However, contributions to the election campaign can increase the quality of opinion formation if they lead to more balanced information – in the sense of a ‘vital’ democracy. Therefore it is not a question of *whether* but rather of *how* state intervention may take place. In the context of elections there is a strict imperative of equal treatment. As long as state intervention stays neutral (no preference for or discrimination against one single candidate or party), objective and factual, state regulations regarding VAAs are constitutional.

What happens when a VVA is directly linked to an electronic voting platform allowing the voters to send their selection of candidates directly to the polls through the Internet, as it was done on the occasion of the Bernese student council elections in 2005? The Federal Supreme Court confirmed by its judgement that the state must remain strictly neutral in elections and must treat all candidates and parties equally. Connection with VAAs is therefore only possible under restrictive conditions: an organizational, personal and financial independence of officially promoted VAAs from political parties and interest groups; as well as high standards regarding a voting advice tool’s quality and operation. Given such conditions, the official promotion of specific VAAs would lead to regulatory complications; and in order to avoid these, the deregulation of the ballot system might

be proposed to facilitate the use of VAAs by the electorate. This would enable the users of such tools to print their individual electoral recommendations or send them electronically as valid ballots.

In sum, the legal imperatives for state involvement in the run-up to elections reduce the range of opportunity for action enormously but by providing a legal framework for VAAs without operating them; the state can contribute to increased accountability of VAA tools without influencing the election campaign directly and therefore the election outcome.

Apart from the right to free and unadulterated opinion formation, there are also institutional provisions of the Constitution. In Switzerland, the Constitution contains a range of guarantees that accord the political parties a special role in the electoral process. Among these guarantees is Article 137, according to which parties are meant to participate in public opinion formation. Further, Article 149 (see section 5.1 above) allows proportional representation in National Council elections. If a large number of voters use VAAs the proportional representation system could be undermined. The individual electoral recommendations of candidates compete with the party lists. VAAs give a strong impetus to ticket splitting. This is not illegal but it could become a conflict for the constitutional principle of proportional representation, which presupposes that voters make an initial choice between party lists. Consequently, the state should not promote VAAs unless they also offer voting by party lists as an option.

Moreover, we need to ask whether VAAs lead to greater responsiveness of representative bodies to the voters. *Prima facie* responsiveness can be strengthened. However, there are no institutional safeguards to ensure that politicians once elected actually support the positions they have

declared through the VAA. Under this arrangement, reference back to the will of the electorate is limited to the act of voting. Possibilities are thereby opened for politicians to strategically use VAAs for their own purposes. From a constitutional perspective, this is why it is desirable for such tools to involve a monitoring of the voting behaviour of politicians while in office (in Switzerland the NCCR Democracy project *smartmonitor* has exactly this intention). Once a VAA like *smartvote* is connected with a monitoring system like *smartmonitor* this negative potential can be reduced remarkably.

To sum up, the degree of accountability varies among the different actors. As private VAA providers have to maximise the content of the VAA, its quality and transparency, the state can only provide assistance and control within the bounds of its legal restrictions. In short, VAA providers are accountable for maximising the quality of their tool. As VAAs are regarded as only one out of several information sources in the election campaign they cannot be made accountable for the election outcome on their own. The state in contrast can only provide the legal framework for VAAs and try to legally minimise potential manipulations. Accountability for the tool is therefore shared between the provider (content, quality, transparency) and the state (legal framework); accountability for the final election outcome can only be assumed by all actors together within an election campaign and should be a matter of future analysis in this context.

5.6. Outlook

After the success of three pilot projects in three Swiss cantons (GE, NE, ZH), on May 31, 2006 the Federal Council declared electronic voting a strategic goal which is

to be implemented step by step. Once we vote electronically in Switzerland – so our argument – VAAs will become indispensable and will have a considerable influence on party politics. After having selected candidates in a ‘smart’ way, citizens will want to send the list to the polls electronically. VAAs will no longer be regarded as a toy but as a useful instrument to select parties and candidates.

This, of course, leads to new problems and challenges. We do not believe that it will be possible to agree on ‘politically correct’ questions which all parties accept in their wording, or that a state office should be responsible for the questions put forward by the VAAs. We rather think that the voters should have a choice between different VAAs. It is up to the voters to decide which VAA is trustworthy and which voting advice they will follow.

We do believe, however, that transparency and equal access to VAAs is required. Only those VAAs meeting such minimal standards should be directly linked to the electronic ballot station. Political scientists are very much needed to research and investigate the functioning of VAAs. Their findings will help to improve the quality of VAAs and shed light on the manipulation possibilities of such tools. Scientists, however, cannot assume responsibility for the results of elections and the social consequences of these results. Who knows for sure which party is best for society in the long run? VAAs are one source of information about politics, but they are only one (important) source among others.

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