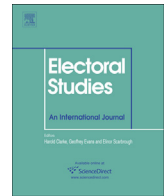




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What's the point of voting advice applications? Competing perspectives on democracy and citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Voting advice applications (VAAs) are interactive online tools designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. Current VAAs typically aim to do so by matching users' policy-preferences with the positions of parties or candidates. But this 'matching model' depends crucially on implicit, contestable presuppositions about the proper functioning of the electoral process and about the forms of competence required for good citizenship—presuppositions associated with the social choice conception of democracy. This paper aims to make those presuppositions explicit and to contrast them with two possible alternative perspectives on VAAs, associated with deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy and citizenship.

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1. Introduction

Debates over democracy are frequently motivated by concerns about low levels of voter competence (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Friedman, 2007; Caplan, 2008; Brennan, 2011). One recent response to this concern has been the development of 'Voting Advice Applications' (VAAs). These interactive online tools are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. Due to the growing number, popularity, and influence of VAAs (Garzia, 2010), they are now attracting sustained attention from political scientists.

For the most part, however, researchers have focused either on the extent to which VAAs influence voting behaviour and election outcomes or on issues of methodology and measurement (see the articles in this symposium, as well as Garzia and Marschall, 2012; Garzia and Marschall, 2014). This focus on technical issues, we believe, has left

other important concerns unaddressed. As interventions in electoral politics, VAAs can also be assessed from the perspective of how well they perform their *function*, and that requires making clear what their function is supposed to be. Hence our guiding question here: 'What's the point of VAAs?' As we shall argue, VAAs are built on conceptual, normative and empirical presuppositions about democracy and citizenship, especially about the ways in which electoral practices currently fail to live up to their democratic potential and voters currently fall short of making well-considered decisions. As a result, claims about how VAAs ought to be designed can never be adequately defended on the basis of technical or methodological considerations alone. Rather, justifying a VAA requires articulating and defending these presuppositions about democracy and citizenship.

Once questions are raised as to what makes a democracy function 'well' or what qualities citizens must have to be 'competent,' it turns out that there are many more possible approaches than the current crop of VAAs would suggest. In particular, our central claim will be that the VAAs currently on offer are premised on one specific, disputed understanding of democracy and citizenship. In brief, the

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assumption is that elections are in essence about aggregating the policy-preferences of voters and that strengthening democracy is a matter of ensuring that the support for parties (expressed in votes) more accurately reflects the existing preferences of voters. This fits well with the normative conception of democracy expounded by social choice theorists, but that view of democracy is contested. Defenders of deliberative democracy argue that the democratic process is largely about the on-going revision of political views rather than the aggregation of given preferences. And advocates of contestatory or agonistic models of democracy and citizenship emphasize the political task of seeing beyond the current political landscape rather than accepting it as a given. Our aim here is to show both that a social choice model of electoral politics is implicit in the current design of matching VAAs (even if not in the explicit statements of their designers) and that, if one were to endorse a deliberative or agonistic conception of democracy and citizenship, VAAs would have to be significantly transformed if they were to serve those purposes.

To make our case, we proceed in three steps. In the next section, we situate the discussion about VAAs within a broad concern with citizen competence. Then, in Section 3, we identify the predominant ‘matching’ model of VAA-design and the corresponding ‘social choice’ conception of electoral politics and citizen competence. In a third step, we discuss two alternative conceptions of electoral politics and citizen competence – ‘deliberative democracy’ (Section 4) and ‘agonistic politics’ (Section 5) – and sketch the ways in which VAAs would have to be (and are being) transformed to realize these aims rather than the aims driving current ‘matching’ models.

Posing these questions unavoidably shifts the discussion from methodological issues to issues of political philosophy and democratic theory, where questions have a normative-evaluative, political, and contested character. Attending to these issues is not, however, a matter of injecting politics and values into a neutral domain. It is rather a matter of bringing to the surface the normative commitments that *already* frame the design of VAAs. By identifying the guiding assumptions behind existing VAAs and highlighting their contingent and disputable status, we hope to broaden the debate over what forms of digitally mediated voting assistance might be possible and appropriate. For however much easier it might be to implement matching VAAs, the fact that they are premised on a contested understanding of good citizenship and democratic politics raises concerns about the dominance of the matching model in current VAA-design. The point of this essay, then, is not to defend any particular conception of democracy, nor to provide a blueprint for new voting advice applications, but to provide a frame of reference for further debate by making explicit the contestable commitments undertaken in the design-choices of different VAAs.

2. The problem of citizen competence

In general, voting advice applications can be defined as interactive online tools that are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. As such, VAAs are intended as means of addressing one of the oldest and most tenacious worries about democracy,

namely, that citizens turn out to be poorly informed, easily swayed, highly irrational, etc. Political thinkers from Plato, Cicero, and Schumpeter to the present day (e.g. Caplan, 2008; Friedman, 2007) have seen citizen incompetence as an unavoidable reality to which political systems must respond, typically by strengthening the role of experts and elites. Others, from J. S. Mill and John Dewey to present-day advocates of civic education (Barber, 1994; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; or the United Nations Development Program <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/democraticgovernance/> (Last accessed July 4, 2013)), keen to avoid this elitism and committed to overcoming citizen apathy and ignorance, call for programs that will make citizens more engaged and better informed. Part of what makes VAAs so interesting is that they represent a response that is arguably more feasible, convenient, and effective than wholesale programs in voter education while still being inclusively democratic.

There is an enormous literature on the precise nature and extent of voter competence in various countries, and we do not wish to take a position on the extent of voter incompetence. But few would deny that there is room for improvement. Recent empirical work in behavioural economics, political psychology, and neuroscience is further highlighting how predictably irrational humans are in making choices (Kahneman, 2011), and how easily voters can be misled intentionally and unintentionally (Caplan, 2008; Kelly, 2012). In light of this research, traditional efforts to increase voter competence by providing them with more information may even exacerbate the problem by generating further cognitive overload. In addition, as voters have shifted away from voting on the basis of party loyalty and demographic affiliation, they lose one of the primary time-saving strategies for figuring out how to vote (Dalton, 2002). In short, the growing complexity of electoral politics overtakes citizens’ already limited ability to make good decisions about how to vote.

It is clear that many designers of VAAs take their primary task to be one of raising citizen competence. The German ‘Wahl-O-Mat,’ for instance, aims to overcome voter apathy and increase voter turnout by reducing the perceived difficulty of making a choice (Marschall and Schmidt, 2010). The Dutch ‘StemWijzer’ and Belgian ‘Do the Vote Test,’ similarly, present themselves as increasing voters’ knowledge of the parties’ positions on the issues, so that users vote based on ‘substance,’ rather than the distracting candidate images and soundbites on which the media (and hence the easily influenced public) tend to focus (de Graaf, 2010; Nuytemans et al., 2010). The makers of the ‘Kieskompas’ [Vote Compass Inc.] articulate yet another version of the problem of citizen competence:

‘Members of the general public find themselves confronted with increasingly complex choices in several walks of life. It is not always clear which choice fits best with their own preferences. Kieskompas seeks to help people make more better-informed [*sic*] choices. Based on scientifically approved methods, Kieskompas develops web applications in order to make choices more straightforward and more transparent, both to voters and consumers.’ (<http://www.kieskompas.nl>, version of 2011).

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