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A perfect match? The impact of statement selection on voting advice applications' ability to match voters and parties

Jonas Lefevere [a,*], Stefaan Walgrave [b]

[a] Amsterdam School of Communication, Department of Communication, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48 (Room C0.03), 1012 CX Amsterdam, Netherlands
[b] Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Sint Jacobstraat 2 (Room LN55.012), 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how statement selection systematically affects the output of voting advice applications (VAAs). Does the statement selection influence how often voters are matched with parties that 'should be' close to them? Our benchmark is a classic account of issue voting, the proximity left–right model. We analyze the Belgian VAA *Do the Vote Test* and find that the output resembles the left–right model. When more left–right statements are included, more left-wing voters get the advice to vote for left-wing parties and the same is true on the right, while simultaneously advantaging parties with more extreme positions on this dimension. We also analyze issue saliency and find that parties are disadvantaged when more statements about salient issues are included. These findings imply tough choices for VAA builders.

1. Introduction

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have enjoyed increasing popularity in Western Europe (Cedroni and Garzia, 2010). These on-line tools provide citizens with voting advice based on a comparison between the respondents' and the parties' opinion on a number of actual policy statements. Their popularity has spurred debate among political scientists about their methodology and the validity of their advice. Most debates concern the way in which party positions are determined and the answers voters can give (agree/disagree or a scale). Surprisingly, the elements that are central to all VAAs, the *statements*, have received less attention.

Prior research has found that statement selection—the set of statements presented to parties and voters—has consequences for the advice users get (Walgrave et al., 2009). Statement selection makes *a* difference. This paper goes further and gauges which features of a specific selection of statements matter for which parties, and how these interact with features of users and parties. We examine whether some parties benefit from a given selection of statements (more voters are given the message that the party matches their preferences) while others stand to lose (more voters get the signal that the party is a bad match). We also examine how statement selection affects the matching of specific voters to specific parties.

To accomplish this task, we need a benchmark. Even without a benchmark we could still compare aggregate VAA outputs with the actual election results, for example, and assess how parties' aggregate scores in VAAs relying on different statement selections relate to their actual electoral strength. However, since VAAs are exclusively geared towards issues and ignore all other voter motives, using actual election results as a benchmark is not a good idea. We rely on a classic mainstream theory of issue voting: the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 (0)489 119 663.
E-mail addresses: Jonas.lefevere@uva.nl, jonas.lefevere@gmail.com (J. Lefevere).

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proximity model. It provides hypotheses about which parties should gain/lose with a specific batch of statements and generates expectations about which type of voter is matched with which type of party by which type of statement selection. Since many VAAs include issue salience—the importance of an issue to either voters or parties—in their calculations we also test its impact on VAA results.

We use data from a 2007 real-world VAA (*Do the Vote Test*) created in the Flemish region of Belgium and sponsored by the public broadcaster VRT. The final VAA consisted of 36 statements, but the builders tested a total of 50 statements. In this paper, out of the initial 50 statements, we take a random sample of 500 statement selections each consisting of 36 statements. Drawing on a sample of Belgian voters who took a survey answering all 50 issue statements we test to what extent statement selection makes a difference for the different Belgian (Flemish) parties and how statement selection affects the matching of voters to parties.

2. Statement selection in VAAs

Because they provide the information needed to match voters to parties, statements are the building blocks of all VAA calculations. But research on their effect is scarce. Statement selection has an effect on individual results as well as on the aggregate output across all users.

VAAs differ in the number of statements upon which they calculate their output (Wagner and Ruusuvirta, 2012). However, to select which statements are used, different criteria can be used. Statements should be clear and unambiguous. VAA builders agree that statements should cover current political debates. Also, since statements should discriminate between parties, it is useless to incorporate statements on which all parties (dis)agree. Furthermore, VAA builders aim for statements that are dispersed across issue domains. Finally, VAA builders also, implicitly or explicitly, link their selection to a theoretical issue-space defined by several dimensions. All statement selection choices are bound to have an effect on the output. Depending on the criterion—distinguishing parties from one another, preferring statements that load on a dimension, or another consideration—the statement selection will be different.

In the only academic publication on the subject, based on the same Belgian VAA we study here, Walgrave et al. (2009) show that VAA output differs greatly depending on the selection of statements, with parties receiving an 'advice' *seven* times as often in one batch of statements as in another. Some of these variations are undoubtedly random, since adding or removing any statement is bound to affect the output. However, in this study we depart from the idea that certain statement selection properties systematically (dis)advantage certain parties and that some are better in matching specific voters to specific parties. Walgrave et al. (2009) found that statement selection matters but did not specify which characteristics of statement selections lead to advantages or disadvantages for which parties, nor did they examine whether statement selections differ in their capacity to connect voters to the 'correct' party.

3. Proximity voting and the left–right dimension

In investigating the effect of statement selection, we draw on the proximity model of voting. The proximity model positions voters and parties on an underlying dimension and assumes that issue positions of parties give voters cues about parties' positions on that dimension. Voters minimize the distance between themselves and their party and cast a ballot for the closest party (Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Henning et al., 2007; Merrill and Grofman, 1997). Most VAAs emulate models of proximity voting (Wagner and Ruusuvirta, 2012). The more statements a voter and party agree upon, the smaller the distance and the higher the score of that party for that voter.

The left–right dimension is familiar to many voters and is the key cleavage in most party systems. Voters and parties can easily be positioned on it (Fuchs and Klingeman, 1990; Huber and Powell, 1994). The left–right dimension is often said to consist of two sub-dimensions. The first is the *socio-economic* left–right dimension (Lane and Ersson, 1987). It has been supplemented with a new dimension that does not revolve around economic growth, but rather opposes supporters and critics of post-materialist values such as self-actualization, global responsibility, and aesthetic needs (Inglehart, 1990). Given various names (Dalton, 1996; Kitschelt, 1994), we define this second dimension as *cultural* left–right (Hooghe et al., 2002).

Many parties are rooted in these left–right cleavages; their electoral fate depends on the vividness of 'their' conflict. When more statements in a VAA are relevant to the dimension on which the party holds a strong—a clear and extreme—position, the party should score higher. So, if the left–right cleavage, socio-economically or culturally, is a party's core business, we expect it to fare better when more statements deal with it. Note that VAA builders are constrained by a limited number of statements. Including more left–right statements results in fewer statements on other dimensions (e.g. in the Belgian context, there is the linguistic cleavage between Flemings and Francophones or the old cleavage between Catholics and freethinkers). In light of these considerations, our initial hypotheses can be formulated as follows:

H1a. Parties holding more extreme economic left–right positions are favored by statement selections with more economic left–right statements.

H1b. Parties holding more extreme cultural left–right positions are favored by statement selections with more cultural left–right statements.

The share of left–right statements in a VAA affects not only the aggregate score of parties but also the extent to which VAAs manage to link left- or right-wing voters to left- or right-wing parties. Respondents' positions in VAAs are often internally inconsistent (Walgrave and Lefevere, 2013). Voters oppose increasing taxes and at the same time refuse to accept budget cuts. Parties, in contrast, have to deal with trade-offs and need to present a balanced program as they are subject to public scrutiny. Respondents

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