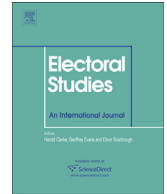




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## Voting Advice Applications and electoral turnout

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### ABSTRACT

In the last two decades Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have become popular tools among voters, especially in several countries with a multi-party system. In this paper we test if the use of VAAs stimulates electoral participation. We use survey data from the Netherlands, where such tools are widely used. In order to overcome methodological problems of earlier studies, we use techniques that model the effect of confounding variables as a problem of selection into the treatment (VAA usage). We estimate that VAA usage accounted for about four per cent of the reported turnout in the election. The mobilising effect was largest among groups that typically vote in relatively small numbers, such as young voters and those less knowledgeable about politics.

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### 1. Introduction

The rise of the internet paved the way for the widespread use of Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), especially in countries with a multi-party system. By providing voters with information and facilitating their decision making, applications such as *smartvote* or *Wahl-O-Mat* may stimulate electoral participation and thus increase the level of turnout. Because VAAs are still a relatively new phenomenon, not much is known about their effects on electoral turnout. Moreover, most of the few studies conducted so far have neglected some important methodological challenges in estimating the purported causal effects. In this paper we present a more thorough analysis of the impact of VAAs on electoral participation by focussing on the Netherlands, a country where these tools have become very popular.

VAAs can be designed in different ways, but most follow a similar procedure (see Cedroni and Garzia, 2010; Garzia and Marschall, 2014). The developers first formulate a series of statements about policy issues that are expected to

be salient in the campaign or that are associated with the main dimensions of political conflict (Lefevere and Walgrave, 2014; van Camp et al., 2014). Next, they estimate the party or candidate positions on those items. This is accomplished by just asking political parties or individual candidates for their positions, by analysing documents such as manifestos or speeches, or by employing expert surveys (Gemenis, 2013; Gemenis and van Ham, 2014). Developers may opt for one of these methods, or combine elements from several of these. When the application is made available to the public, users can indicate their own preferences with respect to the same statements. These answers are then compared to the party or candidate positions and the degree of match or mismatch is calculated and reported to the user. The most frequently adopted approaches are rank ordering the parties in terms of the degree of match between party and user or plotting both parties and users in a two-dimensional political space (Louwerse and Rosema, 2013; Mendez, 2012; Wagner and Ruusuvirta, 2012).

VAAs first appeared as paper-and-pencil tests in the late 1980s and did not immediately attract many voters. This changed after the tools were made available on the internet in the late 1990s (de Graaf, 2010; Ruusuvirta, 2010; Marschall and Garzia, 2014). In several European

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countries VAAs have become an important element of the election campaign, with usage figures exceeding one quarter of the electorate in Belgium, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Marschall, 2014).

The developers of VAAs have often mentioned a positive effect on electoral turnout as a motive for their launch and several studies appear to support their claim. Nevertheless, the estimated effects of VAA usage on turnout vary. Several studies based their estimates on the self-report by voters. In the 2005 German federal election 8% of survey respondents said that *Wahl-O-Mat* motivated them to vote (Marschall and Schmidt, 2008, 270). In other elections in Germany and Switzerland self-reported mobilisation figures were somewhere up to 15% (Fivaz and Nadig, 2010, 184; Ladner and Pianzola, 2010, 219). Such figures should be interpreted with much care, however, because of methodological problems that we discuss later in this paper. Furthermore, citizens do not choose to use a VAA at random, which means that the causal linkage between VAA usage and casting a ballot can be confounded by other factors.

In this paper we therefore test the hypothesis that the usage of VAAs facilitates vote decision making, and thereby increases the chance of voting vis-à-vis abstention, by taking these methodological challenges into account. Furthermore, we test if these effects occur among specific groups. From here the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we discuss the potential electoral effects of VAAs with a particular focus on voter turnout. We then turn to methodological issues surrounding the estimation of electoral effects and propose a solution, which we apply to data from the 2006 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES, 2006). Having discussed the data and method, we proceed with estimating the effect of using a VAA on turnout and investigate whether VAAs are more likely to have an impact on particular strata of the electorate. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and discussion of their implications for the functioning of representative democracy.

## 2. The potential electoral effects of Voting Advice Applications

VAAs can have different sorts of effects on voting behaviour. One potential effect concerns the choice of a particular party or candidate: if voters consult such a website they may remember the outcome of the test and vote accordingly (Ladner et al., 2012; Wall et al., 2012). Another type of effect concerns the question whether citizens vote at all. It is this effect that we focus on in this paper. Does using a VAA increase the chance that a citizen will vote? Research suggests that the internet can activate citizens to become politically active (Hirzalla et al., 2010). To understand why it might with respect to voting, two theoretical approaches provide a rationale. The first approach is rational choice theory, which explains the act of voting in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. The second concerns insights from social psychology, in particular the use of heuristics.

Ever since the seminal contribution by Riker and Ordeshook (1968), it has been customary to explain

turnout by using a calculus of voting (Blais, 2000). According to this theory, the utility of voting  $R$ , is a function of the benefit associated with voting  $B$  (effectively, whether the citizen's vote matters for the outcome), conditional to the probability  $p$  that the citizen will bring out the benefit  $B$ , minus the cost of voting  $C$ , plus the psychological benefits of voting  $D$ . If we have theoretical reasons to believe that the use of VAAs might have a mobilisation effect, then the use of VAAs must be linked theoretically with either of the right-hand side components of equation (1).

$$R = pB - C + D \quad (1)$$

Firstly, VAAs might increase the perceived utility of the benefit of voting ( $B$  in equation (1)). When taking such tests, citizens may become better aware of the differences between parties or candidates and hence realise that it matters who wins the election. The benefits of voting can also become clearer to voters if VAAs show them that a particular party or candidate matches well with their own preferences, which may motivate them to vote (Dinas et al., 2014; Lefkofridi et al., 2014). Secondly, the amount of easily available information provided by VAAs can reduce the costs of collecting information ( $C$  in equation (1)), which in turn increases the likelihood of voting (Lassen, 2005). Thirdly, VAAs may increase turnout by strengthening the sense of citizen duty that motivates citizens to vote (Blais, 2000), and therefore increase the perceived psychological benefits of voting ( $D$  in equation (1)).

The rational choice approach can lead to relevant insights about human behaviour, but research in psychology shows that the human mind often follows different paths towards a decision than such a cost-benefit analysis. One of the most important insights concerns the use of shortcuts or heuristics (Kahneman et al., 1982). VAAs can be viewed in this light. They provide voters with a simple heuristic to decide for whom to vote and thereby facilitate the decision making, which consequently has a positive effect on turnout. This is relevant in particular for undecided voters, since the inability to reach a decision may be a reason to abstain.

Some people may consider any mobilising effect of VAAs a good thing for democracy, whereas others might argue that the value of this effect depends on what segments of the electorate are affected. Low turnout is considered a problem because certain types of voters are not well represented (Lijphart, 1997; but see Rosema, 2007). If VAAs are able to mobilise such groups, this increases the value of a mobilisation effect. In other areas of research about public opinion it has been shown that some groups are more open to persuasion than others (Zaller, 1992). In the field of VAA research, too, it has been shown that certain types of citizens are more likely to follow the advice of VAAs than others (Ladner et al., 2012; Wall et al., 2012). More specifically, on the basis of previous research we may expect these effects to be largest among younger voters and those with low levels of political interest, since these voters are more often undecided. These are precisely the type of voters that abstain in relatively large numbers (Smets and Van Ham, 2013). If VAAs are capable of mobilising such voters in particular, they reduce unequal participation and thus foster the quality of democracy.

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