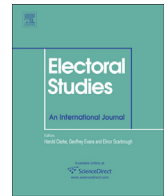




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A look into the mirror preferences, representation and electoral participation

Elias Dinas^a, Alexander H. Trechsel^{b,c}, Kristjan Vassil^{d,*}

^a University of Oxford, United Kingdom

^b European University Institute, Italy

^c Harvard University, USA

^d Institute of Government and Politics, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, 51003 Tartu, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

Voting Advice Applications (VAA) are often praised as tools helping users to find their best matching candidates or parties. Using such tools, so the claim goes, might trigger a positive impact on electoral participation. We show that the relationship between VAA usage and the intention to take part in elections indeed exists. The mechanism through which users are drawn to the polls or, inversely, detracted from taking part in the elections is, however, primarily working through the extent with which users' preferences overlap with those of the political parties running in the campaign. The further users find themselves away – in terms of this overlap – from the political parties, the higher the probability of a VAA deterring this user from participating.

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1. Introduction

The offer of online, web-based Voting Advice Applications (VAA's) during election campaigns is proliferating (Walgrave et al., 2008; Vassil, 2012; Trechsel and Mair, 2011). Today, VAAs have become standard attributes of elections in modern liberal democracies. An increasing number of these elections even give rise to competing VAAs being offered to the citizenry where numerous VAA providers court the voters, often commercially exploiting the popularity of these tools. One can also assume that citizens start using these tools repeatedly, and on a structural basis, before elections. In a way, for a growing part of the electorate these tools have become fully embedded elements of the electoral process.

Despite these developments, too little is known about the effects of such tools. If VAAs become indispensable to voters, do they affect political choices at the polls? And

independently from their potential effects on vote choice, do they exert an impact on citizens' decisions to turn out in the election? In this contribution we focus on the second question: does exposure to a VAA affect its user's probability to go to the polls or to abstain from voting?

Although the existing literature is still scarce, most previous studies tend to suggest that VAA's trigger political participation. A study investigating the impact of Wahl-O-Mat usage during the 2005 German national elections shows that eight per cent of Wahl-O-Mat users claimed to be more motivated to vote than before consulting the VAA. The corresponding portion of 'mobilized' voters in a similar study conducted during the 2009 German national elections was seven per cent (Marschall, 2009). Ruusuvirta and Rosema (2009, p. 15) suggest on the basis of the Dutch 2006 Election Study that the usage of 'online vote selectors' led to an increase in turnout of about three per cent'. In Switzerland, Fivaz and Nadig (2010, p. 184) demonstrate that as much as 40 per cent of VAA ("Smartvote") users declared that the latter had a decisive or at least slight influence on their decision to go to the polls'. The authors

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +372 5684 4856.
E-mail address: kristjan.vassil@ut.ee (K. Vassil).

indicate that the overall turnout may have been six per cent lower had these voters not been mobilized by Smartvote. While recognizing that individuals who go visit of VAA website are already more politically interested and thus more likely to participate in elections than those who do not go through this tool, they conclude that these tools still have the potential to increase general interest in elections and politics (Fivaz and Nadig, 2010, p. 185).

When moving beyond the descriptive self-reported measures, Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof (2008) employ panel data in their study of several Dutch VAAs. They observe that more people made a choice for a particular party after consulting the VAA and thereby, they suppose, because VAAs make it easier for voters to choose between the parties it may also result in concomitant mobilization effects.

All in all, the studies conducted so far assume that mobilization by means of VAA usage can occur through three basic processes. First, undecided voters reach a decision on what party to vote for (an assumption proposed by Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2008). Second, easily accessible information provided by the VAA reduces the costs of gathering information, thereby increasing the likelihood of voting (Ruusuvirta and Rosema, 2009). Third, VAAs get uninterested citizens to think about politics and thereby bring them closer to the act of voting (ibid).

While these effects are generally observable indeed, we suspect that these sources only operate through a mechanism that is a much more fundamental in nature and works as a necessary precondition to any mobilization effects imposed by the VAA usage. Drawing on Alvarez et al. (2011), we argue that the usage of VAAs in its own right will not necessarily foster future participation. Instead, a critical factor that qualifies this effect is the extent to which the message given to the user about the available policy supply matches her policy views. Although engaging into this process may generally encourage political involvement, we argue that it may have counter implications for those people who perceive lack of political representation. Drawing on unique comparative data from the EU Profiler, we try to engage this line of argument into systematic investigation.

2. Theory: information, political supply and turnout

One of the most commonly exalted determinants of electoral participation is political information. Generally, the better informed, the better the ability of voters to perceive their own positions vis-à-vis the electoral offer and thus the higher their probability to turn out. As an influential study in this field has concluded: “[...] the information level of a voter has a strong effect on the likelihood the voter will vote” (Palfrey and Poole, 1987, p. 530).

The argument that information boosts political participation is mainly based on a logic of partisan signaling. People learn parties' issue and policy stances and hence can more clearly make their electoral choices. Although the bulk of the literature on media and campaign effects (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Alvarez, 1997, p. 16) tend to focus on actual vote choice, examining the extent to which political information drives partisan shifts,

various studies have pinpointed the mobilizing role of political information on voter turnout. Kiouisis et al. (2005) have linked agenda-setting theory to turnout and shown that the former increases the latter, in particular among young voters, through socialization mechanisms. Similarly, Ghirardato and Katz (2006) have shown the importance of the quality of information on turnout. Also, Sanders (2001) argues, in a similar vein, that uncertainty regarding candidates in elections does affect turnout.

Our departure point is that the existing literature does not take into account an important factor that conditions whether political information will have a mobilizing or demobilizing role. This factor is the perception that one's political views are to some extent echoed by at least one of the available political parties. By far the largest part of studies on the impact of campaign information on vote choice concerns the question of how information on, for example, issue positions of political parties is received and processed by the voter. It focuses on two categories of actors: the voters (demand) and parties/candidates (supply). Information is generated by the supply side directly (through campaigning, platforms etc.) or indirectly (through the consumption of mass media, social interactions with others etc.), received and processed by the voter. This information potentially increases the transparency of the offer and, through its interpretation by the voter, may lead to an informed choice at the polls.

VAAs fall in this second category of information provision mechanisms: like media, they relay information about positions of political parties to the voters. They allow users to drastically reduce the costs of information gathering as the political offer, in the form of party positions is summarized by the VAA provider. Reducing the costs of information before an election partly explains the growing popularity of VAAs. But the truly revolutionary aspect of this new form of political information acquisition is the revelation of matches between individual voter preferences and the preferences of the parties in the race. VAA users do not only inform themselves about parties' stances on political issues but also match their personal politics with the partisan offer.

VAAs typically make their users answer a series of political questions or statements. The system matches the users answers with the previously coded positions of the parties running in the election. The outcome is then graphically presented through, for instance, match-lists, where parties are ranked from nearest to furthest from the user's own preferences. In the EU Profiler, such a match-list is contained in a bar chart that lists the percentage of overlap between each party and the user in descending order, i.e. from the best to the least matching party.

The form of information gathered by VAA users is thus radically different from the information so far given to voters directly by parties or relayed to them through the media or other intermediaries. This information is *tailor-made* for each individual, in that it reveals to the user the structure of party competition in light of her own preferences. The result is a form of political matchmaking revealing “your picture”, “your political mirror”, “your parties”, a customized view of the political supply.

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