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Voting wiser

The effect of Voting Advice Applications on political understanding

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Chapter 6

General Conclusion and Discussion

This dissertation sheds light on the way VAAs affect understanding of politics and political issues, and how this interacts with the resources and motivations of VAA users. This last chapter distills the general conclusions about the effects of VAAs on political understanding, based on the four empirical chapters of the dissertation. Subsequently, implications are discussed for democracy and the study of VAAs and political information in general. Finally, I will discuss limitations and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Main Findings

The four studies combined in this dissertation lead to four general conclusions. The first general conclusion concerns users of VAAs: they are more diverse than earlier expectations and findings suggested (e.g., Marschall, 2014; Norris, 2001). VAAs being merely a ‘fun’ tool for the politically most interested citizens is only part of the story – a substantial share of the users feels less efficacious about politics, does not follow the campaign closely, and is not very sure about their voting decision. Many of them use the VAA to learn about politics. In the national elections about 40 percent of users can be described in these terms, and in most second-order elections these types of voters are the majority of VAA users.

More specifically, three types of VAA users can be distinguished. These have similar usage patterns across supranational, national, and subnational elections. This typology, developed in Chapter 2, consists of three VAA user types: *checkers*, *seekers* and *doubters*. Checkers are the most certain about their voting decision, have most interest in the campaign and feel most efficacious about politics. They mostly use VAAs as entertainment, or to check whether the VAA will advise them to vote the party they already decided to vote for. Seekers, in contrast, use VAAs with the purpose of increasing their understanding of politics. They are generally less interested, less internally efficacious and less decisive about their voting decision, so they mostly use VAAs to determine their vote choice or learn about party positions. Doubters are similar to seekers – they are relatively less efficacious and interested – but they are especially less efficacious about the responsiveness of the government and have a less clear motivation to use VAAs.

In line with expectations based on campaign volatility literature (Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013), I found that the politically interested checkers use VAAs relatively *early* in the campaign and that the less interested and less decisive seekers consult VAAs relatively *late*, close to election day. VAA use by doubters is constant over the course of the campaign. This pattern is found for each type of election: as the elections come closer, VAA use increases dramatically, and the peak in usage leading up to election day is mostly due to the group of seekers.

Although the same types of VAA users can be identified in first- and second-order elections, and they show the same usage patterns across the election campaign, there are some remarkable differences across elections, as described in Chapter 3. In second-order elections, VAA users are generally less certain about their vote choice, feel less efficacious about politics, and therefore more often use VAAs to gain understanding of the election at hand and to determine their vote choice. This general difference is also reflected in the composition of VAA users: second-order election VAAs are relatively more often used by seekers and doubters. Additionally, in second-order elections, all types of users generally use VAAs much later in the campaign.

These findings can be explained by the second-order national election literature: voters are generally less engaged and interested because less is at stake in such elections (Heath, McLean, Taylor, & Curtice, 1999; Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011). Not in line with this literature, however, is the higher interest in the political campaign by VAA users in second-order elections. This unexpected finding might be explained by the fact that political information is scarcer in these elections, and voters have to put more effort in becoming informed. In the supply of political information in second-order elections, VAAs seem to have an important role.

The second general conclusion of this dissertation is that users' understanding of political issues can be affected by how these issues are framed. Chapter 4 shows how, by changing the headers above the statements in an actual VAA, users' opinions were affected. By changing only the headers, I use an operationalization of emphasis framing that is as narrow and minimal as possible and resembles equivalence framing. The actual statements were kept the same across versions, making sure that the only factor explaining the difference in attitudes was the frame suggested by the headers, not any other aspect of the statement. Still, I found a statistically significant, albeit modest, effect of this framing variation. This subtle variation pushed people's opinions in the direction of the frame. In other words, if issues were framed in a right-wing way, users tended to give slightly more right-wing opinions on the issue. This was found both among very politically interested and less interested people.

Additionally, this framing effect is yet another way in which design aspects affects the voting recommendation people receive, in addition to other wording effects, statement selections, calculation method and way of presenting the advice (see e.g., Germann & Mendez, 2016; Lefevere & Walgrave, 2014; Rosema, Anderson, & Walgrave, 2014). One possible interpretation of the results reported in Chapter 4 is that VAA developers do not have to worry about the way issues are framed, as only slight differences are found among an exceptionally large sample. I argue, on the contrary, that the effect of this subtle manipulation indicates that there must be larger effects of issue framing by statements themselves (rather than the headers). VAA builders have to summarize a political issue in one or two lines, and any formulation they choose

will contain a particular framing of the issue.

The third conclusion is that, while VAAs could affect how users understand particular issues, no evidence was found for an increased understanding of party positions after VAA use. About one in every four to five VAA users use the tool to gain more insight into the positions of parties (see Chapter 3), and lower educated people more so than higher educated people (see Chapter 2). Arguably the most important type of information provided by VAAs is the positions of parties on salient issues, so I expected people to be better at identifying these positions, especially lower educated people. However, the positive relation between VAA use and political knowledge as found in earlier studies (Schultze, 2014; Westle, Begemann, & Rütter, 2014)¹ did not hold in the causal test reported in Chapter 5.

One reason for the different findings might be that this test was quite demanding: the effect on knowledge was measured one to five weeks after using the VAA. Additionally, it was measured among a group of already quite knowledgeable people, which could mean that there is a ceiling effect. Another reason for the inconclusive findings could be that earlier studies looked at national elections and mock elections, while Chapter 5 studied the effect in the context of municipal elections. In these local elections, there might be a less clear connection between party ideologies and their positions on concrete issues. In any way, there is no clear contribution of VAA use to knowledge about party positions, and more research is needed on this topic.

Conclusion four is that VAA use leads to more internal political efficacy. After using a VAA, users more often felt they were informed about politics and had a good understanding of politics. Although small, this effect is significant across the board, and in line with the expectations. Using VAAs will give people the feeling that they are making a more informed voting decision, since they took all important issues into considerations and compared all parties on these issues. Also in line with the expectation is that lower educated people are generally less efficacious, and the gain in efficacy is largest for them. This might be because they are on average less often exposed to political information and therefore more often feel like they learned something new.

Summarizing, VAAs are used by different types of voters with different resources and motivations. While the most interested and efficacious voters are not using VAAs for a better understanding of politics, less interested voters do indicate they use the VAA to learn about politics. However, neither of these groups of citizens actually profits from using a VAA in terms of knowledge about party positions. Resources do matter for efficacy: VAA use contributes to internal efficacy for everybody, but even

¹ As a matter of fact, Westle and her colleagues (2014) emphasize that the effect they find after using the *Wahl-O-Mat* is small and positive overall, but for some issues respondents were less successful in identifying the correct party positions. Also the number of “don’t know” answers increased after using the VAA

more so for lower educated citizens. So, while VAAs do not seem to close the knowledge gap, it does contribute to closing the efficacy gap. Finally, there is no difference between more and less interested people in the way framing of issues in VAAs affects their understanding of these issues.

6.2 VAAs and citizen competence

Taken together, do Voting Advice Applications contribute to citizen competence? This dissertation demonstrates that, because of the wide reach of VAAs and the diversity of their users, VAAs are a potentially powerful tool to mobilize citizens who are less interested and politically engaged. Especially in second-order elections, where a majority of VAA users can be described as seekers or doubters, VAAs seem to gratify information needs of many visitors who otherwise do not consume much political information. The picture that arises from Chapters 2 and 3 is more optimistic about the capacity of VAAs to reach disengaged citizens than earlier research on VAA users, which concluded that the average VAA user is very politically interested anyway (Marschall, 2014; Marschall & Schultze, 2015). This new insight is the result of looking at differences between users instead of studying the average user, and it is the result of taking into account second-order elections, where VAAs are increasingly often deployed as well (Sudulich, Garzia, Trechsel, & Vassil, 2014).

VAA developers aim to contribute to citizen competence, and hence to democracy, by engaging more voters with politics, increasing political understanding and helping voters to make better-informed voting decisions (De Graaf, 2010; Marschall & Schmidt, 2010; Nuytemans, Walgrave, & Deschouwer, 2010). Hence, they are designed to give users more insight into the positions of parties on key issues, and are aimed primarily at those who are not already informed and have not already decided which party to vote for. The findings suggest that this purpose of VAAs resonates more with the needs of users in sub-national elections, because in such elections users more often indicate to be unsure about their vote choice, to be not very efficacious and to be interested to learn about party positions.

One reason for this might be that VAAs, implicitly, have the issue voting model (Downs, 1957) as a point of departure. This model assumes that voters have opinions on concrete issues, and want to elect politicians based on their agenda concerning these issues for the upcoming period of office. Therefore, this model of the voter decision process might fit better with local and regional elections, where ideology potentially plays a more modest role, and campaigns are about very practical and proximate issues that do not necessarily all have ideological loadings, such as whether there should be a new highway between A and B. Because these issues are very concrete and specific, voters might also more often have readily available opinions about them, com-

pared to national elections where many issues are abstract, general, and more remote to the daily lives of voters, such as whether the government budget for development aid could be reduced.

In view of the different groups of citizens VAAs manage to reach, and the extent to which they seem to fulfil information needs, it is striking that VAAs do not appear to contribute to political knowledge – neither for those with many resources nor for those with less. Using VAAs does not change the knowledge gap, or digital divide – hence this corroborates the normalization thesis that the traditional boundaries between un-informed and informed citizens are not affected by online media (Bentivegna, 2006). On the other hand, VAAs do contribute to internal political efficacy, especially so for lower educated voters. This has a clear potential for a mobilizing effect; VAAs seem to close the gap in political efficacy, and efficacy is a crucial determinant of political engagement and turnout (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Möller & De Vreese, 2013). VAAs may even lead to more political knowledge in an indirect way, if citizens pay more attention to political information because they feel more efficacious about politics.

In any way, VAAs turn out to gratify different needs for different groups of people, and their popularity indicates that many people believe it is worth the time and effort to use these tools and think about political issues. Many of them are people who do not inform themselves about politics that much, and they appear to be mobilized by using a VAA, and feel more efficacious because of using a VAA. These are some clear reasons that VAAs should be available during elections.

It is, however, important for users to realize that the VAA result is subject to many assumptions, biases and design choices, and that the VAA result should therefore not actually be interpreted as a voting advice. VAA developers themselves warn about this, but it is important to keep repeating this message (Wagner & Ruusuvirta, 2011). I suggest VAAs can best be viewed as tools that offer a concise summary of party manifestos on a set of concrete political issues, and help users to compare the policies and agendas proposed by parties against each other and against their own opinions. In this way, they can help citizens to look beyond campaign slogans and horse race-like coverage of the election campaign, and focus on issues and positions of parties (Walgrave, Van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008).

6.3 Deliberative VAAs

In addition to being informed and to participate politically, citizen competence also encompasses the competence to develop one's own opinions about an issue, irrespective of how the issue is presented (Druckman, 2001). With respect to this dimension of citizen competence, there is some room for improvement in VAAs. The issue fram-

ing experiment in Chapter 4 shows that people’s understanding of an issue could be affected by VAAs, even by very subtly suggesting, using one or two words, what the issue is about. This might indicate that users are in need of more information to make a judgment about the issue. Instead of trying to be as succinct as possible about issues (and inevitably framing issues in certain ways anyway), VAAs could also do more to inform users about issues and provide background information, arguments and possible positions on an issue. In other words, it could be beneficial to have a stronger focus on developing opinions about political issues as a goal, rather than finding a party that matches supposed fixed opinions.

Fossen and Anderson (2014) suggest that a “deliberative VAA” might help to overcome a gap in having well-considered views about what should be done about particular issues, and what positions parties should have, rather than knowledge about what positions parties do have on issues. The gap in having developed opinions about issues is more worrisome to political scientists and theorists (e.g., Caplan, 2007; Fishkin, 2009) than the gap in knowledge about party positions which traditional VAAs try to address. Next to providing background information, more deliberative VAAs could encourage voters to exchange opinions with others, and make voters aware of inconsistencies in their opinions (e.g., favoring an increase in spending on health care and lowering taxes and keeping the budget balanced at the same time) (Fossen & Anderson, 2014).

One initiative that is interesting in this regard is the Political Balance Scale, a Dutch VAA addressing the inconsistencies in voters’ preferences, forcing users to choose between policy programs (for the philosophy behind this VAA, see Korthals & Levels, 2016). This tool also meets complaints about traditional VAAs that they give voters the impression that a lot can be spent and arranged by the government while lowering taxes at the same time and ignoring the need to make trade-offs (“*Eindhovense raad: Te veel gratis bier in Stemwijzer*”, 2014).

Regular VAAs, like *Stemwijzer*, *Kieskompas*, *Smartvote* and their international spin-offs, could also do more to encourage users to reflect about their opinions. For example, VAAs could provide arguments pro and con each position with every statement. Users then have many different views at their disposal and will be able to make a more informed judgment about the issue. *Stemwijzer* offers the arguments that parties have for their positions on each statement, in a pop-up window after users click a button. This option could be made even more obtrusive, and to avoid steering people’s opinions by following their favorite parties, the party labels could be blinded². If users spend more time developing an informed opinion about issues, they will probably also pay more attention to the positions that parties have on these issues, and hence increase their political knowledge.

² This suggestion was made by Jonas Lefevere at a conference on VAAs.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The scope of this dissertation is limited to VAAs, and within the study of VAAs it is limited to the way VAAs affect understanding of politics in Dutch elections. Still, this is studied from multiple perspectives and multiple contexts are taken into account. Additionally, and naturally, the studies reported in this dissertation suffer from a number of more specific shortcomings. The specific limitations of the separate studies are discussed in the respective chapters. Here, I will discuss the general limitations this dissertation deals with, and suggest some directions for future research.

Doing research on VAAs offers interesting opportunities, like large samples, data from minute to minute, and the possibility to carry out a field experiment involving all users, randomly distributed over experimental conditions and a very precise measure of the effect. VAA research however also introduces a couple of particular challenges. A first challenge is related to external validity. Unlike in most research on public opinion, campaign dynamics or media use, it is not evident what the population of interest exactly should be. Do we want to draw conclusions about all citizens of the Netherlands? All voters? All VAA users? Or all users of one particular VAA, in a particular election or constituency?

Most studies in this dissertation (those reported in Chapters 2, 3 and 4) are based on log data from *Kieskompas*, which means no inferences can be made about non-users. I do, however, argue that users of *Kieskompas* are to a large extent comparable to users of other VAAs in the Netherlands and across Europe. Studies of VAA users without exception found users to be more often male, relatively young and highly educated, and relatively interested in politics (for a summary, see Marschall, 2014). Chapter five is different from the other chapters in that it includes non-users – however, these non-users are very similar to users since they have been VAA-users before.

The lack of a well-defined population, the non-random nature of sample selection, and the large size of the samples also affect how self-evident the use of inferential statistics is. The assumption behind hypothesis testing statistics, that the sample is randomly drawn from a well-defined population, does not hold in the experimental studies in this dissertation. The issue framing experiment does not use a sample but investigates the entire population of VAA users in Utrecht, and the quasi-experiment on knowledge and political efficacy draws on non-random data. However, most experimental studies do not use data that is representative for a larger population. I still used inferential statistics to provide an indication of the signal-to-noise ratio, i.e., to what extent the observed effect is larger than the measurement error.

The lack of data on non-users is another limitation of this dissertation. The typology based on VAA data shows that they reach a group of voters who usually are not very interested in politics. It is not clear, however, how large this group is relative to

other voters who do not use VAAs. To get more insight into the capabilities of VAAs to bridge the knowledge gap and contribute to understanding among the disinterested, a replication of the typology would be needed on a sample that is representative of all voters of a country.

For future research, I suggest that the VAA user typology is used to obtain a better understanding of VAA effects. Most extant research on the effects of VAAs on knowledge, turnout and voting decisions does not take into account individual characteristics and motivations of VAA users (Andreadis & Wall, 2014; Enyedi, 2015; Schultze, 2014), though it is very well conceivable that VAAs have different effects for checker, seeker- and doubter types of users. Some efforts have already been undertaken in this direction: for example, Gemenis and Rosema (2014) find that the effects of using VAAs on turnout are stronger for younger and lower educated people, and for those with weak party identification and limited political knowledge.

The effect of a VAA's voting advice on vote choice would be interesting to differentiate for diverse types of users especially. The typology developed in Chapter 2 suggests that seekers are most susceptible to the voting advice – as they most often indicate to use the VAA to “determine their vote choice”. Additionally, as Zaller (1992) argues, when the campaign gets more intense, the least politically sophisticated voters are more exposed to political information, and will be most influenced by the campaign. Seekers – less sophisticated than the majority of VAA users – consult VAAs close to election day and will therefore probably be most subject to the persuasive effect of voting recommendations. Future research should assess this hypothesis.

Another direction for future research is what the effect of VAA recommendations on vote choice imply for democratic representation. Does this lead to an election outcome that better reflects the opinions of citizens on concrete issues – in other words; do voting decisions to a greater extent follow the issue-voting model? Since the VAA does not take into account what people voted last time, will a VAA effect on vote choices lead to more volatility? And, since the VAA does not take into account which parties are large and which are small, will a VAA effect on vote choices lead to more fragmentation on the aggregate level?

Despite the limitations listed here and in the individual chapters, this dissertation offers evidence that VAAs have an important role in the provision of information in election campaigns. They have the capacity to bridge the knowledge gap, affect opinions and raise political efficacy. As long as users do not interpret the recommendations as evidence-based directions for their choice at the voting booth, VAAs are a useful and powerful tool to inform about political issues and party positions, and future types of VAA might prove to be even more useful.

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