Voter Advice Applications give the increasingly non-partisan electorate the means to choose the right political match

Apr 30 2012

Voter Advice Applications (VAAs) can engage the electorate, and have the potential to educate them on key issues in an election. **Nick Anstead** *argues that in addition to their obvious civic function, VAAs have the potential to give researchers some ideas for new frameworks that bind together citizen's political views.*

Anyone who has been in London in the past few weeks can't help but notice that we are getting close to election time. In many ways, mayoral politics seems to be based on turbocharged versions of many contemporary political communication trends – populism and personalisation chief among them. Certainly, the continuation of the Boris and Ken saga is a great story, while recent by-elections and polling evidence suggests weakening support for the major parties. Thus, the possibility of minor party or independent break-through of some kind. This makes for a fascinating contest.

I am lucky enough to have been invited to be involved in an exciting online project related to the election, which aims to both inform voters and gather data for academic study. Developed by researchers at the University of Zurich and Queen Mary, University of London, Mayor4London.com is from a sub-genre of political websites known at *Voter Advice Applications* (VAAs).

VAAs work by coding candidate and/or party positions on various electoral issues. Citizens can then sign onto the site and answer questions about their own beliefs on these issues, and see to what extent they agree or disagree with various electoral options they have. Essentially, it is a more focused version of the political compass quiz that many people have taken online.

Such web applications have been around for a long time. The first such site, Stemwijzer, was set up in the Netherlands in 1998 and attracted a quarter of a million users. The same site was used 4.7 million times in the 2006 election. In their paper on the subject, Stefaan Walgrave and his colleagues note that this amounts to an astonishing 40 per cent of the Dutch electorate.

The virtue of such sites is obvious – they engage members of the electorate, and have the potential to educate them on key issues in an election. For example, Mayor4London has a battery of questions ranging across issues including transport, mayoral powers, crime, the economy and education. When they are completed the questionnaires, users are presented not only with their own results but also with quotes from the candidates advocating their positions.

Tools such as this are particularly important in an era where citizens are becoming decreasingly attached to political parties, and their voting choices are more likely to fluctuate across time and jurisdictions. In short, the type of partisan cues that governed the decisions of many voters just a couple of generations ago are getting weaker, and more people go into an election with an open mind about who they will support.

The nature of the London election – and other devolved elections, as well as European Parliament elections – also increase the educational utility of VAAs. Unlike a Westminster election, voters need to make multiple choices for both the supplementary vote mayoral election and the additional member system assembly elections. So even for those committed to supporting a particular party,

there is a question about what to do with their other preferences. VAAs can play a role in informing this process.

However, these very benefits also open up systems like Mayor4London to criticism. After all, some political questions are inherently complex and do not lend themselves to simple, reductionist answers. This is an important critique, but I would argue it misrepresents these *Voting Advice Applications*. Indeed, that very term (which is embedded in the literature, so we are now stuck with it) is somewhat misleading. Evidence gathered by Walgrave et al on the subject suggests that voters do not slavishly follow the advice they are given. Rather, the role of the site is to provoke contemplation and conversation on the key issues.

One important element of Mayor4London embodying this philosophy are the social elements of the site. As well as being integrated with Facebook and Twitter, the application also gives each user who completes the survey a personal pin number which they can (if they wish) share with friends to compare and contrast their political views.

VAAs have a second use, going beyond there civic function. For academics, they provide an interesting way of gathering data (which, I should stress, is made completely anonymous). While not capable of providing representative information on the electorate, they do allow for a broader understanding of how certain segments of the public relate different political issues together. The notion of being "left-wing" or "right-wing" in a traditional, partisan sense is increasingly anachronistic for many people (indeed, the recent influence of both blue Labour and red Toryism might lead us to question if citizens could ever have been neatly compartmentalised in this manner). Sites such as Mayor4London have the potential to give researchers some ideas for new frameworks that bind together citizen's political views.

Another interesting – and much under-researched – question which the data might help address relates to citizen's attitudes to devolved politics. Although there is increased debate about Scotland and the national question, we still have quite a limited understanding about how voters' attitudes have evolved to reconcile their voting decisions for different levels of government. London offers an interesting case study of this process in action.

Mayor4London will be running until the election on May 3rd. Please do take a look at the site and pass it on. Also, we value any feedback.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

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