

New Research Project: Voting Advice Applications – Are they useful and how should they be designed?

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Polis-EBU Research Fellow Kamila Varadinová has recently arrived at the LSE from Czech Radio for her month long fellowship, during which she will research the creation and implications of voting advice applications (VAAs). The information she gathers and her resultant report will provide the basis for the creation of the first voting advice application in the Czech Republic. In the following blog post, Kamila will outline the debate surrounding voting advice applications and their design.

Blog post by Kamila Varadinová



Do Voting Advice Applications increase a voter's understanding of political parties' positions?

The popularity of VAAs in recent years has been consistently high in Europe. In the last Bundestag elections, a new record was created when the voting advice application Wahl-o-mat was used by more than a million German voters. The attractiveness of using VAAs for voters is apparent; they get a comparison of their preferences with the preferences of all political parties. The advice of a VAA, in indicating what party is ideologically closest to a voter's, has value. This is all done without much effort on the part of voters and through an entertaining medium. Due to the increasing popularity of VAAs and their potential to impact a voter's choice of candidate, public discussion as well as criticism of their use is growing.

Do Voting Advice Applications lead to populism?

Some who argue against the use of VAAs say that they reduce complex political issues and change them to simple yes/no answers. However, it has also been argued that the aim of VAAs is not to help voters to understand complex political issues and that VAAs do not help voters form an opinion. Rather, VAAs assume that a voter has already formed an opinion. The goal of VAAs is thus more modest – to indicate the party that the voter most agrees with.

What do voters take into account when choosing a candidate?

Although parties' manifestos are important to voters, the decision of whom to vote for is influenced by many other factors. Voters can be persuaded because of a leader's charisma, the religious orientation of parties or populist bribes. In addition, there can be a psychological dimension as individuals could feel that by using a VAA they are letting a questionnaire choose the party they should vote for.

Are VAAs easily manipulated?

For some, the most important argument against the use of Voting Advice Applications is the impact they have on a voter's choices and whether voters may be manipulated by them. The advice voters get may vary across the VAA they choose to use. Van Praag (2007) examines different Dutch VAAs for one election and found "that only 43% of users received the same advice from different VAAs". Given that VAAs compare preferences to party manifestos, the selection of the information to include and compare has a significant impact on the resulting advice of these applications. Walgrave et al. (2008) explain that the reason for the discrepancy of advice given across VAAs is the choice of the particular statements and information used to determine policy positions. If you choose different issues, you can get different recommendations. Moreover, Walgrave et al. (2008) argue that some issue choices can favour

one party and disadvantage another as particular parties may occupy certain issues. The result is that advice given by Voting Advice Applications is also limited to the given number of issues that the application designers have chosen to highlight. The key question for VAAs then becomes the way of selecting issues so that they are representative.

How to design a reliable VAA?

The quality and fairness of VAAs may be different as the selection of issues can be done by single analyst or by a group of professionals. For example, Dutch Kieskompas use a method to set the positions of the parties, consisting of the combination of expert's assessments (this includes political lobbyists, government officials and scientists), research on party manifestos and the involvement of the parties themselves. What should always be transparent is how the VAA was designed and on what principles, and who paid for its development. During my fellowship at Polis one of my key tasks will be to compare different VAA design principles and get recommendations for the design of the Czech VAA.

Blog post by Kamila Varadinová

Sources:

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Image source: League of Women Voters of California

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