

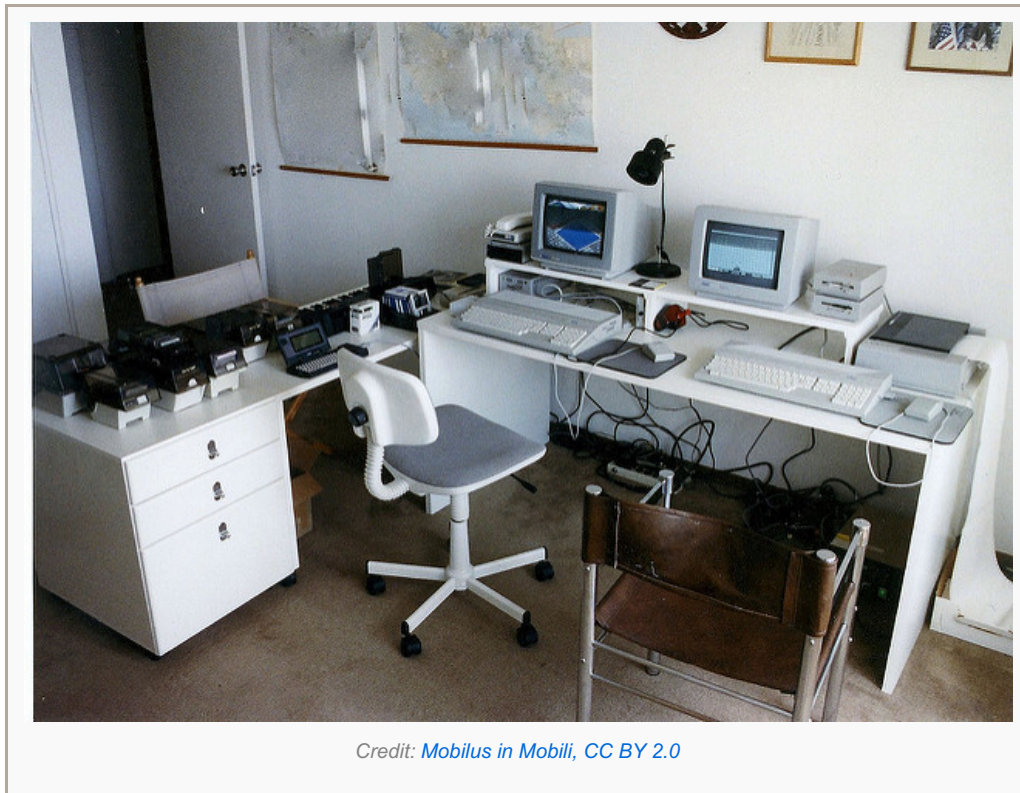
When using Voter Advice Applications, citizens should be aware that they reflect the political assumptions of their developers

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Voter Advice Applications (VAA's) have grown in popularity over recent election cycles, with users matched to a party on the basis of their agreement or disagreement with certain statements or policies. Here, **Thomas Fossen** and **Bert Van Der Brink** argue that though VAA's present themselves as objective sources of political information, they in fact reflect the presuppositions of their developers, and their users should be aware of this when using them.*



Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) are online tools designed to help citizens decide how to vote, such as *Election Compass* in the UK, *Wahl-o-Mat* in Germany, and *EU Profiler* for the European parliamentary elections. The use of such applications is proliferating around the world, and there is an increasing variety on offer. Most readers will be familiar with the typical format: the VAA offers the user a set of statements, soliciting their opinion on a range of issues, in order to match their responses with those of parties or candidates in an election. At first sight, this 'matching model' seems to generate a win-win situation: political experts involved in VAA design leverage the voting competence of users by giving them easy access to the standpoints at stake in an election, thereby improving the quality of the electoral process. Can VAAs deliver on this promise?

A lot depends on how exactly they are interpreted. One common way of thinking about VAAs is as a *mirror* of political reality. The application offers the user, as it were, a look in the mirror, in which she sees a crystal clear reflection of herself as situated within the political landscape. The mirror helps the user to separate fact from fiction in the chaotic electoral circus, and places her in 'her' spot in the landscape. The basic thought behind this picture is that the tool enhances the user's competence to vote by matching her subjective preferences with objective information about what is on offer in the election. On this interpretation, the force of the outcome of the application,

for a user, derives solely from her own preferences. Provided it is methodologically sound, the tool itself remains entirely neutral: it merely provides information, like a clear and undistorted mirror. A clear proponent of this view is the UK VAA *Who Shall I Vote For*, which claims to help you " [find out which party you](#) should vote for" by providing "No spin. No bias. Just facts."

We argue that this picture of the VAA as a mirror is deeply misleading. Even a well-developed, methodologically sound VAA does not simply reflect what is at stake in the election by neutrally passing along information. Rather, it structures political information in a way that is informed by the developers' presuppositions. To see this, consider that in order to do their work, VAAs must reduce the complex reality of electoral politics to manageable proportions and present this to the user in an accessible way. They present the user with a picture, a representation, of the electoral landscape. But any way of doing so for the purposes of voting advice involves choices as to what the election is ultimately about. What are the relevant aspects of the election that a VAA should capture? Any answer to that question involves a specific and contestable conception of the meaning of the act of voting and the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Consider for example the choice by many VAAs to focus on a set of concrete policy statements. In doing so they expect citizens to have fairly clear and stable policy preferences, while lacking detailed knowledge of the policy programmes of parties or candidates; voters are seen as vats of policy preferences to be tapped. In light of this picture, what is ultimately at stake in the election is the transformation of preferences into policy outcomes.

What justifies this focus on policy issues in the first place? The claim that the election is essentially about concrete policy issues is a normative claim, one that fits well with one strand within democratic theory, the social choice approach, in which the electoral process is basically a method of *aggregating* given preferences. Yet this approach is contested. Deliberative democrats, for example, typically hold that the democratic process is primarily about *transforming* preferences, rather than just aggregating them. In their view, individual preferences are a suitable guide to policy- and lawmaking only if they are rational or well considered. Thus VAAs rely implicitly on a specific and contestable theory of democracy that cuts the power of democratic deliberation from its representation of what politics is about. (This point is developed in greater detail in another recent paper from our research project, together with Joel Anderson: "[What's the Point of Voting Advice Applications? Competing Perspectives on Democracy and Citizenship.](#)")

Moreover, *which* issues are supposed to be representative of what is at stake in an election? In making a selection, the developers at least implicitly take a stance on what the salient issues are. This was vividly brought out by a VAA called 'stemijzer' ('voting crowbar') developed by an anarchist collective to counter StemWijzer, the dominant mainstream VAA in the Dutch national elections of 2006. It tried to put issues on the agenda that were not addressed in mainstream VAAs, such as NATO membership and free public transport. Developers inevitably take stances on this point, if only by choosing not to include issues taken to be at the margins.

None of this invalidates VAAs *per se*. But these choices remain hidden if we interpret the tool as a mirror that offers the user a reflection of herself situated within the political landscape. It hides the fact that developers have an active role in shaping the landscape. Thus we propose a different way of interpreting VAAs. VAAs are not mirrors of electoral politics, but *dioramas*, like, for instance, a three-dimensional historical miniature or a shoebox theatre. A VAA does not offer a reflection but a constructed representation of one aspect of what is at stake in an election. The crucial contrast with a mirror is that everything in a diorama is staged according to the presenter's narrative or artistic vision, whereas a mirror simply reflects a structure that is already found in the world. The implication is that VAAs do, implicitly, take a political stance: they adopt and propagate a specific and contestable view of what an election is about.

Some VAA developers recognize this. For example, the makers of the Belgian VAA 'Do the Vote Test' explicitly state that "The 'advice' to vote for a certain party [is best] interpreted as a party profile [...] based on a certain (important) aspect of a voter's world." VAA developers have an active hand in staging electoral dioramas, not just in polishing

mirrors. The choices involved should be made explicit, and not, as in some VAAs, veiled behind claims to neutrality and scientific objectivity. If users cannot see the contestable picture of politics presented in the VAA as a contestable representation of politics, then they are out of tune, in this sense, with politics. And that, of course, cannot be understood as a gain in citizen competence.

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*This post is based on our article “[Electoral Dioramas: On the Problem of Representation in Voting Advice Applications](#)” published in *Representation* 51 (3): 341–58 (2015). It represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit UK. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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