

Book Review

Arthur Edwards

Department of Public Administration, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

E-mail: edwards@fsw.eur.nl

Matching voters with parties and candidates: Voting advice applications in a comparative perspective, Edited by Diego Garzia and Stefan Marschall (2014). Colchester: ECPR Press, 262 pp.

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have enjoyed an increasing popularity in recent years, especially in Europe. The history of VAAs started in the late 1980s, when the ‘ancestor’ of all VAAs, the Dutch *StemWijzer* was developed, originally as a small booklet, in 1994 as a diskette, and in 1998 on the internet. Since then, the number of *Stemwijzer* voting advices rose to about 5 million in the 2012 parliamentary elections. The model was exported to other countries, and nowadays VAAs have been implemented in almost all European countries. In Germany, the *Wahl-O-Mat*, introduced in 2002, accounted for 13 million voting advices in the federal elections of 2013. With these numbers of users, VAAs can have a non-negligible influence on election results. Since about 2010, political scientists have begun investigating VAAs. Because most studies are national case-studies, VAA research lacked an integrated framework. This book is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive overview in a comparative manner.

The book is organised into sixteen chapters; it represents a collective endeavour of twenty-seven authors. Each chapter has a clear-cut format. It deals with one aspect of the VAA phenomenon on the basis of a research question, sets out a research design, presents the results, and concludes. The result is a well-researched, efficiently written and highly readable book, even for a readership not acquainted with all aspects of the statistical methods used in some of the chapters. Following the Introduction, the initial three chapters are devoted to various aspects of VAA design. They deal with the selection and formulation of statements, methods used for estimating parties’ positions and the matching algorithm used for producing voting recommendations. The fifth chapter explores the nature of VAA relationships with the traditional key actors in political campaigns: parties, voters, and mass media. The following six chapters are dedicated to VAA usage and impact. Chapter Seven addresses the ‘conventional’ questions of ‘how many’ and ‘who’. This chapter is a clear example of how a comparative approach increases our understanding of factors, which have an influence on the popularity of VAAs and the composition of the user groups, and how these two elements are interrelated. The author (Marschall) hypothesises “that the larger the user group becomes, the more representative of the online community and the population it might become”. VAAs seem to be able to reach uninformed and politically uninterested voters (p. 102). Two other chapters in this group address the impact of VAAs on electoral participation and vote choice. Chapter Ten (‘Social representations of VAAs’) undertakes a qualitative ‘bottom-up’ analysis, following a social psychology framework, with the aim of exploring how users evaluate (the use of) VAA applications with regard to their importance, functions and political implications. The last chapter in this group deals with how individual candidates participate in a VAA.

The next group of (four) chapters uses VAA generated data in the study of party politics, campaigning and representation. The spread of VAAs across political systems and among voters has opened up new

possibilities for social and political science research. In their Introduction, Marschall and Garzia argue that “VAAs’ most relevant contribution to the discipline probably rests with the huge number of parties’ issues positions coded across time and space by VAA developers” (p. 6). One chapter examines the use of VAA generated data for mapping partisan supporters in the ideological space. Another chapter uses the *EU Profiler* (a VAA launched for the EP elections in 2009) for investigating the representative linkage between European political elites and voters. The third chapter in this group addresses the question concerning the impact of the electoral system on the positioning of parties and candidates in electoral campaigns. Chapter Fifteen concludes this group. It examines a pivotal issue with regard to the quality of political representation: To what extent does the post-electoral legislative behaviour of Members of Parliament correspond to their pre-electoral campaign pledges? This issue also involves the informational reliability of VAAs in terms of how parties will behave after the election. Chapter Sixteen has a special place in the book, because it addresses an almost neglected perspective: How VAAs and their design are connected to democratic theories and normative models of democracy. Anderson and Fossen argue that the justification of VAAs on the basis of its contribution to strengthening democracy, unavoidably takes a normative stance. They identify three themes to which VAAs reveal an (implicit or explicit) commitment: assumptions regarding citizen competence, political participation and democratic representation. Their discussion also implies that the assumption that methodological rigour and scientific expertise guarantee the legitimacy of VAAs is too narrow (p. 225).

VAAs are not toys. They do influence the vote choices of a significant part of the users (see Chapter Nine). The book concludes with a declaration (‘The Lausanne Declaration on Voting Advice Applications’, owing its name from a workshop held in Lausanne in May 2013), in which certain standards and minimal requirements are recommended that should be respected by all the makers of VAAs.

This book succeeds in its ambition to provide a comprehensive overview on VAAs. Still, I have a few critical remarks. Firstly, although there is a chapter on the usage of VAAs by individual candidates, there is no such chapter on the usage by political parties. In their chapter on VAAs as campaign actors, Krouwel, Vitiello and Wall devote a section to the interactions of VAA developers with political parties, especially for selecting and framing issue statements and for determining the parties’ positions on the selected issues. However, some important questions, including if and how the existence of VAAs affects the formulation of election platforms, and how parties have adapted their campaigns to them, are mentioned but not investigated. These questions have a strong bearing on the normative issues raised by Anderson and Fossen. The impact of VAAs on election platforms and campaigns can be seen as important mechanisms in terms of several normative assumptions underlying VAAs (e.g., issue voting, delegate model of representation). Are election platforms and campaigns in countries where VAAs have established themselves for some time increasingly formulated in specific issues? And if so, is this causally connected to the existence of VAAs? Secondly, in their chapter in which they investigate the congruence between election pledges in VAAs and post-electoral parliamentary voting, Fivaz, Louwerse and Schwarz raise the issue concerning the reliability of VAAs as predictors of the total legislative agenda after the elections. In their analysis this factor is unknown. As the authors indicate, this is a very relevant topic for further research (p. 213), but this raises a more fundamental question about the relevance of VAAs for voters. VAAs facilitate voters in performing their role within the model of promissory representation [5]. Andeweg and Thomassen [1] have suggested that platforms with specific election promises are becoming less relevant in a world, in which national governmental agendas are more and more being determined by dynamic, external developments. This would make other models of representation (and other VAA families based upon these models) more relevant for voters, including the anticipatory model of representation in which “representatives focus on what they think their constituents will approve at the next

election, not on what they have promised to do at the last election” [5, p. 515]. VAAs that are exclusively based on specific election promises might actually contribute to increasing political cynicism, an issue also touched upon by Anderson and Fossen (p. 224). Lastly, I would suggest that the findings on the usage and effects of VAAs on vote choice can be supplemented by research from a social-constructionist and interpretive approach. Except for Triga’s chapter on social representations of VAAs, the practices and interpretations in which voters’ VAA uses are embedded, remain an underresearched terrain. Various research questions come to the fore: Which types of VAA uses can be identified and which types of users? How are these types connected to ‘types of citizenship’ and democratic discourses among the citizenry [3]? (How) do users communicate with each other about their VAA uses? And how does this affect the voters’ interpretation of the voting recommendations provided by VAAs and their effects on vote choice? Do voters interpret election pledges on specific issues as commitments of political parties to do specific things or as more general (‘ideological’) policy commitments? Again, these questions have a bearing on the normative issues raised by Anderson and Fossen. For instance, these authors argue that we have little knowledge about the “psychological processes” linking VAA use and voters being better informed and feeling more confident about casting a vote (p. 222). And, last but not least, how can we untangle the work of VAA developers as ‘engineer-political scientists’ [2].

VAAs are excellent examples of how information systems are penetrating into all aspects of our society. Further research on VAAs could benefit from approaches developed in technology sociology, such as Actor-Network Theory [2,4,6] which focuses on the phenomena that emerge when technology and society interact. But this suggestion is based on the conclusion that this book provides a comprehensive, systematic and reliable overview, indeed the most authoritative resource on VAAs for years to come.

References

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