Do Voting Advice Applications have a future?

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This is the third of a series of articles about Voting Advice Applications. Read the first one here and the second here.

 VAAs are digital devices that try to help citizens think about how they might decide to vote in an election. They might be websites, apps or any other online format that you could access via a desktop, laptop, tablet or mobile connected device. They are a niche digital product but they also represent a bigger question for journalism in the Internet age: how can media organisations use the new technology to help the citizen cope with information overload to make better choices for themselves and for society? VAAs are difficult to get right. There are the technical aspects but there are also editorial problems about balance, accuracy and fairness. Even if they work, will they make a difference?

This series of articles will not answer all those questions. But as more people try to use VAAs we hope that this research will give some pointers towards best practice and innovation and help facilitate a debate about their use. The research was carried out by Kamila Varadzinová from Czech Radio as part of a Polis/EBU (European Broadcasting Union) Fellowship. Find out more about the fellowship here.

The Future of VAAs

Kamila Varadzinová

Do voting advice applications have a future? Are they simply a current trend that potential voters will grow out of or will they increase in importance as technology and elections become more intertwined?

Critics of VAAs argue that issues surrounding the reliability and transparency of these tools make them potentially harmful as they may give either invalid advice or manipulate voters into voting a particular way. Additionally, while some surveys made of VAA users indicate that they are found to be useful, it is difficult to say to what extent users would follow the advice or would change their vote based on their VAA result. One may even argue that VAAs could lead to a populist approach to voting as they simplify complex political issues to yes or no answers in some cases.

These reasons could indicate why some media groups have still chosen to stay away from creating their own versions of a VAA as doubts remain as to how you can create a transparent, unbiased and useful tool. However, the future of VAAs may not be so grim as they provide many benefits and open new avenues for voters and parties to get engaged in the process.

While issues remain with the design of VAAs, competition between developers and increasing input from political scientists and members of the public on developing standards of design principles and selecting questions will likely improve their quality.

VAAs generate a huge amount of research data that can be used to see how people vote across different areas compared to political party platforms. Bright et al (2014) find that in five Eastern European countries (Poland, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia) every single user would be better represented by a party outside her country of residence. VAAs could be, in the future, a tool for European election across the countries.

An important aspect of VAAs is how they may encourage potential voters to engage in debate and vote in elections. The 2010 VoteMatch survey indicated that 1 in 20 people surveyed (4.5%) said that they voted as a direct consequence of using the quiz (Vote Match 2010).

Voting advice applications are relatively simple and easy to use and provide an avenue for voters to engage with the political process as well as each other. To some extent, VAA users share their results through social networks and some VAAs, such as Euandi, experiment with this aspect of VAAs by creating discussions between VAA users with the same political preferences via Facebook. The connections VAAs can make between voters and with other technology is a huge area for further development and innovation and we can expect to see them increase in usage and diversity across the EU.

References:

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Vote Match. 2010. User Survey. http://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/campaigns/achievements/entry/vote-match-goes-from-strength-to-strength.

Image courtesy of League of Women Voters of California LWVC, accessed on Flickr

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