



***Voting Smarter?
The Impact of Voting Advice Applications
on Political Behavior***

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Ph.D. thesis defence on 30 January 2012

Abstract

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) proliferate across Europe and beyond. By matching the political offer with voters' preferences, these internet applications assist voters in their decisions. However, despite the growing number of VAA users in several European polities, little is still known about the profile of a typical VAA user, let alone about the impact of VAA usage on individual level attitudes and behavior. Dominant research in this field offers contradictory evidence for it suffers from poor data quality, relies on descriptive analysis and fails to tap causality. To remedy these problems this thesis systematically investigates the patterns of VAA usage and its impact on voting preferences, vote choice and electoral turnout. In so doing I employ data from cross sectional election studies, panel surveys and a large N field experiment. First, I demonstrate that VAA usage is more frequent among the young, educated citizens from urban areas. However, additionally to these baseline properties, VAA users appear to be considerably more active in political life, they are interested in political issues and they are available to electoral competition. Second, using an experimental research design, I demonstrate that VAAs are more likely to affect the young and the less educated. Findings show that VAAs indeed influence users' political preferences, vote choice and motivate voters to participate in elections. More specifically, VAAs help young voters to distinguish between political parties and the less educated are likely to change their vote choice as compared to the previously intended one as a consequence of VAA usage. Taken together, the findings confirm theories of political socialization and the life cycle effects by which one's susceptibility to political information slows down with advancing age. However, the patterns of usage and impact appear to cancel each other out, in that those who most frequently use VAAs are least likely to be affected by their vote advice. Conversely, among those groups where the impact appears to be greatest, the likelihood of VAA usage is lowest. By implication, while the VAA effects can be found on an individual level, the mechanism by which the influence is exercised prevents large changes at the aggregate level. Therefore, much like the boat sailing against the tide covers little distance over ground, VAAs do influence individual level attitudes and behavior, but fail to bring about aggregate change.



Jury: Adrienne Héritier, EUI (replacing Peter Mair), Kristjan Vassil (candidate), Helen Margetts, University of Oxford, Alexander H. Trechsel, EUI (Supervisor), R. Michael Alvarez, California Institute of Technology (videolink).

Bio:

Kristjan Vassil is a PhD graduate from the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. Supervised by Prof. Alexander H. Trechsel, Kristjan has been working on the impact of ICT's on political behavior. He has been involved in the e-voting studies conducted in Estonia since 2005. Since 2009 he has been responsible for fielding three e-voters' surveys and analyzing the data. Kristjan is a co-author of 'Internet Voting in Estonia. A Comparative Analysis of Four Elections in Estonia' - a report to the Council of Europe on Estonian e-voting. He has also been working as a scientific advisor to the Estonian e-Governance Academy, as a research assistant to the European Election Study, and as a country team leader to the EU Profiler. Kristjan has published on the effects of internet voting on voter turnout and how voting advice applications influence individual level political behavior. In his work Kristjan uses survey data and experimental research design, and relies on applied econometric analysis. Kristjan holds MRes degree from the European University Institute and the MA in Communication Studies from the University of Tartu, Estonia.