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Chapter Sixteen

Voting Advice Applications and Political Theory: Citizenship, Participation and Representation¹

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Introduction

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) are interactive online tools designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. In recent years, they have been widely adopted, (*see* Marschall, Chapter Seven in this volume) but their design is the subject of ongoing and often heated criticism (*see* the various chapters by van Camp *et al.*, Gemenis and van Ham, and Mendez in this volume). Most of these debates focus on whether VAAs accurately measure the standpoints of political parties and the preferences of users and on whether they report valid results while avoiding political bias. It is generally assumed that if their methodology is sound, then VAAs can be seen as strengthening the democratic process. But as we argue in this chapter, the setup of VAAs raises basic questions of normative democratic theory as well. Insofar as VAAs are supposed to improve the functioning of the democratic process, it must be clarified in what sense they aim to make a contribution, before it even makes sense to discuss their effectiveness at doing so.

VAAs are often intended to enhance the democratic process by one or all of the following: (1) informing voters about the policy standpoints of political parties (or individual candidates), (2) increasing voter turnout, and (3) ensuring that the composition of parliaments more accurately reflects the political attitudes of the electorate. In the next three sections, we discuss three central bones of contention in current democratic theory that are crucial to these ways in which VAAs typically take themselves to contribute to strengthening the democratic process:

1. Questions about citizen competence: What forms of competence do citizens need to have, and to what extent, for a democracy to function properly?

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2. Questions about political participation: What forms and extent of participation are vital to democracy?
3. Questions about democratic representation: How should the relation between the elected and the electorate be understood?

For each issue we aim to show, first, how the design and setup of mainstream VAAs are tacitly structured by a specific conception of the democratic aim at issue and, second, what some alternative positions on these questions are within contemporary political theory. In the final section, we will discuss some of the implications of this analysis for the responsibilities of VAA developers, and particularly for the procedural neutrality to which they are typically committed. Our conclusion will be that once these issues are identified, developers of VAAs should either argue in favour of their views on democratic competence, participation and representation, or they should rethink the design of VAAs in ways that move beyond their current assumptions, or both.

VAAs and citizen competence

The most prominent claim about how VAAs strengthen democracies is that they address long standing concerns with voter ignorance. The literature on voter ignorance and citizen incompetence makes clear that the majority of citizens have low levels of political knowledge, reason irrationally about the best means to realise their ends, and exhibit widespread, predictable biases in their preferences for candidates, parties and standpoints (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Caplan 2008; Brennan 2011). Some of this is contested, of course, in particular whether ignorance about matters of geography or history is really such a threat to a well-functioning democracy (Lupia 2006) and whether certain cues can serve as reliable heuristics (Goren 2012). But there are also ample grounds for doubting that voters know what they are choosing when they cast a ballot for a candidate or party (Somin 2006), and it certainly seems problematic for voters to choose on the basis of mistaken beliefs about the political positions of candidates and/or parties, for it means that the ballots cast may have little to do with what voters actually find to be important.

As we have argued elsewhere (Fossen and Anderson, forthcoming), this ignorance about where the parties (or candidates) stand is the form of citizen incompetence that VAAs aim, above all, to address. More precisely, they aim to help close a 'competence gap' (Anderson 2009) between how well informed voters actually are, and how well informed they would need to be for the electoral process to function properly.² To the extent to which one views democratic

2. Since we are here making exclusively a formal point about the VAA design needing to address this point, we can refrain from taking a substantive position on what would count as the 'proper function'. It is worth adding that normative issues could include concerns with the comparative size of the competence gaps among citizens and the resulting threats to political equality. (We would like to thank Stefan Marschall for raising this issue with us.)

electoral systems as premised on voters knowing what they are voting for, the potential for a problematic competence gap looms large, especially when sorting out the positions of parties and candidates turns out to be a demanding task, as is often the case in multiparty parliamentary systems. Voters need to be able to sift through lengthy party programs and sort out the claims and counterclaims made about what parties' positions really are, even as the parties do their best to obscure the differences, so as to appeal to as many voters as possible. Thus, even assuming wide-spread access to information and high levels of literacy, the level of political knowledge presupposed by this conception of a democratic electoral system can exceed what most citizens have (or take the time to develop). On the assumption that there are significant competence gaps here, VAAs aim to close such competence gaps by leveraging voters' limited knowledge and time (Garzia 2010).

To the extent to which voters are ignorant of parties' actual positions, the democratic contribution of current VAAs would seem uncontroversial. And yet the exclusive focus on this aspect of citizen incompetence – ignorance about party positions – reveals an implicit commitment to issue voting as a normative principle. The typical setup of current VAAs, centred around a set of statements on policy issues, assumes that competent voting is a matter of finding the party whose stand on current issues best fits with one's political preferences. This 'matching model' of VAAs assumes that citizens lack accurate knowledge of the policy programs of political parties (or candidates), even though they have fairly clear and stable policy preferences on which they are expected to base their vote. But there are strong currents within political theory that challenge this model. To illustrate how contentious this conception of competent voting actually is, consider the following three challenges to it in current political theory.

First, consider the analysis developed within the family of political theories referred to as agonism. The defining characteristic of agonistic political theory is its refusal to equate 'democracy' with existing electoral practice, emphasising democracy's dynamic character and the contestability of a given implementation of democratic ideals (Mouffe 2000; Honig 2007; Tully 2008; for an overview, see Fossen 2008). While current VAAs help voters to orient themselves within a given electoral landscape, agonistic theorists would argue that this treats the status quo of mainstream discourse as a given and depoliticises the selection of issues on the public agenda. From this perspective, the greater concern is that citizens lack the critical attitude and insights that would allow them to resist the myriad and powerful ways in which policy options, 'key issues' and the political landscape itself get packaged (Fossen and Anderson, forthcoming). But once one considers the agonistic position that citizen incompetence is more a matter of an over-readiness to accept the current political offering as given and an lack of imagination in seeing beyond the present horizon, it becomes clear that current VAAs have made a politically significant choice to the extent to which they focus exclusively on ignorance about the policy positions of parties.

A second, parallel point is made by political theorists who see the primary crisis of citizen incompetence not as ignorance about party positions but rather a

failure of voters to form well-considered political positions in the first place. The matching model of VAAs treats the political preferences of citizens as givens, as authoritative inputs into the process of selecting the party and candidate for whom to vote. In recent years, however, a wide range of political theorists and political psychologists have argued that voters not only lack adequate information but also make frequent errors in interpreting the information they have (Somin 2006). Moreover, although it is sometimes claimed that voters' errors end up cancelling each other out and are thus unproblematic, evidence is mounting that citizens are in fact systematically biased in their reasoning about probabilities (Caplan 2008; Kahneman 2011), in selectively filtering out information that challenges existing beliefs (Rosenberg 2007), and in falling prey to how issues are framed (Kelly 2012). Especially within deliberative democratic theory, theorists have contested the very idea that any automatic authority should be given to the political preference that people simply happen to have. They argue instead that democratic politics is best understood in terms of trying to work out the best way of resolving social problems and political challenges (e.g. Bohman and Rehg 1997; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996; Goodin 2008). On this view, voting competently is not a matter of successfully choosing the option that advances one's political inclinations or material interests, but rather a matter of participating in a problem-solving civic process, oriented towards a common good – a process that may well transform one's political preferences. Individual preferences are a suitable guide to policy- and law-making only if they are well considered, which means they take the perspective of others into view. This is a fundamentally different point of departure than is presupposed in matching VAAs, which are built on the premise that users respond to the VAAs' statements on the basis of positions that they had taken (or were unsure of) before starting to use the tool.³

From the standpoint of deliberative democratic theory, however, there is no reason to assume that political opinions should be left unchanged. After all, deliberative democratic theorists typically argue that the democratic process is primarily about transforming preferences, rather than aggregating them (though they often admit that a moment of counting the votes is indispensable in mass democracies). Here again, then, VAAs take a position on how to strengthen democracy that is much more contested than they acknowledge.

A third and perhaps even more fundamental presupposition of current VAAs is thematised in recent work in political theory on the relationship between the 'epistemic' aspirations of a conception of democracy and the scope of the citizen competence it presupposes. As Jamie Kelly has recently argued (2012), building on related work by David Estlund (2008), various theories of democracy differ in terms of the extent to which they see the democratic electoral process as

3. This is particularly true for those VAAs that aspire to serve as measurement tools, as a form of polling. Setting this goal commits designers of VAAs to minimising the extent to which users' individual stand on the issues changes as a result of using the tool, since as a matter of measurement, that would reflect a corruption of the data. Arguably, however, this could be a reason not to approach VAAs as measurement tools.

justified on epistemic grounds or non-epistemic grounds. Epistemic approaches see the point of democratic politics as lying in its distinctive contribution to better justified, more warranted legislation (and other collective undertakings). Non-epistemic approaches, by contrast, understand the point of democratic elections in terms of ensuring stability or avoiding procedural unfairness. Corresponding to the positions along this epistemic/non-epistemic continuum, Kelly points out (2012, Ch. 2), these approaches vary in the level of competence that is expected of citizens. Much less citizen competence is presupposed in conceptions of democracy that view elections primarily as stability-generating public rituals in which power alternates between elites, as in elitist theories of democracy (e.g. Schumpeter 1942; Best and Higley 2010). Once the democratic electoral process is justified on the basis of its contribution to the adoption of better laws, policies and governments, then the whole point of elections depends on it being plausible to assume that voters have a relatively high level of citizen competence needed for reliably discerning what votes will actually lead to better results. Accordingly, conceptions of citizen competence – and thus of the mandate for VAAs – differ not only with regard to type of ability and knowledge involved, but also the extent to which it is urgently needed. It may well be appropriately prudent for VAAs to focus on more limited improvements to citizen competence, but this is not obvious, and should not be treated as such. As is so often the case, concerns with feasibility amount, in point of fact, to taking a controversial political standpoint.

In each of these three regards, fundamental questions are being asked, within political theory, about how we ought to think about citizen competence, the ways in which voters fall short of these standards, and the relative urgency of measures to raise citizen competence. These are discussions with significant implications for the potential contribution of VAAs within the democratic electoral process and for the future design of VAAs.

VAAs and political participation

A second and related way in which VAAs are seen as strengthening democracies lies in their potential to address another persistent concern among political commentators: low or declining political participation. VAAs are presented as lowering the cost of political participation by making the whole process more convenient (Garzia 2010). Key information is collected in an easily accessible form, the decision-making process is streamlined, and some have even suggested allowing valid ballots that could be printed from the VAA (or submitted electronically) (Ladner *et al.* 2010: 120–121). In addition, VAAs have been presented as an antidote to voter disengagement. Stefan Marschall (2008) has argued, for example, that VAAs can increase voter turnout by heightening users' awareness of differences between parties and thus of how much is at stake in the election. For those who don't vote because the parties all seem to be the same, VAAs can provide an additional motivation by sharpening the perceived differences. Here again, however, these claims about how promoting participation strengthens democracy are the topic of lively debates in contemporary political

theory, debates that make clear that particular ways of setting up VAAs presuppose understandings of political participation that are contested.

Consider, first, the assumption that increasing voter turnout itself strengthens democracy. It seems obvious that, other things being equal, higher turnout increases the democratic credentials of elections, since it means that more people express their preferences, and therefore the outcome can more closely reflect the will of the people. Recently, however, a number of political philosophers have been asking hard questions about the assumed desirability of high voter turnout. In *The Ethics of Voting*, Jason Brennan (2011) has argued that citizens who vote without understanding the issues are engaging in a form of recklessness, since they are acting without knowing whether their voting behaviour will cause harm to others (by helping ineffective, ill-willed, or irrational politicians into power). For Brennan and others (Caplan 2008, Friedman 2006), then, raising voter turnout does not necessarily improve the democratic process – not unless the quality of the democratic process is simply assumed to be a matter of more preferences being aggregated. As we saw in the previous section, there is a strong tradition in political theory according to which improvements to the democratic process are measured in terms of whether the resulting governments and laws are better – more just, more effective, more legitimate, or more inclusive. In line with this, one could argue that the only turnout that strengthens democracy is the turnout of competent citizens who vote responsibly, in the sense of voting in a way that they ‘justifiably perceive to contribute to the common good’ (Brennan 2011: Ch. 5, p.133). We are not claiming here that Brennan’s view is correct, but rather signaling a concern that has arisen in the political theory literature and challenges one of the central justifications of VAAs. And it may well be that the voters who vote as a result of completing a VAA are also significantly better informed, in which case Brennan’s objections would be rendered moot. But it is not yet clear what psychological mechanisms would link the two, and we are not aware of any empirical studies that demonstrate that completing a VAA raises the probability of individual users both casting a vote and being better informed. The risk that VAA-usage will increase incompetent (or overconfident) voting may well be worth taking, but it is precisely the point of these critics that this gamble should not be taken on the basis of wishful thinking but on a sober assessment of the evidence.

A second challenge to the focus on voter turnout is taken up by theorists who argue that casting a ballot is not the only, nor perhaps even the most significant, form of democratic participation, as has been argued emphatically by advocates of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970, 2012; Barber 1984); the individual act of casting a ballot is an extremely limited form of participation. It is a private act, carried out in isolation, and it gives citizens no opportunity to shape the content of what is being decided. It is far removed from the dynamic contexts of a town hall meeting or a workers’ council, in which participants can see themselves as jointly and transparently determining the conditions of their cooperation. As Pateman has recently put the point:

In a privatized social and political context in the twenty-first century, consumer-citizens need to be extra vigilant and to monitor providers; they require information, to be consulted, and occasionally to debate with their fellow consumer-citizens about the services they are offered. In contrast, the conception of citizenship embodied in participatory democratic theory is that citizens are not at all like consumers. Citizens have the right to public provision, the right to participate in decision-making about their collective life and to live within authority structures that make such participation possible. However, this alternative view of democracy is now being overshadowed. (Pateman 2012: 15)

From this perspective, the concern is that the overwhelming focus on increasing voter turnout serves to undermine recognition of the importance of these other forms of participation. To the extent that this is the case, the potential success of VAAs in strengthening electoral turnout might have the paradoxical effect of weakening other forms of participation by creating the mistaken impression that concerns about diminished political participation have been adequately addressed. On the other hand, however, one might see increased electoral participation as a step on the way to a deeper sense of political mobilisation (Marschall 2008). As psychological claims about what motivates citizens to become active, informed participants, these arguments clearly deserve further empirical study. And at the theoretical level, more work needs to be done to explain the normative significance of increased turnout.

VAAs and democratic representation

Another sense in which VAAs can be thought to strengthen democracy is by increasing the extent to which elected representatives mirror or are congruent with the views of the electorate (Golder and Stramski 2010). Implicit in the construction of VAAs is the widespread assumption that we have a well-functioning system of representative government just in cases where the legislative actions taken by elected representatives match the positions of their constituents. This is reflected in the exclusive emphasis in many VAAs on matching users' policy preferences with the policy-plans of candidates or parties: representatives are supposed to mirror the will of voters. Yet here again, the proper understanding of the relation between the elected and their constituency is a longstanding subject of debate in political theory, with VAAs tacitly assuming one side in the debate.

The central debate here turns on a classical, if somewhat crude (Rehfeld 2009), distinction between seeing representatives as 'trustees' who are to act according to their best judgment as to the common good, and seeing them as 'delegates' who are to act on the wishes of their constituents (Pitkin 1967). In these terms, if one adopts a delegate model of democratic representation, then it is rational to favour electoral designs that select representatives whose positions regarding the legislative agenda are closely aligned with the positions of voters. And this fits well with what many VAAs aim to do, by matching voters and parties or candidates according to their

policy preferences (rather than, say, their preferences for political ideology, group identification, or leadership style). Indeed, the emphasis on issues is something VAAs frequently mentioned as a way of encouraging voters to engage with matters of substance, rather than distracting candidate images and soundbites (de Graaf 2010; Nuytemans *et al.* 2010). This issue-oriented understanding of political substance suggests that developers are committed to a delegate rather than trustee conception of representation. Users are supposed to choose policies; the tool finds those candidate-representatives who mirror those preferences most closely.

Although VAAs seem to take it for granted, this delegate model of representation is contested by many political theorists. If, for example, one affirms a view of representation as trusteeship, which allows elected representatives more discretion, considerations other than policy preferences can and should count for voters at the ballot box. In selecting good trustees, it matters less whether they pursue specific policies that their constituents endorse and more whether they can maintain the people's trust (Manin 1997; Mansbridge 2003). From that perspective, it becomes crucial to promote electoral procedures (and VAAs) that focus on other aspects, such as candidates' leadership competence, expertise, or commitment to values and principles. Current matching VAAs seem compatible with a trustee conception to a limited extent insofar as one takes policy positions as indicative of underlying ideological commitments, but other pertinent aspects are typically left out. Moreover, questions arise about the degree to which VAAs capture the relevant ideological dimensions and whether user responses really reflect underlying values and principles.

Recent developments in the debate about democratic representation have further complicated the picture of representation as a principal-agent relation between the electorate and the elected (whether as trustees or delegates) (Dovi 2011; Urbinary and Warren 2008). Some theorists argue that establishing fair representation of marginalised groups and maintaining their trust calls for special forms of group representation (Williams 1998; Mansbridge 1999). Others have argued for acknowledgment that representatives have a constitutive role in shaping and articulating the interests and preferences of those being represented (Disch 2011; Saward 2010). Saward, for instance, argues that political representation in general, and democratic representation more specifically, should be understood in terms of the ongoing activity of making and contesting 'representative claims'. In his view, the elected representative is a special case of formally recognised representative, but by no means the only form – representative claims (claims to speak on behalf of some constituency) can be legitimately made and backed up by a variety of political actors (Rehfeld 2006). The upshot of the recent debate has been to significantly broaden the notion of representation, as well as to challenge the opposition between direct and representative democracy, since any form of democratic rule involves some form of representative claim (Näsström 2006).

These theoretical developments reveal the complexity of political representation, but surprisingly little work has been done to show how these conceptual developments feed back into and enhance our understanding of democratic elections, and consequently more work is needed to assess their

implications for VAAs. What is clear, however, is that it would be a highly controversial assumption to claim that democratic representation is simply a matter of mirroring voters' policy preferences.

Conclusion: Contested neutrality and justifying VAAs

We have argued that current VAAs are premised on assumptions about what strengthens democracies, assumptions that may seem obvious but that are, in fact, hotly contested in political theory. In highlighting the competing conceptions of citizen competence, political participation, and democratic representation, we have not made any claims about which conception is more appropriate. Our point is rather that none of these conceptions can simply be assumed, without justification, as a standard for evaluating VAAs. In this closing section we will discuss some of the implications of our analysis, with particular attention to the responsibilities of developers.

As more and more voters rely on VAAs, the developers of VAAs incur significant responsibilities to demonstrate that they can be trusted, that they do not mislead or manipulate users, that they do not have conflicts of interest, that they adhere to methodological best practices, and so on. In this vein, Ladner *et al.* (2010) have argued for the importance of standards of quality and transparency in VAAs. Their discussion focuses on the dangers of insufficient scientific quality, as well as bias and intentional manipulation.

Because VAAs can be more than toys, political scientists should not stay away from them. It is their responsibility too that such tools are set up as transparently as possible on the grounds of scientific knowledge about political issues and the political space. In order to prevent possible distortions these tools have to be researched continuously. In this respect, scientists could be held accountable. (Ladner *et al.* 2010: 117)

While we endorse their point that there is no uniquely correct way of setting up a VAA and their call for best practices in VAA development, there is also a danger of assuming that methodological rigour and scientific expertise guarantee legitimacy.

Designers of VAAs frequently position themselves as playing a neutral role in mediating between voters and political parties or candidates. This neutrality is thought to be demonstrated by their claims to political expertise. On this understanding, VAA developers do not themselves take a political stance but merely help citizens to orient themselves in the landscape as they (developers) find it. Accordingly, what is taken to be decisive for the justification of VAA designs is their ability to provide a neutral mapping of the political landscape that provides a place for everyone, such that the subjective preferences of users can be mapped onto what is presented as an objective depiction of the political landscape. This focus on proceduralist neutrality explains why debates over the methodological rigour and accurate measurement of VAAs are so heated – and so important. At the same

time, in our discussion of what VAAs presuppose regarding citizen competence, political participation and democratic representation, we have seen several ways in which non-partisanship between parties in an election is not the same as neutrality. Indeed, an overly scientific conceptualisation of VAAs carries the danger of obscuring those presuppositions (Fossen and Van den Brink, 2014, n.d.; Fossen and Anderson forthcoming). Even when developers of a VAA successfully avoid favouring a particular party (which itself is no minor accomplishment), they still take sides – implicitly or not – on questions about citizen competence, political participation and democratic representation. As we have seen, for some political theorists the improvements to the democratic process that are needed are decidedly radical: not (merely) knowledge about party positions, but about the issues and the alternatives; not (merely) higher levels of voter turnout, but deeper and stronger forms of political participation; not (merely) a higher level of issue-based congruence between the electorate and the legislature, but a rethinking of democratic representation and of the role of political leaders.

The upshot of this is that, to the extent to which the design of a VAA is justified on the basis of its contribution to strengthening democracy, it unavoidably takes a political stance regarding the understanding of democracy thereby presupposed. It is part of the responsibility of designers of VAAs to be open and transparent about these issues. For all we know, the presuppositions of current matching models – in terms of a social choice theory of democracy; a minimalistic, voting-centred conception of political participation; and a delegate model of democratic representation – might be vindicated. But, certainly for the foreseeable future, these assumptions about the ideals of democracy will continue to be contested.