Facilitating the monitorial voter: retrospective voter information websites in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

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Abstract: Websites for monitoring the past performance of elected representatives in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are analysed according to how they meet the voters' information needs. The case study reveals two distinct models of information provision. One model supports the evaluation of the enactment of election programmes by political parties, the other model supports the monitoring of the performance of individual representatives in terms of the voters' current preferences. Guidelines are suggested for the design of retrospective voter information websites.

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# 1	Introduction

One of the central notions underlying democratic institutions is the responsiveness of political decision-making toward the citizens' wishes (Saward, 1998). In a representative democracy, periodical elections provide a dual mechanism for accomplishing this. Prospectively, they give the voters the opportunity to select candidates on the basis of their election pledges. Retrospectively, elections are a mechanism by which incumbents can be rendered accountable. This assumes that voters compare candidates on their past performance in legislative office. In many Western countries, prospective websites have emerged that support voters in making voting decisions on the basis of election manifestos. These voting indication tools or 'vote matches' are software programmes that correlate the voters' answers on an issue position questionnaire with a database of candidates' or parties' electoral policy propositions (Tops, Voerman and Boogers, 2000). In some countries, websites also have emerged that support voters in their retrospective job. While these websites are less widespread, they might be at least as promising as the voting indication tools in terms of 'voter empowerment'. This paper focuses on these retrospective websites.

The emergence of voter information websites is congruent with the observation made in several election studies that considerations regarding issues and policies have been gaining weight in voting decisions in Western countries, at the expense of previously existing class or partisan alignments. On the basis of his research on elections in Britain, Denver (2003) proposed that it is useful to think of the modern electorate as marked by judgmental voting. Judgmental voting implies

that voters show at least some information-seeking behaviour. With this starting-point we do not look at voting as rational decision-making, in which voters make extensive comparisons between candidates and parties based upon past performance, campaign promises and biographies. Citizens' political uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including their online information-seeking, are dependent on various motivational factors, resources and skills (Norris, 2001; Lee-Kelley and Kolsaker, 2004). However, the opportunities and agencies in the voters' information environment can make a difference. In this environment, websites offer possibilities for providing information from various sources, structuring it in efficient formats, and tailoring it to individual needs. In this way, online information resources could assist the 'monitorial voter', a concept that I derive from Schudson's notion of the 'monitorial citizen', who normally 'scans' his information environment but might be interested in easy-to-obtain kinds of performance data on specific issues (Schudson, 1998, 2004).

This paper investigates how websites on the past performance of elected representatives meet the voters' information needs. I will argue that an account of how a website meets the voters' information needs has to be made by looking at the political system in which the website functions. Political system properties provide a 'horizon of relevance' within which voters develop their information needs. Against this backdrop, a critical assessment can be made of the fit between the voters' information needs and the choices made by the website designers (Lee-Kelley and Kolsaker, 2004). The theoretical aim of this analysis is to contribute to an institutional account of ICTs. While there is a growing literature in which the importance of an institutional perspective is emphasized for the study of ICTs in politics and public administration (e.g. Hoff, 2000; Fountain, 2001; Agre, 2002), analyses in which both

the demand and supply sides of information systems are related to political system properties, in an international comparative framework, are rare.

Three cases will be studied: the website of the Project Vote Smart in the United States (available since 1994), the website 'GeenWoorden' (NoWords) which was available during the 2002 parliamentary election in the Netherlands, and a configuration of websites that recently emerged in the United Kingdom. In the next Section, a theoretical framework of voters' information needs will be proposed. In Section 3, these information needs will be related to institutional properties of different democratic regimes. Section 4 presents the research design, which includes a framework of the main website design choices. The three cases will be discussed in Section 5 and, finally, conclusions are drawn in Section 6.

2   Voters' information needs

In charting the voters' information needs I distinguish two dimensions. The first dimension is the *object* of the voters' evaluations. They can be directed at individual candidates or political parties. For example, because of the election system (proportional representation) and the strong party discipline imposed on Members of Parliament in the Netherlands, there are few incentives for Dutch voters to monitor individual representatives. As I argue in Section 3, the United States is very different in this respect. The second dimension concerns the *focus* of retrospective evaluations. I follow Mansbridge (2003) who discussed four models of representation, namely promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic and surrogate representation. Each model

constitutes a specific role model for the elected representative and an appropriate orientation for the voters.

Promissory representation is based on the idea that during an election campaign, candidates make promises to constituents, and that representatives have an obligation to keep these promises after the election. This model works through the sanction that the voters exercise in the next election. In order to render the representatives accountable, voters need information about (1) the promises made by the candidates in the previous election, and (2) their enactment of these promises in their period as incumbents. In contrast, anticipatory representation is solely based upon the idea that " the representative tries to please the voters in the next election" (Mansbridge, 2003: 517). This model works through the anticipated reactions from the voter in the next election to the representatives' actions during their incumbency. In this model of representation, voters need information about the performance of representatives during incumbency in order to compare this information with their current preferences. Both promissory and anticipatory representation exhibit an inherent power relation, through which the voters can influence the representative's behaviour and can hold him or her accountable. In gyroscopic and surrogate representation this kind of relationship is almost absent. In the model of gyroscopic representation, voters select representatives based on expectations of the representatives' future behaviour, derived from personal characteristics, past behaviour or other cues. Voters try to select a 'good type'. Representatives are presumed to act as 'gyroscopes', pursuing certain built-in goals or understandings of interests (Mansbridge, 2003: 520-521). In this model, voters would primarily look for information about the candidate's convictions, commitments, character and skills. The fourth model is surrogate representation. This is representation by a representative

with whom one has no electoral relationship. This model is particularly relevant when voters face the situation in which their preferred candidate lose in their own district, or when the surrogate representative shares experiences or identities with his or her surrogate constituents that a majority of the legislature does not. As an example, Mansbridge (p. 523) mentions a U.S. Member of Congress who sees himself as a representative for gays and lesbians throughout the nation. For surrogate representation to work, voters need information that assists them in identifying representatives, outside their district, with whom they share substantive interests or identities. In this paper, I limit the focus of voters' information needs to promissory and anticipatory representation because these models constitute a clear accountability relationship between representatives and voters.

As argued by Mansbridge (2003: 526), the four models of representation can be viewed as complementary, not oppositional or mutually exclusive. One obvious limitation of the promissory model, resulting from the complexity and dynamics of modern societies, is the increasing distance between the issues anticipated and discussed during election campaigns and the issues that actually appear on the agenda of the political decision-makers (Offe and Preuss, 1991: 164). However, the basic assumption in this paper is that both the object and focus of voters' evaluations can be related to political system properties. This will be taken up in the next section.

3   National institutional contexts

Website design choices are not made in a vacuum. First of all, the project initiators bring in their own values and presumptions about citizenship and political

representation. Moreover, in case the initiators are established organisations, website design might partly reflect organisational choices made by staff in the project. Furthermore, design choices are made in an institutional context. Institutions function like filters. For instance, they affect the selection of the objects and activities for ICT uses. In regard to retrospective voter information websites this means that institutions affect the choice between monitoring individual representatives or parliamentary parties, as well as the choice of which activities of Members of Parliament are included in the monitor (votes, legislative initiatives etc.).

According to institutional theories of political action, political actors make their choices within an institutional context of certain rules of conduct, codes of rights and duties, and methods constituting a 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen, 1996:252). A part of the institutional context of ICT design and usage in democratic practices is the political system (Hagen, 2000). Political institutions include formal and informal constitutional rules, including the electoral system, the party system and executive-legislative relationships. Against the backdrop of these political system properties, we can evaluate the 'appropriateness' of information-seeking by voters and choices made by the designers of political websites (see also: Hoff, 2000). In this section, I address the two dimensions of voters' information needs and relate these to political system properties. What follows also serves as the basis for the selection of the cases.

Following Lijphart (1984), two opposite models of democracy can be distinguished, the majoritarian model and the consensus model. The majoritarian interpretation of democracy is that the majority of the people should govern and that minorities should form the opposition. Typical majoritarian regimes are characterised by a two-party system, an election system of plurality vote in single-member districts,

concentration of executive power in the party that has the majority of seats in the parliament, and executive dominance over the parliament. In contrast, the essence of the consensus model is that it tries to involve a broad variety of minorities in government, thereby maximizing the size of the ruling majority. Typical consensus regimes are characterised by a multi-party system, proportional representation, sharing of executive power among the parties that participate in broad coalition governments, and an executive-legislative balance.

Lijphart's research revealed that New Zealand and, to a somewhat lesser extent, also the United Kingdom are good examples of the majoritarian model, whereas Switzerland and the Netherlands are prototypes of the consensus model. The United States came out as a majoritarian system as well, although it exhibits an executive-legislative balance rather than executive dominance. This is due to the presidential system of government and the separation of powers in the USA (Lijphart, 1984). In contrast, in the Dutch political system there is rather an executive dominance over the legislature (Andeweg and Irwin, 2002).

These differences bear primarily upon the *object* of the voters' evaluations. In consensus systems, electors vote for a party list. In the Netherlands, apart from the election leaders and a few representatives who succeeded in acquiring a seat by preferential votes, no individual representative has a direct voter mandate. Furthermore, the executive dominance together with the strong party discipline leaves little room for independent behaviour of individual Dutch Members of Parliament. In both respects, the USA is very different. Elections in single member districts produce a direct voter mandate for individual Members of Congress. Furthermore, the executive-legislative balance allows for a less strict party discipline, and as their chances for re-election are strongly dependent on their accomplishments as perceived

by their constituents, individual Members of Congress have the room and the incentives to behave as 'political entrepreneurs' (Hagen, 2000). In the United Kingdom, the election system allows for a direct accountability relation between individual representatives and their voters, but the strict party discipline that is imposed on the representatives in the British House of Commons leaves little room for independent behaviour in parliamentary votes.

With regard to the *focus* of the voters' evaluations, the relationship with institutional factors is more difficult to establish. It could be argued that promissory representation is most relevant to the majoritarian systems with a strict party discipline. In these systems, elections generally provide a clear indication of which party should form the government (Thomson, 1999:5). Moreover, as for the UK, Pilkington (1997) has indicated that both the Conservatives and the Labour Party, either as a permission or as an obligation to carry out manifesto promises, endorse the notion of the party mandate. However, an argument for the relevance of anticipatory representation can be inferred from Lijphart's observation that in a two-party system, political parties have to address a broad constellation of social groups in order to gain a majority, which would lead to more or less similar election programmes. This could induce voters to an evaluation of past performance, without much consideration of election pledges. In majoritarian systems with a weak party discipline, like the USA, promissory representation would have to be related to the promises made by individual candidates. According to Mansbridge (2003: 521), however, gyroscopic representation forms a large part of the representative process in the USA, in particular for the Senate and the presidency, anticipatory representation being the most important mechanism in the House of Representatives. She gives some clues for an institutional explanation of the prominence of anticipatory representation. She

characterizes this model in terms of political entrepreneurs, "motivated to try to attract the votes of future customers" (p. 518). This accords well with Hagen's description of the institutional context in which US Members of Congress find themselves. In contrast, "promissory representation restricts the representative's action after election" (Mansbridge, 2003: 526). In consensus democracies, the institutional conditions are different. Coalition governments make it difficult to ascertain which party is responsible for which policies. In the Netherlands, monitoring party performance is a difficult task for the voter, both in promissory and anticipatory representation. However, the party mandate is an important notion. In consensus democracies, like the Netherlands, election manifestos are not only designed to appeal to voters, they are also the basis for negotiations with prospective coalition partners. In this respect, election manifestos have an institutionally embedded political system function. In his research on the enactment of election pledges, Thomson (1999: 125) concludes that "election pledges are an important element of the political discourse that takes place prior to elections in the Netherlands", and that "substantial numbers of election pledges are explicitly mentioned in the coalition agreements".

4 Research design

4.1 *Framework of main website design choices*

For analytic purposes, a framework is used on the basis of indicators of 'voter empowerment'. In its broadest sense, empowerment can be defined as the expansion of the ability and freedom of choice and action. Participation, access to information and accountability are three key elements of empowerment (World Bank, 2002).

When looking at the impact of ICTs on voter empowerment, the question of whether electronic voting systems could increase citizens' participation in elections is the first question to be discussed (Houston, Yao, Okoli and Watson, 2005). In this paper, we focus on the access to information and the possibility to render politicians accountable (Sharma, 2004). First, the information should be relevant and complete enough to enable the voters to form an opinion about the representatives' past performance. Second, voters should be stimulated to judge the information from alternative points of view (Becker, 2001). Third, voters should be given an opportunity to question politicians about it.

The *object* and *focus* of retrospective evaluations are the first two design choices included in the framework. These are the main criteria with regard to the relevance of the information. As design options, the models of representation represent alternative points of view of the designers' consideration of voters' information needs. A retrospective voter information website will be designated as being designed for evaluating promissory representation if (and only if) it includes an overview of the election pledges made in the previous election.

The next two design choices are the *mode* and *scope* of information. Retrospective information can be provided in the form of factual data or as performance evaluations. If only factual data are presented, such as voting records, the evaluation is left to the site visitors. We look at the scope of the information in terms of the number of policy fields or themes. Scope and mode are the main criteria of completeness.

Another design choice bears upon the kind of parliamentary *actions* that have to be included. Members of Parliament have various means to fulfil their political functions, such as the right to initiate bills, to propose amendments to bills, to present

motions and to vote on them. The designers have to establish which means are relevant enough to be included in a political monitor. The array of included relevant sorts of action is an additional measure of completeness.

A next design choice is the choice of the *actors* that will be involved in the selection and evaluation of the data. Data on parliamentary actions are normally gathered by special agencies in proceedings or records, but the selection of the data for purposes of monitoring has to be conducted by other actors, such as website staff, interest groups or citizen panels. The same holds true for the evaluation of the data. The choice of evaluators should enable the voters to judge the data from different perspectives.

A last design choice concerns additional website facilities, in particular a moderated *discussion forum*. A moderated discussion forum provides citizens with an opportunity to get acquainted with alternative ways of looking at political issues; it should also provide a forum to render politicians accountable. Promissory representation requires some deliberation to ascertain whether representatives have fulfilled their promises – evaluations on this will be debatable – and, if they failed to do so, if they had persuasive reasons for this (Mansbridge, 2003). The anticipatory model of representation would be served by communication, in which citizens reveal their current preferences and evaluations of performance data, and politicians react on this. Independent moderation is essential, not only for ensuring the quality of the discussion, but also for involving politicians in it (Edwards, 2002).

4.2   Case Selection

The research strategy is a case study of three websites within political systems with distinct institutional properties. Above, I have indicated my considerations for the choice of the Netherlands, the United States and the United Kingdom as the system contexts for the cases. Their relevant institutional features can be summarized as follows:

(1) The Netherlands: consensus system (with strong party discipline).

(2) United States: majoritarian system, weak party discipline

(3) United Kingdom: majoritarian system, strong party discipline

The Dutch case is the website GeenWoorden ('No Words'), which was available during the 2002 national election period. This was the first attempt to provide online information on MPs' past performance in the Netherlands. The American case is the website Vote Smart. Since its foundation in 1992 (online since 1994), it has carved out a name as a trustworthy online information provider (IPDI, 2004). In the United Kingdom a configuration of online resources emerged around the website TheyWorkForYou and PublicWhip. I used the following kinds of sources: (1) information available on the websites, (2) interviews with initiators and project staff (Dutch website and PublicWhip website, UK), (3) project documentation (Dutch website) and evaluation reports (on the VoteSmart website, USA).

5   The case studies

5.1   Netherlands: NoWords

In the Netherlands, election campaigns have a predominantly prospective orientation. The political parties formulate their election programmes; the election leaders express their most salient promises; newspapers and interest groups publish comparisons between the election programmes or provide voting indication tools on the Internet. There is no tradition of comparing the performance of political parties in parliament, let alone of individual representatives.

Six weeks before the parliamentary election on 15 May 2002, the website GeenWoorden.nl was launched: an initiative of the Institute for Public and Politics (IPP; an institute for civic education) and the Catholic Broadcasting Association (KRO). The KRO had an interest in 'civic journalism' and saw a new niche for this ambition in holding elected representatives accountable for their past performance. The IPP wanted to lead the way with a 'political monitor' to make parliamentary politics more transparent. A website was developed with four parts: (1) Summaries of the 1998 election programmes of the (eight) political parties represented in parliament on twelve themes; (2) An overview of their deeds on these themes; (3) Expert evaluations of the reported deeds; and (4) A discussion forum for the site visitors.

Two specific themes were chosen within the following policy areas:

- Multi-cultural society: in particular migration and social integration policy;
- Education: in particular on issues of primary and secondary education;
- Transportation policy: public transport and the abatement of slow-moving traffic;
- Public health: waiting lists and shortages of staff;
- Moral issues: euthanasia and gene-technology;

- Democracy: involving the citizens in politics as voters and active
  participants.

'Moral issues' and 'democracy' were priority themes for the KRO and IPP

respectively. The other themes were selected because of their saliency in the public

discussion. However, combating crime and ensuring safety, the policy area that the

Dutch voters regarded as the most important priority, was not included (Van Praag,

2003).

The project staff of the two initiating organisations made summaries of the

1998 election programmes. The parliamentary parties were asked to indicate what

they had done to fulfill their promises (in 200 words on each theme). An important

feature of this project was therefore that the selection of the performance data was left

to the politicians themselves. Experts (staff from interest groups, academic experts

and 'experience experts' from the field) were asked to evaluate the truthfulness and

effectiveness of the reported deeds (100 words on each theme). The summaries,

reported deeds and evaluations were placed side by side on the web pages, searchable

by political party and policy area. On the discussion forum site visitors could provide

their own comments on the information and offer additional reactions. Finally, the

KRO broadcasted a number of programmes on radio and TV that took up the idea of

the project, including 'job evaluation interviews' with politicians.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows the main design choices. Clearly, this website was designed for

monitoring promissory representation. Interestingly, however, the information system

did not work fully according to this model on those issues that became more controversial after the election in 1998. In particular, on the issues of the multi-cultural society several political parties reported deeds that were more restrictive toward immigrants than their 1998 election promises. These discrepancies were noticed by the academic expert, and explained by him to be the result of the change in social climate. On these issues, the anticipatory model seems to be a better tool for interpreting the MPs' behaviour.

Apparently, the political parties were not used to providing clear descriptions of their actions in parliament. In some instances, parliamentary parties presented additional promises, i.e. 'more words', as one member of the project team put it. In her evaluation of the project, the project manager indicated that many reported deeds would require further journalistic research on their actual effects on social problems. However, the information on the website was barely used by the journalists for further research or comment. The experts also had to become accustomed to the idea of the project. Several interest groups initially mailed reports, in which formulations of the organisations' positions on the issues were more prominent than the evaluations they were expected to give.

In the six weeks of its existence, the website counted 60,000 visitors (about 0.5 percent of the adult population). In her evaluation, the project manager concluded that the website was perhaps too cumbersome for the users. For future occasions, she envisages a simpler format, in which 'report marks' are assigned to the political parties. The television broadcasts attracted on average 750,000 viewers. The vast majority of people visited the website to acquire information, not to conduct discussions. Nevertheless, on some issues, in particular on the multicultural society,

lively discussions ensued. In these discussions, politicians were almost absent. A politician provided a short reaction on only one occasion.

5.2   United States: Project Vote Smart

In the USA there is a long tradition of keeping track of the voting behaviour of Members of Congress. Constituents, political candidates, special interest groups and researchers have long been interested in congressional voting patterns (Manning, 1996). Project Vote Smart (PVS) is a civic organisation, founded in 1992 by a number of national leaders from various backgrounds and party affiliations. On its website PVS presents itself as 'a national library of factual information about candidates and elected officials' and as a 'Voter Self-Defence System' against the misinformation and the manipulative tactics propagated through the mass media by candidates and professional campaign practitioners. PVS is funded exclusively through private donations and grants from private philanthropic foundations.

Vote Smart provides the following information about candidates for state and federal office: (1) contact and biographical information, (2) campaign finance information, (3) information on issue positions, (4) voting records (on key votes) of those candidates who have held legislative office, (5) performance evaluations (interest group ratings) and (6) public statements. The information on issue positions is the responses to a questionnaire called the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT). The NPAT asks candidates which items they will support if elected. It, therefore, provides prospective information. However, a substantial number of candidates, about half, declines to complete the questionnaire (IPDI, 2004).

For each candidate, the key votes are grouped by issue. According to the information provided on the website, several criteria are used to select the votes. First, the vote should be helpful in portraying how a Member of Congress stands on a particular issue. Other criteria are comprehensibility, national media attention and a very close margin in votes. Occasionally, when a specific bill is consistently inquired about on the PVS hotline, a vote is added on the website. Descriptions of the votes are written by PVS staff and based on information in the *Congressional Record,* with additional background information from newspapers, magazines etc. Key votes selected by PVS staff go through an approval process before website posting, with five political scientists of opposing viewpoints reviewing both the selection and the content. The hundreds of key votes cover a wide range of issues.

Project Vote Smart collects performance evaluations from special interest groups who provide them. The evaluations are provided on a wide range of issues (the same categories as the key votes), and include the ratings of more than a hundred special interest groups. On the website it is pointed out that ratings done by interest groups are biased and that some groups even select votes that tend to favour members of one political party over another: "Nevertheless, they can be invaluable in showing where an incumbent has stood on a series of votes in the past one or two years, especially when ratings by groups on all sides of an issue are compared".

[Figure 2 about here]

Since no comparisons are made between election pledges and performance data, this website serves the anticipatory model better than the promissory model of representation. The interest groups can be regarded as information intermediaries

examining how the incumbents have performed in meeting the citizens' present preferences ('pleasing their future voters': Mansbridge, 2003: 517).

In an evaluation conducted in 2001, in which various media sites and other non-partisan websites were included for comparison, the site received the highest evaluation from internet users on the standards of 'new information', confidence and "want to learn and talk more about politics" (Lupia, 2001). During the 2000 campaign, two percent of all American adults saw the PVS website, which is a comparatively high percentage of people (IPDI, 2004).

5.3   United Kingdom: TheyWorkForYou

There is a configuration of websites available for British voters to keep track of their MPs. Since June 2004 the website www.theyworkforyou.com is available, developed by a group of volunteers who were previously involved in the development of a range of other not-for-profit websites. Two of them are the FaxYourMP website (since November 2000) and the PublicWhip (since July 2003). The two 'sister websites' TheyWorkForYou and PublicWhip have the aim to make it easier for citizens to keep track on their elected MPs.

For individuals who want to find out more about their MP, TheyWorkForYou provides the most comprehensive information due to its links to other websites. I take this website as the centre of the configuration. By entering his UK postcode, a voter can retrieve the following information:

(a)   Voting records, including a full record available by a link to PublicWhip, and a record of key votes on 'well-known issues', available by a link to the political database Aristotle of the newspaper the Guardian. Guardian staff selects the key votes.

      (b)   Performance data, such as the MP's attendance and rebellion

                    figures (from PublicWhip), the number of written questions etc.

      (c)   Recent appearances in parliament (questions).

      (d)   Early Day Motions signed by this MP (from the official

                    parliamentary website).

      (e)   Biographical information (from the Guardian and BBC News

                    websites).

The PublicWhip specialises in providing and data-mining voting data. Hansard provides the official parliamentary records. The PublicWhip gives a selection of statistics on how MPs have voted at all divisions, their attendance rates, how often they have deviated form the party line ('rebellions') and other figures. [1] The website also gives a ranking of 'top rebels'. Votes can be searched for on subjects.

The PublicWhip offers the site users the possibility of performing their own calculations with the data. An interesting facility is 'Dream MPs'. Individuals, single issue groups or civic organisations can present a profile of "politicians as they want them to be", translate this profile into an ideal voting record of selected divisions, and then make a comparison of the Dream MP to all real MPs. The rankings of real MPs can be used as a kind of performance evaluations. What is especially interesting here, is that they are provided by website users and not by intermediaries as in the American and Dutch cases. For the general election of May 2005, a selection of these Dream MP items were provided on TheyWorkForYou.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 presents the main design choices in the TheyWorkForYou website. Because there are no data provided on previous election pledges, this website serves the anticipatory model better than the promissory model of representation. In the general election period in April and May 2005, TheyWorkForYou had 160,000 unique visitors (about 0.35 percent of the adult population)

6   Conclusions

In this paper, we looked at the design features of websites that provide information on the past performance of elected representatives. The three cases represent distinct models of information provision. The Dutch website constituted an evaluation project on how the political parties enacted their previous election programmes. Parliamentary parties were given the opportunity to report on their 'deeds', which were subsequently evaluated by a panel of academic experts, experience experts and interest groups. In contrast, the American website Vote Smart provides a database of voting records and evaluations on the performance of individual representatives. The evaluations are provided in the form of interest group ratings. In the UK, a configuration of websites is available, providing performance data about individual Members of Parliament. One of the websites offers the users the possibility of providing rankings of elected representatives on ideal profiles.

If we look at how these websites meet the voters' information needs, we can conclude that the Dutch and American websites represent contrasting cases (Figure 4).

[Figure 4 about here]

As indicated above, these differences can be related to the institutional features of the Dutch and American political systems. It has to be emphasized, however, that the suggested connection between political system properties and models of representation is anything but deterministic. In the Dutch case, on the multicultural society issues, we saw that several political parties diverged from the promissory design of the website, thereby trying to please their future voters in a changed social climate. The British website deserves some special attention. At first sight, it more resembles the 'American model', but given the strong party discipline in the British House of Commons it is more rightly placed in cell 2 in figure 4. However, in view of the endorsement of the notion of the party mandate by British political parties (see Section 3), the 'Dutch model' of monitoring the enactment of the parties' election programmes would be at least as appropriate. This option could be combined with a facility monitoring the extent to which individual Members of Parliament conform to the election manifesto of their party. As we saw above, the Public Whip provides data on rebellions, but these data are difficult to interpret, if one has no clue about the relation between these rebellions and the party's previous election programme.

This brings us to an assessment of the websites with regard to voter empowerment. In regard to the relevance of the information, its completeness and the possibility to judge the information from different perspectives, the three websites can be assessed positively, although to different degrees. VoteSmart and NoWords score relatively high on relevance; VoteSmart and TheyWorkForYou/PublicWhip score high on completeness. All websites provide different perspectives for judging the information: VoteSmart by providing rankings from interest groups with different stances on the issues, NoWords by working with evaluation panels of staff from

interest groups, academic experts and experience experts, and TheyWorkForYou by providing 'Dream MP' input from the users. Empowerment also includes the opportunity to discuss the information and to question politicians about it. In this respect, the Dutch website is the most interesting case. On the discussion forum some lively discussions ensued but politicians were almost absent. To be sure, this (unmoderated) discussion forum was explicitly presented as a facility 'for the public' to 'react', not as a forum to call politicians to account for their deeds. The broadcasting association KRO that participated in the project organised a number of programmes on radio and TV that took up the idea of accountability. These programmes attracted a relatively wide audience, but the performance information on the website was barely used by the journalists for further research or comment.

Against this background, the following guidelines can be suggested for the design of retrospective voter information websites:

- *Object and Focus*: the choice between monitoring individual representatives or parliamentary parties, and between monitoring the enactment of election pledges or the performance of representatives on the basis of voters' current preferences has to be considered in the light of political system properties. In some cases, a combination of these options might be appropriate, as indicated above for the UK.

- *Scope and Mode*: Preferably, the scope of the menu of policy fields or themes should be as broad as possible. If only a limited number of policy themes can be included, a selection should be made in view of saliency in the public discussion and voters' most important priorities. Both factual data and performance evaluations should be provided.

- *Actions*: There are two equivalent design options. The first option is that only data on votes are provided. This has the advantage of simplicity. Overviews of voting records and ratings can be presented. The second option is a combination of various 'deeds'. This has the advantage of a more complete account of performance, but it might be more cumbersome for the users to digest these data.

- *Actors*: There are several options for the selection and evaluation of performance data. Data can be selected by website staff, voter panels or (as in the Dutch case) by the politicians themselves. The last option has the risk of serious biases, but this can be discouraged by independent evaluation of the selection on validity and truthfulness. The evaluations can be performed by interest groups, independent (academic) experts, experience experts from the field, ordinary citizens or a combination of them. The selection of evaluators should allow the users to judge the data from different points of view.

- *Discussion Forum*: A moderated discussion forum should be provided. Moderation is especially important for a balanced involvement of politicians in the discussion.

In terms of numbers of site visitors, the empowering effects of the websites discussed in this paper are anything but impressive. The websites attracted a limited number of (probably better educated) people (see also: Frantzich, 2004). The existence of a digital divide affects the access and use of online information resources among the voting population (Joi, 2004; Ifinedo and Davidrajuh, 2005). However, it has to be emphasized that these websites are additional facilities within the voters' information environment. In this perspective, the linkages between the websites and other media

(and with other sorts of websites that attract more visitors) are at least as interesting than sheer numbers of website visitors. For the designers of voter information websites, strategies directed at the integration of the websites in the voters' information environment should be in the focus of their attention. For democratic accountability to work, the quality of the entire fabric of processes of political communication is of primary importance. Dependent on their attunement to the voters' information needs and other criteria of voter empowerment, and their integration in the wider 'ecology of media' (Agre, 2002), retrospective voter information websites can play a role in enhancing the functioning of representative democracy.

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Notes

1. Each political party has 'whips' that try to make their MPs vote for the party line. Sometimes a MP 'rebels' by voting against the party whip.

Figure 1:   Design choices in NoWords

Object of evaluation	Parliamentary parties
Focus of evaluation	Promissory representation
Mode of information	• Factual performance data • Performance evaluations
Scope of information	Selection of 12 themes (6 policy areas)
Parliamentary actions	Any
Actors in selection	• Project staff (issues) • Parliamentary parties (actions)
Actors in evaluation	• Interest groups • Experience experts • Academic experts
Discussion forum	Present

Figure 2: Design choices in VoteSmart

Object of evaluation	Individual representatives
Focus of evaluation	Anticipatory representation
Mode of information	• Factual performance data (key votes) • Performance evaluations
Scope of information	Wide range of issues (about 30)
Parliamentary actions	Votes
Actors in selection	• Project staff and reviewers (key votes) • Interest groups (performance evaluations)
Actors in evaluation	• Interest groups (on most issues groups with opposing points of view)
Discussion forum	Currently not present

Figure 3: Design choices in TheyWorkForYou

Object of evaluation	Individual representatives
Focus of evaluation	Anticipatory representation
Mode of information	• Factual performance data • 'Dream MP's: various rankings of MPs provided by site visitors
Scope of information	• Selection of salient issues • Complete overview of votes available on PublicWhip
Parliamentary actions	• Votes • Questions • 'Early day motions'
Actors in selection	Guardian staff (key votes)
Actors in evaluation	Site visitors
Discussion forum	Not present

Figure 4:   Two contrasting cases in meeting voters' information needs

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	PROMISSORY REPRESENTATION	ANTICIPATORY REPRESENTATION
PARTY APPRAISAL	NoWords (Netherlands) 1	2
CANDIDATE APPRAISAL	4	3 VoteSmart (USA)

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