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tions (VVA) more than Toys?
First findings on Impact and
Accountability of VVAs.**

Paper presented at the 'Voting Advice
Applications (VVA): between
charlatanism and political science'
conference at the University of Antwerp,
May 16, 2008

Working paper de l'IDHEAP
2/2008

Chaire Administration suisse et politiques
institutionnelles



Institut de hautes études en administration publique
Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration
Institut universitaire autonome

L'Université pour le service public

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May 2008

Ce document se trouve sur notre site Internet: <http://www.idheap.ch> > publications > Working paper

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ABSTRACT

To what extent do Voting Advice Applications (VAA) have an influence on voting behaviour and to what extent should providers be hold accountable for such tools? This paper puts forward some empirical evidence from the Swiss VAA smartvote. The enormous popularity of smartvote in the last national elections in 2007 and the feedback of users and candidates let us come to the conclusion that smartvote is more than a toy and likely to have an influence on the voting decisions. Since Swiss citizens not only vote for parties but also for candidates, and the voting recommendation of smartvote is based on the political positions of the candidates, smartvote turns out to be particularly helpful. Political scientists must not keep their hands off such tools. Scientific research is needed to understand their functioning and possibilities to manipulate elections. On the bases of a legal study we come to the conclusion, that a science driven way of setting up such tools is essential for their legitimacy. However, we do not believe that there is a single best way of setting up such a tool and rather support a market like solution with different competing tools, provided they meet minimal standards like transparency and equal access for all parties and candidates. Once the process of selecting candidates and parties are directly linked to the act of voting, all these questions will become even more salient.

1. INTRODUCTION

Are *Voting Advice Applications* (VAAs) more than toys? And should political scientists be directly accountable for the VAAs they produce? These two questions are not easily addressed in a positivistic scientific manner. A toy is usually seen as an object used to play, but toys are also important tools for learning about the real world and promoting the process of socialisation. If VAAs should be more than toys this means that they have a direct impact on voting behaviour and therefore on the outcome of elections. In this sense it is no longer the aspect of 'learning by playing' but much more the aspect of being an important part of the real life elections and decision-making processes that are addressed. At this point the second question becomes important. If VAAs are to be taken seriously to what extent will their providers be accountable? Should they only be accountable for the quality of the tool itself or also for the outcome of the elections? Can a clear distinction be made between offering a new form of support for decision-making and influencing voting behaviour?

This paper will not present final answers to these questions. By presenting some evidence from the National Center of Competence in Research: "Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century" (NCCR Democracy), "smart-voting"¹ research project on the functioning and the use of VAAs in Switzerland we hope to provide an input for further discussions. We will focus on the Swiss VAA *smartvote* (www.smartvote.ch).

In Switzerland VAAs have become more and more popular since 2003, when *smartvote* and *Politarena* – a second VAA based on *StemWijzer* – were offered for the first time to the Swiss voters. During the run-up to the elections for the Swiss parliament in October 2007 *smartvote* was used nearly 940'000 times. Compared to 2003 the use of *smartvote* was four times higher. Considering that there were only 2.3 million voters participating in 2007, the figures turn out to be even more impressive.

The increasing use of VAAs can certainly be explained with the technical progress and the increase of Internet access. In 2006 over 75% of the Swiss population had access to the Internet.² Beside the high rate of Internet access there are additional factors that are

¹ A research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

² See www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/16/04/key/approche_globale.tables.30106.html [28/04/2008].

fostering the popularity of VAAs. Political parties are facing severe challenges: within the last 20 to 30 years traditional ties between voters and parties are loosening (see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Walgrave et al. 2008), the number of party members is decreasing and the volatility rate and the number of swing votes is rising. Dalton, for example, draws a quite pessimistic picture of representative, party-centred democracies with more and more citizens grown distrustful of politicians and disillusioned about the functioning of the democratic processes (see Dalton 2002 and 2007). Although it is still an open question to which degree this pessimistic picture of today's representative democracies meets reality we assume that these developments – at least in their tendency – foster the use of VAAs, which are offering a customized and transparent new form of decision-making beyond the usual ways of selecting candidates and parties. In the case of Switzerland the electoral system, which is candidate-centred and offers voters extensive possibilities to express their political preferences by putting together a customized ballot, provides a further intensification of these effects.

Before we go into more detail and present some first results of our research project on *smartvote* we will have a look at some characteristics of the Swiss electoral system (section 2) and the functioning of *smartvote* (section 3). In sections 4 and 5 we will then present empirical evidence about the use of *smartvote* and the role and the importance attached to it by voters and candidates. Part 6 will focus on the accountability question and the limits of VAAs within the legal framework. The final section 7 offers a short conclusion and an outlook on further developments and questions, which should be raised on the basis of this paper.

2. WHAT CAUSES THE DIFFERENCE? – ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN SWITZERLAND

Design and set-up of *smartvote* as well as its use by candidates and voters depend largely on the specific characteristics of the Swiss electoral system and the way Swiss citizens elect candidates and parties.

The Swiss parliament consists of two chambers comparable with the US congress: the National Council (*Nationalrat*) as counterpart to the House of Representatives and the Council of States (*Ständerat*) as counterpart to the Senate. The National Council has 200

seats and is elected under a proportional counting procedure, whereas the Council of State has 46 seats and is elected under a majoritarian counting procedure.³ Thus elections for the National Council are generally considered as party-oriented and the elections for the Council of States as candidate-oriented.

Politics in Switzerland take place in a very fragmented social context. The country is divided into 26 cantons, which are the national electoral constituencies. The seats for the National Council are assigned to the cantons according their population size: the six smallest cantons have only one seat; whereas the canton of Zurich, the largest canton, has 34 seats. Accordingly, the number of candidates running for office differs from not more than one candidate in the canton of Uri to 804 in the canton of Zurich (Fivaz 2007 and Bundesamt für Statistik 2007). The cantons differ also in various other aspects: language, religion and economic structure. Subsequently cantonal party systems differ widely for example in regard to the number of parties and the degree of party competition (see Ladner 2004 and 2004b).

A further aspect of the social and political heterogeneity of Switzerland is the fragmentation of the political parties (Ladner 2002). Switzerland has many parties with a relatively low share of the votes, parties are decentralised and the cantonal and local sections dispose of far-reaching autonomy. Furthermore it is not unusual that there exist different political position within one party. Even single candidates take positions autonomously (see table 10 on page 20) and resist the dictate of their party leaders.

While electing their members of parliament Swiss voters have the possibility to express their specific preferences for parties as well as for single candidates. First, every voter has as many votes as his constituency has seats (e.g. in the canton of Uri with 1 seat, voters have 1 vote and in the canton of Zurich with 34 seats they have 34 votes). Secondly, voters can split their votes to different parties (e.g. in the canton of Zurich a voter can give 4 votes to party A, 10 to party B and 20 to party C). Thirdly, voters can support their favourite candidates by giving them two votes instead of one (so-called cumulative voting, e.g. in the canton of Zurich a voter could vote for 17 candidates with two votes for each). In the sum these rules allow for composing a customized ballot according ones personal political preferences.

³ There are some exceptions to these rules: The cantons with just one seat in the National Council conduct their elections in a majoritarian counting procedure and the canton of Jura uses the proportional counting procedure for the election of the Council of States as well.

Due to the fragmentation of the political and the party system Swiss voter can choose among a big number of parties and political positions, and quite often it is rather difficult to get to know all parties and candidates (particularly in a canton like Zurich with over 800 candidates). Compared to a two-party-system it is definitely more costly to gather the necessary information about parties and candidates. Nevertheless Swiss voters seem to appreciate these possibilities increasingly. The share of swing voters has increased in the last years (see Linder 2005) as well as the share of those using the possibilities offered by the electoral system to compose their customized ballots according to their individual preferences (see Burger 2001). Here, candidate based VAAs like *smartvote* step in and offer the badly needed information for choosing appropriate parties and candidates.

3. WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE? SMARTVOTE AND OTHER VAAS

As already mentioned, the two platforms *Politarena* and *smartvote* were placed at the disposal of the Internet public for the first time in 2003 on the occasion of the Swiss elections for the National Parliament. *Politarena* is based on the concept of the pioneer platform *StemWijzer* like the German *Wahl-O-Mat* and reached 135 000 users. *smartvote* has a somewhat different concept and has been the basis for other applications like *Politikkabine*, *Koimipasva* and *Holyrood*. In its first use in 2003 a modest number of 255 000 voting recommendations⁴ were made. This number, however, expanded to almost one million in 2007. In the meantime *Politarena* has also been adapted as information tool for popular votes in Switzerland.⁵

smartvote is neither one of the first nor the best-known VAA in Western Europe but it can be claimed that it is comprehensive in regard of its additional features as well as its extensibility. The main differences to its competitors (see Fivaz/Schwarz 2007: 6f) are:

- *smartvote* is capable to manage multiple elections with overlapping constituencies at

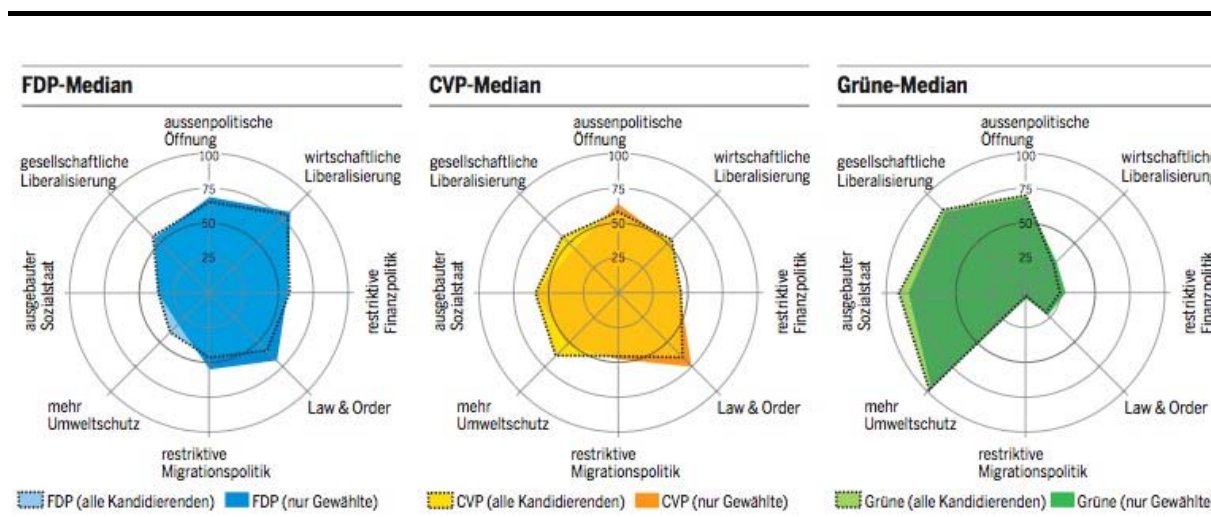
⁴ In Switzerland this is a prevalent term, which might be different in other countries, where VAAs come into use.

⁵ In three popular votes in Switzerland (May 21, September 24 and November 26, 2006) *Politarena* had 37 209 users in total (see www.politik-digital.ch/archiv.htm [10/04/2008]).

the same time (e.g. one national, one cantonal and two local elections).

- *smartvote* calculates voting recommendations according to the electoral system and constituency (electoral district)⁶ on both, the level of single candidates as well as on the level of lists/parties.
- The *smartvote*-questionnaire - containing more than 70 questions - is more than twice as long as questionnaires used by other tools. Hence the recommendation is based on more empirical data and therefore more reliable.
- Besides *Kieskompas*, *smartvote* is the only VAA, which includes additional visual analytical tools like the *smartspider* and the *smartmap* graphs (see figure 1 and figure 2).
- Finally, time series analyses are possible as all data of past elections are stored.

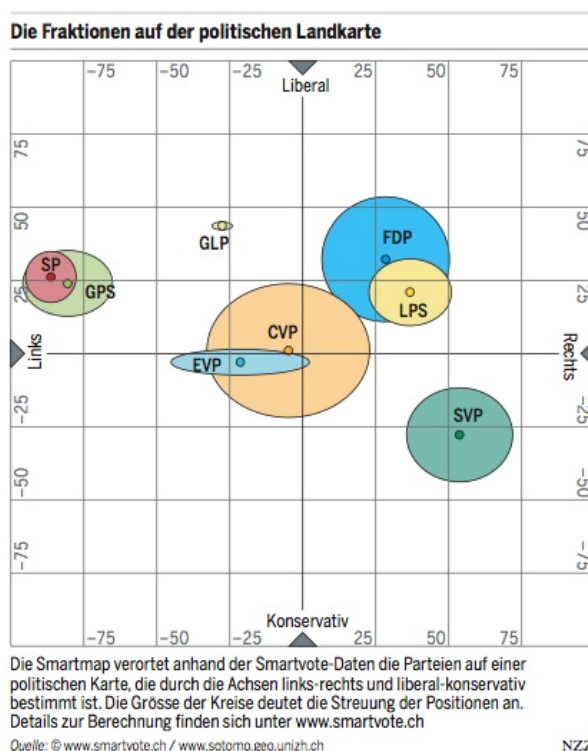
Figure 1 *smartspider* of Radicals, Christian Democratic People's Party and Green Party



Source: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24th October 2007.

⁶ *StemWijzer* for instance provides one for the whole election. In Switzerland not every party necessarily runs for election in every constituency and local and regional party sections might vary in their political positions, a significant voting recommendation has to include these specific circumstances.

Figure 2 *smartmap* of Swiss parties in the National Council



Source: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24th October 2007.

4. SMARTVOTE-PARTICIPATION

Keeping the Swiss context in mind (sections 2 and 3) we would like to focus first on the question “Are VAAs more than Toys?”. To answer this question we suggest looking at the percentage of voters reached as well as at the participation of the candidates. The VAA participation by candidates is an essential precondition for the service value of *smartvote*. Without having almost all relevant candidates in the database, the service value for the citizens is rather low. To what extent do the candidates answer the *smartvote* questionnaire? What are the incentives to take part?

4.1 CANDIDATES

As already mentioned in chapter 3, in the forefront of the National Council elections 2007 *smartvote* was offered for the second time on national level after 2003. The percentage of candidates answering the 73 questions is a first evidence for the seriousness of the VAA *smartvote*. Table 1 highlights an outstanding increase of interest in *smartvote* in the National Council election 2007. Around 85 per cent of the 3100 candidates took part in *smartvote* and answered the questions. This high percentage made it possible to calculate and issue meaningful voting recommendations for the public.

Thanks to media partnerships with relevant Swiss media (from *SF DRS*, *NZZ Online* to *20Minuten*)⁷ *smartvote* managed to enlarge its reach far beyond the Internet community. The media published articles and portrayed the candidates with the aid of the political profiles generated by *smartvote* or broadcasted telecasts or radio transmissions referring to the VAA *smartvote* or using the visual analytical tools like the so-called *smartspider* (see figure 1) in the print area. Media and the candidates depend on each other. On the one hand, candidates have a greater motivation to publish their political preferences in the VAA when they know that large media partners will spread their political profiles also in the print press and on the other hand, the media themselves have a direct interest to have a well-populated database at their disposal.

⁷ See all media partners http://www.smartvote.ch/side_menu/partner/partners.php?who=v [28/04/2008].

Table 1 *smartvote*-participation by candidates 2003 - 2008

Elections	Participation by candidates (per cent)	Participation of elected MPs (per cent)
Swiss parliament 2003	50.3	69.5
Swiss parliament 2007	85.3	93.5
Regional parliaments		
Canton of Thurgau 2004	62.9	77.7
Canton of St. Gallen 2004	72.9	78.9
Canton of Geneva 2005	75.1	91.0
Canton of Berne 2006	63.0	83.4
Canton of Zurich 2007	61.7	85.6
Canton of Lucerne 2007	59.7	70.0
Canton of St. Gallen 2008	85.0	91.7
Local parliaments		
City of Berne 2004	70.1	83.8
City of St. Gallen 2004	80.6	98.4
City of Zurich 2006	57.4	93.6
City of Winterthur 2006	50.4	78.3

Source: *smartvote* (www.smartvote.ch).

The remarkable participation of candidates and the high interest of media to publish contributions based on *smartvote* lead us to the conclusion that *smartvote* is more than a toy. Certainly both assign a sufficient degree of credibility to the VAA. Before we search for more evidence in this regard (see chapter 5.1), we will dress on the response to *smartvote* on the user side. Even the most sophisticated VAA remains unsuccessful when voters ignore it. How did the voters react to the VAA services in Switzerland?

4.2 VOTERS

To what extent do voters turn their attention towards *smartvote*? The absolute figures in table 2 are not very impressive at first sight. The fact that the electorate of Switzerland counts only around 4.9 million voters (2007) changes this impression. The index, which relates *smartvote* users to the number of people voting (absolute number of voting recommendations per

election in relation to voter turnout), amounts to almost 40 per cent in 2007. The use on national level has thus almost quadrupled from 2003 to 2007. This evolution can partly also be ascribed to the repeated use on other levels (canton or local) and to the intense media coverage in 2007 already mentioned.

Table 2 Use of *smartvote* 2003 - 2007 (selected elections)

Elections	<i>smartvote</i> use (absolute)	<i>smartvote</i> use index ¹ (per cent)
Swiss parliament 2003	255'000	11.7
Swiss parliament 2007	938'403	39.5
Regional parliaments		
Canton of St. Gallen 2004	16'000	16.2
Canton of Thurgau 2004	7'750	13.7
Canton of Berne 2006	35'900	16.7
Canton of Zurich 2007	30'465	10.4
Canton of Lucerne 2007	9'864	9.1
Local parliaments		
City of St. Gallen 2004	4'000	23.4
City of Berne 2004	9'500	28.9
City of Geneva 2005	22'900	24.9
City of Zurich 2006	15'100	22.8

¹ *smartvote* use in absolute number relative to the according voter turnout

Source: *smartvote* (www.smartvote.ch).

Outstanding and rather unexpected are the participation rates at the different local city elections. With an average of 25 per cent the *smartvote* use index reaches a higher degree than on cantonal (state) level. This is somehow unexpected as local elections have generally smaller number of candidates and the value added by *smartvote* could be assumed to be smaller.

What do candidates and users/potential voters really think about *smartvote* and how serious do they take it? The next section tries to answer these questions based on different surveys among candidates as well as among voters.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF VVA SMARTVOTE

5.1 CANDIDATES

Parts of the post-electoral survey among Swiss candidates⁸ running for election for the National Council in 2007 were dedicated to the perception of *smartvote*. These questions will give us some ideas whether VAAs can be considered as toys.

A large majority of the respondents insisted on the usefulness of *smartvote* for their election campaign. About 70 per cent considered their participation rather of use and nearly one-fourth believed *smartvote* being explicitly advantageous. Nearly nobody perceived the VAA as damaging for the personal election outcome.

Table 3 Advantage / damage by *smartvote*

Advantage - damage estimation	Responses by candidates (per cent)
Explicit advantageous	23.7
Rather advantageous	45.8
Neither nor	28.9
Rather damaging	1.4
Explicit damaging	0.2
N = 1579	100.0

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

Interesting to note is the fact that the use of *smartvote* was even seen more advantageous by those who were not elected. Presumably these candidates were less prominent and had fewer possibilities to reveal their political positions otherwise. In any case they seem to blame other factors than the VAA for their electoral disappointment.

⁸ Of the 1700 survey respondents around 95 per cent did (N=1'660) participate on *smartvote*. This survey has been realised in cooperation between the Universities of Berne, Geneva, Zurich and the IDHEAP in Lausanne.

Table 4 Advantage / damage by *smartvote* according to electoral success

Council of States / National Council	Explicit advantageous (in %)	Rather advantageous (in %)	Neither nor (in %)	Rather damaging (in %)	Explicit damaging (in %)	N=
Not elected	24.4	46.0	28.1	1.4	0.1	1405
Elected	14.7	44.0	38.8	1.7	0.9	116
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

Are there different views regarding the added value through *smartvote* according to the size of the different voting districts (cantons)? As already mentioned in section 2, a voter of the canton of Zurich has to make his choice out of a much larger number of candidates than a voter of the canton of Jura (804 to 16). To get a voting recommendation for 34 seats out of 804 candidates in Zurich might be a greater help than for 2 seats out of 16 candidates in Jura. Such expectations, however, cannot be confirmed. In the eyes of the candidates there are no striking differences amongst the different cantons (see table 5). However there is a different awareness between the language regions. The German speaking part agrees up to 27 per cent on an explicit advantage, compared to only 12 per cent in the French part, where *smartvote* is still known to a lower extent.

Table 5 Advantage/damage by *smartvote* according to size of canton & language region

Size of canton ⁹ / Number of seats National Council	Explicitly advantageous (in %)	Rather advantageous (in %)	Neither nor (in %)	Rather damaging (in %)	Explicit damaging (in %)	N=
1.00 / 16 +	24.2	45.8	27.8	1.9	0.3	677
2.00 / 10 to 15	24.9	47.1	27.1	.8	0.0	361
3.00 / 5 to 9	22.1	45.3	31.4	1.0	0.2	408
4.00 / 1 to 4	21.3	42.7	34.7	1.3	0.0	75
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1521

Language	Explicit advantageous (in %)	Rather advantageous (in %)	Neither nor (in %)	Rather damaging (in %)	Explicit damaging (in %)	N=
German	27.0	46.1	25.2	1.5	0.2	1199
French	12.1	47.0	39.9	.7	0.4	281
Italian	4.9	29.3	63.4	2.4	0.0	41
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

With focus on the candidate perspectives the expectations that small parties – Green Liberal Party, Evangelical People's Party, and Swiss Democrats – believe particularly more in the use of *smartvote* seems to get confirmed. VAA offer smaller parties equal opportunities to present their candidates. However there is no party not assigning at least 'rather' an advantage to its participation on *smartvote* (table 6). So there seems to be a parallel to the findings of Walgrave et al. (2008) regarding an Belgian survey of a VAA in the form of a TV show: 'Do the Vote Test', where VAAs were taken rather seriously by political parties (Member of Parliaments respectively) as well. This finding led Walgrave et al. come to the conclusion that VAAs have to be taken seriously by political scientists as well.

⁹ ,1' correspond to >900 000 inhabitants, ,2' correspond to 400 000 – 899 999, ,3' correspond to 200 000 – 399 999, ,4' correspond to <199 999, see <http://www.badac.ch/DE/news/typologies.html> [28/04/2008].

Table 6 Advantage, damage by *smartvote* participation according to party

Parties	Explicit advantageous (in %)	Rather advantageous (in %)	Neither nor (in %)	Rather damaging (in %)	Explicit damaging (in %)	N=
Christian Democrats	14.4	45.9	37.6	2.1		194
Radicals	25.1	38.4	34.0	2.5		203
Swiss People's Party	24.2	40.3	33.3	1.6	0.5	186
Social Democrats	25.0	53.3	21.3	0.4		244
Green Party	27.9	44.7	26.6	0.8		244
Green Liberal Party	33.3	55.6	11.1			27
Liberal Party	21.7	52.2	26.1			23
Evangelical People's Party	30.6	56.1	12.1	1.3		157
Federal Democratic Union	19.7	46.1	31.6	2.6		76
Rest	8.8	45.6	42.1	1.8	1.8	57
Total	23.7	45.8	28.9	1.4	0.2	1521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

5.1.1 Importance of *smartvote* in the eyes of the candidates

This paragraph gives a more detailed evaluation of the importance of *smartvote* from the candidates' point of view. On a scale from 0 ('no importance') to 10 ('great importance') the average importance for the candidates amounts to 5.8 (see table 7). *smartvote* was probably not decisive for the candidates but at least perceived as meaningful. Interesting to note are the rather small differences between the parties.

Table 7 Attached importance of *smartvote* by parties (aggregated candidate answers)

		Estimation of importance of <i>smartvote</i> for:			
		You personally?	Your party?	Media?	The voter?
Christian Democrats	Mean	5.68	5.55	6.59	5.83
	<i>N</i>	181	179	180	181
Radicals	Mean	5.76	5.49	6.26	5.77
	<i>N</i>	197	189	192	193
Swiss People's Party	Mean	5.79	5.55	6.53	6.37
	<i>N</i>	178	177	179	176
Social Democrats	Mean	6.08	6.02	6.02	6.17
	<i>N</i>	226	221	224	223
Green Party	Mean	5.71	5.99	6.30	6.22
	<i>N</i>	234	220	225	229
Total	Mean	5.77	5.77	6.25	6.02
	<i>N</i>	1453	1412	1416	1423

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

If we split up the answers along the language regions within Switzerland the differences become more salient. In the German speaking part candidates attach a greater importance to *smartvote* (6.2 to 6.4) as in the French speaking part (3.8 to 5.8). In the German speaking part the VAA *smartvote* seems to be perceived as being more serious, but perhaps the lower importance is mainly due to the fact, that *smartvote* is not as well established in the French-speaking part yet.

Table 8 Attached importance of *smartvote* by languages

Language		Estimation of importance of <i>smartvote</i> for:			
		You personally?	Your party?	Media?	The voter?
German	Mean	6.36	6.20	6.40	6.29
	<i>N</i>	1133	1109	1107	1115
French	Mean	3.76	4.36	5.84	5.19
	<i>N</i>	283	266	271	271
Italian	Mean	2.92	3.03	4.76	4.24
	<i>N</i>	37	37	38	37
Total	Mean	5.77	5.77	6.25	6.02
	<i>N</i>	1453	1412	1416	1423

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

5.1.2 Party influence on candidates answering the questionnaire

Do the candidates answer the 73 questions of the VAA on their own or do they follow party instructions? According to their own account slightly more than one-third of the respondents received instructions of their parties. Among the five biggest parties the candidates of the 'left-wing' Social Democrats received by far more often instructions (56.6 per cent of the respondents) compared to only 20.5 per cent of the candidates of the 'right-wing' Swiss People's Party.

Table 9 **Guidance/direction by the party**

Parties	Guidance / direction by the party:		N =
	Obtained in %	Not obtained in %	
Christian Democrats	37.9	62.1	190
Radicals	41.6	58.4	202
Swiss People's Party	20.5	79.5	185
Social Democrats	56.6	43.4	242
Green Party	17.0	83.0	247
CH	35.4	64.6	1521

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

Receiving instructions does not necessarily mean that all candidates finally followed them when they answered the 73 *smartvote* questions. Approximately 45 per cent followed at least partially the instructions and some 10 per cent strongly. If the candidates received instructions the extent to which they followed them does not vary strongly between the different parties.

Table 10 Compliance of the party guidance/instructions for answering the questionnaire

Parties	Strong adherence in %	Partial adherence in %	Hardly adherence in %	No adherence at all in %	N=
Christian Democrats	5.6	40.8	26.8	26.8	71
Radicals	4.8	38.1	29.8	27.4	84
Swiss People's Party	10.5	34.2	34.2	21.1	38
Social Democrats	3.6	48.2	21.2	27.0	137
Green Party	15.4	38.5	20.5	25.6	39
CH	9.1	44.7	24.8	21.4	528

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

What did influence the candidates most while answering the 73 questions? Table 11 reveals interesting results. Most important with an average of 9.1 ('0' = no importance; '10' most important) is the candidate's own political position, followed by the position of the party. The assumed political positions of the electorate are on the average not seen as very important (average of 3.6 only), which seems to negate the assumption of vote catching. The parties or in this case the candidates do not follow the public as it is depicted in other studies (see Walgrave et al. 2008). Once more there are no important differences between the candidates of the different parties.

Table 11 Points of reference for answering the *smartvote*-questionnaire

Parties	Points of reference attached to:					The assumed political positions of your electorate
	Your party (party program)	Your party colleagues	The other parties	Your own political positions		
Christian Democrats	Mean	5.24	3.45	2.58	9.02	3.99
	N	184	185	183	184	183
Radicals	Mean	4.66	3.21	2.01	9.10	3.73
	N	199	199	197	198	196
Swiss People's Party	Mean	5.84	3.49	2.15	9.09	3.84
	N	179	177	177	181	178
Social Democrats	Mean	5.41	3.51	2.20	9.44	3.30
	N	242	241	240	240	238
Green Party	Mean	4.68	3.40	2.03	9.44	2.70
	N	231	229	230	233	230
Total	Mean	5.32	3.64	2.27	9.09	3.57
	N	1473	1466	1460	1475	1460

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of candidates 2007.

What about the perception of *smartvote* by the voters? It is not enough to have media partners and candidates participating, the tool needs also to be used by the citizens.

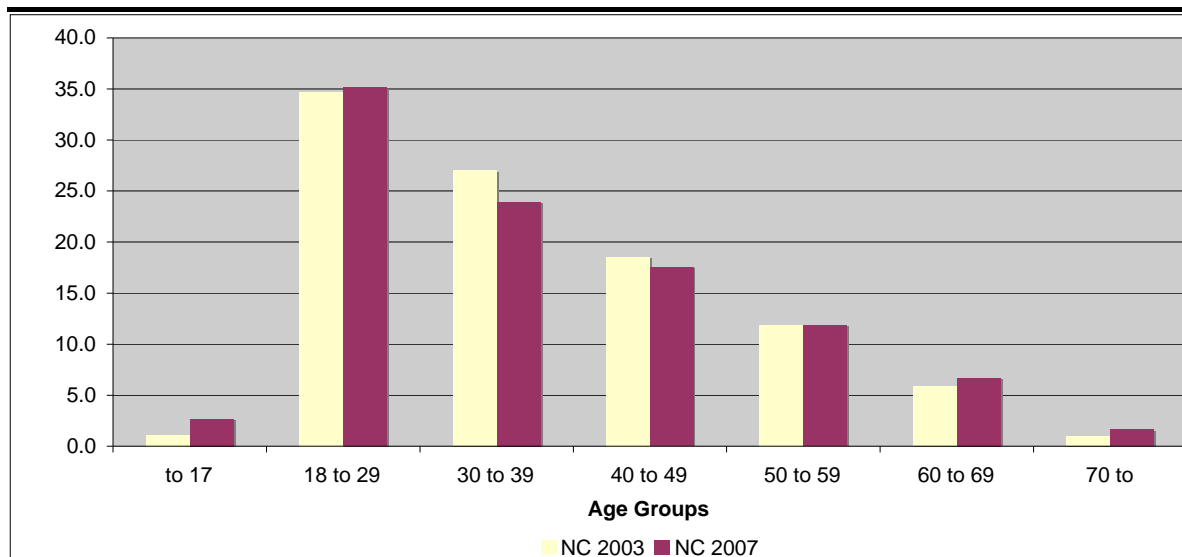
5.2 VOTERS

In the NCCR Democracy research project '*smart voting*' we not only have a closer look at the candidates using *smartvote* but also at the users and potential voters. This can either be done through the information the users reveal once they have entered the website or it can be done through additional surveys. Since most of the data for the 2007 national elections are not available yet we also present here results from earlier elections on cantonal level.

The users of *smartvote* are left-wing computer literates, i.e. they are younger, predominately male, better educated and rather vote for the Social Democrats. Between 2003 and 2007 the percentage of female users increased from 24.1 (N=1297) to 32.5 (N=13308) per cent.

Similarly *smartvote* has become a little bit more popular among people above fifty years of age (see figure 3).

Figure 3 The age of the users: national elections 2003 & 2007 (percentages)



N 2003 =1279, N 2007 = 13277

Source: Post-election survey National Council elections 2007.

Table 12 reveals the strong bias towards the Social Democrats. More than forty per cent of the users in 2007 voted for the Social Democrats in 2003. In the 2003 elections the Social Democrats only scored around 23 per cent. This table, which is based on a pre-election survey, also reveals the loss of the Social Democrats suffered in 2007 but it does not reveal the gains of the Swiss People's Party. By combining such survey results with the information the users leave on the website, however, we might be able to gather information which could help to predict and understand the results ahead.

Table 12 Users party preferences & results of the National elections 2007

Parties	Voted for in 2003	Voted in 2007	Diff.	Results 2007
Christian Democrats	8.7	10.1	1.4	14.5
Radicals	17.2	14.4	-2.8	15.8
Swiss Peoples Party	14.2	9.4	-4.8	28.9
Social Democrats	42.1	28.7	-13.4	19.5
Greens	11.4	17.8	6.4	9.6
Green liberal party	0	7.2	7.2	1.4
N=	8506	16611		

Source: NCCR Democracy, pre- & post electoral survey of *smartvote* users 2007.

And what do the users think about *smartvote*? According to our survey conducted in the 2006 cantonal elections in Berne, the users found *smartvote* – despite its complexity – user friendly (93.6 per cent), credible and easy to follow (86.9 per cent), and found their own position described in a plausible manner (88.3 per cent). Almost all (98.5 per cent) of the about 900 respondents of the user-survey stated that they will use *smartvote* again in the course of the next elections to come.

Did *smartvote* matter? According to the same survey about 75 per cent of the respondents (N=887) claim that *smartvote* influenced their voting decision. About one third voted for another party as usual, 30 per cent reconsidered their political preferences and 15 per cent put candidates from other lists on their party list.

Based on first results of another survey among the VAA users of the National Council elections 2007 in Switzerland even 40 per cent did split their vote (see table 13). An overwhelming majority also claims that *smartvote* helped them to make up their decisions, was the most important information source (57 per cent) among other sources like newspapers, political events, party/candidate advertisement by mail etc. (see table 14).

Table 13 **Did you split vote and/or cumulate candidates while filling in your ballot paper for the National Council election?**

Answer option	Absolute number	In per cent
No change of the ballot paper at all	3110	11.2
Candidates elected of different lists (split voted)	11371	40.8
Several candidates elected twice (cumulative voted)	8865	31.8
Several candidates cancelled	4490	16.1
I can't remember	37	0.1
Total	27873	100.0

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of *smartvote* users 2007.

Table 14 **How important was the following election campaign instrument for getting information about parties and candidates for you?**

Instrument	Important	Rather important	Rather unimportant	Unimportant	N =
The VAA <i>smartvote</i>	10175 57.3%	5190 29.2%	1595 9.0%	800 4.5%	17760 100.0%
Newspaper advertisement of parties and candidates	723 4.2%	3634 20.9%	5538 31.9%	7472 43.0%	17367 100.0%
Political event of their parties	719 4.2%	2103 12.2%	3647 21.2%	10722 62.4%	17191 100.0%
Stand of parties and candidates on the street	364 2.1%	1309 7.6%	3987 23.1%	11627 67.3%	17287 100.0%
Election Internet pages of parties and candidates	2249 12.9%	4860 27.9%	4062 23.3%	6273 36.0%	17444 100.0%
Posters in the streets	547 3.1%	2396 13.7%	5643 32.3%	8882 50.8%	17468 100.0%
Advertisement of parties and candidates in the letterbox	863 4.9%	2554 14.6%	4460 25.5%	9629 55.0%	17506 100.0%
Online-Media	6487 38.1%	5171 30.3%	2639 15.5%	2742 16.1%	17039 100.0%
Supraregional and national TV Station respectively	4612 27.0%	5884 34.4%	2855 16.7%	3754 21.9%	17105 100.0%
Local TV Station	1140 6.9%	2282 13.9%	3424 20.8%	9577 58.3%	16423 100.0%
Supraregional and national radio station respectively	2508 14.9%	4172 24.8%	4013 23.9%	6112 36.4%	16805 100.0%
Local radio station	796 4.8%	2051 12.3%	3827 23.0%	9976 59.9%	16650 100.0%
Supraregional and national newspapers respectively	4631 26.9%	5897 34.3%	3568 20.8%	3098 18.0%	17194 100.0%
Local newspapers	3563 20.6%	4616 26.7%	4197 24.3%	4926 28.5%	17302 100.0%

Source: NCCR Democracy, post electoral survey of *smartvote* users 2007.

5.3 CONCLUSION

The Swiss experiences with www.smartvote.ch, the participation of an overwhelming majority of the candidates and our survey results led us to the conclusion that VAAs in Switzerland – contrary to the findings for Belgium (Walgrave et al. 2008) – are more than a tool for checking the voters existing preference without having any influence on their voting behaviour. Of course, our survey results are somewhat biased. Nevertheless we dare to say – and will focus on that issue in later analyses – that VAAs in Switzerland tend to lead to an increase of split voting and might – in the long run - even bring other candidates and parties into office.

There are probably different reasons for the bigger impact of VAAs in Switzerland. First of all, the Swiss (multi-party) electoral system, where a voter can not only vote for a party but can also express his preferences for particular candidates, makes VAAs a very useful source of political information. It provides a real service for voters, who have to make up their mind among quite a few and sometimes up to several hundred candidates and more than a dozen parties (see details in section 2). Secondly the participation rate of over 85 per cent in the *smartvote*-database is interesting for the media coverage to use *smartvote* as a new source of information – particularly the eye-catching visual analysis of the so-called *smartspider* and *smartmap*. Finally the media interest in the VAA amplifies also the interest and provokes even some sort of ‘pressure’ to be represented in such a tool as candidate or party.

Because VAAs can be more than a toy, political scientists should not stay away from them. It is also their responsibility 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 so far, scientists are accountable. In the following section we will now focus in greater detail on this normative question.

6. SHOULD PROVIDERS OF VAAS BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT THEY OFFER?

On the bases of a legal study (Rütsche 2008), which was also part of our research project we shall try to answer the accountability question. According to Rütsche's findings in the case of Switzerland the use of VAAs has first of all to be reviewed in the light of the right to free and undistorted opinion formation, guaranteed by Article 34 (section 2) of the Federal Constitution. On this basic right dimension it is mainly a question of potential dangers of distortion of the democratic opinion formation and decision-making by VAAs. In a worst-case scenario they become an instrument for political manipulation of particular private interests. If VAA providers are members of (or affiliated to) pressure groups for instance, the potential of abuse increases enormously. Even if there is no worry of real manipulation, VAAs could distort the voter's will solely due to the composition of its content. However, in principle this right to free and undistorted opinion formation does not totally prohibit private propaganda or even false information in the run-up to elections. The constitutional limits are only transgressed if private actors propagate obviously false information to influence the electoral opinion formation one-sidedly. The basic idea of VAAs is to inform the voter about political positions of candidates and/or parties. The goal of that information is even to influence the opinion formation of the voters. As long as this influence is based on objective political information it is not only allowed but also desirable. But having power to form opinions implies a danger of abuse. Hence, VAA providers holding this power could systematically take advantage of it for certain political purposes. Therefore the question of accountability is crucial. In a first step Rütsche (2008: 17f.) focuses on dangers by (private) providers before he then highlights the responsibility of another actor, the state in this context. According to the author it comes to systematic forgery by VAA providers in cases where:

a) *Tendentious questionnaires occur.* Certain political orientations and parties are favoured or discriminated. However, putting into perspective this argument, too one-sided weights of political issues would be noticed by the candidates and voters and therefore it is rather a minor danger.

b) *Single candidates were replaced before the user sees his voting recommendation.*

For a voter the accuracy of a voting recommendation - except amateurish forgery - is difficult to identify. However, this real danger can be diminished by several VAAs (with comparable methods) on one 'election market'. This is a not yet solved risk in

Switzerland, as the VAAs *Politarena* and *smartvote* are lacking of the possibility of comparison due to their methodological differences.

- c) *The VAA discriminates a single candidate or party.* For instance, not all candidates, parties respectively have the same access to the tool. However, also applying different modalities of information regarding the VAA or excluding answered questions are further forms. But real one-sided influencing exists only in case of 'hidden' discrimination. Under constitutional law unacceptable are so-called 'political neutral' VAAs, which give not access to all candidates and parties. Nevertheless a VAA can include only certain candidates, parties as long as this is declared transparently.

Even if there is never a purely objective method of constructing a VAA, systematic forgery is no obligatory consequence. A VAA shall translate political preferences of voters into a concrete voting decision, like any traditional instrument of opinion formation. These are normally not more accurate than any VAA. Many voters generally even pronounce a decision without knowing exactly their own political preferences and that of the candidates. Nobody then speaks of distortion of opinion formation. Hence, using VAAs for identifying political preferences as precisely as possible has nothing to do with forging the opinion formation. However, there is a claim for certain (scientific) VAA quality standards. Fading out or inadequate weighting of particular political issues – even in a standardised questionnaire - provokes a bias in the opinion formation. Also a lack of the number of questions to every political issue or leading questions causes tendencies. Finally, any inexact calculation method of the matching of voter and candidate responses entail the very same problem. According to Rüttsche (2008) all these risks can be reduced through a competitive VAA 'election market' but would need certain minimal standards:

- Transparency regarding sponsoring, financing and methodology.
- Quality and operation standards implementation.

To what extent must the state be accountable in Switzerland? According to the court incumbent authorities are not allowed to advise the voter of any kind. However, contributions to the election campaign can increase the quality of opinion formation, if they lead to more balanced information – in the meaning of a 'vital' democracy. Therefore it is not a question of 'whether' but rather of 'how' state intervention might happen. In the context of elections there is a strict imperative of equal treatment. As long as state intervention stays neutral (no

preference or discrimination for one single candidate or party), objective and factual, state regulations regarding VAAs are constitutional.

The association of VAAs with electronic voting is of particular concern, for instance at the occasion of the Bernese student council elections in 2005. The Federal Supreme Court confirmed with its judgement that the State must remain strictly neutral in elections and must treat all candidates and parties equally. Connection with VAAs is therefore only possible under restrictive conditions: an organizational, personal and financial independence of officially promoted VAAs from political parties and interest groups; as well as high standards regarding a tool's quality and operation. Given such conditions, the official promotion of specific VAAs would lead to regulatory complications; and in order to avoid these, the deregulation of the ballot system might be proposed to facilitate the use of VAAs by the electorate. This would enable the users of such tools to print their individual electoral recommendations or send them electronically as valid ballots.

In summary the legal imperatives for state involvement in the run-up to elections reduce the range of opportunity for action enormously but by providing a legal framework for VAA without running it themselves; the state can contribute to increased accountability of VAA tools without influencing the election campaign directly and therefore the election outcome.

Apart from the right to free and unadulterated opinion formation, there are also institutional provisions of the Constitution. In Switzerland, the Constitution contains a range of guarantees that accord the political parties a special role in the electoral process. Among these guarantees is Article 137, according to which parties are to participate in public opinion formation. Further, Article 149 (see section 2) allows for proportional representation in National Council elections. If a large number of voters use VAAs, the proportional representation system could be undermined. The individual electoral recommendations of candidates compete with the party lists. As candidate VAAs give a strong impetus to ticket splitting (see section 5.2). This is not illegal but it could become a conflict for the constitutional principle of proportional representation, which presupposes that voters make an initial choice between party lists. Consequently, the state should not promote VAAs unless they also offer voting by party lists as an option.

Moreover, it needs to be asked whether VAAs lead to greater responsiveness of representative bodies to the voters. Prima facie responsiveness can be strengthened. However, there are no institutional safeguards to ensure that politicians once elected

actually support the positions that they declared through the VAA. Under this arrangement, reference back to the will of the electorate is limited to the act of voting. Possibilities are thereby opened for politicians to strategically use VAAs for their own purposes. From a constitutional perspective, this is why it is desirable for such tools to involve a monitoring of the voting behaviour of politicians while in office (in Switzerland the NCCR Democracy project *smartmonitor* has exactly this intention). Once a VAA like *smartvote* is connected with a monitoring system like *smartmonitor* this negative potential can be reduced remarkably.

To sum up, the degree of accountability differs among the different actors. As private VAA providers have to maximise the content of the VAA, their quality and transparency respectively, the state can only provide assistance and control limited by its legal restrictions. In short VAA providers are accountable for maximising the quality of their tool. As VAAs are considered as one out of several information sources in the election campaign they cannot be made accountable for the election outcome on their own. The state in contrast can only provide the legal framework for VAAs and try to legally minimise potential manipulations. Accountability for the tool is therefore shared between the provider (content, quality, transparency) and the state (legal framework); accountability for the final election outcome can only be all actors together within an election campaign and should be matter of future analysis in this context.

7. OUTLOOK

After the success of three pilot projects in the Swiss cantons (GE, NE, ZH) the Federal Council defines on May, 31 2006 electronic voting as a strategic goal which he wants to implement step by step. Once we vote electronically in Switzerland – so we would like to argue – VAAs will become indispensable and will have a considerable influence on party politics. After having selected candidates in a ‘smart’ way, citizens will want to send the list to the polls electronically. VAAs will no longer be considered as a toy but as a useful instrument to select parties and candidates. This, of course, leads to new problems and challenges. We do not believe that it will be possible to agree on ‘politically correct’ questions, which all parties accept in their wordings, or that a state office should be responsible for the questions put forward by the VAAs. We rather think that the voters should have a choice between different VAAs. It is up to the voters to decide which VAA is trustworthy and which voting advice they will follow. We do believe, however, that

transparency and equal access to the VAAs is required. Only those VAAs meeting such minimal standards should be directly linked to the electronic ballot station. Political scientists are badly needed to research and investigate the functioning of VAA. Their findings will help to improve the quality to the VAAs and to shed light on the possibilities to manipulate with such tools. Scientists, however, cannot take over the responsibility for the results of the elections and the social consequences of these results. Who knows for sure which party is best for the society in the long run? VAAs are one source of information about politics, but among others.

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