

ECPR General Conference 2016, Prague, Czech Republic

**Section: Advancing Research on Voting Advice Applications –
Studying Issue Voting, Party/Candidates Positioning and Democratic Representation**

Section Chairs: Diego Garzia, EUI , Stefan Marschall, University of Düsseldorf

Voting Advice Applications [VAAs] are online tools designed to help voters comparing their policy preferences on major issues with the respective positions of political parties/candidates. As a result these tools indicate the issue proximity between the individual voters and parties/candidates. In Europe and in other countries these popular tools have been widely used for elections on different levels and of different actors (parliaments, presidents).

In the last years, VAAs have become an established field of social science research resulting in national projects, publications and networking resulting in the formation of an ECPR Research Network in 2015. Recently, the study of VAAs has been significantly advanced especially in terms of the data VAA research draws on and the methodological designs that have been applied to understand the role of these tools in representative democracies. Moreover, there is an increasing number of studies using VAA data for addressing a broad spectrum of question not all of them directly related to the making of these tools.

The proposed section addresses these new developments and is a follow-up to the successful VAA sections in Bordeaux (2013) and in Glasgow (2014) and in Montreal (2015) each of which saw about 20 papers and 30 authors attending. This time the focus will be set on bridging VAA research to general questions of political science. As mentioned above, VAA research has started to be linked to other areas of political research such as party and electoral research or democratic theory. The panels of the section should provide a platform to exchange the findings of VAA research with research from other fields of political science.

Panel themes and chairs:

Panel 1:

Voting Advice Applications and Public Opinion Research Online.

Statement Formulation, Answer Categories and User-Data Quality

Chair: Kostas Gemenis (k.gemenis@utwente.nl)

Although VAAs resemble online public opinion surveys, research on VAAs has not been very well connected to the developments in the area of online survey research. The goal of this panel is to address this gap by linking current research on VAAs with well-established theories and insights from public opinion research. Papers for this panel should generally fall under one of the following two sub-themes: a) Papers that use VAA data to study public opinion in ways which would not be possible using standard public opinion datasets (e.g. election studies), and b) papers that use insights from public opinion research methodology to improve the design of VAAs from a data collection per-

spective. What are the opportunities and challenges (e.g. representativeness, weighting schemes) of using VAA data to answer substantive research questions? What is the effect of statement formulation, response categories, and VAA promotion campaigns on the quality of data? These are some questions that could be addressed in this panel. Papers employing cross-national comparisons, experiments, and advanced multivariate techniques will be particularly welcome.

Panel 2:

**Voting Advice Applications and Empirical Democratic Theory.
Effects on Political Interest, Knowledge, Participation and Electoral Choice**

Chair: Martin Rosema (m.rosema@utwente.nl)

In research about Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) their presumed effects has been a recurring theme. Since many of these online tools were developed by organisations that aim to contribute to civic education, self-evidently the question arises to what extent these goals are achieved in practice. Surprisingly little research has been conducted about this, so there is clearly a need for more work on the mechanisms through which VAAs increase political interest and political knowledge, whether they reach out to all segments of the electorate, and under what conditions the learning effects are largest. More research has already been done on another type of effect, namely the extent to which VAAs have helped to mobilise voters and thus boost electoral participation. However, the estimates of the size of these turnout effects differs a lot across studies, so this makes one wonder if the effects really differ so much across contexts – and if so, which type of factors account for these differences – or whether many such studies have been plagued by methodological problems. So research about the turnout effects of the usage of VAAs is still required to further clarify this matter. Of course for electoral researchers there is also another element of vote choice that is of interest, namely the support for specific parties or candidates. Therefore this panel also welcomes papers that address this aspect of electoral choice. For all three themes there is no single research method that is by definition superior and the field will presumably advance most when observational studies, like those based on survey questionnaires or interviews with users, and experimental studies – either in a lab environment or in the field – are conducted in parallel. Therefore this panel is open to paper proposals irrespective of the method used or the countries where data are collected.

Panel 3:

**Voting Advice Applications and Multi-Level Representation.
Dimensionality, Issue Congruence and the Representative Deficit**

Chair: Fernando Mendez (Fernando.Mendez@zda.uzh.ch)

This panel invites paper submissions that draw on VAA data (such as respondent data and/or party/candidate data) to tackle themes that are of wider relevance to the discipline of political science. In particular, we are interested in bringing together papers that deal with questions of representation, policy congruence and the dimensionality of the political space. What do VAA data reveal about the quality of representation in a given polity? To what extent is there policy issue congruence among citizens and elites? How is the political space structured, and to what extent is the latter equivalent for citizens and elites? VAA generated data is ideally suited for tackling these questions of broader interest to the political science community. To this end, high quality papers that adopt a comparative and/or longitudinal perspective as well as papers that focus on problems of multi-level representation (i.e., the EU) are especially welcome.

Panel 4:

Voting Advice Applications and Party Positioning.

Measuring Policy Positions of Parties and Intra-Party Cohesiveness

Chairs: Ioannis Andreadis, Patrick Dumont

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(endorsed by the ECPR Standing Group on Elites and Political Leadership)

There are various ways to position political parties. A possible approach is to ask the leadership of the party to position the parties and provide a brief justification of this placement. Other approaches include expert surveys and manifesto analyses – all bearing distinctive well-known advantages as well as drawbacks. Finally, we can use the position of the candidates. This way we will have the information by the source itself (instead of depending to an external source, such as an expert who may not know the party's position on the less salient issues), but at the same time we overcome the disadvantages of asking only the leadership of the party (i.e. non-response, manipulation of the position to make their party appear closer to the most popular positions, and lack of any measure of uncertainty). In addition, candidate data, whether gathered through surveys or 'candidate-oriented' Voting Advice Applications, allow for an estimation of the degree of intra-party policy cohesion. We welcome the submission of papers that deal with any of the methods of party and candidate positioning. We strongly encourage papers that compare two or more methods and we are extremely interested in papers that use candidate data as the basis of one of the compared estimates of either inter-party or intra-party policy differences.

Panel 5:

Exploring Party Positions in the Third Millennium.

Expert Surveys, Manifesto Studies and Voting Advice Applications

Chair: Marco Steenbergen (steenbergen@ipz.uzh.ch)

The study of party positions has made tremendous progress with advances in data collection. Next to party manifestos, researchers can now rely on expert surveys. A third data source is coming of age as well: VAAs. Not only do these produce extensive data on voters; they also generate extensive data on political parties through candidate surveys. Still, we know little about the relationship between VAA estimates of party placements versus those generated by other sources. How do VAAs perform in terms of their measurement properties? Are they complement or substitute for other data sources. This panel brings together papers that (1) explore the validity, reliability, and invariance of VAA measures of party positions and (2) compare VAAs with other data sources.