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Section:
Never-Ending Success Story?
Recent Findings from Research on Voting Advice Applications

Chairs:
Dr. Diego Garzia, University of Luzern/Switzerland
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Voting Advice Applications are online tools implemented before elections and designed to help voters to compare their policy preferences on major issues with the respective positions of political parties/candidates. As a result, these tools indicate the political proximity between the individual voters and parties/candidates running for election. In the year 2017, Voting Advice Applications (VAA) have experienced new historic all-time records in several countries. In the Netherlands, the highest percentage ever turned to VAAs before the national elections in spring. And in Germany, the Wahl-O-Mat has topped its previous high in absolute numbers: before the elections in September 2017 it was used more than 15.6 million times. Also in other countries and regions of the world we witness the perpetuation of the VAA success story. Apart from their being strongly demanded, we can observe an increase in the number and variations of Voting Advice Applications.

Given their popularity among the voters, VAAs have been in the last years an object of social science research resulting in projects, publications and networking. By bringing together European scholars working on VAAs, the ECPR Research Network on Voting Advice Applications assembles the wealth of research that has been done in national arenas. 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 modern party democracies. Moreover, there is an increasing number of studies using VAA data for addressing a broad spectrum of questions not all of them directly related to the making of these tools such as to explain and predict the coalition forming after elections.

The section focuses on these new developments and is a follow-up of the successful General Conference Sections in Bordeaux (2013), Glasgow (2014), Montreal (2015), Prague (2016) and in Oslo (2017) dedicated to VAA research each of which saw about 20 papers presented and 30 authors attending. The panels of the section provide a platform to exchange the findings of VAA research with research from other fields of political science.

The section is endorsed by the ECPR Research Network on Voting Advice Applications.

Planned panels
(if you are interested in submitting a paper to one of the following panels, please contact the respective panel chair)

Panel 1: The Design of Voting Advice Applications
Chair: Kostas Gemenis
(k.gemenis@utwente.nl)
From Europe to Oceania, and East Asia to the Americas, Voting Advice Application (VAAs) are the ubiquitous online tools that inform potential voters about the policy positions of parties and candidates. What makes a good Voting Advice Application (VAA) though? This panel invites papers that address this very question by looking at the relationship between VAA design (e.g. question wording, method of matching voters to parties/candidates) on the one hand and the quality of the VAA "advice" or efficacy in terms of their aim (e.g. increase in political knowledge) on the other. Theoretically informed and methodological contributions, from field and laboratory experiments to the analysis of survey and VAA-generated data, as well as studies presenting novel approaches to VAA design are particularly welcome.

Panel 2: Effects of Voting Advice Applications on Political Attitudes and Behaviour
Chair: Martin Rosema
(m.rosema@utwente.nl)
If the use of a Voting Advice Application (VAA) had no effect on the political attitudes and behaviour of voters, these tools would presumably not have received so much attention from political scientists and scholars in other relevant fields of studies. Indeed, numerous studies suggest that the existence and usage of VAAs increases electoral turnout, because it facilitates the decision making of undecided voters. Furthermore, several studies indicate that the results of VAAs influence for whom people vote, although some groups of voters are more strongly influenced than others. Other scholars have focused on attitudinal instead of behavioural effects, for instance analysing the impact on political knowledge and political interest. The aim of this panel is to bring together a set of papers that advance our insights into such attitudinal and behavioural effects of VAAs. Such papers could, for instance, focus on the conditions that influence if and how strongly electoral participation and party or candidate choice are shaped by the usage of VAAs. Also with respect to political interest, knowledge and other attitudinal variables papers that shed more light on how, when, and how much VAA usage has an impact are welcome. In brief, researchers who explore such topics – no matter which methodology they use or what countries they focus on – are most welcome to submit paper proposals for this panel.

Panel 3: Studying the elite-citizen gap using VAA data
Chair: Fernando Mendez
(Fernando.Mendez@zda.uzh.ch)
A topic that has attracted much attention among scholars in recent years, especially those focused on Western political systems, is the purported crisis in representation. The phenomenon refers to an increasing disconnect between citizens and elites (from individual representatives, through to parties and governments). The representation gap has been studied from a variety of conceptual lenses and empirical frames, from a democratic responsiveness angle (Powell 2004) and broader ideological congruence perspective (Powell 2009) to narrower concerns with policy and issue congruence

among voters and elites (e.g. Thomassen 2012). VAAs constitute a rich, yet under-exploited, data source for empirical analyses that aim to contribute to this crucial debate. To address the VAA data source gap in the literature, this panel welcomes papers that draw on VAA datasets to study the quality of representation broadly understood. This includes the study of congruence between voters and elites at different levels of aggregation, from candidate to parties, and with respect to different foci, from broader ideological scales to specific policy issues. Innovations in how to measure elite-voter congruence are welcome while papers with a comparative focus, either cross-national or over time, are particularly encouraged.

Panel 4: Voting Advice Application Data and Coalition Studies
Chairs: Patrick Dumont/Eric Linhart
(patrick.dumont@anu.edu.au / eric.linhart@phil.tu-chemnitz.de)
VAAs have originally been developed to compare parties' and voters' positions on relevant political issues around elections and give advice to voters which parties their positions are most congruent with. At the same time, positions of the various competing parties can be compared to each other and provide information about ideological distances between the parties. While many subfields in political science like the study of party competition, coalition theory or party system analysis require data on positional similarities and dissimilarities of parties, several alternatives to estimate such differences are connected with their own problems. The proliferation of VAAs provides a new alternative to get such kind of data which has some advantages: it is generated close to elections, it is proclaimed to include the relevant topics of an election, and it is easy to get. On the other hand, there might be concerns if VAA data could adequately reflect party distances, e.g. because too complex questions which cannot be simply answered by 'yes' or 'no' are excluded. This panel welcomes papers which i) theoretically discuss the usability of VAA data for the above mentioned fields, ii) compare VAA data on party distances with data coming from other methods like expert surveys or manifesto analyses, or iii) use VAA data to analyze empirically party competition, party systems or coalition formation.

Bios of section chairs:

Prof. Dr. Stefan Marschall is a full professor of political science and Chair of German Politics at the University of Düsseldorf/Germany. He is a specialist on political (online) communication and comparative as well as transnational parliamentarism. He serves as one of the organizers and (founding) convenors of the ECPR Research Group on Voting Advice Applications, as co-editor (with Diego Garzia) of "Matching Voters with Parties and Candidates: Voting Advice Applications in a Comparative Perspective" (published 2014 with ECPR Press) and is chiefly in charge of the research on the German VAA "Wahl-O-Mat".

Dr. Diego Garzia is currently a Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Lucerne/Switzerland. He has authored articles in journals such as Electoral Studies, Political Psychology, Party Politics, Political Research Quarterly and West European Politics. He is one of the organizers and (founding) convenors of the ECPR Research Group on Voting Advice Applications and co-editor (with Stefan Marschall) of "Matching Voters with Parties and Candidates: Voting Advice Applications in a Comparative Perspective" (published 2014 with ECPR Press).