Voter Information Web Sites

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INTRODUCTION

Several election studies observe 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 (Denver, 2003). This development may imply that voters show more information-seeking behaviour. In the 1990s, various Web sites have emerged that are designed to support the voters in this job. These voter information Web sites are nonpartisan Web sites that provide the users with information on the election promises, issue positions or past performance of political parties or individual candidates. The term *Web site* should be understood as including various Internet-based resources and facilities, such as databases, decision-support systems, and discussion forums. In this article, we address the question what these voter information Web sites may offer in terms of their potential of enhancing the quality of voting decisions. The core of this exposition will centre on the Web site design features and on how the voters make use of the Web sites.

In the next section, we will highlight the distinction between prospective and retrospective Web sites. The section titled "Voter Information Web Sites" provides an overview of the main design features of voter information Web sites. Some examples of prospective and retrospective Web sites will be discussed. In the Future Trends section, we point toward some future trends. Finally, a tentative assessment will be given of the significance of voter information Web sites for enhancing the functioning of representative democracy.

BACKGROUND

Voters can make up their minds within different time perspectives. They can orient themselves toward a comparative assessment ex ante of the candidates' or parties' election pledges (prospective voting) or toward an ex post evaluation of the incumbents' past performance (retrospective voting).

Along these lines, two types of voter information Web sites can be distinguished:

1. Web sites that assist the voters in their prospective appraisals. One type of prospective voter information Web sites assists the voters in the job of comparing election manifestos. Election pledges and issue positions are made searchable by policy area or theme. In this article, we look at "vote matches" or "voting indication tools". These are software programmes that compare the user's answers on an issue position questionnaire with a database of candidates' or parties' electoral policy propositions, and give the users an advice about the best fitting political preference.
2. Web sites that assist the voters in their retrospective appraisals. These Web sites provide information on the past performance of elected representatives. For instance, performance data can be provided by overviews of voting records; performance evaluations can be presented in the form of ratings or in qualitative terms.

Voter information Web sites can be regarded as new nonpartisan information intermediaries in the voters' information environment (Edwards, 2005; IPDI, 2004). In this environment, a variety of information providers are active: political parties and individual politicians, actors within the media system and civil society actors (interest groups and other nonpartisan and not-for-profit organisations). The Web sites to be discussed in this article were set up by civil society actors. However, traditional media organisations are also active in this domain, as well as for-profit organisations, such as media and consultancy companies.[1]

VOTER INFORMATION WEB SITES: DESIGN CHOICES, EXPERIENCES

Prospective Voter Information Web Sites (Voting Indicators)

Examples of voting indicators are the *StemWijzer* in The Netherlands, the *Wahl-O-Mat* in Germany, the *PolitArena* in Switzerland and several "voting machines" in Finland.

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In several countries, voting indicators were available during the European Parliament election in 2004. In this section, the main design choices will be indicated. The most successful voting indicator in The Netherlands ('most successful' in terms of number of visitors) will be discussed as an example.

Main Design Choices

In designing voting indicators, several decisions have to be made. The main design features include:

- The basis of the parties' or candidates' profiles: Voting indicators can be based on the parties' election manifestos, on issue positions formulated by the party leaders or candidates, or on the personal answers given by individual candidates on the designers' questionnaire.
- The composition of the list of propositions: Groot (2003) formulated the following criteria for the selection of propositions: content validity (the inclusion of the most important points of contention between the parties or candidates), representational validity (the duly representation of the positions held by the different parties or candidates), avoidance of overlap and discriminatory power.
- The validation and "calibration" of the voting indicator: First, by submitting the list of propositions to party officials for authorization, and, second, by subjecting the final draft of the voting indicator to a test by politicians.
- The options for the users: the response categories and the possibilities of giving additional weights to certain themes or issues.
- The presentation of the results to the user: a single voting advice, an overview of the differences between the user's profile with the parties profiles on all propositions, the inclusion of links with relevant statements in the election manifestos, and so forth.

The Dutch Voting Indicator StemWijzer

In a multi-party system, as in The Netherlands, comparing political parties on the basis of their election pledges is a complex task for the voters. Since the Dutch parliamentary election in 1994, the Institute for Public and Politics (IPP, an independent institute for civic education) distributes a digital voting indicator, called the *StemWijzer,* in their regular package of civic educative material.[2] This first digital voting indicator was available as a diskette. A few thousand were sold to schools and individual users. In the1998 parliamentary election, the *StemWijzer* was also made available on the Internet. About 6,500 voters made use of this Internet version (Tops, Voerman, & Boogers, 2000). In the 2002 parliamentary election, the *StemWijzer* was only available on the Internet. More than 2 million voting advices were provided.

From the beginning, the designers of the system had two aims, the first of which was educative: increasing the users' knowledge about the programmatic differences and similarities between the political parties. The second aim was to assist the users with their party choice. The educative aim is important for understanding the system's design and for the assessment of its quality.

The Design of the List of Propositions and Party Profiles

Methodologically, the *StemWijzer* works by comparing party profiles with the profile of the user. The party profiles are based on the election platforms of the political parties. A first selection is made of about 100 propositions, considering their distribution over the themes covered in the party platforms, their saliency in the public discussion and a balance between "positive" and "negative" propositions. Then, a further selection is made of about 50 propositions, in view of saliency, clarity and formulation. This list is submitted to authoritative representatives of the political parties. They determine the party's standpoints on the propositions (agree, disagree, or neutral). They can take this opportunity to give their comments on the list. Then a final selection is made. Propositions on which there is at least not one party in agreement, and one party in disagreement, are deleted. A final control is made with regard to the distribution of the propositions over the themes, and the overall differences between the parties.[3] The final list should include between 25 and 30 propositions.

The Method for Determining the Voting Advice

The users build their own profile by working through the list of propositions. They can choose between "agree", "neutral", "disagree", or "no opinion". When they have completed the list, they can assign some extra weight to propositions. Then the computer compares the different party profiles with the user's profile on the basis of the principle of the "smallest difference". The user gets a voting advice with a list of all parties in decreasing order of congruence, together with a comparative overview of his or her points of view on each proposition and those of all the parties included in the voting indicator.

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