What's the point of voting advice applications? Competing perspectives on democracy and citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Voting advice applications (VAAs) are interactive online tools designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. Current VAAs typically aim to do so by matching users' policy-preferences with the positions of parties or candidates. But this 'matching model' depends crucially on implicit, contestable presuppositions about the proper functioning of the electoral process and about the forms of competence required for good citizenship—presuppositions associated with the social choice conception of democracy. This paper aims to make those presuppositions explicit and to contrast them with two possible alternative perspectives on VAAs, associated with deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy and citizenship.

1. Introduction

Debates over democracy are frequently motivated by concerns about low levels of voter competence (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Friedman, 2007; Caplan, 2008; Brennan, 2011). One recent response to this concern has been the development of 'Voting Advice Applications' (VAAs). These interactive online tools are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. Due to the growing number, popularity, and influence of VAAs (Garzia, 2010), they are now attracting sustained attention from political scientists.

For the most part, however, researchers have focused either on the extent to which VAAs influence voting behaviour and election outcomes or on issues of methodology and measurement (see the articles in this symposium, as well as Garzia and Marschall, 2012; Garzia and Marschall, 2014). This focus on technical issues, we believe, has left other important concerns unaddressed. As interventions in electoral politics, VAAs can also be assessed from the perspective of how well they perform their *function*, and that requires making clear what their function is supposed to be. Hence our guiding question here: 'What's the point of VAAs?' As we shall argue, VAAs are built on conceptual, normative and empirical presuppositions about democracy and citizenship, especially about the ways in which electoral practices currently fail to live up to their democratic potential and voters currently fall short of making well-considered decisions. As a result, claims about how VAAs ought to be designed can never be adequately defended on the basis of technical or methodological considerations alone. Rather, justifying a VAA requires articulating and defending these presuppositions about democracy and citizenship.

Once questions are raised as to what makes a democracy function 'well' or what qualities citizens must have to be 'competent,' it turns out that there are many more possible approaches than the current crop of VAAs would suggest. In particular, our central claim will be that the VAAs currently on offer are premised on one specific, disputed understanding of democracy and citizenship. In brief, the

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assumption is that elections are in essence about aggregating the policy-preferences of voters and that strengthening democracy is a matter of ensuring that the support for parties (expressed in votes) more accurately reflects the existing preferences of voters. This fits well with the normative conception of democracy expounded by social choice theorists, but that view of democracy is contested. Defenders of deliberative democracy argue that the democratic process is largely about the on-going revision of political views rather than the aggregation of given preferences. And advocates of contestatory or agonistic models of democracy and citizenship emphasize the political task of seeing beyond the current political landscape rather than accepting it as a given. Our aim here is to show both that a social choice model of electoral politics is implicit in the current design of matching VAAs (even if not in the explicit statements of their designers) and that, if one were to endorse a deliberative or agonistic conception of democracy and citizenship, VAAs would have to be significantly transformed if they were to serve those purposes.

To make our case, we proceed in three steps. In the next section, we situate the discussion about VAAs within a broad concern with citizen competence. Then, in Section 3, we identify the predominant 'matching' model of VAA-design and the corresponding 'social choice' conception of electoral politics and citizen competence. In a third step, we discuss two alternative conceptions of electoral politics and citizen competence – 'deliberative democracy' (Section 4) and 'agonistic politics' (Section 5) – and sketch the ways in which VAAs would have to be (and are being) transformed to realize these aims rather than the aims driving current 'matching' models.

Posing these questions unavoidably shifts the discussion from methodological issues to issues of political philosophy and democratic theory, where questions have a normative-evaluative, political, and contested character. Attending to these issues is not, however, a matter of injecting politics and values into a neutral domain. It is rather a matter of bringing to the surface the normative commitments that *already* frame the design of VAAs. By identifying the guiding assumptions behind existing VAAs and highlighting their contingent and disputable status, we hope to broaden the debate over what forms of digitally mediated voting assistance might be possible and appropriate. For however much easier it might be to implement matching VAAs, the fact that they are premised on a contested understanding of good citizenship and democratic politics raises concerns about the dominance of the matching model in current VAA-design. The point of this essay, then, is not to defend any particular conception of democracy, nor to provide a blueprint for new voting advice applications, but to provide a frame of reference for further debate by making explicit the contestable commitments undertaken in the design-choices of different VAAs.

2. The problem of citizen competence

In general, voting advice applications can be defined as interactive online tools that are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. As such, VAAs are intended as means of addressing one of the oldest and must tenacious worries about democracy,

namely, that citizens turn out to be poorly informed, easily swayed, highly irrational, etc. Political thinkers from Plato, Cicero, and Schumpeter to the present day (e.g. Caplan, 2008; Friedman, 2007) have seen citizen incompetence as an unavoidable reality to which political systems must respond, typically by strengthening the role of experts and elites. Others, from J. S. Mill and John Dewey to present-day advocates of civic education (Barber, 1994; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; or the United Nations Development Program http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/democraticgovernance/ (Last accessed July 4, 2013)), keen to avoid this elitism and committed to overcoming citizen apathy and ignorance, call for programs that will make citizens more engaged and better informed. Part of what makes VAAs so interesting is that they represent a response that is arguably more feasible, convenient, and effective than wholesale programs in voter education while still being inclusively democratic.

There is an enormous literature on the precise nature and extent of voter competence in various countries, and we do not wish to take a position on the extent of voter incompetence. But few would deny that there is room for improvement. Recent empirical work in behavioural economics, political psychology, and neuroscience is further highlighting how predictably irrational humans are in making choices (Kahneman, 2011), and how easily voters can be misled intentionally and unintentionally (Caplan, 2008; Kelly, 2012). In light of this research, traditional efforts to increase voter competence by providing them with more information may even exacerbate the problem by generating further cognitive overload. In addition, as voters have shifted away from voting on the basis of party loyalty and demographic affiliation, they lose one of the primary time-saving strategies for figuring out how to vote (Dalton, 2002). In short, the growing complexity of electoral politics overtaxes citizens' already limited ability to make good decisions about how to vote.

It is clear that many designers of VAAs take their primarily task to be one of raising citizen competence. The German 'Wahl-O-Mat,' for instance, aims to overcome voter apathy and increase voter turnout by reducing the perceived difficulty of making a choice (Marschall and Schmidt, 2010). The Dutch 'StemWijzer' and Belgian 'Do the Vote Test,' similarly, present themselves as increasing voters' knowledge of the parties' positions on the issues, so that users vote based on 'substance,' rather than the distracting candidate images and soundbites on which the media (and hence the easily influenced public) tend to focus (de Graaf, 2010; Nuytemans et al., 2010). The makers of the 'Kieskompas' [Vote Compass Inc.] articulate yet another version of the problem of citizen competence:

> 'Members of the general public find themselves confronted with increasingly complex choices in several walks of life. It is not always clear which choice fits best with their own preferences. Kieskompas seeks to help people make more better-informed [*sic*] choices. Based on scientifically approved methods, Kieskompas develops web applications in order to make choices more straightforward and more transparent, both to voters and consumers.' (http://www.kieskompas.nl, version of 2011).

In general, then, we take it that the main aspiration of VAAs – their 'point' – is to efficiently raise citizen competence, conveniently transforming users into better-informed voters.[1] That is to say, the 'point' of VAAs, at a general level, is to address what may be called a democratic 'competence gap' between how engaged and knowledgeable voters actually are and how engaged and knowledgeable they would have to be for the democratic process to function properly (Anderson, 2009). VAAs serve to close this competence gap by leveraging voters' performance, much as a computerized expert system might assist an architectural engineer in navigating complex decisions about the construction of a building.

Clearly, however, there are a variety of ways of conceptualizing what capacities citizens must have for a 'properly functioning' democracy. If one surveys the literature on voter ignorance and citizen incompetence, there is wide consensus that the majority of citizens have low levels of political knowledge, reason irrationally about the best means to realize their ends, and exhibit widespread, predictable biases in their preferences for candidates, parties, and standpoints (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Caplan, 2008; Brennan, 2011). Some of this is contested, of course, in particular whether ignorance about matters of geography or history is really such a threat to a well-functioning democracy (Lupia, 2006). Indeed, part of what a political theory needs to explain is why certain forms of knowledge or other dimensions of citizen competence are vitally important to a well-functioning democracy. In the following sections, we will sketch three competing perspectives on democracy and citizenship, each of which casts the problem of citizen competence in a different light. The key implication of this for our purposes is that, depending on which perspective one takes, the point of a VAA will be different, as will the desiderata for designing a VAA.

3. The matching VAA

By far the most prominent model of voting advice application – represented by the Vote Compass and the StemWijzer (as well as VAAs based on these, such as EU Profiler and Wahl-O-Mat) – is concerned with *matchmaking* between citizens and political parties (or candidates), mapping the users' preferences onto parties' positions on the issues, thereby transforming users into well-informed political shoppers. Uncommitted voters receive guidance in finding the party that best fits with their political preferences, as measured by the degree of agreement with a set of statements concerning policy proposals drawn from political party platforms. Different VAAs have different ways of obtaining their information and different ways of calculating and presenting the result. But the idea is the same: the VAA aims to increase users' ability to vote well by informing them conveniently, efficiently, and engagingly. It does so in three ways (Garzia, 2010): by *procuring* information about the policy proposals of parties involved in an election; by *analysing* the information in terms of the fit with the user's own preferences; and by assisting the user in *applying* this information, in light of an easy-to-understand "results" page, in deciding how to vote.[2]

Given this setup, the operating assumption of the matching model is that voters lack sufficient knowledge about which electoral options fit best with their preferences. They are poorly informed regarding the programmatic differences between the parties on the issues at stake in an election. At the same time, they are implicitly assumed to be sufficiently competent to quickly express cogent policy-preferences in response to appropriately formulated issue-statements. So the primary competence gap that matching VAAs are meant to address is a lack of adequate knowledge of relevant party positions (whether as a result of complexity or lack of time). By clarifying the fit between where they stand on the issues and where the parties stand, matching VAA hope to also address the sense of futility and alienation associated with being overwhelmed by the complexity of the information or being unable to resist candidates' framing of the issues.

What broader picture of democracy and citizenship does this presuppose? A good way to get at this is to ask: What would we have to presuppose about the significance of the act of voting, in order for this construal of the competence gap in electoral politics to make sense? To start with, by presenting the user with a kind of voting advice based on answers to what boils down to a set of referenda (a series of yes-no stances on concrete policy-issues), the VAA treats *given policy-preferences* on a particular set of issues as appropriate reasons on which to base one's choice at the ballot. In essence, this turns issue-voting into a normative principle. What distinguishes a good voting decision is that the selected party's policy-positions accord with one's own policy-preferences. These preferences can reflect interests or values—the VAA is neutral about this. What voters need to know is what options are on the table, and this is the sense in which the VAA helps voters make choices that are 'better'. The significance of the act of voting, on this view, lies in expressing one's policy preferences; the importance of doing this well lies in the prospect that democracy offers of satisfying those preferences by aggregating them at the collective level.

This view of the significance of voting fits closely with a normative conception of democracy offered by social choice theory. Democratic processes of decision-making, on this view, are a means of aggregating the preferences of individuals, in order to achieve outcomes that take the preferences of each into account in a fair way—which is complicated, of course, by the difficulties that afflict decision-rules, as social choice theory has demonstrated (Arrow, 1963; Downs, 1957; Riker, 1982). In short, a well-

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[1] This is not to deny that VAAs have other functions too. They also provide entertainment value and introduce more accountability regarding the genuine positions of political parties or candidates (see, for instance, Marzuca et al., 2011).

[2] However much the developers of VAAs may insist that they are not telling users who to vote for, the 'results' screen is presented as the *conclusion* of a process, a process in which the inputs are the accurate measurements of policy positions of both users and political parties.

functioning democracy is a preference-aggregator, which turns individual preferences into collective policies. The good citizen (or, at least, the smart voter) is a savvy consumer, who is well informed about the options on the electoral menu, and therefore competent to choose a political party that matches his or her preferences.

What we get with the current VAAs then is a package of elements that hang together in a way that is mutually reinforcing: there is the design focus on matching voter preferences with party or candidate positions; there is an implicit diagnosis of citizens' ignorance about party positions on current policy issues as a leading source of problems with the democratic process; and there is a background assumption that the democratic process is primarily about elections, understood as a means to aggregate the given preferences of voters in the legislature. This picture is further reflected in the tendency, among proposals to revise VAAs, to focus on methodological improvements, tweaking the setup to get more accurate results by measuring users' preferences in a valid and reliable way, placing parties correctly, and providing sufficient policy detail.

Despite the dominance of this model in current VAAs, however, many political theorists and citizens reject this conception of the democratic process and of the corresponding view of the competence gap in electoral politics. In what follows, we consider two approaches that depart from the matching model of VAAs and its associated conceptions of democracy and citizenship. The first emphasizes the importance of citizens' rational, critical, and open reflection on their current political preferences (or lack thereof). We refer to this as the 'deliberative' approach, owing to the emphasis on reasoning and the open dialogue that often (though not necessarily) improves reasoning. The other approach, which we label 'contestatory,' focuses on challenging taken-for-granted depictions of the political landscape and on helping voters to appreciate the contentiousness of what gets presented as the relevant issues in the election. Seen from either a deliberative or a contestatory perspective, if the point of VAAs lies in addressing democratic competence gaps, then the dominant matching model of VAAs misses much of the point.

4. The deliberative approach to VAAs

Consider first the possibility that it is not *knowledge of party-positions* that citizens lack but rather *well-considered views about what the parties ought to be defending*. The form of citizen incompetence at stake, from this perspective, concerns not a failure to know where the candidates stand but a failure to think through what policies ought to be adopted. More than voter ignorance about party-platforms, it is actually a frustration with this broader lack of well-considered preferences that figures prominently in complaints about the state of the electorate (Fishkin, 2009; Friedman, 2007; Caplan, 2008; Brennan, 2011). Yet this conception of the competence gap between citizens' capacities for self-government and what democracy presupposes is fundamentally at odds with the social choice model of democracy, which focuses on aggregating *given* preferences.

The idea that democratic politics might be about transforming voters' views does, however, fit very well with other approaches to democratic theory, particularly deliberative democratic theory (e.g. Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1994; Goodin, 2008). Here, the democratic ideal is not one of policies accurately reflecting existing preferences but of citizens being able to see themselves as co-authors of law and public policy in virtue of the democratic procedures in which they (have the possibility to) participate. The point of campaigns and elections, on this view, is not merely to publicize the electoral options and then aggregate the votes; the point is for citizens to reflect critically and deliberate on the question of how best to respond to various conflicts, issues of principle, collective action problems, and so forth. According to the deliberative model, then, a well-functioning democracy is not just one in which ballots cast accurately match one's political preferences, but one in which the political institutions and culture facilitate the careful (re)consideration of preferences, typically in response to new arguments and information presented by others.

The citizen competence presupposed by deliberative democratic theory has three key components. First, there is an emphasis on being well informed about the issues on which one takes a position; thus, one votes poorly if one votes on the basis of political standpoints that rest on factual mistakes, for example, about the economic, environmental, social, or legal implications of a proposed policy. Second, deliberatively competent citizens revise their political standpoints when they realize that their positions on various issues or principles are inconsistent; in this sense, one votes poorly when one is oblivious to tensions between one's own commitments to lowering taxes *and* maintaining current levels of spending *and* keeping the budget balanced (Caplan, 2008). Finally, and most distinctively, deliberative democrats emphasize the importance of the genuinely public exchange between citizens about how best to address pressing issues and what policies can be justified. This emphasis on public deliberation reflects both an empirical claim about the way in which appropriate dialogue can facilitate creative and effective problem-solving (Goodin, 2008, chapter 5) and a normative claim about collective will-formation through rational deliberation being the only convincing way of explaining how citizens can see themselves as engaged in self-rule (Habermas, 2006; Estlund, 2008). For deliberative democrats, the significance of voting lies not in trying to bring about outcomes that fit one's policy-preferences but in jointly attempting to develop legislation that citizens can view themselves as having co-authored.

Suppose one were convinced of some version of this deliberative conception of citizen competence and democratic theory. What would one look for in a voting advice application? Certainly *not* the matching model, which treats as definitive users' on-the-spot responses to issue-statements. Rather, one would look for VAAs that addressed the three key points mentioned above – VAAs that assist citizens in becoming well informed about the issues, in reflecting carefully on the implications of their views on some issues for their views on others, and in engaging in the sort of public deliberation that leads to rational co-legislation.

How this could be done is obviously no simple question, and the normative issues raised by talk of 'rational' deliberation are vexed. Still we would say that VAA-developers committed to deliberative democracy can draw on a range of promising ideas. With regard to improving the extent to which users are well informed, one step in a deliberative direction would involve integrating background information more prominently into existing VAAs, many of which already offer links to additional information about the issues but do little to encourage their use. Other options include pop-up windows with additional information in response to 'no opinion' response, or 'gamification' elements that encourage actively consulting various sources of information. With regard to facilitating individual reflection on how one's various policy preferences cohere, VAAs could take a page from 'expert systems' in artificial intelligence that require users' decisions to jointly satisfy certain criteria, such as budget constraints on the allocation of public funds.[3]

One problem with these sorts of interventions, however, is that they are particularly liable to charges of bias regarding what information is relevant and what arguments are cogent. Thus deliberative democrats would advocate more publicly discursive approaches in which information, arguments, and challenges come from other citizens. A distinctively deliberative VAA would try to draw on the potential of communicative interaction to improve the quality of arguments and information. To accomplish this, deliberative VAAs would have to become more interactive. One possibility here has recently been suggested by 'YourView Australia' in which users provide justifications for their views and these justifications are promoted and demoted via 'credibility' ratings from other users (van Gelder, 2012), drawing on the approach developed by TruthMapping.com, which highlights the importance of ongoing, dynamic revisions to how statements, critiques, and rebuttals are formulated within the tool. None of these are panaceas. And to realize the potential of this technology, designers of deliberative VAAs would have to facilitate, structure, and prepare online exchanges so as to counter well-known problems with group decision-making, including the tendency toward conformity, polarization, and 'groupthink' (Rosenberg, 2007; Fishkin, 2009), especially as they emerge in online forums (Davies and Gangadharan, 2009; Kies, 2010).

What we hope to have shown here, however, is that deliberative VAAs are both conceivable and markedly different from the matching model with regard to what they take the point of a VAA to be.

5. The contestatory approach to VAAs

As we have seen, the deliberative model of the VAA departs from the matching model by facilitating users'

critical reflection on and transformation of their preferences, rather than approaching voters' existing preferences as 'givens'. But there is another way in which the 'givenness' presupposed by the matching model (and to some extent the deliberative model) can be challenged, namely, with regard to the political landscape itself, understood as comprising the issues that are seen as 'relevant,' the electoral procedures that are deemed 'appropriate,' the parties or candidates viewed as 'legitimate candidates,' and quite generally, what counts as democratic politics. What we call a 'contestatory' approach aims to challenge and reshape users' perception of the political landscape, rather than helping users find their place within the status quo. Whereas the deliberative model departs from the matching model in encouraging re-examination of voters' political tastes, the contestatory model focuses on assumptions about what belongs on the menu.

To see why this might be deemed important, consider that although well-constructed matching and deliberative VAAs may be non-partisan, in the sense of not being biased toward a particular political party, they are not thereby wholly politically neutral. Even carefully designed VAAs structure political information in a way that is informed by the developers' presuppositions (Fossen and Van den Brink, unpublished work). Through the selection of issues and parties or the spatial representation of the political landscape, for instance, VAAs help shape the agenda and reinforce assumptions about what is at stake in the election (Lefevere and Walgrave, present issue; Otjes and Louwerse, present issue). Moreover, in focussing exclusively on voting decisions, they endorse the legitimacy of the existing electoral process (Anderson and Fossen, forthcoming). But some citizens, and indeed some political theorists, take a much more critical stance toward the current shape of the electoral arena, or even toward the electoral process itself. These critics emphasize, in particular, how a focus on elections diverts attention away from more radical forms of participation. From this perspective, VAAs might seem to be pointless, or worse. Yet democratic theories that emphasize the 'contestatory' or 'agonistic' character of democratic politics also provide an alternative vantage point from which to develop VAAs, understood as interactive online tools that are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how (and perhaps whether) to vote.

The defining characteristic of agonistic political theory is its refusal to equate 'democracy' with existing electoral practice, stressing instead democracy's inherent openness and the contestability of policy outcomes, institutions, procedures, and articulations of democratic ideals (Mouffe, 2000; Honig, 2007; Tully, 2008; Fossen, 2008). Agonists agree with deliberative democrats that given preferences should not be treated as automatically authoritative. But they are less sanguine than deliberative democrats about the salutary potential of rational discussion, insisting that individual preferences, public discourse, and political institutions are unavoidably the result of relations of power. Failure to acknowledge this, they argue, can generate a degree of tunnel vision, in which citizens are held captive by a narrow picture of politics while alternate possibilities are depoliticized and occluded from view (Owen, 2003;

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[3] In 2012, the Dutch ProDemos launched an online tool ('De Nationale BegrotingsWijzer') that allowed users to dynamically adjust where governmental budget cuts would be made to achieve a constant overall reduction (http://www.nationalebegrotingswijzer.nl; last accessed on July 4, 2013).

Van den Brink, 2012). From this perspective, one competence gap in electoral practice that generates concern stems from a blindness to the contingent and framed character of the political landscape as it is presented in the electoral process (and in VAAs), as well as a lack of open-minded imagination toward the possibilities for taking seriously other ideas, institutions, practices, candidates, and issues.

Given how matching VAAs reinforce prevailing views on what 'the key issues' are and where people stand in 'the political landscape', one would expect that defenders of a contestatory model of politics would want little to do with them. Interestingly, however, VAAs have also been used to take a sceptical and sometimes even adversarial stance toward mainstream public discourse, the party system, or the electoral process. To give an example, in the run-up to the 2006 Dutch parliamentary election the anarchist collective Eurodusnie developed an alternative to the popular StemWijzer, the 'stemijzer' (loosely translated, the 'voting-crowbar'). It aimed to make clear that behind the 'parliamentary horizon' there is a 'whole world of possible standpoints and possibilities.' As they stated: 'Those who fill in traditional voting aides cannot even choose to leave NATO or to have free public transport. In this way voting aides contribute to a disturbing narrowing of public discourse in the Netherlands' ('Eurodusnie presenteert stemijzer', 2006, our translation). This radical alternative to mainstream VAAs was pitched at the level of the public agenda. It sought to make room for options that were excluded from the menu on offer—and in doing so it also rendered visible some of the political choices inherent in mainstream VAAs. In addition, by pitching itself as openly and explicitly partisan, this 'contestatory' VAA was designed to heighten voters' awareness to the way in which a biased depiction of the political landscape is often shrouded in claims to neutrality – including the claims of VAAs.

Some of the VAAs that spring up at election time – and there were more than 30 during the Dutch 2012 elections – are just for laughs. This has led some commentators to dismiss non-mainstream VAAs as 'toys' (Nuytemans et al., 2010, p. 140). And some of them do, indeed, have a *rogue* character, openly flaunting the careful methodological strictures of mainstream VAAs: they use highly tendentious formulations of statements, take up issues on which some parties have no public position, and even encourage voters to cast blank ballots. But to dismiss these VAAs as perverting the political process would be to overlook the contribution they make, in various ways, to helping citizens appreciate the constructed and contingent character of the political landscape. As political satire, some contestatory 'VAAs' call attention to the limits of electoral politics by exaggerating and ridiculing certain of its characteristics, for instance by emphasizing framing effects of campaigns and even of VAAs.[4] By focusing on interests of specific groups

(such as students or construction workers), some of these VAAs serve to raise awareness of specific issues that are marginalized in the public debate or absent from party platforms. Alternatively, some contestatory VAAs may seek not to put a particular issue on the political agenda but rather to sensitize voters to what is at stake in an election from the perspective of some particular identity—based, for instance, on religious affiliation or sexual orientation. Even a result screen with 'Don't vote!' can be seen as contributing to citizen competence by drawing attention to the lack of suitable candidates or highlighting alternative modes of political activity besides voting.

In discussing the contestatory VAAs that have cropped up spontaneously outside the mainstream of matching VAAs, we have sought to highlight their diverse contributions to problematizing and even remedying citizens' limited ability to look beyond conventional representations of the political landscape. What we have not addressed here are the important design questions involved in critically assessing these existing contestatory VAAs: one can always ask, for example, whether VAAs avoid playing into the hands of commercial interests, or how effective they are in making the political process more open, transparent, and inclusive. What won't be central to this assessment, however, is political neutrality. After all, part of their point is to highlight the way in which VAAs – including contestatory VAAs – never simply mirror the political landscape but rather stage it according to politically contestable presuppositions. From this perspective, the difference with the matching model of the VAA, in particular, is not that contestatory VAAs take up a substantive position in the political debate, but rather that they acknowledge that they do this.

6. Conclusion

What one takes the point of VAAs to be clearly depends on one's conception of electoral politics and citizen competence. Table 1 summarizes the three contrasting perspectives on democratic practice, ideals of citizenship, and the point of VAAs that we have discussed in this paper.

These are not, of course, the only options. The perspectives we have distinguished are meant to open a debate rather than exhaust the possibilities. We challenge both advocates and critics of VAAs to further elaborate and reflect on these perspectives, and to specify more clearly the competence gaps that their tools are meant to address. It is important for developers to be clear about these presuppositions because it will enable them to interpret, assess, and defend future design-choices. Our primary claim here is that an exclusive focus on a matching model of VAAs represents an undue narrowing of what the point of VAAs can be – a narrowing that turns out to be premised on a contested understanding of electoral democracy and good citizenship. Once it is clear that the design of VAAs depends not only on technical considerations but also on disputable normative and political conceptions of democracy and citizenship, a whole field of debate opens up regarding *which* approach to take.

One possible take on the different approaches that we have outlined here would be to say that they are

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[4] Examples include a VAA that presents pictures of party leaders and asks users to evaluate their looks (http://kopsnel.nl (Last accessed July 4, 2013)); and one that gives voting advice based on primary responses to images (for instance, responding to an image of a cow with either 'Cute! Let's pet it' or 'Yummy! Let's eat it' (http://www.stomwijzer.nl (Last accessed July 4, 2013)).

Table 1
Three competing perspectives on democracy, citizenship, and the point of VAAs.

	Matching VAA	Deliberative VAA	Contestatory VAA
Model of democracy	Social choice democracy	Deliberative democracy	Agonistic democracy
Ideal of the citizen	Citizen as savvy policy shopper	Citizen as co-legislator	Citizen as nonconformist
Competence gap	Ignorance of party-positions	Lack of well-considered preferences on issues	Constricted perceptions of the political landscape
Point of VAA	To increase congruence between voters' preferences and public policies	To facilitate rational preference revision	To challenge the status quo and shift the agenda

complementary pieces of a comprehensive approach rather than exclusive alternatives. Even if it is granted that deliberative and contestatory approaches are right to emphasize the importance of facilitating voters' critical reflection on their own preferences and on the predominant understandings of what 'the issues' are, it is still the case that voters will need improved knowledge of parties' positions to vote in an informed way. What is clear, however, is that it is a mistake to think that the matching model of VAAs, by itself, exhausts the possibilities for buttressing citizen competence and strengthening democracy.

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