# The differential impact of voting advice applications (VAAs) on first time electors´ voting decisions in recent Scandinavian elections.

## Introduction

There are several factors which over the recent decades have made the political processes of party choice rather complex, particularly in multiparty systems. First fission processes in multiparty systems like the Scandinavian as well as new political cleavages have resulted in growth in number of parties and thus the number of choices. Second, the political processes within parties to catch more voters outside their traditional supporters have blurred the distinctions between parties. New party alignments arise like the Red-Green coalition in Norway and Red-Blue bloc in Denmark which confirm that the left/right scale on the one hand exist, but on the other hand is more flexible and blurred. These developments in the party structure reflect social and political developments like the rise of the middle class and higher income. Class voting is declining ([Knutsen, 2006](#_ENREF_1)), ([Knutsen, 2008](#_ENREF_2)). Urbanization continues to change the social and political demography in both center and periphery. Secularization has consequences for the traditional religious cleavage while the growing particularly Muslim population has created new religious tension. Globalization and the information age have created new forms of participation, pluralization of societies as well as new political contradictions between political parties (Hoff 2004, Castells 2009). Particularly, questions of rights and immigration are salient. More parties, major social changes, voter dealignment and blurred distinctions between several parties points to the growing need for voter information, and thus also growing complexities in voting decisions particularly for first time electors. Despite politicians´ and the media´s efforts to reduce complexity by offering a choice between two blocks we believe that this growing complexity in party choice is a major trend. Here, the VAAs enter the scene as a possible “replacement” and as a popular heuristic for a lot of voters. Many first time voters place faith in them. VAAs become an important guide in an increased blurred political landscape characterized by the strategic communication favoured in order to attract voters. Declining party membership and identification, multiple channels of media, personalized politics and an ever more intense focus on election campaigns dominated by constant opinion surveys also add to this development (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Coleman, & Blumler, 2008; Stanyer, 2007). Precisely in this increased complexity, media offers interactive “Computer assisted party choice” (hereafter named VAAs) on their websites. These VAAs presents questions from party programs which voters may respond to. Based on voters´ responses to a number of questions the program suggests a party choice to the voter. The question is, now, how young voters actually make use of VAAs? In elections there is a trend of growing complexity as well as a trend of political simplifications and support for the voters. Despite attempts to simplify the voter’s choice, these trends altogether may be perceived by some voters as a confusing complexity. Consequently, our interest here is to explore how first time voters act and reason about their party choice in growing complexity on the one hand and also growing attempts to solve the voters dilemmas of choice on the other.

*What characterizes the role of VAAS in a selection of first time voters’ decisions in recent elections in Norway and Denmark?*

In our approach to this study we use open ended individual interviews and group interviews of a selection of first time voters. Our aim is to capture, how these voters deal with complexity by analyzing how they reason about their choice of political parties and particularly their use of VAAs in the process of deciding. It turns out that many of the voters use VAAs in their decision-making process but our informants use the information quite differently.

### Sample description of VAA – NRK-Norwegian state broadcasting

We afford a brief description of a VAAs and use the one developed by Norwegian broadcasting (NRK) as a sample for this brief introduction. The information is retrieved at this Website 28.02.2014 <http://nrkbeta.no/2013/08/28/slik-funkar-nrks-valgomat/> which unfortunately does not have an English version.

The VAA is briefly a questionnaire of items based on an analysis of party programs designed to reveal *differences*, and often political debates, between parties. Questions are mainly issue-oriented, as the theoretical model underlying VAAs is the model of issue voting. VAAs are based on the conceptions of Anthony Down´s proximity-model (Andreadis et al. 2013). The VAA presents itself as a help for voters to gain knowledge of the political landscape of parties. From the presentation we site; “It (the VAA) doesn’t not provide answers but try to be a sound basis for reflections. A particular aim of the content “validity” is to reveal differences between political parties”. The political parties have validated the items and given their policy scores in the VAA which serves as the baseline for estimation. Four elements are significant for the algorithm and final score of user. 1. The distance between political – party score and user score on single items (political issues). 2. Up to 5 items may be singled out as particularly important to voters and thus weighted twice. 3. The users’ selection of a candidate for Prime minister. 4. The users’ initial choice of party is given 1 point. Standard recommendations for handling bias in survey questionnaires are followed. Based on scores of distance (agreement and disagreement) with political party policy scores a final party is suggested for voters’ choice. The NRK has in 2013 made a two stage model where the second stage is a chase between the two parties which is closest to the user/voters preferences. This second stage concludes with a final suggestion of party choice to the voter. There are a number of VAAs in Norway and Denmark, which may be somewhat different in terms of items, like being weighted differently, having different party policy scores and thus may present different results. Some VAAs also present a score of party preferences at the VAA-website, while the NRK doesn’t do this in order to avoid bias or influence on the voter, as it is claimed. The main underlying logic in the VVA is an issue-voting logic. To favor certain issues should logically result in a choice of a political party.

### Previous research

Our research on first time voters use of VVAs touches upon several fields like political reasoning and identity as well as political rationalities and party alignment and particularly research related to VAAs.

There is some research to be found on voting aid applications, but we haven’t been able to locate studies on how voters reason about their VAAs experiences. Important research exists on studies like one from Belgium and one cross country study of content validity and political bias in 13 VAAs and seven countries. In a panel study of Belgian voters Walgrave found that 'Do the Vote Test' indeed has affected Belgian voters' final decision, but at the same time these effects were modest ([Walgrave, van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008](#_ENREF_8)). Walgrave et al. also did a test of what may be termed the outcome reliability of the VAAs. In a simulation of a random sample of voters they found;

From a “large-scale simulation of 500,000 different configurations of 36 statements and on a random sample of Belgian voters that many of these combinations produce diverging information for the participants. The study establishes that the specific selection of statements has a considerable impact on the 'voting advice' that is produced: some configurations favor certain parties, other configurations benefit other parties ([Walgrave, Nuytemans, & Pepermans, 2009](#_ENREF_7)).

Walgrave et al.´s study may not be generalized to VAAs in other countries, but there are reasons to believe that the voting advise from a combination of voter responses in different VAAs may be inconsistent and create confusion. The reliability or bias is also pointed out by Wagner and Ruusuvirta in their cross country study of 13 VAAs in seven countries.

“Party positions extracted from VAAs show strong convergent validity with left-right and economic positions, but compare less favorably with immigration and environment measures. The voting advice given to users is also inherently limited: VAAs mostly disregard accountability, salience, competence and non-policy factors; they treat policy positions and not outcomes as paramount; and they can be subject to strategic manipulation by political parties. As recommended by their designers, voters should treat these applications as tools and guides rather than as stringent recommendations”([Wagner & Ruusuvirta, 2012](#_ENREF_6)).

Although the VAAs may be designed very differently, this research indicates that Wagner & Ruusuvirta’s recommendations of their use should be taken seriously. In our empirical research we elaborate the differential role of VAAs and thus also their influence on voting decisions. In our data we find first time voter’s judgments of the validity of the VAAs recommendations which touch upon the above quantitative research. However, we explore the differential impact on young voters’ choice and believe that identity concepts are important analytical tools.

## Theory of identity and its development

We live in an age where the range of possible identities and the number identities offered to individuals increases, which is also the case for political identities. Before exploring political identities we may ask why identities are adopted. Identities are first and foremost adopted to serve basic needs ([Ryan & Deci, 2003](#_ENREF_3)). Some identities are forced upon us which even may be the case where voting is compulsory a purely external definition of the role. More voluntarily people adopt identities to maintain and secure their connectedness to the social and political world. People adopt identities to fit in, acquire roles, beliefs, attitudes. Often people gravitate toward identities where they gain competence, challenges and development which also may be the case for political identities particularly in the field of politics. People also tend to adopt identities within which they can engage challenges or gain skills and knowledge and feel generally effective, or identities that support the need for autonomy by providing a forum for personal development (Ryan & Deci, 2003: 254).We believe that political identities serve some of the same basic purposes whether the particular identity is to be not interested in politics, or e.g. a dedicated party member. Since identities serve basic needs, we assume that there is an inner drive to seek and adopt these various identities of personal profile or belonging. We therefore find a motivational approach to the development of political identities quite fruitful.

### Political identity

Already Eriksson 1968 described the development of political commitment as a key aspect of identification. The development of political identity is part of how young people anticipate their life and try to develop an understanding of who they are within a social and historical context. As part of these efforts adolescents reflect on values, ideologies and traditions as part of their community in their struggle to understand their role in society. Identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a specific social role or situation. It defines what it means to be a particular person in that role or situation (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stryker, 1980). Political identity can be seen as a subset of social identity. The competing social identities offered by superordinate (e.g., one’s national identity) and subgroup (e.g., ethnic, religious, gender) identities interact in a complex manner to generate optimal distinctiveness (Brewer & Conover, 2009). In our study, political identity is seen as *how* *citizens understand and represent themselves in relation to the field of politics*.

Identity involves the process of defining *us,* typically in opposition to *them*, a group holding different interests and values. Without the adversarial component, Gamson (2009) argues, the potential target of collective will most likely remain an abstraction, as in the cases of hunger, disease, or pollution. Identity does not dictate rationalities, but may add direction and depth to them. Consequently, identity gives reasoning a direction and has a generative capability for political involvement.

The process of voting for the first time may be seen as a political “rites de passage” where young people are given the role of independent political decision-maker. The choice of a political party is a signifier of belonging and identification to the individual which may stand out quite clear or might be very uncertain the individual. Therefore, regardless of decline of party loyalty we believe that the choice of a party still is a question of belonging and internalization of a political identity. Ryan & Deci assume that identification may be described according to internalization of identities that are based on either external regulation or degrees identification.

At one end of the continuum people lack any intentionality and are completely demotivated toward a particular field. Action may be a result of external forces e.g. voting is in some states compulsory ([Ryan & Deci, 2003](#_ENREF_3)). Voters who lack any internal political motivation may be termed “apolitical”. This is certainly an identity often touched upon in literature as “politically alienated” or “political cynicism”, a state of total withdrawal from any political affairs for various reasons. Introjected regulation on the other hand is associated with vulnerability to persuasion and reliance on other´s opinions. People who use VAAs with blind faith are positioned here. Identification – associated with active seeking out information and more complex and differentiated viewpoints relevant to voters’ decisions usually have an inner drive from personal interest and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2003: 254). *Identified regulation* is characterized by volitional action “regulated by one´s sense of the importance of action”([Ryan & Deci, 2003:260](#_ENREF_3)). The question of importance (to the individual) implies a judgment of values, attitudes or gain. Identified regulation of political action, as opposed to introjected regulation, might be related to the choice of parties which promote issues of personal importance to the voter. We believe that many voters find themselves in this position. The strongest identity is characterized by volitional engagement in activities out of interest and spontaneous satisfaction ([Ryan & Deci, 2003](#_ENREF_3)). We believe that voters may approach VVAs differently according to their internalization of political identities. We expect that voters with more identified regulations will have a more independent approach to VVAs.

The process of identity development may best be described by symbolic interactionism where identity mirrors and develops in social encounters and environments (Stryker, 1980). Two features that are particularly important in structural symbolic interaction are “society” and “self”. Society is viewed as a relatively stable and orderly structure, as reflected in the patterned behavior within and between social actors. While actors are creating the social structure, they are also receiving feedback from the social structure that influences their behavior. In this way, actors are always embedded in the very social structure that they are simultaneously creating (Stryker, 1980). Voters are typically situated in the dialogue between self and election processes as part of the political system. In accordance with symbolic interactionism we wish to mention Stets and Burkes´ “Cybernetic model” as a micro model for repetitive dialogues and identity developments. Stets & Burke state it in this way: “The hallmark … of selfhood is reflexivity. Humans have the ability to reflect back on themselves, to take account of themselves and plan accordingly to bring about future states, to be self-aware or achieve consciousness with respect to their own existence. In this way, humans are processual entities. They formulate and reflect, and this process is ongoing” ([Stets & Burke, 2006:130](#_ENREF_4)) (Stets & Burke 2003: 130). We believe this model is particularly relevant to voters´ encounter with VAAs. Identities are activated when it implies that they serve the purpose or background for judgments of situations. The situations might be of any political kind, but the process and outcome of the VAAs are certainly important ones. Answering questions and facing the outcome of a party recommendation leads to judgments between the particular content of the situation and the internal standards and identities in a sort of a dialogue. This may lead to a conclusion which might strengthen an identity, but may also lead to confusion and detachment from values. So far, we have elaborated why identities are important in political decision-making and presented a developmental model of identities which we consider to be fruitful in the analysis of students´ responses. In the interviews students reflect on experiences and decisions and thereby display aspects of their identity development. How they reason on their VAAs experiences is therefore important.

### Identities and rationalities

The way our informants reason about their engagements with WAAs may be an important signifier of their political identity and how the VAA experience is related to the voters’ judgments and their political development. Most thinking about social and political life is structured around two basic perspectives. The liberal institutional perspective (dating back to classical liberal thinkers such as Locke, Mill, and Bentham) is based on certain core assumptions, including that individuals have preferences that guide individuals’ choices and motivate their behavior. Central to this liberal understanding is the ongoing interplay between individuals and institutions (Rosenberg, 2002), and in a narrow sense, rationality can simply be seen as intelligent pursuit of self-interest (Sen, 2002). In March & Olsen’s work on political institutions and rationality they name this liberal logic as the “*logic of consequentiality”* which means that actors are motivated by the pursuit of interests as opposed to the “*logic of appropriateness”* stressing the role of identity, moral considerations, and “reasoned obligation”. This distinction can be regarded as a difference between on the one hand instrumental, and on the other hand identity-based types of action in relation to political institutions (March & Olsen, 2000). In the latter view, people are not particularly rational in the sense of being calculating or goal-oriented. To the extent that they reason or that their actions are actually directed, the underlying comprehension is more likely based on values, faith, or feelings. March & Olsen propose what they call the “conventional” or “obligatory” mode of action (which refers to the “logic of appropriateness”). Political action here aims to match identity to specific situations (March & Olsen, 2000). In such an institutional perspective, which is also very indebted to Mead (1934)and the symbolic interactionism, political action is primarily seen as driven by socially constructed meanings, roles, and rules as reflected in identities and institutions.

The sociology of Giddens emphasizes that modernity is characterized by information seeking and reflexivity (Giddens, 1991). In other words, the way people reason about politics, pursue their interests, and reach decisions may be quite different. Individuals’ information processing therefore reflects specific approaches to the role of citizen and also specific perceptions of democracy. In our analysis we believe that young voters may be characterized as to how they reason about their use of VAAsas a tool in party choice.

### The role of heuristics in voting

The ability to differentiate in politics is crucial. For many voters, this constitutes a real challenge, especially among first-time electors, who do not have familiar traditions or long-lasting habits to rely on. But, how do you survey and evaluate a complex and obscure political landscape? Downs, who in his classic study tried to determine political behaviour from economic notions and terms, stated that it is not rational for the individual to try to be politically informed, because the profit from such an effort is not commensurate with the effort needed (Downs 1957). Therefore, voters often need to find certain issues to rely on in their reasoning, of which some may be termed as “heuristics”. A heuristic can be understood as a perceptual tool to be used when the world is complex and ambiguous, but when a choice has to be made, and when it is useful or necessary to economize on the mental resources and cognitive investments needed for making the choice (Kuklinski & Quirk 1998). VAAs may be seen as a heuristic tool. The use of VAAs could also be argued to be rather “rational” – as it certainly includes the efforts to consider, optimize, and decide, and as the individual often performs this action in order to find a proper resolution.

### Summary

Summarizing, we rely on three theoretical approaches in our analysis of first time voters’ use of VAAs. Firstly, theory of identity development, secondly forms of rationality which can be traced in the reasoning of our informants, and thirdly heuristic functions in the voters´ decision-making.

## Methodology

### Procedure of data collection

The data for the study was collected as part of a project “Students as researcher” where social science teacher students in a teacher education program selected and interviewed upper secondary school pupils (respondents) who were all ready to vote. The teacher education students were given an introduction seminar to the theory, methodological guidelines and interview guide developed by researchers. The students were also given selection criteria to maximize variance and minimize interdependence among respondents. The criteria were variances in gender, political interest, schools and classes and also avoiding close friendship among respondents. The selected respondents are below: Selection of informants in the Norwegian sample.

Table 1 – Codes, gen= gender (M=male F=female), age, Imm= Immigrant, Y=Yes N=No, P-Int=Political interest (Y=yes, N=No, some), Voted, Y=Yes N=No, VAAS-participated in VAAS, Y=yes N=No

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Code | AG1 | AG2 | AG3 | AG4 | AG5 | BH1 | BH2 | BH3 | BH4 | BH5 | CB1 | CB2 | CB3 | CB4 |
| Gen | F | M | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | M | F | F | M | M |
| Age | 17 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| Imm | N | Y | N | Y | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | Y | N | N |
| P-Int | Y | Y | N | Y | some | Y | Y | Y | Y | some | some | some | some | Y |
| Voted | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| VAAS | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y |

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| Code | DA1 | DA2 | DA3 | DA4 | EK1 | EK2 | EK3 | EK4 | FS1 | FS2 | FS3 | FS4 | FS5 | FS6 |
| Gen | F | M | F | F | F | F | F | M | M | F | F | M | F | F |
| Age | 19 | 21 | 20 | 20 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 17 | 18 | 18 |
| Imm | Y | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | Y | N | N |
| P-Int | some | Y | N | some | N | Y | N | N | Y | some | some | some | some | Y |
| Voted | Y | Y-B | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| VAAS | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y |

In the selection of 28 young voters there are 13 males, 15 females, 6 immigrants, 5 non-interested in politics and 10 some interested, two non-voters and one “Blank voter (Y-B), four did not participate in the VAAs. The teacher education students transcribed their interviews and presented their results in a second seminar together with the researchers. This last seminar was part of the interview validation and discussion of interpretation with the researchers ([Tjora, 2009](#_ENREF_5)).

The Danish election study consisted of 4 in-depth focus group interviews: One conducted with first time voters. One with elderly citizens, one with MA students, and finally one with unskilled labourers. The focus groups consisted of 4-9 individuals each. These participants were interviewed for approx. 1-2 hours and the interviews were transcribed in full length subsequently. For this study only the focus group of first time voters is being used.

### Analytical procedures

All the interviews were read and the parts which elaborated the VAAs were selected. These parts were reread and analyzed according to theory. Repeated approaches to the text reveal the richness of the material and gave the basis for analysis and interpretation. Based on repeated readings of transcripts a tentative analytical typology of approaches to VAAs was constructed. This will serve as an analytical tool in the analysis of interviews. In addition to this categorization, concepts of heuristics, forms of political reasoning and theory of identity-formation are used to analyze respondents’ elaborations.

## Analysis

### Categorization of respondents

Before elaborating the relationship between the VAAs and respondents, we´d like to illustrate how the VAAs are placed in a complex political landscape as well as being situated in the strategic communication favoured in order to attract voters. In earlier studies voting was closely connected to partisanship characterized by long-term attachments to one ore other of the political parties. There has, however, gradually been a disengaging between voters and the political parties (”dealignment”) for several reasons, as we have indicated above. In representative democracy it is a common doctrine that voters are assumed to make an informed choice of a party/a candidate on the basis of political programmes (and the successful party then translates the programme into practice once in government) (Whiteley 2012). According to classic economic theory information is always a good in relation to decision making processes – more information and more knowledge provide better decisions, and it is always in the interest of an actor to gain as much information as possible. VAAs are aimed at guiding the potential voter in order to find the particular political party or political candidate who optimally matches the voter´s personal political preferences.

The respondents in this study in general are split up – some are very positive towards the idea of using VAAs in voting decisions others remain sceptic towards the concept. Nevertheless, some of the respondents take on the advice given, while others reject it. Based on these distinctions we would like to introduce the following square figure to be used as an analytic tool by presenting some ideal types for the analysis below.

**Figure 1: Analytical ideal types**

**Faith in VAAs**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Yes/some | No/critical |
| Yes | The confirmationists | (The converted) |
| No | The explorationists | The sceptics |

**Advice taken**

In our study, we particularly find three types, the sceptics, the confirmationists and the explorationists and elaborate our findings blow;

### The sceptics

A group of respondents are especially sceptical when it comes to using the voting advice. Therefore it seems important to them to seek confirmation of their choice. The first respondent belongs to the focus group of first time voters. He and female are aged 18. The male did not vote while the female did:

Male R: I need to acquaint myself with the matters more than I have done at this election campaign. But I really could not be bothered to spend the required time. I don’t want to vote, if I haven´t done the job properly. So, if I´m going to vote, then I need to know exactly, who I´m voting for. Otherwise, there is no need to do it. I don´t think that these tests provide you with a clear picture. You should not vote, if you don´t acquaint yourself with things (FG3-R4).

Female I: I feel that VAAS are somewhat “stupid”, you only look at the party you prefer…I did a couple, but it did not influence my choice (AG1.S2)!

Both respondents seem to emphasize independence, control of their decision and rationality based on as complete information as possible. Though this might be uncertain, we assume that this need for control is rooted in a political identity based on values, issues or belonging of importance to the respondents. The female respondent did not elaborate on the “stupidity”, but this may reflect distrust in the decision which is perceived as mechanical and not based on sound reflections. Another respondent gives some reasons of this:

I: Did you try a VVA? R: No I didn’t..I may try next time and it may be a good basis for a choice. However, I think it gives a somewhat superficial picture of politics. Even if I arrive at a certain decision on a political party, I would still read some more before casting my vote (DA4S4).

This respondent seems to confirm the scepticism expressed by the two above. The underlying feeling for the scepticism seems to be a need for information and thorough considerations.

R:…I did take a VVA. I got the “Conservative party as an advice. But I really did not care about many of the questions. They were not relevant to me – and I did not answer them (BH4S1)

Here we face another problem with the VAAs – the fact that a number of the questions might be irrelevant to the user and therefore may result in an uncertain outcome. In this case the VAAs presented a “satisfactory” outcome, but as pointed out in the previous research above, perceived irrelevances in the questionnaires cause respondents to ignore the advice or might even result in different outcomes. VAAs sometimes also offer some surprises like this one;

I: did you use VAAS? R: Yes I did. I and did it affect your choice? No, I just lost my faith the VAAs (laughter). I got the opposite political advice of what I consider to be my political position! I: ok!? R continues; I may have expressed myself inaccurate. I think the VAAs put an emphasis on very few questions that are very important to a party, which explains that you all of a sudden are given this advice. I: did you find a good party match to your political preferences? R: No, not all of them, only my most important viewpoints.

During the writing of this article one of us took the (NRK) VVA-test in Norway (where the national elections were going on at the time), as well as the (DR) VVA-test in Denmark (where the local elections were going on at the time). There are many similarities between the two countries, when it comes to political parties and civic and political culture. After answering a battery of questions both of the tests came up with a surprising result: It suggested a party positioned at the very opposite political wing than the one this author would normally vote for. This example suggests that these tests are rather tricky tools, or contrary that the author as a political scientist has no serious clue of his own political and ideological values designed to reach what they aim for. And additionally, that the problem here is, that both possibilities seem somewhat unacceptable.

Summary, at the heart of “the sceptics” scepticism seems to be a need to be in control of their voting, and that they should be as informed as possible about their choices at the ballot box. This position may reflect a strong need for independence and/or a strong identity or adherence to political values and attitudes which may not be violated particularly by computerized advice. Some expressions from the respondents (like VVAs are stupid) clearly downplay the VAAs and it´s mathematical/mechanical approach to important matters in life, like voting.

### The converted

Our analytically constructed group of “the converted“, obviously, is a somewhat paradoxical category and following it was unsurprisingly not detected in the study.

The need for political autonomy is particularly apparent in the following group of “The confirmationists”. These respondents are mostly positive to use VAAs in voting decisions. In the Danish study of focus groups one of the male first time voters explain:

*R: On the TV I tried to watch a series of election discussions. But, it didn´t work well. After 5 minutes I got sick of watching the candidates. It´s better when they don´t say anything – like in the VAAs. I took several tests, because I thought: “This cannot be true”. But it could, ´cause it was the same result every time (FG3-R3).*

A male respondent states like this: “VAAs are great for many in order to decide. For me, this is just not necessary. I know who to vote for” (A-G2-S2). The respondent uses the VAA to confirm his political position which is also the case for the next one. However, he points to the fact that for many VAAs might be useful an work as a support for the decisions, a heuristic.

I: Did you try VAAs? R: Yes I did the …one, and it was quite clear what my opinion (party choice – author comment) was. It confirmed my choice!(E-K2)

Although VAAs in several cases can be seen as a trademark political heuristic, they at the same time incarnate the processes of reflexivity common to contemporary lifestyles and embracing individual political indications like voting. While the sceptics seem to regard VAAs more or less like a computer-game, the confirmationists put some reflective emphasis on them.

The next respondent, who is a Norwegian male, aged 18 (did vote), is somewhat typical for this position:

I: How did you experience the election, did the media try to urge the youth to cast their vote?

R: I think the election was all over, it was a lot in papers and on TV. It was almost too much in the end. I didn´t care to watch the debates on TV and the like, it was just bickering and biking which I don´t understand. The media in a way tried to make us vote, I did a lot of VVA tests because the media was so obsessed with it (A-G3-S1).

This respondent reflects a genuine political communicative paradox: On the one hand many respondents claim “the election is all over the place in the papers and in the TV”. At the same time they report that they badly need more information about various candidates and political parties in order to make a proper choice. This contradiction seems to be a source of frustration for many voters, perhaps especially first time voters, who significantly include VAAs in their decision making processes, perhaps thereby managing insecurities and managing the entire voting process.

What the respondents in this category have in common is that they pretty much have decided on their choice. Some have clear preferences, but deep inside there still seems to be some doubt about their choice. From this position they encounter one or several VAAs to see the outcome, partly for interest, or just for fun, but the outcome generates reflections. They all emphasize that their choice was confirmed, which seems to give them some satisfaction. The fact that they seek to use the outcome to confirm leads us to name them “confirmationists” after this strategy. The VAAs seem to be a tool which confirms that the respondents have understood politics and that the outcome also confirms this understanding in addition to fit their choice. Such a positive self-confirmatory experience from net computer dialogue might also strengthen their political self and identity. This way, the VAAs not only works as a heuristic tool in party choice but also develop the respondents’ political identity and works as a signifier of political belonging. Some respondents certainly like to keep control, and one should not rely on VAAs because they don’t provide an overall judgment of what is “really important” in political life. The respondents´ reflective approach to the use of VAAs shows that the VAAs might have substantial influence on the development of respondents´ political identity. Before elaborating on this we turn to other politically more uncertain respondents.

### The explorationists

As pointed out in the introduction, the VAAs are part of a larger discourse particularly orchestrated by the media in its overwhelming flow of information. Consequently, the voting advice outcome is also situated in the public media discourse. Furthermore, in terms of political influence the VAAs´ voting advice is a source of influence along with family, friends and school. We´d like to show this in the following statement.

I: Did the VAAs influence your voting?

R: Yes. To some extent. Obviously, in the end I got the same result on many VAAs. That and many other things contributed to my decision.

I: What other things – do you have some examples?

R: The ways your friends vote. For instance we have a guy in the circle of friends who is very interested in politics. He votes for Fremskrittspartiet (the “Progressive party”). It ended up that we did the same.

I: Were you influenced a lot by your friends – how about your family?

R: I would not say that I was influenced a lot by my friends, I sort of did agree with them in the first place on how to vote, so it was more like my own personal points of view. My family does not mean lot when it comes to voting, I don’t think that people care a lot about how parents vote. At least not me. I voted completely different than my mother and father. And they said it was fine that I totally decided for myself how to vote (A-G3-S1).

First of all, this respondent reports different sources behind his voting decision. There are various VAAs, and he compares and holds these tests against his own core values. He is also very much influenced by his friend. Many first time voters rely on their actual political knowledge – derived from various sources: family, school, friends, media, etc., and socialization is a main heuristics in coping with difficult choices and ambiguities. But perhaps the most important finesse in the quotation above is a linguistic one: the respondent does not just decide for himself how to vote, *he totally decides for himself how to vote*. This is, at least in the Norwegian language, a somewhat extraordinary expression, stressing the point that the respondent is acting *completely* independently in his political deciding. Accountability, reliance and independency in general appear as important elements of the political identity and the political self of our respondents. Such political and democratic values are apparently much more present rather than ideas of what pays off, or how do certain policies or political coalitions possibly benefit the individual. A logic of appropriateness seems more present here than a logic of consequentiality. These first timers obviously want to appear as being responsible democratic voters. This in many ways seems to resemble what Ryan & Deci characterize as “identified regulation”, which is a volitional action that regulates one´s sense of the importance of an action for one´s values or goals. Identified regulation of political action, as opposed to introjected regulation, is related to the choice of parties which promotes issues of personal importance to the voter, and it signifies ways of embracing political concerns that contain independent individual experiences as well as different qualities of involvement (Ryan & Deci 2003: 261).

A similar discourse as localised in the preceding respondent is also apparent in the following, not very politically interested, woman’s statement.

Yes I tried VAAs…(pause)..I don’t know. I did not vote for the party which I was advised to do…Actually, I think my mom and dad as well as my boyfriend have influenced me more (E-K1).

It seems that VAAs are a dialogue box which provide some advice which often is overruled by stronger and significant others.

Another respondent, a woman aged 17 (who did vote), shows how VAAs may function contrary to a guiding principle and as the reverse to a political heuristic, inducing uncertainty and adding anxiety to the individual decision making process. She says the following:

I: How did you make your voting decision? R: I have always been very fond of “Arbeiderpartiet” (the Worker´s party, red.), and have always been fond of their values and so on. And then I start to become uncertain and insecure. So, I decided that I needed to look for different alternatives. There are extremely many VAAs on the net, and I have probably done about ten of them myself. But, because they just consist of data, they don´t extrapolate what is most important for me in the various issues. (B-H1-S1)

What we wish to point out here is respondents struggle to fit “data from VAAs” to the political self. She is not a traditional issue-voter, and VAAs are almost introducing uncertainty and doubt in her universe. The voter, and particularly the first time voter, is situated between influence and political autonomy – the need for independent decision and political identity which fits the conception of political self. Some respondents seem to have a need for exploring the political world while they have always been attached to a certain party. This also seems to be the case for the respondent (B-H1) (the labor voter) commented upon above. Despite “belonging” to the workers' party she all of a sudden feels insecure and starts exploring the political landscape by using innumerous VAAs. To her these tools (VAAs) become heuristics as they produce outcomes. Although she seems to be a workers' party voter, she is categorized as an explorationist.

Another respondent, a woman aged 18 (immigrant, politically interested, did vote), says the following about VAAs, indication how they work as a general political heuristic to her:

I: You mentioned for instance VAAs on the net; did media influence you a lot?

R: Yes, that´s how you decide on how to vote. When you take a VAA test you go free from reading all the political programmes and policy agendas, and you get to know what the various political parties stand for. So, for me it is a very important tool. When I took these tests it showed that I´m preoccupied with environmental matters, so I ended up voting for a party who cares for the environment – but not MdG (the “Green Party”, red.), because they only think about the environment and not the rest of society, and that´s a little too silly. But, yes, it was on the media all over, and to me it´s a lot of fun, because I´m very interested in politics, but it´s not too good for those who are not that interested in politics. I did not watch all the panel debates and all that, but I tried to read the stuff on the net. When you´re on the third year of upper secondary school you don’t have so much time to follow things on TV, so it was mainly the internet. (A-G4-S1)

This particular woman is obviously very fond of VAAs. She spends a lot of time taking not just a single – but various tests, and she puts a lot of trust in them. But, interestingly, she does not rely on them. Though the tests reveal her preoccupation with environmental issues, she does not just end up voting for the Green Party, as one might expect, but instead she finds another personal solution. Thereby, she stresses two matters: First of all her independency and need for autonomy – she “listens” to the tests – but she does not have any kind of blind faith in them. She makes the final decision for herself. Secondly, she has a holistic conception of politics – and single issue oriented political parties do not appeal or make it for her. She takes on the broad considerations for society as such – and does not only look at the particular issues and special political interests.

Exploration and need for autonomy and identity is also apparent in what the following respondent comments:

Earlier I wasn’t particularly preoccupied with politics, but I started following the information and debates at this election. I have taken various VAAs and read about the parties which were suggested by the VAAs’ advice. Besides this we (our class) went to the political stands of political parties at the market place (downtown our city), but I did not reach a decision (B-H3).

Exploration, information and value consideration, rather than making a decision, is apparent in this woman’s story which may reflect her need for a political decision on voting which matches her values or priorities.

Furthermore, an immigrant woman particularly stresses her independent decision in response to the interviewer’s question.

I: May I ask you what influenced your voting decision? R: No, really, I decide independently. No-one forced me to vote for any party! I have been reading on my own! There has been talk on elections in school either. I voted for the first time, but I think the labour party is good so most of my reading has been about them – but no one forced me! (D-A1)

The respondent´s strong emphasis on independent decisions may be a response to the way in which the interviewer ask about external influences on voting, and may be interpreted as an explicit truth. However, she also expresses a strong need for independence, autonomy and her right to decide on her personal political belonging and identity. Her discourse shows her struggle to explore how one party fits to her values.

A special case of exploration is this young guy who ended up with a blank vote. He tells a rationalist story of how he started by excluding the all the parties he disagreed with. From the group of “least bad” parties he had decided to vote blank in some kind of a protest against political parties (D-A2).

The last “explorer” we want to mention is a young guy only moderately interested in politics.

I read about them (parties) – their core issues and general issues...In fact I did a lot, read a lot, I should say what is best for me. And then I took tests (VAAs) ..And then I discussed with many, family, friends and the like...And we discuss.. I learn a lot from discussions (F-S5).

Like several other respondents this guy tries to do his best in arriving at a party choice which may fit his preferences, but it seems difficult for him.

Summary of the “explorators”: This group has deserved its term for the personal openness and less certain approach to the party choice that characterize these individuals. They all seem preoccupied to search for a decision which is based on their personal commitments. None of the respondents display the logic of consequentiality. Rather, the logic of appropriateness (what is appropriate values to one’s self) is apparent in almost all respondents’ stories. Apart from this, their reasoning consists of stories of confirming or arriving at a political self an identity where a choice of a party is among the key elements.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our research question in this article was; *what characterizes the role of VAAs in a selection of first time voters’ decisions in recent elections…?* Based on the above categorization and analysis we like to discuss the following characteristics of the role of VAAs in our findings.

First, reflectivity. The VAAs seem to feed the dialogue among all users. Even the “sceptics” do reflect on their role, even if they don’t use VAAs. As tools of reflections the VAAs are useful and may provide political insights to the users. The influences of VAAs on voters´ political decisions seem to embrace trough the respondents´ encounter and the dialogue with the questions, but also the outcome of an advice. The strongest influence seems to be shown where the VAAs confirm the respondent’s positions. In these cases the VAAs may be regarded as data support for own party choice and also support for a political identity. When the VAAs give an advice which is contradictory to the respondents´ position, the advice is ignored and quite a few respondents become critical to the VAA.

Second, the VAA is a *heuristic*. VAAs are useful when they confirm the respondent’s choices. When they don’t the VAAs’ advice seem to be the first one to be ignored. None of our respondents show any blind faith in the VAAs. In this way VAAs have only moderate political authority, and the value of them seems to lie in the database – which after all may be taken into account by the respondents. The VAAs may therefore first of all be characterized as a heuristic to the user.

Third, VAAs´ limited influence. It seems to nearly all of our first time voters that this choice and political act is taken very seriously and actually is a question of their identity. This is most apparent in their reasoning where there is a remarkable absence of instrumental reasoning or logic of consequentiality in the respondents. Nearly all of them are preoccupied with the match between political party programs and personal values, viewpoints and their self, in a process of political identity development. Some seems to be quite clear about their positions, while others are searching more openly. In this process we find that VAAs haves become a confirmer and moderator, but we find no evidence of its´ decisive influence. It seems that finding a party is a signifier of belonging and identity and such a serious question may not be left to a computer to be decided upon. The process of identity formation therefore limits the VAA’s role in the voting decision. The lack of instrumentalism and strategic rationality in our first time voters´ reasoning is probably due to the fact that our respondents are not standard issue voters – they are primarily identity seekers. They don’t simply think in terms of measuring their distance to certain political parties on specific issues. Their decision process is much more complex than presumed in the theoretical foundations underlying the VAAs. There are many sources of influence, but particularly first time voters are preoccupied with how a political party matches the political self. Voting is therefore part of a struggle to find their political self and VAAs may be a meaningful component in this work.

We may therefore conclude that the role of VVAs in first time voters’ decisions is to provide a basis for reflections and mainly work as a heuristic in the process of party choice. VVAs seem to have limited influence on the voter’s choice as these are primarily preoccupied with identity formation and the political self. This logic contradicts the logic in how VVAs are constructed. The VVAs may contribute significantly to the voters’ political identity by providing outcomes and reflections over political issues. This contribution may in many cases be significant for the voter.

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