

Diverse, popular, and growing in importance: Voter Advice Applications and the 2015 General Election

By Democratic Audit UK

*In advance of the 2015 General Election, there are now more Voter Advice Applications (VAA's) than ever before. These websites provide users with a list of policy-based questions, allowing them to match themselves to a political party. **Dr Matthew Wall** argues that the VAA's on offer display a range of characteristics and crucial methodological differences.*



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As we count down towards May 7th, voters may be forgiven for feeling confused. The political scene in the UK is uncharacteristically fragmented – smaller parties like the Greens and UKIP have seen their strong performances in polling over recent months rewarded with inclusion in leaders' debates, while the SNP surge in Scotland continues unabated. Unhelpfully for voters seeking to simplify their political choice, the two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, adopted rather counter-intuitive rhetorical stances– with Labour emphasising their fiscal responsibility and the Conservatives presenting themselves as 'the party of working people'.

Over the last week or so, each of the parties has launched their manifesto, the traditional source of information for voters on where parties stand on the issues. However, these are typically lengthy, with both the Conservatives and Labour having produced documents that are over 80 pages long, so it may be asking too much of ordinary voters to read through all of the party manifestos line-by-line. This is further complicated by the parties' habit of framing the issues to suit their particular approach, meaning that, even if one does read through the manifestos in detail, it can be difficult to directly compare the parties' policies on key issues.

Given this complex informational environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that the 2015 campaign has generated a large number of 'Voting Advice Application' (VAA) – websites. VAA sites offer voters a structured comparison over a range of policy questions – typically divided up into spheres such as Economy, Immigration, Healthcare etc. The *raison d'être* behind such sites is to provide voters with information on the accordance of their views with those of the parties competing, offering a simplified summary which can assist voters in making their decision at the ballot box.

A growing body of research has shown VAAs to be politically influential in two ways. Firstly, use of VAA sites has

consistently been found to boost levels of political confidence, engagement and likelihood to vote. Secondly, there is evidence that VAA users are more likely to vote for the party that is recommended to them, especially when they were seriously contemplating voting for that party already.

VAA sites are not completely new to UK politics; in 2010 the [Vote Match](#) site claimed to have received over 1 million unique users, but there was nothing like the diversity of choice that we see in 2015. Below, I provide a table of VAA sites that are currently live for the 2015 UK general election campaign, using data helpfully compiled by Tom Steinberg's [MySociety blog](#).

Table 1. List of VAA sites, their URLs, type of output and question format (Click site name to visit VAA homepage)

Site name	Type of output	Question format
UK election compass 2015	'Map' visualisation	Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree
Vote Match	% Match	Agree/Neutral/Disagree
ISideWith	% Match	Yes/No/Other Stances
Vote for policies	% Match	No, I'd never consider these policies/yes, I'd consider these policies
Who should you vote for?	% Match	Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree
Position Dial	% Match and 'Dial' Visualisation	Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree
Tick Box	Top 3 Parties Match	Yes/No/Don't Care
Who shall I vote for?	% Match	Yes/Unsure/No
Who gets my vote UK	% Match and 'Map' Visualisation	Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree
Verto	% Match	Tick versus cross

This range of choice of VAA sites reflects a growing acknowledgement of those seeking to influence the political debate (including many academics) of the utility of the idea. However, looking through the sites, we must also acknowledge that they display considerable diversity in terms of how they function.

One of the biggest bones of contention within the academic literature on VAA development is the lack of a widely agreed upon method for arriving at a list of question topics and deciding how questions should be framed. Thus, if you visit several of these sites, you are likely to notice quite striking differences in terms of the questions that you will be asked to answer. Some sites are specifically targeted at certain groups of voters, for example 'Verto', a VAA created by Bite the Ballot and Demos describes itself as 'keeping the target demographic of 16-24 year-olds in mind at all times'. Most of the other sites are designed with the entire voting-age population in mind, but they all differ on the specific questions that are asked. This is problematic because [simulation-based research](#) has shown that different sets of questions can produce divergent 'advice' to voters.

Users are invited to respond to policy questions in a range of formats, ranging from 'yes/no/don't care' answers to direct questions to either 'agree/neutral/disagree' or 5 point Likert scales (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') responses to declarative statements. Similarly, the sites differ in the manner and extent to which they capture the salience of individual issues to voters. This diversity points to a lack of consensus as to the 'best' question format for eliciting policy positions from voters.

Finally, the type of output varies between those that provide a ranking of the percentage match of voters with

parties from those which provide a visualisation of voters' and parties' relative positions (some sites, like 'Position Dial' present both). Again, there is no clear agreement within the field as to the 'best' type of representation of voter/party similarity.

Altogether, these considerations lead to the conclusion that any individual VAA site represents an array of methodological choices made by site creators that can dramatically alter the experience of the site user and, more importantly, the nature of the 'advice' given to them. This leaves those of us who study VAA and develop sites in an interesting position – while most of us would celebrate the growing prevalence of such sites during UK election campaign, considerable work remains to be done to understand the consequences of these methodological choices for the experience of the user and for the nature of the advice that VAA sites generate. Such work is vital as, if current trends continue, future elections look bound to generate more and more such sites.

Note: the author was involved in creating UK Election Compass 2015 with partners from Kieskompas, the University of Exeter, The VU University Amsterdam, Akoten and Local World. Members of the Democratic Audit UK team were members of Votematch's independent advisory board. This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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