Ε-tools for civic education: experiences from the election campaign in Switzerland 2007

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Summary

Political participation is often very low in Switzerland – especially among students and young citizens. In the run-up to the Swiss parliamentary election in October 2007 several online tools and campaigns were developed with the aim to increase not only the level of information about the political programs of parties and candidates, but also the electoral participation of younger citizens.

From a practical point of view this paper will describe the development, marketing efforts and the distribution as well as the use of two of these tools: the so-called "Parteienkompass" (*party compass*) and the "*myVote*"- tool – an online voting assistance tool based on an issue-matching system comparing policy preferences between voters and candidates on an individual level. We also have a look at similar tools stemming from Voting Advice Applications (VAA) in other countries in Western Europe.

The paper closes with the results of an evaluation and an outlook to further developments and on-going projects in the near future in Switzerland.

Contents

1.   INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, deficits in civic education have been made increasingly responsible for a lack of political interest and low political participation among younger citizens in Switzerland. Any attempt to improve the situation – we believe – has to consider the new ways younger people use the media, i.e. the internet, and treat information. The closer a teaching tool comes to a real life situation – in our case it is the act of voting – the more likely it is to attract young people.

During the 20th century electoral turnout in Swiss parliamentary elections went constantly back. In 1995 turnout reached its lowest score with nothing more than 42.2%. Since then turnout has varied between 42% and 49%. Still, it remains one of the lowest among advanced democracies. Especially among younger voters participation is far below average.

There are, of course, different explanations for this low turnout in Swiss elections. On the one hand, elections in Switzerland are of lesser importance than in other countries because of the far reaching means of direct democracy which give citizens the opportunity to vote on important political issues. On the other hand, the complexity of the elections has increased. Nevertheless, a higher electoral turnout and higher political involvement of younger people is a broadly accepted claim.

Democratic elections are – at least to some extent – based on the idea that citizens choose among different parties and candidates those, which correspond best to their political preferences and which they want to represent them during the following legislature. Pre-conditions for such a choice are transparency and information. In the last decades the number of candidates running for office has constantly grown. This has led to increasing difficulties for the voters to sort out the correct and important information from the large flood of information.

This is where Voting Advice Applications (VAA) step in. These tools help citizens to make up their minds. But can VAAs also be used for the purpose of civic education? If so, which standards and requirements do VAA's have to meet? Which use can VAA's generate for new and first time voters?

In the forefront of the Swiss parliamentary Elections in 2007 two projects, the Parteienkompass (*party compass*) and the VAA myVote have been developed. Their aim was to increase the level of information about political parties, candidates and their political programs as well as to increase participation of young voters.

The paper is organised in the following way: it starts with a short section on political knowledge, interest and participation of younger citizens in Switzerland. The next section describes the main technical features of the VAA smartvote, on which the other two projects are based on (section 3). Sections 4 and 5 describe the development, the content, the functioning and the particular objectives of the *party compass* and *myVote* with a special focus on marketing efforts and the distribution of the tools. In section 6 other VAAs from European countries are presented focussing on the possibilities to use them for civic education. Section 7 evaluates the two projects by trying to outline some challenges for future projects. The final section 8 offers a short conclusion and an outlook on further projects and further developments of existing projects considering the findings made.

2.   POLITICAL INTEREST AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNGER PEOPLE IN SWITZERLAND

Comparative studies show that political knowledge and political interest of younger people in Switzerland is rather low. Swiss 14 – 15 year olds have a below average political knowledge and an average capacity for political interpretation (Kersten 2003) and also their interest in politics is lower than in many other countries (Maiello 2003). Even though pupils can fall back on a pronounced understanding of democracy, this is limited by a partial lacking of acceptance of fundamental rights of democracy (cf. Haenni-Hoti 2003; Reichenbach 1998: 29). Furthermore, they place below average weight on conventional and participation-related citizenship and have little experience concerning political participation. Accordingly they show little political interest, and in the future they tend to participate in conventional political activities at a below average rate (Maiello 2003).

Figure 1.1 reveals that political interest is clearly related to age, at least for the younger age groups, and to the question whether you are able to participate politically. A first increase in political interest takes place at the age of 18 when young people receive the right to vote. Then, until the age of 35, political interest remains rather unchanged and then it increases constantly until the age of 65.

Figure 1.1:   Political interest for different age groups (percentages)
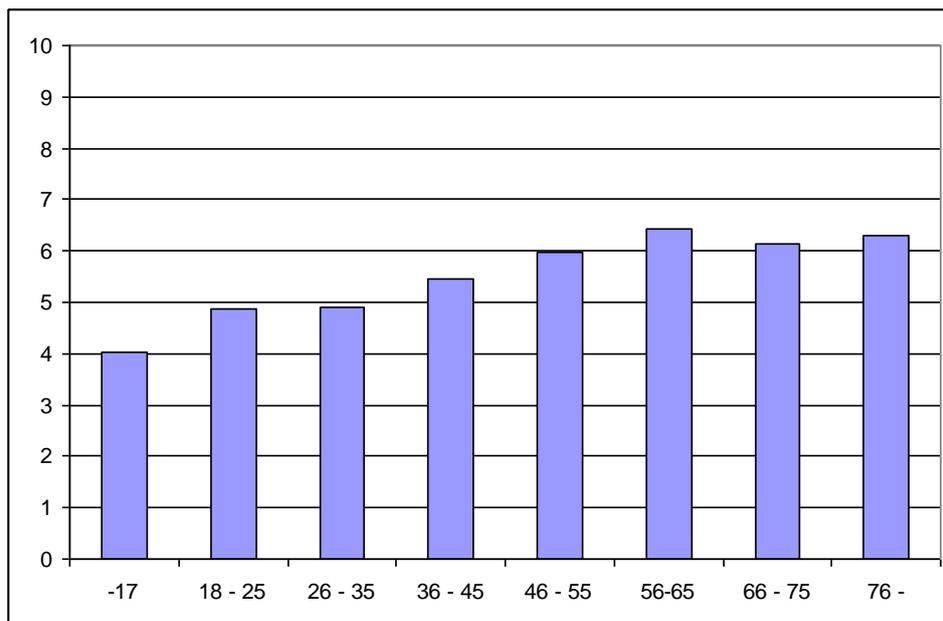
Source: Swiss Household –Panel, Neuchâtel, 0 = not interested; 10 = strongly interested, N=5699

Similarly, electoral participation is considerably lower among younger people (see Figure 1.2). In the National elections 2007 only about 35 per cent of the citizens between 18 and 24 years of age went to the polls. This figure, however, has constantly increased in the last 12 years. In 1995 only one fifth of the citizens of this age group took part in the national elections.

Figure 1.2: Electoral turnout in national elections for different age groups (percentages)
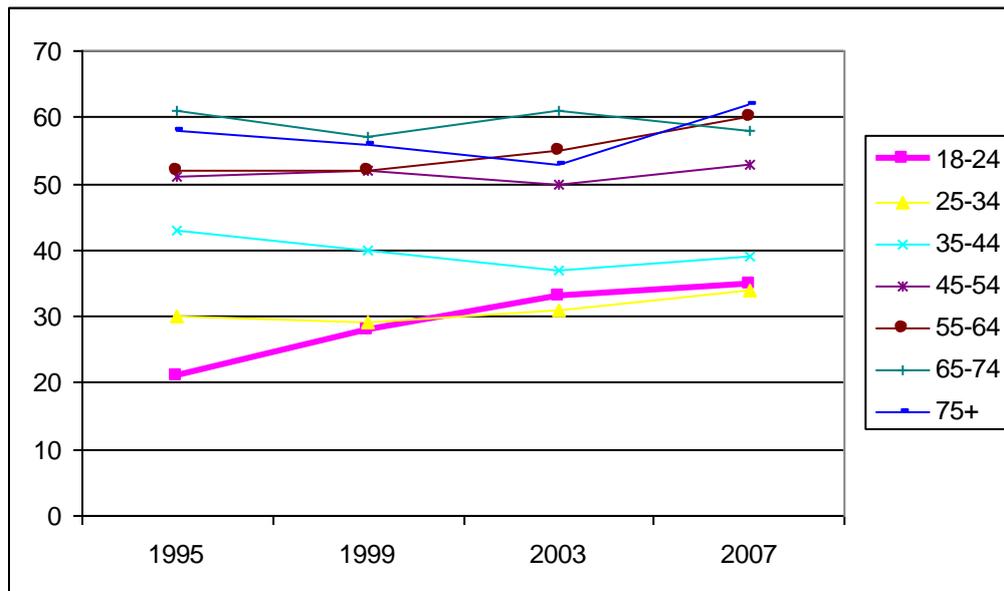
Source: Lutz (2008)

The question is, of course, to what extent these low rates of participation, political interest and political knowledge can be related to a lack of civic education. According to Milner et al (2008: 7) civic education is much less developed in Switzerland than in many other countries. This general statement has, at least partially, to be attenuate in regard to differences due to federalism. The way civic education is organised and the resources allocated to foster such activities vary from one canton to another (see Quesel/Allenspach 2007:12 ff.).[1]

3.   SMARTVOTE – FEATURES AND FUNCTIONING

Starting point for our e-tools for civic education is the spread of voting assistance websites all over the world. They exist in different forms, are used for different types of elections, and have to be taken more or less seriously. Basically these websites offer citizens help to make up their minds when it comes to voting. Some of them do this by simply asking a few questions and telling the users which candidate or party they should vote for, others provide additional information to improve the knowledge base for electoral decisions.

DEVELOPMENT OF VAA'S IN EUROPE

One of the first VAA was the so-called "Stemwijzer"[2] which was introduced during the campaign to the 1998 election in the Netherlands and offered support for undecided voters. In a first step they had to reveal their political preferences by answering a number of questions on political issues. In a second step "Stemwijzer" compared their answers with the propositions of the political parties on the same issues and generated a list ranking in decreasing order according to the degree of congruence with the

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[1]   This, of course, offers a unique possibility for empirical research. A field we unfortunately cannot explore in this paper.
[2]   See http://www.stemwijzer.nl

voters' answers. Since 1998 a steadily growing number of such issue-matching systems have been implemented in many major elections in Western Europe.[3] Of course, there are huge differences between this online voting assistance tools regarding the offered features or used methods, but most of them are bases on the same functioning as "Stemwijzer".

Smartvote was developed for the 2003 elections in Switzerland and can be described as the by far most sophisticated voting assistance tool.[4] The smartvote website consists of three main elements: the smartvote module with the issue-matching system, a comprehensive database providing information on all candidates running for office, and an analysis module with elaborated analytical tools for the visualisation of political positions.

Box 2.1: smartvote at a glance

Website:	http://www.smartvote.ch
Use:	First time application in the 2003 national elections in Switzerland. Since then it was offered in more than twenty local or regional elections in Switzerland and Bulgaria.
Owner/provider:	Politools – Political Research Network (http://www.politools.net). Politools is a non-profit, non-partisan interdisciplinary scientific network.

THE SMARTVOTE MODULE

The core of the smartvote website is an issue-matching module (smartvote module). In a first phase, a couple of month before election day, all candidates receive the smartvote questionnaire, either by e-mail or by letter and they are asked to answer the questionnaire completely and to return it. The questionnaire consists of up to 70 questions on the most important political issues (like e.g., "Do you think that nuclear power plants should be shut down?"). Thus it allows generating a comprehensive political profile. Answer options are "yes", "rather yes", "rather no" and "no". Candidates do not have an opting-out possibility; they always have to answer all questions. Only complete answer sets are included into the later calculation of voting recommendations. Moreover, candidates have to confirm their answers before they are saved in the smartvote database. Once they have confirmed their answer set it is no longer possible to change them.

About six weeks before the election day the second, operational phase starts. The smartvote website is now accessible for voters and leads them in three steps to their individual voting recommendation:

1. *Voters have to specify their political profile*: To do so they are asked to answer the same questionnaire as the candidates before. Voters can choose from two different questionnaires differing in the numbers of questions being asked. The "deluxe version" consists of 73 questions

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[3] The "Stemwijzer" was also implemented in Switzerland (http://www.politarena.ch) and Germany (http://www.wahlomat.de).In Austria, too, a similar website was developed (http://www.wahlkabine.at) as well as in the United Kingdom (http://www.whodoivotefor.co.uk), the United States (http://www.project-vote-smart.org; http://www.ontheissues.org), and one may find also a similar website for non-electoral comparisons with historical political figures from Stalin to Nelson Mandela (http://www.politicalcompass.org). A research project at the University of Antwerp currently works on an overview of such websites (http://webhost.ua.ac.be/m2p/vaa/).

[4] In a green paper on the future of democracy in Europe the whole group of these voting assistance tools was labelled "smart voting" tools (see Schmitter and Trechsel 2004).

whereas the "rapid version" consists of 36 questions only. Although the questions are formulated as easily understandable as possible, additional support is provided by some background information and explanations including pros and cons to every question. In contrast to candidates voters have also a "no answer" option if they wish to leave out a number of questions, and they can weight the answers according to the relevance the issue has to them

2. *Voters have to customize their voting recommendation*: After defining their political profile voters have to specify in which constituency (electoral district) they live, respectively for which constituency they want to receive a voting recommendation. Depending on the electoral system they have also to decide whether they wish to receive a voting recommendation for lists/parties or for individual candidates.

3. *Calculation and presentation of the voting recommendation*: Based on this information smartvote calculates an individual voting recommendation for each voter. First, smartvote compares the answers of the voter with the answers of a candidate including the weighting factors the voter has given to the questions. The higher the congruence of the answers between a voter and a candidate, the more "congruence points" a candidate gets.[5] This process is repeated over all questions and for every candidate in the selected constituency. Second, smartvote generates the voting recommendation in form of a list with a decreasing ranking of the candidates according to their total congruence score.

If a voter wishes to receive a voting recommendation for lists/parties the procedure is the same with the exception that instead of the answers of single candidates the list or party answers are used. As list or party answer smartvote uses the mean value of all answering candidates of a list or party.

ADDITIONAL SERVICES

Besides the smartvote module the website features some additional services:

- The website contains a database with all candidates, including extensive portraits with political profile (smartvote questionnaire, information about their political career, their political agenda, and so on), and information about their personal profile (e.g., educational, professional and family background). The database also includes links to personal websites or to video files.

- The website provides tools for visual analysis of political preferences: the so-called smartspider and smartmap charts (for examples see Figure 2.1). Both analytical graphs are based on the candidates' answers to the smartvote questionnaire.

  o The smartspider shows the agreement or disagreement on eight major political issues dimensions formulated as political goals (e.g. more law and order, more environmental protection, or a strong welfare state) in a spider net graph. The values on the eight axes range from 0 to 100 – 0 standing for complete disapproval of the formulated political goal and 100 for full approval.

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[5]   For an identical answer (e.g. yes-yes) the candidate gets 100 congruence points, for a complete disaccord (e.g. yes-no) he/she gets 0 points. The points to the individual questions are then added up to a total score.

o The smartmap is based on a system of coordinates with two major ideological cleavages serving as axes – the "north-south axis" for the cleavage between liberal and conservative standpoints and the "west-east axis" for the left-right cleavage. (Of course, the two axes are designed for the Swiss – or European at most – political context and would need to be adapted in other countries.)

Figure 2.1: Examples for smartspider (left graph) and smartmap (right graph)
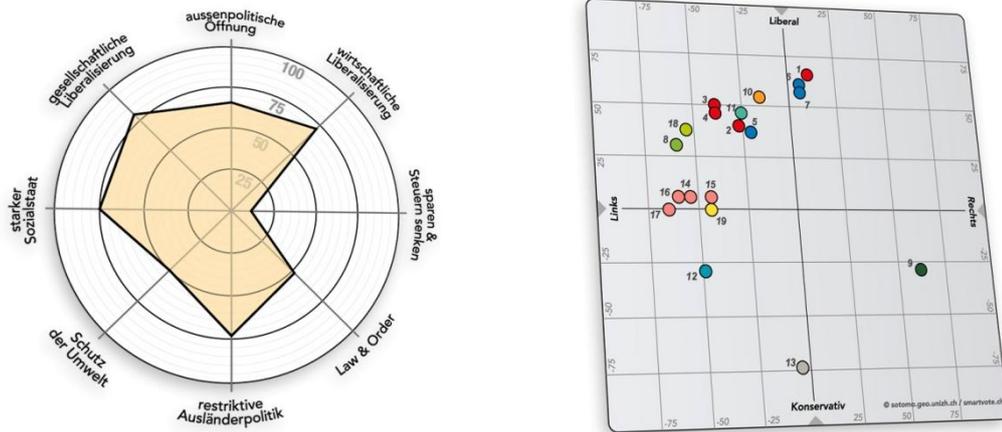
4. PARTEIENKOMPASS (*PARTY COMPASS*) – SCHOOL VERSION OF SMARTVOTE

DEVELOPMENT AND CONTENT

In collaboration with one of the largest educational textbook publisher[6] in Switzerland an adapted smartvote version for civic education, the so called "*party compass*"[7], was implemented in summer 2006. The free of cost online website was redesigned this spring. The *party compass* addresses itself primarily to teachers and pupils (upper secondary level) all over Switzerland.

The *party compass* website consists of three main elements: an adapted version of the smartvote module with the issue-matching system, a comprehensive database providing information on the basic political positions and values of the five most important political parties in Switzerland and the party system in general and a download section where further information about the tool itself and the political parties are provided.

The issue-matching system used for the *party compass* has the same design and operates very similarly to the one used by smartvote. As a questionnaire the smartvote "rapid version" is used but the questions cannot be weighted. By answering a questionnaire on the most important political issues the *party compass* calculates an individual voting recommendation for each voter. Unlike the smartvote issue-

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6   See www.hep-verlag.ch

7   See www.parteienkompass.ch (only available in German)

matching system the *party compass* does not compare the answer to those of single candidates but to those of the five included parties and it calculates the compliance with the five political parties ranking them in the order from the highest to the lowest.

The background information provided in the database and the download section are:

- general information about the party (name, president, secretary, website, etc.)
- a short summary of the party history
- information about the voters profile (e.g. gender, age, income, education level etc.)
- statistics with the strength of the party
- a map indicating the number of voters per region in Switzerland
- the questionnaire with the party answers
- the smartmap and the smartspider revealing the political position of the parties and of the users

AIMS

Primary aim of the "*party compass*" is to give insights in the basic political positions and values of the Swiss political parties and the party system in general in a non-partisan manner. What is the benefit of the *party compass* for civic education?

By answering the questionnaire the pupil learns to know his or her political position and which party represents this position best. He or she can compare the result with the less matching political parties and find out why they match less. By discussing the results in class the future voters get to know the basic political positions of the most important Swiss political parties by presenting their own position to the rest of the class. The process of explaining a political position and argue in favour of it in a discussion is a very important part of the decision-making process.

For teachers the *party compass* is an additional instrument for civic education. The teacher can discuss and explain the most important political issues by answering the questionnaire with his class. All the questions are provided by some background information and explanations including pros and cons. Discussing the pros and cons in class helps the future voters learn how to make a decision in a playful way.

5. MYVOTE

INITIAL SITUATION

Electoral abstention, higher complexity and the lack of transparency in the forefront of elections were the main reasons why the project *myVote* was initiated. The primary aim of the project *myVote* is to further the interest and participation in this democratic act, to inform young voters objectively and neutrally about the elections, and to help them finding their candidates in order to induce them to participate.

Young people aged 16 to 30 years have a different understanding and knowledge of the Swiss political landscape. The majority of that particular group is not aware of their own political position and this is another big obstacle to make a choice between the various candidates running for office. In a first step

the voters should locate themselves in the political landscape and recognize that they have a political opinion. In a second step the voters should be shown that there are candidates running for office who represent their opinion better than others.

ELECTIONS 07 – INITIAL POINT

The Swiss parliamentary election in October 2007 was the perfect time to point out the importance of elections to future voters and to motivate them to participate.

Therefore within the political research network Politools the project group civic education was founded and project *myVote*[8] was initiated. The main focus was to develop a specific website for the 2007 elections. The smartvote website served as a model. The *myVote* website consists of the same three main elements: the smartvote module with the issue-matching system, a comprehensive database providing information on all candidates running for office, and an analysis module with elaborated analytical tools for visualisation of political positions (see figure 2.1).

CONTENT OF THE TOOL

The website is specifically for young people and first time voters designed, offering an uncomplicated introduction to the themes "policy" and "elections". The website should not only provide guidance and stimulating further thought it should also help the put the available political knowledge into action. By using *myVote* the user should be able to answer the following questions: Where do I stand politically and which politicians or party running for office represents my interests best?

The main differences of the *myVote* website compared to *smartvote* were:

- A new desing for the website;
- The use of only the rapide version of the questionnaire;
- All texts were adapted by using a more common and understandable language;
- The program run of the smartvote module with the issue-matching system was changed. After the user has answered the questionnaire he first gets his own smartspider displaying his own political position in order to make it for him possible to locate himself in the political landscape. Only in a second step the user gets the voting recommendation for the candidates or lists/parties of a chosen constituency.

The website was translated into French and Italian to use and promote it in all regions of Switzerland.

COLLARBORATION WITH THE NEWSPAPER "20 MINUTEN"

Based on the experience made during the collaboration with the textbook publisher "hep" we had to create partnerships in order to reach young people especially new voters who do not attend an institution of learning. In addition to the collaboration with textbook publisher, teacher's associations and several youth organisations a media partner which appeals to young people had to be found.

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8   See www.my-vote.ch (only in German, French and Italian)

With 20 Minuten[9] we found an ideal media partner for our project. 20 Minuten is Switzerland's strongest and most read free daily newspaper with a daily print run of almost 650'000 copies and over 1'500'000 daily readers, having a German and a French issue[10]. Besides 20 Minuten runs also the largest online community information platform in Switzerland and most readers and users have the age of our target group, exactly 14 to 34 years.

Political websites should provide citizens with a wide variety of information about political issues, parties and candidates; and online forums, blogs and chats should foster deliberative discussions among citizens as well as between citizens and the political elite (see Fivaz/Schwarz 2007). In the run up to the Swiss parliamentary election such an online platform[11] and the corresponding campaign was elaborated in collaboration with 20 Minuten.

Two and a half month before the election the platform went online and the campaign started. During this period in the German print edition twice a week a complete page was dedicated to upcoming elections. In terms of content the printed articles and those published on the internet were similar. The platform consisted of a large numbers of contents such as:

- an inline-frame of the smartvote module with the issue-matching system;
- a problem-barometer where users could indicate their worries;
- portrait of famous Swiss people and their smartspider graph;
- two kind of blogs, one where candidates running for office, the second were an ex-politician and an ex-editor-in-chief wrote their article, and the user had the possibility to comment the articles;
- e-talk section. Two candidates from opposite parties were invited to a discussion and the users could ask them question in real time online;
- a public opinion poll whose results were also published in the print edition;
- a political quiz, where users could test their political know-how;
- a wide variety of information about political parties and the political and voting system in Switzerland

During the campaign period flyers were distributed at chosen youth events and advertisement were placed to promote the 20 Minuten online platform and the *myVote* website. The impact of the campaign and the promotion was remarkable. Slightly over 50'000 recommendation were generated on the 20 Minuten platform and 27'000 on the myVote website which makes 8% of the total of all the recommendation generated in the forefront of the Swiss parliamentary elections by smartvote. After SRG SSR idée Suisse – the main media partner of smartvote[12]- 20 Minuten was the media patner who generated the most recommendation.

TEACHER TRAINING

Before the myVote website went online the civic education group of Politools organised together with Lernetz[13], another developer e-learning tools, an advanced training course on the subject "politics in class". Primary aim of the course was to give the teachers an overview of the latest e-tools for civic

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[9]   See www.20min.ch
[10] See.http://www.schweizerpresse.ch/fileadmin/schweizerpresse/brancheninfos/allgemein/
[11] See www.20min.ch/myvote/ (only available in German and French)
[12] See all media partners http://www.smartvote.ch/side_menu/partner/partners.php?who=v
[13] See www.lernetz.ch

education. After a short lecture about smartvote the project myVote was presented by explaining how it could be used for civic education. The teachers also had the opportunity to test the website and to give their feedback.

6.   VAA'S AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

VAA's and other tools for civic education are not unknown in other European countries especially in Germany, Netherlands and Austria such applications have been developed in the past few years.

Germany:
Wahl-o-mat: In the forefront of the Bundestag elections in 2002 Germanys Federal Central for Civic Education developed the VAA wahl-o-mat based on the StemWijzer. From the beginning the application's primary aim was to make politics accessible for young people by a young and playful internet application. Pursuing this objective a large number of additional features for civic education are available on the website besides the issue-matching module itself. The amount and the quality of the available documents for civic education are unique. Depending on how much time a teacher can spend on civic education, papers for short lessons (one or two hours) or complete modules (sixteen to twenty hours) can be downloaded. A large amount of documents providing information about the political parties, elections, election campaign, the political system are available in two versions, a student and a teacher version. A complete section is dedicated to the decision-making process a mobile version and an offline version are provided. Off all the VAA's geared for the use of civic education the wahl-o-mat offers the best developed and largest set of didactic tools, making it state of the art.

Netherlands:
StemWijzer: As already described (see Section 2) the VAA StemWijzer was the first being developed. Since March 2008 the Institut für Poltics und Public Policy (IPP) the owner and producer of SternWijzer has developed a new application for younger people the PartijenWizer[14] a very similar application to the *party compass*. By answering 42 comments the system indicates which of the ten parties represents the users' opinion best. Teaching materials are not available.

Austria:
Politikkabine[15]: By oder of the Federal Office for Education, Arts and Culture in Austria, in collaboration with the University of Krems, the Politools developpe this VAA in 2007. The VAA consists of an adapted version for Austria of the *party compass*. Teaching materials are not available.

7.   EVALUATION

Even the best and most developed VAA's cannot contribute to civic education when they are not know by their target public. Developers have to collaborate with textbook publisher, teacher's associations, youth organisations and media partner in order to allow for the fact.

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[14]   See www.partijenwizer.nl
[15]   See www.politikkabine.at (only available in German)

Especially the collaboration with media partner offers the opportunity to reach new and first time voters who do not attend an institution of learning offering lessons in civic education. The value of such applications for direct democratic decision making can be increased if it is linked to a general information platform where additional tools are to be found.

The collaboration with the text book publisher "hep" was the first experience in developing a specific tool for civic education and helped us gain know-how in this field. The joint project *party compass* opened the door for the use of smartvote and myVote among teachers for civic education. The advanced training course we organized had a similar effect. The feedback received from the participating teacher was throughout positive especially the opportunity to ask questions about the method and the functions of *myVote* and our suggestions how to use the tool for civic education was pointed out. Discussions with teachers and the feedback from the participants lead to the conclusion that both tools have room for improvement. The complexity of the questions and the missing set of didactic tools are the main points mentioned. The complexity of the questionnaire is a handicap for civic education, by simplifying the language and creating a frequently asked questions section the problem could be solved, at least partially.

The myVote campaign in collaboration with the newspater 20 Minuten had a considerable success. Nearly 80'000 recommendations were generated, the platform and the website were very often visited and a great interaction between young people, the political elite, journalists and scientists took place. The fact that the myVote module with the issue-matching system was embedded in the 20 Minuten platform helped to provide young people with a wide variety of information about political issues, parties and candidates and the features like the online forum, the blog and the e-talks fostered the deliberative discussions among young people as well as between young people and the political elite.

8.   CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

When you develop new e-tools for civic education they have to satisfy the needs of educational institutions, teachers and pupils. But civic education can not only be seen as school-based activities seeking to promote democratic involvement by young people (see Milner et al. 2008). Civic education must be seen in a wider context otherwise it cannot reach those not attending an institution of learning. Civic education has to start early at school but it should not focus on young people and first time voter only because low political participation and insufficient political knowledge are not exclusive problems of younger citizens, but also of the mass of older ("senior") voters (see Fivaz 2008).

Besides the development of new e-tools for civic education in the near future the *party compass* and the myVote website are subject to further changes. The results of the latest Swiss parliamentary election are added to the party compass database and in collaboration with the publisher hep a set of didactic tools (single modules) will be developed in order to make the tool more useful for civic education.

Simplifying the language of the questions, adding a frequent asked questions section and elaborating e set of modules for schools are going to be the main changes to the myVote website this year. We are considering integrating the complete myVote module into the smartvote website.

Teacher training and presenting the application to a wider public in special occasion (fairs, youth parliament, events, etc) is another field of activity our group dedicates more attention to.

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