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Students as First-time Voters: The Role of Voter Advice Applications in Self-reflection on Party Choice and Political Identity

- There is an absence of instrumental reasoning in students' reflections on party choice.
- All students seem dedicated to the process of finding a political party for which to vote.
- Students vary strongly in their willingness to adopt advice from Voting Advice Applications (VAAs).
- We argue that student reflections on their party choice on VAA sites is best characterised as political self- and identity development.
- We suggest that political education of elections and voting should address greater reflectivity in support for students' political identity. -

Purpose: This article analyses what characterises first time voters' self-reflections on party choice as they use voter advice applications.

Method: This study is based on interviews of 28 Norwegian students (age 18-20) preparing themselves for their first election.

Findings: Finding a party to vote for is primarily characterized by a process of matching a party to students' political self, which we see as steps toward a political identity.

Practical implications: Teaching politics should allow for students' reflections on self and their political preferences.

Keywords:

Political identity, first-time voters, Voter Advice Applications (VAAs), participation, social studies, voter education

1 Introduction

Citizens' right to vote is at the heart of democracy. Finding a party to vote for has, since the Michigan school (Belknap & Campbell, 1952), been regarded as influenced by the process of identification with collectives. Though party identification has declined somewhat in recent decades, it may still be important (Holmberg, 2008). In particular, young, first-time voters are in a process of developing their political selves and identities. Finding a party to vote for is a central part of political identity formation, and voter education is a major issue in schools' political education (Børhaug, 2008).

The political process of party choice (and identification) has, over the years, become more complex, particularly in multiparty systems. First, fission processes in multiparty systems such as Scandinavia's, as well as new political cleavages, have resulted in a growth in the number of parties and thus have provided a wide range of political options. Second, the 'catch-all' orientation among parties has blurred the distinction among them. Third, new party alignments have arisen, like the Red-Green coalition in Norway, which confirm that the left/right scale still exists, but has become more flexible and blurry. Fourth, class-based voting is declining (Knutsen, 2006; 2008), which has reduced social class belonging as a guide to voting. Furthermore, social and

political processes such as urbanisation, secularisation, and globalisation, including the spread and use of information technology, have implied pluralisation as well as new alliances and distinctions among people (Castells, 2009). All of these changes have increased the complexities in voters' decisions, and the growing need for voter information.

Historically, the development of party identification was seen as an outcome of (political) socialisation through family, friends, school, and other sources (Holmberg, 2008). A political party reflected (and still reflects) the interests of social groups and was/is also a sign of social/political identification. In recent decades, modernity has led to differentiation in society and numerous possible life courses. Growing wealth gives young people more options, and the development of a popular culture encourages young people to reflect upon questions such as 'who am I?' and 'who do I wish to be?' (Giddens, 1991; Krange & Øia, 2005). While in early research partisan identity was seen as a consequence of social identity, perspectives from the theory of individual life projects suggest that people may question their early socialisation (Beck, 1992), and are especially prone to do so as they reach the age of the first-time voter (Abendschön 2013). The growing complexity might therefore further complicate young people's processes of finding a party that 'fits'.

A further sign of modernity is the profusion of voting advice applications (VAAs), which have become very popular heuristics for a significant number of voters. These VAAs present questions from party platforms to which voters are supposed to respond. Based on voters' responses to a number of questions, these applications suggest a party choice to the voter. Thus, VAAs may become important guides in an increasingly blurry

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political landscape characterised by the strategic communication favoured to attract voters (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Coleman & Blumler, 2008). The fact that the VAAs are popular 'sites' used voluntarily by first-time voters makes it particularly interesting to obtain first-time voters' reflections at these sites. In our approach to this study, we therefore used open-ended individual interviews to ask students in school, who also were first-time voters, for their reflections when using VAAs. In our view, the individual reflections indicate how those voters' experiences are used to fit a party to the political self. This seemingly unavoidable process of reflections on political identity, when using the VAA, directed our attention, not least because the process of finding the political self is very relevant to the issue of 'voter education' as part of the political education. We therefore addressed the following research questions:

What characterises young, first-time voters' reflections on their party choice when using VAAs during the 2013 parliamentary elections in Norway? What implications may these findings have for political education in schools?

In the following, we offer a short description of the educational context in Norway and a sample description of VAAs, as well as sections on the theory of identity formation, previous research, methodology, and empirical results/discussion and implications for political education.

1.1 The educational political context and description of a Voter Advice Applications

Norway's democratic political system has regular parliamentary elections in September every fourth year and local municipal elections every fourth year (Aardal, 2007). The Norwegian party system, as in other European systems, is historically rooted in historical social movements, and school in Norway (as well as in many European countries) teaches the political system, elections, and parties as important parts of a compulsory course in social studies in both primary and secondary school (Rokkan, 1987). Also, mock elections and school debates are arranged in lower and upper secondary school, and these events are heavily cited in the media as attempts to promote voting among young people (Ødegaard, 2015). VAAs are increasingly used by voters, particularly young ones.¹

A VAA is a brief questionnaire based on an analysis of party programmes. Questions are mainly issue oriented, and VAAs are generally based on the conceptions of Anthony Down's proximity model (Andreadis & Wall, 2013). The VAA says about itself that it 'does not provide answers but tries to be a sound basis for reflections. A particular aim of the content "validity" is to reveal differences between political parties' (NRK, 2014). It is precisely its intention of being a site that provides a sound basis for reflection that makes the VAA experience interesting for young voters exploring political identity formation.

Technically, the political parties have validated the VAA items and have given their policy scores for them, which serve as the baseline for statistical estimation and recommendations. Four elements are significant for the algorithm and final score of the user: 1) the distance between political party score and user score on single items (political issues); 2) the fact that up to five items may be singled out as particularly important to voters and thus weighted twice; 3) the users' selection of a candidate for prime minister; and 4) the users' initial choice, which is given 1 point. Favouring certain issues should logically mark a preference for a particular political party. Based on a summary of scores of distance (agreement and disagreement) from political party policy, a final party is suggested by the VAA. In 2013, the NRK made a two-stage model in which the second stage is a choice between the two parties that are closest to the users'/voters' preferences. This second stage concludes with a final suggestion of party choice to the voter. There are a number of VAAs in Norway, which may yield different results because of differences in their items, as well as differences in how the items are weighted and how party policy is scored.

2 Previous research

Several fields of research, such as partisan identity formation, the use of VAAs, political socialisation, and political education are relevant to the current analysis. A decline in loyalty to political parties has led to a situation where many voters make their final decision close to the election. In a summary of voter volatility, Bernt Aardal (2007) concluded that 40 % of voters decide immediately prior to an election or on the day of the election. Only one-third of voters find choosing a party easy. In the four most recent elections (after 2000), 40 % of voters changed their party preference, and only 38 % of the voters really cared about the election outcome. 'Voters are uncertain, but dedicated', Aardal (2007) concluded. Voters who decide during the election campaign are on average younger than voters who make an early decision (Karlsen, 2011).

The popularity of VAAs has been steadily growing, and they are among the most commonly used internet applications during elections in most European countries. In some elections, as much as 50 % of the electorate has used them (Ladner, Feldner, & Fivaz, 2008). In the 2009 Norwegian election, 38 % of the electorate used a VAA (Karlsen, 2011). The use of VAAs was greatest among young age groups (aged 17-24); 64 % claimed they had used them and 35 % reported some influence (Karlsen, 2011). Only 27 % in the group of 45- to 67-year-olds had used a VAA. The VAAs were also an important determinant of party choice in the youngest group of voters. This reflects earlier studies showing that young voters are more insecure and are more easily influenced during election campaigns (Karlsen, 2011).

In their overview of research on VAAs, Garcia and Marschall (2012) expressed that the design of the tool affects the advice outcome. The selection of items that are presented to the voter has a considerable impact on



the 'voting advice' that is produced (Walgrave, Nuytemans, & Pepermans, 2009). Wagner and Ruusuvirta (2012) also pointed out reliability or bias issues in their cross-country study of 13 VAAs in seven countries. Walgrave, van Aelst, and Nuytemans (2008) found that the 'Do the Vote Test' (a VAA) has indeed affected Belgian voters' final decision, but at the same time, these effects were modest. They also pointed out that '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 (Walgrave, van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008). The above-mentioned critical research indicates that the reliability of VAAs are questionable, and this fact may also influence the voters' trust in them. However, the question of reliability may be a source of reflection in teaching, to which we will return.

Use of internet and recent studies of VAAs confirm that the VAA sites and tools may have a mobilising potential and affect voter turnout (Garcia & Marschall, 2012) (Norris, 2001). Fossen and Andersen (2014) examined the role of VAAs and provided a very interesting discussion from different theoretical perspectives on citizenship and democracy. The discussion on implications for teaching is rooted in political socialisation research from the late 1950s dealing with sources of public opinion, and in which increasing voter turnout through education was a major issue (Jennings, 2008). After a pause in the 1970s and '80s, the field had few publications, but interest in it was revitalized in the '90s (Hepburn, 1995; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995) and has since been steadily growing (Jennings, 2008). The use of VAAs touches upon the issue of citizens' competence, discussions that go back to Plato and continue to develop (Dahl, 1992), including in cross-country studies (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010) as well as new contributions on competence (Print & Lange, 2012, 2013; Fossen & Anderson, 2014). In Norway as well as in most European countries, voting is at the heart of political education and is highly emphasised in the curriculum. Important findings in the study of political education in Norway show that it often emphasises formal procedures and political parties as participants (Børhaug, 2007; Børhaug, 2008). We have not been able to find studies that report on the use of VAAs in political education. In this study, we use students' retrospective reflections on their use of VAAs, to find out what best characterises the interaction between the first-time voter and the VAA.

3 Theory

3.1 Identity: what and why?

According to Ryan and Deci, identities are first and foremost adopted to serve basic needs in support the individual's need for autonomy, to give people a feeling of *belonging*, and to manage a variety of *relations* (Ryan & Deci, 2003). To put it plainly, 'individuals acquire identities over time, identities whose origins and meanings derive from people's interactions with social

groups and organizations that surround them. 'Once identities are adopted they play a significant role in the organization of life' (Ryan & Deci, 2003, p. 253). People adopt identities, they argued, within which they can confront challenges or acquire skills and knowledge and feel generally effective. Furthermore, people need to acquire roles and beliefs and to maintain and secure their connectedness to the social and political world (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Identity also involves processes of defining *us*, typically in opposition to *them*, a group holding different interests and values. The importance of identity formation in human lives also serves as the theoretical argument for our analytical focus on identity formation and implications for teaching.

We define identity as a set of meanings applied to the self in a specific social role or situation. Several theorists in the vein of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have argued for increased reflexivity in society, in institutions as well as in individuals, which implies that individuals are not able to rely on traditions in the creation of their self-identity. In late modern society, the self is solely a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). According to Thomas Ziehe (1989), cultural emancipation and modernity have caused people to become much less reliant objectively predetermined structures, particularly from the symbolic foundation of tradition. The consequence of this emancipation is primarily an upgrading of the meaning of subjectivity. This altered subjectivity implies, we believe, that political identity is no longer experienced only as something adopted from a group or the immediate social environment, where life as a whole is mapped out in the personal biographies determined during childhood. Identities are, to a large extent, constructed by the individual. The notion of 'self' in the work of the sociologists of late modernity, such as Giddens or Ziehe, however, lacks a profound relation to the notion of 'political identity'. Identity defines what it means to be a particular person in that situation (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stryker, 1980). Political identity can be seen as a subset of social identity. In line with our general definition, we see political identity as entailing how citizens understand and represent themselves in relation to the field of politics. The field of politics may have several aspects, of which participation in elections, party choice, party identification, and social-political relations are quite important signifiers in this study.

The social environment can never be ignored. Bourdieu (1986) offered a dispositional theory of social practice, carried out in the concept of habitus. The idea here is that human individuals incorporate the objective social structures in which they are socialised in the shape of mental or cognitive structures. Therefore, increased reflexivity does not just lead us to reflect arbitrarily. Reflections are shaped by our habitus and by praxis. We therefore take into consideration the role of social environment in our analysis of the reflections of our informants in relation to VAAs, party choice, and political identity.

3.2 Identities and their development

In symbolic interactionism, identity 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 behaviour within and between social actors. While actors are creating the social structure, they are also receiving feedback from it that influences their behaviour. In this way, actors are always embedded in the social structure that they are simultaneously creating (Stryker, 1980). Voters are typically situated in the dialogue between self, society, and election processes. Media, family, friends, school, workplaces, and other settings all offer information and responses in an on-going social/political interaction. This process is quite clear in Stets and Burke's (2003) 'Cybernetic Model', which is a symbolic, interactionist micro-model for repetitive dialogues and identity development. Stets and Burke (2003) stated it 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' (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 130). The process may be illustrated as follows. According to Stets and Burke, identities are activated when they serve the purpose or provide the background for judgements of situations. Humans (voters) formulate issues, receive responses, and reflect in an on-going process, which involves feedback on how they see themselves (Stets & Burke, 2006). Identities therefore come into play and develop through repeated interactions in individuals' lives. We believe this simple model is particularly relevant to young voters' encounters with VAAs, where relevant information (and identities) is brought forward and serves as the basis for reflections on the process and the advice outcome. As such, VAAs offer a tool to differentiate in politics, and the same reflective process may be repeated continually in school.

3.3 Political identity

In the political behaviour tradition, political identity has primarily been seen as partisan identity (Jackson, 2011). We believe this is too narrow an understanding of political identity. The field of politics is about values, beliefs, and various means of participation, but the dominant political behaviourist tradition illustrates how important voting and partisanship is in democracies after all. The 'Michigan four' invented the term 'party identification'. They characterised it as 'the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment' (Holmberg, 2008, p. 557). The theoretical rationale for acquiring partisan identity was reference group theory (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), which later evolved into social identity theory (Holmberg, 2008). The original theory of group identification has been criticised as a result of voter de-alignment. Still, we believe that the process of voting for

the first-timers may be seen as a political rite of passage, where young people are given the role of independent political decision maker. Soon after the release of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), Erikson (1968) described the development of political commitment as a key aspect of social identification. The development of political identity (also party identification) is part of how young people imagine their lives 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 and on being part of their community in their struggle to understand their role in society.

Downs (1957) 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. Therefore, voters often need to find a tool to rely on in their reasoning, some of which may be termed 'heuristics'. A heuristic can be understood as a perceptual tool to be used when the world is seen as complex and ambiguous, but when a choice has to be made, and when it is useful or necessary to economise on the mental resources and cognitive investments needed for making the choice (Kuklinski & Quirk, 1998). VAAs may also be seen as heuristic tools, as the efforts to consider, optimise, and decide are included in the use of them, and as the individual uses them in order to find a proper choice of party.

To summarise, we have argued that identity formation serves basic (but also political) needs that support our focus for the analysis of students' reflections that follows. Theories of identity formation and VAAs as heuristics will 'feed' the discussion of first-time voters' reflections on party choice when using VAAs. We have also provided a theoretical rationale for the voters' encounters with the VAAs, where voters' political identity formation is situated in the tension between social structure and individual reflexivity. Furthermore, we aim at showing how the theory and analysis of respondents is important to practices in political education in school.

4 Methodology

4.1 Data collection procedure

This study is based on a qualitative, explorative design (Babbie, 2007). The data were collected by teacher students (hereafter interviewers) specialising in social/political science in their final (master) year of the teacher education programme at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Students were all approached by the interviewers and given an information letter on the topic explaining their rights as respondents. The interviews were carried out in these schools. The interviewers were introduced to the specific theoretical field of approaches to political socialisation and specific methodological considerations. A main target in the interviews was how the first-time voters arrived at their choice at the ballot box and, particularly, their experiences with VAAs. Among the methodological considerations was the conscious development of



dialogue and follow-up questions on the intended research focus. In response to open-ended questions, the respondents were interviewed very broadly on different aspects of political life such as political interest, party choice, engagement, participation, media use, political socialisation, perceived role and influence, and their use of VAAs, etc. Furthermore, an interview guide was developed and discussed by the interviewers. The interviewers were given general selection criteria in order to maximise difference and, more specifically, to

ensure a mixture of gender, political interests, ethnic Norwegians and immigrants, different schools, and school classes, and to avoid interdependence among respondents. Respondents were then selected from 6 different schools and 16 different classes equally distributed among the schools. Schools were located in urban and semi-urban areas. The selected respondents are indicated in the table below.

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)

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

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 somewhat interested, two non-voters, and one 'blank voter' (Y-B); four did not use the VAAs. Such a variety of students strengthens our analysis and our research.

The teacher education students transcribed their interviews and presented their results in a second seminar together with the researchers. In this seminar student independent interpretations and analysis became the starting point of our (researchers) analysis. The interviewers interpretations and discussion of results became later part of the researchers validation of analysis (Tjora, 2009). We argue that finding similarities across such a great variety of dialogues strengthens our conclusions. However, we acknowledge that, as researchers, we were not able to create the lively impressions of a conversation, with opportunities to follow up, and this makes us more dependent on transcripts and text.

4.2 Analytical procedures

All the interviews were read, and the parts that elaborated on VAAs were selected. These parts were reread and a preliminary explorative analysis of students experiences with VAAs was performed. From these first readings, we inductively approached the data in the vein of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We started out with an inductive analysis using tools from grounded analysis, followed by a deductive analysis based on the theoretical framework. We determined that our informants had quite different levels of openness to and trust in the results of the VAAs. Despite this diversity, the students seemed to have important approaches to the use of VAAs in common. Based on the preliminary

empirical analysis we grouped our respondents according to their openness to and trust in the VAAs. In search for and to interpret what students had in common, we went back and forth between different theories to our respondents' reflections. Through this process, we arrived at a theory of identity as the most fruitful approach to develop our interpretation and further analyses of data. In this analysis, we asked ourselves what these groups of students have in common. In the following empirical analysis we display 15 excerpts, which are carefully selected to show the variety of self-reflections on party choice among these students as they use VAAs.

5 Empirical analysis

In the preliminary analysis we experienced very little instrumental reasoning among our respondents. They all took the elections process very seriously, and most of their reflections were about the fit of party choice to their political self. These preliminary findings were somewhat contrary to our expectancies and supported our choice to approach student's reflections from a theoretical perspective of political identity.

5.1 Categorisation of respondents

From our first readings, it seemed that our respondents varied in their trust of VAAs and the extent to which they used the 'advice' provided by the application. It seemed that our respondents could be grouped according to how open they were to the advice provided by the VAAs. Based on these variables, we found three types: 'the sceptics, the confirmationists, and the explorationists'. In the following, we will discuss what characterises these

types. Later we analyse what these groups have in common.

The sceptics

This first, main group of respondents was particularly reluctant to taking the voting advice and approached the VAAs with great scepticism. However, it also seemed important to them to seek validation of their planned party choice. The sceptics displayed a somewhat ambivalent position. On the one hand, they are rather critical of VAAs. On the other, they look for acceptance. This dilemma likely reflects the common doctrine of representative democracy that assumes that voters make an informed choice of a party or candidate on the basis of announced political programmes (Whiteley, 2012). The following respondents (one male and one female, both aged 18) are representative of this group. The male did not vote, while the female did:

Male R: *I don't want to vote if I haven't done the job properly. . . . You should not vote if you don't have a clear picture. 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. (FK4-S4)*

Female R: *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)*

The first respondent reveals the general dilemma mentioned above. He displays a political identity based on acknowledging the role of citizenship by taking on the role of voting, *as well as* a desire to justify not voting with reference to insufficient information. The female, on the other hand, refers to 'stupidity' and expresses distrust in the computer tool itself, as this is perceived as mechanical and not based on sound reflections. Both respondents still emphasise independence and control over their decision. The hesitation to rely on the VAA advice is common and is voiced by the next two respondents:

R: *I did take a VAA. 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)*

R: *VAAs 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)*

The need for information and the reluctance to rely on computerized advice is apparent in the respondents' voices. Some respondents even found that the VAA questions were odd and did not match their political identity. We interpret the fact that a number of the questions were characterised as 'irrelevant' as a sign of the respondents' sense of a political self, signified by a cluster of values and issues of importance to him/her. In the 'dialogue' with the VAAs, the user may be able to clarify which questions are more relevant to him/her. In this case, the VAAs presented a 'satisfactory' outcome,

but, as pointed out above, perceived irrelevance of the VAA questionnaires may cause respondents to doubt the subsequent advice. Still, the VAAs may invoke self-reflection even though the advice as such is being rejected:

I: Did VAAs affect your choice?

R: *No, I just lost my faith [in] the VAAs [laughter]. I got the opposite political advice of what I consider to be my political position! 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. (FS6.S7)*

The fact that respondents commented on unexpected advice indicates a process of reflection and self-direction with regard to choosing a party, and reveals critical thinking with regard to VAAs. Overall, at the heart of the sceptics' mistrust is a strong need for reflexivity and control over their ballot decision. Scepticism, along with the need for information, seems to posit a need for finding a political self. The sceptics believe that voting is dutiful, which implies that they should be as informed as possible about their choices at the ballot box, and VAAs are used for clarifying purposes. This position truly reflects a strong need for independence and a preference for political values that match the respondents' political identity.

The confirmationists

The next group, the confirmationists, generally had trust in VAAs, and respondents were open to VAA advice, especially when the advice confirmed their choice. Some people even favour VAAs as a source of political information compared to TV debates, and respondents typically make the following argument: *'I took several tests because I thought: "This [the party proposed by the VAA] cannot be true". But it could, cause it was the same result every time'* (FK4-S4). The fact that the VAA delivers a surprising result does not lead to rejection of the advice. Instead, it increases reflexivity and leads a respondent to take even more tests before finally accepting the advice.

Another respondent made this statement: *'VAAs are great for many in order to decide. For me, this is just not necessary. I know whom to vote for'* (A-G2-S2). The respondent used the VAA to confirm his political position, which was common for this group. However, this respondent pointed out that for many people, VAAs might be useful and might work as a support for their decisions. Confirmation is also quite clear in the following response:

R: *It was quite clear what my opinion was. It confirmed my choice! (E-K2)*

Although VAAs in several cases are used as a political heuristic, at the same time, they incarnate the processes of reflexivity as argued by the theorists of reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens, & Lash 1994), and embrace such individual political indications as voting. Whereas the sceptics seem to regard VAAs more or less

as a computer game, the confirmationists put some reflective emphasis on them, like this respondent who claims to be influenced by VAAs:

R: I thought the election was all over the place; it was a lot in newspapers and on TV. It was almost too much in the end. I didn't care to watch. It was just bickering, which I don't understand. I did a lot of VAA tests because the media was so obsessed with it. (A-G3-S1)

This respondent reflects a genuine political paradox: on the one hand, he is sick and tired of politics because the election is 'all over' the place. At the same time, he is disturbed by the media calling upon his individual political choice through institutions and discourses 'hailing' young people in various social interactions to fulfil a duty of citizenship. Hence, he is seeking more information about various candidates and political parties in order to confirm a proper choice.

A common feature of the respondents in this group was their positive attitude to the VAAs 'confirmation' of their choice. This led us to name them 'confirmationists'. They often consulted one or several VAAs to check the outcome, sometimes out of interest, or just for fun, but the outcomes generated reflection. Such a positive, self-confirmatory experience from reflection on recommendations derived from a computer program might help clarify their political preferences. In this way, the VAAs may work partly as a heuristic tool in party choice, but also as signifiers of the respondent's political identity. Despite differences between the sceptics and the confirmationists, they seem to have the process of searching for a political identity in common.

The explorationists

This group of respondents was characterised by greater openness to VAA advice and slightly more trust compared to the sceptics. As pointed out in the theory section, the voters' reflections on the VAA sites are sometimes related to their social background and everyday life, as revealed in the following extract:

I: Did the VAAs influence your voting?

R: Yes, to some extent. That and many other things contributed to my decision.

I: What other things? Do you have some examples?

R: The ways your friends vote. 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 [a] lot when it comes to voting. I voted completely differently than my mother and father. And they said it was fine that I totally decided for myself how to vote. (A-G3-S1)

This respondent admits that there was some influence from VAAs on his voting decision. In these reflections, however, the immediate social environment, including the opinions of friends and parents, are all given thorough consideration. He emphasises his autonomy by

saying that he agrees with his friends. We believe this reflects his search for group membership, and also that his process is about constructing a political self. A similar discourse of influence is also apparent in the following woman's statement.

R: Yes I tried VAA . . . 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)

This woman (like several others) seems preoccupied with her social environment as she encounters the VAAs. On the one hand, she is open to exploring her political position, but on the other, the political self seems situated in important social relations, and the complex pattern of influence leads them to ignore the VAAs and to favour the opinions of significant others. Another respondent, a woman aged 17, shows how VAAs may function contrary to a guiding principle:

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 started 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)

We want to point out here that this respondent struggles to fit data from VAAs to her political self. This voter encounters the VAA with newly gained uncertainty in order to find clarity, but is disappointed. Such an unexpected outcome is one of many signs that the focus on issues in VAAs seems too narrow and avoids the important overarching questions that first-time voters struggle with. For these reasons, the VAAs are often regarded as inadequate for the first-time voter. But the fact that the respondent's feeling that the questions are often inadequate could also be interpreted as the voter's sincerity and preoccupation with her political identity, which is also valid for the following respondent:

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

R: Yes, that's how you decide 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 that 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. (A-G4-S1)

This particular woman is obviously very fond of VAAs, and she uses them heuristically to achieve balance in her decisions. She spends time taking several tests, and she puts considerable trust in them on the one hand, but in the end, she does not rely on them. It is notable that the



tests made her preoccupation with environmental issues clear to her. In this case, she relies on the VAAs because they seem to fit her political priorities. But her autonomy is apparent, as the Green Party is dismissed in favour of another one. Thereby, she stresses that she takes the needs of the broader society into account. Hence, exploration and political priorities are highlighted. This is also the case in the following respondent's comments:

R: 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 marketplace [downtown], but I did not reach a decision. (B-H3)

Exploration, information seeking, and considerations of values are evident in this woman's story, which we believe reflects her need for a political decision on voting that matches her political priorities and identity. The comment *I didn't reach a decision* shows how difficult it can be to fit a political party to self. Nevertheless, this process often leads to participation, which is the case for the next respondent, an immigrant woman:

R: I decide independently. No one forced me to vote for any party! I have been reading on my own! There has been some talk on elections in school. 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 reflects a strong need for autonomy, and the right to decide on her personal political party preferences. She is classified as an explorer due to her thorough reading. Her discourse shows her struggle to explore how one party fits her values. Another case of exploration is a young man who ended up with a blank vote. He tells a story of how he tried to explore and match all the parties by excluding the parties he disagreed with. Faced with a group of 'least bad' parties, he decided to vote blank in some kind of protest against political parties (D-A2). The process is clearly a story of reflective matching of parties to the perceived political self – without success.

The last 'explorer' we want to present is a young fellow, who is only moderately interested in politics:

R: 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 discussed . . . I learn a lot from discussions. (F-S5)

Like the other respondents, this young man tries to do his best to arrive at a decision based on as much information as possible. Like several explorationists, the social environment as well as other available sources of information are all part of the reflection processes.

The explorationists seem to share the goal of finding a political self with the two other groups in their use of

VAAs. This group earned its name, 'explorationists', for personal openness to information, including VAAs, and the less certain approach to party choice that characterise these individuals. More so than the groups of sceptics and confirmationists, the explorationists voice their opinions about past and present social influences. This group most clearly mirrors the theoretical discussion that emphasises the importance of habitus and individual reflexivity.

6 Discussion

The 'sceptics', the 'confirmationists', and the 'explorationists' all differ in their openness to or trust in VAAs and their use of the advice that VAAs provide, but what do these stories have in common? First, there is a notable absence of instrumentalism and selfish motives when accounting for voting decisions. In most cases, the respondents' reflections are related to role-taking, reflexivity, and a prevailing logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 2000), where the reasoning is perceived and expected to be grounded in altruistic arguments rather than in interest maximisation. Second, we see the students' interaction with VAAs as a matching process between the VAA questions, advice, and student's political self. As tools of reflection, the VAAs provide political insights to the users and clarify questions in the identity formation process. In some cases (the confirmationists), the VAAs may be regarded as data support for their own party choice and also support for their political self. When the VAAs provide advice contrary to the respondents' position, the advice is ignored by almost all, and quite a few respondents then become critical of the VAAs.

It seems that for nearly all of our first-time voters, the political act of voting is taken very seriously, and accountability, reliance, and independence appear as important elements of the political self of our respondents. For these reasons, we see no better description of 'the metatext' in the interview transcriptions of our respondents' search for a match between political party programmes and the individual political self than in their *political identity*. Some seem to be quite determined about their positions, while others are more openly searching. In this process, we find that the VAA has become both a confirmer and a moderator of the respondents' political identity. It also seems that finding a party is a signifier of belonging and of identity, and that such serious pursuit may not be left to a computer application to determine. This finding supports the theoretical viewpoint of Ryan and Deci (2003) that identities, and in this case, political identities, fulfil basic needs for connectedness and orientation in the political environment. Several respondents expressed that the VAA questions were irrelevant, or that there was a lack of overarching questions of importance to first-time voters. It seems that the VAAs have important shortcomings, particularly to young people who have a long-term perspective on life. To them, the choice of a party somehow needs to 'fit' their political orientations and social belonging. Respondents who do not find a

reasonable match between self and party choice are reluctant to participate as voters. One of our respondents, an otherwise well-informed young man, voted blank because there was no party that would match his preferences. Although we interviewed students in school, their VAA experiences came from 'voluntary' use during leisure time. We believe this fact makes our data more genuine in comparison with experiences from a teacher telling the students to use a VAA in a lesson. Our discussion of implications for teaching relies on the fact that students display a genuine need for understanding themselves in relation to politics. Although students discuss their experience outside school, the VAA site does not offer a forum for reflection, and we suggest that the aforementioned findings have implications for the political education of voters in school, particularly since a feeling of a political self seems to be a basis for political participation.

7 Voter education as forming political identities

Politics for many is often abstract and difficult to grasp. The fact that students are in need of information and use VAAs makes these sites valuable for learning. This fact, along with our observation that students primarily are identity seekers, suggests the importance of bringing their experiences into school to create an arena for discussion and reflection. Following Stets and Burke's (2006) cybernetic model of identity formation, we argue that the goal of finding an identity should be more emphasised in political education at the expense of formal institutional knowledge. Bringing in these students for 'real' VAA experiences and letting students wrestle with them in an open classroom climate offers a variety of learning experiences on their way to finding their political identities. The question of the reliability of the outcome of VAAs may in itself be subject to important discussions in school. We argue that the feeling of lacking knowledge (about politics) and being subject to unreliable outcomes in voter choice often seems accompanied by feelings of political powerlessness (Finifter, 1970). Discussions of VAA reliability may therefore have the potential to reveal and understand the basis for these sites, which also may also lead the students to take control and empower themselves (Shor, 1992).

Another issue is related to the teacher-initiated use of VAAs. Since there is a variety of VAAs, which at times pose quite different political questions to the user, they are important sites for learning and comparison, particularly by recording the questions for reflective use. Along with classroom and group discussions, the use of VAAs in itself offers numerous opportunities for reflections on the political self. School is often regarded as an 'apolitical site' that should not take a stand in political issues. This 'apolitical burden' of school often causes students to think that it has to 'deserve' their personal thoughts and values. Also, a part of the political culture is that personal votes are secret and no one should know for which party the individual will vote. Therefore the classroom climate not only needs to be

open, but also felt to be 'safe' by the students. To move from a traditional teacher-centred approach to handling controversial issues (Hess, 2009; Solhaug & Børhaug, 2012) requires in itself steps of development and positive student experiences to build trust in the classroom as a meaningful political forum.

We have pointed out the absence of instrumental reasoning among our informants, but we acknowledge that pursuit of personal gains is often a part of young people's reasoning. We argue that reasoning in itself might be an issue of consciousness raising and learning from classroom discussions. We have also pointed out that the VAAs in this study are merely issue oriented, but they are constantly developed, and value-oriented VAAs are also being constructed internationally. VAAs are often good at highlighting important dilemmas and issues in politics. The fact that VAAs subject to change, including changes in various political climates, and are situated in the midst of political affairs may work as a bridge between school and the political life outside school. To illustrate, Norwegian broadcasting NRK developed a VAA for all 430 municipalities at the recent 2015 local elections. In Norway, using a specific and local VAA is a significant step further and offers opportunities to engage in local community politics.

8 Conclusions

By looking at similarities among our first-time voters, a common feature seems to be that VAAs serve as a *basis for reflection* on political issues and identity. We therefore conclude that, to our first-time voters, *VAAs are primarily tools for political identity formation, and this process precedes their decision to vote.*

Our second conclusion is that *nearly all of our first-time voters take the role of being a voter very seriously, which to most of them seems to be central to finding their political identity.* This is most apparent in their reasoning and absence of instrumentalism. Nearly all of them are preoccupied with the match between political party programmes and personal values in a process of political identity formation. This finding is the major contribution to knowledge of this article.

A third conclusion is that there seems to be a *mismatch in the design of VAAs, due to their emphasis on issues, on the one hand, and many first-time voters' needs for sorting out political values, on the other hand.* At least our first-time voters are not standard "issue voters", and they appear not to think simply in terms of measuring their distance to certain political parties on specific issues.

The above conclusions lead to this final, fourth statement that political identity *formation* seems crucial to most of our first-time voters. Forming a political identity seems to have consequences for their participation and for important choices regarding political 'belonging', and therefore we recommend political identity formation be a focus in schools' voter education.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be addressed. An important question in qualitative studies is whether informants tell the truth and show sincerity. Respondents' considerations and selections of information are quite subjective. To meet these challenges, we stressed the need for good social relations with the respondents in our preparation of the interviewers. Strictly speaking, our findings are limited to the present selection of informants and are only applicable to the group of respondents in this article. Having said this, the study gives good reasons to assume that similar patterns of self-reflection and identity formation, sound scepticism toward VAAs, the sincerity of first-time voters, and VAAs as a heuristic tool may be found in further studies. We particularly call for studies on the use of VAAs in political teaching.

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Endnote

¹ The information for this sample description comes from the VAA at the Norwegian state broadcasting (radio and television) (<http://nrkbeta.no/2013/08/28/slik-funkar-nrks-valgomat/> (28.02.2014). Unfortunately, the site does not have an English version.