

Titel:

Clicking and voting: Agendas of Voting Advice Applications (VAA) for the European elections 2019

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Kurzzusammenfassung

Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have been established all over Europe, some of which used by millions of voters to decide which party to vote for. Our study establishes a new database of national VAAs for the European Parliament election in 2019 and opens up new possibilities how to use this data: The article surveys and evaluates the different thematic focuses of these online instruments. With our data set, we can show the different national issues and the differing degrees of the Europeanization in the national EU election campaigns.

Schlagworte

Voting Advice Applications (VAA), campaign agendas, country comparison, Second Order Election, European elections 2019

1. Introduction

In the national election campaigns for the European Parliament in 2019, research institutes, national authorities of European Union (EU) member states, national media companies and non-profit organizations developed special editions of their Voting Advice Applications (VAAs). For example, the Dutch foundation *ProDemos* develops its *StemWijzer* application for regional and national elections as well as for the elections to the European Parliament. This is a relevant development because VAAs offer a special perspective on election campaigns in a multi-level polity. With this almost EU-wide use of VAAs,¹ more data for political science analysis are available and the theses or questions of the VAAs for European election campaigns can become the subject of investigation.

The ideas for this article are to show the relevance of VAAs for campaign research in the emerging Euro-polity and to explain the dataset we created. Furthermore, we use the data for two insights: we firstly look at VAAs as indicators for the salience of issues in national publics

¹ We were able to include 23 VAAs from 22 countries in our study, but we do not include pan-european VAAs such as *euandi*.

and secondly we investigate the degree of Europeanization of the EP election campaign within national political systems. Using our data on the Europeanization of the VAAs, we argue that the election campaigns for the EP conducted in 2019 are not (only) *second-order campaigns* (SOC) anymore, but indicate the emergence of a Euro-polity with connected national political publics.²

The relevance of the theses/questions to national publics and that the theses/questions mirror party and ideological competition in the political system should be the two most important issues in relation to the formulation of the VAAs according to the Lausanne Declaration on Voting Advice Applications (published in Garzia & Marschall 2014, p. 228). However, there are other criteria as well used, e.g. specific political science research requirements. Against the background that theses/questions should mirror each national political system with its internal conflicts, we collected and analyzed the data and we drew a realistic picture of the most salient issues. Based on these data, our contribution links two research fields with each other and thus aims at answering the following questions:

- *Which are the most salient issues in these surveyed VAAs?*
- *To what degree are the national VAA editions for the EP elections 2019 Europeanized?*

We can answer these questions and connect the research on the Europeanization of national publics (cf. Kriesi & Grande 2015; Peters et al. 2005; Sanders et al. 2012; Koopmans & Erbe 2004) with the research on Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) (cf. Cedroni & Garzia 2010; Fossen & Anderson 2014) and with the literature on second-order campaigns (Reif & Schmitt 1980).

We are able to show that different VAA-originator networks have an influence on the structure as well as on the policy orientation of their VAAs. Furthermore, our data reveals that there is a difference between national VAAs in relation to the degree of the Europeanization of their theses/questions. Our analysis shows that the most salient issues in all VAAs are the economy, public finances, migration, rule of law and civil rights and the political institutions.

Our study constitutes a starting point for further research – it is therefore mainly focussing on the database, its scientific value and results from descriptive statistics. In the next section, we will summarize the debates on Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), on the Europeanization of national publics and on second-order elections (SOE) (section 2). After clarifying our methods

² We acknowledge that there might be a gap between the actors formulating the VAAs (academia etc.) and the possible consumers of the VAAs with regard to the perceived importance of European issues in relation to national issues.

(section 3), we present first results from descriptive statistics (section 4) and end up with a conclusion and outlook (section 5). We portray the analyzed VAAs shortly in an Appendix (section 6).

2. Political Science debates: Voting Advice Applications (VAA) and Second Order Elections (SOE)

Our study combines three streams of political science research. We connect our study with the literature on European elections as second-order elections (Reif/Schmitt 1980), with the literature on the importance of European elections for the parliamentarization of the European integration process (Abels & Wilde 2016; Abromeit 1998; Crum & Fossum 2009; Risse 2015; Rittberger 2005) and with the literature on Voting Advice Applications (VAAs). We sketch these debates and show how our study contributes to them.

2.1 Voting Advice Applications (VAA)

The research on Voting Advice Applications (VAA) has been establishing itself parallel to their emergence and remains a growing field of research, which is not only addressed by the researchers of the ECPR Research Network of the same name. With regard to VAAs, the focus has often been on users and the influence of VAA on voter participation and decisions (cf. Garzia & Marschall 2014). Cedroni & Garzia published their first anthology on VAA in Europe in 2010 (Cedroni & Garzia 2010), systematizing the existing knowledge on VAA. The often-high numbers of users as well as the limited number of (alternative) sources for comparative decision-making before elections make VAAs relatively information-efficient. However, the content of the theses/questions has not been studied on a comparative and European level for a single election.³ The thematic focus of the VAA editions is particularly relevant, since many authors of VAAs now feel committed to the principles of the so-called Lausanne Declaration, but the providers continue to be very diverse. Moreover, only a few VAAs make the selection criteria transparent. We go beyond previous research (as in the case of Heinsohn et al. 2016) by providing a statistical analysis of the VAAs. The VAAs are the source to provide data on which policy fields are particularly salient for the respective national election campaign and to answer the question how Europeanized each campaign is. In this sense, we conceptualize the VAAs as an indicator for national agendas. The agenda functions of the VAA theses/questions can thus provide an insight into the second-order election characteristics. The creation of a

³ An international comparative study by Van Camp et al. 2014 looks at various VAAs of national elections from 2002–2012, other attempts of research in this direction have not been finalized.

comprehensive database of these VAAs for the European elections and their statements is of essential scientific relevance because the data can be used for further purposes. With this, as well as with the help of the analysis prepared on this basis, we establish Europe-wide comparability at a specific point in time, as it does not yet exist – this is an essential scientific contribution of our study.

2.2 Second-Order Elections and the Europeanization of the Euro-democracy

Though scholars and practitioners early framed European elections as tools for the parliamentarization of the European integration process (Euro-democracy), those scholars discussed their character as a series of “additional national second-order elections” (SOE) (Reif & Schmitt 1980, p. 3; cf. also Marsh 1998) since their introduction in 1979; it continues to be tested (e.g. Träger & Anders 2020, in this volume). The basic idea is that elections to the highest (executive) electoral office in a country are first order elections, while other elections, for example at the federal, municipal and at the European level, have a subordinate character for voters as well as for politicians (Reif & Schmitt 1980). The classification of the European elections as third-order elections (since no government is elected), also proposed by Reif in 1997, has left fewer traces in the scientific debate (Holtz-Bacha 2005, p. 27). The SOE model was adapted and differentiated not least with the enlargement of the EU and other systems now becoming part of the Union (e.g. Schakel 2015). In recent years, there has been criticism that the first and second-order elections contrasted by the model build on very different electoral systems and are therefore in part not comparable. In addition, the SOE factor generally remains in a black box without being possible to trace the exact processes. Nevertheless, the concept and the results achieved with its help remain important for the investigation of elections in the multi-level system (Golder et al. 2017, p. 5–7). Against the background of this scientific debate, it is also understandable that research on political communication and election campaign research have adopted and adapted the SOE model. Although Reif & Schmitt had already pointed out a different role for campaigns in SOE (1980, p. 13-14, p. 28-30), in recent years the European election campaign has increasingly been understood and investigated as a *low-key* or *second-order campaign* (SOC) in addition to the analytical consideration of the particular election and its results (Holtz-Bacha 2005; Höller 2015). Although the concept is accepted now, there are still no studies that compare the SOC phenomenon across Europe. By investigating the topics within national VAAs, we add some new insights to this gap.

The literature on the salience of European issues in European election campaigns acknowledges that Europe is a more important issue than previously assumed (cf. Braun et al. 2016); even

connections in transnational media outlets direct towards this (cf. Wallaschek 2020, in this volume). One important question of the European integration process was whether politicians could politicize European issues to a degree that citizens view elections and election campaigns as relevant aspects of their political life. We therefore especially consider supranational contents and focus on the vertical dimension of Europeanization (cf. for the vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanization: Koopmans & Erbe 2004, p. 101). By analyzing the issues and the degree of the Europeanization of VAAs in the 2019 European election campaign, we contribute some insights to the knowledge on the Europeanization of the nationally organized election campaigns of the Euro-democracy.

3. Methods and data collection

In order to answer our research questions, we analyzed each one of the available VAAs from Austria, Belgium (one for Wallonia, one for Flanders), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and from the United Kingdom (England). We were not able to identify an only EU-election VAA for Italy and therefore used a general VAA. Furthermore, we did not identify a country-specific, relevant EU-2019 Voting Advice Application in the cases of Croatia, Estonia, Malta, Portugal and Slovenia. For our search for VAAs, we used the Global VAA Census conducted by the ECPR VAA Research Network in 2016 (ECPR Research Network on VAA 2019). We used this database and amplified it referencing the currently active VAAs (a list of the used VAAs and their originator networks is attached (Appendix)).

There was a considerable number of countries in which more than one VAA was created for the European elections. We chose those, which we were able to identify as more established or more country-specific. The Appendix contains information on the chosen VAA, its originator networks and possible additional VAAs for the relevant country. The originators of the questions might already explain some of the variation we observed. We assume the originator networks to share congruent ideas concerning the European integration process and being motivated by the desire to influence public discourses. It is therefore especially interesting to identify three more or less big networks which are based on cross country cooperation: the VoteMatch-Network (initiated by *ProDemos*, NL and *bpb*, DE), a group around the Preference Matcher consortium and a third one connected to the team of *kieskompas*. Within these VAA-networks, we observed similarities in structure and theses.

To achieve comparability of the data, we translated all of the theses and questions into English. For further research, analysis and clustering we sought to code these theses/questions concerning three aspects: The general political field (socio-political dimension, nominal variable), the concrete policy area (issues, nominal variable) and the degree of Europeanization (ordinal variable) of the thesis/question. Starting from the most frequently named policy areas in the Standard Eurobarometer (for comparability and further research), we ex-ante categorized the totality of possible issues within the VAAs into four socio-political dimensions: socio-economic (1.), socio-cultural (2.), socio-ecological (3.) and political-institutional (4.). We firstly coded two test-VAAs and re-checked all of the categorizations afterwards to minimize biases or different categorizations. We took the first three dimensions from the Eurostat surveys and we added the political-institutional dimension to be able to cover issues concerning the governing bodies of the Member states and the European Union (EU) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Analytical dimensions and issues (number indicate codes)

Socio-political dimensions	Issues
socio-economic (1.)	Economic situation (11.); Public finances (12.); Pensions (13.); Energy supply (14.); Taxation (15.); Unemployment (16.); Inflation (17.)
socio-cultural (2.)	Immigration (21.); Terrorism (22.); Crime (23.)
socio-ecological (3.)	Climate change (31.); Environment (32.)
political-institutional (4.)	Influence of the EU on global developments (41.); Rule of law and civil rights (42.); Institutions (43.); Future of the European Union (44.)

Source: own figure

To cope with occurring double affiliations of issues, we introduced the possibility of two different codings for one thesis/question. One example: While we coded the thesis “The European Union should enforce strict targets regarding the reduction of CO2 emissions” from the Luxembourgish VAA *smartwielen* as 31 (Climate Change), we double coded the statement

“The European Union should increase the amount of contributions for development aid” from the Dutch *StemWijzer* as 12 (Public Finances) and 41 (Influence of the EU on global developments). To identify the correct share of a policy area in the total number of theses/questions of a VAA, we doubled the single affiliations/codings before calculating the shares.

Though we could cover the vast majority of issues within the VAAs, some difficulties resulted from the clustering of cultural-sociopolitical issues such as health, education and values (e.g. Greece: “The people can be represented better by a simple citizen than by an experienced politician”), the behavior of representatives/MEP in selected European countries and national foreign policy. We categorized such issues as 99 and excluded them from our final calculations. Furthermore, we surveyed whether the VAAs contained thesis/questions concerning Brexit (yes: 1; no: 0). Besides classifying the theses/questions of the VAA into policy issue clusters, we used an ordinal coding concerning their degree of vertical and supranational Europeanization. We classified theses/questions without European reference or the national states as single actors as “National” (0). (Example from German *Wahl-O-Mat*: “Germany is to reintroduce a national currency instead of the euro.”) We coded theses/questions touching national and European actors as “National and European” (1). (Example from *Wahl-O-Mat*: “The EU should support the introduction of a national minimum wage in all member states.”) We classified those theses/questions with a primarily European focus as “European” (2). (Example from *Wahl-O-Mat*: “The EU should set itself higher targets for reducing CO2 emissions.”) Out of this coding of the single theses, we were able to calculate the national VAA-Europeanization average. One should consider testing the validity of this measure by consulting the summed differences of the policy area in a later step of employing the data set.

4. Results

The average (vertical and supranational) degree of Europeanization of the surveyed VAAs (excluding Italy) was 0.99 (median 1.2) (scale 0–2), which indicates that a significant part of the theses concerned the Euro-polity. Our analysis shows that the most Europeanized VAAs in the 2019 European election campaign were published in Austria, Belgium (Flemish), Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Finland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland with an average Europeanization score of more than 1.21. The least Europeanized VAAs came from Great Britain (0.07) and Ireland (0.19) (cf. Graph 1). Surprisingly, the VAAs in *newer* member states Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland belong to the most Europeanized VAAs. If we keep in mind that in Hungary and Poland rather illiberal parties

dominate the public agendas these findings were not expectable, but possibly explainable by the originators of the VAAs – apart of Austria, Belgium and Latvia all of them take part in the VoteMatcher-Network. Concerning the most important issues within the VAAs, we found out that the two dimensions socio-economic and political-institutional, which also cover the most issues in our codebook, are dominating the analysed VAAs in all countries. Besides this general dominance, we find variegating degrees of the importance of socio-cultural issues (Graph 2), which we use as an example for the different distribution of issues in VAA-editions across Europe. In Denmark (30% of theses) and Italy (26%), the socio-cultural issues played a more prominent role than in other countries. Interestingly this was not the case for Hungary (9.5%) and not for Slovakia (9.2%), Latvia (6.2%), Austria (8.5%) or Luxembourg (9.5%). A possible explanation for the similar values for Hungary, Slovakia and Luxembourg might be found in their joint participation in the VoteMatch-Network. Concerning the single issues, we can show across all VAAs that the economic situation (13.6%), public finances (10.8%) migration (12.0%), rule of law and civil rights (14.7%) and the political institutions (14.7%) are the most salient. We will follow up with a more detailed study on these issues at a later point of our research and already refer to the research programme outlined in the conclusion (section 5).

The abovementioned Graphs 1 and 2 constitute an early summary of some findings already sketched. For countries marked by an exclamation mark we were not able to include an EP election specific VAA, therefore the data are less comparable – especially concerning the question of Europeanization.

Legend Europeanization

- Non-EU country
- EU country/region without 2019 VAA-data
- Very low degree of VAA-Europeanization (0.0-0.4)
- Low degree of VAA-Europeanization (0.41-0.8)
- Medium degree of VAA-Europeanization (0.81-1.2)
- Relatively high degree of VAA-Europeanization (1.21-1.6)

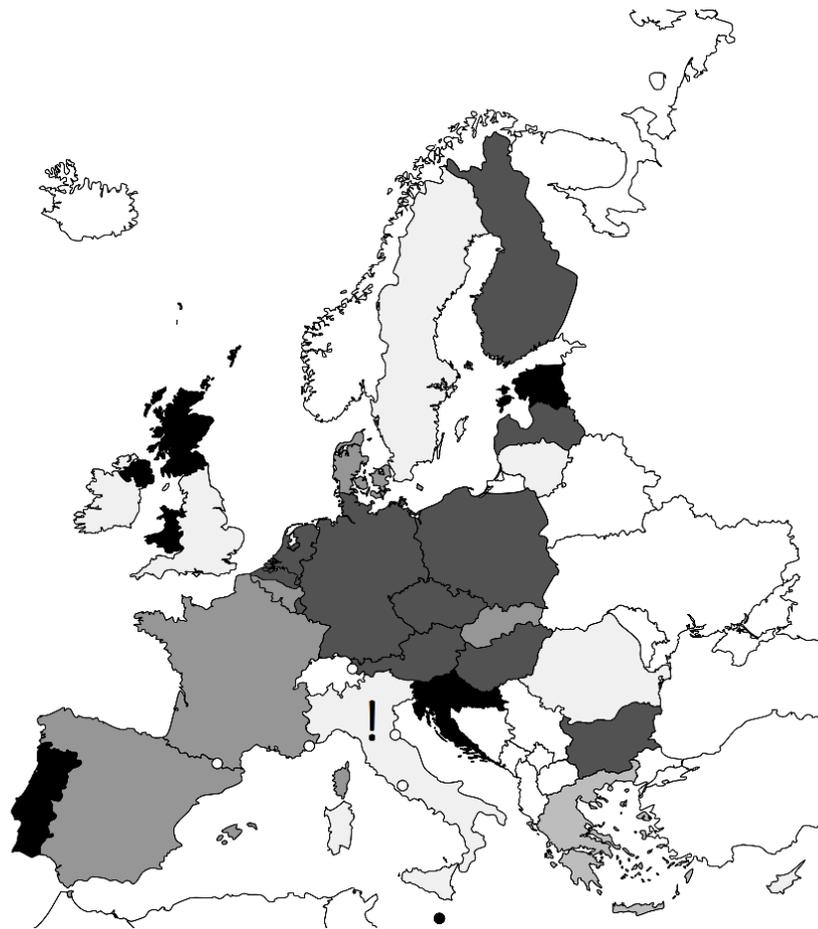


Figure 1: Degree of Europeanization on a scale 0–2

Source: Own figure created with mapchart.net

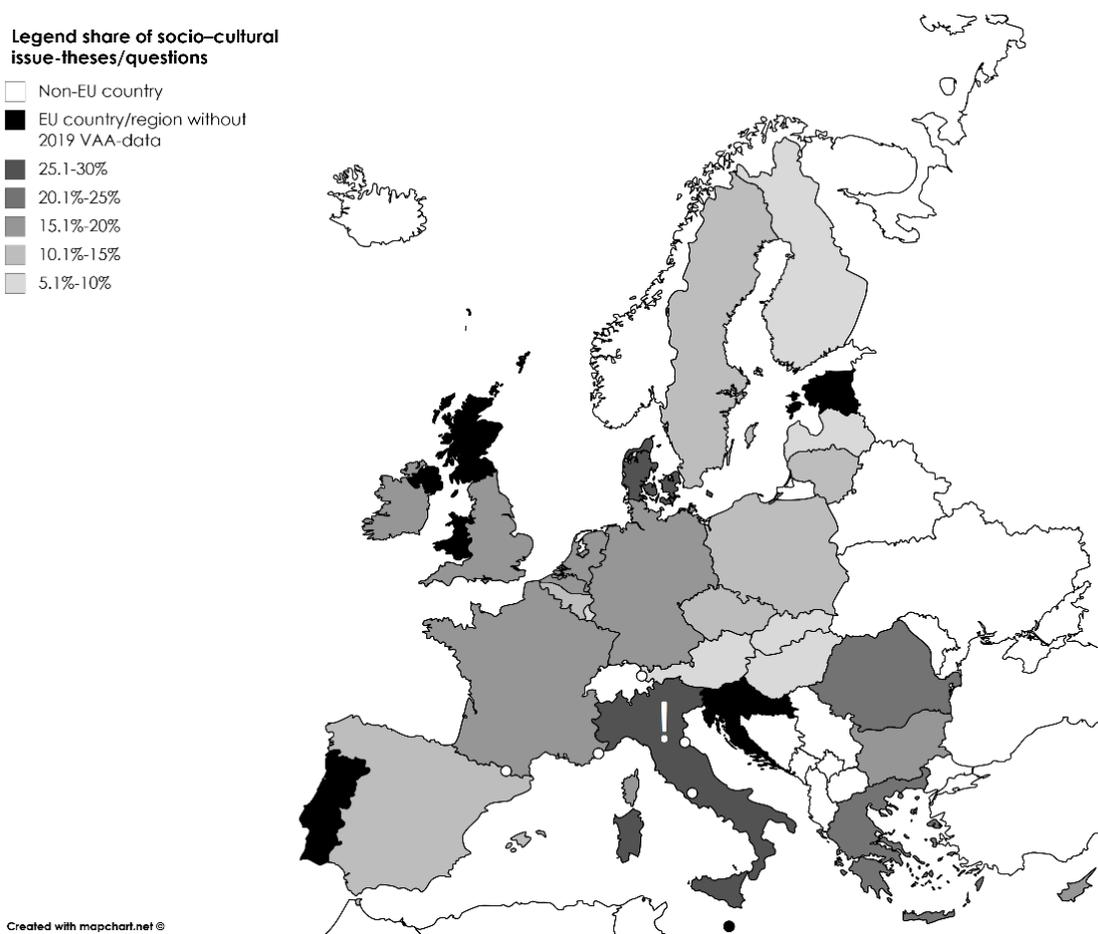


Figure 2: Share of socio-cultural issue-theses/questions

Source: Own figure created with mapchart.net

5. Conclusion and outlook

We would like to stress that this chapter constitutes a starting point for further research. By analyzing the VAAs of 22 European Union member states, we wanted to find out to what degree the 2019 European election campaign is Europeanized and to identify the most salient issues.

Starting with the most salient issues, we found that with an average share of above 10.5% of the theseses the economic situation, public finances, migration, rule of law and civil rights and the political institutions dominated the VAA-theses/questions. The most Europeanized VAAs were offered to the publics in Austria, Belgium (Flemish), Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Poland. We found the least Europeanized VAAs in Great Britain and Ireland. We can argue that the VAAs represent the increased importance of the Euro-polity and related issues within national politics. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the originators of the VAAs and their networks seem to have a decisive influence on these issues. These findings of descriptive statistics and our data set could and should be employed for further research e.g. in the areas of VAA-research,

research dealing with Second Order Campaigns and party research. We especially consider the correlations between the salience of socio-ecological issues in the VAAs and the success of green parties, the correlations between the salience of socio-cultural issues and the success of the far-right ID-parties (Identity and Democracy) relevant for future research. Another highly relevant issue for the emerging Euro-democracy is the importance of European solidarity. In this field, we can ask whether and how the VAAs represent solidarity between member states and citizens. Furthermore, it might be worthwhile checking for correlations between the salient issues in the surveyed VAA editions and the Standard Eurobarometer of the time. Finally, the question of the VAA originators we already shortly touched upon would be worth further investigation.

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