

TOWARDS AN INFORMED CITIZENRY? Information- and communication technologies and electoral choice

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From: I.Th.M. Snellen & W.B.H.J. van de Donk (eds.) (1998), *Public Administration in an information age. A Handbook*, Amsterdam IOS Press: 191-206.

Abstract. What is the significance of ICT's for voting decisions? This chapter assesses two uses of ICT's: (1) databases of the voting records of representatives, and (2) a decision support system for party choice. It examines the information-seeking behavior of (prospective and retrospective) voters appraising either parties or individual candidates. Empirically, the significance of both ICT's for the voters' level of information seems to be limited, at least when considered separately. In combination, they provide new information that may attract the interest of more 'Downsian' voters. However, a large-scale and combined use of these ICT's may put the classical liberal model of representation under pressure.

1. Introduction

By casting their vote, citizens participate in a collective action that can have important repercussions on their lives. Popkin (1991:10) proposes that we regard the voter as an investor compelled to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, using only imperfect and costly to obtain information.

In democratic theory several assumptions are held regarding the population's level of information. One of the prominent classical models of democracy described by Held (1996:115-118), is the 'developmental model' of liberal democracy, in which an informed citizenry is viewed as a precondition for collective decision making that is created within the democratic process. Schumpeter (1943/1976), on the contrary, attacks the idea of a democratic process that would evoke a 'popular will' made up of the individual wills of rational and well-informed citizens. He views democracy as a competitive institutional arrangement in which the voter's task is confined to choosing a team of leaders, whom once elected will then do the job of choosing policies. Apparently, Schumpeter assumes that the level of information required of the voters in his model is lower than assumed by 'classical' democratic theory.

In this chapter I want to discuss what the significance of ICT's for electoral choice could be. ICT's bear many promises for overcoming a lack of information. They make it possible for their users to access vast quantities of information, at any time they wish. The new technical possibilities are aptly indicated by Tracy Western (1996) in a 'digital election scenario' for the U.S. in the year 2004. I take a lengthy quote from it:

"October 2004, Voter education: The election is now only a month away. You need to begin your voter education effort. You will have over 200 individual ballot decisions to make, including 35 ballot measures, additional choices for local, appellate, and supreme court judges, and decisions on a host of new state offices, [...].

You settle down on your couch, pick up your television set's remote control, and speak the word "menu" in it. [...]

You ask *The Democracy Network* to start by displaying information on the 'Governor's race'. *The Democracy Network* offers you a wide selection of video materials on all the gubernatorial candidates, divided into four categories:

- . video statements and other materials completely controlled, prepared and edited by the candidates themselves;
- . materials prepared and inserted by local television and radiostations and newspapers, [...] (allowing viewers to

select from an index of topics and view only the portion [...] they want to see);

- . opinions on the gubernatorial candidates from statewide organizations [...];
- . opinions on the candidates by individual members of the public [...].

These options are offered through a lengthy submenu of video materials, including:

- . opening candidate 'vision' statements;
- . candidate statements on over 30 specific issues [...] - in the future, you'll be able to compare the candidates' statements with their statements on the same issues in prior elections;
- . candidate positions endorsing or opposing the 35 initiative measures on the ballot; [...]

You sigh at the sheer quantity of this available material and wish that South western Bell's new *Smart Agent* was available (its scheduled release won't occur until 2006). Then you'll be able to program your views into your system, and your *Smart Agent* will preliminary select all those candidates and ballot measures which agree most closely with your opinions. Until then you've got to do it all yourself." (Western, 1996, 62-64)

In order to make a realistic assessment of the significance of ICT's for electoral choice, we have to ask some basic questions concerning the information needs of voters and their information-seeking behavior. How do citizens arrive at judgments about political issues, about candidates and programs? How well informed are citizens in making these judgments? From empirical research on electoral choice we know that the electorate's average level of political knowledge - in the sense of 'textbook' or 'encyclopedic' knowledge- is relatively low. However, it has been shown that voters employ various economizing cognitive strategies and information shortcuts to accomplish their task of decision making. I will assess the significance of ICT's by relating their potential to the insights we have gained into the use of information by voters. Two uses of ICT's will be examined; the availability of voting records of representatives (particularly on the Internet) and a decision support system for party choice. In the conclusion, I will return to questions of democratic theory. Does our discussion indicate that the availability of ICT's makes a difference for our assumptions about the voters' level of information? And if so, may we conclude that new forms of relationships between voters and representatives will emerge?

2. *Starting-points*

In order to obtain a more clear-cut idea about the relation between information and voting decisions, I have attempted to map the field of voting decisions into a range of categories. Firstly, I propose to examine the relation between information and rationality in voting, starting from the assumption that voters behave rationally. Following on from this, I have made an analytical categorization of voting decisions based on two sets of criteria. Concerning the object or focus of the voting decision, I have made a distinction between an orientation towards either individual candidates or parties. The second set of criteria relates to the time perspective of the voting decision. It can be oriented towards the past (retrospective voting) or towards the future (prospective voting).

2.1 Voter rationality: the role of information

A main function of representative democratic arrangements is to guarantee the responsiveness of governmental policy towards the people's wishes. For this purpose, a basic requirement for any democratic system is a mechanism whereby political leaders and their decisions are rendered accountable to the public, who then have the freedom to choose another set of leaders if in disagreement with the current government. Periodical elections fulfill this function, but only when certain assumptions apply in regard to the decision making by the voters. These

assumptions include:

- (1) that voters make comparisons between candidates or parties. This comparison could include past performance, promises regarding future performance and/or personal characteristics and competencies;
- (2) that they make a judgment based on the perceived differences in relation to the own preference.

These two assumptions represent the *rationality* of the voter's decision. What do these assumptions imply in terms of information and information-seeking behavior? An exhaustive appraisal of the candidates or parties would include all election platforms and campaign promises, and full information about the performance of the incumbents who are standing for re-election.

We cannot assume that even the most rational of voters will make a sufficient effort to obtain all of the relevant information. The relation between information and voter rationality is more complex. Downs (1957), within his theoretical approach of voting behavior, drew attention to the role of information costs. The two assumptions mentioned above involve costs of gathering, analyzing and evaluating political information. In the second place, also in line with Downsian insights, it has been established that voters employ various economizing strategies to accomplish these tasks. They use various 'information shortcuts' - easily obtained forms of information as substitutes for harder-to-obtain kinds of data (Popkin, 1991:44) - as well as simplifying rules for analyzing and evaluating political information. One of the most important shortcuts is *ideology*. It serves both as an information shortcut and as a simplifying rule for evaluating the information. When we try to assess the significance of ICT's for voting decisions, it may be interesting to look at the role played by ideology. By reducing information costs ICT's might contribute to the decline of ideology.

2.2 Candidate versus party appraisal

Voters can make a judgment based on an evaluation of either the merits of an individual candidate or those of a political party. I see this as a difference in focus. *Candidate appraisal* entails an evaluation of the personal qualities and professional competencies of the candidates, but political characteristics, notably stands on issues, ideology or even partisanship as such, will also enter into the evaluation (Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida & Sullivan, 1990). *Party appraisal* will cover political factors as ideology and program, but personal characteristics of the party candidates -especially of the electoral leader- may also play a role.

The tendency to focus on either candidates or parties is strongly influenced by the institutional characteristics of the national political system. The American political system is a major example of a system in which voters are 'directed' towards candidate appraisal. This has its origins in a combination of characteristics of the electoral system and the party system. The United States has an electoral system that is characteristic of 'majoritarian democracies' (Lijphart, 1984). Two big parties compete for governmental power. The electoral system puts one of them in a position to form a majority government. Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have a district system. People vote for the candidate of one of the (two) major parties. In the district "the winner takes all". These conditions are necessary, but not sufficient on their own to elicit candidate oriented voting decisions. In addition to this, the American party system has some specific characteristics. The two major parties are not so strong and cohesive as their counterparts in the United Kingdom. They are not sharply

differentiated in terms of their party platforms. The two parties are 'coalitions' themselves that exercise relatively weak control over incumbent officials (Popkin, 1991:60-61; Lijphart, 1984:34).

Examples of political systems that orient their voters towards party appraisal can be found under the 'consensus democracies' (Lijphart, 1984). In contrast to majoritarian systems, consensus democracies have a multi-party system and a system of proportional representation. Elections do not result in clear cut majorities and governments are formed by coalitions. Parties exercise a relatively strong control over 'their' representatives. The Netherlands can be taken as a good example of the democracies oriented towards party appraisal. The political system of the Netherlands gives individual candidates, as distinct from parties, a relatively minor role.

2.3 Retrospective and prospective voting

Voters can make up their minds within different time perspectives. They can orient themselves towards an ex post evaluation of the incumbents, or towards a comparative assessment ex ante of the candidates or parties. In line with Fiorina (1981), Sniderman, Glaser and Griffin (1990:120) define *retrospective voting* as performance evaluation and *prospective voting* as a calculus concerning future policy. The terms 'performance' and 'policy' cannot, however, be taken as synonymous. 'Performance' should be understood in terms of actual outcomes and 'policies' as goals and instruments. Miller and Borelli (1992) point out that both retrospective and prospective judgments can be directed towards either performance or policies.

Following Fiorina (1981) the meaning of retrospective voting as a mechanism of political linkage can be approached in two different ways. Firstly, it can be approached in terms of what he calls a 'traditional punishment-reward theory'. In such an approach an electoral victory of the incumbents does not imply a new mandate for certain policies, but is like a 'reward' for past performance: "...good past performance simply reinforces the presumption that the incumbent administration is competent to govern, whether this means the smooth continuation of old policies or the good sense to change when circumstances dictate" (Fiorina, 1981:13). An alternative view is to see retrospective voting as an information shortcut within a basically prospective voting orientation, based on the simplifying assumption that the future will look like the past when the incumbents stay in office. It is clear that the information basis for retrospective voting can be very simple: the voter's own experience of his circumstances of life during the incumbents' administration. This is the Downsian approach towards retrospective voting.

These, of course, are theoretical considerations. Voting decisions can be the outcome of a combination of retrospective and prospective evaluations. Sniderman, Glaser and Griffin (1990) found that well educated voters tend towards comparative assessments of candidate competency and policy orientation, and less educated voters towards evaluations of incumbents' past performance. They add to these findings that both well educated and less educated voters can be seen as rational decision makers, in the sense that the well educated are 'optimizers', who try to identify the best possible choice, whereas the less educated are 'satisficers', who aim to find out whether things have been good enough (Sniderman, Glaser and Griffin, 1990:131).

2.4 Analytic scheme and cases

On the basis of the two dimensions introduced above, I distinguish four analytical categories of

voting decisions (see figure 1).

	PARTY APPRAISAL	CANDIDATE APPRAISAL
PROSPECTIVE VOTING	1	2
RETROSPECTIVE VOTING	4	3

Fig. 1: An analytic categorization of voting decisions

I consider the categories 1 and 3 as to be the most relevant ones. In democratic systems that are oriented towards party appraisal, notably democracies with a multi-party system, proportional representation (the whole country forms one district) and strong ties between the representatives and their parties, voters will tend towards prospective voting. In the case of a coalition government, it is very difficult to relate performance (ex post) to the contribution of a particular party in the coalition. Moreover, by choosing between parties on the basis of their policy platforms, voters can influence the balance of power between the parties involved in the process of forming a coalition and formulating a 'government program'. In democracies oriented towards candidate appraisal, characterized as they are by a party system with loose ties between representatives/incumbents and parties, retrospective voting involves less uncertainties and it has prospective value (see above: Fiorina, 1981).

I will discuss two sorts of ICT's. The first sort consists of decision support systems that help the voter to compare and judge party platforms. An application of such a system was distributed on a small scale in The Netherlands during the campaigns for the parliamentary elections in 1994 and the provincial elections in 1995 by a nonprofit organization for civic education. The second sort of ICT's to be discussed are databases that inform voters about the voting record of their representatives in legislative bodies. We will look at the information systems which are available to American voters who wish to inform themselves about the voting records of members of Congress.

2.5 Further outline

The central question posed in this chapter is what difference the availability of ICT's will make to the information-seeking behavior of voters and, consequently, for their level of information. In the next paragraph I will examine assumptions about the level of voter information as they are formulated (explicitly or implicitly) in modern democratic theory. This will be followed by a short survey of some important empirical findings over the role of information in voting

decisions. Firstly, I will approach the acquisition and transmission of political information as a social phenomenon. People acquire political information from an informational environment in which various information providers are active. Furthermore, political information is acquired, transmitted and processed through social interaction in a variety of settings. I will raise the question of what influence ICT's will have on the informational environment and on the relationship between information providers and voters. Then, I will deal with cognitive-psychological aspects of voting decisions, including the informational shortcuts that voters employ. I will discuss the question of how the availability of ICT's relates to these cognitive insights into the information-seeking behavior of voters. In the sections 5 and 6 we will turn to our two cases.

3. Assumptions in democratic theory about voters' level of information

As a starting point, I formulated that a main function of the representative democratic system is to guarantee the responsiveness of government policy towards the people's wishes. The central concept here is 'political linkage', understood as "a mechanism that allows public leaders to act in accordance with the wants, needs, and demands of their public" (Luttbeg, 1968:2). In political science literature different theories or models are formulated with respect to the way in which political linkage is realized. In this section, I will briefly examine three models of the democratic process focusing on their view of political linkage and - in relation to this - their assumptions about the level of information of the voters. Against the backdrop of my scheme in the preceding section, it is convenient to begin by comparing two contrasting models, viz. Schumpeter's model of the democratic method and the so-called Responsible Party Model. In Schumpeter's model the role of the voter is solely defined in terms of the choice of political leaders among competing teams of candidates, whereas the Responsible Party Model assumes that voters make a choice between political platforms. Then, I will discuss Downs' economic theory of democracy. His theory seems to be better equipped to cope with questions regarding information-seeking behavior.

According to Schumpeter (1943/1976), voters are generally unable to develop autonomous 'volitions' or to form informed opinions on political issues. However, he does provide for a loose political linkage in his model. From time to time, people do express certain volitions, related to their immediate self-interest. These volitions are organized and selected by political leaders, and included in their competing offerings. Schumpeter (1943/1976:270-271) assumes a certain interaction between the assertion of 'sectional' interests, public opinion and the management of the situation by political leaders. In his reconstruction of Schumpeter's position, Miller (1981:141) points out that Schumpeter has to assume that "a lesser degree of rationality is required to choose a team of leaders than is required to decide directly on policy" and that, whereas voters are not able to perform the last job, they are competent enough for the first. According to Miller (1981:139-140), this is certainly not an absurd position. Schumpeter might agree to assume that voters are able to judge the performance of political leaders retrospectively, taking for granted that this is an easier job than to decide *ex ante* on policies. However, "it is a fine line that we are drawing" (*ibidem*).

The Responsible Party Model was first formulated by the American Political Science Association in 1950 (APSA, 1950). It stresses the importance of the programs presented by political parties. The first condition for political linkage is that the political parties offer a real choice in terms of alternative political platforms. The second condition is that the parties are

internally integrated, so that the representatives make their decisions in accordance with the program. Implicitly, the model also states certain assumptions regarding the behavior of the voters as well. These can be defined as follows (cf. Thomassen, 1991):

- a) voters have policy preferences with respect to (important) political issues;
- b) they know the policy preferences of the political parties regarding these issues;
- c) they vote for the party whose policy preferences are most in agreement with their own policy preferences.

Clearly, the Responsible Party Model is a critique on the loose internal integration of American political parties. The lack of programmatic cohesion is seen as depriving the voters of influence on government policies. However, the model's weakness may lie in its assumptions about the voter's rationality. The model assumes that voters have adequate knowledge about at least those issues that are important to them as well as about the stances of the political parties on these issues. Moreover, the model seems to imply that voters will maximize their efforts to obtain this information.

Downs' economic theory of democracy elaborates on Schumpeter's competitive conception of democracy (Miller, 1983). Downs pictures the mechanism of political linkage as a market. There is an important difference here with Schumpeter's model. Whereas Schumpeter reserves the assumption of rationality for the political leaders, Downs conceptualizes the voters as rational decision makers as well: "each citizen casts his vote for the party he believes will provide him with more benefits than any other" (Downs, 1957:36). It is obvious that this amounts to a heavy information load, much higher than in Schumpeter's model. What is underlined in the Downsian formula is that voters - in addition to information about past and future (promised) actions of candidates or parties - have to know what the effects of these actions will be for their circumstances of life, or their utility income. However, Downs assumes that a rational voter will try to minimize his information costs as much as possible. He advances two considerations for this proposition. Firstly, as the (two) competing parties move towards the centre of the political spectrum, the surplus utility of a correct appraisal decreases. The 'party differential' is the basic return upon which the marginal return of investing in information is calculated (Downs, 1957:240-241). Secondly, the difference to the election outcome that his individual vote makes generally stands in no proportion to the costs of getting the information required by the axiom quoted above (Downs, 1957:246).

Downs (1957:39-40) sketches the information-seeking behavior of voters roughly as follows. In principle, a rational voter will cast his vote based on his expectations of the competing parties' performances throughout the coming period. In the first place, he can reduce his information costs by substituting the prospective evaluation by a retrospective evaluation (including an assessment of the counterfactual performance of the opposition). Downs suggests other cost-saving devices as well. Ideologies can serve as an important cost-saving device because they help the voter focus attention on the differences between parties, as 'samples of all the differentiating stands' (Downs, 1957:98-100). Also, a voter can consult trusted others (private persons, interest groups, experts), with whom he shares basic beliefs (Downs, 1957:230-233). These shortcuts are 'rational' when it can be taken as plausible that they lead to the same voting decision as that would be reached by an exhaustive search.

4. Empirical findings about the role of information in voting decisions

Within the scope of this chapter, I can only point to some main insights from empirical research

on voting behavior. I will do this by starting at the macro-level of societal factors conditioning the rationality of voting, then examining the social environment from which voters acquire information and, finally, by dealing with the cognitive aspects of the individual judgmental process.

In the first place, electoral behavior can be approached against the backdrop of social structure. Class and religion have played a distinctive role in Europe. In Dutch society the traditional parties were deeply rooted in the structure of 'pillarization'. Party choice was embedded in a broader orientation on a specific religious or class subculture. In the U.S. class and religion played an other role, working via 'party identification', a more or less stable psychological attachment to a political party. Subcultural orientation and psychological attachment to a party may be seen as factors that could distort the competitive democratic process insofar as they make it possible for the party to change its position without running the risk of being reassessed by voters who maintain such loyalties (cf. Miller, 1983:147). It has been suggested, however, that party identification does undergo changes as a result of retrospective evaluations (Fiorina, 1981). Regarding subcultural loyalties, one can say that party choice based around this factor, is at least consistent with basic outlooks and interests (Thomassen, 1991:200). Still, it is important to note that empirical research has established that in the last decades, both in European and in American societies, considerations as to political issues or policies have been gaining weight in determining vote decisions, probably due to rising education levels and media exposure (Thomassen, 1991:199-202). This means that more voters behave more or less rationally, as consistent with the Responsive Party Model and the Downsian model.

Casting a vote is the outcome of a judgmental process that takes place within a social environment, in which a variety of information sources are available and various information providers are active. I propose to distinguish the information providers into four categories:

(1) actors within the media system

To this category belong the written press, television and radio companies and (other) commercial organizations active in the field of the new media.

(2) political actors (parties, individual politicians) functioning within the political system. They operate via the media system but also use their own channels for informing the electorate.

(3) actors in civil society: interest or advocacy groups and other nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations.

(4) informal sources in the lifeworld of the voter such as family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and other trusted sources with whom one interacts.

Each information source has its own particular bias, its own characteristics and potentials. A basic difference in the pattern of information provision between the media system or the political system and informal sources in the lifeworld is that the first ones are *allocutive* and the last one tends to be *consultative*. Allocution is the dissemination of information by a central unit towards a collectivity of decentral units, the central unit being both the source and the determining actor. Consultation is characterized by two-way communication, in which the consulting actors determine some aspects of the information provided (Van Dijk, 1997).

One characteristic of the 'new media' is that they might give more control over information in the hands of the users. ICT's have a clear consultative potential. However, in order to ascertain whether this potential is materialized, several questions must be answered as to the information environment in which they function. What sorts of information will be accessible? What will be the quality and variety of the information offered? Which developments occur in the

configuration of information providers? We will touch upon these questions in our two cases.

Recent studies of the cognitive aspects of electoral behavior have somewhat rehabilitated the voter as a more or less rational and also informed decisionmaker. In an important contribution, Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau (1995) set out that traditional accounts of the candidate evaluation process implicitly use a memory-based model, thus seeing the voter as having a storehouse of political information. The authors propose an 'on-line model' of information-processing, according to which the voters are bounded rationalists who draw politically relevant conclusions from information at the very moment they encounter it, "spontaneously culling the affective value from each specific candidate message, and immediately integrating these assessments into a 'running tally' that holds the individual's summary evaluation of the candidate" (Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau, 1995:310-311). This model implies that voters are responsive to campaign information, although they are often not able to recollect their considerations at later moments very well, for example when being questioned in surveys.

According to Popkin (1991:214) voters assemble what data they have about a candidate into a narrative, making a complete picture from limited information. A narrative is one of the informational shortcuts and simplifying rules that voters employ. The function of these shortcuts is that they relieve the voter of the task of acquiring and evaluating costly to obtain, 'encyclopedic' information about candidates or parties (Ferejohn & Kuklinski, 1990; Popkin, 1991; Lupia, 1994). Among the shortcuts used, are the following.

- ideological labels

Empirical research gives some support to Downs' assumption that ideologies may be used by the voter as a shortcut for saving information costs. Particularly, it has been established that a substantial part of the electorate in European countries employ concepts of 'left' and 'right' in ordering the positions of political parties and in making their vote decisions (Van der Eijk & Niemoeller, 1983; Heath, Jowell & Curtice, 1985). In the American context, the role (and meaning) of such a left-right dimension is less clear but ideological dispositions as in the liberal-conservative fashion do play a role in the judgments of a small proportion of the American electorate as well (see for example: Sniderman, Glaser & Griffin, 1990). The ideology shortcut can be used in combination with the shortcut of retrospection by projecting the past behavior and ideology of a party on to what it might do in the future:

"Thus a vote for a leftwing party might be given, not on the basis of what it currently promises to do, but on the projection that, whatever happens, it will always keep up levels of welfare more than its rival(s)" (Budge, 1996:77-78).

- selective attention

Political attention is discretionary. Rather than acquiring information about all political issues, citizens focus their attention on specific issue-domains. Psychological evidence suggests that these are indeed the domains that impinge directly upon voters, or for which they have strong preferences (Iyengar, 1990:181).

- accessibility bias

The accessibility bias is a shortcut for retrieving information from memory. People tend to attach greater weight to considerations that are momentarily prominent in public communication. Media attention may enhance the saliency of issues. Motivational factors, corresponding with a domain-specific high level of information, may also play a role (Iyengar,

1990:168-169).

- political signaling

People may take positive cues from 'insiders' or from any information provider when they assume that they share the same preferences (or, negative cues when they assume that they have contrary opinions). A signaling role can be played, for example, by members of Congress (Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990) or by interest groups (Lupia, 1994).

ICT's, as those discussed in this chapter, can reduce the costs of gathering, analyzing and evaluating political information to a great extent. I surmise that voters will keep on using shortcuts in order to cope with information overload and also because the use of some shortcuts, notably selective attention, may be politically motivated. I will look into the relation between the use of shortcuts and ICT's in the context of our two cases. It should be noted that this relation can also be thematized as a design question. With regard to other consultative ICT's for the public it has been established that two main requirements for the use of these ICT's are their compatibility with citizens' information needs and with their existing information-seeking behavior (Scheepers, 1995).

5. Voting records of members of the U.S. Congress

American voters' appraisals of candidates for Congress are different from those for other offices. In his study of retrospective voting in American national elections Fiorina (1981:207) established that the presidents' performance rating essentially depends on how well the citizen believes the government has done on the most important problems facing the country. Party identification is also an important factor. Positive congressional ratings, however, are dependent on other things: "today's congressman increasingly runs for reelection as a concerned ombudsman" (Fiorina, 1981:204). Such factors as familiarity with the incumbents' name, contacts with his office, expectations of helpfulness and recollection of services done for the district have a significant influence on performance ratings, whereas the influence of party-identification and considerations over government policy drops sharply. On the other hand, appraisals of the incumbent's voting record are found to be strongly related to performance evaluations, but Fiorina (1981:208) adds that "only 40 percent of constituents offer such appraisals". Whether one agrees with this qualification or not, the last finding is an interesting one for us. Voting records seem to be a potentially important source of information for retrospective voting in elections for Congress.

The practise of reviewing voting records of members of Congress for the purpose of gaining political information has a long history. For example, vote analyses have been carried out and published by various interest groups for several decades. Constituents can make use of sources of various information providers (Manning, 1996):

(1) official or semi-official sources

The 'Congressional Record' (U.S. Government Printing Office) is the official source of information on recorded votes. It also contains the proceedings and debates on the floor of the House and the Senate. Votes are also published in the Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, and then compiled in the annual Congressional Roll Call and Congressional Quarterly Almanac publications. Since 1993, the Congressional Record has also been available on Internet. However, "there is not yet a complete, official, and free voting records database on the Internet"

(Manning, 1996:9).

These sources provide the data in a raw version. By consulting the annual publications the constituent or researcher can make a scan of a member's complete voting record. Compiling a member's voting record by issue or subject is a more complex task. One has to deal with the subject indexes being used in the publications, 'translating' these into the terms that one has in his mind.

(2) commercial databases

Several private companies have developed computer databases which assist the researcher by speeding up the retrieving of votes and the performance of statistical analyses.

(3) interest groups

Many interest or advocacy groups compile the voting records on selected issues and give ratings for members of Congress based on how often they voted with the group's position. The findings are usually published in newsletters or reports. Often these groups make their ratings available on the Internet. The reliability of the ratings is often problematic, because they are generally based on a small sample of voting incidences selected as indicative.

(4) nonprofit/nonpartisan organizations

Several nonprofit organizations compile voting records and make them available on the Internet. I mention two of these organizations, the Voter Information Services and the Project Vote Smart, that explicitly aim at empowering the voter by supplying him or her with political information.

The Voter Information Services (VIS) gives access to the results of legislative research by various (at present more than 20) interest groups. The so-called VIS Ratings are based on a member's voting record and an interest group's position on legislation. To show the members' performance over the long run, the reports include ratings for the past six years (VIS, website).

Project Vote Smart is the major program of The Center for National Independence in Politics. The project defines its work as a 'voter's self-defense system'. It aims to provide informational tools in order to insure that elected officials remain accountable to the public. College students and volunteers make up 90% of the PVS staff. PVS numbers 50.000 paying members. Its services include a Voter's Research Hotline and (since 1994) the Vote Smart Website. In election year 1992 200.000 calls came in on the Hotline. The information made available during election campaigns by PVS includes: candidates' positions on significant issues, their voting records, the sources of their campaign donations and their biographical backgrounds. During off-election years the focus changes to offering citizens a way to monitor the elected. PVS does not evaluate the actions of members of Congress itself but provides the performance evaluations from all interest groups that produce them -with a general warning against the possible partisan biases in these ratings- (PVS, website).

Network technology has made voting records directly and cheaply available to any citizen who is interested in this information (and is in possession of the necessary equipment). To assess the significance of this we have to look, firstly, at the information environment with regard to retrospective candidate appraisal and the role of ICT's in this environment. One important development is the use of ICT's by politicians themselves, for example the use of direct-mail about performance in Congress directed to specific target groups in the electorate. This information provision forms a part of political marketing strategies; it is both tailormade and allocutive, meeting the logic of vote maximizing (Van de Donk & Tops, 1992). In our case, we see that new information providers are entering the information environment. Civic organizations, like Project Vote Smart, are initiatives from civil society that explicitly aim at

counterbalancing the use of ICT's by candidates and elected officials ('turning the technology around' in their words). Still, the consultation of voting records has to be seen as a 'research activity', for which the voter has to take the initiative. We should know more, for example, about how people go about with political direct-mail, whether they also use other information sources about the performance of their representatives and who are their trusted information providers.

The VIS and PVS websites allow an easy 'encyclopedic' overview of voting records. For selections and compilations by subject matter, however, the voter has to rely on the standard subject terms in the database or on the (biased) compilations of interest groups. In the future, the task of applying the shortcut of selective attention to voting records might be supported by 'intelligent agents'. For the interpretation and evaluation of the record data, the voter has to rely on the material offered by interest groups as well. Groups like PVS could assign themselves a critical role, by providing the 'consumers' with reassurance as to the quality of the information on offer.

6. A decision support system for voting decisions

Comparing election programs is a complex undertaking for Dutch voters. About a dozen parties are represented in the parliament. The Central Planning Bureau provides the diligent voter with some assistance with his Downsian task of translating programs into utilities. The bureau goes through the election programs of the main parties (on request), calculating the effects on employment and income. Shortly before election day, the newspapers publish schematic summaries of the programs by subject or policy area. Some interest groups, for example environmentalist groups, make their own analyses and publish their conclusions in special reports and in the media.

During the campaign of the Dutch parliamentary elections in 1994 a so-called StemWijzer was distributed by the 'Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek' as a part of their regular package of civic educative material. The word 'stem-wijzer' has a double meaning in Dutch: it can mean 'vote-directory' and (the encouraging statement) 'vote wiser'. The StemWijzer is an automated decision support system for party choice. By working through 26 questions about political issues the user makes his own profile that is compared with the profiles of the political parties in the system. The outcome of the test is a voting advice (the first three parties in order of ranking out of eight parties represented in the Second Chamber). The designers of the system had two aims (Michels & Schuszler, 1994):

- to increase the user's knowledge about the programmatic differences and similarities between the political parties;
- to help the user with his party choice.

The designers shared the normative view that voting decisions should be based on programmatic considerations. As educative material it was intended to carry some weight against a presumed personality-centered tendency in election campaigns. Three empirical assumptions are underlying the StemWijzer (Michels & Schuszler, 1994):

- 1) There are substantive programmatic differences between the Dutch political parties.
- 2) Many voters would wish to base their voting decision on an assessment of these differences.
- 3) Voters have difficulties in making sense of these differences.

The first assumption has been more or less established. In her study of the election programs of

the three major parties -PvdA (social democrats), CDA (christian democrats) and VVD (liberals)- in the period between 1970 to 1989 Michels (1993) concluded that these parties have rather clear ideological profiles, although to different extents. The second assumption seems also realistic. In the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study of 1988 the respondents were asked to indicate the importance of a number of factors in their voting decision. Table 1 gives the results.

	(very) important	not important (at all)
election platform	77.0	18.5
political principles	76.2	17.9
stance on emancipation of women	56.9	37.2
the electoral leader	53.0	43.5
campaign performance	44.7	51.0
entire list of candidates	43.4	52.0
party's standing in polls	29.2	66.3

table 1: importance of factors in voting decisions of Dutch voters (Van der Eyk, Irwin & Niemöller, 1988)

Against this background the third assumption becomes crucial for assessing the usefulness of the StemWijzer. One might suppose that Dutch voters use ideological labels as a shortcut for 'encyclopedic' knowledge about the parties' stands on issues. Michels (1993) established that the outlines of the party programs do not concur with the voters' perceptions of party standpoints. I take this result to imply that voters using the ideology shortcut may make 'mistakes', insofar as election programs correctly reflect the parties' stances on issues.

Methodologically, the StemWijzer works by comparing party profiles with the profile of the user. First of all, the designers made a list of 49 propositions, aiming to compose the list in such a way that the 'essence' of the platforms of all parties could be recognized and that on each separate item there was differentiation in the parties' stands. Then, this list was presented to authoritative representatives of the political parties. They filled in a list of points of views on these propositions, on a 1-5 scale. On the basis of these points of view score lists, 26 propositions were selected to be included in the system. The propositions were classified under 12 themes. The scores on the selected propositions as filled in by the party representatives produced the score profiles of the parties. The users build their own profile by working through the 26 propositions. The statement 'no opinion' can be given on at most 5 propositions. The user can assign extra weight to 3 themes (Michels & Schuszler, 1994).

The StemWijzer was distributed on a small scale. Of a total of 5500 diskettes 700 were distributed on secondary schools, and 1300 were sold to individual users. In 1995 a special version of the StemWijzer was distributed during the provincial elections in the province of Overijssel. All available 1500 diskettes were distributed and sold. A survey over the

StemWijzer was conducted amongst individual users. The main results were the following (Schuszler, 1995):

- the users formed a very select group: higher educated men in the age between 40 and 50 were heavily overrepresented. They had a high level of political interest.
 - asked whether the voting advice (at the first turn of use) corresponded with the expectation in advance, 44% of the respondents answered 'yes', 51% answered 'no'.
 - asked whether the voting advice had played a role in the actual voting decision, 13% answered 'yes, completely', 34% 'a bit', 19% 'almost not' and 28% 'absolutely not'.
- There were no big differences between the groups answering 'yes', respectively 'no' on the question about the correspondence of the advice with the expectation. So, 12% of the respondents saying 'no' on that question, changed their party choice in accordance with the advice of the StemWijzer.
- more than 60% of the users indicated that the StemWijzer had given them a better understanding of provincial issues and of the differences between the political parties in the province.

The StemWijzer received a lot of media attention and has been widely copied. The distributor estimates that each diskette was used on average by 6 people in the private sphere (notably in the family) or by 19 people in schools or institutes (Schuszler, 1995).

People have various motives in voting for a party. As we have seen above, programmatic considerations are important for a substantial part of the (Dutch) electorate but other motives may also play a role. Not surprisingly therefore, the StemWijzer is not a very good predictor of party choice. However, the StemWijzer has to be judged as an adviser: does it give correct advice on the basis of a comparison of the user's own points of view with those of the political parties? According to the designers, it performs this task fairly well. As one of the indications supporting this judgment they take the finding that the correspondence between the initial party choice and the advice increased with the voter's level of political interest. The authors do not offer any explanation as to why such a connection should occur. A possible explanation could be based on the hypothesis that educated voters bring a broader range of issues into their evaluation than less educated voters (Popkin, 1991:36-38). From this it would follow that the encyclopedic coverage of themes in the StemWijzer and its limited possibilities for selection and influencing weights result in a system that better matches with what has been called the 'optimizing' appraisals of educated voters (Sniderman, Glaser and Griffin, 1990:131; see above). It has to be borne in mind, however, that the StemWijzer was intended to serve educational purposes.

The initial selection of items by the designers necessarily introduces a more or less arbitrary element into the system. There is no 'objective' representation of election programs. The designers might have decided to involve the political parties in the whole process of selecting points of view, but in that case strategic considerations would possibly enter into the selection process.

The designers got the impression that the users did not take the StemWijzer merely as a 'toy'. Nearly half of the users of the provincial StemWijzer followed the advice to some extent or even completely: 6% of all users changed their initial voting decision in accordance with the advice. In this sense, the StemWijzer did make a difference! We do not know in which way the users integrated the advice into their final vote decision or whether an 'electronic oracle effect' (Van Dijk, 1997) occurred. The 'electronic oracle effect' means that users 'forget' the inherent

biases or limitations in decision support systems and fail to see their own position as that of decision maker with the final responsibility.

7. Conclusion

Do ICT's make a difference for voting decisions? Let us start by looking at what these technologies really do. In both cases, the information systems accomplish two tasks:

- (1) they provide factual information (about voting records and election platforms);
- (2) they assist the voters in their evaluation of this information (by providing ratings and a voting advice).

Taking the two cases separately, there is no new information being provided. Clearly, the ICT's discussed in this chapter make it easier and less costly (for those voters who have the equipment) to obtain and evaluate the information. However, this is only so in comparison with the situation in which it is very cumbersome for the ordinary voter to obtain written overviews of voting records and to evaluate these data or to compare election programs in a more or less systematic way. The consultation of voting records on the Internet or the use of the StemWijzer entail active information-seeking behavior, in contrast to watching television or reading direct mail. I surmise, that only a small part of the electorate, probably the better educated voters, will feel attracted to using these instruments. The users of the StemWijzer 1995 belonged to this category; we have seen that the system did influence the voting decisions of a portion of them. The use of ICT's may enhance the rationality of the voting decisions of 'optimizing' voters in the direction of what Etzioni called 'mixed scanning'. The ICT's make it easier and cheaper to gather detailed information within selected domains of interest.

Taking the two cases in combination, the picture looks different. By coupling voting records to (past or even current) election programs with the help of ICT's, interest groups and other intermediaries can bring new information to the political battlefield, thus attracting the interest of more, and especially Downsian voters. It gives prospective voters at least an indicator of the credibility of current promises.

A third important conclusion is that the introduction of ICT's will make the voter's information environment more pluralistic and complex. In this environment the 'new media' technologies are playing an increasingly important role, not only as information technologies -as discussed in this chapter- but also as technologies facilitating direct communication between citizens and politicians (e.g. e-mail, interactive television). The information providers in this environment include the actors with an established position in the media system and the political system, as well as new information providers and intermediaries (Corrado, 1996:25-27). In such an environment, the trust that voters have in particular information providers will become a factor of increasing importance in their information seeking behavior.

The implicit claim in the title of this chapter has proven to be a dubious one. The premise is that voters' information levels are low, the claim being that ICT's will help to fill the voters' information needs, resulting in a better functioning democracy. We have seen that while voters' encyclopedic or textbook political knowledge is generally low, voters seem to be responsive to campaign information and incorporate political messages in narratives about candidates or parties. They use various shortcuts and simplifying rules to cope with complexity and to reduce information costs. For the majority of the electorate, the introduction of ICT's will make no difference to this pattern. Voters will have to rely on these devices even more, because of the increasing complexity of their information environment.

Should it be taken for granted that a well informed electorate is a good thing for democracy? The issue here is the function of information in the control relationship between representatives and represented. Ferejohn (1990) conceptualizes this relationship as one between principal and agent. As the principal is not an individual but a collectivity, the agent might seek to play one group off against another. This would allow the official to manipulate the electorate to a large extent. The idea is that citizens (as a collective principal) are only able to exercise effective control over the elected officials when they are not too eagerly interested in detailed information about their specific gains and losses from public policy:

" Thus, the fact that citizens do not pay much attention to new information, and that politicians know this, implies that politicians are limited in their ability to take advantage of the heterogeneity of their constituency to build new coalitions" (Ferejohn, 1990:12).

Detailed information about past performance and future promises in terms of gains and losses of specific groups would contribute to the decline of ideology in the sense of schemes of appraisal held in common by broad categories of the electorate. Snellen (1995) has made a similar point as to the function of relative ignorance of the representatives about the specific preferences of different groups of the electorate. The more that the differences between the preferences of the voters and the voting behavior of their representatives come to the forefront, the more the classical liberal model of representation will be put under pressure. A large-scale use of ICT's in the relation between elected officials and the citizenry may lessen the orientation of democratic politics on (alternative) formula's of the general interest.

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