

Chapter 2

ETHICALLY RELEVANT DIMENSIONS OF ELECTIONS, REFERENDUMS AND PRIMARIES

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1. INTRODUCTION

On a popular view of democratic voting, citizens should exercise their electoral rights *sincerely* (as opposed to strategically) in their *self-interest*, as they themselves would define it beyond any appeal to a supposed public interest or common good (Riker 1982). This ethics of voting is generally presented in liberal terms, against any form of populism. However, many political philosophers and political scientists have recently challenged this binary approach to the ethics of voting by arguing that there is nothing distinctively populist (as opposed to liberal) in supposing that people can have shared interests that are not simply the sum of their individual interests and that such interests may be legitimately pursued in elections (e.g., Cohen 1986; Mackie 2003). Some commentators have also started to explore the moral justifiability of strategic, rather than sincere, voting (see Rouméas, 2020).

These debates are indicative of the ethical uncertainties surrounding the theory and practice of democratic electoral vote. These uncertainties have not only an inherent philosophical interest. They also matter to the practice of democracy to the extent that democratic voters believe that they have moral duties to vote in elections, and to vote on some ethical considerations rather than others. The moral dimensions of voting seem to bear, therefore, on the democratic electoral process and possibly on the outcomes of democratic elections, but also of referendums and primaries.¹

¹ We have considered including the recall elections in our analysis, that is, the procedure that allows voters to remove elected politicians before that official's term of office has ended. It is used far more frequently in the Americas than in Europe (see Welp and Whitehead, 2020). In our view the recall procedures, contrary to primaries, elections and referendums (where the latter are institutionalized), are an instrument that is used only in exceptional circumstances, as one among many "securities against misrule" (Elster, 2012). Including it in our analysis would be rather distracting in this deliverable, and a serious examination of this instrument would have obliged us to reduce the extent of the analysis of primaries, elections and referendums.

In this chapter, we aim to collect information and identify ethically relevant dimensions of different types of elections, including a discussion of referendums and primaries. After briefly presenting our approach (Section 2), we identify three sets of sources of ethical uncertainty that voters face (Section 3) and then apply them to real-world examples that illustrate how these uncertainties intersect various institutional models of democracy and forms of democratic election (Section 4). In our conclusion (Section 5) we sum up the discussion and ask a crucial question for a normative ethics of democratic voting that can yield *practical* guidance for citizens' action, that is, "what level of knowledge of and commitment to daily politics may be expected of citizens as electoral voters?" To address this question, we conclude by pointing out the importance of heuristic shortcuts, as well as the recent emergence and rapid expansion of Voting Advice Applications (VAAs).

2. APPROACH

Our discussion falls into the domain of conceptual and normative democratic theory. While we use the methods of inquiry common to contemporary studies on conceptual and normative aspects of democracy (e.g., Estlund, 2008: ch. 14; Lever 2007; Mansbridge, 2011; Rehfeld, 2010) our approach is not detached from reality and should profit from empirical insights. To quote Jane Mansbridge, former president of the American Political Science Association and one of the most influential contemporary experts on representation and democratic theory, "normative political theory and empirical political science are more intertwined today than at any time in the past half century" (Mansbridge, 2011: 629).

In particular, we seek a "reflective equilibrium" between the normative theory and the practice of democratic voting. We seek to identify the normative ideals that ought to inform the exercise of democratic electoral voting rights from a moral point of view. We systematize those ideals to typify some of the most important ethical uncertainties that democratic voters may face when they participate in elections. Then we look at concrete instances of the democratic electoral practice (institutional set ups and electoral forms) and see how those uncertainties play out concretely, how they can be illuminated in view of the normative ideals of democratic ethics, and, finally, how these latter should be reviewed to better adapt to the concrete circumstances in which voters exercise their rights. Such a reflexive exercise is eventually conducive to offering some practical guidance for electoral democratic ethics, which is action-guiding for democratic voters as it is at once normatively sound and practically relevant.

3. SOURCES OF VOTERS' ETHICAL UNCERTAINTIES

3.1 Voting for the Common Good/Public Interest vs. Voting for Self-Interest

The idea that there are different ways in which people may vote or may be expected to vote is at least as old as the work of John Stuart Mill. Mill pioneered the idea that "a great number of the electors will have two sets of preferences - those on private and those on public grounds" (1964 [1861]: 305). The contrast between voting for the common good, or the public interest,² and voting based on someone's self-interest is one of the most pervasive - albeit

² Although the common good and the public interest are not synonyms (Douglass 1980), in this context they have a sufficient family resemblance to be discussed together. Therefore, in this chapter¹¹ we refer to

questionable (Lever, 2017) – sources of ethical uncertainty that citizens face at the ballot and a paramount question of the ethics of voting. More specifically, ethical uncertainty concerns here the following questions: Who should benefit from someone’s vote? Who/which groups should one consider when deciding how to vote?

This section aims at addressing the normative questions concerning voters’ behaviour and motivation when citizens face the choice between voting for the common good or public interest and voting based on their self-interest. The debate is originally grounded in the question of whether there are or there should be moral constraints applicable to the democratic vote, thus underpinning a moral duty “to vote well” (Brennan, 2011; see also Crookston, Killoren and Trerise, 2017; Volacu, 2021). To answer this question, a first step requires asking what “voting well” means.

The philosophical literature on the ethics of voting distinguishes at least two views of what voting well means in a democracy. The first view is that the decision-making process of voters should be constrained through the imposition of some epistemic and moral requisites, such as “standards of rationality, rightness, and knowledge” (Maskivker, 2016: 224). Accounts of this kind can also be devised in negative terms: some requisites can be provided as a means to prevent bad voting, so that “voting well” would merely imply voting without violating such requirements (Volacu, 2021: 4). For example, for Jason Brennan (2011) to vote badly means to vote from ignorance, epistemic rationality, or immoral beliefs.

On the second view, instead, voting well corresponds to voting for the common good or the public interest. Of course, the main challenge for this view is to identify a widely shared or uncontroversial account of what the common good or the public interest actually consist of. To overcome this risk of indeterminacy two strategies are on offer. The first strategy consists in saying that the common good can be interpreted as a list of goods that can be generally assumed to be in the interest of everyone. Among these interests, we find “peace, physical security, ... freedom, equality, well-being, respect, happiness” (Lever, 2017: 146). The second strategy, instead, is to argue that we could ground the idea of voting well in comprehensive accounts of the common good. An example of an account employing this strategy is the one defended by Beerbohm and Davis (2017).

Regardless of the view of what voting well means, a further distinct but related normative question ensues: assuming that the idea of voting well in elections makes sense, does this imply that citizens have a *duty* to vote in such a way?

Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit (1990) have famously addressed this question. They argue that “we should vote for the common good because (a) self-interested voting is unfeasible as a normative ideal of electoral behaviour and (b) we should vote in a discursively defensible manner, which requires us to appeal to other-regarding considerations in our decisional processes” (Volacu, 2021: 5). Brennan and Pettit actually identify two main ideal models of voting: the *preference model* and the *judgment model*. Both models are based on some important assumptions concerning the rationality of voters and their motivations that are shared by most rational choice theories: “people are largely though not exclusively concerned with the self-interested ends of economic gain and social acceptance; and [...] they

both of them in opposition to the concept of self-interest. For a similar approach, see Brennan and Pettit (1990).

are largely though not invariably rational about the promotion of those ends” (Brennan and Pettit, 1990: 320). These assumptions, moreover, do not rule out the possibility that even when voters are altruistic, “they will care for the cost of their altruism to themselves” (Brennan and Pettit, 1990: 323). The two models proposed by Brennan and Pettit differ in how what is desirable for voters is construed. According to the preference model, voters select candidate policies or persons based on their personal ranking all things considered: both personal and public considerations are taken into account (Brennan and Pettit, 1990: 314). For the judgment model, voters select what is desirable based on their personal ranking of available options in the light of the common good (Brennan and Pettit, 1990: 316).

The two models differ also with regard to the mechanisms of collective decision that are involved, and the democratic traditions they are associated with. Regardless of the differences between the two, in both cases voters can take into account self-interested considerations and/or the public interest: both models are based on the presumption that collective decisions emerging from the electoral process will be for the common good or the public interest, however one construes them (Brennan and Pettit, 1990: 314). Generally (due to the abovementioned motivational assumptions) it is presumed that in the preference model self-interested reasons are predominant, whilst in the judgment model the public interest is more relevant. To sum it up, according to the preference ideal of voting, personal or group-specific interests should be the focus whereas the judgement ideal leads us to consider general interests and to vote “for the common good”. Yet, the problem with the judgment model is that it leads us back to the question of what it means for people to vote for the common good or the public interest (see Lever, 2017).

More recently, Jason Brennan (2011) has appealed to the duties citizens have towards each other as participants in social cooperation schemes that involve coercive practices to support a preference for the judgment model (and thus for voting bearing in mind the common good or the public interest). In a similar vein, Alexandru Volacu claims that “voting with the intention of benefiting some groups over others is unjust, since it is akin to the subjugation of fellow citizens, as they will be forced to comply with rules that are not providing a reasonably sufficient level of benefits to them” (Volacu, 2021: 5).³

There are other accounts offering grounds for supporting the idea that citizens have a duty to vote well. According to Beerbohm, as democratic citizens are coauthors of the laws that coercively bind them all, failing to vote well implies being complicit in state’s wrongdoing because one would not contribute to defeating injustices. Volacu (2019) claims that any defense of a duty to vote that is democratic has to rely on the existence of a moral duty to vote well (see also Maskivker, 2018).

Notice, however, that that not all democratic theorists think that there is - or ought to be - a clear distinction between voting for the common good or the public interest vs. for one’s own interests. According to Annabelle Lever, there are probably more circumstances when it will seem “ethically compelling to satisfice, rather than to maximize the common good”, partly because voters may be concerned with “determining which is the ‘least bad’ option of the

³ Of course, this claim should be considered only one among various hypotheses. As such, it should be subjected to an empirical test. Indeed, a rival hypothesis would posit that people tend to vote in ways that reflect a well-considered and substantively correct view of the common good or of the public interest.

ones we face, rather than trying to evaluate which of several appealing options to choose given uncertainties about our knowledge, or about the likely consequences of different policies” (Lever, 2017: 151). Also, we should emphasize that “self-interest” can be defined in ways that are altruistic.⁴

3.2 Strategic Voting vs. Sincere Voting

Another ethically relevant dimension of voting concerns the question of whether citizens should behave sincerely or strategically when casting their vote at elections (but also in referendums and in primaries; see §4.2 and §4.3). In fact, people do not always vote for the party they prefer. Often, the decision to vote in this way is the result of a strategic calculus aimed at maximizing the impact that their vote can make on the final electoral outcome. In this sense, it is assumed that voters act rationally and instrumentally and decide to vote in this way “because they understand the mechanics of the system and that it would be better to vote for someone else in order to maximize their influence on the final electoral outcome” (Bol and Verthé, 2019: 2). This behaviour is defined as “strategic voting” (see Stephenson, Aldrich and Blais, 2018) and is opposed to “sincere voting”, which instead implies that citizens vote for their own favorite party and/or candidate (see also Rouméas, 2020).

The idea of strategic voting is based on four underlying assumptions concerning voters and their behaviour. First, voters are rational: when voting, citizens try to maximize their interests or satisfice. This assumption is based on a particular understanding of rationality that does not necessarily entail that people are able to correctly identify what is best for themselves and vote accordingly. Rather, rationality implies that people have certain goals they want to achieve and vote in a way that allows them to pursue such goals (Downs, 1957: 6).

The second assumption relates to the outcome of elections (but also referendums and primaries): not only voters care about voting, but they also care about the outcomes achieved by their vote. As a consequence, voters can decide to vote in a way that maximizes their possibility to have an impact on the outcome. This assumption implies that voters have “instrumental motivations” (the vote is seen as a revelation of preference over possible electoral outcomes), rather than “expressive motivations” (the vote expresses support for one or another electoral option; see Brennan and Hamlin, 1998).

The third assumption concerns the amount of information that people have for making their decision about how to vote: to be able to vote strategically citizens need to be able to evaluate the relative strength of various parties and anticipate (with more or less accuracy) the electoral outcome. The last assumption presumes that people need to be able to understand the mechanics of the electoral system in order to cast a strategic vote.

Of course, making this last assumption is not tantamount to saying that citizens can or are expected to memorize all the mechanisms, rules, and procedures of their electoral systems. The assumption is, rather, that citizens are able to grasp the general functioning of the democratic electoral system in order to vote strategically. Opinion leaders, who are more aware of the details of electoral mechanisms, may actually trade on this ability when they

⁴ Think for example of John Stuart Mill who, in *Utilitarianism*, expressed the hope that we might come to see our own interests in ways consistent with the interests of humanity (see Lever, 2007).

claim that voting for X means “wasting” one’s vote. For example, in majoritarian systems, voting for a small party or a marginal candidate may be said to amount to wasting one’s vote and possibly menacing the prospects of success of the second-best party/candidate. An illustration comes from the US voters who, in 2000, voted for the candidate of the Green party, Ralph Nader, instead of their – we may assume – second-best option, Al Gore, and whose vote was probably decisive in securing the victory of George W. Bush.

Sometimes, one can even say that voters do not even need to lack sincerity to act strategically; some commentators view the willingness to affect the final electoral outcome as a sufficient condition for strategic voting (Blais et al., 2011; Stephenson, Aldrich and Blais, 2018). Nevertheless, such an approach appears unable to differentiate between sincere and strategic voting. To differentiate, sincere voting is more commonly thought to consist in voting for one’s own favorite party or according to one’s own preferences (Blais and Nadeau, 1996; Fisher, 2004). From this it follows that for voting to be strategic two conditions must be met: “the voter needs to (a) cast a vote for a party that is not her favorite one, and (b) do so to maximize her chances to affect the final electoral outcome” (Bol and Verthé, 2019: 2). The first necessary condition is conceptual. The second condition adds a consequentialist dimension: to count as strategic, voting must be aimed to affect the electoral outcome or to reach other significant political goals (e.g., to persuade one’s party to move in a particular direction at the next election; see Rouméas, 2020).

While both sincere and strategic voting are conceptually possible in general terms, the actual voters’ choice to behave in a way or the other is exposed to various subjective and contextual factors. For example, among the subjective factors, people with a strong “partisan identity” are more likely to vote sincerely rather than strategically (Lanoue and Bowler, 1992; Niemi, Whitten and Franklin, 1992). Also, citizens who are particularly interested in and knowledgeable about politics are generally more likely to vote strategically (Alvarez, Boehmke and Nagler, 2006; Merolla and Stephenson, 2007). As they better understand the incentives brought about by the electoral system, also voters with higher abstract-thinking capabilities are more likely to vote strategically (Loewen, Hinton and Scheffer, 2015).

Some of the determinants of strategic voting are contextual. Strategic voting seems to be more likely when the election is close (Niemi, Whitten and Franklin, 1992), when it is polarized (Daoust and Bol, 2018), or when there is a single party that constitutes an unambiguous focal point for voters who are willing to cast a strategic vote (Blais, Erisen and Rheault, 2014; Fredèn, 2016). Ultimately, strategic voting seems to be less likely in countries where the results of polls in the days immediately preceding the elections cannot be made public by the media: this would make it harder for voters to anticipate the results of the election (Lago, Guinjoan and Bermúdez, 2015).

This complexity suggests that the choice of voting sincerely or strategically is one of the main sources of ethical uncertainty that citizens face in democracies irrespectively of the particular electoral system in place in their country (Gibbard, 1973; Satterthwaite, 1975). Nevertheless, the concrete ways in which citizens can vote strategically do vary depending on the specific electoral system in place. Starting from the basic distinction between electoral systems based on majoritarian rules and those based on proportional representation (PR), different forms of strategic voting can be identified.

Two forms of strategic voting are associated with electoral systems based on the first-past-the-post (FPTP) rule.⁵ The first form consists in voting for a large party, rather than for the favourite but small party, to avoid wasting the vote; the second form involves deserting the large party (which would be one's favourite) in favor of a smaller one, with the aim of sending a signal to the large one (see Rouméas, 2020).

Electoral systems based on PR, which were once considered to be immune to strategic voting, are characterized by rather different forms of strategic voting and, according to recent studies, would occur as much as in the FPTP elections (Abramson et al., 2010). The first form of strategic voting in PR election works similarly to the first form described in FPTP systems: even if there are multiple parties elected under this system, there are always a few very small parties that have no chance of getting a seat, so that their supporters who fear wasting their vote can sometimes choose to support a larger party that they like less.

Other forms of strategic voting associated with electoral systems based on PR are relevant in circumstances of coalition politics. One such form consists in “deserting a party that has no chance of entering the government for a party that has some, to prevent a wasted vote”, while the other consists in “deserting a large party for its small coalition partner to ensure it conquers a seat and hence improve the chances of the preferred bloc of parties forming the next coalition” (Bol and Verthé, 2019: 11).

Within the coordinates of this general picture of strategic voting, many possible ways exist in which voters can decide to apply strategic reasoning in their voting behaviour. Such ways are context-dependent both in terms of specific under-types of electoral system (e.g., single transferable vote STV vs. list PR; closed-list PR vs. open or free-list PR⁶) and in terms of polity-specific contingent events that happen before the election day (e.g., a major corruption scandal affecting the ruling party). Last but not least, given that citizens do not possess all relevant information, they might miscalculate the impact of their (strategic) vote. This is at the heart of the concept of “bounded rationality” that posits that people “are goal-oriented and adaptive, but because of human cognitive and emotional architecture, they sometimes fail, occasionally in important decisions” (Jones, 1999: 297).

3.3 Forward-looking vs. Backward-looking Voting

A distinct but equally relevant source of ethical uncertainty that citizens may face in the context of democratic elections relates to the issue of *democratic accountability* and

⁵ The FPTP is “[t]he simplest form of plurality/majority electoral system, using single-member districts and candidate-centred voting. The winning candidate is the one who gains more votes than any other candidate, even if this is not an absolute majority of valid votes” (IDEA, 2005: 177).

⁶ The STV is a preferential candidate-centred proportional representation system used in multi-member districts. “Candidates that surpass a specific quota ... of first-preference votes are immediately elected. In successive counts, votes are redistributed from least successful candidates, who are eliminated, and votes surplus to the quota are redistributed from successful candidates, until sufficient candidates are declared elected” (IDEA, 2005: 182). Another major type of PR system is list PR. In *closed-list* PR systems voters can only vote for party lists, not for single candidates. In *open-list* PR, by contrast, they can also allocate one or more preferential votes to specific candidates running on the selected party list. In *free-list* PR systems the preferential votes can also be distributed to candidates from other party lists (*panachage*). The latter system is used, for example, in Switzerland, where, in addition, voters can also allocate *negative* preference votes to candidates from the selected party list, by crossing them off the ballot (see Portmann and Stojanović, 2021).

political representation more broadly: should citizens cast their vote basing their choice on backward-looking considerations or rather on forward-looking considerations? To begin with, the idea of “retrospective voting” implies that the voter bases the choice of which party or candidate to vote for on backward-looking considerations related to the past behaviour of political representatives (e.g., members of parliament). On the other hand, the idea of “prospective voting” implies that voters base their choice on forward-looking considerations related to what policies and political actions they want to see in the future.

Clearly, this source of uncertainty matters in particular in the context of a representative democracy. This said, as democratic representation comes in various forms, ethical uncertainties may manifest themselves in various ways.

Following Mansbridge (2003), four forms of representation can be identified. These are not mutually exclusive and may actually interact through time. The first form of representation is labelled *promissory representation* and consists of the traditional model, based on the classic principal-agent relationship. The power relation from the principal (voter) to the agent (representative) follows a linear fashion and it is forward-looking. Building on a standard (forward-looking) understanding of power according to which “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957: 202-203), promissory representation functions normatively by means of explicit and implicit promises made to the electorate by the elected representative (Mansbridge, 2003: 516). Indeed, it is generally associated with sanctions on representatives, as a punishment or a reward for failing to act or for acting according to the promises they made to the voters (generally during electoral campaigns). Because control and information are asymmetric (i.e., a typical representative has more power and sources of information than ordinary citizens), the problem for the principal is making sure that the agent furthers the principal’s interests when acting. The normative understanding of accountability associated with promissory representation is that the representative is “responsible to” and “answerable to” the voters (Pitkin, 1967). Promissory representation seems to be the only model that follows the traditional understanding of accountability. It exists in two versions: for the “mandate” (also called “delegate”) version, the representative is bound to follow the voters’ instructions or expressed desires; for the “trustee” version, instead, “the representative promises to further the constituency’s long-run interests and the interests of the nation as a whole” (Mansbridge, 2003: 516).

The second form that representation might take is called *anticipatory representation*. The power relation is based on the representatives’ beliefs at time 1 ($t1$) about the future preferences that the voters will have at $t2$. To put it simply, in the aftermath of an election and before the next election representatives typically try to anticipate voters’ preferences and reactions, and build their proposals accordingly; their ambition, of course, is to get re-elected (Downs, 1957). Hence, from the voters’ perspective, and in contrast to the promissory representation that is forward-looking, the anticipatory representation is backward-looking (i.e., at $t2$ the voter is expected to consider what the representative did in $t1$). The concept of power on which anticipatory representation rests is similar to that described by Nagel, that defined power as a “causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself” (Nagel, 1975: 29).

The relation between the voter and the representative in contexts of anticipatory representation is one of reciprocal power and mutual influence, making this form of representation more deliberative in nature. As it would sound strange to say that a representative ought to please the anticipated preference of voters, the idea of accountability – forward rather than backward-looking – associated with this model is very different from the one associated with promissory representation. Ultimately, anticipatory representation “shifts normative scrutiny from the process of accountability to the quality of deliberation throughout the representative’s term in office” (Mansbridge, 2003: 520).

The third form of representation covers representation by “recruitment” (Kingdon, 1981: 45), “initial selection” (Bernstein, 1989), “electoral replacement” (Stimson et al., 1995). It has also been labelled “*gyroscopic*” representation (Mansbridge 2003). The unifying idea is here that voters select representatives that they expect to act in ways they approve without the need for external incentives. In this model, too, representatives are not accountable to their electors in the traditional sense: as their actions as representatives are grounded in “internal” reasons, they are only accountable to their own beliefs and principles. According to gyroscopic representation, voters select representatives and candidates on the basis of their character, which can include considerations concerning the principles that candidates hold and their identification with a party. Differently from the two earlier forms of representation, since the representative’s preferences are internally determined, “the voters cause outcome changes first in the legislature and more distantly in the larger polity not by changing the direction of the representative’s behaviour but by placing in the legislature and larger polity (the ‘system’) the active, powerful element constituted by this representative” (Mansbridge, 2003: 521). This model too is unfit for using the traditional understanding of accountability. The key to the relationship between the voter and the representative is not one of accountability but one of deep predictability. The same line of reasoning can, in some electoral systems, be applied to political parties directly. To conclude, “the point for the voter is only to place in the system a representative whose self-propelled actions the voter can expect to further the voter’s own interests” (Mansbridge, 2003: 522).

The last form of representation is quite peculiar, as it concerns those cases where there is no actual relationships between voters and the representative who is taken to represent them (for example, because he or she represents another district). This form has been labelled as “virtual representation” (Burke, 1889 [1792]), “collective representation” (Weissberg, 1978), “institutional representation” (Jackson and King, 1989), and as “surrogate representation” (Mansbridge, 2003). This form of representation plays a normatively important role because it provides state-wide and nation-wide representation to voters who have lost in their own district. For this reason, *surrogate representation* is crucial for the democratic legitimacy of some electoral systems. In this case, not only there is no relation of accountability between the representative and the surrogate constituent: there is also no power relation between the two. Nevertheless, the lack of both types of relation does not necessarily imply that the surrogate representative does not feel responsible towards voters of other districts (Mansbridge, 2003: 523).

4. ELECTIONS, REFERENDUMS, PRIMARIES

In Section 3 we presented the most important sources of ethical uncertainty that citizens may face in the voting booth and (often) days and weeks before entering the polling station.

In this section, we show how these sources of uncertainties are present in elections, but also in referendums and primaries.

4.1 Low-information vs. High-information Elections

An important aspect of elections is the amount of information about parties and candidates that voters receive. In this regard, elections can be low-information or high-information (McDermott, 1998; Matson and Fine, 2006). This distinction is important insofar as it intersects the sources of ethical uncertainty presented in Section 3. Indeed, in order for voters to know whether they should vote for the common good rather than for their own interests (see §3.1; but see Lever, 2017), sincerely rather than strategically (see §3.2), voters need to have a sufficient amount of information on available parties and candidates, both regarding their past performance (if available) and future intentions (see §3.3.).

Majoritarian electoral systems typically allow citizens to get to know the candidates better than in PR systems – especially in national elections, but also in local elections in important cities or regions of the county, that receive wide media coverage. Such high-information elections, compared to low-information elections, are not only more favorable to help citizens to overcome ethical uncertainties but are possibly also more conducive to a kind of voting behaviour that is more respectful towards candidates coming from minority and/or disadvantaged groups.

In the UK, for example, empirical evidence shows that Muslim candidates face electoral discrimination in local elections held in the single or multi-member districts according to plurality/majority rules (Dancygier, 2014). They can win seats only if in their constituency there is a considerable number of co-ethnic Muslim voters. But notice that local elections – perhaps not in small villages but certainly in small or medium-size towns, with relatively fluid populations – are precisely an example of low-information elections: voters know little about the candidates competing in such elections. The election of a mayor of London, on the other hand, is an example of a high-information election, also held by majoritarian rules. In such a context, in 2016 and again in 2021, a declared Muslim of Pakistani origin – Sadiq Khan – succeeded in getting elected.

The presidential elections in the US – but also in France, Brazil etc. – are another example of a high-information election. In such a context, a black candidate (Barack Obama) could be elected, even though African Americans make up only 13% of the US population (and possibly even less with regard to the electorate). In fact, 43-44% of non-Hispanic white Americans (whose population share is 64%) voted for Obama in 2012 and 2008.⁷ We can notice here a striking contrast with the general pattern, according to which heavily white districts will elect white representatives “nearly all the time” (Achen and Bartels, 2016: 313). For example, just 5 percent of the districts with white majorities elected African Americans in the 2014-2015 US House of Representatives elections. The evidence of racial vote is particularly strong in low-information elections in the US context, such as the elections to state legislatures and municipalities (Barth, 2016).

But *why* high-information elections would make citizens more willing to vote for someone who they would not choose in low-information elections? The reason is that in low-

⁷ Source: Gallup. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/139880/election-polls-presidential-vote-groups.aspx>

information contexts voters tend to apply “low-information rationality” (Lupia et al., 2000), for instance by using easily available ballot cues to obtain information about candidates (Matson and Fine, 2006). A considerable body of research shows that voters use simple cues such as a candidate’s sociodemographic characteristics as cognitive shortcuts to infer information about candidates (see, e.g., McDermott, 1998). Arguably, a candidate’s sociodemographic characteristics (e.g. her or his ethnicity) are “the simplest shortcut of all” (Cutler, 2002). Such shortcuts can serve low-information voters as useful heuristics to approximate a candidate’s ideology, policy positions, and expected behaviour in office without processing a large amount of political information (Cutler, 2002; Lupia, 1994; McCubbins and Popkin, 1998). Cognitive shortcuts, however, can also lead to severely biased electoral decisions and to “electoral discrimination” (e.g., against immigrant-origin candidates; see Portmann and Stojanović, 2021). In high-information elections, on the other hand, voters have more information about single candidates and this allows them to overcome their unconscious or conscious biases (versus, e.g., black or Muslim candidates).

Generally speaking, the use of elections to select political representatives arguably pivots on a discussion of *accountability*. Political representation is generally understood as a way of establishing the democratic legitimacy of an institution and a way to create institutional incentives to make representatives responsive to citizens (Dovi, 2018). The traditional understanding of accountability fits well enough institutions of representative democracy due to its forward-looking nature and to the fact that it is conceptually based on a standard principal-agent relation. In representative democracies, the citizens (voters) act as principals, and representatives (parliaments, governments, and presidents) act as agents. The resulting accountability is typically⁸ *vertical* since it relies heavily on selection procedures such as elections that work as sanctioning mechanisms for the voters towards their representatives (Przeworski et al., 1999).

Through elections, voters can at least try to hold their representatives accountable for their past actions. For example, voters might punish what they consider to be a bad candidate’s performance during their term by voting them out. Moreover, it is typically during electoral campaigns that voters gather information about candidates and parties and vote accordingly. Electoral promises will eventually constitute something for which representatives will have to account at the end of their mandate (and that will lead to positive or negative sanctions at the following election), unless they succeed in convincing their voters that contingent events and/or changed circumstances obliged them to modify their initial promises. To put it simply, voters at elections exercise their function of control and punishment over their representatives.

4.2 Direct Democracy (Referendums)

To better contextualize the many sources of voters’ ethical uncertainty, it is useful to distinguish among the varieties of democratic institutions and processes of decision-making.

⁸ Typically, but not exclusively. Other forms of accountability may find space within representative democracy: for example, horizontal accountability, that refers to checks and balances among equally positioned actors (actors that are at the same level), and oblique accountability, that involves organizations of civil society (Schmitter, 2007). A distinctive kind of accountability is internal to the political function and horizontal between institutional members (the accountability of members of parliament towards each other—this is the idea of office accountability; see Ceva and Ferretti, 2021).

In particular, we can ask the question of how these uncertainties are reflected in contexts based on *direct*⁹ democracy that complement the traditional institutions of representative democracy (e.g., Switzerland, California, Oregon).

Direct democracy can take various forms. The two most important criteria to distinguish them is to ask (1) who is legally entitled to initiate the process (government/parliament vs. citizens) and (2) if the outcome of the popular vote is binding or not. Table 1 offers a basic overview of the various instruments of direct democracy.

Table 1: A basic overview of direct-democratic instruments

	Binding	Non-binding
Top-down (decided by parliament/government)	Obligatory referendum Plebiscite	Consultative plebiscite
Bottom-up (it is necessary to collect signatures)	Facultative referendum Citizens' initiative Recall	Consultative initiative

Yet the reality is more complex than this overview suggests. For example, some non-binding direct-democratic instruments are *de jure* non-binding but due to a specific context or to political pressures they are (or become) *de facto* binding. Think of the role of the government-initiated referendums in the United Kingdom (e.g. Brexit) that are legally non-binding – and hence fall into the category “consultative plebiscites” –, but which outcome has a politically binding force. On the other side, the outcome of some *de jure* binding tools such as citizens’ (called “popular”) initiatives in Switzerland can be put aside if a majority of members of Parliament think that their implementation would produce major negative drawbacks for the country (see, e.g., the non-implementation of the 2014 popular initiative “against mass immigration” in Switzerland; its implementation would have probably ended the bilateral agreements with the EU, considered of vital importance for Swiss economy). The top-down vs. bottom-up distinction can also be questioned because quite often (e.g. in the US states) citizens’ initiatives are launched by political parties and/or interest groups and not by, say, ad hoc citizens’ gatherings or grassroot movements (Cronin, 1989).

Also, notice that the tools of direct democracy typically imply that at the end of the process a popular vote *will* take place. But sometimes the initiators – for example a citizens’ committee that has successfully launched an initiative – can stop the process before the popular vote, if some of their demands are met by Parliament. (Other tools that are associated with direct democracy – such as European Citizens’ Initiative – do not even contemplate the possibility to hold a popular vote and for this reason we suggest discarding them from the present analysis.)

⁹ The notion *direct* democracy is not necessarily the best terminological choice to describe a democratic system in which referendums and citizens’ initiatives come into play in order to *complement* and not to replace the political processes within the institutions of representative democracy. Therefore, some scholars suggest to abandon the adjective “direct” altogether and speak “popular vote processes” (Cheneval and el-Wakil, 2018: 294). Nevertheless, the notion of direct democracy is still widely used in the literature and as long as we know what we are referring to I suggest that we keep it for the time being.

Now, how the institutions of direct democracy relate to the three ethical uncertainties presented in Section 3? Regarding the uncertainty about voting for the common good vs. voting out of self-interest (§3.1), it should be noted that, generally speaking, referendums have been criticized in political theory because they present voters with a simplistic “yes-no” choice on very complex issues. So voters may tend to focus on their own self-interest rather than on the importance of equality, solidarity and the common good. Indeed, as Céline Colombo notes, deliberative theorists, in particular, have criticized referendums claiming that “binary, majoritarian and irreversible choices incentivize strategic and self-interested voting, and disincentivize deliberative arguing and reasoning” (Colombo, 2016: 60)

Thomas Christiano, for example, argues that under certain conditions (in particular a proportional representation of citizens’ aims in a legislative assembly and faithfulness of representatives to defend such aims), representative democracy is “superior” to direct democracy with regard to the requirement of political equality (Christiano, 2008: 104-5). For him, in a modern state a system of direct democracy would “undermine any sense that equality is being realized between citizens” because it would be excessively “cumbersome and unwieldy” for citizens. The main problem is that most citizens lack time “to devote to the complicated issues in making legislation”. In the end, the whole democratic process “would be hijacked by elites with axes to grind”. In sum, for Christiano direct democracy may be “in some sense more equal” than representative democracy, but the latter is “more just”. Hélène Landemore, too, sees “the risk of epistemic failures presented by [direct democracy] where it is feasible” (Landemore, 2013: 10). In light of that risk she maintains that representative democracy is a “more intelligent” form of democratic regime because it is “less immediate, allowing people time for reflecting on and refining their judgement” (Ibid.). The device of representation introduces the “epistemic improvement”, because it is a way “to improve on the decisions that ordinary citizens would make by delegating the task to professional politicians” (Landemore, 2013: 106).

To be sure, a number of empirical studies do show that in popular votes there is a tendency to vote for one’s self-interest. For example, an empirical test of the “self-interest hypothesis” analysing the 2004 referendum on fiscal equalisation in Switzerland has shown that – “although Switzerland is usually portrayed as a paradigmatic case in terms of inter-regional solidarity and national integration” – in the end “rational and selfish cost-benefit calculations strongly mattered for the end-result” (Mueller et al. 2017: 3). Another example comes from Germany, where a very controversial construction of a new railway station in Stuttgart was put to a referendum (and eventually rejected), revealing the tendency of voters to vote according to the NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) rule (Vatter and Heidelberger, 2013). In the US context, similar results have been found in relation to referendums on financing of public schools (Tedin et al., 2001). This said, the empirical literature on this topic is large and there is not a consensus that in popular vote most voters behave out of self-interest most of the time (see, e.g., Deacon and Shapiro, 1975; Shabman and Stephenson 1994).

However, a lot depends on the *type* of direct-democratic instrument that we have in mind (see Table 1 above). Citizens’ initiatives, in particular, have often been used by political *minorities* as a tool to put on the political agenda proposals going clearly in the direction of more solidarity (think of initiatives for an unconditional basic income or for more equal distribution of fiscal resources in Switzerland). Even if such initiatives typically failed to

convince a majority of voters, we should not downplay the role they play in raising awareness on the importance of political reforms that are not motivated by one's self-interest.

When it comes to sincere vs. strategic voting (§3.2), the institutions of direct democracy present voters with a similar but distinct sort of ethical uncertainties compared to the uncertainties that they face in elections. Suppose, for example, that a voter faces a binary yes/no choice in a popular vote demanding abolition of the army. She knows that abolishing armed forces altogether would be a too radical move, assuming that every country needs an army to ensure its security. But at the same time she thinks that the current army budget is far too high and that security can be ensured by other means. What should she do? Voting "yes" would be irresponsible in her eyes. So her sincere choice would be to vote "no". But at the same time, she does not want her vote to be misused by pro-military lobby who will certainly claim victory, if a majority of people vote "no", and interpret the result as a strong support for the army and its budget. To solve her internal dilemma, our voter could use a cognitive shortcut and take a look at surveys. If she sees that a sufficiently strong majority of respondents intend to vote "no", she could strategically decide vote "yes" in order to boost the "yes" side. In other words, by her vote she wants to send a signal to political establishment rather than to express her genuine will.

The example that we have chosen in order to illustrate this kind of uncertainty in direct-democratic votes is not a product of our phantasy. On 26 November 1989 35.6% of Swiss voters accepted a citizen's initiative, launched by the group "For a Switzerland Without an Army and an Overall Peaceful Political Stance (GSOA)", demanding abolition of the army. Hence the initiative was rejected but the high percentage of "yes" votes - coupled with an extraordinarily high turnout (68.6%) according to Swiss standards (where the average turnout rate is around 46%) - was a true shock for the political and military establishment. Its by-effect was that in the 1990s and 2000s much less financial resources were invested in Swiss armed forces in order to avoid that a similar initiative becomes successful some day. Indeed, on 2 December 2001 another GSOA initiative demanding abolition of the army was accepted by only 27.9% of voters, and a significantly lower turnout (37.9%) also showed that this time most enfranchised citizens did not even bother to vote.

In the literature, strategic voting is sometimes called "compensatory voting", describing a kind of voting behaviour which intention is different from the final content of one's vote. Hence, a typical "compensatory voter" behaves strategically insofar she tries "to influence the policy by choosing parties that defend more extreme positions than themselves because they anticipate a dilution of policy positions in post-electoral coalition formation" (Gisiger et al., 2019: 103). In electoral research compensatory voting has been applied only to elections. Empirical studies on compensatory (i.e. strategic) voting in direct-democratic votes are scarce. A major recent study by Gisiger et al (2019), based on individual level data from post-vote surveys on 63 popular initiatives voted in Switzerland between 1993 and 2015, is the first systematic analysis of compensatory voting in Swiss direct democracy. Its main finding is that, indeed, "a non-negligible share of voters tends to vote more extremely than their true preferences" (Gisiger et al., 2019: 120). This said, the average share of strategic voters was 6.5%, meaning that the vast majority voted according to their true preferences. But in the context of direct democracy a share of 6.5% is still significant because it can be decisive for the final result, especially in close races. As a matter of fact, *anticipated closeness of ballot results* is an important aspect to consider in all studies on strategic vs. sincere voting.

Informed voters can anticipate closeness on the basis of opinion surveys. Logically, one should expect that the closer anticipated results are, the fewer strategic votes will be expressed (because if I know that my vote might be decisive, I should better vote according to my true preferences). In reality, the results of Gisiger et al (2019: 118, Figure 3) could not found a strong correlation confirming that hypothesis; to the contrary, there is a slight tendency to see *higher* shares of strategic votes in votes with a *higher* anticipated probability of close results.

To conclude this discussion, let us return to Table 1 illustrating different types of direct-democratic instruments. We should especially highlight the distinction between top-down and bottom-up referendums. The votes on citizens' initiatives belong to the latter category, i.e. in order to trigger a popular vote it is mandatory to collect citizens' signatures. In top-down referendums - typically triggered by a president (as in France) or a prime minister (as in the UK) - strategic voting often correlates with *protest* vote. Indeed, in the recent years in a number of referendums a majority of voters used the occasion to express their dissatisfaction with the government (think of the 2005 French referendums on the EU constitution, the 2016 Brexit referendum, or the 2016 Dutch referendum on the treaty with Ukraine). This voting behaviour is also known as "punishment strategy" and referendums are considered a sort of "second-order elections" (Hobolt, 2006; de Vreese and Semetko, 2004), meaning that the vote choice does not necessarily reflect the voter's position on the concrete issue, because the actual topic of a referendum topic is influenced by other factors. This said, protest voting and strategic voting are two distinct behavioural concepts even though, empirically, it is often difficult to distinguish them (Gisiger et al., 2019: 111).

With regard to the third ethical uncertainty (§3.3) - i.e. the contrast between forward-looking and backward-looking voting - we start by pointing out that representative and direct democracies accommodate different understandings of what *democratic accountability* requires. The distinction between these two institutional models bears, therefore, on the contrast between forward-looking and backward-looking voting considerations. Moreover, the focus on relations of accountability is telling of the availability of information (see §4.1) and the justifications that can be given to account for an act (or an omission) occurring in democratic institutional settings.

In the previous sub-section (§4.1) we have already discussed the importance of accountability in a system of *representative* democracy. Yet the traditional scholarly debate tends to dismiss the possibility of applying the concept of democratic accountability to contexts governed by *direct* democracy. The exclusion of direct democracy from discussions about democratic accountability has been typically associated with the fact that in referendums and citizens' initiatives a citizen is both the principal and the agent (since she votes directly on issues and policies that they want to stop or to see implemented). Considering that we are witnessing a rise of direct-democratic instruments all over the globe and a large comparative-empirical literature dedicated to them,¹⁰ it seems worth discussing the relationship between direct democracy and democratic accountability. Indeed, some

¹⁰ While we cannot review here the vast empirical literature on direct democracy, its empirical insights have been very useful for this chapter (Cronin 1989; Budge 1996; Papadopoulos 1998; Hug and Tsebelis 2002; Kriesi 2005; Altman, 2010; Qvortrup, 2013). For a good review of this literature see, e.g., Smith (2009: chap. 4).

commentators have argued that the concept of democratic accountability can be applied to such a form of democracy too (Trechsel, 2010). Reconsidering the relationship between direct democracy and accountability suggests that referendums (but not citizens' initiatives) are mechanisms that voters can use to hold the ruling elite accountable for its past performance.

According to Michael Saward, democracy should be seen as a “responsive rule,” or more precisely as characterized by a “necessary correspondence between acts of governance and the equally weighted felt interests of citizens with respect to those acts” (Saward, 1998: 51). Now, one of the requirements that flow from the responsive rule ideal is that “direct democratic mechanisms be given formal and systematic priority over indirect mechanisms” (1998: 65). For Alexander Trechsel “[t]hrough referendums, whether binding or consultative, political decisions taken by the rulers can either be democratically accepted or rejected and therefore legitimized or *désavoué*” (Trechsel, 2010: 1055). An accountability relation of this kind is vertical and resembles the vertical accountability associated with the election but in a “softer” form. Moreover, in referendums voters can sanction the ruling elites on the basis of a single policy or single issue, rather than for their general performance. In this sense, referendums function as “negative elections” similar to recall procedures (Trechsel, 2010: 1055).¹¹ In the case of direct democracy, relations of accountability are evident also if we consider that sometimes the ruling elites might use referendums as devices to transfer political responsibility concerning a particular decision to the citizens, or as a means to solve a deadlock involving two irreconcilable positions.

4.3 Primaries

The role of primaries in a democracy is an underexplored topic in political theory. According to Dennis Thompson (2010), there are two conceptions of primaries: participatory and competitive. *Participatory* primaries favour greater inclusion; the process is said to be more democratic to the extent that it is *more* inclusive. The notion of inclusion, in this context, can mean two things. It can mean opening doors to all party *members* or to citizens who are *registered as voters of a specific party* and allow them to choose the candidate(s) for the upcoming election. But it can also mean allowing *any* citizen to participate in primaries of a political party. Notice, however, that while it is true that nowadays parties tend to make electorates - i.e. people who select the candidates - more inclusive, this apparent “internal democratization ... often diminishes the influence of party branches and their activists on the selection of the candidates” (Wolkenstein, 2016: 312).

The other conception of primaries - *competitive* - justifies *less* inclusion. The idea here is that it is in the interest of party voters, but also of the electorate as a whole, that party leaders have more control. The reason is that leaders are supposed to be more likely to choose candidates who will be more competitive in the general election and thus give *all* voters greater choice. “The sovereignty of the voter consists in his freedom of choice just as the sovereignty of the consumer in the economic system consists in his freedom to trade in a

¹¹ This statement holds, we believe, in polities where there is a relatively frequent use of direct democracy. If referendums are used once every 10-20 years – as in France or the UK – than there is a greater risk that behind a referendum question various issues get mixed up (see, e.g., Brexit) and that in the end voters might be tempted to sanction the government for their general political performance (e.g. the 2005 European Constitution referendum in France).

competitive market... Democracy is not to be found *in* the parties but *between* the parties” (Schattschneider, 1942, quoted in Thompson, 2010: 206; on intra-party democracy see also Wolkenstein, 2018).

On either model, some important questions can be raised. If primaries play a significant role in electoral democracies, why should parties control the nominating process? Shouldn't there be some minimal democratic standards that intra-party democracy should meet? If so, who should set such standards?

In this chapter, however, our focus is on *voter*-centred ethical uncertainties (see Section 3) and hence we want to analyse their role in primaries. For Thompson (2010: 208), a “chief concern” of voters who participate in primaries is, or ought to be, the quality – or even the “character” – of the nominees. Participation and competition are only the means to achieve that ideal. Thompson thinks that choosing the best candidate is the most important “normative principle” in primaries. Hence, the question is how well the process allows citizens to judge the candidates’ character in a primary. For example, instead of simultaneous primaries (e.g., in the US presidential election), Thompson favours sequential primaries, with long intervals between them, because they provide “more and better opportunities for voters to learn about a candidate’s constitutional character” (Thompson, 2010: 231).

However, this seems to be a too idealistic view of what voters should do in primaries. According to Thompson, they should vote for candidates who have a “capability for collaboration”, a “sense of responsibility”, a “respect for due process”, and even a “commitment to candour”. It is not easy for voters to assess these qualities among candidates in primaries, because it involves considerations on both candidates’ past performance and the credibility of their declared future intentions, as our discussion on the forward-looking vs. backward-looking has already shown (§3.3).

But isn't sometimes ethically justified – or even ethically required – that voters support a candidate who scores less on each of these quality items, but has a higher probability of winning the election against the candidate(s) of other parties? This is an empirical question but the one that should inform our theoretical reflections on strategic vs. sincere voting (§3.2). For example, some studies (e.g., Fertik, 2016; but see Abramowitz, 1981) show that an important number of Democratic voters in the 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries in the US were in favor of Bernie Sanders but ended up voting for Hillary Clinton (in 2016) and Joseph Biden (in 2020) for *strategic* reasons, i.e., because they thought that the more moderate candidates would have more chance to win against Donald Trump.

There is more to say about strategic voting in primaries. It is also influenced by the various forms that primaries can take with regard to *who is allowed* to participate (and that go beyond the participatory vs. competitive distinction discussed above). Here we distinguish between open, semi-open and closed primaries. In closed primaries parties let only party members decide which candidate should advance to the general elections. In semi-open primaries parties let voters registered as “independents” (i.e. neither Republican nor Democrat, in the US context) participate as well. In open primaries parties allow anyone (i.e. also members of other parties) to vote.

In the United States, the fully open primaries were declared unconstitutional in 2000 by a majority vote (7 to 2) in the Supreme Court (*California Democratic Party v. Jones*), precisely

because their opponents were successful in making the case that there is a risk that non-party members may “raid” a primary because they may “strategically vote for their party’s weakest candidate to decrease the party’s chances of general election success” (Cherry and Kroll, 2003: 389). In other words, we can see that “strategic voting” (§3.2) in open primaries can take different forms depending on who the voters are (party members vs. non-party members).

In the European context, primaries are a more recent phenomenon. In France, open primaries were used since the 2011 presidential elections. Earlier, the open primary system was associated “with an unappealing ‘Americanization’ of political life, and importing it has long been seen as unthinkable [because they] were thought to be contrary to French political culture and the ‘spirit’ of the Fifth Republic’s institutions, and against the interests of the political parties, which have typically exerted control over the nomination of candidates” (Lefebvre and Treille 2017: 1167). It is also interesting to note that the choice to opt for open instead of closed primaries, in France, is seen as “a result of weakening political parties and shrinking activist bases, both of which meant closed internal primaries were less valuable” (Lefebvre and Treille 2017: 1168; see also Sandri et al. 2015). In Italy, the political parties – predominantly but not exclusively from the left – started using them in 2004, both in their closed and open form (De Luca and Rombi, 2016; Vassallo and Passarelli, 2016). The use of primaries for candidate selection has taken place also in Iceland, Romania and Slovakia (Sandri et al., 2015).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have identified three sources of ethical uncertainty that democratic citizens face when voting. These sources derive from three main contrasts that may emerge in relation to voters’ behavior: (§3.1) voting for the common good / the public interest vs. voting for one’s own interests, (§3.2) voting sincerely vs. voting strategically, (§3.3) backward vs. forward-looking voting. We have then discussed how such sources of voters’ ethical uncertainty intersect issues of democratic practice across three institutional spheres: (§4.1) voting in elections (by stressing the difference between high and low-information elections), (§4.2) voting in referendums, and (§4.3) voting in primaries.

This reflexive exercise, from democratic theory to democratic action and back, opens the normative and practical question of how democratic voters may navigate such uncertainties. This general question prompts also a more specific one concerning the contrast between citizens’ low information levels and their capability to take meaningful political decisions. This is a crucial question for a normative ethics of democratic voting that can give practical guidance for citizens’ action: What level of knowledge of and commitment to daily politics may be expected of citizens as electoral voters?

Two main solutions may be worth a couple of final words of discussion: the use of heuristic (cognitive) shortcuts and, more recently, the resort to collective intelligence via aggregation of opinions. The former is a widely studied solution. There has been much empirical evidence that citizens qua voters frequently use cognitive shortcuts in elections and popular votes (Cutler, 2002; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Lupia, 1994; Lupia, McCubbins and Popkin, 2000). In other words, citizens with little knowledge can reach decisions comparable to those of

highly knowledgeable citizens by relying on heuristic cues, such as recommendations of parties, experts, interest groups, and the media.

In more recent years, solutions of the second kind have considerably developed. In particular, there have been strong developments of the so-called Voting Advice Applications (VAAs; for an overview, see Garzia and Marshall, 2014). An off-line precursor of VAAs was developed in the Netherlands in 1989 - notice that the Dutch electoral system is an open-list PR system in a single country-wide electoral district (i.e. voters can opt not only for a given party but they can also allocate preference votes to candidates running on that party list; see footnote 4). The arrival of the Internet has radically changed the situation. Today, the Internet is “a major source of political information, communication and participation for a growing number of citizens” (Garzia and Marschall, 2014: 1; Zittel and Fuchs, 2007). Nowadays, VAAs exist in many countries (*Wahl-O-Mat* in Germany, *Vote Match* in the UK, *Vote Compass* in Canada and the US, *smartvote* in Switzerland etc.). For example, the Swiss VAA *smartvote* works as follows:

“The Swiss VAA *smartvote* is - in accordance with the electoral systems applied - candidate based. This means that every candidate has its own political profile and the users not only see which party is closest to their political preferences but they also get a list of candidates with the candidates closest to their positions at the top. The candidates reveal their political profile by answering the same questions (issues) as the users will do at a later stage. They are more or less free to position themselves according to their personal preferences and strategic considerations. [...] The way the candidates present themselves and the political profile they have is not unimportant. *smartvote* is very popular and quite influential. More than 80 per cent of the roughly 3,600 candidates running for both houses reveal their political profile on the website. About 15 per cent of the voters consult the website before voting, and it can be shown that *smartvote* has an influence on electoral turnout [...] and on the electoral decisions of the users [...]” (Ladner 2014: 188)

Despite their increasing popularity and diffusion, VAAs have also been the object of normative criticisms especially as concerns their relation to the concept of representation in democratic theory. As Fossen and van den Brink (2015: 353; original emphasis) put it: “VAAs can enhance voter competence under a very specific aspect: that of the citizen’s voting in line with his or her preferences on particular issues. But VAAs may undermine voter competence insofar as the political judgements with regard to what the election is *about*, made in the background of the application, are hidden from view”. Hence the authors conclude that the VAAs do not simply reflect, in a neutral way, what is at stake in an election. Rather, they structure political information in a way that is informed by the - more or less hidden - presuppositions of their developers.

This condition may create a further source of ethical uncertainty in the exercise of the voters’ electoral rights; this source of uncertainty shows one more how the adoption of a voter-centred perspective is critical for making a good use of the conceptual and normative tools of democratic theory for understanding the democratic practice.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This chapter was prepared in collaboration with Sandra Lavenex and Jonas Pontusson from the University of Geneva. We greatly acknowledge helpful insights and generous assistance by Marta Giunta Martino from the University of Geneva.

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