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Stefan Marschall & Martin Schultze

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German E-Campaigning and the Emergence of a ‘Digital Voter’? An Analysis of the Users of the Wahl-O-Mat

STEFAN MARSCHALL and MARTIN SCHULTZE

Within the e-campaigning activities of political actors in Germany, the Wahl-O-Mat has emerged as a popular ‘non-party’ online tool which has been used by millions of voters before elections in Germany. An analysis of the users can provide information about the characteristics of people resorting to this and other types of online pre-election tools. Based on an application-specific approach, hypotheses about the users are developed in light of the uses and gratification theory, taking into consideration normative expectations associated with the rise of the Internet. Whether the Wahl-O-Mat helps fulfilling these expectations is analysed by drawing (1) on data generated by an online exit survey of the Wahl-O-Mat users and (2) on datasets of the German Longitudinal Election Study 2009. The findings show that users of the Wahl-O-Mat largely belong to a group of young and politically interested voters who resort primarily to the Internet to collect political information.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the election campaigns in the 1990s, the Internet has been emerging as a platform for political pre-election marketing in modern democracies; candidates and parties running for elections have started to use the web and its applications to promote their positions, to organise their campaigns, to solicit donations and to mobilise supporters.¹ In European countries, the evolving role of the Internet as an element of a ‘post-modern’ campaign² could partly be seen as the result of a ‘shopping effect’: campaign managers from European countries have been eager to learn from the American case which is widely perceived as a role model for the successful application of online communication. This is particularly true for the so-called ‘Obama effect’, that is, the exemplary way the Obama campaign used the Internet in the 2008 US Presidential Election to pave his way to the White House. Given the differences between the American presidential system and most European political systems, though, the transatlantic transfer of knowledge on ‘how to campaign’ does not work without modifications.

In addition to parties and candidates, non-party actors such as media companies, universities and non-governmental organisations (e.g. citizen education initiatives), have started to offer Internet applications during campaigns. These are designed to provide voters with information and orientation for upcoming elections so as to increase political participation and communication.³

The growing online activities of both parties and non-party organisations are based on the assumption that online political communication exerts a decisive impact on voters. This expectation is essentially based on the diffusion of the Internet among the population. Its rapid and global spread is believed to have changed the way voters collect and process information about elections – possibly creating something like a new type of citizen to whom we will refer to as a ‘digital voter’. Parties as well as non-party actors assume that they could not only reach their existing target groups but also new voters effectively by using online communication in addition to traditional media.

In Germany, one of the most prominent campaign tools offered by a non-party organisation is the Wahl-O-Mat. It is produced by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (‘Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung’; bpb), a governmental agency attached to the Ministry of the Interior. Although institutionally affiliated with the German (party) government, the bpb is – by its institutional idea – a supra-party organisation which is supervised by a board composed of members of all parliamentary groups in the Bundestag.

The Wahl-O-Mat works as follows: the website confronts users with thirty-eight statements on which they can position themselves. Before the tool is launched, all parties which had been admitted to the election have been invited to answer these questions as well. At the end of the user’s session, the Wahl-O-Mat calculates the distances between the voter’s and the parties’ positions and displays the party with the smallest distance as the ‘result’ – as well as the distances to other parties – in the form of a bar graph. According to the providers of the tool, the Wahl-O-Mat aims to instigate political communication, information and participation by confronting voters with the issues of the campaign, with the positions of the parties and with the policy differences between the parties.

The first version of a Wahl-O-Mat was launched for the 2002 German Federal Election. Subsequently, Wahl-O-Mat versions were generated for all subsequent Federal Elections, for European Parliament Elections as well as for a large number of elections on the state (Länder) level. Already in its first run in 2002, the tool was used 3.6 million times. Since then, there has been a steady increase in its demand: at the Federal Election in 2009, the tool provided 6.7 million results, thereby reaching a remarkable share of the German electorate.⁴

The Wahl-O-Mat is a member of a family of online tools which have spread over many countries in recent years. This group of tools, labelled as ‘Voting Advice Applications’ (VAAs), works in a similar way as the Wahl-O-Mat. Due to their success, VAAs have attracted the attention of the social sciences: in recent years, they have become the object of research projects, conferences and publications. Different perspectives have been employed in the analyses of VAAs: with the growth in numbers of people resorting to these tools, the design and methods of VAAs have become the object of study (and criticism), suggesting that the specific format of a VAA could influence the quality of its results. Another part of the VAA literature deals with the ways in which VAAs could affect users’ electoral choices.

Applying a new approach, this paper comes back to the basic question of *who* uses the tool. The answer might provide a key for understanding the application’s impact on

voting behaviour. What type of voter resorts to the Wahl-O-Mat and what does it tell us about the role such a web-based tool plays in election times? Does the Wahl-O-Mat user represent a new type of voter who primarily relies on the Internet to gather information for his/her voting decision ('digital voter')? Only the knowledge about the users' characteristics can shed light on the effectiveness of such web-applications and about the changes that could be instigated by new forms of e-campaigning. Finally, this kind of research is necessary to check whether the tool could achieve the aforementioned aims of citizen education.

The paper is structured as follows: referring to the notion of a 'digital divide', we discuss in the next section of the paper the change of political communication on the micro-level of the voters, which is caused by the new online campaign environment, and draw conclusions for our empirical analysis. We report first results about the users of this type of application as they have been provided by the VAA research thus far. The empirical study in section four draws on different data sources: first, we use data generated by an online onsite-survey which was conducted for the Wahl-O-Mat version of the 2009 Federal Election. Second, we make use of datasets from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). By referring to these sources, we are able to aggregate information on the users from different perspectives in order to learn more about those resorting to the Wahl-O-Mat in comparison to other groups. In the second step of the empirical section, we examine and compare the characteristics of VAA users and non-users by taking into consideration their respective communication behaviour and political attitudes. In the final section, we draw conclusions about the users of the Wahl-O-Mat, that is, whether and to what degree they represent a new type of voter. Moreover, we discuss the implications of the findings for the role that VAAs and online communication in general could play in modern campaigning.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: DIGITAL DIVIDE 2.0 AND THE MOBILISING POWER OF THE INTERNET

From the outset, the scientific discourse about the use of the Internet has been shaped by the notion of 'divide', that is, of inclusion and exclusion. The early discussion on the web-generated divides referred to the gap between those being on the net and those being offline – a gap which was prominently labelled 'digital divide'.⁵ Accordingly, early studies concentrated on the differences between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not, and revealed remarkable dissimilarities in age, gender and formal education.⁶ There was also a normative side to this discussion, as it was assumed that in contrast to people who are offline, the online population could profit more from the new potentials of information, communication and networking on the web which would widen the already existing (social) gap between these two groups.

However, since Internet use has expanded significantly within many modern societies including Germany, the empirical basis and – as a result – the academic debate has changed. As for the 2009 election year, about 69 per cent of the German population had access to the Internet.⁷ This diffusion rate has effectively led to a leveling out of the biases that were a crucial topic of the original digital divide discussion.

Moreover, we observe a new generation of users labelled 'digital natives' for which the (flexible) use of the Internet has become an indispensable part of their lives, not knowing the concept of being offline any more.⁸

Given that the (social) gap between people using and people not using the Internet has become a less pressing issue (although a remarkable share of the population is still offline), a new 'digital divide' has been identified regarding the quantity and quality with which the Internet is used by citizens for political communication and participation. The concept of division has been transformed from the question of who is online to a question of how people use the Internet. Thus, from the perspective of communication research the 'digital divide 2.0' is no longer solely about users but also about types of usages with a special concern about the political dimension of online communication.

The focus on the political uses of the Internet is based on expectations that the net should have become a place for (more) political interaction, intensifying and widening the realm of political participation. These expectations are boiled down to what has been called the mobilisation thesis. According to this thesis, online communication should be able to politically mobilise persons who are usually difficult to reach and who are rarely active outside of the Internet.⁹ For instance, the lifecycle effect implies that political participation increases when people get older. The web should compensate for this effect as it is supposed to be a medium especially used by youngsters; this should make forms of online-based political participation in this group more likely.¹⁰

On the other hand, these expectations have been countered by a more sceptical position contending that only those who are already politically active offline use the Internet for political purposes.¹¹ In the sense of this normalisation thesis, new information technologies are assumed to stabilise the status quo of the disparity in offline political participation. This also refers to age: the lifecycle effect is believed to be reinforced by the new information and communication technologies.¹²

Finally, there is a third, even more sceptical perspective on the implications of the Internet on online political mobilisation. Advocates of this position believe that the overwhelmingly apolitical content of the Internet results in an overall reduction of political participation even among those who have been active offline before.¹³ By providing an attractive alternative to spend time on, Internet communication could become a distraction from any form of online or offline political participation.

In the German case, the research project of Emmer *et al.* has empirically contributed to the discussion about the political uses of the Internet.¹⁴ One key finding of their research is that political communication only plays a marginal role in the overall usage of the Internet. They argue that there has only been a modest increase in political communication among citizens due to the diffusion of the web. This gives evidence to the online stabilisation of existing offline disparities in political participation (i.e. the normalisation thesis).

The discussion about a 'digital divide 2.0' and the respective empirical findings show that it has become difficult to conceive Internet users as a homogenous group. Evidently, people resort to the Internet and its applications quite diversely. Hence, there is a need to understand the various types of users and the different types of usages in an application-specific manner, taking into account that the Internet is a

conglomerate of diverse applications.¹⁵ Accordingly, hypotheses on users and usage have been formulated with regard to the characteristics of the concrete application (e.g. VAAs).

Why and how people use Internet applications can be theoretically framed by the uses and gratification theory. Based on a rational choice perspective, this concept posits that individuals actively turn to those media which they believe they can profit from most in terms of their needs (e.g. information, entertainment).¹⁶ This theory has been heavily criticised as taking wrong pre-conditions as granted, for example, that recipients are aware of the hierarchy of their needs and that media selection takes place without social influences.¹⁷ However, using it as an ‘approach’ rather than a consistent ‘theory’, the analytical strategy of uses and gratification seems to work especially well for the Internet which is by its construction primarily a pull medium. As a consequence, users intentionally choose out of an abundance of resources on the web supposedly those applications they expect a certain profit from.¹⁸ Considering the present-day media environment, the uses and gratification approach might even become (in a revised version) a ‘theory’ of communication and media science (again).¹⁹ Responding to the negligence of social influences in the early theory, the social dimension should be integrated in this approach by analysing the relationship between the characteristics of the tool on the one hand and the characteristics of its users on the other hand.

What are our expectations about the users of the Wahl-O-Mat? Given the findings of Emmer *et al.* that support the normalisation thesis,²⁰ we expect the Wahl-O-Mat users to belong to the already mobilised and politically active group, that is, the tool is ‘preaching to the choir’. This questions the expectation that this application could reach out to those groups of voters which are normally not interested in politics, thereby bridging the digital divide between the political interested and apolitical groups. Instead, we expect that disparities in offline political involvement are stabilised by the Internet.

Hypothesis 1: The users of the Wahl-O-Mat belong to the group of already mobilised people (‘stabilisation hypothesis’).

Second, drawing on a changing media usage profile of the electorate,²¹ we expect Wahl-O-Mat users to belong to a group of recipients who rely on a selection of online applications as their primary source for (political) information. VAAs like other political websites reduce voters’ costs for surveying and processing relevant information.²² With the Wahl-O-Mat being a ‘political’ website, we expect users of the tool to be ‘digital voters’ who form their political preferences primarily on the Internet.

Hypothesis 2: The Wahl-O-Mat is used by persons who use the Internet as their primary source of information (‘digital voter hypothesis’).

Relating to the uses and gratification approach, our third expectation refers to the functional characteristics of the Wahl-O-Mat and the kind of ‘gratification’ it provides. VAAs like the Wahl-O-Mat are issue-oriented tools. VAAs select a number of relevant policy issues and reduce them to a set of statements while at the same time collecting and processing the respective party positions. As a result, VAAs calculate and display the issue-based distance between the user’s and the parties’ positions. Thus, these tools

particularly serve the needs of citizens who base their voting decision on the policy proposals of the parties and less on their personnel ('issue orientation' vs 'candidate orientation'). This leads us to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: VAAs are used by persons who base their voting decision primarily on policy issues ('issue orientation hypothesis').

What do we know so far about the users of VAAs in general and the users of the Wahl-O-Mat in particular? The fundamental question about who uses these tools has been an early and central issue in studies on this type of tool. Put briefly, VAA research has found out that the typical VAA user is young, male, with a high formal educational attainment.²³ As far as political attitudes are concerned, VAA research findings indicate that those who resort to these sites indeed share a high political interest. In the German case, it was argued (based on an exit survey of those resorting to the Wahl-O-Mat) that only a rather small percentage of users (about 17 per cent) can be considered politically uninterested.²⁴

Even though these early findings seem to support our hypotheses, additional and alternative research is needed, as research that relies on data generated by online surveys conducted right after the tool has been played suffer from methodical problems. First, there are reasonable doubts that those who take part in such exit or on-site surveys are representative of the general VAA users.²⁵ Second, user analyses have often deliberately restricted themselves to a basic approach using traditional demographic variables leaving out specific questions on political communication behaviour. And third, those data sources do not allow a comparison with non-users of the tool.

To sum up: referring to the uses and gratification approach and considering the characteristics of the tool, we expect Wahl-O-Mat users to belong to a type of issue-oriented and politically involved group. They primarily resort to Internet resources in order to collect information as a basis for their electoral choice. Whether these expectations hold true will be tested empirically by multi-source and multivariate analyses after briefly describing the data sources and methods in more detail.

DATA AND METHODS

To answer the question who uses the German VAA, and more precisely to test our hypotheses, we first apply a multi-source approach aggregating and comparing different datasets in order to profile the Wahl-O-Mat users. To compare the results, we briefly describe in a first step the three data sources: (1) Wahl-O-Mat 2009 on-site survey; (2) GLES online tracking; (3) GLES pre-election study.

1. The on-site survey was directly linked to the use of the Wahl-O-Mat for the Federal Election in 2009 and was realised as an exit study: at the moment users were about to leave the website, they were invited to fill in a short questionnaire. Respondents were selected randomly so that only a part of the tool users was confronted with an invitation to the survey. The total number of Wahl-O-Mat usages for the Federal Election was about 6.7 million; roughly 325,000 individuals were asked to fill in the questionnaire. Due to a cleaned response rate of about 14 per cent, the

sample of the on-site survey consists of 43,120 persons who are eligible to vote. The field period of the survey was identical with the online availability of the Wahl-O-Mat (4 to 27 September 2009), that is, several weeks before the 2009 German Federal Election. VAA users who participated in the on-site exit survey are labelled as 'exit-VAA user'.

2. For describing the general VAA users and the general online population we draw on a dataset of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). This contains several questions concerning the use of the Wahl-O-Mat (GLES 1006). The pre-election study, conducted from 18 to 26 September, was realised as an online survey applying a questionnaire. About 65,000 active members of the 'Respondi' online access panel constitute the total population. The sample for the online survey was realised as a quota sample taking into account gender, education and age providing for an adequate and proportional representation of those groups who are normally difficult to reach in web surveys (e.g. elder people or persons with low formal education). Of the 3,318 persons invited by Respondi to take part in the survey, 1,153 completed the questionnaire constituting the sample of our analyses. When referring to the 'general VAA user', we relate to the subgroup of this sample who said that they have used the Wahl-O-Mat (N = 441). For the online population, in the following 'Internet user', we draw on all cases of this study. The dataset included an adjustment variable for the entire online population in Germany at age 18 and older based on the German '(N)Onliner-Atlas 2008'.²⁶ By applying this variable to weight the cases, the sample can be qualified as approximately representative for the German online population in terms of gender, education and age.
3. Finally, we use a pre-election study of the GLES (GLES 1101) with a random sample of the German *electorate* that was conducted before the Federal Election (field time: 10 August to 26 September). The survey was realised as a face-to-face interview according to the Arbeitskreis Deutscher Marktforschungsinstitute (ADM) sample system. From a total of 4,740 addresses, 2,173 interviews could be realised successfully. Due to an oversampling of respondents who live in the eastern part of Germany, the dataset also contains an adjustment variable for a countrywide analysis.

For a comparison of the different groups that can be reached with the above-mentioned surveys we use descriptive statistics across the datasets in the next section to sharpen the profile of the VAA users compared to the other groups. For further analyses we then solely resort to the GLES online survey, as the exit survey does not contain any questions that allow for a test of Hypotheses 2 and 3. Moreover, because of the self-selection biases in the sample, the exit survey dataset also does not represent the general VAA users. A control group of non-users cannot be created on the basis of the on-site survey sample which is necessary to explain the Wahl-O-Mat usage vs non-usage. By drawing on the GLES online survey we can avoid these problems and in the section 'Descriptive Comparisons between Users and Non-Users' we analyse the usage and non-usage of the tool using cross-tabulation with the relevant independent variables that represent our hypotheses in a bivariate perspective. Finally, in the last section of the empirical analyses we apply binary logistic regression models²⁷ with Wahl-O-Mat usage as

binary dependent variable to identify the key variables and to test our hypotheses in a multivariate framework.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

Descriptive Comparisons across Datasets

A comparison across these different sources can only cover basic information because the number of common or similar questions in the datasets is limited to a few. Nevertheless, by comparing these datasets, a profile of the VAA users emerges which allows for preliminary conclusions, especially about the stabilisation hypothesis. Table 1 shows the distribution of the socio-demographic variables across the datasets.

While gender and age show the same pattern for both, VAA users participating in the exit survey have a slightly higher educational attainment and are more often full-time employees or students than the general VAA users. Compared to the whole Internet community, VAA users are slightly younger and better educated. The share of people with high educational attainment among the Internet users is more than

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES (COLUMN PER CENT)

	Exit-VAA user	General VAA user	Internet user	Electorate
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	59.8	59.7	53.8	48.5
Female	40.2	40.3	46.2	51.5
<i>Age</i>				
18–29	35.8	37.5	23.5	17.1
30–39	22.4	20.4	22.2	14.9
40–49	22.7	24.2	24.5	20.1
50–59	11.7	10.7	15.4	16.2
60+	7.4	7.1	14.5	31.7
<i>Formal education</i> ^a				
Low (none or 'Hauptschule')	6.1	20.4	31.1	43.1
Medium ('Mittlere Reife')	22.4	35.8	39.4	29.4
High ('Abitur oder Fachhochschulreife')	23.7	38.7	27.0	24.2
University	46.7			
<i>Occupational status</i> ^a				
Full-time	54.5	46.3	43.9	38.9
Part-time	8.9	9.1	12.2	6.8
Unemployed	3.4	4.7	7.2	8.6
Retired	6.3	8.2	14.5	28.3
Homemaker	2.3	3.9	7.4	4.2
Pupil	3.8	10.1	4.8	3.9
Student	13.6	9.5	5.2	4.1
Apprentice	3.6	6.9	3.8	1.4
Military/civil service	0.5	0.7	0.4	0.1

Notes:

^a Missing cases to 100 per cent are 'other'.

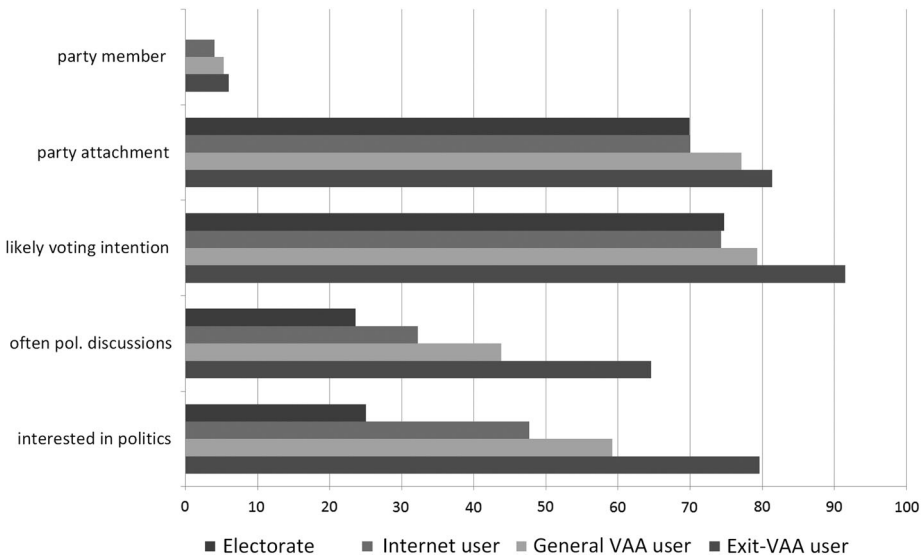
Datasets: Exit-Survey Wahl-O-Mat Federal Election 2009; GLES 1006 –T6: election campaign (weighted for online representativeness); GLES 1101 pre-election dataset (weighted for all-German analysis).

Source: authors' own calculations.

10 per cent lower compared to the general VAA users. Again, these characteristics differ fundamentally from the total electorate. On average, this is much older encompassing a higher percentage of retired people and persons with a low formal education. Despite the fact that the Internet nowadays reaches a remarkable share of the population, **Table 1** clearly shows that the online population still differs remarkably from the average citizen in terms of age and education, pointing to the remaining significance of the ‘digital divide’ in its original meaning.

The distinctions also hold true for the distribution of several political attitudes (see **Figure 1**). Exit-VAA users are more interested in politics and more engaged in political discussions than the other groups. Also, respondents of this group are more likely to express a voting intention and are more frequently attached to a political party. As regards the distribution of people with strong or very strong interest in politics and those who often have political discussions (on three or more days a week), the share of politically active and mobilised people decreases strongly with the expanding scope of the sample: starting with the general VAA users, 59.2 per cent are interested in politics and 43.8 per cent often discuss politics, respectively. By moving to the Internet users, this share decreases to 47.7 and 32.2 per cent respectively. In the whole electorate, only a quarter is strongly or very strongly interested in politics and only 23.6 per cent often discuss politics. The distributions of the attitudinal variables in these three groups are more similar when it comes to voting intention, party attachment and party membership.

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES



Note: Datasets: Exit-Survey Wahl-O-Mat Federal Election 2009; GLES 1006–T6: election campaign (weighted for online representativeness); GLES 1101 pre-election dataset (weighted for all-German analysis).
Source: authors’ own calculations.

These results show that the overwhelming majority of participants in the Wahl-O-Mat exit survey have a strong political involvement and a high formal education. The general VAA users show a similar age distribution, are well educated and interested in politics. However, when compared to the exit-VAA users, they perform slightly worse in the two latter aspects. Compared to the online population, the general VAA user is on average younger and fairly better educated and more politically involved. In comparison to the electorate as a whole, all three groups differ dramatically.

To sum up: the exit-VAA users are an elitist subgroup of the general VAA users, who again constitute a politically active subgroup of the online community. And the online community further differs largely from the average citizen in terms of socio-demographic background and political attitudes. By only referring to the exit survey, one might tend to overestimate the political involvement of all VAA users. The analysis of the general VAA users reveals a lower political involvement – which is still above the level of the online population. At this stage, these findings, derived from aggregating and comparing the datasets, support our stabilisation hypothesis: according to our multi-source study, the politically active part of the electorate is overrepresented within the group of VAA users. More than Internet users in general, the users of the Wahl-O-Mat belong to the group of already politically mobilised citizens.

Descriptive Comparisons between Users and Non-Users

As the previous analysis has shown, the exit-VAA user is a special, more politically involved subtype of the general VAA user. For a comparison of non-users and (general) VAA users we therefore rely on the GLES online dataset, in which we find variables that are suitable to test all of our hypotheses. [Table 2](#) shows the distribution of these variables in relation to our dependent variable, the Wahl-O-Mat usage, and sorted by the foci of our three hypotheses. We test the stabilisation hypothesis with the variables education, political interest, talk about politics and party attachment. The digital voter hypothesis is examined by variables that cover the political Internet use in terms of intensity and importance of political information. For the hypothesis on the relationship between issue orientation and Wahl-O-Mat usage, we refer to the responses towards the questions ‘the election campaign is too little issue-centred’ and ‘I want to be informed as best as possible about parties and their positions’. Additionally, issue orientation can be measured by asking whether respondents have already read any party’s election manifesto.

[Table 2](#) provides the first evidence on whether the selected variables explain the use of the Wahl-O-Mat in a bivariate perspective. Additionally, age was included because it serves as a strong control variable for the use of the tool and also covers the aspect of the digital natives. The findings indicate that the independent variables have a moderate influence on using the German VAA. Age has the strongest impact: in the group 18 to 29 years of age, 61.6 per cent used the Wahl-O-Mat; on the contrary, only about 19 per cent of the respondents aged 60 and older draw on this application.

For education and political interest the patterns are similar: in the group of low educated and politically uninterested persons, we only find about a quarter or a fifth of VAA users, respectively. The overwhelming majority are non-users. Strong political interest and high formal education make the usage of the tool more likely. The same

TABLE 2
 DISTRIBUTION OF USERS AND NON-USERS OF THE WAHL-O-MAT IN TERMS OF AGE,
 POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT, INTERNET USE AND ISSUE ORIENTATION (ROW PER CENT)

	User in % (N)	Non-user in % (N)
Respondents	38.5 (441)	61.5 (705)
<i>Age</i>		
18–29	61.6 (165)	38.4 (103)
30–39	35.6 (90)	64.4 (163)
40–49	38.1 (107)	61.9 (174)
50–59	26.7 (47)	73.3 (129)
60+	18.6 (31)	81.4 (136)
Cramer's V		0.295**
Stabilisation hypothesis		
<i>Education</i>		
Low	25.5 (90)	74.5 (263)
Medium	34.9 (158)	65.1 (295)
High	55.2 (171)	44.8 (139)
Cramer's V		0.240**
<i>Political interest</i>		
None or low	21.3 (42)	78.7 (155)
Average	34.3 (138)	65.7 (264)
Strong or very strong	47.8 (261)	52.2 (285)
Cramer's V		0.204**
<i>Talk about politics in the last week at</i>		
0 days	25.3 (100)	74.7 (295)
1 day	35.8 (67)	64.2 (120)
2 days	41.6 (79)	58.4 (111)
3 days	44.9 (70)	55.1 (86)
4 days	54.4 (49)	45.6 (41)
5 days	59.6 (34)	40.4 (23)
6 days	63.2 (12)	36.8 (7)
7 days	58.7(27)	41.3 (19)
Cramer's V		0.241**
<i>Party attachment</i>		
No	29.5 (100)	70.5 (239)
Yes	42.5 (337)	57.5 (456)
Cramer's V		0.122**
Digital voter hypothesis		
<i>Intensity of political Internet use in the last week at</i>		
0 days	28.0 (97)	72.0 (249)
1 days	40.2 (45)	59.8 (67)
2 days	37.5 (45)	62.5 (75)
3 days	45.2 (57)	54.8 (69)
4 days	51.9 (42)	48.1 (39)
5 days	50.0 (33)	50.0 (33)
6 days	69.4 (25)	30.6 (11)
7 days	50.3 (78)	49.7 (77)
Cramer's V		0.218**
<i>Most important source of information</i>		
TV	35.9 (156)	64.1 (279)
Newspaper	32.3 (73)	67.7 (153)
Radio	29.8 (14)	70.2 (33)
Internet	56.6 (146)	43.4 (112)
Personal talks	43.3 (26)	56.7 (34)
Other sources	42.1 (8)	57.9 (11)
No need for information	18.0 (18)	82.0 (82)
Cramer's V		0.230**

Continued

TABLE 2
CONTINUED.

	User in % (N)	Non-user in % (N)
Issue orientation hypothesis		
<i>The campaign is too little about issues</i>		
Negative	35.9 (42)	64.1 (75)
Neutral	32.5 (121)	67.5 (251)
Positive	42.0 (266)	58.0 (367)
Cramer's V		0.091*
<i>Need for information about party programmes</i>		
Negative	25.9 (36)	74.1 (103)
Neutral	32.2 (119)	67.8 (251)
Positive	45.0 (273)	55.0 (333)
Cramer's V		0.154**
<i>Election manifesto read</i>		
No	31.7 (247)	68.3 (532)
Yes	52.7 (193)	47.3 (173)
Cramer's V		0.202**

*Notes:** $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Dataset: GLES 1006 – Komponente X/8 – Online-Tracking 6: Wahlkampf (weighted for online representativeness).

Source: authors' own calculations.

pattern also holds true for the intensity of talking about politics. Among those who do not or only seldom talk about politics in the course of a week, the share of Wahl-O-Mat users is low. In contrast, those who often talk about politics are more likely to be users of the German VAA. An analysis of respondents' party attachment shows that more than two out of five feeling attached to a party used the German VAA, whereas only 30 per cent of the respondents without party identification relied on the tool. Still, a majority of voters with party attachment do not resort to the tool so that the relationship between the VAA usage and this independent variable is weaker compared to the relationships with other variables.

Concerning the intensity of Internet usage, the data tell us that a large share of people do not inform themselves about politics online. In our sample, this group of 'non-digitally informed persons' amounts to 346 respondents, of which 72 per cent are Wahl-O-Mat non-users. Those who often inform themselves on the Internet (three, four, five and seven days) are to nearly equal parts users and non-users; the value of six days constitutes an exception, for which the VAA users outnumber the non-users. For the global question about the most important source of information, though, the analysis reveals that those who rely on the Internet are slightly more VAA users than non-users. In contrast, those who stated that TV or newspapers are their most important source of information are only to a minor part VAA users.

Concerning issue orientation, the relationship between reading an election manifesto and using the Wahl-O-Mat turns out to be moderate, while the variable that covers the issue importance for the election campaign has only a small influence on using the tool. Finally, as represented in the bivariate relationship, the need for information about parties and their positions also influences the usage of the Wahl-O-Mat.

To sum up: all selected variables show in bivariate relationships a significant effect on the use of the Wahl-O-Mat. Age is the strongest predictor indicating that young people tend to use the tool more often. For other independent variables, the direction of the relationship is reversed, that is, a higher parameter value, indicating more political involvement, a more frequent Internet use or stronger issue orientation, leads to a higher probability of using the Wahl-O-Mat. Taking these results into consideration, our hypotheses are not falsified at this stage of our research. Whether these bivariate results remain robust will be studied in the following section through multivariate analyses.

Multivariate Analyses

For the multivariate analyses we specify four models. In the first three models, we add the relevant variables to test each of our three hypotheses one by one. In the last model, we integrate all variables to analyse which effects remain significant. Age is included in all models as a control variable and the reference category is set to the highest parameter value (60+ years old). The variable 'most important source of information' was recoded so that the answer 'Internet' is tested against all other response categories (after removing the cases who said that they do not have any need for information). In all other cases, the lowest parameter value of the independent variable represents the reference category. Response options for count variables, for example, use in terms of the number of days, have been merged.

Table 3 shows the results.²⁸ In Model 1, age has the strongest effect on using the tool: voters in the lowest age category are nearly seven times more likely to use the Wahl-O-Mat than respondents being in the reference category (aged 60 and older). All variables that cover the stabilisation hypothesis have the expected direction in their relationships and are significant. In Model 2, the intensity of Internet usage and the dominance of the Internet as a source of information have a significant positive influence on using the tool.

In Model 3, controlled for other variables, there is no significant effect of the perceived missing issue centredness of the campaign. However, both reading an election manifesto and the desire to know as much as possible about the parties and their positions have a positive significant effect on the use of the tool.

Model 4 contains all predictors and therefore tries to identify the key variables that explain the use of the Wahl-O-Mat according to our theoretical considerations. Not surprisingly, age is still the dominant factor for the use of the tool. For the variables that cover the stabilisation hypothesis, only party attachment does not exert a significant influence on using the Wahl-O-Mat. For the other variables, there are still significant differences between the lowest and highest parameter values. Concerning the digital voter hypothesis, only the dominance of the Internet as an information source has a significantly positive influence, but not the intensity of this usage. Among the variables that cover the issue orientation hypothesis, reading election manifestos stimulates the Wahl-O-Mat usage. In contrast, interest in party positions and the perceived missing issue centredness of the campaign do not exert a significant influence on using the tool when other independent variables are controlled. This provides counter-evidence for the issue orientation hypothesis.

TABLE 3
 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS FOR THE EXPLANATION OF THE USAGE OF THE
 WAHL-O-MAT – ODDS RATIOS

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Age (reference: 60+)</i>				
18–29	6.945** (.261)	8.217** (.251)	8.819** (.249)	6.658** (.292)
30–39	3.291** (.253)	3.132** (.250)	3.332** (.249)	3.266** (.266)
40–49	2.697** (.251)	2.907** (.239)	3.062** (.241)	2.692** (.263)
50–59	1.947* (.266)	1.738* (.268)	1.926* (.267)	1.764* (.277)
<i>Education (reference: low)</i>				
Medium	1.243 (.171)			1.189 (.182)
High	1.844** (.189)			1.685* (.204)
<i>Political interest (reference: none or weak)</i>				
Average	1.642* (.228)			1.450 (.263)
Strong or very strong	2.310** (.231)			1.925* (.274)
<i>Talk about politics (reference: 0 days)</i>				
1–2 days	1.468* (.176)			1.159 (.194)
3+ days	2.301** (.183)			1.588* (.218)
<i>Party identification (reference: no)</i>				
Yes	1.524** (.160)			1.343 (.173)
<i>Political Internet use (reference: 0 days)</i>				
1+2 days		1.450 (.192)		1.188 (.210)
3+ days		2.600** (.172)		1.406 (.215)
<i>Most important source of information (reference: all other)</i>				
Internet		1.420* (.167)		1.549* (.178)
<i>Need: party positions (reference: negative)</i>				
Neutral			1.246 (.237)	1.178 (.266)
Positive			2.145** (.228)	1.182 (.260)
<i>Campaign too little issue-centred (reference: negative)</i>				
Neutral			1.028 (.242)	1.287 (.260)
Positive			1.508 (.227)	1.438 (.240)
<i>Election manifesto read (reference: no)</i>				
Yes			1.953** (.147)	1.601** (.160)
Pseudo-R ² (Nagelkerke)	0.213	0.186	0.189	0.240

Notes:

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; standard errors in parentheses.

Dataset: GLES 1006 – Komponente X/8 – Online-Tracking 6: Wahlkampf (weighted for online representativeness).

Source: authors' own calculations.

To sum up: using the Wahl-O-Mat is a phenomenon to be found among young people who are already mobilised and who rely on the Internet as their primary source of information. The variables that cover these individual characteristics remain significant even in a multivariate framework. Thus, our analyses support the stabilisation and the digital voter hypothesis. For the expectation that the Wahl-O-Mat is used by people with strong issue orientation, we have found evidence in a bivariate analysis. However, in multivariate analyses – controlling for other relevant factors – two out of three indicators measuring this construct do not remain significant. Therefore, the hypothesis that the primary reason to play the tool is issue orientation could not be supported.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The rise of e-campaigning in Germany calls for empirically based analyses of tools, users and usages taking into consideration that online applications differ significantly from each other in terms of their format and their functional characteristics. This again has implications for the recipients they reach and for the role that these platforms can play in political online communication. There is a need for application-specific research.

Within our study, we focused on the German Voting Advice Application: the Wahl-O-Mat. Given its demand in absolute numbers and the steady growth in its usage rates over the past years, this tool is certainly not a marginal one within German online campaigning. Provided by the Federal Agency of Civic Education, the Wahl-O-Mat belongs to a group of tools produced by non-party actors trying to inform and mobilise voters for upcoming elections.

Starting from the uses and gratification approach, we theoretically expected users of the Wahl-O-Mat to have a profile which distinguishes this group significantly from Internet users in general as well as from non-users of the tool in particular. We expected that users of the application are already politically active (stabilisation hypothesis), rely on the Internet as a primary information source (digital voter hypothesis), and base their voting decision largely on issues (issue orientation hypothesis).

To make our case in our empirical analyses, we resorted to different datasets providing information about the Wahl-O-Mat users before the 2009 Federal Election. We identified significant variation in the findings resulting from the different ways the data had been collected. Aggregating, comparing and analysing the datasets, we could find clear evidence for both the stabilisation hypothesis and the digital voter hypothesis. No strong empirical support, however, was provided for the issue orientation hypothesis. What we could identify in the data is the emergence of a generation of users who could indeed be called ‘digital voters’, yet they are not necessarily more interested in issues than in candidates. Obviously, among youngsters the Internet and applications such as the Wahl-O-Mat have become a popular platform to collect information. Considering the future of e-campaigning in Germany, we expect a generation effect: the rise of age cohorts whose Internet use is a quasi-natural part of their (political) communication and information behaviour.

But it is not only their age which explains why voters resort to Voting Advice Applications. Tools like the Wahl-O-Mat are used by people already interested and

active in politics. Given that the micro-level influence of VAAs on electoral behaviour and political participation is heavily mediated by the characteristics of the group, the Wahl-O-Mat currently ‘preaches to the choir’. Thus, it has to be carefully observed whether and under which conditions e-campaigning applications foster the existing divides within the electorate. In the face of what has been described as a growing estrangement between citizens and politicians within representative democracies, it remains a crucial challenge for civic education to find (online) ways to reach out to those who are not interested in political affairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stefan Marschall is professor of political science and Chair of German Politics at the Department of Social Sciences at the Heinrich-Heine-University of Düsseldorf. He is a specialist on political communication and comparative as well as transnational parliamentarism. He has published text books on the political system of Germany and on parliamentarism as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters on political (online) communication and parliamentary affairs.

Martin Schultze is currently researcher and PhD candidate at the Department of Social Sciences at the Heinrich-Heine-University of Düsseldorf. Previously he studied social sciences and philosophy at the University of Erfurt (Bachelor degree) and political science at the Philipps-University of Marburg (Master degree). His research interests consist of voting behaviour and political attitudes, applied quantitative methods of social research and empirical research on democracies.

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28. Table 3 shows the odds ratios and standard errors. Odds ratios will be interpreted in our model as follows: values between 0 and 1 indicate that the probability of using the Wahl-O-Mat is smaller compared to the reference category. Values higher than 1 imply that the probability of using the tool is higher compared to the reference category. As an overall goodness-of-fit measure we calculate Nagelkerke-Pseudo-R².