‘Do the vote test’. Electoral effects of a vote advice application at the 2004 Belgian elections

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ABSTRACT
This empirical paper attempts to assess the electoral impact of an immensely popular vote advice application annex TV-show (Do the Vote Test) put online and broadcasted during the 2004 Belgian election campaign. Drawing on a large panel of internet users it systematically compares users and non-users testing whether getting a personal voting advice made any difference. We establish that Do the Vote Test indeed significantly affected some Belgian voters final decision but at the same time we find that these effects were tiny. Some parties gained votes due to Do the Vote Test, others lost votes, but the application, probably, did not strongly affect the overall elections results. Also we show that people’s subjective perception of the impact of Do the Vote Test on their vote and their actual electoral behavior are often contradictory. Finally, we confront the weak-effect conclusion with the opinions of politicians and journalists and show that these elites, in contrast, think Do the Vote Test had a very large impact on the public’s votes.

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'Do the Vote Test'. Electoral effects of a voting advice application at the 2004 Belgian elections[1]

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This paper examines the electoral effects of nonpartisan party profile websites and TV-shows that have become increasingly popular in quite some European countries during last few years. Media companies or independent agencies, non-connected to the competing parties, have set up popular websites giving voters advice about which party programs come closest to ones own preferences. In some countries, the websites have been launched at major TV-shows giving viewers the chance to participate and to receive their voting advice immediately while watching TV. Both the websites and the TV-shows have often had impressive participation rates and viewing figures. A great many people have been exposed to their personal voting advice. Set up by nonparty actors during the campaign, we want to gauge these voting advice applications' electoral consequences. These applications, in fact, are explicitly aimed at influencing the elections or, at least, at informing the public.

Do we witness the rise of new campaign players constraining parties' room of manoeuvre? Are these applications really affecting people's choices in the ballot? Or are they, in contrast, nothing but entertainment and show without any tangible electoral consequences? These questions are important. In some of the countries with popular voting advice applications a vivid debate broke out about the acceptability of voting advice applications. Some maintained that voting advice applications are a fraud that can never be able to give a correct and neutral voting advice; others contended that these applications must be commended as they focus peoples' attention to party programmes and to policy issues thereby compelling parties to discuss substance in stead of personalities, images and campaign events.

Belgium[2] is one of those European countries in which voting advice applications have boomed during the last few elections. Modestly starting in 1999, the last two national campaigns of 2003 and 2004 witnessed a major breakthrough. Especially the public broadcaster VRT has thrown itself on voting advice applications via the internet and it has broadcasted very popular TV-shows called *Do the Vote Test* launching their voting advice web application in 2003 and in 2004. Taking Belgium (Flanders) as an example, it is the effect of this very popular *Do the Vote Test* TV-show annex web application that will be scrutinized in this study[3]. Just like in other countries, the discussion about the

[1] This paper is a thoroughly revised version of a paper that has been published before in Dutch (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2005).
[2] When we talk about 'Belgium' in this study we actually mean Flanders, the north of Belgium speaking Dutch and containing about 60% of the Belgian population.
[3] The authors of this paper have all been implied in elaborating and devising the *Do the Vote Test*-application in 2003 and 2004 organized by the national public broadcaster VRT. This involvement, we believe, does not affect our scientific judgement in this paper.

acceptability of this initiative has been very lively[4]. To order to investigate whether *Do the Vote Test* really made a difference in Belgium (Flanders) in 2004 we will first of all draw on a large but nonrepresentative panel of 7,500 voters. Second, we rely on a survey of 500 Belgian politicians and political journalists.

The first section of the paper briefly sketches the general rise of voting advice applications and the impact question these applications raise. Next, we describe the Belgian public broadcaster's *Do the Vote Test* in more detail and show that the potential electoral impact of this application was considerable. Then, we empirically test whether we record any electoral effects systematically comparing participants and viewers of *Do the Vote Test* with non-participants and non-viewers. We also present the opinions of politicians and of journalists and show their view contrasts strongly with the real effects of *Do the Vote Test* on the Belgian (Flemish) electorate. We conclude with a conclusion and discussion section.

VOTING ADVICE APPLICATIONS ON THE INTERNET AND TV

All voting advice applications (VAA) work more or less similarly. Participants answer a series of questions about the political preferences on a special website. The application contains (weighed) information about parties' programmatic stances. Drawing on that information the VAA calculates which parties' electoral offer comes closest to the participants preferences and supplies the participant with a list of parties in decreasing order of congruence with his opinions and beliefs (see also: Teepe 2005). As such, VAAs do not literally 'advice' someone to vote for a certain party, but they link someone's opinions to official party stances and, at least, contain an implicit voting advice.

VAAs, obviously, do not make much sense in two-party systems in which parties' positions and voters' identifications are clear (Teepe and Hooghe 2005). In multi-party systems, however, we witness a fast rise of VAAs: in The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium they have been very popular during the last elections.

The very first VAA on the net has probably been devised in The Netherlands in 1998. The Netherlands has doubtlessly been the VAA pioneer. For the 2003 general elections, no less than *eight* different VVAs were online trying to convince the Dutch voter to take their advice (for an overview see: www.stemadvies.com). While in 1998 in The Netherlands, 250,000 voters asked for voting advice via a VAA this figure exploded to 2,600,000 advices given in 2002 or an astonishing 25% of the Dutch electorate. In Germany, in 2002, the Wahl-O-Mat gave 3,600,000 voting advices. In Switzerland, 30,000 advices were yielded by Politarena in 2002. In Belgium, the daily *De Standaard* started with *Wij Kiezen Partij voor U* in 1999 producing 150,000 advices. The same newspaper continued in 2003 and 2004 with respectively 210,000 and 150,000 voting advices. In 2003 and 2004 the Belgian public broadcaster VRT launched its *Do the Vote Test* TV-show annex VAA which rendered 840,000 advices in 2004 (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2005).

[4] The semi-scientific journal *Samenleving & Politiek* has devoted a complete issue to the controversy about voting advice applications.

Together with the *De Standaard* VAA this amounts to about 1,000,000 VAA advices in 2004 in Belgium corresponding with almost 25% of the Belgian electorate.

Of course, many people participate several times in the same and in different VAAs testing themselves and the system. So, the net exposure to VAAs probably lies much lower. Still, these remarkable participation rates raise questions about the electoral effects of VAAs. If that many people are reached, VAAs potential effects are huge. That is why two Belgian political scientists called Do the Vote Test "… *potentially the single most powerful campaign instrument*" (Swyngedouw and Goeminne 2005) and it is the reason why there has been such a controversy about VAAs in some countries.

DO THE VOTE TEST IN BELGIUM

Late 2002, the Belgian public broadcaster VRT decided to make its own VAA and to produce a major Sunday evening TV-show to launch it at the start of the electoral campaign six weeks before the ballot on May 18th, 2003. Inspired by the Dutch TV-show *Waar Stem ik op?* aired on the commercial channel SBS6 a year earlier, the VRT asked two Belgian universities to devise a new VAA called *Do the Vote Test* (DVT). The TV-show as broadcasted on April 20th, 2003. The program won the first prize at the Premios Ondas TV-program contest in Barcelona and it was nominated for the Golden Rose of Luzern.

This inspired the VRT to repeat the same exercise for the regional elections on June 13th, 2004. This time, VRT decided to play it even bigger. They broadcasted three Sunday evening-filling TV-shows dedicated to stances of parties and voters regarding money, quality of life and value issues. The final show was aired a week before the ballot. The shows were able to attract a large audience: the absolute viewing figures (+12 year) lay between 10% and 14% with a market share of 51-63%. On average 640,000 Belgian watched the three TV-shows[5]. While watching TV people could participate via internet, mobile phone and landline phone. At the end of the program, they would get their personal voting profile. The website containing the VAA was immensely popular and it gave 840,000 advices in four weeks preceding Election Day.

We do not dispose of information about the socio-demographics of the DVT-users. Yet, we think it is safe to assume that they display the profile that is so typical for the interested and politically active citizen. Teepe and Hooghe (2005) analysed the log files of the users of the VAA *Wij Kiezen Partij voor U* from the daily *De Standaard* in 2003 and 2004 and found that, indeed, the typical user was young, male, and higher schooled. There are no reasons to expect DVT-users would be very different although the somewhat more popular profile of the public broadcaster VRT compared to the rather elitist public of the newspaper *De Standaard* might have made a (small) difference.

DVT was controversial, it its TV-format and in its internet format. Especially opposition parties accused it of fuelling populism and simplifying politics into all too easy yes/no statements. Parties with a moderate centre position were expected to be disadvantaged by the polarizing effect of DVT.

[5] We thank Daniël Poesmans from the VRT research service for providing us with this viewers information.

The public broadcaster ran all its 2004 election programs under the baseline 'The VRT helps you to vote'. This was clearly picked up by the parties as they all considered DVT as being extremely important and as a major campaign event. While the system was devised pressure mounted on the system builders. Parties became very nervous and wanted to know precisely how the VAA functioned; they tried to maximize their 'result' by strategically using their so-called 'trump card'. Some of them even postponed the release of their party program to take the DVT statements into account. Some parties threatened the program makers that they would withdraw and not participate if their small cartel partner was not integrated in the VAA[6]. Program-makers were invited into parties' headquarters to defend their approach and to convince party leaders to participate in the TV-show and the VAA. The vice PM of the socialist party SP.A, allegedly, told his collaborators before positioning his party on the 100 statements creating his party profile that this was 'not just an important' campaign event but that determining the party position on the DVT statements 'was the campaign itself'.

Thus, the high viewing and participation rates, the political controversy surrounding DVT, and the nervousness among political parties regarding the system all suggest that DVT may have had a large electoral impact on the Belgian electorate in 2004.

DATA AND METHODS

We draw upon the University of Antwerp Web-based Electoral Panel 2004 (UAWEP-2004). This is a five-wave, non-representative pre- and post-electoral panel of 11,486 voters in Belgium (Flanders) in March-June 2004. The panel was devised with five consecutive waves: two pre-campaign waves (W1 and W2), two campaign waves (W3 and W4), and one post-electoral wave (W5). In Belgium, the 2003 national elections fell exactly one year before the 2004 regional elections; the country was affected by generalized election fever for more than a year.

Although also within academia gradually more web-based surveys are conducted (Dillman 2000; Best and Krueger 2004), most web-panels are set up for commercial reasons and it certainly is not a common research technique for electoral surveying yet. The main problem with web-surveys is, of course, representativity. How can you get a representative sample of the population with all members of the population having an equal chance to be among the respondents? The strategy we followed to circumvent that problem for the present study was very simple: we tried to maximize diversity. We reconciled ourselves from the beginning with the fact that our study could only be explorative and that we would not be able to get a true random sample of the Belgian (Flemish) population. Self-selection is too big a problem, as we could only ask people to participate but could not control in any way for non-participants or for people that were not reached by us. That being said, we tried to put together a panel that was as diverse as possible and that drew respondents from all corners of society and with all walks of life.

[6] Parties could indeed decide not to participate by simply not answering the 100 policy statements they were confronted with to construct their party profile. All party statements, ultimately, were answered by the party leaders themselves.

For that purpose we recruited panel participants via banners on websites of popular radio stations, of soccer teams, of associations of the elderly, of women's organizations… Students, taking a class in methods, distributed leaflets inviting people to participate at train stations, on the streets, in bars... We also relied on snow ball sampling asking participants to invite other people they knew. Additionally, via email we recontacted all participants (N=3,500) that participated in a electoral panel set up for the previous 2003 elections. For that previous panel, we used the same recruiting strategies as for the 2004 panel survey[7]. All these sampling strategies generated internal diversity, as we wished, but they also contributed to further skewing the panel. For example: working via elderly organizations yielded, as expected, quite some elderly participants; but it probably generated an overrepresentation of *organized* elderly.

Recruitment existed in asking people to go to a website and to answer an html-based questionnaire. People had to provide their email address so they could be recontacted for the next waves. Only people participating in the first wave were recontacted for the following waves. No new respondents were allowed after closing the first wave. Response was mostly immediate with an enormous amount of completed questionnaires in the first hours and days just after opening another wave. Return rates dropped sharply after three days; then we sent a reminder which temporarily spurred answering activity again; after which the response petered out completely. As, once the campaign had started, we wanted to gauge more punctual time-linked campaign effects we gradually reduced the time slot for filling in the questionnaire as the campaign evolved. Table 1 contains the response rates. Response rates go down gradually. Sometimes respondents decided not to participate in, for example, the third wave, but then they stayed on board and participated again in wave 4 and/or 5. The panel was substantially skewed, we will come back to that immediately, but the drop out from W1 till W5 did not really worsen its substantial initial skewness. For example, drop outs came from all political leanings, were not less educated, not more female than male, etc.

TABLE 1: Design of the University of Antwerp Web-based Electoral Panel 2004 (UAWEP-2004)

		Date	N	'Response rate'
Pre-campaign	W1	2-12 March	11,486	-
Pre-campaign	W2	20-30 April	8,824	77%
Campaign	W3	17-25 May	8,419	73%
Campaign	W4	6-10 June	7,906	69%
Elections		**13 June**		
Post-campaign	W5	15-21 June	7,917	69%

Our design has advantages and drawbacks. The main drawback is that we do not dispose of representative data for the Belgian population. Our main goal is, however, *not* to put forward definitive statements about the Belgian population and it's electorally floating behavior in 2004. Rather, we want to explore whether DVT might have made a difference

[7] In W2 of UAWEP-2004 we asked respondents how they became involved in the UAWEP-2004 panel: most participants (42%) participated after being contacted via email by the organizers (teachers and students); the participants that came from the 2003 panel were the second largest group (36%); one sixth of the participants were recruited via websites (15%), 1% via leaflets and 6% via other (non-specified) channels.

in general and for different parties more specifically. The main question is whether we have enough diversity and variation in our sample to test for relationships and effects between variables. In what respect is our sample most skewed? Comparing our panel participants with the population at large, three features strike the eye: our participants are younger, they are higher schooled and they have more interest in politics than the average Belgian. These biases are linked to two characteristics of the sampling procedure: students and university teachers mobilized in their respective social environments; people were mainly contacted via electronic media. The available data on internet use confirm that, in Belgium, internet use is still concentrated in the younger and affluent segments. Because we did not want to create the impression that our data are representative, and because of unwanted effects of weighing procedures, we decide not to weigh our data.

The main strength of the study is that the number of respondents is high. The UAWEP-2004 contains 7,413 usable respondents, which answered at least one pre-campaign (W1 or W2) and the post-electoral wave. Moreover, we dispose for a large amount of voters per party; for all major parties we have at least 1,000 respondents in our database.

A second strength is the fact that due to the panel design we can avoid working with questionable recall data. Most of the research into electoral campaign effects is based on cross-sectional post-electoral surveys (Schoen 2000). After an election, people are asked about their electoral behavior in the previous election and the elections before that. Sometimes, these post-electoral surveys take place months after the actual elections which reduces reliability of the answers considerably. Recall questions tend to overrate consistency of voters (Schuman and Presser 1981; Schoen 2000). As we will show in what follows, people's answers are often unreliable or at least inconsistent. What people say afterwards they did and what they actually did is not always the same. Only panel studies tapping electoral preference several times during the campaign are fit to gauge intra-campaign change

In terms of DVT, we questioned our panellists just before the first DVT TV-show and the launch of the VAA in wave 2 (W2) and right after the DVT programs in wave 4 (W4). This design allows us to make a reasonable estimate of the effect of DVT on our panellists' electoral intentions. In wave 4 (W4), we additionally asked some very specific questions about whether people had watched the TV-programmes and whether they had used the VAA to get a voting advice. We also asked them whether they thought DVT had affected their electoral preferences. In wave 5 (W5), after the elections, we assessed the motives of people's definite choice and explicitly confronted them with the possible impact of VAA on their vote.

What can we learn something about DVTs effects on the Belgian electorate from our panel? As mentioned above, our panellists are not at all representative for the population at large. They are internet users displaying specific characteristics. Yet, the effects of DVT apply especially to people with internet since non-internet users could not get a voting advice via DVT. So, if DVT affected the population at large, we should certainly find traces among our panellists. Indeed, the surveyed people are younger, higher schooled and, especially, more interested in politics than the average citizen. Consequently they had been exposed to DVT much more than the population at large. While, as mentioned

above, 'only' 10-14% of the Belgian population watched the DVT TV-shows, in our panel no less than 64% said it watched at least one of the three shows. Without counting the double users, we estimate that DVT procured voting advices to about 500,000 Belgians which is 8% of the Belgian (Flemish) population. Of our panellists, in contrast, no less than 54% say they got a voting advice from the DVT VAA. Our panel, thus, overwhelmingly belongs to the DVT users and watchers.

Apart from an internet panel of voters we, additionally, also surveyed Belgian politicians (MPs) and (political) print and audio-visual journalists in February-March 2006. The response rate for politicians was 78% (N=184); for journalists it was 50% (N=316). We asked these privileged observers whether they though DVT had affected the electorate. We will start the empirical section of the paper by briefly presenting these elite opinion data and confront them later with the panellists' actual behavior and perceptions of DVT.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

DVT's electoral power according to politicians and journalists

Politicians think high of the electoral power of DVT. We confronted them with the following statement: 'TV-shows like Do the Vote Test have much impact on people's voting behavior'. TABLE 2 summarizes politicians' answers per party.

TABLE 2: Politicians' reactions to the statement that DVT has much electoral impact per party (in%)

	CD&V	Groen!	NVa	SP.A	Spirit	Vlaams Belang	VLD	Total
Agree	47.7	56.7	57.1	64.3	70.0	48.5	55.5	56.2
Neutral	29.5	0.0	42.9	25.0	13.3	30.3	20.0	25.1
Disagree	22.7	16.7	0.0	10.7	6.7	21.2	22.2	17.6
No opinion	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	1.1
	N=44	N=6	N=7	N=28	N=15	N=33	N=45	N=178

Source: UA-media and politics survey, 2006

In all parties at least half of the MPs believe that DVT impacted the votes considerably; in some parties even more than two thirds of the MPs are convinced of DVTs electoral importance. Politicians that do not think high of the impact of DVT clearly are a small minority in every party. Additionally, we confronted our political respondents with a second statement: 'TV-shows like Do the Vote Test should be banned'. A clear majority of politicians (58.7%) rejected this statement and thought that DVT should not be forbidden; many had no outspoken opinion (21.2%). Yet, in some parties (CD&V and NVa), more than a third of the MPs agreed with banning DVT (evidence not in table).

We asked the same two questions to political journalists and they too estimated DVT to be a powerful campaign instrument affecting voters' choices. At the same time they even more clearly rejected the idea that events like DVT should be banned (evidence not in table).

So, political and journalistic elites overwhelmingly consider DVT to have considerably affected the votes in 2004. Are these elites' opinion warranted by the facts? Did DVT indeed influence a lot of voters' decisions?

DVT's electoral power according to voters

We asked our panellists in wave 5, after Election Day, whether VAAs like DVT had had an impact on their vote. In sharp contrast to the opinions of politicians and journalists about DVT's electoral power, an overwhelming majority denied that DVT had affected their electoral preference. TABLE 3 contains the answers of only the people that used DVT or watched the TV-show[8].

TABLE 3: Subjective impact of DVT on party preference (in %)

DVT did not at all affect my party preference	45.8
DVT did confirm my party preference	45.0
DVT made me doubt about my party preference	8.2
DVT changed my party preference	1.1

Source: UA Internet Panel 2004 (N=4.956)

More than 90% of our panellists denied that DVT had affected their vote: they did not bother about the voting advice or their existing preference was confirmed. This suggests that a considerable amount of voters sought in the first place a confirmation of their preference and did not want to be challenged by DVT. Only one in ten users says DVT contributed to their doubt and barely one in a hundred says DVT made them change their minds.

We not only asked our panellists an explicit question about the impact of DVT on their vote, we also confronted them in wave 5 with a list of possible information channels that had been important in making their choice. Among this list also featured the item 'the results of voting advice applications on the internet or on television'. This item was not an important information channel according to most voters. VVAs only occupied the 6th place of information channels with only 4.9% of people stating that VAAs had been important. TV-debates, discussions with friends, coverage in newspapers, information on the internet, and direct partisan information, our panellists stated, had all been more important than VAA results. Yet, the opinion of associations the respondent was member of, opinion polls, and posters had even been less important than VAA results. Note, again, that our panellists had been *much* more confronted with DVT than the average Belgian.

[8] Some people stated that they did *not* watch DVT nor got a DVT voting advice and they still maintain that their voting behavior had been affected by DVT. We think this is rather unlikely and, therefore, choose to skip these people from the table.

TABLE 4: 'To what extent have you been affected in your choice by the results of vote advice applications on TV or on the internet?' Figures per effective party vote in wave 5 (in %)

	CD&V–NV-A	Groen!	Sp.a–Spirit	Flemish Block	VLD–Vivant
Strong impact	3.0	5.1	5.7	3.5	**8.7**
Moderate impact	19.4	25.9	**28.8**	15.1	25.1
No impact	77.5	69.0	65.5	**81.4**	66.2
	N=2012	N=1506	N=1471	N=990	N=999

Source: UA Internet Panel 2004 (N=6,978)

TABLE 4 contains the results split up per party. As mentioned above DVT was not the only VAA that was available online during the 2004 campaign in Belgium. Also the VAA from the newspaper *De Standaard* was very popular and yielded many advices. The question, thus, tapped not only DVT's effect but effects of VAAs *in general*. We do not dispose of evidence regarding the party advices given by DVT; the log files of the *De Standaard* VAA have been analysed by Hooghe and Teepe (2005) showing that it delivered a massive amount of voting advices to vote for Sp.a-SPIRIT and a relatively small amount of advices to vote for Groen!. This bias might have affected the figures in TABLE 3. Subjectively least affected by VAAs was the extreme-right Flemish Block voter followed by the CD&V-NV-A electorate. Subjectively most affected by VAA advices were the voters of the liberal cartel VLD-Vivant.

Both subjective measures grasping opinions of voters about what had affected their vote must be interpreted with caution. People might deliberately deny the impact of a VAA like DVT because this might indicate political immaturity; the impact of DVT could have been unconscious; one could have forgotten that DVT had played a role. Therefore, we do not only need evidence of what people *say* about DVT but also what they actually *did* after having watched or used DVT. The following paragraphs present some of this harder evidence.

Did DVT make voters change their minds?

In Belgium, like in many other countries, electoral volatility is on the rise. Voters switch parties more often than they used to do. This not only happens between elections but also within an election campaign. In the 1980s only 15% of the voters changed parties between elections (Swyngedouw, Billiet et al. 1992); this turnover rate grew to more than 33% by the end of the 1990s (FET 2000). A postelectoral poll of TNS-media showed that 24% of the Belgians switched allegiances in 2004 compared to the 2003 national elections organized hardly a year earlier. Can DVT be held responsible?

The answer is very simple: not really. On an aggregate level, we did not find any trace of a rising number of party switchers in the period that the DVT TV-shows were broadcasted or that the VAA was online (May). In all periods, the number of switchers roughly equalled 10% of the panellists and this figure was not higher in May 2004. On an individual level, we asked our panellists in wave 2 (April), before DVT started, to inform us about their voting intentions. We asked them the same question again after DVT

(June) and after the elections (end of June). This permits us to check whether viewers and users of DVT switched more between parties than non-viewers and non-users. If DVT made people change their minds we would expect that the exposed group shifted party allegiance more often. This was *not* the case as TABLE 5 shows.

Table 5: Vote intention changes and degree of exposure to DVT between wave 2 and wave4 and between wave 2 and wave 5 (in%)

	Change W2→W4	Change W2→W5	Change W2→W4	Change W2→W5
Watching + using	15.9	17.1	using	using
Not watching + using	15.4	18.5	15.8	17.4
Watching + not using	12.5	16.4	not using	not using
Not watching + not using	14.3	19.0	13.4	17.7

Source: UA Internet Panel 2004 (N=6,985)

The first two columns of the table show that differences in vote intention changes across exposure conditions are minimal. Although we observe that watching+using translates in a slighter higher change rate between W2 and W4 (15.9%) than not watching+not using (14.3%), all changes W2→W4 (column 1) are not significant: people who watched/used DVT did not significantly change party preference more often than the ones who did not watch/use DVT. Regarding changes between W2 and W5, column 2 shows that DVT users/watchers switched parties even less. So, if DVT might have slightly affected their vote between W2 and W4, in W5 they returned to their old party; voters not exposed at all (not watching+not using) even changed parties most often (19.0%).

Taking a closer look at the table shows that watching or not watching hardly had an effect. If there is a DVT effect it comes from participating and from getting a personal voting advice. This is shown in column 3. Comparing W2 and W4, users, indeed, switch more than non-users (15.8% vs.13.4%) and this difference is even significant. Therefore, in what follows, we will concentrate on comparing users with non-users and neglect the fact whether people watched the DVT TV-show(s). This finding confirms the hybrid character of the DVT-event: it was a night-filling and entertaining political TV-show seemingly without any effects but, at the same time, it was an interactive voting advice application that may have had electoral consequences, although minimal ones. We estimated an OLS model that, controlling for the traditional socio-demographics age, sex and education, predicted party change between W2 and W4. Having used DVT was a significant predictor of party change but it had only a very small effect (R^2=.009). Looking further, DVT participation's changing effect completely disappeared by Election Day (W5) as column 4 shows. DVT use seems only to have affected vote intention but not the actual vote *behavior*: Both groups, users and non-users, display an almost identical volatility.

Talking about the 'effects' of DVT use implies a causal relationship: without participating in DVT people would not have changed parties. But exactly the reverse could also be true: people still in doubt about their vote searching about information about parties' stances; they used DVT to supply that information. The data, however, do not support that interpretation: undecided voters did not use DVT to a larger extent than voters who

had made their mind up yet. This suggest that quite some people use vote advice applications like DVT to confirm or test their existing preference and not to be convinced to vote for another party. People do not turn to VAAs because they do not know but because they want to check whether the VAA gives them the 'right' advice.

We can conclude that watching the DVT TV-show(s) had no effect on party change among our panellists; using the interactive vote advice application seems to have had a significant but very small effect; this effect completely disappeared by the time people had to vote for real; many people sought for a confirmation of their (firm) party preference in stead of desperately seeking for an advice because of doubts. All these intermediary conclusions, however, do not tell us anything about the different political parties and whether and how their electoral fate was affected by DVT.

Winners and losers of DVT?

A part of the controversy about DVT in Belgium was related to the fact that the major parties formed cartels with minor electoral partners in 2003 and 2004. In 2003, the socialist party Sp.a went to the ballots together with SPIRIT, a small left-liberal party. In, 2004, the right-liberal VLD forged a union with the tiny Vivant party while the Christian-democrats of CD&V went together with NV-A, a small Flemish nationalist formation. The reason for this sudden boost in electoral carteling was simple: the instauration of an electoral threshold of 5%. As the cartel partners, forming an electoral alliance and presenting one list to the voters, maintained their separate programs and did not present themselves with a common electoral platform, the DVT developers decided to consider them as separate parties. Obviously, this gave a unique opportunity to these small parties to present their program and beliefs to the public at large which was often not really aware of its existence, let alone its party program (especially Vivant was unknown). In Belgian media coverage, these smaller parties are often marginalized and they only get a small share of the media attention cake. DVT gave them the chance to be taken seriously and to be treated just like the big parties. Moreover, as DVT only dealt with the content of parties' programs and not with the image of the party, its track record, or its politicians, it reduced the small parties' disadvantages considerable: these parties may be less relevant in terms of power but that is not a reason why their stances and beliefs would be less popular. Another potential advantage for the small parties is that they, unlike the big parties, often have an incomplete program and no official stance regarding an issue. This gave them the opportunity to freely pick the most popular stance regarding many statements of DVT as there were no official party stances contradicting their choices. In a nutshell: if there any parties that got a boost from DVT, we expect it to be especially the small parties that were part of one of the three cartels with the traditional main stream parties. Do we find such DVT effects in out panel?

TABLE 6: Votes gain and loss for Belgian parties (cartels) between wave 2 and wave 4 comparing DVT-users with non-DVT-users (differences in %)

	Gain		Loss		Balance
	Difference users vs. non-users	N	Difference users vs. non-users	N	
CD&V - NV-A	**+2.3**	2,029	**-2.9**	2,039	=
Groen!	**+4.9**	1,339	+1.0	988	+
SP.A - Spirit	-1.0	1,552	-1.0	1,848	=
Flemish Block	-0.4	998	**-4.2**	1,076	-
VLD - Vivant	**+7.0**	976	-2.1	923	+
Other parties	**-3.0**	99	**-7.6**	119	-

Source: UA Internet Panel 2004 (N=6,985)

Table 6 contains the evidence of a systematic comparison of user and non-users of DVT in terms of their vote intention change between wave 2 (before DVT) and wave 4 (after DVT). The figure +2.3 in the first column, for example, means that there were 2.3% more DVT-users than non-DVT-users that switched towards CD&V-NV-A between wave 2 and wave 4. This suggests that getting a voting advice from DVT made people turn towards the CD&V-NV-A cartel. The negative figure -1.0 for Sp.a-SPIRIT in the first column indicates that there was 1.0% less people that shifted towards the leftist cartel among the DVT-users than among the non-DVT-users. The same logic applies to the fourth column but the signs have been reversed with a negative sign indicating a bigger loss among DVT-users and a positive sign a smaller loss among DVT-users than among non-users. Significant differences have been printed in bold. The balance column combines both and assesses the net result of gain and loss due to DVT. As the N of gain and loss is not identical this column must be interpreted with caution.

TABLE 6 indicates that DVT-users and non-users display a different electoral behavior, and that the different electorates differ with respect to the effect of DVT on their vote. DVT did not cause major mass migrations but it appears as if small groups of voters have been affected by DVT-participation. On the significantly winning side we find Groen!, the green party, and the liberal VLD-Vivant cartel. They won more voters among DVT-users than they lost votes among DVT-users. Losers were the extreme-right Flemish Block and the other small parties that were not represented in DVT. We do not know whether the progress of the liberal cartel is due to a better score of big partner VLD or small partner Vivant but we suspect the latter is true. Table 6 suggests, indeed, that small parties have more to win with VVAs like DVT; small parties that are excluded from VAAs, however, become even more marginalized and irrelevant in the eye of the voter.

The analyses presented in TABLE 6 are bivariate and thus incomplete. We need to run multivariate analyses to check whether loss and gain among DVT-users can be really attributed to their DVT-use or rather to some other of their characteristics like age or education. In other words: what is the net effect of DVT-use? We estimated a number of logistic regression analyses comparing new and disloyal voters on the one hand with loyal voters (W2 to W4) of all parties on the other hand (results not presented in a table). Apart from DVT-use we controlled for age, sex, education, interest in politics, left-right placement, and the extent to which the campaign had been followed by the media

(because the DVT effect could have been a sort of general media effect). *All* tendencies found in TABLE 4 remained significant in the multivariate analyses. DVT-use has by far the strongest effect on switching to VLD-Vivant. Both CD&V-NV-A and Groen! as well won votes among DVT-users. On the side of the significant losers we find, again, the CD&V-NV-A cartel, narrowly significant also the VLD-Vivant cartel and, very clearly, also the Flemish Block. Especially the extreme-right party seemed to have lost some votes due to DVT. The positive and negative effects compensate each other for CD&V-NV-A so that, finally, only VLD-Vivant and Groen! won votes because of DVT-use while the Flemish Block lost votes. Note that the strength of the DVT-effects in all our multivariate models is really small. In most analyses, DVT-use is the smallest of all significant effects and, in spite of the large Ns, only passes the significance threshold narrowly. The explained variance of the models is small (maximum adjusted R^2=.06).

The subjective and objective impact of DVT combined

We have presented subjective and objective evidence regarding the impact of DVT on the votes of our panellists in 2004. Both measures were not always corresponding. For VLD-Vivant the picture was clear: objectively (see TABLE 6) as well as subjectively (see TABLE 4) the liberal cartel seemed to have won votes due to DVT. For the CD&V-NV-A cartel DVT seems to have made no difference, both subjectively and objectively. The leftist cartel Sp.a-SPIRIT seemed to have won subjectively, according to its voters, more than the greens of Groen! but the objective behavioral evidence points in the opposite direction. Also for the Flemish Block the results seem to be contradictory: subjectively Flemish Block voters have hardly been affected by DVT, while the behavioral measures clearly showed that the Flemish Block lost voters due to DVT.

In this final empirical paragraph, we compare both measures attempting to shed more light on these contradictions. We want to check whether people who said DVT had raised doubts really changed party preferences. Therefore we crosstab vote (intention) behavior change (W2 to W4) with the respondents subjective estimation of DVT's effect on their party preference in TABLE 7. The table learns that, on average, only half of the people who said DVT made them doubt about their vote (8.2%) actually changed preferences. For the other half, DVT-inspired doubt got no electoral consequences. Even among the small group of people saying that DVT made them change their mind (1.1%), one third did *not* change their mind at all and remained loyal to the party getting their vote already in wave 2. Overall, this tells us that the subjective impact of DVT is a very unreliable measure of real electoral impact: many people say they doubted while they did not; many people say they changed opinion while they did not. Combining both figures, only 4.7% of our panellists say that their electoral preferences had somehow been affected by DVT *and* really changed their party preference. Which parties were the winners and losers?

TABLE 7: Subjective impact of DVT-users split up between loyal, new and disloyal voters (W2→W4) of all parties (in %)

	CD&V–N-A	Groen!	SP.A–Spirit	Flemish Block	VLD–Vivant
Loyal voters W2+W4					
No impact	**57.2**	34.6	41.0	52.5	38.4
Confirmation	36.1	**62.3**	49.6	44.5	57.3
Doubt	6.9	3.1	**9.3**	2.9	4.2
Change	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Incoming voters W2 →W4					
No impact	46.8	34.1	40.0	**(59.1)**	41.7
Confirmation	23.4	**40.3**	30.5	(29.5)	30.9
Doubt	**26.0**	21.4	25.3	(9.1)	20.1
Change	3.9	4.1	4.2	(2.3)	**7.2**
Disloyal voters W2→W4					
No impact	**45.3**	(28.9)	33.4	44.0	31.1
Confirmation	30.7	**(38.9)**	**37.5**	31.9	27.8
Doubt	22.7	(16.7)	22.5	20.9	**33.3**
Change	1.3	(5.6)	6.5	3.3	**7.8**
	N=1151 N=154 N=150	N=560 N=290 N=36 (!)	N=943 N=95 N=293	N=573 N=44 (!) N=91	N=497 N=139 N=90

Source: UA Internet Panel 2004 (N=5,106)

We must be careful with interpreting the table as the basis (N) often is rather small, especially with regard to incoming and disloyal voters, but the differences between parties are substantial. Does the table confirm the objective change findings presented above that the Flemish Block lost votes due to DVT while Groen! and especially the VLD-Vivant cartel won some votes? In terms of the Flemish Block, the contradiction between subjective and objective impact measures above is maintained. Loyal (52.2%), incoming (59.1%) and disloyal (44.0%) Flemish Block voters all asserted more than average that DVT had had no effect at all on their vote. Of the voters leaving the Flemish Block between W2 and W4, only a very small group, smaller than average, pointed towards DVT (3.3%). The opposite applies to the voters of Groen!. All Groen!-voters least said that DVT had had no effect al all. DVT seemed to have confirmed the vote intention of many Groen!-voters (62.3%). These voters sought and found confirmation in DVT. At the incoming side, relatively much new Groen!-voters (4.1%) referred to DVT to explain their switch towards the greens. The liberal VLD-Vivant cartel is yet another story. Many loyal voters got a confirmation of their vote through DVT (57.3%). A large group of new VLD-Vivant (7.2%) voters state that DVT made them change their mind. But also quite some voters who turned their back on the liberal cartel, however, point towards DVT as the culprit (7.8%). For CD&V-NV-A and Sp.a-SPIRIT the results seem to go in the expected direction indicating no clear impact of DVT on the wining or on the losing side.

Wrapping up, combining both the subjective and objective measures more or less confirmed the outcomes of the vote intention change indicators for Groen! and VLD-Vivant. These parties seem to have won votes because of DVT. For the Flemish Block the pictures is les clear: its (ex)voters claimed DVT made no difference while the evidence about their changing vote intentions points in the opposite direction. Concerning CD&V-NV-A and Sp.a-SPIRIT, we can hold that DVT was not an important source of instream or outstream of voters.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Students of the electoral process agree that voting behavior has changed during the last few decades. One of the most secular trends is that voters have become more disloyal (Norris, Curtice et al. 1999; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Citizens switch party allegiance more often than they did. This process of dealignment not only translated in party switching between elections but also within the election campaign. Quite some studies show that the number of people that changes opinion during the campaign has gradually increased (Granberg and Holmberg 1990; Granberg and Holmberg 1991; McAllister 2002; Blais 2004; Lachat 2004). Consequently, electoral campaigns have become more important: as voters change more often efforts to make them change may really make a difference. At the same time, media and politics scholars have pointed out that the media's role in the campaign has changed. While the media used to be partisan they gradually freed themselves from party interference and started to follow their own logic. Following Altheide & Snow (1979), Brants and Van Praag (2000) developed the notion of 'media logic'. Media logic means that mass media, in their relation with politics, obey their own rules. Their workings, formats, deadlines and interests have become the basis of their coverage of politics. Media follow their own rules when making news.

The boom of voting advice applications in many European countries created by the media and broadcasted on TV must be situated in this double evolution: as voters have orphaned and decide late, they search for information about parties and candidates during the campaign; media companies search for readily available and low-threshold formats to inform and entertain voters while attracting a large audience. The online vote advice application *Do the Vote Test* (DVT) and the annex TV-shows of the Belgian public broadcaster VRT in 2004 perfectly fit in that picture.

Our analyses show, though, that electoral effects of VAAs like DVT cannot be taken for granted. Based on a non-representative internetpanel we scrutinized the electoral effects of DVT and found that effects were modest. We do find measurable effects but they are tiny. Drawing on a smaller sample we would certainly not have found any significant effect at all. Not watching the TV-show but rather using the online VAA to get a personalized voting advice seems to have affected a fraction of the Belgian electorate's preferences. In total, in our panel, only a few percent of the voters have been affected by DVT. As our panel is skewed and contains disproportionally much DVT-users, we believe the effect of DVT in the Belgian population at large to be even much smaller. Many people sought foremost for confirmation of their existing preference in DVT, they were not searching to be challenged. They tested the VAA system and not their own

opinions or the parties. All Belgian parties won *and* lost due to DVT. Having said that, we showed that DVT gave some parties slight backing while other parties suffered and lost a few votes due to DVT. One of the most interesting findings, we think, is that politicians and journalists, in contrast to the public at large's subjective perception and in contrast to the vote change facts, do believe that DVT had a large impact on the public's voting behavior.

The fact that DVT seems not to have changed many peoples opinion during the 2004 electoral campaign in Belgium does not exclude that VAAs like DVT might have other important consequences. We did not focus on those non-electoral DVT-effects in this paper, but they are worth mentioning and contemplating. On the one hand, a possible consequence is that VAAs boost the debate about issues and content pulling away the attention from secondary aspects of the campaign. VAA are all about programs, stances, and issues, and this can be considered as a healthy thing for democracy. If VAAs, on top, do reach a large public parts of which normally are less interested in politics, they might increase the involvement of previously not concerned citizens. On the other hand, VAAs may affect the way parties campaign. They may make parties follow the public in stead of trying to convince the public to follow them. In others words, VAAs might stir populism. Moreover, VAAs simplify political choices considerably. All issues are translated in yes/no statements ignoring nuanced and mixed argumentations. While broadening the debate to new groups VAAs may at the same time impoverish the quality of the debate and reduce the level of the argumentation.

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