

Improving political literacy by design

*Voter advice applications for young
New Zealanders*

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KEY POINTS

- Helping young people navigate the political landscape, and find their place in it, is an important step in addressing the decline in youth voter turnout.
- Voter advice applications are effective design-led tools for engaging young people in the political process by making them more informed, confident participants in the process of choosing and challenging their representatives.

Voter participation by young people has been in long-term decline in New Zealand. Many do not understand what elected representatives do, and assume that politics does not affect them. Voter advice applications (VAAs) are effective design-led tools for addressing these issues by providing game-like experiences that help voters compare their values with the positions of political parties or candidates. By providing an accessible introduction to politics, VAAs engage young people within and beyond the classroom, and help them become informed, confident participants in elections.

Introduction

Voter participation has been in long-term decline in the developed world (or global north), particularly among young people. New Zealand is no exception. Official statistics tell us that 42 percent of 18–24 year olds didn't vote in the 2011 election, and more than 37 percent failed to turn out in 2014 (Electoral Commission, 2014). The Virgin Voter Collective (2014) published figures that suggest that these high numbers may be under-representing the problem of youth engagement. Their statistical interpretations (factoring enrolment and other forces) suggest that closer to 60 percent of 18–24 year olds didn't vote in the 2011 election. The long-term trend from 1996 to 2011 shows that every year 4 percent fewer young people had voted (Vowles, 2014). If that trend had continued, only one-third of young people would have voted in the last election.

This decline in youth voter turnout has provided a clear focus for many of those involved in citizenship education, with a growing number of non-governmental initiatives to specifically arrest—and hopefully reverse—that trend. This article discusses the design of voter advice applications (VAAs) as one response, and suggests a role for these tools to encourage first-time voters by empowering them within and beyond the classroom.

In its 2013 Voter Participation Strategy, the Electoral Commission declared a consensus had been reached that, for anything effective to be done to reverse declining participation trends long-term, a broad strategy involving politicians, the media, academics, teachers, opinion leaders and, ultimately, society in general would be required. New tools might also be required to implement that strategy. In 2013, the Electoral Commission acted upon this by calling on academic and research communities to respond to declining voter participation.

The Design+Democracy Project

The Design+Democracy Project was formed in response to that call, bringing to bear on the problem the methods, tools, and techniques that define design practice. The project has worked in partnership with industry, government, and the social sector to explore voter engagement through user-centred design. The aim is to engage young people in the political process by making them more informed, confident participants in the process of choosing (and challenging) their representatives. The university's independence from the commission has allowed explorations and innovation at the edges of what have been traditional norms in generally one-way electoral communication design. This includes the initiatives *On the Fence*, *Ask Away*, and under development this year, *VoteLocal*.

Voter advice applications and young New Zealanders

A VAA is a web application designed to help voters to compare their policy preferences on major issues with the positions of political parties/candidates on these policies. While they take a variety of forms and offer different features, they all use an issue-matching system. This is a process where voters create a political profile by responding to, or asking a range of politically based questions. Generally, an algorithm then correlates users' responses with candidates' or parties positions on the same issues to indicate which candidate is most compatible (Fivaz & Nadig, 2010).

The Design+Democracy Project focused on developing VAA initiatives specifically for young people because it is an effective long-term approach to increasing overall voter participation. As outlined above, young people (18–24) are among the least engaged in local and general elections. But few would

disagree that informing and engaging with young people is a vital contribution to the fabric of New Zealand’s future. It responds directly to one of the central purposes of government, which is to consider and work towards meeting the needs of future generations. Focusing on youth voters also has the potential to increase overall participation because, as Franklin (2004) and Catt (2005) argue:

- when citizens vote at their first opportunity, their likelihood of becoming lifelong voters dramatically increases
- young voters have a positive behavioural influence on their non-voting family members.

Young people may need new mechanisms through which to engage with the political process. Many of those that don’t vote have rejected the adversarial structures of government (Martin, 2012)—a system in New Zealand that was built largely upon 17th- and 18th-century British ideas of citizenship. It is a system increasingly out of sync with the reality of their hyper-connected 21st-century Pacific lives. But they are not apathetic. As Noam Chomsky (2016) notes, if you count the number of young people who are today directly involved in an active political concern, while diverse and directed in many directions, the number is higher than in the 1960s. While many have only ever engaged informally with New Zealand’s political structures, expressing their political will, for example, through online social action or conscious consumption, they *do* engage. This is a trend observable in many developed democracies, and creates a schism between the values and attitudes of older “dutiful”, and younger “self-actualising” citizens as shown in Table 1.

DUTIFUL CITIZEN	SELF-ACTUALISING CITIZEN
Obligation to participate in government-centered activities	Diminished sense of government obligation—higher sense of individual purpose
Sees voting as the core democratic act	Sees voting as less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism
Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media	Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment
Joins civil society organizations and/or expresses interest through parties that typically employ one-way (top-down) conventional communication to mobilise supporters	Favours loose networks of community action—often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies

TABLE 1. THE GAP BETWEEN THE “DUTIFUL” AND THE “SELF-ACTUALISING” CITIZEN (ADAPTED FROM BENNETT, 2008)

“A VAA is a web application designed to help voters to compare their policy preferences on major issues with the positions of political parties/candidates on these policies. While they take a variety of forms and offer different features, they all use an issue-matching system. This is a process where voters create a political profile by responding to, or asking a range of politically based questions. Generally, an algorithm then correlates users’ responses with candidates’ or parties positions on the same issues to indicate which candidate is most compatible ...”

Perhaps what may be required to bridge this divide is a familiar, accessible and less adversarial “way in”. Reduced to their essence, these barriers are entirely navigable by both the “dutiful” and “self-actualised” elector. Local Government New Zealand (Hercus, 2011) have, for example, concluded that the main reasons for disengagement in council elections (attracting turnout even lower than in general elections) are:

- lack of knowledge about the candidates and what they stand for.
- lack of understanding about what councils do, and an assumption that they aren’t relevant.
- underexposure to political knowledge and awareness about the elections in general.

VAA’s are effective tools for addressing these issues and giving young people an introduction to politics. They are designed to assist voters by improving the basis on which they decide how to vote. Easy accessibility to the internet has resulted in VAA’s playing an increasingly important role in political communication, supplementing more

traditional media and resources (Garzia & Marschall, 2012). VAAs can help to define a political landscape, and enable young voters to find their place within it. Owing to the growing number, popularity, and influence of VAAs, they are attracting sustained attention, including from political scientists and educators (Garzia, 2010).

Local voter advice applications

Most VAAs work with the assumption that elections are in essence about aggregating the policy-preferences of voters, and that strengthening democracy is a matter of ensuring that the support for parties (expressed in votes) more accurately reflects the existing preferences of voters (Fossen & Anderson, 2014). This fits well with the normative conception of democracy expounded by social-choice theorists. An especially successful example of an advanced matching VAA is On The Fence (onthefence.co.nz), an award-winning tool that builds political confidence to transform disengaged users into informed, active voters through game-like design. It helps pre- and first-time voters engage directly with issues by matching their personal values with political parties. (In the 6 weeks before General Election 2014, the site surpassed all goals by attracting over 170,000 unique visitors who spent on average 8 minutes 13 seconds on the site, achieving a 92 percent completion rate. A 2015 Horizon Research survey of voting behaviour during that election showed that On The Fence was the most effective initiative focused on increasing voter turnout (Voxy, 2015). The survey showed that 33,500 eligible voters aged 18–34 were aware of the Virgin Voter Collective campaign (to which Design+Democracy Project belonged) with 31.7 per cent of them influenced to vote by On The Fence.

But more contestatory VAAs can also challenge the status quo. Ask Away (askaway.co.nz) is one example of this—a digital forum for the 2014 General Election that enabled less-represented groups within the constituency to influence the political discourse and agenda (see Howie, in this special issue for further details on Ask Away). The differences in modes and ideals inherent within various VAAs are clarified by Fossen and Anderson (2014) in Table 2. It provided an unthreatening, “one-click” way of participating in elector-initiated political conversations directly with candidates. *Ask Away* gave young people the opportunity to talk about issues they cared about and gave parties the opportunity to engage. One problem for young digital natives is not that there is not enough information; the problem was there was too much information, and their individual voices appear lost. Over the course of the election campaign 22,000 young New Zealanders used the tool and asked over a thousand

questions of nine different parties. This is particularly impressive considering the depth of the questions covered (from abortion to mass transit). What became apparent over the course of the election was that politicians ignored this platform for engagement with young people at their peril. It was enthusiastically embraced, in the end, by the full spectrum of political parties. By design, being the “missing response” was too negative a message for politicians to tolerate. That indeed provides an empowering lesson for a young voter.

On the Fence and Ask Away challenged the cycle of mutual neglect between political parties and young people. This contribution, among other initiatives, succeeded in reversing voter turnout rates in New Zealand. According to a Horizon Research poll (2014), more than 10,000 young people aged 18–34 were influenced to vote at the last General Election by the efforts the Design+Democracy Project (Voxy, 2015).

This year, the Design+Democracy Project is exploring a middle-ground, by producing VoteLocal—an online tool to help young New Zealanders engage in local body elections (votelocal.nz). It helps young, undecided, and first-time voters to become more deliberative, rational civic participants by matching well-considered preferences on issues with those of the candidates vying for their support. It will present a game-like simulacra of politics as the balancing act of competing demands for limited resources.

These VAA examples have shown that they offer a considerable potential to increase interest, knowledge and, ultimately, turnout. A closer look shows that they also have the potential to teach the nuances of politics by providing a game-like exploration of ideals of the citizen as a *political shopper*, *non-conformist*, and *co-legislator* (see Table 2).

	SIMPLE MATCHING VAA eg. On the Fence	MORE DELIBERATIVE VAA eg. VoteLocal	MORE CONTESTATORY VAA eg. Ask Away
Model of democracy	Social choice democracy	Deliberative democracy	Agnostic democracy
Ideal of the citizen	Citizen as savvy policy shopper	Citizen as co-legislator	Citizen as nonconformist
Competence gap addressed	Ignorance of party-positions	Lack of well-considered preferences on issues	Constricted perceptions of the political landscape
Point of VAA	To increase congruence between voters' preferences and public policies	To facilitate rational preference revision	To challenge the status quo and shift the agenda

TABLE 2. PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY, CITIZENSHIP, AND THE PEDAGOGY OF VAAS (ADAPTED FROM FOSSEN & ANDERSON, 2014)

Notes on the role of design

The VAA initiatives created by The Design+Democracy Project were designed specifically for young people with little or no knowledge about political issues. This represented a shift from the majority of VAAs, which are targeted at a more mature audience. The majority of such tools worldwide provide a one-sided issue statement that the user responds to using a sliding scale. A criticism of this approach is that it assumes users are sufficiently pre-informed about the issue-statements to quickly express an incisive policy preference (Fossen & Anderson 2014). The Project engaged user-centred design processes to address these issues, and to make VAAs more applicable to young New Zealanders. User-centred design is a process of designing products, processes, and services by including end users as active participants at each stage of the design process, and top of mind. In this way the user directly influences how the design takes shape and the quality or effectiveness of the experience (Brown, 2009).

By engaging with young people, The Design+Democracy Project developed the language of the online tools to meet the needs of young people with a very low political knowledge base, or even interest. Questions are kept as simple as possible, with the amount of text reduced to a minimum. The tools also apply both a visual and verbal vernacular that is accessible to a youth audience while maintaining the mana of the political content. The user interface also favours the familiar—adapting functionalities from commonly used online platforms to create a game-like experience that feels natural and intuitive.

Conclusion

While these VAAs are not the product of social scientists, designers believe they have much to offer citizenship education in a digital century. Design is no longer (if it ever was) focused on an end result, a logo or a brand livery—design is a process; it is a verb not a noun. What is today meant by *design* is a process for discovering opportunities, for solving problems, and enabling new ways of seeing. Used properly, it is a powerful tool to define and solve a problem: it requires some suspension of judgement, and involves considering and creating many options with a team of people, all with different perspectives. Through creative thinking one can create an environment conducive to growth and experimentation where out-of-the-ordinary results can be achieved.

Applying creative thinking to social issues and public services is proving to be not only incredibly successful, but also crucial. As public services throughout the

western world develop new services, digitise existing ones, and try to understand their constituencies, there is a role for design thinking. Design can help in policy development in the highest levels, with its ability to anticipate and plan for future scenarios through creative problem-solving. Design-based approaches like VAAs are now being used to support innovation and improvement in public services and to tackle social problems. Equally there are investigations occurring in pockets throughout the western world in exploring the contribution design can make to improving participation in the democratic process and communication between electors, those who seek election, and those who have been elected.

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Details about Massey University's Design+Democracy Project and the designers, researchers and development partners behind the work can be found at designdemocracy.ac.nz.

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