

publicity. The Electoral Commission reported that the tool was used by 330,000 New Zealanders in the 2014 election (around ten per cent of the electorate; New Zealand Electoral Commission 2014: 15). This process works both ways, as around 13,600 people accessed the Commission's 'Check, Update, Enrol' page after having used the VAA (New Zealand Electoral Commission 2014: 15). In 2017, the Commission supported three VAAs – On the Fence, Policy and Vote Compass – and the tools were used by around 700,000 electors, with over 7,000 clicking through to enrol from On the Fence and Vote Compass (New Zealand Electoral Commission 2018b: 21). The New Zealand case thus offers evidence on the efficacy of arms-length state involvement in a VAA.

A final model consists in the state being involved throughout the process, from initial development to promotion and publicity. As far as we know, this model is only used in Germany, where the Federal Agency for Civic Education (BPB) is actively involved in the development of the Wahl-O-Mat application. We will examine this model in depth in the following section. As this VAA is the most widely used of any worldwide, we will seek to understand the extent to which the state's involvement contributes to the Wahl-O-Mat's operability, how it is perceived, and its impact.

Germany's Wahl-O-Mat

This section considers how the state can be involved during the development and delivery of a VAA by examining in depth the German Wahl-O-Mat, the most frequently used VAA worldwide in absolute numbers. Whereas most VAAs are developed by private organisations, such as media companies, the Wahl-O-Mat is unique in being developed and sponsored by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, hereafter BPB). This section describes how the Wahl-O-Mat works, looking at its development process and design. It then assesses the effectiveness of this VAA by considering its operability, perceptions and impact.

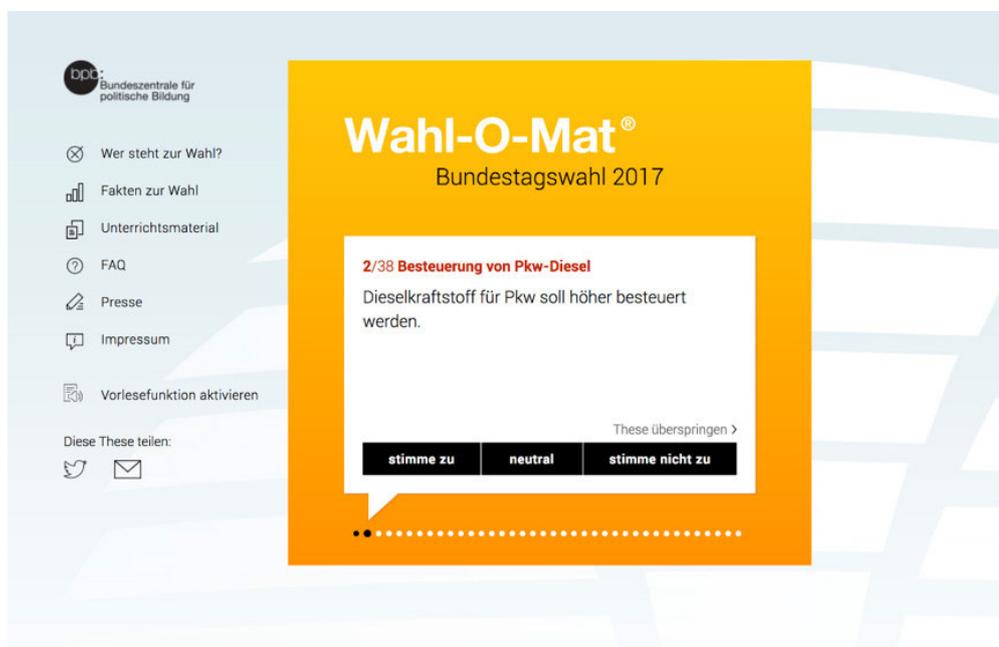
How Does the Wahl-O-Mat Work in Practice?

The Wahl-O-Mat ('Vote-O-Mat') was created in 1998 by the BPB and first used prior to the 2002 Bundestag elections (Marschall and Schmidt 2010: 65). The BPB is a 'governmental agency attached to the Ministry of the Interior' (Marschall and Schultze 2015: 526). Though institutionally linked to the government, it is a 'supra-party organization' supervised by an all-party parliamentary board (Marschall and Schultze 2015: 526). Given its role of fostering civic engagement and education, the BPB developed the Wahl-O-Mat as a way of countering declining voter turnout and responding to increased electoral volatility and dealignment. By focusing on salient issues, highlighting differences between parties, and adapting to the public's increasing use of the internet, the BPB aimed, through the Wahl-O-Mat, to tackle 'the view that voting won't make a difference' and stimulate political debate and engagement (Marschall 2008: 138–9).

In addition to its state sponsorship, the Wahl-O-Mat is also unique in how its content is developed at each election. Broad policy fields are selected by a panel of political scientists and academics. But the statements themselves are formulated on the basis of party manifestos and other publicly available information by a group of 20–25 first- or second-time voters under the age of 27 (known as 'editorial staff'), who represent a state or the entire federal territory (BPB 2017; Marschall 2008: 138; Marschall and Schmidt 2010: 67). Young people are included in the statement selection process because the Wahl-O-Mat originally targeted young and first-time voters, for whom clear

and independent information was considered particularly important. Though the Wahl-O-Mat quickly widened its appeal to the entire electorate, younger voters still make up the entire editorial staff.

Figure 6.4. Example of a Wahl-O-Mat statement

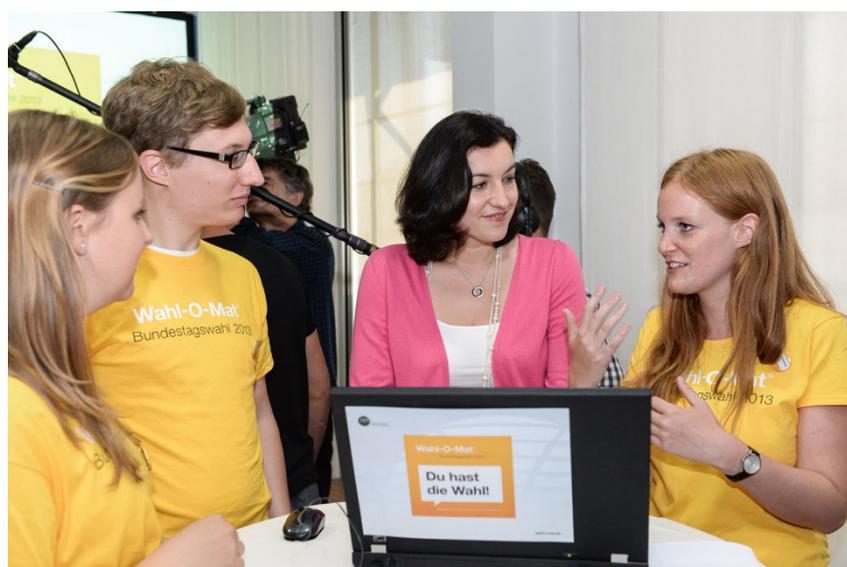


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Development of the tool begins around three months before the elections and takes place in several workshops. The ‘editors’ work in thematic units and select statements that are easy to understand, address relevant issues and differentiate among parties. The editorial staff are assisted by journalists, political scientists and experts in different fields (BPB 2017; Marschall 2008: 138). An initial set of around 60–100 statements are presented to parties via a secure online system.² Parties have between two and three weeks to position themselves on each issue and, if they wish, provide a justification for their placement (BPB 2017). Parties can also supply additional information, that will be displayed in the results screen, and, in the event of discrepancies, can revise their answer. A team of political scientists verifies the quality of the answers provided, though parties are ultimately responsible for deciding their positioning (BPB 2017). The final list of approximately 38 statements are selected by the Wahl-O-Mat editorial staff about a week before the tool goes live (BPB 2017). The BPB is not involved in the development of topics or statements, or in determining parties’ positions. Rather, it oversees the process by convening the editorial staff and expert panel, and providing funding, resources and publicity.

² Originally, the Wahl-O-Mat only allowed up to six parties to take part, i.e. only those that had or were projected to gain a seat in parliament (Marschall 2009: 486). During the 2008 Bavarian elections, however, the Ecological Democratic Party initiated an injunction against the local Wahl-O-Mat convenor, on the grounds that their exclusion contradicted its commitment to impartiality. Since the injunction, the BPB has allowed all parties standing a national list to participate in the federal Wahl-O-Mat: around 30 parties (Marschall 2011: 41).

Figure 6.6. Dorothee Bär, Deputy General Secretary of the CSU, plays the Wahl-O-Mat at the inaugural press conference for the 2013 Wahl-O-Mat



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Since 2002, the Wahl-O-Mat has been set up for all federal and European elections, and most state elections. The federal office of the BPB oversees the development of the federal Wahl-O-Mat, but delegates this task to state-level institutions for state elections.

Operability

This section assesses the effectiveness of the Wahl-O-Mat in terms of operability. To do so, we rely on interviews conducted with those closely involved in the Wahl-O-Mat's development and publicity.

None of the interviewees raised any concerns about the Wahl-O-Mat's operability. They all agreed that the system works very well and, unsurprisingly, argued that it does indeed contribute to improving the quality of information and discussion. Armin Berger, founder of 3 pc, the Wahl-O-Mat's design agency, reiterated many times that the Wahl-O-Mat's main effect is to make people 'think'. He stated that 'the most interesting thing [about the Wahl-O-Mat] is the fact that people have to think about the stuff themselves. That's [...] an underestimated resource, thinking for yourself' (Berger 2018). He argued that, with journalists and politicians always telling people what to think, '[taking the Wahl-O-Mat] is more or less nearly the only moment you are asked and nobody tells you what to think. And that's what I love' (Berger 2018). Stefan Marschall, Professor of Political Science at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf and Director of Research on the Wahl-O-Mat, argued that the way in which the tool is developed contributes to the impartiality of the information provided. The scientific panel and the editorial staff ensure that the policy issues selected cover the width of the political spectrum and that the statement formulations are as objective as possible (Marschall 2018). Similarly, Daniel Kraft, Head of Communications and Press Officer at the BPB, also emphasised the structure of the development process as key to the Wahl-O-Mat's operability. He stated that 'we [the BPB] are the resource-giver, we are the funder, we are the [people] who are bringing the Wahl-O-Mat with marketing in special regions, we are the speakers of the Wahl-O-Mat, we are talking at press conferences, but the real heart of the Wahl-

O-Mat, these are always young people' (Kraft 2018). The interviewees also agreed that people reflect on their results, even – and perhaps especially – when they are unexpected. They also said that people seek further information and sometimes reconsider their positions on certain topics.

Only two minor points were raised as potential areas for improvement:

- Stefan Marschall said that there has been some debate about whether it would be better to broaden the demographic composition of the editorial staff. This would allow the inclusion of different perspectives in the selection and formulation of statements. But he did not think this would be particularly beneficial (Marschall 2018). He suggested that it is easier to start a process of deliberation and discussion within a homogeneous group, and that, in a broader group, more experienced voters might dominate the discussion. Furthermore, having witnessed all workshops, he argued that young people bring a less biased and fresher perspective on politics, while being able to represent the interests of the electorate as a whole (Marschall 2018).
- Armin Berger stated that there is a trade-off between ensuring that a VAA has an attractive design and is simple to use, and that it is accessible to all users regardless of physical or other disabilities. He suggested that non-official VAAs 'are very free to do whatever they want to do', whereas 3pc (the Wahl-O-Mat's design agency, founded by Berger) are more constrained in how they can design the tool (Berger 2018). But this was only a minor concern and he accepted the primary importance of wide accessibility

Underpinning this strikingly positive view of how the Wahl-O-Mat operates is the involvement of the BPB. When asked about perceptions of this institution, the interviewees emphasised that the BPB is very well known and positively viewed in the country. Armin Berger said that the 'BPB is extremely important, [...] it's the most neutral institution imaginable'; Stefan Marschall described the BPB as a 'very special institution'; and Daniel Kraft argued that it has 'big credibility in society'. For our interviewees, this positive perception was the result of the organisation's historical development and role in strengthening democracy through civic education in the aftermath of the Second World War. They all asserted that citizens are aware of the BPB and its work, as they come across its educational materials from a young age in school. In addition to developing the Wahl-O-Mat, Daniel Kraft told us that the BPB engages in a variety of other civic education activities both online and offline, targeted at different age groups and demographics. In this context, Kraft said that the BPB views the Wahl-O-Mat as an initial step in citizens' long-term engagement (Kraft 2018).

All interviewees stressed that the BPB's involvement is essential to the Wahl-O-Mat's development and promotion, to parties' participation, and to the VAA's wide reach and high usage figures. Funding and resource concerns do not challenge the Wahl-O-Mat as they do many other VAAs. Though the BPB's funding is part of the state budget, this does not appear to affect perceptions of the institution's independence or credibility. Daniel Kraft summarised what he thinks public perceptions of the organisation's independence are by saying that the BPB does 'civic education in the name of the state, but not in the name of the government' (Kraft 2018). The BPB has around 200 staff members and, even though the process of developing the Wahl-O-Mat at each election takes around two or three months, this does not seem to affect other BPB projects.

Within the BPB's staff, a press and communications team focuses exclusively on publicising the federal Wahl-O-Mat at election time, aiming, as Daniel Kraft put it, to make the Wahl-O-Mat 'more popular than ever before' at each election (Kraft 2018). It seeks to generate buzz and get television, print and online media outlets talking about the Wahl-O-Mat. Daniel Kraft told us that, in 2002, the tool first became widely known after it was played on live television by Harald Schmidt – one of the most popular German late-night hosts (Kraft 2018). Furthermore, many websites and media partners link to the Wahl-O-Mat or embed it within their own sites for a small licence fee. In 2017, for example, the Wahl-O-Mat had more than fifty media partners (Kraft 2018). Armin Berger told us that online platforms are happy to publish the Wahl-O-Mat on their own sites as 'it's neutral' and does not belong to anybody. He did not think this would be the case with VAAs published by other organisations (Berger 2018). The press team also does focused outreach work in areas with low political participation. Daniel Kraft said that, in 2017, the BPB identified 32 communities with particularly low turnout and focused significant marketing activity on them. This included co-operation with McDonald's, which provided the BPB with free publicity on their in-store tray covers; local pubs, which allowed the BPB to advertise on coasters; and cinemas, which screened a free trailer advertising the Wahl-O-Mat (Kraft 2018). Some of the promotion also happens organically. Vloggers, for example, upload videos of themselves playing the Wahl-O-Mat on YouTube. For Daniel Kraft, this allows the tool to reach people whom the BPB might not generally target (Kraft 2018).

All interviewees agreed that the BPB's credibility and legitimacy in German society was key to achieving buy-in from political parties and remains a reason for their participation. Stefan Marschall told us that, initially, there was some reluctance among parties to engage with the Wahl-O-Mat and take a stand on each statement, given their scepticism 'about whether it's possible to condense complex political issues into one statement' (Marschall 2018). But this perspective has changed over time. Indeed, all interviewees maintained that, even if some reluctance might have persisted, parties appear to have reached a 'tipping point' or a 'point of no return', with non-participation in the Wahl-O-Mat being viewed as a break from an accepted norm. Stefan Marschall, for example, suggested that 'Within the last [...] ten years, I would say the Wahl-O-Mat has become kind of so prominent and so mandatory [for parties].' (Marschall 2018). One feature that interviewees highlighted as particularly attractive to parties is the possibility of providing additional explanations of their policy positions so as to 'document all caveats' as Stefan Marschall put it (Marschall 2018). The fact that the final authority in determining policy positions is left with parties themselves also helps achieve political buy-in. In fact, for Stefan Marschall, 'It's not the BPB which is telling parties which position they have; it's up to the parties to make their point' (Marschall 2018). Another valuable aspect for parties' engagement is the fact that every party is invited to participate (Berger 2018; Kraft 2018).

Looking more broadly at what enables the Wahl-O-Mat to operate effectively, our interviewees stressed their view that the role and perception of the state, and the understanding of society, are quite different in Germany from in other countries. They all agreed that the state plays a crucial role in people's lives and is seen not as an intruder or aggressor, but as a central figure to which people resort to solve problems. They also thought that the credibility of the BPB as a state organisation providing information might be hard to achieve in other countries, such as the UK. For example, Daniel Kraft posited that outside Germany such credibility would more likely be given to a non-state actor. This awareness echoes the concerns we have already seen in the UK about state involvement. Nevertheless, it is important even in Germany that the BPB has an arm's-

length role: it is a resource-giver and co-ordinator, rather than final decision-maker, in the development of the Wahl-O-Mat.

Perceptions

This section considers whether similarly positive perceptions of the Wahl-O-Mat, its impact on the quality of discourse, and the BPB's role are shared more widely.

We conducted a content analysis of all the news pieces we identified that referred to the Wahl-O-Mat in the 30 days up to and including polling day for all federal elections since 2002: 191 articles in total.³ The analysis confirms the media's role in publicising the Wahl-O-Mat: most references were general mentions or brief descriptions of the tool, rather than more substantive assessments (Table 6.2). These included statements such as 'Today the Wahl-O-Mat goes online. You can compare these 30 positions with those of the parties. Discover which party you agree with most here' (*Die Tageszeitung* 2005). The media also frequently refer to how the content of the Wahl-O-Mat is developed; eight news pieces included the subheading 'How does the Wahl-O-Mat work?' and described, for example, how questions were selected, how parties answered questions, and how the final list was chosen.

Table 6.2. Tone of statements in the media

	Descriptive	Positive	Negative
Wahl-O-Mat in general	101	11	3
Wahl-O-Mat usage	50	3	2
Effects of Wahl-O-Mat	13	15	8
Purpose of Wahl-O-Mat	13	4	1
Participation of parties	10	0	0
Usefulness of Wahl-O-Mat	6	44	34
Involvement of BPB	3	2	0
Other	18	1	2
TOTAL	214	80	50

Looking at more substantive arguments advanced in the media coverage, we find that the main reasons for praising the Wahl-O-Mat are its role in helping users make a decision, its influence on the quality of the debate, and the fact that it stimulates engagement.

- Regarding the first point, reporting suggests that the Wahl-O-Mat helps voters gain familiarity with the main issues of the election debate and compare their positions with those of parties (e.g. 'Are you unsure of whom to vote for? How do parties and manifestos

³ Of those available in the Nexis UK and Factiva databases, we included the following publications in our sample to ensure that it was broadly representative of political leanings: *Die Welt* (including Sunday, online and compact editions); *Frankfurter Rundschau*; *Handelsblatt*; *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung*; *Die Tageszeitung*; *Der Tagesspiegel*; *Die Zeit*.

differ? From 30 August, the Wahl-O-Mat offers help’, *Welt Online* 2017; ‘The Wahl-O-Mat is a useful tool for finding your preferred party in the political jungle’, *Die Tageszeitung* 2002).

- Turning to influence on the quality of the debate, the Wahl-O-Mat is seen as focusing the discussion on facts and salient issues. One journalist said it ‘brings to light what was often overshadowed by personalities in this election: content, themes’ (Tholl 2017). Another commented that it raises topics ‘that would otherwise be dismissed or viewed as a general consensus’ (Langer 2017). Reporting also suggests that the Wahl-O-Mat counters the trend of assuming that all parties have the same policy goals: ‘When you answer the 38 questions of the Wahl-O-Mat, which the BPB has now put online, you will quickly realise that the differences between the parties are by no means so small that the election is superfluous or it does not matter whom you vote for’ (Schuster 2017).
- The number of users, particularly younger people, who share results with family and friends on social media was also mentioned. As one journalist for *Die Tageszeitung* described it, ‘the results are often so surprising that they are shared for fun. That’s why social networks are currently flooded with crazy Wahl-O-Mat results’ (Frank 2013). Furthermore, writers present the Wahl-O-Mat as a route to further information: ‘The Wahl-O-Mat is expressly not a voting recommendation; instead, it is supposed to encourage voters to engage further with politics’ (Haag 2017).

Concerns about the independence or impartiality of the Wahl-O-Mat and the BPB were non-existent. Indeed, one journalist said, ‘There is no trace of an agenda in [the BPB’s] questions’ (Schuster 2017). Still, there are some criticisms of the Wahl-O-Mat. Some journalists criticised the type of information provided to voters, suggesting the questions are largely about fringe or ‘exotic’ issues, or are too far-fetched. One article, for example, remarked:

As we clicked away, we were a bit surprised by the choice of the 38 questions. Animal testing? Organic farming? Speed limits? Adoption rights for same-sex couples? Female manager quotas? Hmm, although we certainly have opinions on these issues, these questions aren’t really central to our voting decision (Maxeiner and Miersch 2009)

Others complained that the results gave a selection of politically distant parties or included minor or ‘joke’ parties: ‘Wahl-O-Mat leads to difficult constellations. For example, a young first-time voter was equally aligned to the Pirate Party and the CDU according to the programme, because he agreed that grammar schools should continue to exist but strongly disagreed with the idea of secret online surveillance’ (Dribbusch and Winkelmann 2009). Some journalists also questioned whether the Wahl-O-Mat truly encourages users to reflect on issues critically and whether users take their results seriously (*Der Tagesspiegel* 2017; Frankenberg 2013).

We explored these issues further in interviews with people who have experience of the Wahl-O-Mat. Marius De Bortoli, who is responsible for co-ordinating the answers for the Wahl-O-Mat and other VAAs for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), agreed that ‘in general, [...] it’s good to have these tools because they provide information in an easy and accessible way’. He was broadly satisfied with how parties could convey their policy positions through the Wahl-O-Mat, and found the additional information section particularly useful. He added that, through the Wahl-O-Mat, parties ‘can reach many, many people with our positions and also get people interested in politics, [who] normally wouldn’t look at our programme’ He saw the BPB’s legitimacy, neutrality and

independence as the main reasons parties decided to participate in the Wahl-O-Mat, and oversight by the Ministry of the Interior and parties was crucial to this. If it were to act or provide information in a non-neutral way, he was confident that this would be quickly taken up in parliament (De Bortoli 2018). An editor at *Handelsblatt Global*, Allison Williams, also expressed positive views, saying that, unlike traditional news outlets, the Wahl-O-Mat makes voters aware of the policies of all parties equally, rather than just focusing on the main parties (Williams 2018).

Still, there were also some criticisms in our interviews. Notably, while De Bortoli was overall happy with the quality of the questions, he expressed concern about the fact that a group of young, first-time voters decides on the questions to include. He suggested that broadening the editorial staff might be desirable so that questions are interesting for all ages (De Bortoli 2018).

Overall, it appears that the Wahl-O-Mat is widely regarded as a positive mechanism for providing information to the public and for improving the quality of discourse. Both the media coverage and interviews reinforced the positive perception of the BPB and its involvement in the Wahl-O-Mat. It is viewed as a trustworthy source of information; concerns about its independence, neutrality and credibility are non-existent. The media did highlight some aspects of the Wahl-O-Mat which might hinder its effectiveness, particularly in terms of how its content is developed and its results are presented and perceived. But such criticisms are rare.

Impact

The foregoing examination of the Wahl-O-Mat shows that this mechanism is seen as providing high-quality information and as enhancing the quality of the election debate by stimulating discussion among voters. Usage figures and user surveys conducted by Stefan Marschall, Director of Research on the Wahl-O-Mat, further reinforce these findings.

Federal usage figures have steadily increased, from 3.6 million users in 2002 to 15.7 million in 2017 (Table 6.3). This means that around a quarter of eligible voters used the Wahl-O-Mat before the 2017 federal election. In both absolute and relative terms, the number of Wahl-O-Mat users is extremely high.

Table 6.3. Wahl-O-Mat usage statistics for Bundestag elections

Year	Size of the electorate	Number of Wahl-O-Mat users	Users as a share of the electorate
2002	61,432,868	3,600,000	6%
2005	61,870,711	5,200,000	8%
2009	62,168,489	6,740,000	11%
2013	61,946,900	13,270,000	21%
2017	61,688,485	15,700,000	25%

Sources: BPB n.d. and the Federal Returning Officer 2018. NB: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Demographically, Wahl-O-Mat users are more likely than the electorate as a whole to be male, aged between 20 and 49 years, and university educated (Table 6.4). Over time, however, the proportion of female users has grown, and the age of the user base has shifted significantly and balanced out across groups. In 2017, voters under 30 made up around 23 per cent of users, a decrease of fifteen percentage points since 2005. People aged 40 years and over constituted 59 per cent of the user base, an increase of 23 percentage points since 2005. This is much closer to the electorate as a whole, 57 per cent of whom are aged over 40. According to Stefan Marschall, this shift is not due to a decrease in the proportion of younger voters who use the tool, but rather to the increase in users more generally, which now more accurately mirror the online population in Germany (Marschall 2018).

Table 6.4. Demographics of Wahl-O-Mat users

		2005 Bundestag election	2017 Bundestag election	Average across all federal and state elections	Electorate average
Gender	Female	44%	46%	37%	51%
	Male	56%	54%	61%	49%
Age	<20	11%	7%	7%	18%
	20–29	27%	16%	25%	25%
	30–39	26%	19%	21%	
	40–49	21%	20%	20%	
	50–59	10%	22%	13%	29%
	60+	5%	17%	9%	28%
Education	Did not attend university	70%	54%	50%	83%
	Attended university	30%	46%	50%	17%

Sources: BPB 2005 and 2009, Wahl-O-Mat Research 2013 and 2017, and Federal Statistical Office 2018a, 2018b and 2018c. NB: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Looking at the survey results for federal elections for the 2005–17 period (Table 6.5), user assessments of the Wahl-O-Mat are highly positive: respondents say that the quiz was fun, highlighted relevant issues in federal politics, and clarified differences among parties. There is some variation in these responses over time: since 2005, there has been a fourteen-point increase in respondents who state that the Wahl-O-Mat clarified the differences among parties, while the number saying that they had fun playing the quiz decreased by seven percentage points. The user assessments also suggest that the Wahl-O-Mat might influence political participation. Users are highly likely to talk about their results with others and this is consistent across the twelve-year timeframe (an average of 72 per cent). Around half of respondents state that they would seek further political information after using the Wahl-O-Mat, and this varies only slightly over time.

Table 6.2. Users' perceptions of the Wahl-O-Mat

		2005	2009	2013	2017
Assessment of the Wahl-O-Mat	Clarified differences among parties	48%	64%	61%	62%
	Raised awareness of federal policy issues	44%	48%	54%	51%
	Had fun	94%	88%	85%	81%
Influence on political participation	Will talk about results	72%	71%	70%	74%
	Motivated to seek further political information	47%	52%	49%	55%

Sources: BPB 2005 and 2009, Wahl-O-Mat Research 2013 and 2017. NB: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

The Wahl-O-Mat's influence on the election debate via the media is, however, more limited. In the 30 days up to and including polling day for all federal elections since 2002, the Wahl-O-Mat is mentioned in only around one per cent of the election coverage (Table 6.6) – though this has tended to rise over time.⁴ An explanation for this limited presence might be that, once the tool is live and has been publicised, journalists are no longer interested in reporting on the Wahl-O-Mat itself – something which our interviewees confirmed.

Table 6.3. Total media coverage

	Mentions of the Bundestag elections	Mentions of the Wahl-O-Mat	Coverage of the Wahl-O-Mat as a share of the elections
2002	1,472	10	0.70%
2005	2,460	14	0.60%
2009	3,671	39	1%
2013	3,601	41	1.10%
2017	6,063	87	1.40%
TOTAL	17,267	191	1.10%

The extent of the Wahl-O-Mat's impact on the broader quality of discourse during elections is hard to ascertain on the basis of the evidence available. It would appear that its direct effect on the debate in the media is limited, as journalists primarily publicise and describe the Wahl-O-Mat rather than engage with the issues included in it. Similarly, our interviewees did not think that politicians would directly refer to the Wahl-O-Mat in public statements during an election campaign. But evidence from different sources does indicate that the Wahl-O-Mat enhances the quality of debate

⁴ The search string used to capture references to the federal elections was: 'Bundestagswahl' OR ('wahl' AND 'Bundestag') OR 'wahlkampf'.

among voters, who are likely to discuss their Wahl-O-Mat results and seek further political information.

Concluding Remarks on the Wahl-O-Mat

Our analysis of the German Wahl-O-Mat suggests that VAAs can be effective in providing voters with high-quality information and shaping the tone of debate during election campaigns. While it primarily reaches those who are already engaged in politics, the Wahl-O-Mat is widely used and positively viewed. The information it provides is seen as accurate and, generally, relevant, though the media highlighted some concerns in the latter regard. The involvement of young people in the process allows for some bottom-up input in the development of the VAA. While some suggest broadening the composition of the editorial staff, the general perception is that it is good to have citizens themselves select topics and statements.

In addition, the evidence strongly suggests that public sponsorship by the BPB is fundamental to the Wahl-O-Mat's efficacy and wide reach. The BPB provides funding and resources and has wide access to promotional opportunities which contribute to the tool's wide public reach. The BPB is, furthermore, perceived to be completely impartial and independent. This is the result both of its organisational structure (any concerns about bias would be quickly picked up and discussed in parliament) and of its historical development as an active promoter of democratic and political education. This affected both initial political buy-in and continued party engagement. The BPB's long-standing experience in offering political and civic education means that the information provided in the Wahl-O-Mat is seen as trustworthy.

The BPB's view of itself as the resource-giver and co-ordinator of the Wahl-O-Mat, rather than its primary developer and final decision-maker, seems to further protect the Wahl-O-Mat's independence and impartiality. This less direct level of involvement brings the Wahl-O-Mat towards the second model of VAA delivery we identified earlier (where the state sponsors or endorses a VAA, as in New Zealand), even though the BPB is involved to varying degrees at all stages of the process.

Though there are no significant concerns about the tool's operability, perceptions and impact, speaking with those who have experience of the Wahl-O-Mat highlighted a widespread view that the success of this VAA and the positive perceptions of state involvement in providing neutral information are contingent on certain features of German political and media culture. Applying a similar system to a different polity, such as the UK, might not be straightforward. Our interviewees, in fact, argued that it might be difficult for a state actor, tasked with providing impartial information, to be viewed as legitimate and credible in other countries.

Lessons for the UK

We conclude this examination of VAAs by considering what lessons might be drawn for the UK context. These points will be further developed in Part 5 of this report.

VAAs have now become a permanent feature of UK elections, with different tools being developed by a variety of civil society organisations. Their development is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with different methodologies and formats being trialled. In addition to increased

dissemination and usage, VAAs are becoming widely recognised as mechanisms for providing high-quality information to the public and for stimulating discussion and perhaps even turnout.

Unlike VAAs available in other countries, however, the development of such tools in the UK has been the sole preserve of civil society organisations, which lack adequate time and resources to invest in the creation of VAAs and must therefore rely on philanthropic funds for these efforts. In addition to threatening the very development of VAAs, lack of funds and resources constrains the impact, reach and legitimacy of these tools.

But we believe that the effectiveness and reach of VAAs in the UK could be significantly improved: we envision VAAs forming part of the national conversation around election time and offering high-quality content that is responsive to different voters' interests, needs and concerns. This chapter has explored different ways of doing so. We quickly excluded pursuing a commercial model (based on advertising or data mining) to fund VAAs: this would not only be contrary to the values of the civil society organisations that develop these tools, but could also significantly reduce the quality, independence and legitimacy of the information they provide. Private media companies – while being an improvement on the purely commercial model – would also risk being accused of partiality and may not have an equal reach across all parts of the population.

We therefore considered whether some form of public support – whether through a public broadcaster or an official public body – might be feasible, and to what extent it might contribute to enhancing the impact and reach of a VAA. Based on the evidence set out in this chapter, it seems that, for VAAs to reach their full potential in the UK, some form of public support is needed. The evidence from the VAA community and civil society organisations supports this view. There is widespread agreement that the state should not be involved directly in producing the tool and its content – there are genuine concerns about impartiality and the appropriateness of state involvement in this regard. Rather, a public body could sponsor the development of a single, official VAA or of multiple VAAs developed by different organisations and aimed at different segments of society, hosted on a single 'information hub'.

Support would primarily be in the form of funding, endorsement and promotion. Funding would allow developers to focus on building a methodologically rigorous and well-designed VAA. A well-developed UK VAA could thus ensure, for example, that all parties are included and that topics and policy issues are accurately portrayed, weighted and relevant to the public. The VAA could also include information on candidates and their positions on constituency-level issues. The example of the Wahl-O-Mat shows how having a longer timeframe allows for an iterative process between developers and political parties, and thus helps ensure the accuracy and quality of the information provided. The credibility brought by public sponsorship could also help developers to bring academics, journalists and experts on board to help with the tool's development.

Increased funding opportunities and public support would allow developers to ensure that the VAA is accessible to all electors and user demographics, and that it is protected from security breaches. The VAA's design and language should make it accessible to all potential users, including those with disabilities. Users should be able to complete the quiz on a variety of platforms (e.g. simple webpage, social media, mobile application) and to customise their experience by selecting the number and type of questions they wish to answer, and by having access to additional quizzes or information. For example, a voter may wish to use a 'regular' VAA to find out about parties' positions on certain topics and may then decide to take a more in-depth look at individual parties'

policy programmes through another online quiz. Or – as is the case with the BPB – the website could offer additional educational materials on political and civic education topics. Furthermore, there is growing concern about interference in our election processes, and that the digital aspect of VAAs makes them particularly vulnerable to hacking and security breaches. Proper funding is needed to respond to this challenge.

Through public sponsorship, an official VAA or VAA platform could reach a wider audience. For example, it could be given access to television broadcasts or a link to the VAA could be included on polling cards or at the end of media articles about the elections, as VAA developers in the UK have called for. It is highly unlikely that the Wahl-O-Mat would have secured the collaboration of pub and cinema chains, and especially a large multinational corporation such as McDonald's, were it not for state sponsorship. In Australia, Vote Compass's collaboration with the main public service broadcaster means that this VAA was promoted on ABC's website and thus had a considerable online reach.

The credibility and legitimacy offered by the involvement of the state might also stimulate parties to engage with the VAA and more actively promote it among the public. As the German case has shown, the involvement of a highly respected state agency was crucial to their participation in the Wahl-O-Mat. Political buy-in might also help formalise VAAs within the election calendar – thus ensuring, for example, that manifestos are published well in advance of polling day so as to allow VAA developers to incorporate any new policies or make amendments to the tool. Having a more centralised process would also benefit the parties, which would no longer be asked to answer questions from multiple organisations.

Concerns remain about the legitimacy of the information provided by VAAs and about the trust and credibility of developers and sponsors. As emphasised by most people with whom we spoke in the UK, any official VAA or platform would need to be supervised by an independent advisory board, which would oversee and scrutinise the development process and ensure that the information provided is impartial and accurate. This could be made up of academics, representatives of political parties, and election administrators, as has been suggested to us. Creating spaces for citizen input is another way to address such concerns. Citizens, for example, could be asked to assist in the selection of topics or statements, so that the information provided in the VAA more accurately reflects the interests and concerns of the electorate, and prevent criticism on the grounds that topics are disparate or far-fetched. Many of our UK interviewees thought that this kind of involvement would be desirable – and would be feasible with more generous funding. In this regard, the German case illustrates the importance of having a population-wide sample to ensure that the topics included in the VAA are relevant to all citizens, rather than merely young and first-time voters. Citizens could also provide feedback on the additional features the VAA should include, such as questions on leaders' personalities. How citizens can be involved in such processes will be examined further in Part 5 of this report.

Voting advice applications are only one mechanism which can be implemented to improve the quality of discourse and debate. The remaining two chapters in this Part examine two further strategies which can supplement the information provided by a VAA during election or referendum campaigns.