building verto the methodology behind the bite the ballot and demos vote match tool

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INTRODUCTION

This document outlines the methodology behind the Bite the Ballot and Demos Voter Advice Tool Verto. A Voter Advice Tool (also known as a Voting Advice Application or VAA) is an online quiz that helps users understand where different political parties stand on key policy issues. While many other Voter Advice Tools exist, Verto is unique in that it has been designed for a target audience of 16 to 25 year olds, especially those who may be switched off by traditional political engagement.

With Bite the Ballot leading on the design and promotion of Verto among this target demographic, Demos' role has been to design the policy statements and party positions – ensuring that Verto is neutral, fair and balanced to all the political parties. This is something that we have taken extremely seriously and we've produced this document to explain in detail the process that we've undertaken, the decisions that we made and why we made them.

Why we created Verto

Demos is an independent, non-partisan public education charity. We are by law, not aligned with any political party and are forbidden to work to unduly benefit one political party over any others. Moreover, the Demos team who worked on Verto is politically diverse: their results on Verto span the political spectrum. Our organisational focus on methodological rigour and the accessibility of our outputs ensures that our work is accessible and relevant to a broad audience, and makes us well-suited to safeguard the neutrality, accuracy, rigour and balance of Verto's design.

Our efforts to build Verto in partnership with Bite the Ballot have been a natural extension of our concern for declining trust and engagement in politics – particularly among younger generations – as well our optimism regarding the potential roles that social media and new technologies can play in our democracy.

In the past year, Demos' Citizenship and Political Participation programme has launched three reports into youth political engagement and digital democracy, which have guided our approach to the production of the tool.

Introducing Generation Citizen, launched in February 2014, explored the attitudes of the generation that will follow Generation Y: those who are currently between the ages of 14 and 18. We found that, while teenagers do not see themselves as interested in traditional politics, many do see themselves as engaged and passionate about social issues (and a majority of their teachers agree). Unlike previous

generations of young people who looked to the ballot box to make a difference, this generation has a range of new tools to make a positive impact: volunteering and social action, social media, career choices and their desire to set up socially beneficial businesses and social enterprises.

More recently our report *Tune In, Turn Out*, produced in support of Vinspired's Swing the Vote campaign, looked at the attitudes of young voters ahead of the general election in May. That report found that the topic issues that concerned young people were living costs, affordable housing, the NHS, unemployment and the gap between the rich and the poor. We also found that the biggest barriers to turnout among young people were a lack of knowledge of party positions, and a feeling that all the parties are the same. The report also revealed a significant appetite for politics to move online, with two thirds saying they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online.

The third report, produced in partnership with Demos' Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, was *Like, Share, Vote*, launched in November 2014. This report looked at how social media and new technologies can mobilise voter turnout, particularly among young people. Based on our own experiences using social media to gather data (including gathering over 13,000 completed surveys from Facebook supporters of anti-immigration groups across Europe using social media advertising tools), this report highlighted current best practice for using social media and new technologies to mobilise turnout – particularly among groups with historically low turnout, like young people. One of the key findings of the report concerned the growing importance of interactive and shareable Voter Advice Tools and online quizzes, which tap into the patterns of behaviour that young people display on social media sites, whilst also addressing the barriers to voting identified above.

Across Europe, these tools have been shown to strengthen political engagement and increase voter turnout. The main Dutch voter advice application, *Stemwijzer*, was used 4.9 million times in their 2012 elections, while in Germany, the state-sponsored *Wahl-O-Mat* was used 13.3 million times. There are excellent tools already in the UK: the most well known being *Vote Match*, which was used 1.2 million times in 2010, as well as more recent tools like PositionDial.

Nonetheless, our research identified gaps in this growing marketplace. Firstly, very few if any such tools were designed with a specific age demographic (for example young people) in mind. Often the language used was complex and could potentially be off-putting to younger users who were not comfortable with politics. The same was often true of the design of these tools, which have often been dictated by academic requirements. While these tools of course need to be academically rigorous – and they can produce a huge amount of relevant data for

academics – this often leads to design principles or aesthetics being very much a secondary consideration, reducing its appeal to young or politically less confident users.

These gaps in the market, in the context of an increasingly busy Voter Advice Tool marketplace, stimulated us to create Verto. Bite the Ballot and Demos have aimed to design Verto to ensure that it focuses on the issues that young people care about, and endeavoured to explain policies in plain, simple language without presupposing any political knowledge or leaving any political term or concept unexplained. Moreover, we've designed the tool for the 'swipe' generation, who may be most likely to use such a tool in short windows of 5 minutes or less: allowing them to get immediate feedback based on answers to just a few policy statements, rather than requiring them to run a gauntlet of 30 or more questions before receiving any feedback. Yet, despite our desire to make a tool that is easy-to-use and accessible to the less politically experienced user, we've sought to ensure that Verto is at the same time academically robust and completely fair and neutral. This document explains how we did this.

Every Voter Advice Tool is created as a result of a series of difficult methodological decisions. These choices include which issues to focus on, what parties to include, what weighting system to adopt, and what information to provider users on the results page (e.g. links to polling place locations, or party manifestos). No tool is perfect, nor can any tool be a comprehensive presentation of party policies and positions. Indeed, even conceptually speaking, Voter Advice Tools can only effectively guide users through an issues-based analysis of the parties, and considerations of trust, individual political personalities and other subjective decisions all contribute to a person's eventual voting decision. This being said, Voter Advice Tools can be an effective guide, and a fun political education tool through which to engage people who are otherwise uninterested in or not confident about politics and political decisions.

It is our hope that Verto will be used by large numbers of young people between now and polling day, and that it will convince at least some young people who may be disillusioned and distrustful of politics of the importance of voting on 7th May.

THE METHODOLOGY BEHIND OUR VOTE MATCH TOOL

Our main methodological considerations

The key principles that guided the development of Verto were the following:

- **Accuracy:** The need to give a truthful view of the political parties' policies
- **Neutrality:** The need to ensure careful balance so as not to unduly favour any political party
- **Accessibility:** The need for the tool to be easy to understand and easy to use
- **Relevance:** The need to ensure that the statements and issue areas covered subjects that young people are interested in
- **Transparency:** The need to be clear why we designed Verto as we did

In order to ensure that these were met, Demos undertook the following activities:

- A review of existing Voter Advice Tools in the UK and Europe to determine best practice approaches to design and methodology
- A review of research into young people's attitudes from a variety of surveys, including Demos / Vinspired, Ipsos Mori, YouGov, Ashcroft, and Sky / Survation youth poll
- The creation of a Steering Group of experts, including political scientists, academics and Voter Advice Tool experts, to advise on the wording of the statements and the design to ensure neutrality and accuracy
- The use of focus groups and testing sessions with young people (16-25 year olds) from a range of backgrounds and in a range of contexts, from schools to social media company headquarters, to ensure that the statements were accessible and relevant to the target audience that the tool was designed for
- Extensive consultation with the policy teams of all the political parties to ensure that our representation of the policy positions included in the tool were accurate

What follows is a detailed breakdown of our methodology, explaining exactly what decisions we made at key points of the developmental process and why.

Selecting the policy areas covered in Verto

Voter Advice Tools consist of a series of policies statements that are grouped into policy categories, like 'Health', 'The Economy', or 'Education'. Many tools, though not all, present these categories to the user either at the beginning or end of the user experience, and ask the user to choose the ones that are most important (or sometimes least important) to them, for example through a ranking or prioritisation system.

Most Voter Advice Tools present users with around 10 issue categories. In Verto, we have chosen the following 13 categories:

- Foreign affairs
- Economy
- Immigration
- Health
- Jobs and Work
- Paying Tax
- Welfare and Benefits
- Living Costs
- Education
- Crime and Justice
- The Environment
- Democracy
- Equal Rights

The selection of these categories was an iterative process that included input from:

- A review of surveys of young people's top concerns
- Focus groups and test sessions with young people
- Consultations with our Steering Group
- Consideration of the parties' policy areas, and areas of key difference between the parties.

Our decision to include a quite long list of categories (13, for 39 statements in total) was taken in light of the design of the tool. Verto's design allows users to dip in and out of different 'issue areas' and see their results at any time – as opposed to requiring the user to answer every question before being shown a result. Because of this choice – intended to better fit the tools' design with typical patterns of online behaviour amongst young people – we were able to be more inclusive in terms of 'issue areas' and the policy statements represented in Verto.

Selecting statements and determining party positions

For every 'issue area' in the above list, we sought to produce three policy statements, in order to safeguard a general balance between topics in the tool. Across the Voter Advice Tool marketplace, a wide range of types of statement or questions are presented to users in order to help them explore their political preferences. These can range from very broad, abstract statements of political preference, to statements designed to draw out user's political preferences across a left-right spectrum, to very specific and detailed policy statements. Two of the most common types of statements used in Voter Advice Tools are:

- Statements that represent values or general policy preferences without specific details. Tools that use this method include the European Parliamentary Elections quiz *EUvox*.
- Statements that represent detailed policies taken from party manifestos or other official party sources. Tools that use this method include *Voteforpolicies.org.uk*.

Some Voter Advice Tools, like *ISideWith*, use a mixture of both types of statement.

Our approach represents a middle-way that allows for simple statements that are nonetheless focused on detailed policy pledges or commitments. In order to select the party statements, we conducted a comprehensive review of publicly available information pertaining to the policy proposals and commitments of the political parties. This included a review of political party websites, speeches, press releases, votes and other coverage by major media organisations.

The policy statements in Verto have been designed to highlight key differences in policy between the political parties. Some statements relate directly to a particular party's pledge, while others are an amalgamation of several parties' slightly differing policies.

As well as deciding on the format of the statements, we also had to decide how best to position the parties in relation to each statement. One of our key decisions in this regard was to code parties in a binary manner; that is to say coding policy statements as either disagree or agree, without the 'neither agree nor disagree' or an equivalent option often supplied in other Voter Advice Tools.

We made this decision for a number of reasons. The most important was that we wanted to create a tool that didn't allow parties to sit on the fence on key issues. We wanted the question not just to represent the positions of the parties, but to an extent to challenge them with regard to issues that young people feel strongly about.
Additionally, the presentation of a binary choice to users makes the process clearer and simpler. It should be noted however that users are still presented with a 'don't know option' as there is no requirement to complete any number of statements before accessing the results page.

In most cases, we were able to determine every party's stated position on a given policy. However, our binary approach means that in some cases, a lack of distinct policies on a certain subject has been taken as support for the status quo. For example, with regards to the statement *'When hiring new staff, businesses should have to select people to interview without knowing their names to stop bosses discriminating against someone on the basis of their gender or skin colour'*, UKIP has no planned reforms or

stated positions, and therefore we have assumed that they agree with the status quo – thereby disagreeing with this statement. To buttress this approach and ensure accuracy, we have painstakingly tracked the source material for a party's position and are maintaining a justification document. Moreover, we shared all of our policy statements with the policy teams of each of the parties to check that their views were accurately reflected. It's worth noting that this was – as might be expected – an interesting process. Some of the parties lobbied to change language or positions to fit their narratives, but on the whole everyone we engaged with was fair and reasonable. We received feedback on our statements from all of the parties included in Verto, although not all parties responded to the final iteration of statements that we sent to them in advance of the tool's launch.

Arguably, the exclusion of a 'neither agree nor disagree' option could lead to the positions of some parties being represented less accurately. However, we have endeavoured to avoid this through our choice of statements, and the final product has been a Voter Advice Tool that represents clearly the positions of all the parties on every statement.

Because our statements represent the positions of multiple parties, in most cases, there is more than one party on both sides (agree and disagree) of a statement. In a few instances this is not the case, and the position of a single party is distinct from the position of the others.

One of the main challenges in our approach has been to find enough statements on which all parties have a position, but on which there is significant disagreement. A key requirement of an effective Voter Advice Tool is to avoid issues where the positions of the parties are unanimous; at the same time, we also particularly wanted to ensure that the issues young people are most interested in were represented in Verto. We have also been careful to ensure that differences between the larger and smaller parties (e.g. between Labour and the Greens) are represented as much as the differences between the major parties. The desire for a set of statements in which all parties have a roughly equal opportunity to differentiate themselves from all others has been balanced with the need for relevance and simplicity.

Choosing which parties to include
In order to provide a neutral and unbiased approach to which parties were included in the Voter Advice Tool and which were not, we decided to include parties based on two factors.

Firstly, the parties had to have achieved at least a one per cent vote share, either within England, Scotland or Wales – not the UK as a whole – at the last election. This distinction was drawn in order to ensure the relevance of Verto to voters from all of the UK's constituent countries: for example, this distinction allows the

representation of both of the 'national' parties in the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales.

Secondly, the parties had to also be predicted through formal polling to win over one per cent at the 2015 election. We decided to add this criterion in order to ensure that Verto took account of the rapidly changing electoral landscape of the United Kingdom – for example the rapid and severe decline of the British National Party.

As a result of these guiding considerations, we have chosen to include the following parties:

- The Conservative Party
- The Green Party
- The Labour Party
- The Liberal Democrats
- The United Kingdom Independence Party
- The Scottish National Party (for users in Scotland)
- Plaid Cymru (for users in Wales)

Verto presents different party options to users in England, Wales and Scotland, to reflect the differing choices of these users. For example, Welsh users are presented with the UK parties or their national associations (Green, Liberal Democrat, Labour, Conservative and UKIP) and Plaid Cymru, while Scottish users are presented with the UK parties and the SNP. English users are presented with just the main parties with candidates in England.

We have decided not to include Northern Irish parties in this iteration due to the complexity and unique character of the Northern Irish political landscape and resource limitations. We acknowledge however that this situation is not ideal, given the particularly low levels of political engagement amongst young people in Northern Ireland. We will therefore endeavour to include Northern Ireland parties in future iterations of Verto.

Our decision on party inclusion matches the recent decision of the broadcasters to feature these seven parties in a debate on 2 April 2015.

Calculating users' party matches

For each of the 39 statements in Verto, the user is given three options: They can swipe left to 'agree', swipe right to 'disagree', or leave a statement if they don't know where they stand on it.

Only the statements for which users actively state a position count towards their final score. This means users are free to answer as many or as few statements as they want, and allows individuals to consider which party is most aligned with their views on the basis of a single or handful of issues or statements.

The response of the user to the statement reflects their level of agreement with the parties, and this in turn is reflected in the results outputs. Only levels of agreement between a party and a user with regards to any given statement are recorded (not the extent of disagreement).

For example:

- An English VAA user is presented with the statement 'If you're earning the minimum wage, you shouldn't pay any income tax on your wages.'
- UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives agree with this statement. The Labour Party and the Green Party disagree with this statement.
- If the user selects 'Don't Know', no change is made to their results outputs. The statement does not count in the calculation of their overall result.
- If the user selects 'Agree', their support for the UKIP, Liberal Democrats and Conservative positions is recorded. The extent of their support with Labour and the Greens remains unchanged.
- If the user selects 'Disagree', their support for Labour and the Greens is recorded, and the extent of their support for UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives remains unchanged.

As the user answers the statements, the number of times a user agrees with the positions of any of the parties is collated. As each statement is completed, the level of similarity between a user's preferences and the party's positions is calculated.

How issues are weighted

Because we have designed Verto so that all the political parties either agree or disagree with the policy statements, all statements initially carry the same weight; that is to say, the statistical effect of agreement with a party regarding one statement is the same as any other statement.

However, a user can prioritise (or weight) topics by dragging them to the top of the list on their screen, in order to make statements related to that topic more important for their overall party affiliation score.

If a user selects an issue area – say the Economy – as the most important issue to them, then the user's answers to statements within that topic will carry twice as much value as any other statement. If they prioritise two issues, for example with Health as the most important, and Education as the second most important, then

statements within Health will be worth three times as much, and statements within Education twice as much as statements from any other issue area, and so on.

The effect of this prioritisation is to influence the results output. For example, if a user agrees with the Green Party on all three economy statements, then without prioritisation, this would matter as much as their support for the Conservative Party on all three education statements. However, if a user ranks the economy as the most important issue topic, then the results will reflect far greater support for the Green Party and far less support for the Conservative Party.

The glossary

While we have designed our statements to be simple and accessible, and not to require a prerequisite knowledge of policy debates, some more complex terms or concepts –like 'fracking' or 'EU' – might not be fully understood by all users. In order to help the least politically engaged to use this app, and in order to increase the value of Verto as a political education tool, we have included a glossary of key terms. If a user clicks on a key term on their device, a simple, accessible description of the term, or some contextual detail, will pop up on their screen.

For example, if a user clicks on 'people seeking asylum' in the statement 'The UK should welcome more people seeking asylum from war-torn countries', a description will pop up that reads:

> *An asylum seeker is someone who has left their own country fleeing war or persecution and is waiting to hear the outcome of their application to be taken in by another country.*

Why the results are presented as they are

At any point in the process, a user can access their results. Their results are presented as a series of ring graphs. The results show:

- **The 'Me' Dial:** This shows the extent to which a user agrees with the parties represented in the Voter Advice Tool, based on their responses to the statements they have completed.
- **The 'My Neighbourhood' Dial:** This is the aggregate result of all the Verto users in the same constituency as the user. This has been achieved through access to MySociety's YourNextMP API. We hope through this Dial to connect users to their local politics.
- **The 'Nation' Dial:** The aggregate results of other Verto users in the user's country.

The most important working part of these results is the 'Me' dial; the expression of the extent to which parties agree with the decisions a user has made. Most Voter

Advice Tools present a user's results not as a ring graph, but as a bar graph which displays to users in absolute terms the extent of their agreement with a party's policies. This might show them, for example that they agree with 50 per cent of Conservative policies, 30 per cent of Green policies and so on.

We chose to use a ring graph without these absolute percentages for two reasons. Primarily, we wanted to make the results more user focused. We didn't want to show the extent to which a user agreed with the various parties, but the extent to which the parties fit with a user's political preferences – to focus on the user's political profile, and not to so simplistically represent a ranking of parties. We also wanted to present the results in a more aesthetically interesting manner, and to allow a more fluid comparison of user's results with those of users in their constituency and the nation to which they belong.

The user is also presented with a breakdown of which party most agrees with their position by topic, so they can see which parties they agree with most on the issues that are most important to them, and so they can understand in more detail where the parties stand. This appears as the user answers the statements within topic areas. We are careful to present the party results as information that can help a user decide how to vote, as opposed to a concrete assessment of who they should vote for. This is because a lot of issues other than policy positions determine support for a party, such as trust in a party, confidence in leaders, local concerns and so on.

The 'My Neighbourhood' tab further breaks down into the results of other app users in the same area, and 'My Constituency', which tells the user which constituency they live in, based on their location input, and links to information about the candidates standing in their constituency on the Mysociety.org webite. This information is designed to help connect young people to the election on a constituency level.

The user's results can be easily shared at any stage through Twitter, Facebook or Whatsapp, via the social media sharing buttons directly below the results.

What sources did we use to determine party policies?
Our statements were first and foremost derived from open, official sources, such as press releases, speech transcripts, policy documents, votes or news reports from respected journalistic sources. All of our statements were then run past all the political parties represented in the VAA before publication, to ensure that they agreed that our representation of their policies was accurate.

Where we were unable to determine a party's position on a policy based on the information available, we have assumed support for the status quo, as described earlier in this document. All of our positioning decisions have been catalogued and formally evidenced.

Who was on our Steering Committee?

In order to assemble our Steering Committee, we conducted a comprehensive review of UK-based experts and academics from a range of disciplines, and drew on existing Demos contacts. We included experts with practical experience of Voter Advice Tool projects, political scientists and journalists. The following people generously gave us the benefit of their time and expertise by being part of our Steering Committee:

Dr Rosie Campbell, Birkbeck College
Professor Susan Banducci, University of Essex
Dr Nick Anstead, LSE
Dr Matt Wall, University of Swansea
Emily Rainsford, University of Newcastle
Nick Randall, University of Newcastle
Cristian Vaccari, Royal Holloway University
Ben Kisby, University of Lincoln
Jacqui Briggs, University of Lincoln
Jonathan Bright, Oxford Internet Institute
Chrysa Lamprinakou, UCL
Tom Louwerse, Trinity College Dublin
Dr James Sloam, Royal Holloway University
Dr Andy Mycock, University of Huddersfield
Shiv Malek, The Guardian
Ed Howker, Channel 4

Who funded this project?

Bite the Ballot covered the remaining costs associated with the technological development and marketing and promotion through a mixture of funding raised from an IndieGoGo crowdfunding campaign, Unbound Philanthropy and through investment from their core funding.

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The gap in voter turnout between young and older voters in the UK is the largest among all OECD countries. This has to change, and social media and new technologies must be at the forefront.

The main reasons young people do not turnout is the feeling that they don't understand the differences between the parties, and they feel that all the parties are the same. In our report, Like, Share,Vote, Demos highlighted the ability of interactive and shareable vote match tools and online quizzes to help tackle these barriers by presenting users with a means of determining which party their views are most closely aligned with.

Across Europe, these tools have been shown to strengthen political engagement and increase voter turnout. The main Dutch voter advice application, Stemwijzer, was used 4.9 million times in their 2012 elections, while in Germany, the state-sponsored Wahl-O-Mat was used 13.3 million times. There are excellent tools already in the UK: the most well known being Vote Match, which was used 1.2 million times in 2010, as well as more recent tools Vote for Policies and I Side With.

But while many of these tools exist, none have been designed with an emphasis on a younger demographic (primarily 16 to 24 year olds) - both in terms of the issues it focuses on and its design features -- who feel disengaged and uninspired by the political process. This is why we've developed Verto.

With Bite the Ballot leading on the design and promotion of Verto, with their exciting brand and links with young people throughout the UK, Demos' role has been to design the policy statements and party positions - and to ensure that Verto is fair, neutral and balanced. To do this we've sought the advice of academic experts, young people themselves and the seven main political parties contesting this election. This document explains in detail the process that we've undertaken and the decisions we made to design Verto.

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