AI in elections: A problem searching for a solution

Council of Europe, Tuesday, November 15, 2022

ministry of the interior and housing

VOTING IS AN
ACT OF FAITH

UNITED METHODIST
BUILDING

Who are we to discuss this?

How many data scientists present?
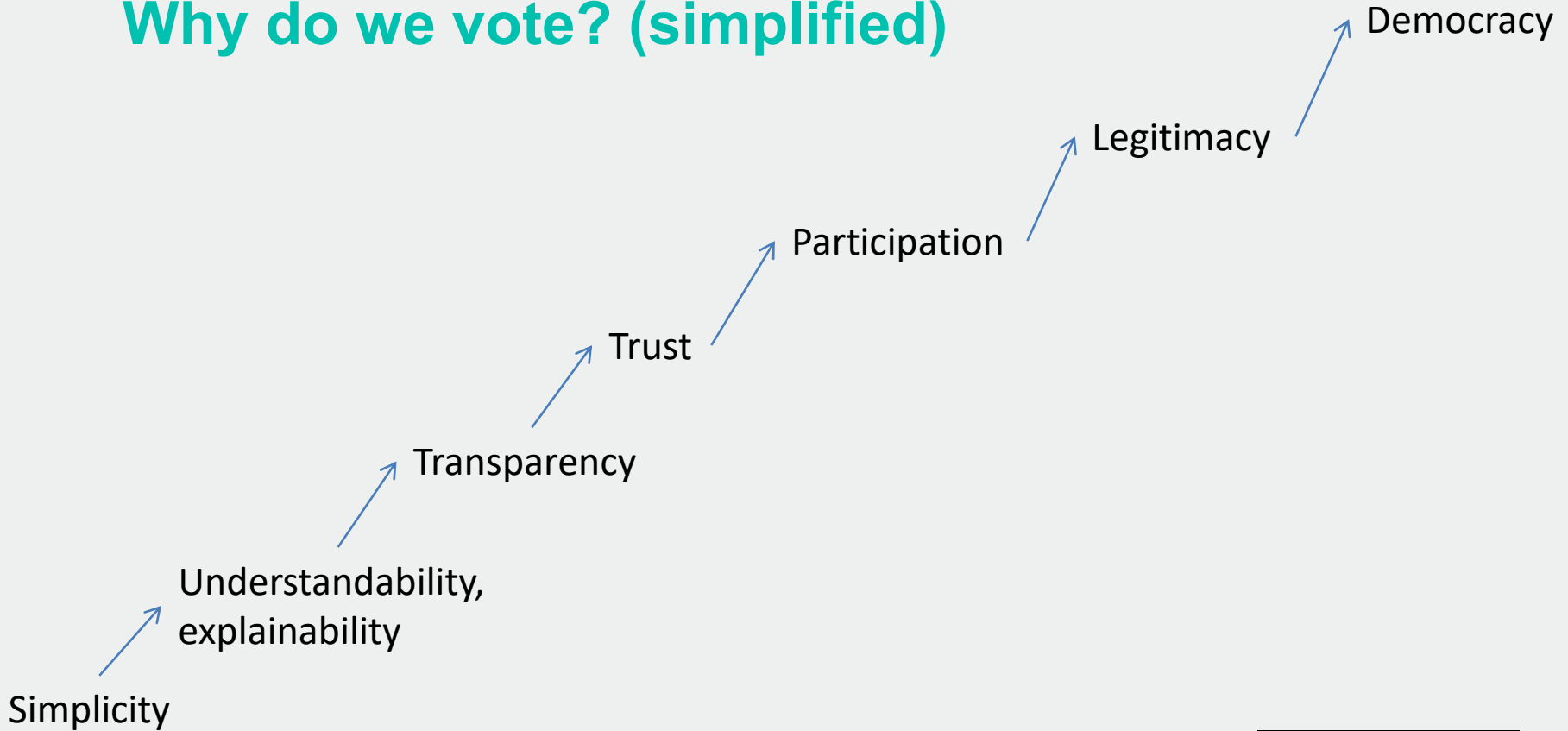What do we know about algorithms?

What is your problem?

Why should we talk about AI in elections?

- For whom is it a problem?
- For whom is it an opportunity?

Primum non nocere: First, do no harm

Why do we vote? (simplified)

Democracy

Legitimacy

Participation

Trust

Transparency

Understandability, explainability

Simplicity

Keep it simple …

We vote if we trust

We trust if we understand

We understand if we can

→ Introducing more complexity will harm trust, participation, integrity and legitimacy

Let's go back: Year 2000

We should get voting machines!
That'll be great for election integrity.

Year 2010

We should get internet voting!

That'll be great for election integrity.

But: Year 1897:

We should get secret voting!
That'll be great for election integrity.

(only this is procedure, not technology)

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The case for techno-scepticism

The Danish context

2012: E-voting almost introduced

2020: New election administration IT system goes down in flames

2017: Microtargeting in mobilisation campaigns almost introduced

2018: Cambridge Analytica scandal

Can AI reliably predict election outcomes?

I certainly hope not, and we should resist it.

"AI can
- Predict voter turnout
- Election results
- Predict # of advance vs. election day voters
- Reduce waiting times
- Ensure that elections run smoothly
- Make results more readily available."

Is this sufficiently true?...

Election system of Denmark

4,3 M eligible voters

Proportional representation

179 seats in parliament

Average turnout app. (85 pct. general elections)

All votes on paper only

All votes counted twice

No critical infrastructure or systems!

A recent case

Nov 2nd, 1.30 AM on election night in Copenhagen

A legal corner case appears. The tabulation IT system of Statistics Denmark cannot tabulate the results.

https://www.dst.dk/valg/Mandatfordeleren20220921.xlsx
From
https://www.dst.dk/valg/beregninger.htm

So how do we deal with AI?

1) It is out there. But don't embrace it.
2) Focus on The Fair Election: Fair rules. Fair press. Fair arguments.
3) Focus on the fact that many of the AI using actors in elections are key stakeholders: Politicians and press

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My claims

1) If you have an immensely complex election integrity problem that only AI can solve, the complexity is the problem. So simplify.
2) If your election integrity is flawed, you most likely know the cause(s).
3) Complexity harms election integrity. AI will increase complexity and therefore harm election integrity.

Ask instead:

Which voters are hampered in the voting process?

Which voters abstain?

Why do they?

What will it take for voters to support democracy in 20 years? 40?

       (hint: AI is not part of the solution)

… etc.

(but probably only researchers can answer those for you)

Thank you for listening!