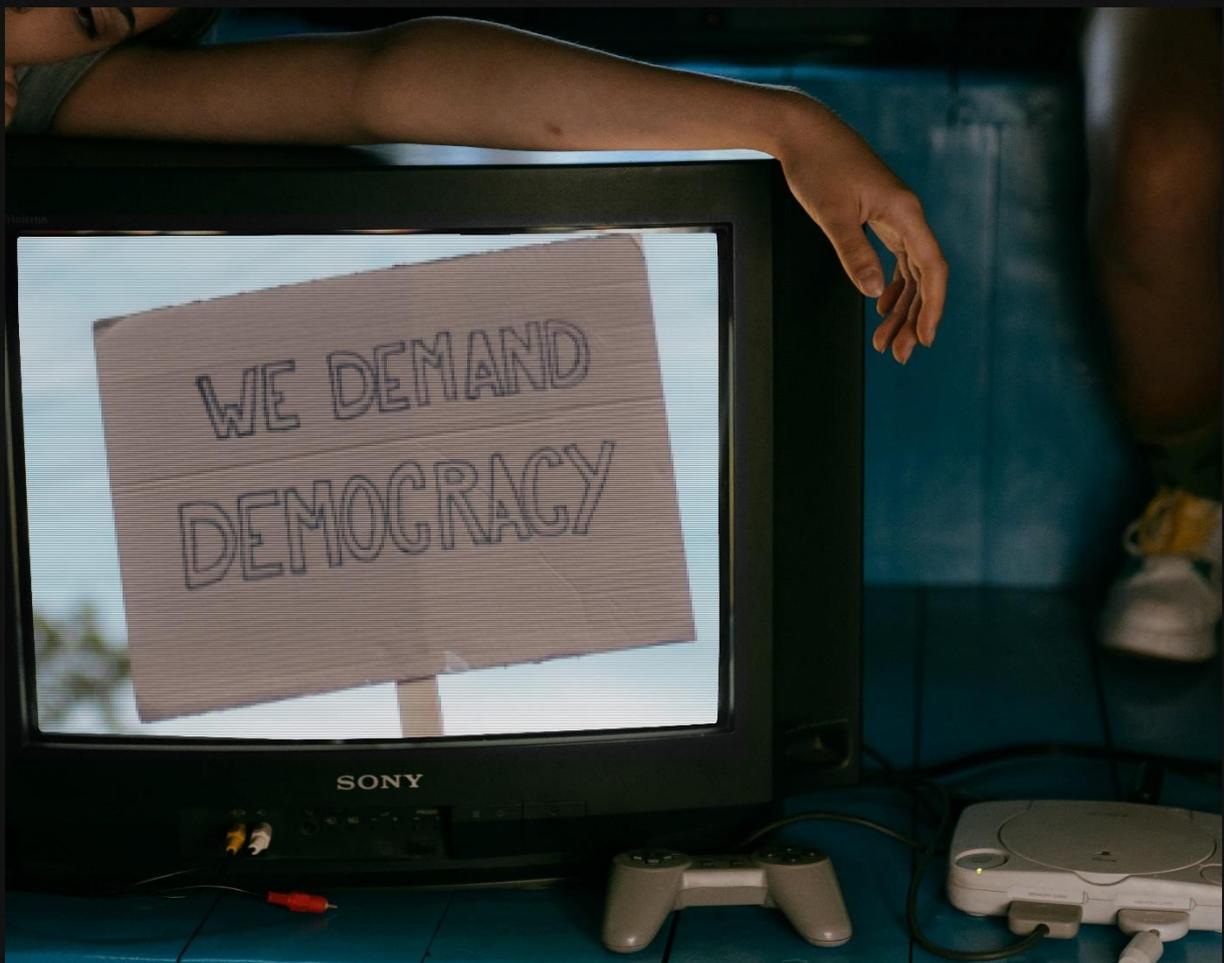


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Untitled. © Collage by Felix Zimmermann. Photos by cottonbro, Pexels, and Fred Moon, Unsplash.

Political Participation and Media Consumption

Participation rates during Swiss elections have been below 50% since 1979 (Bundesamt für Statistik 2019). Many young people do not feel truly represented by political parties or distrust politicians to act according to the will of the people (Golder & Jans 2019). In 2003, political scientists Bühlmann, Freitag and Vatter began categorising different kinds of non-voters. After further exploration, six non-voter groups were defined: "Content but disinterested," "Incompetent," [sic!] "Socially isolated," "Politically frustrated," "Voting only," (vote on initiatives but do not take part in elections) and "Unconventionally participating" (Fatke and Freitag 2015, 103). Thereof, the largest three groups were "Content but disinterested" (25%), "Incompetent" (20%) and "Socially isolated" (18%) (Fatke and Freitag 2015, 103). This shows us an interesting yet concerning mix between people passively agreeing with the government and people incapable to fully comprehend or interact with it.

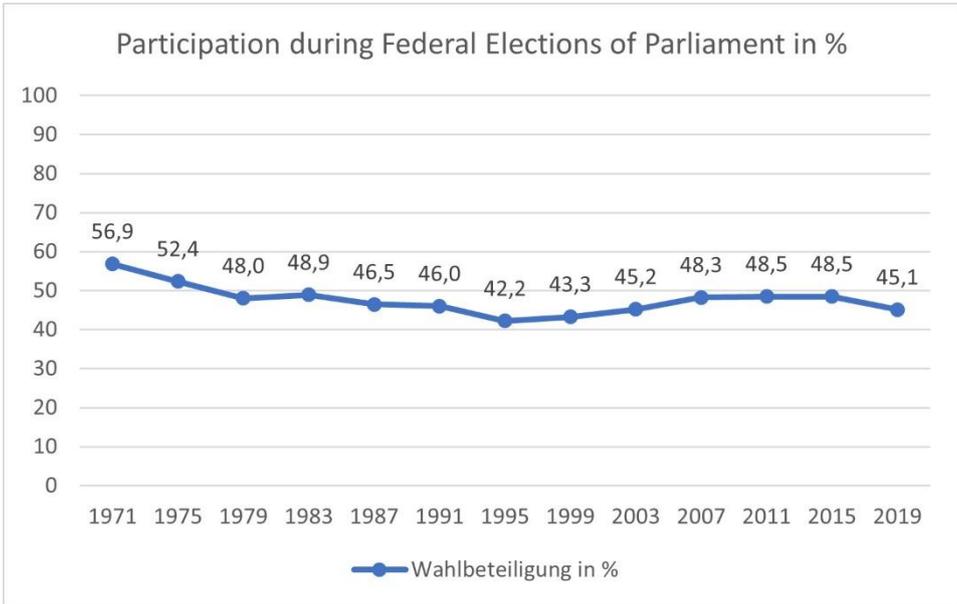


Figure 1. Swiss government agency for statistics (Bundesamt für Statistik 2019).

are especially interesting, since the people can shape the rules, the *Mechanics* that surround them. How individuals feel within their system could be compared with the *Aesthetics*, since every individual introduces a new mix to their own *Dynamics*. On an official level, politics often defines *macro mechanics*, which are slow to be agreed upon and often even slower to be implemented and experienceable in day to day life. A personal vote might be perceived more as a *micro mechanic*, since it is a short activity for voters – however, this vote might very well have long-term impact.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 95) describe the “magic circle” as the non-physical place where game experiences usually take place. The magic circle is separate from reality, and for the duration of play, its rules overwrite other norms outside the magic circle. According to their research, another essential aspect of games is the fact that the outcome is uncertain (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Now, we could argue that magic circles do not only exist in game contexts. If we compare them to cultural norms and values, every culture has their unwritten rules, which are followed by large parts of the population. When visiting different countries, we adapt to local rules – during the time of our stay, we enter a different magic circle. One could understand any political system as a magic circle, since every country has their own legislation and norms. The serious danger of isolated institutional *magic circles* lies in exactly the fact that they have the power to overwrite reality. We can see extreme examples in totalitarian systems, which work with hierarchies that can be climbed when following the rules, a monopoly on truth, unified performances and standardised appearances. As long as the magic circle holds, everything is allowed. Luckily, such extremes are exceptions. On another note, the uncertainty aspect which is present in most games is also present when politically participating in any political system. There are always fellow citizens and existing legislation to be considered and one never really knows if

the personal action had an effect. This might be part of the reason why the previously described *Unconventionally participating* or *Politically frustrated* non-voters are unhappy.

While the goal of a game is usually defined, there are challenges and limitations which keep players from reaching this goal. These challenges and obstacles are core aspects of any game (Brandse 2017). Providing the player with different, “meaningful choices” (Schell 2008, 179) in order to overcome challenges is another important task for game designers. Having the freedom to choose their actions is one reason why players have a sense of being in control while engaging in the “possibility space” (Bauer 2018, 35), which is created by the game system. Time investment and the ability to manage and shape the game reality gives players a sense of responsibility for the game world (Götz 2017). With regards to democratic participation, the first step for voters is to shape their own opinion. According to their thoughts, they can identify their political goals, be it societal change or personal contribution. This might be a point which *Incompetent* non-voters do not reach in the first place. While game challenges offer feedback, punishments and rewards, we could argue that the challenge in political education lies in the fact that voters need to understand political fields before making decisions on how to reach their political goals. Without awareness of the personal political opinion, goals derived thereof and the available options to reach them, it is difficult to define subjectively *meaningful choices*. Without meaningful choices or options available, it is difficult to establish a sense of participation, investment and ownership over the personal contribution to a political system.

On the opposite end of being in control is the element of chance, which keeps players on their toes, as they are anticipating the outcome of their action or a random event

in the game world. Players are often unwilling or unable to differentiate between chance and personal skill (Schell 2008, 183). The anticipation of the result leads to the release of dopamine, which fosters knowledge seeking behaviour (Weinschenk 2011, 121). Compared to the pace of social media and entertainment, politics works slowly and there are not a lot of perceived elements of chance. While it is certainly important for decision-makers to rely on facts and consideration instead of chance, this lack of novelty might be one of the reasons why disengaged voters are *Content but disinterested*. On the other hand, political conflicts and aggressive political debates add to the *digital stress*, which especially young people are confronted with on a regular basis.

Another major element of any game is the way in which it provides feedback to users (Fabricatore 2018). This feedback shows players how they are progressing towards their goal, it guides them through the game world and exposes limits or *forbidden* actions right as they are encountered. While every country has legal feedback mechanisms in place, there is not a lot of feedback given on an individual's political participation. At the moment, this feedback role is usually taken on by specific political parties, which create events for their voters, where they exchange, celebrate and discuss. *Socially isolated* non-voters, or people who do not identify with specific political parties do not have such a feedback system.

Clear goals, immediate feedback and a sense of control over one's own actions facilitate the experience of *flow*, which allows people to forget the world around them and truly invest themselves into a specific task (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). This state of mind can be sustained by providing tasks that are in balance between being too simple (boredom) or too difficult (anxiety) (Sherry 2004). Without clear goals, options on how to reach them or feedback on the personal contribution, there is not a lot of

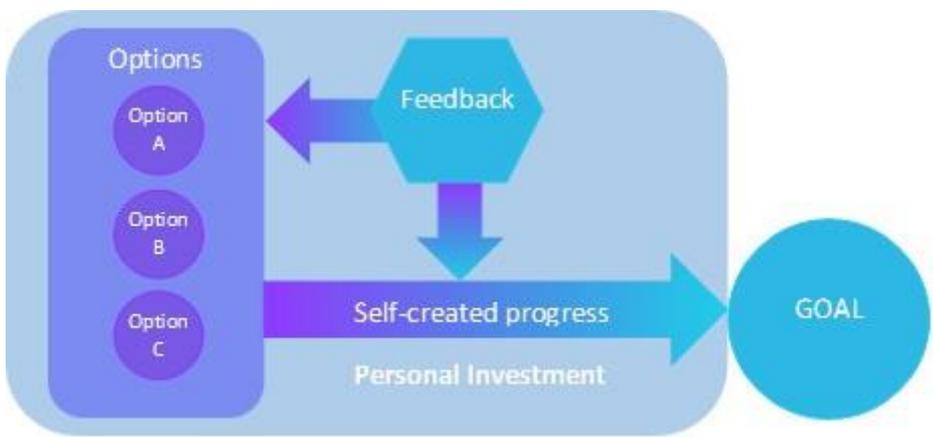


Figure 3. Basic model on game feedback.

As it was outlined in previous parts of this text, we can find similar themes in democratic systems. In order to create change, there needs to be a clear goal. This could be a desired change in society, legislation or the political landscape in a parliament. In order to reach political goals, voters need to be familiar with their system's rules and their *options* to work towards their goal. By choosing from their options on how they would like to work towards their political goal, voters can create their own progress towards reaching this goal. At this point, the biggest difference between democratic systems and game worlds becomes evident: *In a democratic system, there is often no direct, personal feedback on the voter's participation.* Even when looking at election results, the feedback can be delayed by days, weeks or months, and might never be experienceable in day to day life. In addition, being one voice amongst millions, there is no reason for voters to feel personally responsible for the outcome of an election. The feedback which *is* provided, is mostly given by parties and bound to ideology. There is no, or very little, personal feedback on personal progress with regards to political reflection and political learning. In order to motivate independent thinking, motivational strategies must be built around giving people feedback on their personal progression as they are working towards a deeper understanding of their personal political concerns. *Projekt CH+* aims to support voters in their familiarisation process with the options they have within their system,

and show them how they can act and progress towards their goal within the ruleset of their system. Most of all, the aim is to address the lack of personal feedback on personal political growth, by showing voters *their value* in the system and giving feedback on their *personal progress* within *their own* understanding and evaluation of political matters.

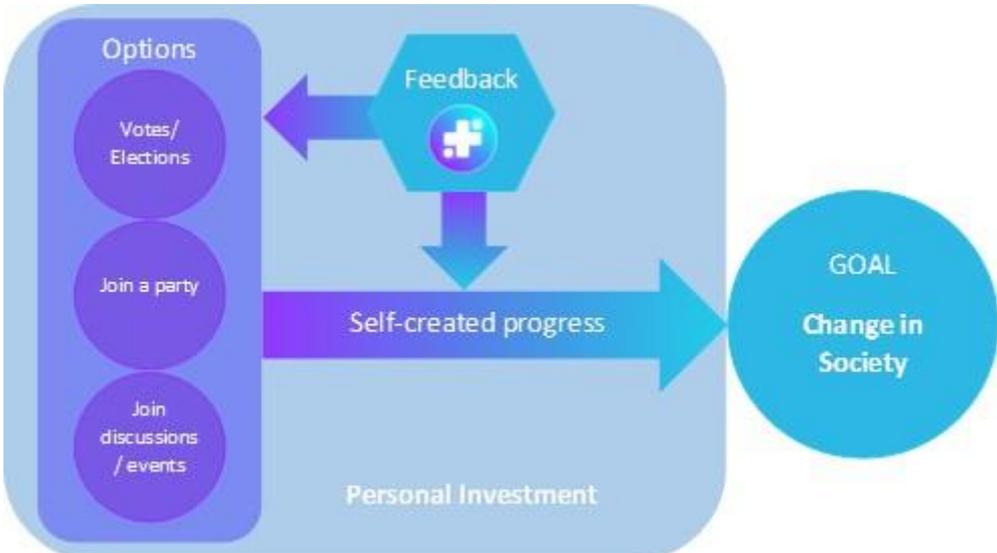


Figure 4. Feedback model: Comparison of a simple game structure with political participation.

Field Research. Federal Elections of Parliament 2019

We can read and theorise all day, but until we test and share our thoughts with others, there is not much to be gained. While I conducted interviews and short feedback sessions during the literature review and initial concept phase, I decided to set up a quantitative field study during the federal elections of parliament. The only problem: When the elections were around the corner, I had nothing to test. One month before the elections, my prototype was still on paper. It was clear that there would be no digital prototype which could be tested, at least not without personal instructions and basic explanations. With the federal elections only occurring every four years, I still had to take advantage of the fact that *now* was the time when users

time is displayed by a countdown. Once users start creating their own political profile, their political diagram appears as a backdrop behind the *Uristiär*, the main symbol on the cantonal flag of Uri. When they first enter the main menu, users see the flag of their municipality and a menu with 5 items, 4 of which are locked. By choosing the unlocked *Profiil* item, users are faced with their first challenge. By answering political questions, they create their own political profile. In order to receive their political diagram, they have to answer at least one of two official smartvote questionnaires, which have been implemented directly into our prototype.



Figure 5. Uri Prototype start and home screens, 2020 © Sophie Walker.

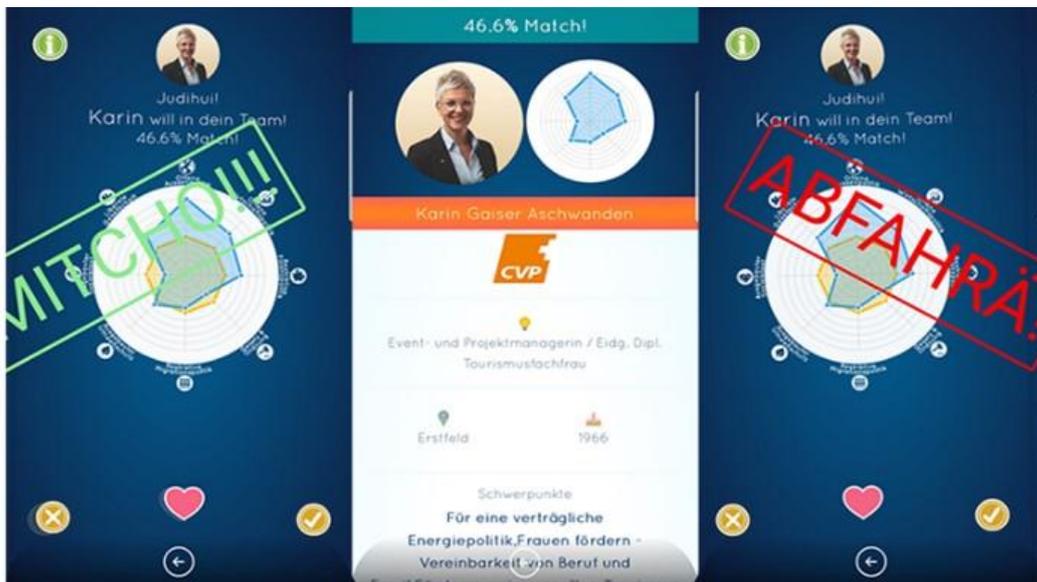


Figure 7. Uri Prototype *Üssortierä* functionalities, 2020 © Sophie Walker.



Figure 8. Uri Prototype *Favoritā* functionalities, 2020 © Sophie Walker.

Once they are happy with their ranking, they can continue to *Alli Liischtä*. *Alli Liischtä* is a structured overview of official political lists and lists created by the user. Adapted or newly created lists can be renamed and edited at any time. Users have the choice to copy official lists or to make their own list from the ground up. The first time they choose either option, *Mini Liischtä* is unlocked. *Mini Liischtä* is the centrepiece of the application, since this is the point where users can dynamically change and try out

Motivational Design Recap ii

Goal

The goal of the application is to help users create their own political list. This goal is clearly communicated from the first time users open the application and can always be seen on the main menu. A timer reminds users of their limited time resources to master this challenge until the elections are over. This exposure of time scarcity is inspired by the descriptions of Tracey Fullerton (2008).

Options

Users can base their choice of political candidates on various aspects: personal, political, or defined by users themselves. Overall, the aim is to give users a sense of ownership over their candidate selection by clearly providing them with options and asking them to invest time before making decisions. This approach is shaped by the motivational theories by Ulrich Götz (2017). When swiping through candidates, users experience chance and uncertainty of outcome, which are enticing game components according to Salen and Zimmerman (2004). In addition, Weinschenk states that chance and anticipation foster information-seeking behaviour (2011). To a lesser extent, these mechanics are picked up again when users can create their own list. At this stage, chance takes a backseat to a mixture between Lazzaro's (2004, 7) "easy fun" and "exploration," and a strategic approach to creating the best possible list with regards to the user's own opinions, the candidates' personal stats and the *team stats* of the entire list. Being able to accept or reject candidates puts users into a position of power. When ranking candidates, users are able to interact with candidates instead of being in a position where they merely receive information about them. Users are able to evaluate and act on this information, which allows them to make "meaningful choices," as described by Schell (2008, 179).

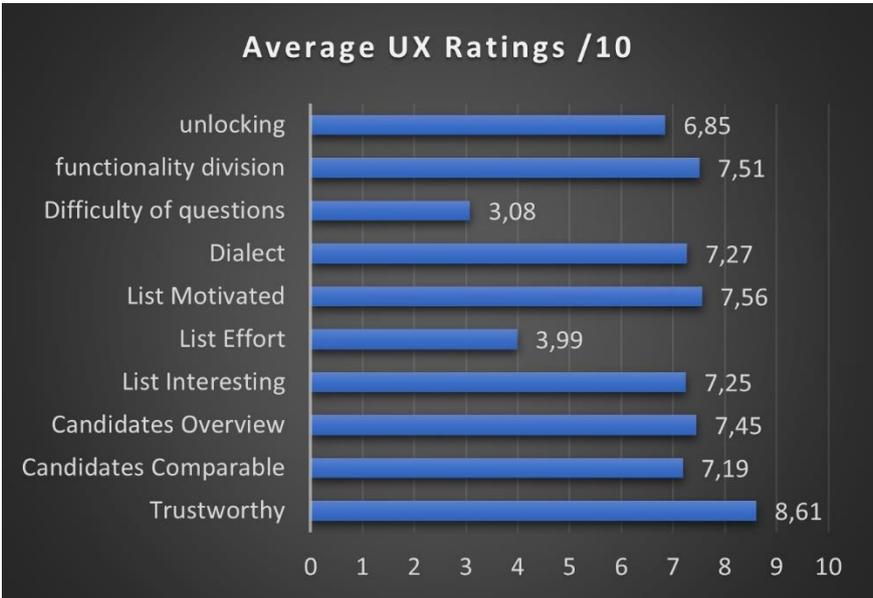


Figure 13. Average scores of the public group for various user experience questions.

From the respondents who voted during the elections, 74% used the application to create their political list. From this group, 59% created their own list from scratch, 24% voted for an edited list and 17% for an official list. While the prototype includes explanatory videos on the electoral system, it is important for future iterations of the prototype to point towards the implications of voting for a completely custom list instead of an official list, as this is something that voters might be unaware of. 71% of respondents confidently stated that they would use the final application and there were no responses explicitly stating that they would not use the application. This is an indication that the prototype is going into the right direction. Overall, the public ratings were higher than those of the other two groups who were part of the evaluation.

A/B Evaluation

55 students took part in an A/B evaluation of the prototype and smartvote. At this stage, there were no significant differences between the comparable functionalities of the prototype and smartvote, how users interacted with candidate profiles or how

they perceive politics. On the one hand this shows us that our solution measures up to an established system, on the other hand we see that there is still room for improvement. The biggest difference between the A/B groups was the user's interest towards political candidates, where our prototype group scored their interest for candidates as a 6.4/10, while the smartvote group scored it at 5.2/10. On the flipside, the respondent's subjectively perceived interest from candidates towards voters was rated slightly lower by the group who used the prototype (3.77/10) than the group who used smartvote (4.08/10). While this is a small difference, it shows that the prototype failed to establish a more personal sense of connection with candidates. Additionally, the prototype makes use of cheeky remarks about candidates who did not fill in their political profile on smartvote. It is possible that these remarks had a negative effect on the user's impression of candidates, so the phrasing in the next project iteration will be considered more carefully. With a small sample (n=55) and small A/B groups (An=26, Bn=29), it is not possible to draw final conclusions. It should also be noted that, since participants only used one application or the other, they could not directly compare the two applications and the features in which they differed.

Game Design Evaluation

Compared to the other groups who were part of the evaluation, game designers were stricter in their evaluation. Especially in the face to face feedback round, they criticised visuals, usability, the lack of playful elements and a final reward after having unlocked all functionalities. While the public group was content with their overview of candidates (7.45) and how they could compare candidates with each other (7.19), the expert group had a different opinion. They were not happy with their overview (5.94) and did not feel candidates were comparable (4.25).

The most prominent request for improvement of the prototype was the addition of more animations. While designers believed that the application needed work in the sound department, users wanted to see more videos.

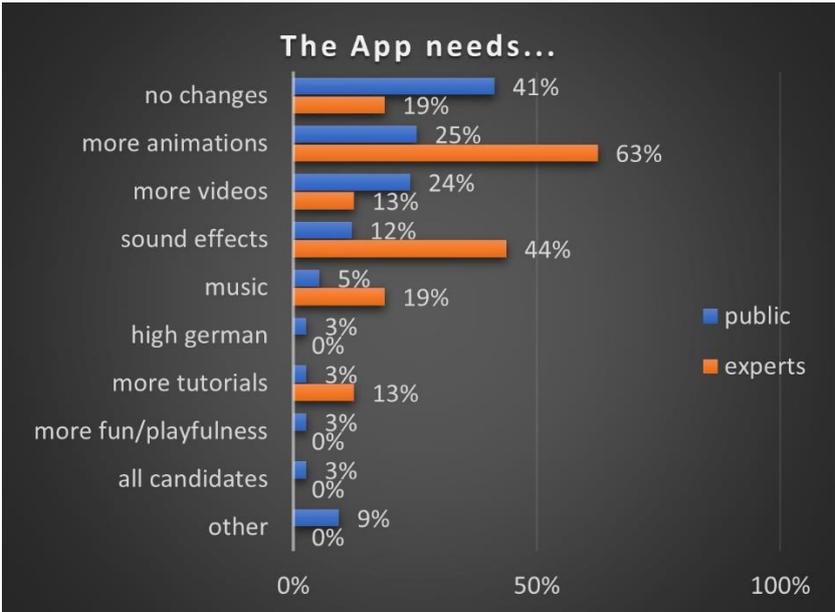


Figure 14. Most requested improvements of public respondents and game design experts.

In conclusion, the public prototype received high ratings for user friendliness, helpfulness and the visual style. The two most popular functionalities were the creation of the personal political profile as well as the personal list creation. The fact that the differences between the comparable functionalities of the traditional voting aid and the playful prototype were assessed as being small, was a disappointment at first. Personally, I had been hoping for more extreme results – regardless of whether they would have been positive or negative. This would have given a stronger indication of what areas to improve or develop further. On the other hand, it made sense to me that a master’s project and a prototype that was developed in 6 months would neither be the best thing ever created nor a magical cure for political self-education. While there are no significant differences between the comparable functionalities of the prototype and smartvote, it is also safe to say that the playful

