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Who would vote NOTA? Explaining a 'none of the above' choice in eight countries

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Abstract. In this study, we investigate who would vote 'none of the above' (NOTA) if this were available on the ballot paper using original data from eight European countries. In particular, we examine whether NOTA would be used by abstainers and voters to protest within the electoral process. We also test whether socioeconomic factors and specific and diffuse support for democracy and its institutions correlate with a NOTA vote. We find that having NOTA on the ballot would reduce invalid balloting more than abstention and much more than protest party voting. Our results also suggest that NOTA is related to socioeconomic status, political interest, political knowledge and distrust in political institutions and authorities, but not to broadly undemocratic attitudes. These findings have important implications for our understanding of the increasingly large amounts of abstention and invalid voting, as well as the growing distrust of political institutions, in democratic countries. They also hold lessons for electoral reformers.

Keywords: none of the above; support for democracy; invalid voting; voting behaviour; Europe

Introduction

Substantive electoral participation is vital to democracy. Yet, in recent elections the number of people deciding to abstain and the number of (voluntary or involuntary) blank and spoiled ballots is on the rise both in the developed and developing world (IDEA, 2016). Abstention as well as invalid voting are consistent with multiple and divergent interpretations (see Kouba & Lysek, 2019; Myatt, 2017). People may not turn out to vote to launch a message of protest (Hirschman, 1970; Kang, 2004), because they are alienated from politics (e.g., Adams et al., 2006), or due to a lack of information or interest about the issues at stake during the election (e.g., Bowler et al., 1992; Norris, 2011; Uggla, 2008). Satisfaction with the current state of affairs (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2016; Lipset, 1981) and voters' social status (Plutzer, 2017; Verba et al., 1995) are also linked to abstention. When it comes to blank and spoiled ballots, while some can be a genuine consequence of voting error, invalid voting has been shown to associate with discontent, as well (Superti, 2014).

The ambiguity surrounding abstention and invalid ballots has led reformers in several countries to advocate for the inclusion of a 'None Of The Above' (NOTA) option on the ballot paper (see also Alvarez et al., 2018). The main argument goes: '[…] by providing voters with such a ballot option, it is in principle possible for voters to send a clear signal of discontent or protest' (Damore et al., 2012, p. 895). In this regard, the NOTA option could be seen as a tool provided to citizens to protest within the electoral process while still participating.

There is an increasing number of places around the world that, at various levels of government, include a NOTA option. Besides Nevada, which has included it since 1976, an explicit 'blank vote' option is available on the ballot in Bulgaria, Colombia, Thailand and Ukraine. In India, the

Supreme Court ruled in 2013 that a NOTA option must be included on all electronic ballots to give voters the possibility to participate without voting for any of the candidates (Ujhelyi et al., 2019). More broadly, political organizations and citizen initiatives for the 'recognition' and computation of blank votes exist in several countries, including France and Spain.[1] Yet, as far as we know, no systematic individual-level investigations of voters' attitudes towards the NOTA option or its use currently exist.

In this paper, we aim to fill this research gap and systematically investigate which eligible voters would make use of the NOTA option if it were available on the ballot paper and why, with a strict focus on individual-level characteristics and intentions. We are agnostic about the merits or demerits of the NOTA option for election outcomes or electoral representation. In addition, we do not study whether the NOTA option makes voters happier or whether it may inflate discontent by fuelling the expression of dissatisfaction. Our focus in this paper is on the correlates of the NOTA option and who would use it to protest *within* the electoral process and why. As such, this paper makes at least three contributions.

First, we investigate for the first time how people would react to a NOTA option in national elections. We find that the intended use of the NOTA option correlates with socioeconomic status, political interest and knowledge and distrust in elected representatives, but it is less robustly related to undemocratic attitudes. Second, our study is comparative in nature and includes countries with very different electoral rules and party systems, thus allowing us to explore the individual-level correlates of voters' attitudes towards the NOTA option within a variety of countries. Third, from a policy perspective, we contribute not only to the study of potential tools to increase political participation, but also to current debates over the importance of recording forms of protests on the ballot paper to allow for a clear message of dissent (Alvarez, Kiewiet & Núñez, 2018). We find that a NOTA option may reduce abstention and especially invalid balloting particularly amongst low-educated and low-income voters, and that a high portion of invalid ballots may be a signal of discontent with the candidates and/or parties on the ballot paper.

Explaining NOTA voting

During elections, eligible voters may decide to vote or to abstain altogether by not turning out to vote. When they decide to vote, people can decide to cast a valid vote that is recorded and counted for the assignment of seats to parties or candidates or cast an invalid ballot, whether blank or spoiled, that is generally recorded but does not count towards the assignment of seats. It is not easy to trace the reasons behind voting, abstention or invalid balloting, particularly because divergent motivations can lead to the same observable behaviour. Indeed, voters may even cast a blank or spoiled ballot by mistake.

The existing literature highlights several systematic reasons for abstention and invalid balloting. First, voters' socioeconomic characteristics like education, income and gender can be crucial in explaining whether people will turn out to vote or cast a valid ballot, since they structure the inequalities of political participation (for an overview see Plutzer, 2017). On education, Armingeon and Schädel (2015) have shown that, due to a continuous decline of social integration and social control, voters with lower levels of education can rely to a lower extent on cues from their social groups resulting in less political participation, and thus less clear-cut notions on voting preferences. Also, literacy and ability to make an informed choice have been shown to relate to invalid ballots (e.g., McAllister & Makkai, 1993) and voting 'against all' in Russia (McAllister & White, 2008).

When it comes to income, while scholars have observed that for European democracies its effects on turnout are almost nonexistent (e.g., Franklin, 2002), in the United States this is an important predictor, with low-income voters being less likely to participate in elections (e.g., Avery, 2015). As with education, it can be assumed that voters with a low income are less likely to receive the necessary cues to make an informed choice. Furthermore, preferences of low-income groups are less represented (Avery, 2015), perhaps because they are less likely to turn out to vote or more likely to cast an invalid vote. With regard to gender, politics is often referred to as a 'male-dominated enterprise' (Anderson, 1975, p. 439) with women being less interested in politics or possessing less political knowledge (Verba et al., 1997) – both important predictors for political participation. Drawing from these insights, we hypothesise that the NOTA option might be chosen by those less likely to vote, and thus, our first hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with lower education, females and individuals with a lower income are more likely to choose the NOTA option.

Both abstention and invalid ballots may arise from a lack of information or interest in the election, whether or not this is a result of a voter's socioeconomic status. Politically informed and interested voters tend to turn out to vote more (Verba et al., 1995), either out of a higher sense of political efficacy (Karp & Banducci, 2008) or because they know more and desire to voice their political needs (Carreras & Castañeda-Angarita, 2014). Existing studies based on aggregate-level election results on the actual use of NOTA in Nevada (Brown, 2011; Damore, Waters & Bowler, 2012) found that rates of NOTA voting were higher in nonpartisan contests and in contests for lower offices, which implies that NOTA voting does reflect a lack of interest and information in the election. Both Damore, Waters and Bowler (2012) and Brown (2011, p. 364) reached similar conclusions, arguing that NOTA votes in Nevada 'are motivated by a mixture of ignorance and protest.' Our expectation is that a NOTA option will simply reflect a lack of interest in the political race, which is expressed in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who are less interested in or know less about politics are more likely to choose the NOTA option.

The main alternative explanation to choosing NOTA because of socioeconomic aspects and a lack of information is choosing NOTA due to protest motivations. A political-protest approach would claim that both abstention and invalid ballots can be considered protest behaviour (Alvarez, Kiewiet & Núñez, 2018), a purposive act against mainstream parties (see van der Brug et al., 2000). Of course, it is also possible for citizens to protest by voting for 'protest' parties. There are however no uniformly agreed upon criteria for identifying such parties, which can be niche, radical left, centrist or non-centrist populist, extreme nationalist or neo-fascist (see for example Giugni & Koopmans, 2007). Several studies even criticize the label of 'protest parties', indicating that their supporters are very much like mainstream party supporters in the weights they attach to party issue positions and policy priorities (see van der Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2000). While the practice of referring to electoral support for small, populist, anti-establishment, unorthodox or ideologically extreme parties as 'protest voting' persists, it is clear that all parties beyond the conventional mainstream may often attract protest voters (Pop-Eleches, 2010; Alvarez, Kiewiet & Núñez, 2018).[2] In this regard, de Vries and Hobolt (2020) have recently popularized the notion of 'challenger parties'. These are 'new' parties that act as issue entrepreneurs aiming to disrupt the power of established parties, which is facilitated by their being 'unconstrained by the responsibilities of government' (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016, p. 972).

Overall, protest voting can be channelled by at least three types of behaviours: abstention, invalid balloting and selecting 'protest' parties. One of the key arguments for the introduction of NOTA on the ballot paper is that it would provide citizens with a way of protesting *within* the electoral process; in the words of Alvarez, Kiewiet and Núñez (2018, p.151), 'political scientists advocate placing the choice of NOTA on ballots to *regularize* protest voting'. Existing studies on Russia, where an 'against all' option was allowed until 2006, find a strong correlation between higher engagement and higher education and choosing the 'against all' option, a finding suggesting that the 'against all' voters consciously protest *against* all candidates (Hutcheson, 2004; McAllister & White, 2008; Oversloot et al., 2002). Hence, we expect that the NOTA option would redirect all types of 'protest' behaviours by providing (a) the possibility for citizens to protest within the electoral process (hence reducing abstention and invalid balloting) and (b) the possibility to protest by voicing a more direct (albeit symbolic) message of refusal to support any party, including 'protest parties' (hence reducing vote choice for protest parties). We express these expectations in hypothesis form as:

Hypothesis 3a: Individuals who are prone to abstention are more likely to choose the NOTA option.

Hypothesis 3b: Individuals who are prone to invalid balloting are more likely to choose the NOTA option.

Hypothesis 3c: Individuals who are prone to support 'protest' parties are more likely to choose the NOTA option.

Next, still operating within the broad political protest approach, we focus on the motivations citizens may have to choose a NOTA option. To this end, we rely upon the seminal distinction between diffuse and specific support by Easton (1975). Diffuse support encompasses a sentiment of legitimacy for the entire political system, or as Lipset puts it, 'the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society' (Lipset, 1983, p. 64). Specific support is instead directed at officeholders themselves (political authorities) and is closely related to aspects of performance and outputs. Broad attitudes about democratic principles are related to but do not necessarily predict support and trust towards specific political institutions. To put it differently, a person can be a committed democrat but display low levels of trust in the institutions of representative democracy, such as the government and parliament, due to negative evaluations of their performance (Klingemann, 2014).

Our first argument with regard to motivations posits that citizens overall would choose the NOTA option out of specific distrust towards political institutions and authorities. Such citizens would prefer to vote rather than abstain because they believe in the processes of representative democracy but are unsatisfied with the performance of its institutions. However, while voters typically have several viable parties to choose from, distrust in political institutions and authorities implies distrust towards party politics as an institution perceived to be unresponsive to voters' preferences (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Individuals who distrust actors and/or institutions would be drawn to NOTA, as it allows them to avoid choosing any of the actors (parties or candidates) of these institutions (government and/or parliament). This leads to our next hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The higher the specific distrust, the more likely one is to choose the NOTA option.

A second motivation for choosing the NOTA option relates to a lack of diffuse support, namely low support for general regime principles, including approval of democratic attitudes and values (Norris, 1999). Such broad disaffection is likely to generate cynicism and voter apathy (see Anderson & Tverdova, 2003) so that citizens broadly unhappy with the regime often decide to abstain (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007) to de-legitimize it. It is not uncommon, in fact, to consider valid turnout as the public expression of consent to the democratic regime, with elections being first and foremost a procedure of regime legitimation (LeDuc, 1996). For this reason, low or declining valid voter turnout is often perceived as a signal of dissatisfaction with a regime (Power & Roberts, 1995). Tellingly, individuals that abstain due to broad disillusionment with the status quo may become irritated if their electoral participation is mandated and are, thereby, less willing to cast a meaningful ballot (cf. Cohen, 2018; Singh, 2019).

We contend that citizens unsupportive of general regime principles, including approval of democratic values, are unlikely to choose the NOTA option, which represents a form of protest *within* the democratic electoral process: this is the very process that these citizens may not want to legitimize and that same institutional arrangement that they refuse to consent to.[3] Put differently, we expect these citizens to be fundamentally opposed to the democratic system, and hence less likely to use a tool provided to them by that system. This leads to our final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: The higher the undemocratic attitudes, the less likely one is to choose the NOTA option.

Data and variable measurement

To test our hypotheses, we use data from eight European countries, namely Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Spain.[4] While the choice of countries is due first and foremost to data availability, it is important to note that the countries included in this study vary in terms of abstention rates as well as invalid ballots usually cast at national elections, which could be related to citizens' propensity to use a NOTA option. Countries like Denmark, Italy and Austria, where more than 75 per cent of eligible voters generally turn out, are included, as are countries like Poland and Spain, where turnout is usually less than 65 per cent. The number of invalid ballots also varies considerably, with less than 2 per cent in Germany to around 10 per cent of cast ballots in France. Our study also spans countries with proportional rules (e.g., Austria and Spain), mixed member systems (e.g. Germany and Hungary) and majoritarian systems (France). Further, the countries under investigation vary in terms of party systems, with countries like Denmark, Hungary and Poland having more fragmented party systems compared to countries like Austria and Germany (Gallagher et al., 2011). One could assume that the more choice voters have on the ballot papers, the less likely they might be to turn to a NOTA choice. Also, with movements towards the recognition of blank ballots in long-time members of the European Union (EU), such as France and Spain, and the actual adoption of the NOTA option in an EU newcomer, Bulgaria, we find it particularly important to test our hypotheses with reference to elections in a European context.

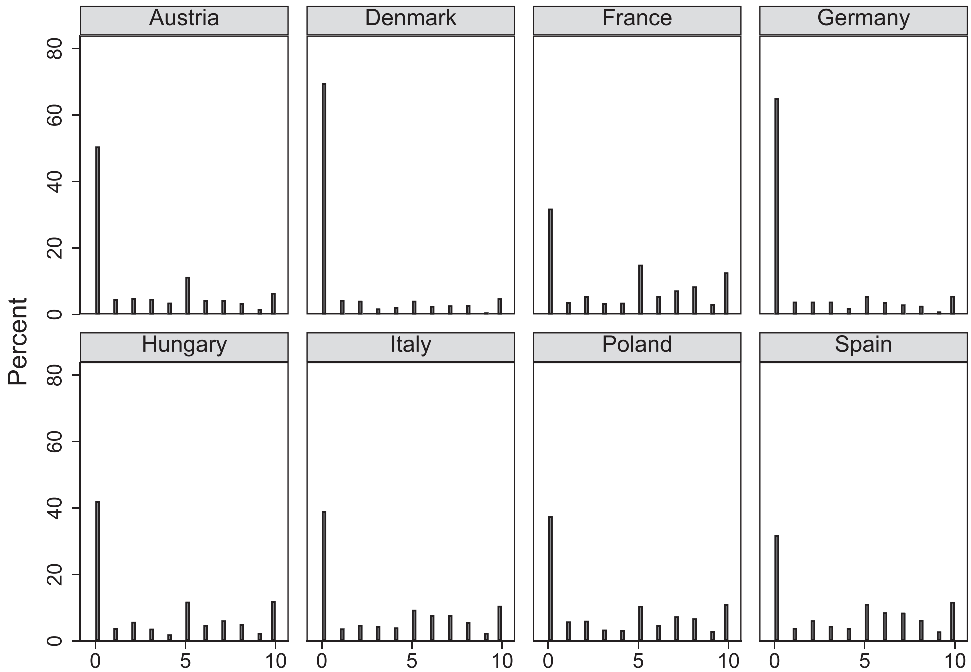

Figure 1. The distribution of the propensity to choose a NOTA option across countries (0–10 scale).
Notes: The figure excludes 'Don't know' and 'Refused'. Percentages of 'Don't know' and 'Refused' are as follows: 10.49 per cent in Austria, 7.27 per cent in Denmark, 13.39 per cent in France, 9.84 per cent in Germany, 7.10 per cent in Hungary, 8.62 per cent in Italy, 8.38 per cent in Poland and 7.68 per cent in Spain.

The post-election survey we rely on was conducted immediately after the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election that was held from 27 May to 24 June, 2019 and includes about 1,000 respondents in each country, except for Austria, for which there is a slightly higher number of respondents (i.e., 1,380).[5] The surveys were conducted online among recruited panellists by professional polling companies, with quotas that help guarantee the samples are representative of the target population with regard to age, gender, education and region.

The survey asked respondents the following question: 'In some elections, voters are given the option to reject all parties and candidates on the ballot paper with a 'none of the above' option. If a "none of the above" option were available on the ballot paper in the next national election in [COUNTRY], how likely is it that you would choose this option'? Answers to this question range from 0 ('very unlikely') to 10 ('very likely') and represent the dependent variable of our study. Online Appendix A lists the question in each country-specific language.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of this variable across countries. The figure shows that we are not simply studying noise, as quite a few of our respondents would be very likely to choose the NOTA option if it were available on the ballot paper. If we define would-be NOTA voters as those who chose at least a 7 in response to the NOTA survey question, Denmark displays the lowest percentage of would-be NOTA voters (11 per cent) followed by Germany (12 per cent) and Austria (15 per cent). The highest proportions are in Poland (28 per cent), Spain (30 per cent) and France (31 per cent).[6]

Our data include several questions that allow us to capture the behaviours and motivations discussed in our hypotheses. Starting with Hypothesis 1, education is measured on a three-point scale for low, medium and high level education. Gender is a dummy variable taking a value of 1 for female respondents. As far as income is concerned, we opt for a measure based on the following question: 'How would you assess your current income situation'? Respondents had four response options: 1 'Get along with great difficulty'; 2 'Get along with difficulty'; 3 'Get along well'; and 4 'Get along very well'. While the survey we use also contains a measure of objective income, we refrain from using this variable in our models due to the large number of missing cases (about 27 per cent of the respondents choose not to answer this question).[7]

Moving to Hypothesis 2, we measure political knowledge as an additive scale of correct answers given to five knowledge questions; hence, the variable ranges from 0 'no correct answer' to 5 'all correct answers'.[8] The measurement of political interest relies on a survey question asking respondents how interested they are in politics in general using a scale from 0 'not at all' to 3 'very much'. Moving to Hypothesis 3, we measure abstention and invalid[9] voting using a vote intention question. Respondents were asked which party they would support if an election were held tomorrow using the question: 'If there were a general election in [COUNTRY] tomorrow, which party would you vote for'?[10] Invalid voting is a dummy variable taking a value of 1 if respondents chose the 'would spoil the ballot' option and 0 otherwise. Just over two per cent of respondents in our sample would cast an invalid ballot. Similarly, abstention is a dummy variable taking a value of 1 if respondents chose the 'would not vote' category and 0 otherwise. Between four and five per cent of respondents in our sample would abstain. These percentages are clearly below the abstention rates we normally see in the countries under investigation. Overestimating turnout is an unfortunate but very common problem of existing survey data since electoral participation in democracies is a socially desirable behaviour. The overestimation is not, however, a major problem for our inferential purposes. Existing studies using validated turnout demonstrate that 'researchers will rarely be grossly misled by using any of these three sources [intention to vote, reported vote or validated vote]. The same variables tend to be influential in all three, and their relative proportions are usually (though not universally) unchanged' (Achen & Blais, 2016, p. 206).[11]

To measure protest voting we rely on the same vote choice question we use for invalid voting and abstention. Operationalizing protest voting is not easy and there are no universally accepted rules for doing so. Here, we follow de Vries and Hobolt (2020) and use the categorization of established versus challenger parties, that is, parties that have served in (national) government at least once since 1945 versus those that have not. Hence, we create a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 for voters of established parties and a value of 1 for challenger parties. Online Appendix B shows the list for all established as well as challenger parties as used in our analysis in each country. However, since the category of protest parties is contested in the existing literature, we repeat our empirical analysis using an alternative categorization with reference to existing works showing that all parties beyond the conventional mainstream parties in each party system may attract protest voters (e.g., Pop-Eleches, 2010; van der Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2000). Hence, we create a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 for voters of mainstream parties and a value of 1 for all other parties as listed in online Appendix C. The results are robust to this alternative classification (see below).

To disentangle distrust in the political system (Hypothesis 4) from broader rejection and alienation with democracy and citizens' unwillingness to consent to democratic institutions (Hypothesis 5), we follow the insights from Alvarez, Kiewiet and Núñez (2018) and Singh (2019).

Specifically, to capture political distrust, we use a composite measure of distrust of government and distrust of parliament. The two variables are positively correlated with a Cronbach's α of 0.91; factor analysis reveals one factor accounting for over 87 per cent of the common variance. We predict factor scores to create this variable, which we employ to test Hypothesis 4. Similarly, to gauge negative orientations towards democracy, we use a composite measure made from four items capturing attitudes towards democracy. Respondents were asked how much on a scale from 1 to 5 they agreed with the following statements: 'The media should be free to criticise the government', 'The courts should be able to stop the government acting beyond its authority', 'Minority rights must be protected against majority decisions' and 'Democratically made decisions must be followed in any case, even if they contradict my own interests'.[12] The four items are positively correlated with a Cronbach's α of 0.62; factor analysis reveals one factor accounting for about 65 per cent of the common variance. We again use factor scores to create this variable, which we employ to test Hypothesis 5.

Control variables

A NOTA option could be chosen by voters to express their indifference for all parties via the ballot paper (see also Ambrus et al., 2019). Because indifference also relates to our key explanatory variables, we control for it in our models. To gauge indifference, we follow the measurement strategy described in Johnston et al. (2007). Since the dataset we use does not include like/dislike questions for parties (used by Johnston, Matthews & Bittner, 2007), we rely on 'propensity to vote' (PTV)-measures for each of the six main parties on offer in each country. PTV-scales are usually highly correlated with thermometer and like/dislike scales, but they are intended to directly measure electoral utilities (van der Eijk & Marsh, 2011); this makes them well suited for operationalizing indifference and alienation (see also Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2018). The wording of the PTV-question is: 'We have a number of parties in [country] each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please specify your views on an 11-point scale where 0 means "not probable at all" and 10 means "very probable"'. So, indifference is a measure of 'how much the respondent prefers his or her favorite party over the least favorite one' (Johnston, Matthews & Bittner, 2007, p. 737), which is expressed as follows: Indifference $= \frac{10-((\text{party}_i)\ -\min\ (\text{party}_{j\neq i}))}{10}$, where party$_i$ is the rating of the ith party on the 11-point scale.[13]

We also control for age (in years), since younger generations are overall less likely to turn out (Franklin, 2004), and one's position in life is plausibly related to each of our explanatory variables. Importantly, to ensure that our findings are not driven by unobserved macro-level factors, we include country-fixed effects.[14] To facilitate the interpretation of the results we rescale all of our independent variables to range from 0 to 1. Table D.1 in the online Appendix D shows descriptive statistics for all variables used in our models. We use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test our hypotheses.[15]

Empirical findings

Table 1 shows results from our OLS models. Starting with Hypothesis 1, Model 1 shows that higher education and higher income are negatively and significantly associated with NOTA, meaning that low-income and low-educated voters are more likely to use the NOTA option. Meanwhile, being

Table 1. Explaining a NOTA choice (OLS models)

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)	(Model 4)	(Model 5)
Income (subjective)	−0.979***				−0.503**
	(0.157)				(0.156)
Female	0.043				−0.059
	(0.074)				(0.073)
Education	−0.635***				−0.498***
	(0.119)				(0.117)
Political interest		−0.972***			−0.505***
		(0.145)			(0.147)
Political knowledge		−0.975***			−0.765***
		(0.171)			(0.168)
Ref: Established					
Challenger			0.374***		0.164
			(0.081)		(0.086)
Invalid			4.464***		4.194***
			(0.250)		(0.249)
Abstain			3.190***		2.737***
			(0.215)		(0.217)
Political distrust				1.560***	1.035***
				(0.140)	(0.147)
Undemocratic attitudes				0.635**	0.338
				(0.227)	(0.225)
Controls					
Indifference	3.918***	3.715***	2.845***	3.714***	2.640***
	(0.133)	(0.135)	(0.140)	(0.135)	(0.141)
Age	−1.475***	−1.154***	−1.351***	−1.357***	−1.305***
	(0.204)	(0.204)	(0.197)	(0.203)	(0.200)
Country fixed effects	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Constant	2.877***	3.039***	1.877***	1.045***	2.639***
	(0.175)	(0.174)	(0.131)	(0.168)	(0.241)
N	7653	7653	7653	7653	7653
Adjusted R-squared	0.182	0.183	0.223	0.187	0.238
Log-likelihood	−19703.1	−19699.8	−19510.2	−19682.3	−19431.9
AIC	39432.3	39423.7	39046.5	39388.7	38903.9

Note: Standard errors in parentheses: $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Country fixed effects shown in Appendix L.

male or female is irrelevant for a NOTA choice. It seems as if NOTA could indeed be an important tool to mitigate inequality in political participation with regards to voters with lower incomes and lower levels of education.

Model 2 shows that both political interest and political knowledge are negatively associated with NOTA, suggesting overall support for Hypothesis 2: individuals who are less interested in or know less about politics are more likely to choose the NOTA option. This accords with the claim that NOTA use also reflects a lack of engagement in politics, as suggested by Brown (2011), Damore, Waters, and Bowler (2012) and Ujhelyi, Chatterjee and Szabó (2019).

Next, we move to the association between *potential* types of voting and nonvoting and choosing NOTA, as discussed in relation to Hypotheses 3a–c. The results indicate clear support for all three hypotheses: we find that voting for challenger parties is positively related to NOTA intentions, but invalid balloting and abstention have an especially strong upward impact (Model 3 in Table 1). While those voting for challenger parties are about 0.4 points higher (on the 0–10 scale) than those voting for established parties on the dependent variable, those casting an invalid ballot are much more likely to choose NOTA, with a score about 4.5 points higher (on the 0–10 scale) than those voting for established parties; those abstaining are about 3.2 points higher (on the 0–10 scale) than those voting for established parties. As previously mentioned, there are no widely accepted rules for operationalizing protest voting, and as such we examined an alternative operationalization of this concept using the classification of mainstream versus non-mainstream parties. The results in online Appendix K show that supporters of non-mainstream parties are more likely to choose NOTA than mainstream party supporters.

Moving to specific and diffuse support for the political system, in line with Hypothesis 4, the higher the distrust in political institutions, the more likely one is to choose a NOTA option on the ballot paper (Model 4 in Table 1). The effect of distrust is however not very big: someone with the highest level of distrust will display a chance of choosing NOTA about 1.6 points higher (on the 0–10 scale) compared to someone with the lowest level of political distrust. Further, while it is true that a NOTA option is more attractive among those who are distrustful of political institutions, the overall support for NOTA is not very large for extremely distrustful voters: those with the maximum value of distrust score about 4.3 on the 0–10 scale of support for NOTA (with all other variables held at their means). Regarding Hypothesis 5, in Model 4 undemocratic attitudes have a significant positive impact on choosing the NOTA option, thus showing the opposite effect as assumed. When, however, motivations are included in a model together with behaviours (Model 5 in Table 1), the coefficient of undemocratic attitudes is no longer significant, with the coefficient still pointing in the opposite direction from what we theorized.

In addition, being indifferent towards all parties has a consistently positive and significant association with choosing NOTA. The impact of indifference is quite large and only second to intentions to abstain and cast an invalid ballot. Adding to the findings on political interest and knowledge, people not distinguishing between parties within the party system would be more likely to choose a NOTA option.

When testing for interactions, online Appendix N shows that the likelihood of choosing NOTA for every group of voters and non-voters is substantially the same across different levels of political distrust. As far as undemocratic attitudes are concerned, the propensity of choosing NOTA for those voting either for challenger or established parties decreases with increasing levels of undemocratic attitudes; the opposite seems to be true for those choosing to vote invalid or abstain. When it comes to political distrust, online Appendix O shows that protest voters are more likely to vote NOTA (compared to non-protest voters), and this is true regardless of levels of political distrust. A similar conclusion holds for undemocratic attitudes, albeit protest and non-protest voters are, statistically, equally likely to choose NOTA at very high levels of undemocratic attitudes.

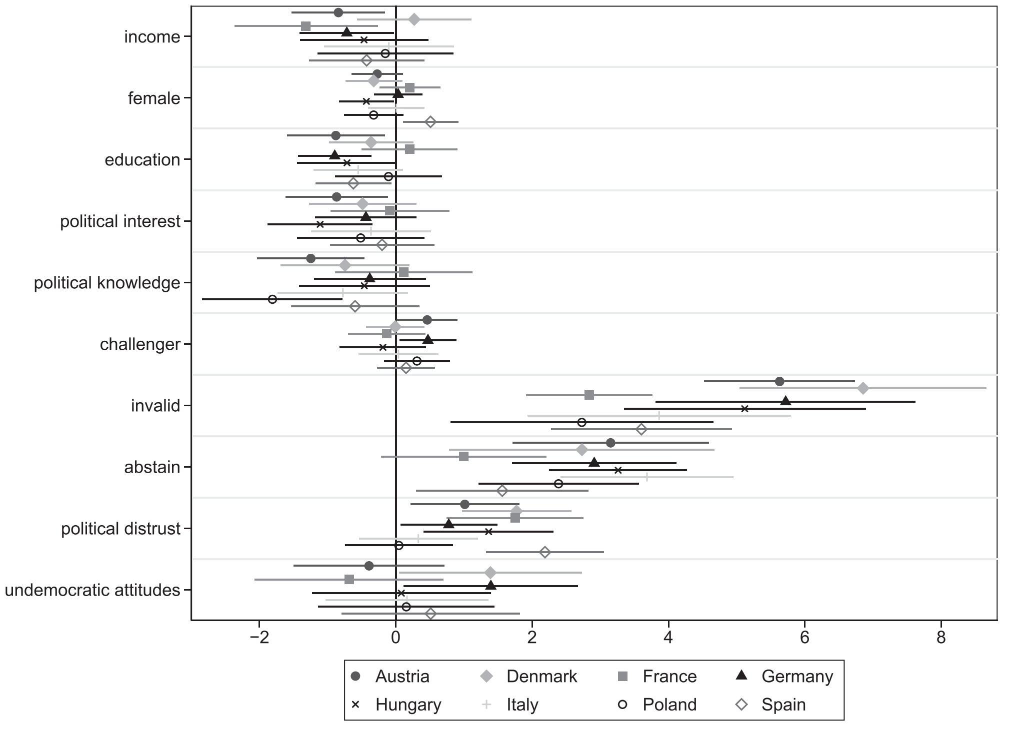

Figure 2. The correlates of NOTA voting across countries (point estimates and 95 per cent confidence intervals).
Notes: Based on models presented in online Appendix H.

Cross-country variation

As there are only a handful of countries in our sample, conclusions about system-specific findings should be taken as purely descriptive. Still, we can assess the extent to which the correlates of voters' attitudes towards the NOTA option vary across countries that themselves differ in terms of abstention and invalid balloting rates, the rules of the game and the number of parties on offer on the ballot paper.

Figure 2 presents the point estimates and associated 95 per cent confidence intervals for the coefficients on our main independent variables by country (full results available in online Appendix H). As Figure 2 shows, the association between income and NOTA and education and NOTA is consistently negative across all countries, the only exception being Denmark in the case of income and France in the case of education (though both effects are not statistically different from zero). The effect of gender is only positive and statistically significant in Spain.

The association between political interest and political knowledge is consistently negative across all countries, with the strongest negative effects being registered in Hungary for political interest and Austria and Poland for political knowledge. In most of the countries investigated, voters of challenger parties are more likely to choose the NOTA option compared to voters of established parties with the strongest effect in Germany, which is among the countries in our sample with the lowest number of challenger parties. We can also see from Figure 2 that the association between potential types of nonvoting (invalid and abstain) and choosing NOTA is consistently positive and significant across all countries (exception made for France in the case of abstention). The effect of political distrust in explaining the NOTA option is especially relevant in France and Spain, but less so in countries with more fragmented party systems like Italy and Poland (though it is large and positive in Denmark). The coefficient on the variable measuring undemocratic attitudes fails to reach a conventional level of statistical significance in all countries except for Denmark and Germany, where there is a positive association between undemocratic attitudes and choosing the NOTA option.

Remarkably, the coefficients on the key independent variables are rarely statistically different from one another and are almost always in the same direction. Overall, this suggests that the correlates of the propensity to use a NOTA option are stable across countries, and, as such, across varying electoral and party systems. While the small number of countries precludes us from systematically investigating whether macro-level factors condition the forerunners of NOTA voting, the cross-national stability of our estimates suggests that such factors do not play a large role.

Discussion and conclusion

The first question that we set out to answer in this study is whether, in line with the ideas of some electoral reformers, the inclusion of a NOTA option on the ballot paper would help redirect invalid ballots and abstention. We also sought to test whether a NOTA ballot is related to voters' socioeconomic characteristics, political interest, knowledge, types of voting, specific distrust towards the government and parliament and a lack of diffuse support for democracy.

We find that abstainers and those intending to cast an invalid ballot are more likely to choose NOTA, as are supporters of challenger parties relative to those who prefer established parties. We also find that indicators of socioeconomic inequality and distrust towards institutions are positively related to choosing a NOTA option, while political sophistication is correlated negatively with NOTA use. With regard to diffuse support, we could not confirm the idea that citizens fundamentally opposed to the democratic system will be less likely to use a protest tool provided to them by that same system.

We contend these results are important for at least two main reasons. First, they contribute to our knowledge of abstention and invalid ballots by investigating how people would react to a NOTA option in national elections. The fact that quite a few of those who would cast an invalid ballot or abstain would choose NOTA confirms that these two types of nonvoting do not alone result from alienation from politics or civic disengagement per se, but are also a result of protest behaviour. This is an important finding, especially given the increasingly high rates of abstention and spoiled ballots worldwide, and partly good news for the legitimacy of existing institutional arrangements.

Second, we believe our findings are of interest for electoral reformers. Taken together, our results suggest that a NOTA option can reduce both invalid votes and abstention, which aligns with the goals of many policymakers. The inclusion of a NOTA option on the ballot will likely decrease the ambiguity surrounding nonvoting, allowing for a clear message of distrust and discontent (Alvarez, Kiewiet & Núñez, 2018). Our results also suggest that NOTA should be strongly considered in countries using compulsory voting, where it has been demonstrated that individuals that participate reluctantly cast invalid ballots more often (Singh, 2019). Along these lines, the adoption of a NOTA option in Bulgaria and the state of Gujarat in India came at the same time as the implementation of mandatory voting (Singh, 2021, chapter 1).

Our results also have implications for the equality of political participation, as they show that less wealthy and educated individuals may be more likely to use a NOTA option. However, while a NOTA option might help level out socioeconomic disparities in electoral participation, it would not necessarily amplify the voices of marginalized groups and thus disparities in electoral representation. This is because NOTA votes could not be used to allocate legislative seats.

Indeed, the challenges a NOTA option presents in terms of mandate allocation and representational discrimination are a potentially serious problem. To this end, during the 'great national debate' organized by the French government in 2019 in response to the yellow vests movement,[16] several proposals were discussed in relation to the issue of representation of blank ballots, including the possibility of invalidating an election if their number exceeds a certain threshold (as is already the case in Colombia and Peru). It would be interesting to investigate not only potential solutions to these issues but also whether would-be NOTA voters are aware of these considerations. We leave this to future studies. Here, we limit ourselves to the conclusion that NOTA would channel, first and foremost, protest voting and possibly bring (or bring back) to the voting booth many of those who have not completely lost confidence in the democratic process but distrust their country's leadership and experience socioeconomic inequalities.

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Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Supporting information

Notes

1. For example, in Spain the political movement of the *Ciudadanos en Blanco* and in France the group *Citoyens du Vote Blanc*.
2. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue for a correlation between protest motives and populist parties. Moral (2016) shows a link between dissatisfaction and support for niche parties. Similarly, Ivarsflaten (2008) writes that anti-immigration parties are vehicles for protest voting.
3. Or, using Alvarez, Kiewiet and Núñez's (2018, p. 136) words, citizens unsupportive of general regime principles may be repelled by 'officially sanctioned protest voting'.
4. Data come from a panel election study conducted for the RECONNECT ('Reconciling Europe with its Citizens through Democracy and the Rule of Law') project (www.reconnect-europe.eu) in the realm of the 2019 European Parliament Elections. Data for Austria come from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) conducted at the same time (https://www.autnes.at/en/).
5. As also explained below, while the panel election study is during the 2019 EP Elections, the question regarding NOTA use is in reference to national elections. It should also be noted that decades of research has shown that the EP Elections are considered substantially less important than national elections (e.g., Schmitt, 2005; Hix and Marsh, 2011), meaning it is unlikely that responses to the NOTA question are contaminated by attitudes towards EP Elections.
6. The relative high number of 'Don't know' and 'Refused' (see notes to Figure 1) is not surprising if one considers (a) that in none of the countries studied in this paper is the NOTA option implemented in elections and (b) that we ask about prospective vote choices in elections that in some cases are in the distant future. As with many other survey questions, refusal rates are correlated with political interest and education, as well as with age. It should be noted that for our study this means that we are likely underestimating the proportion of NOTA supporters, so if anything, our empirical models represent conservative tests of our Hypotheses 1 and 2.
7. However, results hold almost unchanged when using objective income (see online Appendix E).
8. The variable is an additive index computed from dichotomously coded correct answers to five knowledge questions: (a) which EU institution is directly elected; (b) how did the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, became president; (c) which EU institution formally proposes laws; (d) which EU statement is not true and (e) which EU institution represents national governments. Respondents were always offered four possible answers and asked to choose the correct one. Using an alternative measure of political knowledge based on respondents' ability to discern parties' relative left-right ideological positions leads to substantially unchanged conclusions (see online Appendix F).
9. Invalid vote encompasses both blank *and* spoiled ballots. Despite these two categories being theoretically different – especially in those countries like Spain, which count blank ballots as valid – the data we have available do not allow us to distinguish between blank and spoiled ballots.
10. This question was asked before the NOTA item. We prefer to use hypothetical vote choice rather than past vote choice to avoid the issues with voting recall. Online Appendix G presents models using past vote choice instead of prospective vote choice and shows that the results remain unchanged.
11. It should be noted that respondents in some of the countries are asked about their prospective behaviour for an election rather distant in the future, and they are given additional response options of 'Don't know' or 'Refuse'. Individuals who selected these options have been dropped from the analysis. As a robustness check, we have also run our models setting 'Don't know' or 'Refuse' as non-voting. Our substantive findings remain identical.
12. The original attitudes scale included two more items, namely 'It would be better if important political decisions were made by independent experts and not by elected politicians' and 'The government should stick to planned measures, even if the majority of citizens oppose it'. The inclusion of these two items does not change the substantive conclusions of this paper but decreases substantially the Cronbach's α and requires the use of more than one factor.
13. It is also possible that, rather than indifference, NOTA is driven by alienation, or 'how far the respondent is from his or her closest party' (Johnston et al., 2007, p. 737). The two variables, alienation and indifference in our dataset are highly correlated (Pearson's r=0.90). In fact, running our models substituting alienation with indifference leads to almost identical results to those presented in this paper, as shown in the online Appendix H. We have also run our models using an ideological measure of alienation following Schaefer and Debus

(2018). Substantive findings do not change when we opt for an ideological measure of alienation. Please see online Appendix I for details of measurement and results.

14. We decided not to use random effects models given our goal of holding country-invariant factors constant. In any case, using a random effects model leads to similar substantive conclusions.
15. Substantive findings do not change when using Tobit models (see online Appendix J).
16. https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/grand-debat-a-evry-courcouronnes-le-president-casse-les-codes-04-02-2019-8004303.php.

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