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A Taxonomy of Protest Voting

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Abstract

Observers of elections often report that voters have engaged in protest voting. We find that “protest voting” refers to a wide range of behaviors, and we create a taxonomy of these phenomena. Support for fringe or insurgent parties is often labeled as protest voting. Voting theorists have used the term in a completely different way, identifying an unusual type of tactical voting as protest voting. Protest voting also occurs when voters cast blank, null, or spoiled ballots. There are also instances when protest voting is organized and directed by political elites. Finally, several countries provide voters with the option of casting a vote for “None of the Above,” which some see as a form of protest voting. In addition to developing this taxonomy, we discuss the analytical and empirical challenges confronting research on each type of protest voting.

INTRODUCTION

In the weeks leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, Bernie Sanders urged voters not to cast a so-called protest vote for Green Party candidate Jill Stein or Libertarian Gary Johnson. According to Blake (2016, p. 1), this was ironic, because “Sanders actually rose politically thanks to what some would call protest votes”. Whether they believed they were casting protest votes or not, nearly eight million American voters failed to heed Sanders’s advice and voted for Johnson, Stein, or another minor party candidate. In the battleground state of Florida, which Donald Trump won by a margin of 113,000 votes, nearly 300,000 voters voted for one of the minor party candidates listed on the ballot. More than 160,000 other Floridian voters wrote in a name, e.g., Mickey Mouse or the Norse god Thor; entered an editorial comment, e.g., “We Can Do Better;” or left the choices blank. Ballot commentary of this nature was registered more than twice as frequently in 2016 as in either 2008 or 2012 (Fineout 2017).

Protest voting is not confined to the United States. Tony Blair recently charged that Jeremy Corbyn had reduced the Labour Party to a “party of protest” (Ashmore 2016). As they were in the 2016 US presidential election, votes cast for insurgent candidates in elections throughout the world are often seen as expressions of protest against the mainstream parties or, more generally, the political status quo. Protest voting is also seen in votes cast in referenda and other forms of direct democracy. Post mortems of the Brexit vote, for example, attribute some of the success of the “Leave” campaign to voters who cared little one way or the other about remaining in the European Union but who used their vote as a vehicle of protest. For some, it was a way to register displeasure with David Cameron; for others, it was a way “to extend a middle finger to the establishment” (Cross 2016).

But what exactly is protest voting? We find that many different types of voting behavior, motivated by a variety of considerations, have fallen under this category. In science, the first step to understanding a particular set of phenomena is to develop an accurate and analytically useful classification system for the phenomena. In this review, we create a taxonomy for the wide range of behaviors that political scientists have described as protest voting. This is not meant to be and cannot be, given the large volume of previous research in this area, an exhaustive literature review. It is our hope, however, that our efforts will stimulate new and more precisely focused research.

We find that there are five distinct patterns of voting behavior that have been characterized as protest voting:

1. Instead of voting for one of the major, conventional candidates or parties on the ballot, voters instead cast their ballots for candidates or parties that are antiestablishment, unorthodox, ideologically extreme, or some combination of these characteristics—parties that we refer to collectively as insurgents. As we show, it may be questionable to refer to this as protest voting, but if one does, it should be referred to as insurgent party protest voting.
2. To convey their dissatisfaction with some aspect of their most preferred party’s issue positions, voters cast their vote for a less preferred party. This choice is based on tactical considerations and for that reason can be accurately characterized as tactical protest voting.
3. Instead of voting for a party or candidate listed on the ballot, voters instead intentionally cast blank, null, or spoiled (BNS) ballots. These behaviors are best described as BNS protest voting.
4. In response to disenfranchisement or due to other political considerations, political elites lead campaigns to encourage protest voting, a phenomenon we call organized protest voting.
5. In recent years, a number of countries and jurisdictions have begun offering voters the choice of “None of the Above” (NOTA) on the ballot. We characterize voters who choose this option as participating in officially sanctioned protest voting.

In developing this taxonomy, we find that the study of protest voting—or, more specifically, of all the various manifestations of protest voting that we identify—is beset by a number of analytical and observational challenges. First, the results of several studies indicate that voting for insurgent parties or candidates cannot be distinguished from conventional issue or retrospective voting. Second, what we call tactical protest voting can be observationally equivalent to other non-Duvergerian types of tactical voting. Third, in the case of BNS protest voting, it is difficult to distinguish between ballots spoiled intentionally and those spoiled unintentionally, and much depends on the way election administrators handle ballots. In the case of organized protest voting, it is clear that protest voting has occurred, but we observe this type of protest voting only rarely and under unusual circumstances. Finally, it is hard to say whether officially sanctioned NOTA voting can be meaningfully described as protest voting.

INSURGENT PARTY PROTEST VOTING

Several studies have investigated voting for insurgent, unorthodox, or fringe parties outside of the political mainstream, or for insurgent candidates, and have characterized support for such parties and candidates as protest votes. What criteria are used to assess whether a particular party is the recipient of protest voting? These parties can be ideologically extreme but may also have little in the way of a programmatic policy agenda; positioning themselves as outsiders uninfluenced and uncorrupted by a decadent status quo, they simply promise to deliver results. The list of 68 such parties in Eastern Europe that Pop-Eleches (2010) compiles in his study of protest voting contains parties that are radical left, centrist populist, extreme nationalist, and neo-fascist. Critical assessments of such parties often detect elements of xenophobia and antisemitism. Deciding whether an insurgent party is the potential recipient of protest votes is a judgment call (see Giugni & Koopmans 2007), and in making these judgments, political scientists ultimately rely on the criterion used by Justice Potter Stewart in the celebrated *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964, p. 197) obscenity case: “I know it when I see it.”

Some studies in this area pursue the following analytical strategy: After having stipulated that a particular party or candidate attracts protest voters, the researchers test hypotheses concerning differences between supporters of such parties and supporters of the conventional mainstream parties. Southwell & Everest (1998), for example, characterize Perot voters in the 1992 US presidential election as protest voters. They then seek to determine if Perot voters held a distinctive set of political beliefs and attitudes and to gauge the extent to which these distinctive beliefs and attitudes led them to vote for Perot. In their analysis of American National Election Studies data, they find that Perot voters had weaker attachments than other voters to either the mainstream Democratic or mainstream Republican parties. They were also more likely to agree that the government could not be trusted and that it was run for the benefit of special interest groups. Perot voters were also “externally inefficacious,” in that they were more likely to believe that existing parties did not offer meaningful choices, that elections did not allow citizens to influence government policy, and that elected officials were not representative of public opinion. Southwell & Everest therefore conclude that support for Perot had the earmarks of what they considered to be protest voting, though other studies have cast some doubt on whether Perot supporters were angry protest voters (Alvarez & Nagler 1995).

In similar fashion, several studies have investigated the nature of support for the anti-immigration parties that have emerged throughout Europe. Such parties are frequently viewed as protest parties, and votes for them are seen to be protest votes. Van der Brug et al. (2000) are critical of this approach. As they put it, “students of right-wing extremism so far have neither given serious thought to the theoretical elaboration nor to the operationalization of the concept

of a 'protest vote' We find the definition 'a protest voter is a voter who votes for a protest party' unacceptable, because it begs the question" (Van der Brug et al. 2000, p. 82).

A different approach is taken by several other researchers, who posit that protest voters support insurgent parties not because of what they are, but rather because of what they are not. What insurgent parties are not, in general, are the mainstream parties that protest voters associate with status quo politics, and it is a status quo they find exasperating and uncongenial. In many cases, such parties are personalistic and lacking in terms of identifiable policy positions. As Pop-Eleches (2010, p. 236) puts it, "A protest vote (or antivote) is an electoral option driven less by the positive appeal of the chosen party's ideological/policy platform than by the rejection of other possible political choices." Protest voting for insurgent parties is thus seen to reflect a dearth of "acceptable mainstream parties to vent their frustration" (Pop-Eleches 2010, p. 238).

Defining protest voting in this manner is analytically more useful than labeling a party *a priori* as a protest party and, thus, the recipient of protest votes. This definition allows for the possibility that some votes cast for an insurgent party are protest votes while others are not. Furthermore, the key hypothesis that this definition generates, i.e., protest votes are motivated not by the positive appeal of a party's platform but rather by the rejection of the choices presented by the mainstream parties, can be tested through survey research and possibly through other methods.

Some studies have done just that. In investigating support for the Canadian New Democratic Party (NDP) in the 1984 federal election, Bowler & Lanoue (1992, p. 489) posit that the NDP garnered votes from two groups: (a) NDP party loyalists who supported the party and its platform regardless of its electoral prospects and (b) protest voters, who, "disenchanted with the performance of the major parties or the incumbent government," voted NDP to signal their high level of dissatisfaction. Unlike the first group of NDP voters, voters in the latter group were not necessarily attracted to the NDP's policy positions or even aware of them. Analyzing data from the Canadian National Election Study, Bowler & Lanoue find that NDP support came mainly from voters who held the government responsible for their deteriorating standard of living and who expressed strong dissatisfaction with the current government's performance. The voters they classified as protest voters, however, did not differ significantly from those deemed to be NDP party loyalists in terms of support for NDP issue positions. It should also be noted that dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbent government, which was widely prevalent among NDP voters, is also the basis of conventional retrospective voting.

As indicated above, several studies have investigated the nature of support for the anti-immigration parties that have emerged throughout Europe during the past few decades. Like Bowler & Lanoue (1992), Van der Brug et al. (2000) hypothesize that, if supporters of these parties are casting protest votes, then the spatial (ideological) location of parties will be given little weight in their voting decisions. These authors also hypothesize that such voters are relatively unconcerned about electoral viability and are more Euroskeptic, i.e., hostile to the European Union. Their analysis of voting behavior in seven countries in the 1994 elections to the European Parliament uncovered little support for these hypotheses. Supporters of anti-immigrant parties were no less influenced by ideological location, no less concerned about parties' electoral prospects, and no more hostile to the European Union than supporters of conventional mainstream parties. What differentiated anti-immigrant party supporters from other voters was their strong opposition to immigration. What Van der Brug et al. had hypothesized to be protest voting turned out, instead, to be straightforward issue voting.

Ivarsflaten's (2008) findings regarding support for right-wing populist parties are consistent with Bowler & Lanoue's (1992) and Van der Brug et al.'s (2000). In seeking to determine what factors were responsible for the rise of these parties in the early years of the new millennium, Ivarsflaten writes that they are in the business of "mobilizing grievances" and are thus vehicles of

protest voting. Her main hypotheses concern the nature of voters' grievances, and she investigates four possible sources: (a) the deterioration of real income, living standards, and economic security caused by welfare retrenchment, and job losses due to technological advances, trade liberalization, and privatization; (b) political cynicism and disillusionment fanned by large-scale corruption scandals in several European countries and antagonism toward the European Union; (c) a backlash against the postmaterialist Green movement; and (d) unhappiness and uneasiness due to continued high rates of immigration, particularly by immigrants from Islamic countries who lack the skills and education needed to integrate into their societies and who, they suspect, hold values inimical to those of modern Western civilization. In an analysis of data from seven Western European countries collected by the European Social Survey in 2002–2003, Ivarsflaten found nothing to distinguish supporters of the insurgent right-wing populist parties from those of conventional, mainstream parties along these first three dimensions. Views concerning immigration, in contrast, were powerful predictors of support for these parties: "As immigration policy preferences become more restrictive, the probability of voting for the populist right increases dramatically" (Ivarsflaten 2008, p. 17).

Pop-Eleches (2010) makes a comprehensive study of the many insurgent, unorthodox parties that gained prominence throughout Eastern Europe in the early years of the new millennium. His analysis of 76 elections held in post-Communist countries between 1990 and 2006 shows that support for insurgent parties became much more widespread in third-generation elections, as negative experiences with the first and second generation of post-Communist party governments accumulated. His analysis of a dozen panels of survey data collected in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems similarly indicates that insurgent party supporters tended not to feel close to any party, a result that is consistent with the idea that support for protest parties is more a function of what they are not than of what they are. Contrary to expectations of protest voting, however, insurgent party voters, compared to supporters of other mainstream opposition parties, were no more likely to adopt the cynical view that it makes no difference who is in power or to be dissatisfied with democratic government.

Rodon & Hierro (2016) report similar results in their study of the rise of insurgent parties (and the poor performance of mainstream parties) in Spain in the 2014 European Parliament election and in the 2015 local and regional elections. Following a severe economic downturn, the imposition of austerity measures, and revelations of corruption involving the incumbent Partido Socialista Obrero Español government, the conservative Partido Popular (PP) rode a wave of discontent to power in 2011. Because of the lack of improvement in the economy, the PP's continuation of debt reduction as a major policy priority, and the PP's own corruption scandals, both major parties had lost considerable credibility by the next elections. In the 2014 and 2015 elections, electoral support for two new insurgent parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos, rose significantly. What attracted voters to these parties was the fact that they offered a different mix of policies regarding taxation, welfare benefits, and immigration, rather than the mere opportunity to signal rejection of the conventional parties. Podemos and Ciudadanos supporters can also quite properly be seen to be engaging in retrospective voting in response to the poor performance of the economy under the incumbent government. Like the voters in the Eastern European countries studied by Pop-Eleches (2010), they chose to vote for a new insurgent party instead of a mainstream opposition party that they also found wanting.

Denemark & Bowler's (2002) findings with respect to Australia's One Nation Party (ONP) and New Zealand's New Zealand First (NZF) are also consistent with the studies we discuss above. Supporters of the ONP and NZF came not only from among the politically or economically dissatisfied but also from among voters who endorsed (some of) these parties' policies with respect to immigration and Aboriginal aid. What had been labeled as protest voting, in short,

could be accounted for by the standard explanations of affinity for the parties' issue positions and retrospective evaluations of the incumbent party's performance.

In their study of the British National Party (BNP), Cutts et al. (2011) observe that research on parties of the extreme right in Britain has been informed by the same theory that we have been discussing, i.e., that these parties garner votes not so much for what they are as for what they are not. Support for parties like the BNP is "a by-product of citizens' dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and discontent with the political system more generally Implicit in the protest model is the assumption that 'voters have reasons to vote for them [extreme right parties] that have more to do with deficiencies of mainstream parties than with the attraction of anti-immigrant parties *per se*'" (Cutts et al. 2011, p. 420). Cutts et al. find that BNP voters in the 2009 European Parliament election did indeed hold negative views of the political mainstream. An overwhelming majority of them agreed that most politicians were corrupt and that there were no differences between the major parties. Contrary to expectations concerning protest voting, however, Cutts et al. also find that BNP votes were in strong agreement with (and thus attracted by) the BNP's issue stances: BNP voters were opposed to immigration, favored withdrawal from the European Union, and held hostile views toward racial minorities and Islam. BNP voters, in short, were not simply casting a protest vote to express dissatisfaction with conventional parties and the political mainstream; they were also quite supportive of the BNP's program.

Dozens of political commentators and bloggers have characterized support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) as protest voting. Former Prime Minister David Cameron did the same. Urging voters not to support UKIP in the 2014 European Parliament election, Cameron warned: "Just sending a message or making a protest doesn't actually, I think, achieve what people want" (BT 2014). Based on their analysis of data from a massive YouGov sample ($N > 30,000$), Whitaker & Lynch (2011) report that UKIP voters in the 2009 European Parliament election were, like BNP supporters, distrustful of the political mainstream, Euroskeptic, and anti-immigration. Unlike the BNP, however, UKIP was not overtly racist and xenophobic, and so, by 2009, it was not as small and insurgent a party as it had been a decade earlier.

In their analysis of these same YouGov data, Ford et al. (2012) find that UKIP supporters came in two distinct varieties. The first group, which they characterize as core UKIP supporters, reported voting for UKIP in both European Parliament and UK Parliament elections. These voters were relatively young, more working class in background, more likely to report growing up in a Labour-supporting household, and were doing relatively poorly economically. They did not view the Conservative Party and its policies as conducive to their interests and were disaffected with the mainstream political establishment, Euroskeptic, and anti-immigration. They might otherwise have been BNP supporters had not that fringe party been discredited by its violent and racist elements. The second, larger group, that of strategic supporters, however, voted UKIP primarily to express disapproval of Britain's membership in the European Union—a behavior that one could label protest voting. In all other respects, they were much like Conservative voters in general—older, more male, more affluent, and more middle class.

But can UKIP still be regarded as an insurgent party benefitting from the support of protest voters now that its overriding policy goal—Britain's withdrawal from the European Union—has been approved by a majority of voters in a national referendum? Ford et al. (2012) do not describe UKIP support as protest voting, and their study raises additional questions about the analytical usefulness of characterizing support for insurgent parties as an act of protest. Confining our attention to the 2009 European Parliament election, we ask the question: Just who among UKIP supporters was casting a protest vote? Was it the politically disaffected, anti-European Union, and anti-immigration core supporters? As Ford et al. show, their voting choices were motivated by the same factors—issue congruence and retrospective assessments of government performance—that

inform the choices of mainstream party supporters. Strategic supporters of UKIP may not have been engaging in protest voting, either. Their votes may have simply been strategic. It could well be that UKIP was their most preferred party, which they voted for sincerely in European Parliament proportional representation elections. In plurality elections to the UK Parliament, however, they adopted Duverger's logic of avoiding vote wasting, and voted for the Conservatives because UKIP had no chance of carrying their constituency.

In sum, several studies of anti-immigrant and extreme right-wing parties indicate that insurgent party supporters are much like mainstream party supporters in the weights they attach to party issue positions and policy priorities. Their votes reflect their attraction to insurgent party policies—as objectionable as these policies might be to those in the political mainstream—and not merely their rejection of (and protest against) established mainstream parties. Calling them protest voters does not provide additional insight into their behavior as voters.

Our doubts about the usefulness of characterizing support for insurgent parties as protest voting are reinforced by the fact that this support is also informed by evaluations of incumbent performance, which we also take to be the case for voters in general. Pop-Eleches (2010), who fittingly titles his article “Throwing Out the Bums,” shows that voting for insurgent parties, which is so often characterized as protest voting, looks remarkably like conventional retrospective voting. In the decades following the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, there were plenty of things generating negative retrospective evaluations—standard-of-living-killing austerity policies, job losses due to globalization, rising inequality, governmental incompetence, and rampant corruption. As Pop-Eleches explains, voters in these countries who were disappointed with the status quo initially turned to untried but nevertheless mainstream alternatives to the incumbents. When these parties, too, were found wanting, insurgent parties became a more compelling option. As we observe above, Rodon & Hierro's (2016) account of recent Spanish elections finds the same pattern. Insurgent party supporters, then, are engaging in the same sort of choice behavior as conventional retrospective voters. They find the status quo unacceptable and blame the incumbent party. What is different in the case of insurgent party supporters is that the party they end up supporting is a new and unorthodox fringe party, rather than a perennial opposition party.

For these reasons, we question the value of referring to support for small, antiestablishment, unorthodox, or ideologically extreme parties as protest voting. If one does prefer to continue using this label, we would urge that this sort of voting behavior be referred to by a more specific term: insurgent party protest voting.¹

TACTICAL PROTEST VOTING

Several studies of tactical voting in the United Kingdom have discovered an anomalous pattern of voting behavior. Respondents in the British Election Study surveys sometimes report that they cast a tactical vote. However, this vote is not of the standard Duvergerian form, i.e., the abandonment of a preferred party with no chance of winning to support a different party that they found acceptable and that was in contention (for a recent review of the literature on avoidance

¹We have not discussed the nature of voting for parties that are generally regarded as frivolous. The United Kingdom's Official Monster Raving Loony Party (OMRLP), founded by the late Screaming Lord Sutch, is the canonical example. Our inclination is to regard voting for the OMRLP as an expression of irreverence, or as just being silly, rather than as an act of protest. This is a gray area in our classification scheme, however, given that writing in Mickey Mouse seems equally irreverent and silly, but many observers would characterize that as protest voting. Another complication arises from the fact that the political role of the OMRLP has not been confined to providing comic relief. Several policy proposals first introduced in OMRLP manifestoes, including 24-hour pub licenses, lowering the voting age to 18, and legalizing commercial radio, have been enacted into law (Edwards 2015).

of vote wasting, see Núñez 2016). In many cases, the “tactical” choices that respondents report suggest that, when they say they were tactical, they mean that they had thought a bit about what they were doing. Some of them persisted in voting for their preferred party, while others voted instead for the other major party. In the days of the Alliance between the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, some said that they voted tactically for a Social Democrat candidate instead of a Liberal. As Kiewiet (2013, p. 91) puts it, “political scientists do not have a monopoly on the definition of ‘tactical’. British voters sometimes describe their vote as being tactical because it is based upon some sort of calculation, but a calculation different from what Duverger had in mind.”

Some of the non-Duvergerian voters, however, did something that was interesting and, in the view of some political scientists, sensible. These voters reported one of the major competing parties to be the highest party in their preference ordering but voted instead for a minor party, e.g., the Greens instead of Labour. Franklin et al. (1994, p. 552) speculate that voters might do so “in order to show support for the policies espoused by that party in the hopes that the voter’s preferred party might be induced to adopt them.” They also suggest that such voters might not want their preferred party to have an overwhelming majority, which can be an important consideration when major constitutional changes are in the offing.

Kselman & Niou (2011) define this sort of vote as protest voting, by which they mean “choosing a party other than one’s most-preferred to send that most preferred party a signal of dissatisfaction” (Kselman & Niou 2011, p. 400). This type of protest voting is a variant of tactical voting in that it involves voting for a less preferred party or candidate rather than one’s favorite. Instead of abandoning a party with no chance of winning, however, protest voters vote for another party to signal dissatisfaction with their most preferred party, which they are confident is going to win. The dissatisfaction protest voters are seeking to convey is usually understood in terms of the spatial model. Supporters of the major socialist party, for example, might vote instead for a more extreme left-wing party to signal a desire that the party move somewhat to the left of its current ideological location. As suggested by the discussion in the previous section, this is also the type of protest vote that David Cameron feared could lead many erstwhile Conservative supporters to cast a vote for UKIP in the 2014 European Parliament election. To distinguish it from conventional Duvergerian tactical (or strategic) voting, as well as from other forms of protest voting, we refer to this behavior as tactical protest voting.²

Myatt (2015) develops a formal model of tactical protest voting in which voting for a small, issue-focused party generates a successful protest if the vote share of the small party rises above a certain threshold. His model assumes that those considering casting a tactical protest vote nevertheless want the mainstream political party that is their most preferred choice to win the election. This creates a tension between staging a successful protest and making sure the preferred mainstream party still gets elected. In contrast to conventional strategic voting, where voters seek to coordinate on an alternative, tactical protest voters face an anticoordination problem: Those in favor of the protest want the protest to succeed, but they also need to ensure that not too many of them vote for the small party. Cox (1997) also observes that tactical protest voting is a plausible tactic but that it entails the risk of excess coordination. If tactical protest voters withdraw too much support from their most preferred party, that party could lose.

There has not been a great deal of empirical work on tactical protest voting. Kselman & Niou’s (2011) analysis of survey data from the 1988 national election in Canada finds scant evidence of

²What US political scientists call strategic voting is called tactical voting in Europe, and we use the terms interchangeably. Given that, in this review, we are talking about choosing between alternatives listed on a ballot and not something complicated and weighty, e.g., how to defeat the Confederacy in the Civil War, the European terminology is probably preferable.

Table 1 Tactical protest voting in the 2002 French presidential election (N = 2,897), from Blais (2004)

	Chirac (%)	Jospin (%)	Le Pen (%)
First choice	27.0	24.8	7.4
Actual vote share	19.4	16.0	16.7
Loyalty rate of supporters	66.7	59.5	94.4
Loss due to protest voting	−9.0	−10.0	−0.3
Gain from other candidates	1.3	1.2	9.7
Percentage of defectors to Le Pen	21.2	33.3	Not applicable

this behavior, primarily because few voters were both ideologically disposed and tactically situated in a riding to even consider casting a protest vote for the small, leftist NDP. In an analysis of elections to the European Parliament, Weber (2011) similarly reports finding no clear evidence of voters casting tactical votes for a less preferred party to protest against their most preferred party. He concludes instead that protest voting is sincere and, as indicated in many of the studies we discuss above, motivated by issue concerns and retrospective evaluations.

One study, that of Blais (2004), detects high levels of tactical protest voting in the 2002 French presidential election. Blais also shows that the tactic backfired. In the days leading up to the first round of the election, political elites, the press, and virtually all members of the mass public were convinced that incumbent center-right candidate Jacques Chirac and Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin would advance to the second round. National Front candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen was polling well but was in third place. Given the high level of disrepute associated with his party, virtually no one in France gave Le Pen a chance of advancing to the second round (Blais 2004, p. 98).

The Socialist Jospin garnered 16% of the votes in the first round. This turned out to be less than Le Pen's total, and so it was Le Pen and not Jospin who advanced to the second round. Falsely confident that Jospin was sure to advance, over 40% of Jospin's supporters instead cast a tactical protest vote for a smaller party in the first round! This result is consistent with the idea that they voted this way to signal dissatisfaction with what they viewed to be the overly moderate positions of Jospin and the Socialist party. Bolstered by defectors from Jospin, the seven other small parties of the left amassed 26% of the vote in the first round. As **Table 1** indicates, Chirac also suffered from tactical protest voting in the first round, but not to the extent Jospin did and not enough to prevent him from advancing to the second round and to an overwhelming victory over Le Pen.

As it turns out, Jospin could have withstood this level of defection if it had all gone to the other parties on the left. What was lethal to his prospects was that one-third of his backers, as well as over 20% of the voters who most preferred Chirac, voted for Le Pen. Were these voters seeking to signal to Jospin, or to Chirac, that they wanted their preferred parties' candidates to be more like Le Pen and the National Front? A number of authorities on French politics and elections whom we consulted confirmed that this was likely; many French voters from both the left and right desired that their preferred party take a stance against continued large-scale immigration, and this was what they were seeking to communicate in first-round votes for Le Pen. Another scenario worth contemplating is that some voters on the left supported Le Pen in the first round out of a desire to knock out Chirac, while some on the right voted for Le Pen hoping to knock out Jospin. Running against Le Pen in the second round, after all, was an iron-clad guarantee of victory.

In contrast to insurgent party protest voting, tactical protest voting can be clearly defined, formally modeled, and empirically tested. The issue in this case, as we point out above, is that there is little evidence to indicate that this behavior is widespread (Weber 2011). In the one

election in which there is strong evidence of tactical protest voting—the 2002 French presidential election—the tactic backfired for erstwhile supporters of a major party candidate. With this history in mind, it may well be that voters in the future will be quite averse to engaging in tactical protest voting—at least in France, anyway.

BLANK, NULL, OR SPOILED PROTEST VOTING

Those who study election administration know that there are always anomalies in the tabulation of ballots. Since the earliest days of the study of political science, rates of unmarked and mismarked ballots have been taken to be measures of the reliability, usability, and accuracy of electoral systems and balloting technologies (Mott 1926). The Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project has documented that the residual vote, i.e., the fraction of uncounted ballots among those cast, is correlated with the particular type of voting technology in use (Sinclair & Alvarez 2004). This indicates that unmarked and mismarked ballots result from mistakes that voters make when they fill out their ballot or from mistakes that the voting technologies themselves introduce in the ballot marking process (see also Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project 2001, Ansolabehere & Stewart 2005).

But anomalous ballots like these can also be the product of intentional actions by voters. Voters who intentionally cast a BNS ballot can be regarded as engaging in a type of protest that we term BNS protest voting. According to Superti (2016), data from over 2,000 elections held throughout the world over the past several decades indicate that the rate of BNS voting has been increasing. BNS votes have exceeded 15% of all votes cast in one-third of the elections in Latin America held since 2000 and are cast at similar rates in emerging democracies throughout the world (IDEA 2002).

A review of research in this area reveals that political scientists have frequently sought to explain the rate of BNS protest voting in particular elections as a function of electoral laws and institutions. In mandatory voting regimes, for example, voters who would rather not vote are compelled to do so, and some respond by casting a BNS ballot. Superti (2016), among others, finds that BNS ballots are cast at higher rates in mandatory electoral regimes than in nonmandatory ones—presumably by voters who would otherwise not turn out to vote. Other institutional factors that may reduce the perceived efficacy of voting, e.g., bicameralism, electoral disproportionality, and multipartyism, are also seen to encourage more BNS protest voting. The casting of BNS ballots is also hypothesized to arise from voter discontent with poor economic conditions, from the rejection of incumbent politicians, or from disillusionment with the existing political system. As indicated above, research in this area must necessarily confront the thorny problem of distinguishing BNS ballots cast intentionally, which are thus protest votes, from BNS ballots cast unintentionally when voters do something to unwittingly spoil their ballot. BNS votes cast unintentionally can be attributed to lack of voter information, political skills, and experience. Research in this area focuses on socioeconomic factors such as urbanization, education, and literacy as predictors of BNS votes.

In the first major study of BNS voting, Steifbold (1965) distinguishes two types of BNS voters in the 1957 and 1961 elections in West Germany. In his view, the first category, apathetic voters, turned out to the polls because of strong social conformity pressures but had no clear opinions about the legitimacy of the political system and were indifferent to the party choices presented to them. They cast blank ballots, which he considered to be a sort of weak protest vote. The second category comprises “voters who are highly politicized, who know exactly whom they would vote for if they could find the party corresponding to their ideas; but failing to do so, they deliberately invalidate their ballots as a political act” (Steifbold 1965, p. 406). He bases his inference concerning this stronger form of protest voting on the fact that rates of BNS voting were higher in locations that

formerly gave significant support to parties that were not on the ballot, e.g., the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, which was banned in 1956.

In their classic study of the first set of run-off elections held in the French Fifth Republic, Rosenthal & Sen (1973), like Steifbold (1965), identify a pattern of BNS protest voting that they attribute to alienation, i.e., disapproval of all of the choices on the ballot. BNS ballots were cast at much higher rates by second-round voters whose most preferred party had been forced off the ballot after the first round. Rather than vote for any of the remaining options on the ballot, they preferred to indicate their dissatisfaction with these remaining options—either by leaving the ballot blank or by indicating their dissatisfaction explicitly, sometimes in colorful or vulgar terms. Pierce (1995), who refers to those voters whose first choice failed to make it to the second round as thwarted voters, also finds such voters to have engaged in higher levels of BNS voting in the four French presidential elections held between 1969 and 1988. Rosenthal & Sen surmise that BNS protest voting could be targeted either at incumbent officeholders or at the regime in general. In any case, BNS voting occurred at a record level in the second round of the recent French presidential election, as nearly 12% of the votes cast were either blank or spoiled (Mackintosh & Vonberg 2017).

McAllister & Makkai (1993) analyze aggregate data from the 1990 and 1997 federal elections in Australia, in conjunction with census data, to assess the relative contribution of several factors to rates of BNS balloting. The institutional factors they consider are the number of parties competing in the elections and the closeness of the elections. Their major predictor of BNS protest voting proclivity is socioeconomic status (SES), the hypothesis being that protesters are politically efficacious and should thus come disproportionately from the high-SES echelon. They also entertain hypotheses concerning unintentional BNS voting from the other end of the SES spectrum, i.e., that a number of socioeconomic factors are associated with voters making more mistakes in casting their ballots; these factors may include the percentage of immigrants who are likely to have poor English language skills and the percentage of the population that is Aboriginal. McAllister & Makkai find no support for their institutional hypotheses; the closeness of the election was not related to the percentage of invalid votes, and the number of parties contesting the election had no effect whatsoever. SES and BNS voting rates were negatively correlated, a result that was the opposite of what was predicted by their hypothesis regarding intentional BNS protest voting. The strongest predictor of invalid ballots cast was the number of voters who were recently arrived immigrants who, presumably, were lacking in English language skills. They therefore conclude that most voters who cast invalid BNS ballots in these elections did so unintentionally and that intentional BNS protest voting appears to have been of negligible importance in these elections.

In another study of BNS voting in Australia, Hill & Young (2007) categorize different types of BNS ballots cast in the 2004 federal elections and reach conclusions similar to those of McAllister & Makkai (1993). They report that approximately 60% of the BNS ballots had been filled out incorrectly in ways that suggested that the voters had intended to cast a valid vote. These voters simply made mistakes that invalidated their ballots. Approximately 15% of the BNS ballots were purposely written upon, indicating that these voters were seeking to make some type of political statement rather than cast a valid vote—in other words, they were casting a protest vote. The remaining 25% of BNS ballots were blank, which Hill & Young view as inconclusive in terms of motive. Blank ballots could be cast to signal protest. However, they could also reflect indifference to the available choices on the ballot or the voters' sense that they lacked enough information to make a choice.

Power & Roberts (1995) also find that background factors associated with the political skills and information levels of voters, i.e., literacy rates and urbanization, explain much of the variance in the rate of BNS votes. But they also find evidence of BNS protest voting. In Brazilian elections held between 1945 and 1990, BNS votes were cast at markedly higher rates in elections held under authoritarian regimes or when there was overt electoral manipulation by the government, which

often resulted in the proscription of some parties. Measures of objective economic conditions, economic growth, and inflation were not associated with the casting of invalid ballots.

Power & Garand (2007) analyze BNS voting rates in 80 legislative elections held in 18 Latin American countries between 1980 and 2000. The institutional variables they investigate include the degree to which the electoral system favors personal votes (closed versus open party lists), average district magnitude, disproportionality of the electoral system, unicameralism, whether voting was voluntary or compulsory, and how strictly compulsory voting was enforced. Adopting socioeconomic measures as indicators of voter skill and knowledge (hypothesized to lower the rate of invalid ballots cast unintentionally), they investigate the degree of urbanization, literacy rates, income inequality, and GDP per capita. Their predictors of intentional BNS protest voting include economic growth rates, an index of revolutionary violence, and both levels and changes in the Freedom House Index of Civil and Political Rights. Their findings indicate that all three sets of factors were significant in predicting the percentage of BNS ballots cast. With respect to protest behavior, they find that higher levels of revolutionary violence were associated with higher levels of BNS voting, while both the level and change in the Freedom House Index were negatively correlated with it. Countries with good or improving civil and political rights thus experienced less BNS voting.

Uggla (2008) takes a similar approach to those of Power & Roberts (1995) and Power & Garand (2007). He analyzes BNS voting, as well as turnout and voting for extraparlimentary parties (parties with no representation in the legislature), using data from 200 elections in Western Europe, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand held between 1980 and 2000. Uggla entertains four hypotheses: (a) the incompetence hypothesis, according to which voters make mistakes that void their ballots, which he tests using measures of literacy and years since the last democratization; (b) the social marginality hypothesis, whereby discontent bred by social marginality leads to BNS and extraparlimentary votes, operationalized by the degree of urbanization and unemployment; (c) the polity hypothesis, viewing BNS and extraparlimentary votes as generated by feelings of alienation, which he posits are reflected in the Freedom House Index and the degree of election saliency (from legislative midterms to executive elections); and (d) the political hypothesis, whereby BNS and extraparlimentary votes are the results of a party system dominated by a single party. This last hypothesis can be measured by the vote share of the first party and the margin of victory. Uggla includes, as extra covariates, dummies for majoritarian elections, proportional elections, compulsory voting, and Latin American countries. He finds that lower levels of political rights are associated with higher levels of BNS ballots and abstention, lending some support to the polity hypothesis. Uggla also finds some support for the political hypothesis, as the margin of victory of the largest party is positively associated with both BNS and extraparlimentary voting. Both of these findings can be seen as indicative of protest voting.

Moral (2016) studies invalid voting, abstention, and support for niche (fringe) parties using data from 23 postelection surveys in 18 European party systems between 2001 and 2011. He finds that invalid votes might be an expression of discontent with the variety of policy offers in the party system, measured as the effective number of distinct party families. He also reports that dissatisfaction with democracy is associated with higher levels of invalid votes, as well as higher abstention and support for niche parties.

Escobar et al. (2002) rely on ecological estimates of voter transition matrices, obtained with data at the municipality level, to analyze the sources of BNS votes, as well as the support of parties in general, in the 1999 and 2001 Argentine general elections. They find some indirect evidence of protest behavior, as around 25% of voters who supported the Alianza government in the 1999 elections instead decided to cast a spoiled ballot in 2001. Moreover, the other major party lost only 0.1% of its support to spoiled votes, which suggests that it was Alianza voters disappointed with the government who cast spoiled votes as a way to signal dissatisfaction.

Some of the many studies of BNS voting that we survey above cover a single country, while others are based on data from dozens of countries. They vary in how many elections they cover and entertain a wide range of specific hypotheses. What is common to almost all of them, however, is heavy reliance on aggregate data. This is unfortunate but likely unavoidable. BNS votes usually constitute a small fraction of all votes cast, so sample sizes would need to be quite large to investigate this phenomenon through survey research. Aggregate data, however, are not well suited to addressing the key empirical issue in the analysis of BNS voting, which is to distinguish between BNS votes cast unintentionally and those cast as intentional protest votes. Another problem resulting from the reliance of research in this area on aggregate data is that many of the macro-level covariates hypothesized to predict BNS protest voting can be linked to unintentional BNS voting, as well. Lack of political rights or electoral manipulation may well induce protest voting, but they may also be correlated with electorates that are less informed on average, less experienced, and, thus, prone to making mistakes at higher rates. Finally, in compulsory voting systems, it is hard to distinguish between voter apathy and protest behavior as drivers of BNS votes, and researchers should be especially careful in analyzing BNS voting in these systems.

Despite these challenges, we believe that, in some situations, the number of BNS ballots cast as acts of protest can be estimated with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Barring innovations in ballot form and electoral administration, a spike in the number of BNS ballots above an historical baseline is indicative of a surge in protest voting. The examples of the 2016 US presidential election in Florida, cited at the beginning of this review, and the 2017 French presidential election are cases in point. As we have noted, the number of Florida voters who used the ballot to issue a political comment instead of choosing between the presidential candidates on the ballot was more than twice as high in 2016 as in the previous two elections.

ORGANIZED PROTEST VOTING

Incontrovertible evidence that voters engage in protest voting by casting BNS ballots comes from elections in which such ballots are a major, even predominant, phenomenon. Major BNS episodes usually occur in response to directives from political leaders and elites to their followers. In this section, we discuss several of the more celebrated episodes in which organized protest voting has reached an impressive percentage of total votes cast. Our review of these cases indicates that, while it is indeed possible to orchestrate high levels of protest voting, large sections of the electorate remain resistant to such appeals. As a consequence, protest vote organizers in these instances have failed to achieve their objectives.

Argentina's 1957 Constitutional Assembly Election

In 1957, following the coup that toppled then–Argentine President Juan Perón, President (and General) Pedro Aramburu called for a constitutional assembly to supplant the 1949 Peronist constitution. This marked the culmination of an intense campaign of de-Peronization. Perón was in exile, Peronist leaders were imprisoned, Peronist elements had been purged from the government and the General Confederation of Labor, and the Justicialist (Peronist) party had been banned from participating in politics. A 1956 decree made it illegal to speak Perón's name out loud, and Eva Perón's body had been disinterred and hidden to prevent it from being a rally point for die-hard Peronists. Prior to the Constitutional Assembly election, the largest legal party, the Radical Civic Union, split into two factions: the anti-Peronist People's Radical Civic Union (UCR-P), supported by the military regime, and the Intransigent Radical Civic Union (UCR-I), headed by Arturo Frondizi. Frondizi signaled a willingness to recognize and eventually rehabilitate the Peronists.

Table 2 Constitutional Assembly election and presidential election, Argentina, 1957–1958

Party	Percentage of the vote: 1957	Percentage of the vote: 1958
People's Radical Civic Union	24.2	29.1
Intransigent Radical Civic Union	21.2	43.8
Center Federation	6.1	Not applicable
Popular Conservative	Not applicable	1.4
Socialist	6.0	5.6
Christian Democratic	4.8	3.6
Democratic Progressive	3.0	1.8
Communist	2.6	Not applicable
Others	7.2	6.3
Blanks	24.3	8.4
Other invalid	0.4	Data unavailable

Choosing not to accept these overtures from the UCR-I, Perón instructed his supporters to cast blank votes in the Constitutional Assembly election; as **Table 2** indicates, large numbers of them did so. In an election that featured turnout in excess of 90%, the largest number of votes cast went to neither the UCR-P (24.2%) nor the UCR-I (21.2%) but were instead left blank (24.7%).

The plurality won by blank votes represents an impressive ability on the Peronists' part to organize protest voting, especially given that their leaders were in exile or in jail, had no voice in the press, and were not allowed to meet—and that the world was still 60 years away from Twitter and Facebook. Upon reflection, however, this strategy appears to have been politically ineffective, as it divided the electoral support of the military regime's strongest opponents. Many Peronists cast blank votes, but many of them voted instead for the ICR-I—a sort of tactical vote, as it were. The UCR-I's strategy of appealing to Peronists also fell short of its intended objective. As Torre & De Riz (1993, p. 270) put it, "In spite of having achieved considerable electoral support, the UCR-I had to resign itself to having failed to co-opt the *peronista* electorate." In 1958, in contrast, the Peronists and UCR-I did join forces after Perón endorsed Frondizi four days before the presidential election. Frondizi won nearly half the popular vote and over two-thirds of the Electoral College votes.

In the end, Frondizi's quasi-Faustian bargain with the Peronists led to his undoing. In 1962, he lifted the ban on the Peronists and allowed them to compete in provincial elections. They did very well, winning the governorship of Buenos Aires and 9 out of the 13 other governorships. As it turned out, they did too well: Frondizi was deposed by the military and exiled a few weeks later.

The 2000 Peruvian Presidential Election

As in France, presidential elections in Peru require a runoff election if no candidate wins an absolute majority of the vote in the first round. Incumbent president Alberto Fujimori had consolidated political power in the presidency in the so-called auto-coup of 1992, and the shock-treatment economic reforms he instituted appeared to go well at first. By 2000, however, Peru had experienced years of rampant inflation and political turmoil. According to the official results, Fujimori, running as the Perú 2000 candidate, nevertheless obtained 49.9% of the vote in the first round, just short of the majority required to avoid a runoff with Alejandro Toledo of the Perú Posible party. Toledo and international election observers protested the government's use of state resources for campaign purposes and control of the news media, the absence of an independent election authority, irregularities in the vote count, and inexplicable delays in announcing election results (Schmidt 2002).

Table 3 Presidential election, Peru, 2000

Party	Percentage of the vote: first round	Percentage of the vote: second round
Perú 2000	49.9	74.3
Perú Posible	40.2	25.7
Somos Perú	3.0	Not applicable
Avancemos	2.2	Not applicable
Solidaridad Nacional	1.8	Not applicable
American Popular Revolutionary Alliance	1.4	Not applicable
Frente Popular Agrícola del Perú	0.7	Not applicable
Acción Popular	0.4	Not applicable
Unión por el Perú	0.3	Not applicable
Valid votes	91.9	68.9
Blanks	5.9	1.2
Spoiled	2.3	29.9

The first-round vote totals, reported in **Table 3**, raise a number of questions. First, if Fujimori was cheating (and most everyone in Peru believed he was), then why did he stop at 49.9% when 50.0% would have obviated the need for a second round of balloting? Fujimori's people would have needed to find only another 15,000 ballots, or to declare 30,000 others to be invalid, to put him over the threshold. Some observers argue that Fujimori had indeed intended to achieve and declare a first-round victory, but backed off in the face of domestic pressure and international opprobrium (Schmidt 2002). We doubt that this is the case. It seems more likely that Fujimori was confident of defeating Toledo in the second round and so was not concerned about achieving a first-round absolute majority. This question could well be one that is never answered.

Toledo demanded that the second round be postponed until the fairness and integrity of the electoral process could be guaranteed in the runoff. When it was not postponed, Toledo withdrew from the contest and urged his supporters to cast protest votes by either spoiling the ballot, i.e., by writing "No to Fraud" or something along those lines, or by leaving it blank. Most of Toledo's supporters followed his directive, and in the second round, 3.7 million voters, or about 31% of those who participated in the election, cast a blank or spoiled ballot.

As in the case of the 1957 Argentine election, however, the strategy of organized protest voting was not efficacious. As shown in **Table 3**, even though Toledo had withdrawn and urged his followers to cast BNS ballots, over two million Peruvians voted for him anyway in the second round. The sum of the Toledo and BNS votes still fell below Fujimori's total, but it is also the case that turnout was lower in the second round than in the first. This may have been due, at least in part, to discouragement and confusion among Toledo supporters after his withdrawal from the contest. Toledo might well have done better had he pursued a different strategy. Instead of pulling out and urging blank protest votes, he could have placed his supporters at as many voting sites as possible to deter fraud or sought even more scrutiny from international observers.

As it turns out, Fujimori was subsequently pressured to call for new elections to be held in April 2001, but was removed from office before that date after the so-called Vlad videos came to light and the Montesinos corruption scandal broke. Fujimori faxed in a letter of resignation from Tokyo in November 2000, but Congress, citing permanent moral disability as grounds for removal, fired him instead.

The 2011 Bolivian Judicial Election

Vowing to refound the country to better serve the interests of the working class, indigenous peoples, and cocaleros (coca leaf growers), the leader of the Movement to Socialism party (MAS), Evo Morales, was elected president of Bolivia in 2005. In accordance with the new 2009 constitution, the Morales government called for elections to the national judiciary in 2011. These elections were to be nonpartisan, and it was also illegal to campaign for or against any individual.

All voting information was provided by a government office—the Organo Electoral Plurinacional—and another constitutional provision required Bolivia’s Congress, the Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional, to vet all candidates. Given the large supermajority that MAS enjoyed in the Congress, the candidates selected through this process were Morales himself and other MAS loyalists (Driscoll & Nelson 2014).

Anti-MAS opponents, forbidden by law to campaign against any of the judicial election candidates, called on their backers to instead cast BNS votes. An unprecedented level of BNS voting occurred—nearly 60% of all ballots cast. Using both individual-level survey data and municipality-level election results, Driscoll & Nelson (2014) confirm that the overwhelming share of BNS votes were protest votes. Those who supported MAS and Morales were far less likely to have reported casting blank or spoiled votes. Evidence from their survey data is corroborated by election results. Municipalities in opposition strongholds (primarily in the east of Bolivia) reported much higher percentages of BNS ballots, while government strongholds experienced much lower levels of BNS voting.

Driscoll & Nelson’s (2014) findings also indicate that voters who spoiled their ballots intended to register a stronger degree of protest than those who cast blank ballots. This makes sense: Spoiling a ballot requires more effort than simply casting a blank one, and at least some blank ballots result from voter or voting technology error. Secondly, even though ballot spoilers are known to sometimes traffic in vulgar imperatives and coarse imagery, Driscoll & Nelson report that anti-Morales Bolivian voters with at least some college education were more likely to cast a spoiled ballot than those with less education. In a study of Italian municipal elections and elections in the Basque country of Spain, Superti (2016) also finds that the more educated and politically sophisticated voters are more likely to spoil their ballots.

Sinn Fein and Abstentionism

Urging voters to cast a blank ballot as a protest vote, as Perón did in the 1957 Argentine Constitutional Assembly election and Toledo did in the 2000 Peruvian presidential election, appears to be a problematic strategy. Many of Perón’s supporters were not persuaded that anything would be accomplished by casting a blank ballot, and so, in 1957, cast votes for the relatively pro-Peronist UCR-I. In Peru in 2000, millions of voters persisted in voting for Toledo even though he had told them not to. We suspect that they may have been reluctant to cast a ballot that they knew by definition would not count. They may have also seen this as a defeatist strategy or have not understood why a blank ballot would convey any information whatsoever. Others might have thought that it would make no sense to show up at the polls only to cast a blank ballot. But what better way is there to signal that one supports a candidate who has been banned from competing or that one perceives the electoral process to be fraudulent or otherwise illegitimate?

There is at least one method of protest voting that does not discourage or confuse some of one’s supporters. This is the policy of abstention that Sinn Fein has adopted in Northern Ireland with respect to elections to the UK Parliament. Sinn Fein places its candidates on the ballot, and they participate in the election like all other candidates. If elected, however, they promise not to

serve. Their supporters thus do not have to do anything out of the ordinary when they vote in the election—they can cast a protest vote against UK rule in Northern Ireland by simply voting for Sinn Fein. The costs of this strategy, both financial and political, are minimal. The abstentionist Members of Parliament (MPs) cannot collect their salary, but they can claim living expenses. Politically, of course, it is hard to imagine a bloc of four or five Sinn Fein MPs casting a pivotal vote in Parliament.

BNS ballots cast during the typical election leave observers with multiple alternative explanations for their cause and intent. In contrast, BNS ballots cast in the context of organized political activity, directed by elites, are readily associated with protest behavior. This is likely to significantly increase the psychic benefits of casting a BNS ballot, as such voters can be confident that their BNS ballots will be perceived as protest votes. Organized BNS protest voting, however, occurs only infrequently, under special circumstances, and, in our view at least, has generally failed to achieve the objectives of the organizers.

OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED PROTEST VOTING

Some political scientists advocate placing the choice of NOTA on ballots to regularize protest voting. India, Ukraine, Thailand, Columbia, and the US state of Nevada currently provide voters this option. While NOTA can be taken to be an expression of protest voting, it is obviously different in that it is officially sanctioned. In any case, the NOTA option sometimes looms large in particular elections. In the 2014 Democratic gubernatorial primary in Nevada, for example, the NOTA option registered a plurality of the votes cast (30%). Democratic candidate Robert Goodman came in second behind NOTA with 25%, but under Nevada election law, he was declared the winner of the election.

Superti (2016), an advocate of NOTA, argues that inclusion of the NOTA choice eliminates the observational equivalence between BNS protest voting and voter error. It does not, however, eliminate all of the ambiguity that we discuss above because the NOTA choice can reflect indifference and low information as well as a rejection of all other candidates. Damore et al. (2012) found that approximately 11% of all ballots cast in all statewide elections in Nevada between 1976 and 2008 were marked NOTA, and the results of their analyses indicate that some of these votes did reflect a rejection of all candidates on the ballot. But rates of NOTA voting were also higher in nonpartisan contests and in contests for lesser offices, which implies that NOTA voting also reflects a lack of interest and information. Brown (2011, p. 364) reached similar conclusions, arguing that NOTA votes in Nevada “are motivated by a mixture of ignorance and protest.”

At this point, little research has been done on NOTA voting, and the studies that we have found in the literature have concentrated on recent data from Nevada. More research using data from other countries, as well as other sources of data from Nevada (particularly survey data), would be of great value in helping us determine when and where NOTA votes can be accurately classified as protest votes.

CONCLUSION

Reports of protest voting abound in news coverage of contemporary politics, and protest voting has been subject to considerable social scientific analysis. In this review, we have developed a basic taxonomy to distinguish among the many different behaviors that have been referred to as protest voting. Going forward, we urge those studying elections and voting behavior not to use the vague and ambiguous moniker of protest voting, but rather to use the taxonomy we have developed in order to more accurately characterize the phenomena of interest to them.

As we have discussed, across all categories of protest voting, there are significant challenges that researchers must confront. First, much more needs to be done to better differentiate between unintentional BNS voting and purposeful BNS protest voting. Second, what we call tactical protest voting is observationally equivalent to other non-Duvergerian types of tactical voting. The more basic questions in this case are when and where protest votes are sincere expressions of voters' preferences and when they are motivated by tactical considerations. Weber's (2011) study of voting in European Parliamentary elections favors the view that protest voters are generally voting sincerely, but much more work needs to be done on these questions. Moreover, there are a number of other questions that we have not addressed. Are protest votes more akin to other forms of unconventional political participation than to the conventional act of voting? Are protest votes an emotional reaction, what we might call angry voting?

A major step forward in studying the many phenomena that fall under the rubric of protest voting would be to reduce reliance on aggregate data and to turn instead to survey research. As we have observed, however, in most places and most of the time, only small fractions of the electorate engage in these behaviors. This means that we would need large-sample surveys like the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, or other innovative sampling methods, to yield sufficiently large samples for analysis of protest voting.

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