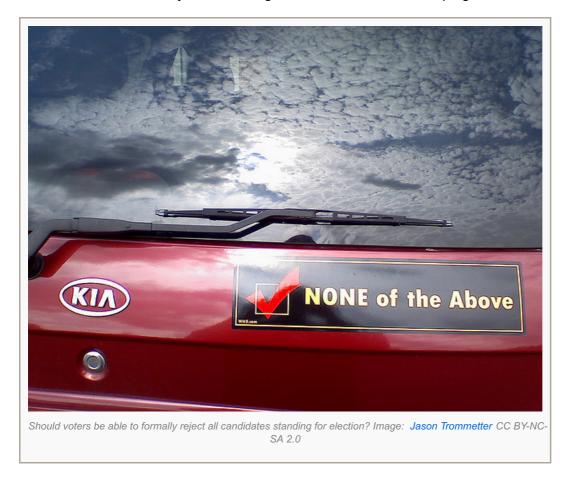# Three reforms that would be more effective than adding a 'None of the above' option to ballot papers

By Democratic Audit UK

*Should voters be allowed to select 'None of the above' at elections, as proposed recently on Democratic Audit? In this post, **Richard Berry** argues that this would represent only a superficial change to the electoral process. He suggests that changing the electoral system, introducing primaries and providing better support for candidates would be more effective ways of achieving the aims of the NOTA campaign.*

Should voters be able to formally reject all candidates standing for election? Image: Jason Trommetter CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

India introduced a 'None of the above' (NOTA) option at its general election last year, the biggest democratic election ever held. This allowed voters to reject all of the candidates standing in their constituency; ultimately, 1.1% of Indian voters chose this option.

Rohin Vadera proposed recently on Democratic Audit that the UK should do the same, arguing that putting a NOTA option on ballot papers is,*"the only measurable way to bring consent into the UK electoral process."* In the post Vadera envisages formalised consequences of a NOTA vote: if this proves the most popular option at an election, the next highest-placed candidate would assume office for 6-12 months until a new election is held. No such mechanism exists in India, which means the NOTA has little more than symbolic value.

The proposal seems an appealing one. There is clear evidence that a large number of people feel entirely disaffected from the democratic process, and it seems only right that this sentiment is given an outlet at election time. Of course, people can already spoil their ballot papers or stay at home, but these are imprecise methods and fail to record exactly what preferences voters are expressing.

The problem with introducing a NOTA option, however, is that the change it brings about will be superficial. There is nothing wrong with allowing voters to register their dissatisfaction, but in itself this will do nothing to address the fundamental challenges facing British democracy.

NOTA will not increase turnout. Some people will select this option, including those who travel to the polling station specifically to do so. But the notion that significant numbers of voters refuse to participate at the moment because they lack a formal mechanism for registering discontent is far-fetched. Political disaffection has many causes, most of them much more deeply-entrenched than proponents of NOTA would have us believe.

We need only look at differential rates of turnout by social class. At the 2010 General Election, the gap in turnout between voters in the highest income group and those in the lowest was 23 percentage points. NOTA campaigners might point out that the poorest members of our society are not well represented by the candidates that tend to stand for election – and therefore NOTA would potentially give them a voice – and that is true. But attending a polling station to vote for 'none of the above' is in almost every respect the very same activity as attending a polling station to vote for a party. NOTA may seem like an act of rebellion, but simply being in a position to choose it requires a level of political engagement that is unthinkable for millions of citizens.

There is a range of other political reforms that have the potential to achieve some of the aims of the NOTA campaign. In this post I will discuss three: changing the electoral system, introducing primary elections, and improving support for candidates. None of these can fully address the deeply-entrenched disaffection borne out of inequality, but each would be much more effective than NOTA in changing the dynamic of elections.

Electoral reform

Rohin Vadera stated in his post that, *"If the majority of voters choose [NOTA] then that electorate as a whole (e.g. MP constituency) has withheld its consent and the election must be re-run."* But under Britain's First Past The Post (FPTP) electoral system that would not necessarily be the case. Only a plurality of voters would need to choose NOTA, meaning that elections can be voided on the wishes of perhaps just a third of voters. In this sense, NOTA would do nothing to address the current situation where tens of millions of votes are 'wasted' and not reflected in electoral outcomes.

First Past The Post – used for the House of Commons and most local authorities – provides for MPs to be elected if they win the highest number of votes in their constituency. Successful candidates do not need the support of the majority of their constituents, and most do not have it even in those seats considered 'safe'. Scaled up, this also allows parties to win parliamentary majorities with much less than 50% of the public vote.

Other electoral systems work in different ways. Systems like the Alternative Vote and Supplementary Vote allow votes for multiple candidates in order of preference; while not guaranteeing that candidates must win a majority, they would help ensure that MPs cannot win without the endorsement of a much greater proportion of their electorate. Other systems like the Single Transferable Vote or List systems aim for proportionality in the overall result. Each system has its own strengths and weaknesses, but most alternatives would change the electoral dynamic in a meaningful way and give the individual voter more power than under FPTP.

Primary elections

Primary elections are a phenomenon we associate chiefly with the United States, but they are a feature of the electoral process in many parts of the world, including Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. Primaries essentially open up the candidate selection process – to a greater or lesser extent – so that ordinary voters can take part in choosing the candidate that a party is going to nominate for an upcoming election.

Both Labour and the Conservatives have experimented with primary elections, and pledged to continue doing so. This is to be encouraged. Primaries, if run in a fair and open manner, can widen the pool of candidates putting themselves forward for election and shift power from party elites to the public in choosing which of them succeeds. In doing so, this reform would significantly weaken the appeal of NOTA.

Support for candidates

We tend to make life hard for election candidates in the UK. For parliamentary elections candidates are required to collect 10 signatures from local electors and to pay a deposit of £500, which is lost if the candidate fails to get 5% of the vote. Candidates without significant financial and organisational backing may therefore be discouraged

from standing. This does not just affect independent candidates but parties, too: for instance, UKIP lost £229,000 and the Green Party £163,500 in election deposits at the 2010 General Election. Abolishing deposits would reduce barriers to standing for election, helping to increase the choices available to voters.

Publicity for candidates is also poor. Parliamentary candidates are given one free mailout to voters during the campaign, but the same privilege is not afforded to candidates at most other types of election. Arguably, however, even this form of support is insufficient, in an age where political communication is moving online. As I have argued elsewhere, pre-election information aimed at voters falls short of what is required. There are very few places a voter can go to find comprehensive information about all of the candidates standing for election in their constituency or ward. In these circumstances it is no surprise some people reach for NOTA as a solution, but the better response is to improve the quality of information available.

In conclusion, it is clear that elections in the UK can be improved. Voters should have more information, more choice and more influence over the outcomes. If changes to deliver these objectives are introduced, we can also expect the representativeness and responsiveness of our elected politicians to increase. Adding a 'none of the above' option to ballot papers may address a narrow theoretical concern about the provision of voter consent, but there are much more effective and practical ways to achieve meaningful change.

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Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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Richard Berry is a Research Associate at Democratic Audit and the LSE Public Policy Group. He is a scrutiny manager for the London Assembly and also runs the new Health Election Data website. View his research at richardjberry.com or find him on Twitter @richard3berry.