

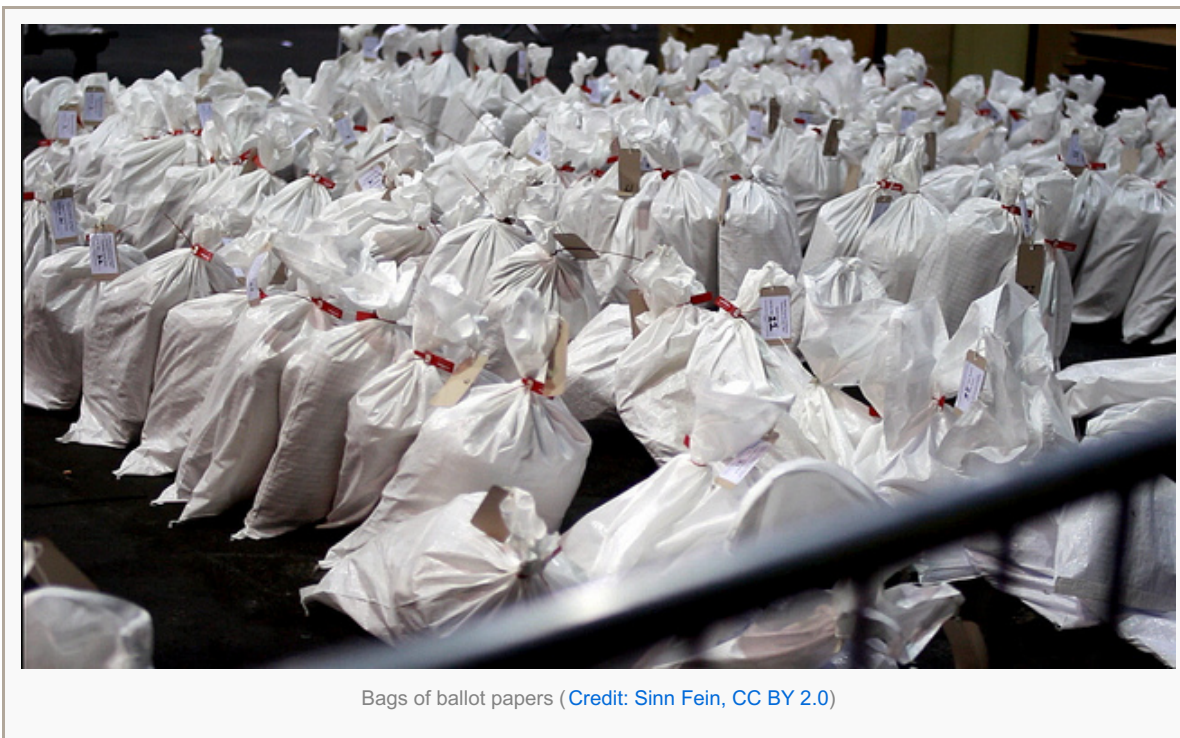
# Democracy demands that a ‘None of the Above’ option be added to ballot papers for UK elections

[democraticaudit.com/2015/01/08/democracy-demands-that-a-none-of-the-above-option-be-added-to-ballot-papers-for-uk-elections/](https://democraticaudit.com/2015/01/08/democracy-demands-that-a-none-of-the-above-option-be-added-to-ballot-papers-for-uk-elections/)

By Democratic Audit UK

2015-1-8

*Currently in elections, voters have a binary choice of endorsing a political party, or not voting at all, with little to distinguish between those who opt out due to reasons of apathy or disinterest, and those who do not find any of the choices on offer sufficiently appealing. **Rohin Vadera** argues that this situation has to change, and makes the case for a “None of the Above” option on ballot papers.*



Bags of ballot papers (Credit: Sinn Fein, CC BY 2.0)

Can a true electoral democracy exist without a viable ‘None of the Above’ option on the ballot? Democracy is fuzzily defined; however it is indisputable that a government in an electoral democracy should derive its powers from the consent of its voters. However, consent is completely absent from the UK electoral system; it is a serious systemic flaw, easily exploitable, and makes it very difficult for voters to be truly represented; it has created an oligarchy in form and practice.

The UK electoral system can be best summed up as ‘Lead, follow, or get out of the way’. Voter consent is not required within this paradigm.

The only measurable way to bring consent into the UK electoral process is by the use of a viable ‘None of the Above’ (NOTA) option with formalised consequences on ballots. When voters choose a candidate on the ballot they are implicitly consenting for the winner of that election to represent them, even though they may have not voted for the successful candidate; when voters choose NOTA they are withholding their consent for any of the candidates on the ballot to represent them. If the majority of voters choose that option then that electorate as a whole (e.g. MP constituency) has withheld its consent and the election must be re-run.

NOTA should not be conflated with abstention.

Spoiling the ballot is not the same either, as spoilt ballots can be counted as spoilt in error. Any spoilt vote count is

therefore meaningless and does not provide a measure of voter discontent. In any case it exposes the undemocratic nature of the current system, as an act of vandalism is required to exercise what should be a democratic prerequisite, and if carried in large enough numbers will only result in uncertainty and confusion.

If you can give your consent by ticking a box is it not fair and reasonable that consent can be withheld by the same means? The degree to which consent can be measurably given is commensurate with the degree it can be measurably withheld. There are legitimate objections on the grounds of political instability if NOTA 'wins', the possibility of continual re-runs, and voter fatigue. Managing of the logistics of a NOTA 'win' is as important as its inclusion on the ballot for it to deliver its true potential .

A solution could be to allow the 2nd placed candidate take office temporarily, for a defined period of 6 -12 months, so an appropriate response to a NOTA win can be developed by all stakeholders in the context of the election as a whole before facing voters again.

The advantage of this solution is that it enhances the power of NOTA, by allowing time for a fully developed response, while maintaining political stability and avoiding voter fatigue. Voters can now choose NOTA with the confidence that a robust system exists to support their choice, just as one exists if they choose a candidate.

In many cases the logistical requirements are no different to a by-election; in other cases it may require an entire general election.

The most important criteria is to make NOTA a viable option for those who wish to use it and so make voter discontent measurable and reliable; you cannot hope respond properly to anything you don't reliably measure.

NOTA's true benefit is that it makes the voter central to the electoral process and so will improve governance and the quality of candidates, as candidates must put voters' needs ahead of their financial backers, party factions, special interest groups and their personal ambitions.

What is the point of universal suffrage if many voters feel nothing is worth voting for? It effectively disenfranchises these voters, and for all practical purposes suffrage is not universal or even equal. The NOTA option ensures that every vote will count and each carry enough weight so candidates will have to start competing for these votes and be forced to broaden their voter bases significantly.

A NOTA with formalised consequences is a democratic prerequisite. It is possible that it may also be a legal requisite for any country that has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as has the UK.

To concentrate on Article 25 (b)

To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;

In any dictionary the relevant definition of will is: expressing desire, consent, or willingness. Its clear that consent is inherent aspect of will. How can the free expression of the will of the electors be guaranteed unless their consent has been sought and subsequently given or withheld? It seems ludicrous to even conceive of it.

With NOTA, perhaps for the first time ever, the electorate is the sovereign power. Without NOTA, it can be argued that what we have is in fact an electoral oligarchy, as sovereign power resides solely in parliament and never with the electorate, and voters have a say in who rules them, not who represents them. It's an oligarchy disguising itself as a democracy, without exaggeration arguing against NOTA is really arguing against democracy. Sovereign power by definition must come with the prerogative to give and withhold consent; currently that prerogative exists only in parliament.

Given the current electoral system is it any wonder that an institution like Westminster has become remote, unrepresentative and disconnected from the electorate?

NOTA is surely an essential and easily implementable reform as it corrects a systemic flaw in the electoral system, and is a logical, moral, and possibly a legal prerequisite for democracy.

—

*Note: this post gives the views of the author, and not Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.*

—

**Rohin Vadera** is a hydrographic surveyor by profession and an active member and researcher of NOTA UK; a loose knit group of volunteers advocating for the inclusion of a viable 'None of the Above' option on ballots. The group has recently been instrumental in persuading a parliamentary select committee to include NOTA as one of the possible reforms required for improving voter turn-out. If you wish to know more, join us at [www.notauk.com](http://www.notauk.com); we are active in the media, as well as Facebook, Twitter and You Tube and have a petition open on 38 degrees.

