

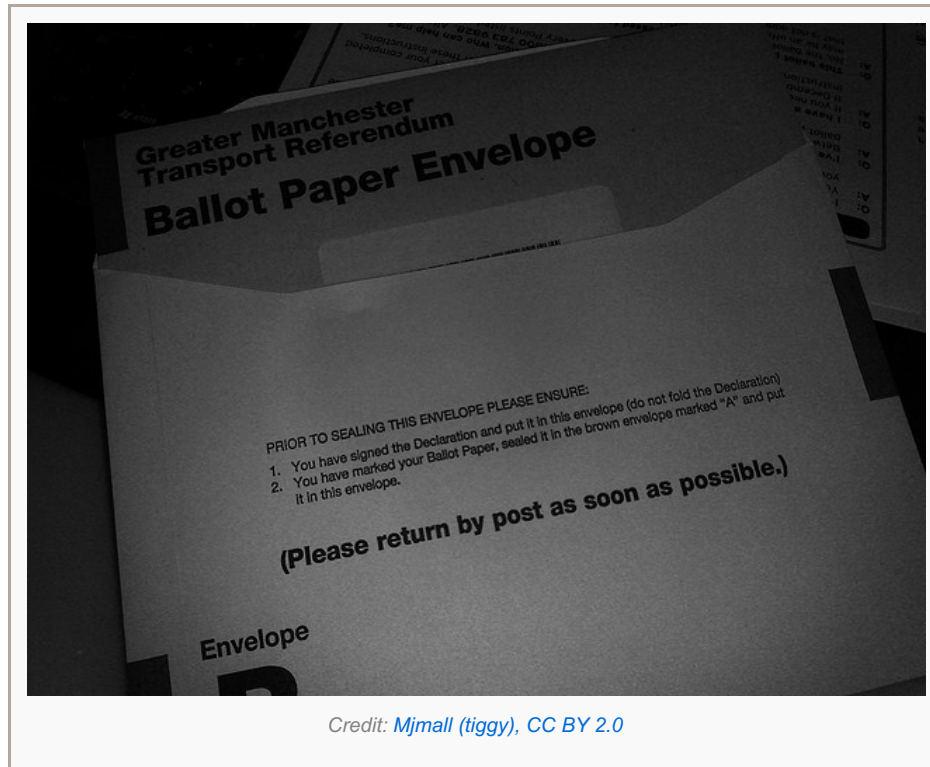
Debate part 1: should adding 'None of the Above' to ballot papers be a priority for UK political reformers?

 [democraticaudit.com /2015/02/20/debate-should-adding-none-of-the-above-to-ballot-papers-be-a-priority-of-uk-political-reformers/](https://democraticaudit.com/2015/02/20/debate-should-adding-none-of-the-above-to-ballot-papers-be-a-priority-of-uk-political-reformers/)

By Democratic Audit UK

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Is adding 'None of the Above' to ballot papers a good idea, and would it make any real difference? Democratic Audit has carried pieces from firm [advocates](#) and [sceptics](#) of the proposal. Here, **Emma Rome** (an advocate of the reform), and **Richard Berry** debate its merits in the form of an exchange of emails, which we publish below.



Dear Richard,

Adding 'None of the Above' (NOTA) to ballot papers should be a priority, since the consent of the governed means little when the ability to withhold consent (as opposed to merely abstaining or intentionally spoiling a ballot, which is officially considered to be either disinterest or failure to follow instructions). Without the ability to withhold consent, there is a democratic deficit, which needs to be addressed. However, NOTA, as I [originally proposed](#) on my blog isn't intended to be a quick fix. In the short term, I would actually expect it to make little difference. Instead, I would expect it to trigger a slower shift, but one ultimately great than could be achieved by PR, party primaries, or a lower financial threshold for standing for election. NOTA is intended to organically shift MP attitudes towards truly representing their voters; no MP wants to be known for having been just barely popular than someone – anyone – else. And the best way they can avoid that is by being responsive to the voters.

Party primaries still leave existing parties in the same position where they can manoeuvre to exclude broader points of view. The USA has party primaries, yet, according to [Lenin](#),

*"[...] **representative democracy** had simply been used to give the illusion of democracy while maintaining the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie; describing the U.S. representative democratic system, he described the 'spectacular and meaningless duels between two bourgeois parties', both of whom were led by 'astute multimillionaires' who exploited the American proletariat."*

He was writing about USA of 100 years ago, but given the similarities of the two main parties in the UK today (pro-Europe, pro-TTIP, pro-austerity, pro-military intervention, pro-steadily rising housing costs), he might as well have been writing about modern Britain. Party primaries don't give any effective ability to withhold consent. They don't give parties any reason to be responsive to anyone who is not a paid-up party member.

Were I a Mauve Party member, the Magenta Party would not be interested in my views on who should lead their party; the reverse is also true. Indeed, opening up such primaries to non-party members would open the door to voting for weak candidates to ruin your opposing party's chances. It's simply not possible for primary election voting to be open to non-party-members.

Regards,

Emma

Dear Emma,

I appreciate you are not suggesting NOTA would be a quick fix. Indeed, there are no quick fixes available when it comes to addressing fundamental weaknesses in UK democracy. Yet I fail to see any mechanism by which NOTA will achieve the desired effect, which you describe as "organically shift[ing] MP's attitudes towards truly representing their voters."

As an aside, I would say this is an unfair dismissal of those many MPs who do seek to represent voters to the best of their abilities. But the crucial flaw in the argument is that no solid reason is given for why MPs' or parties' attitudes change significantly as a result of NOTA being on ballot papers. I can envisage circumstances where NOTA could be very useful – for instance, it could help voters boot out a corrupt incumbent who has been re-selected by their party. For that reason alone it is worth considering. However, that is a rare occurrence.

As for primaries, we could have a whole separate debate on that topic. The United States is just one of many countries using primaries, and we shouldn't make the mistake of attributing the problems of their money-dominated system to the existence of primaries. Primary elections, when opened up to non-party members in the UK, have been a great success.

Regards,

Richard

Dear Richard,

I note that NOTA would not be a quick fix for the same reason that PR not be a quick fix. I would not expect either of these to create anything resembling a new status quo in less than two election cycles, and possibly more. In the first election after the reform's implementation, party strategists would make plans based on old voting patterns, and voters will be a combination of confused by the new system and keep to the same "tactical" voting pattern they always have (or just according to how their folks have always voted), or voting sincerely based on their personal political views.

It is very likely that a significant fraction won't recognise how best to use the new voting option(s) presented in either PR or NOTA (or both, were they implemented together). Additionally, a great many people who had never before voted are likely to vote (and some who previously voted may decide to abstain because they don't understand the new system or disagree with it on a fundamental level), skewing party strategists' plans further. In the second round, party strategists will respond to these changes in voter behaviour, whilst voters would very likely change their behaviour again in response to how they saw everyone change their behaviour in the first election after reform.

This change in behaviour based on an observation of how the reform would work is what I refer to as an organic shift – it grows out of behaviour in a dynamic manner. And this dynamic behaviour would affect MPs too. Just as an MP who is seriously challenged by an opposition candidate may choose to stand down (or may be asked to stand down by his local party), the same would apply if that MP were seriously challenged by the NOTA vote.

Just as wise MPs in marginal constituencies today listen to voters who support other parties (and MPs in very safe seats have been known to pay more attention to party policy than constituency views), an MP who was seriously challenged by the NOTA vote would reasonably be expected to pay closer attention to the needs of his constituents than one who wasn't so challenged.

I note that you see NOTA as a way in which voters could boot out a corrupt (or merely unpopular) incumbent. While it is true that it could be used as a rallying banner so that, for example in a three-way constituency, the two trailing parties could call on their supporters to unite under NOTA to force the lead party out, that isn't its main strength. I would like to see the ability for voters to recall their MP via petition and force a by-election. Voter recall would be the best method for this to happen, because it could in principle happen at any point in the lifetime of any given parliament. The strength of NOTA is that it gives people who might otherwise not have a candidate who represents their views the opportunity to continue to participate in an election and have their vote potentially make a real difference.

Regards,

Emma

Note: part two of this exchange will be published shortly. The views expressed here represent the views of the participants and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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Emma Rome is a former teacher and independent liberal political blogger. She is a member of the Electoral Reform Society. Her blog can be found [here](#).

