



Research Article

Strategic Asymmetries in Plurality Voting: Evaluating The "None of the Above" (NOTA) Option as An Unintended Subsidy for Electoral Incumbency in India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22975517>

Abstract

Background and Objectives: By allowing a voter to collectively reject all candidates while keeping the secrecy of their choices, the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option was introduced into India's elections. In the context of India's single-member plurality electoral system, this paper examines NOTA and evaluates the claim that, under certain conditions of competition, it may offer indirect support to those already in office.

Methodology: In order to understand the issues regarding strategic voting, protest behaviour, vote margins, incumbency, and electoral competition, the current study uses a literature review of secondary sources from 2014 to 2026 that include research papers, election surveys, books, and book chapters on Indian elections.

Key Findings: In the literature review, it is found that NOTA gives voters an extended platform for expressing their preferences and makes blank votes a way of protest; however, people choosing NOTA do not compete for seats. When votes for NOTA are concentrated in closely contested constituencies, they can affect the outcome of elections without necessarily penalising the sitting office-holder. Nevertheless, the impact of NOTA is found to be variable, depending on the competitiveness of the constituency and the behaviour of voters and candidates.

Conclusion and Significance: NOTA should therefore be seen as both an outlet for protest and a potentially asymmetric instrument in elections, with its impact varying according to the level of competition and the behaviours of participants.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 11-08-2026
- Accepted: 20-09-2026
- Published: 26-09-2026
- IJCRM:5(5); 2026: 410-417
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- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Singh S. Strategic Asymmetries in Plurality Voting: Evaluating The "None of the Above" (NOTA) Option as An Unintended Subsidy for Electoral Incumbency in India. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(5): 410-417.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: NOTA; Plurality Voting; Strategic Voting; Electoral Incumbency; Protest Voting

1. INTRODUCTION

India's electoral system is based on single-member constituencies in which the plurality winner is elected, so votes split between candidates and a protest vote do not directly translate into representation. [1] Strategic voting scenarios arise when votes for less preferred candidates, a divided opposition, and protest votes favour the winner without representation. [2] The 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election results indicated that strategic voting was limited, as many voters thought their preferred party could win, reducing the incentive to vote for another candidate. [2] India's electoral system is volatile due to the constant formation and dissolution of parties, which impacts voter turnout and the competition in constituencies. [3] In this regard, NOTA gives voters the option to vote against all candidates in secret. [4] It emerged in the 2019 Lok Sabha election and received 6,522,772 votes (1.06% of the total votes cast), with Bihar recording the highest at 2.0%, and the lowest being Nagaland at 0.20%. [4] As of 2024, this figure has reduced to 6,371,839 votes (0.99%) even though 64.64 crore votes have been cast altogether. [5] The most fundamental problem with NOTA is that votes cast using it are not considered valid for any candidate, and the majority candidate winner is determined by comparing the number of votes cast for each candidate. [6] This implies that NOTA can provide more channels for expression without challenging the plurality rule. [7] The study views NOTA as a strategic protest vote and argues that it has the potential to replace abstentions and votes for candidates ranked lower than the voter's preferred candidate. [8] Subsequent research has questioned the uniformity of effect that NOTA has on elections outcomes and argued potential differences in electoral competitiveness and information effects. [9] In this regard, this study will assess whether NOTA affects the dynamics of elections and, ultimately, favour the status quo in plurality elections. [10]

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore NOTA with reference to plurality elections in India
2. To study the tactics involved with protest voting
3. To find if NOTA can impact the victory margin in Indian elections
4. To find out the possible link between NOTA and incumbency advantage

Indicator	Statistical evidence	Relevance
Indian parliamentary electorate, 2014	834 million electors	Demonstrates the scale of electoral choice.[31]
Turnout, 2014 Lok Sabha election	66.4%	High participation increases the potential pool of expressive and strategic votes.[31]
Electoral rule	Single-member plurality	Victory depends on plurality rather than majority support.[11]
Strategic coordination	Uneven across districts	Strategic effects differ according to local competition and information.[14]

Understanding how a non-candidate alternative like NOTA functions within plurality competition thus depends on the informational environment.[16] In addition, experiments show that the strategic reasoning employed by voters varies from one person to the next, since the preference for a strategic vote depends on preferences for third-place candidates and voters'

5. To draw some inferences on democratic accountability and electoral reforms in the context of Indian elections in 2014-2026.

1.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a review methodology based on published secondary data available between 2014 and 2026. Data includes electoral statistics and election atlases of the Election Commission of India, journal articles, working papers and studies on NOTA, strategic voting, electoral competition, party behaviour and incumbency. Particular focus is placed on the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, as they provide comparable figures of NOTA and voter turnouts at the national level. Drawing on institutional, behavioural and electoral evidence, the study evaluates the hypothesis that NOTA may induce an unintended strategic asymmetry in the case of plurality voting. No primary survey or fieldwork is conducted.

2. ELECTORAL CHOICE, PLURALITY RULES AND THE EMERGENCE OF NOTA IN INDIA

2.1 Single-Member Plurality Voting, Electoral Competition and Strategic Choice in the Indian Party System

Elections to India's Lok Sabha and state legislatures mainly take place in single-member constituencies under the first-past-the-post system, in which the candidate with the largest vote total, regardless of whether it constitutes an absolute majority, emerges victorious.[11] Comparative research finds plurality rules to foster coordination among voters and political actors around viable candidates, but the degree of strategic coordination varies significantly from one electoral environment to another.[12] Studies focused on India are particularly relevant, as Indian elections combine plurality competition with high levels of party-system fragmentation, yielding results that often depart from the two-party convergence that plurality voting is supposed to generate.[13] Research on Indian elections suggests strategic voting to be relatively limited, with voters tending to stick to their preferred parties rather than consistently favouring whomever they deem the strongest contender.[14] The duration of the campaign, however, can influence strategic voting, as the additional information acquired throughout the election campaign allows voters to evaluate which candidates are viable and coordinate their support behind the frontrunners.[15]

beliefs about each candidate's chances of winning.[17] Likewise, Ziegfeld's analysis of elections in Indian states concludes that elite strategic entry and the selective nomination of candidates account for most of the shift observed towards two-party competition, whereas strategic defection at the level of voters plays a smaller role.[18]

2.2 How NOTA Came into Being via People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, and Its Institutional Development

The institutional basis of NOTA arose out of constitutional and electoral concerns that voters marking ballots on electronic voting machines should have a way to reject all candidates on the list, while being able to keep their vote secret.[19] As NOTA subsequently evolved, an initially implicit or uncertain expression of electoral discontent became a recognisable

electoral option.[20] Party competition in India, however, continues to be deeply influenced by ideological, social and organisational divisions, which means NOTA operates within the broader context of the party system, rather than distinct from it.[21] The development of India's fourth party system after 2014 also indicates that electoral competition now involves more intense mobilisation by national parties, although regional differences endure.[22]

Table 2. Institutional development relevant to NOTA and plurality competition

Period / feature	Evidence	Analytical significance
2013	NOTA introduced following the Supreme Court intervention	Created a formal rejection option within electronic voting.[19]
2014 onward	NOTA became part of national electoral competition	Made candidate rejection separately observable.[20]
Party-system transformation	Fourth party system associated with stronger national-party dominance	NOTA operates within changing party competition.[22]
Voter choice	Ideological and identity-based distinctions remain salient	NOTA cannot be interpreted independently of party preferences.[21]

India's 2019 national vote gave more evidence that modern contests between parties in the country tend to combine leader-centric campaigns, wide-scale mobilization, and uneven levels of access to the voters through political communications.[23] According to the campaign literature, the mobilisation environment in which the voters are placed can therefore affect both the value and the strategic cost of a NOTA-marked ballot.[24]

3. NOTA AS A SEPARATE BALLOT CHOICE: ITS DESIGN, LEGAL CONSEQUENCES AND HOW VOTERS BEHAVE

3.1 How NOTA Stands Legally and Procedurally within Indian Electoral Law and Election Administration

NOTA has a unique position, because it allows voters to express their disapproval of the candidates without it resulting in the emergence of a distinct representative at the end of the day.[25] This differentiates it from any normal vote for a candidate, since NOTA ballot does not add a seat for parliament nor does it shift the winner of the plurality due to outpolling an individual rival.[26] Modern Indian politics scholarship suggests that the value of any electoral choice depends on its mobilisation context within which parties communicate issues, leaders and policies to the electorate.[27]

Table 3. Distinction between candidate voting, protest voting and NOTA

Electoral choice	Numerical/electoral property	Likely institutional consequence
Candidate vote	Added directly to candidate total	Can contribute to winning plurality.[11]
NOTA vote	Recorded separately	Expresses rejection without becoming a winning candidate.[25]
Abstention	No ballot cast	Dissatisfaction remains less electorally identifiable.[13]
Spoiled/invalid ballot	Ballot rendered invalid	Protest signal is less clearly distinguishable from error.[12]

The point is that an electoral institution can boost opportunities for political expression without boosting the electoral cost that incumbents face.[11] Comparative literature on NOTA indicates that rejection votes can enhance understanding of political discontent; however, the behavioural significance of these measures is conditional on particular institutional arrangements and particular categories of voters.[12]

3.2 NOTA as Protest, Abstention, Rejection of Candidates and Strategic Voting

It is impossible to define the political meaning of NOTA in

terms of one specific group of dissatisfied voters since protest voting involves abstention, vote invalidation, strategic protest, and the rejection of all candidates on the ballot.[13] In comparative perspective, evidence suggests that the use of NOTA by citizens implies not only politically interested voters who are dissatisfied with candidates or politics generally but also those who would invalidate their vote otherwise.[12] Protest voting in India has to be understood against the backdrop of a party system in which ideological preferences among voters remain stable even in conditions of high electoral volatility.[24]

Table 4. Selected empirical estimates relevant to voter behaviour

Study	Statistical evidence	Implication
Indian electoral participation, 2014	66.4% turnout	A large participatory base creates room for identifiable protest choices.[31]
Vote-buying experiment, India	Nearly 60% reported willingness to support a party offering a government job	Material incentives remain relevant to vote choice.[35]
Radio anti-corruption experiment	Campaign reached millions of voters	Information can alter electoral behaviour.[34]

Quota exposure in India	One-third local leadership quota	Institutional design can shape candidate supply and political careers.[41]
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Evidence from India, too, suggests that voters respond to information about candidates and political behaviour rather than just strictly adhering to pre-existing party loyalty.[34] This is relevant for NOTA because a rejection device could work differently in constituencies where voter knowledge about the performance of the incumbents and challengers is high compared to constituencies characterised by uncertainty.[11]

4. STRATEGIC ASYMMETRIES BETWEEN NOTA, INCUMBENTS AND CHALLENGERS

4.1 Vote Splitting, Winning Margins and the Distributional Effects of NOTA under Plurality Competition

The fundamental strategic challenge arises from the fact that a NOTA vote has expressive value but will never consolidate as a competing plurality tally.[14] As a result, under plurality formats, election outcomes can turn on relatively narrow winning margins and, therefore, the carefully targeted introduction of just a few protest votes might impact election results.[15] This will not always be the case, however, since NOTA voters are not necessarily skewed out of the support

base of any particular candidate.[16]

A useful theoretical distinction needs to be made between the effects of vote subtraction and vote redistribution: NOTA may remove specific votes that would have gone to an established candidate, a challenger, a minor candidate or no candidate at all.[17] The actual effect thus depends on who NOTA voters would have voted for in the counterfactual scenario rather than the general size of NOTA.[18]

4.2 From Candidate Rejection to Electoral Advantage: Assessing the Possibility of an Unintended Incumbency Subsidy

By contrast, the notion of an incumbency subsidy should rather be seen as an empirical hypothesis than a given consequence of NOTA.[23] This hypothesis is only plausible when NOTA votes systematically drain off the votes of competitive challengers or non-incumbent candidates but leave the incumbent's support untouched.[24] If NOTA simply converts abstention into participation its direct impact on competitive margins may be limited.[25]

Table 5. Empirical mechanisms that could strengthen or weaken an incumbency-substitution effect

Mechanism	Evidence / estimate	Effect on the hypothesis
NOTA as participation mechanism	Explicit rejection can mobilise voters who might otherwise abstain.[12]	May weaken a direct incumbency-transfer interpretation.
Moderate electoral competition	NOTA-related policy effects concentrated in moderately competitive constituencies.[11]	Suggests heterogeneous constituency effects.
Candidate-entry strategies	Elite strategic entry explains substantial convergence in Indian races.[18]	Incumbency effects cannot be attributed to voters alone.
Political resource advantages	Campaign organisation and communication can substantially structure voter choice.[24]	Electoral asymmetry may predate NOTA.

Recent theoretical and empirical research is particularly interesting, since it reveals a trade-off: while NOTA could improve information aggregation and participation, it may simultaneously undermine some disciplinary incentives facing established candidates.[11] According to the same dataset, the log of nighttime luminosity, used here as a proxy for local economic activity, rises by 7.5%–10% after NOTA is adopted, in the case of moderately competitive constituencies.[11] This warns against interpreting the overall effect of NOTA as being uniformly favourable to incumbents, since it highlights the possibility that the consequences of its adoption may operate through policy responsiveness and candidature incentives.[11]

5. EMPIRICAL PATTERNS OF NOTA AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION IN INDIA

5.1 NOTA Votes, Victory Margins, Political Competition and Constituency-Level Electoral Outcomes

Historically, electoral outcomes in India have shown wide variation across constituencies, which implies that aggregate national measures may mask important strategic interactions taking place at the level of districts and constituencies.[30] Thus the 2014 election featured a record-breaking level of turnout alongside a substantial expansion of the territorial

spread of national-party support, indicating that electoral outcomes can be shaped as much by mobilisation as by vote conversion at the constituency level.[31] The changing social geography of electoral support implies that patterns of urbanisation, class and caste composition can affect the way votes are apportioned across different constituencies.[32]

Table 6. Selected Indian electoral indicators relevant to constituency-level asymmetry

Indicator	Statistical value	Significance
2014 electorate	834 million	Scale of national electoral participation.[31]
2014 turnout	66.4%	Indicates substantial voter mobilisation.[31]
Women in 2019 Lok Sabha	Below 15% of lower-house MPs	Illustrates continuing representational asymmetry in candidate outcomes.[28]
Women's local leadership reservation	One-third	Demonstrates institutional effects on political recruitment.[41]

Research showing electoral and institutional consequences are most pronounced in marginal seats reinforces the value of paying close attention to swing constituencies.[37] This provides an impetus to study NOTA in relation to its share of the national vote, but also in terms of how NOTA votes connect with runners-up' margins, candidate quality and incumbency status.

5.2 How Incumbents Perform, Voter Discontent and the Varying Impact of NOTA in Indian Elections

Incumbency in India is a multi-faceted phenomenon since voters can evaluate national, state and constituency-level incumbents differently, along with individual candidates.[34] Studies into economic voting in Kerala and West Bengal illustrate how voters distinguish between tiers and make choices based on how they view economic performance.[34] This complicates inferences that a NOTA vote reflects widespread anti-incumbency sentiments.[36]

Scholarship also reveals that politicians strategically distribute resources, as evidenced by the fact that patterns of constituency development expenditure correlate with past voting behaviour.[36] Voter decisions may therefore be guided simultaneously by candidate quality, charges of criminality, political networks and institutional stature, which implies that NOTA dissatisfactions could stem from multiple distinct sources rather than one anti-incumbency incentive.[42]

6. REEVALUATING NOTA, ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PATHS TO REFORM

6.1 Democratic Voice versus Electoral Outcome: Revisiting What NOTA Does for Accountability

NOTA's democratic value rests primarily on its ability to make rejection visible, avoiding the problem of having citizens choose between abstention and endorsing an unacceptable candidate.[12] The institutional question is whether this expressive function should remain decoupled from electoral consequences, or if it should be connected to a particular threshold that would prompt a formal response.[11] Inserting such a mechanism would impact representation, electoral predictability, repeat elections and the strategic calculations of parties and voters alike.[20]

Studies of political selection reveal that electoral institutions determine who enters politics, who wins a party nomination, and who accumulates political experience.[39] Consequently, adjusting NOTA will influence not only voters' expressive choices but possibly the candidate pool and party strategies.

6.2 Reconceiving NOTA within India's Plurality System: Institutional Alternatives, Thresholds and the Shape of Future Reform Debates

The scholarship reveals that NOTA should be understood as part of a broader electoral-system ecology rather than a single choice on a voter's EVM.[43] India's party system has been radically transformed while regional parties, national parties and coalitions generate various competitive landscapes.[44] Reforming NOTA necessitates distinguishing between expressive voting, candidate selection, plurality formation and post-electoral accountability mechanisms.[45]

New research into the 2024 election also shows that leadership, gender, populist attitudes and socio-economic factors interact to shape voter choices, underlining that no single electoral mechanism can explain outcomes.[46] The endurance of these multi-dimensional forces implies that NOTA should be assessed in a constituency-sensitive way rather than through aggregate measures.

7. CONCLUSION

The above review of evidence suggests that NOTA has changed the information architecture of Indian elections by providing a distinct choice of voter rejection without changing the rules of plurality distribution.[47] This implies that the main difference is institutional in nature, as the voters get one additional form of expression while the winning criterion and candidate selection procedure remain largely the same.[48] Although strategic behaviour is theoretically possible under plurality election systems due to increased marginal value, there is no empirical evidence that NOTA mechanically leads to increased incumbent popularity.[49] However, there is a possibility of NOTA integrating some of those voters that would abstain or invalidate their vote according to protest voting studies.[12] On the other hand, the 2025 evidence of impact of NOTA on local economy demonstrates that NOTA's effect may go beyond the expression issue to candidate incentives and responsiveness.[11] Party organization, candidate selection, economic evaluation, political capital and constituency competition influence incumbency in India.[36] Thus, the review of evidence allows one to cautiously interpret the hypothesis of "incumbency subsidy": it is a testable hypothesis that can be true in specific electoral environments, but evidence suggests heterogeneity rather than universality.[50]

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Maintaining NOTA's Role as Only Expressive Electoral Option: Option is to maintain the status quo in which NOTA serves strictly as a form of expressive rejection, even though it never results in an actual winning candidate. [12] This preserves the expressive function for voters dissatisfied with the set of candidates without introducing uncertainty regarding automatic re-election or empty seats. [11] Its principal theoretical virtue is analytical continuity based on the familiar plurality framework in which voters and administrators operate. [20] Its principal drawback is the continued gap between the expressive and electoral dimensions of NOTA. [25]

7.2 Establishing Explicit Threshold Above Which NOTA Has Procedural Consequences: A option would be establishing a statutory threshold above which a NOTA vote produces a specific procedural outcome distinct from mere candidate rejection. [11] A threshold could specify, for instance, that a NOTA vote triggers an additional round of nominations, disclosure requirements or institutional review, rather than allowing automatic election of the next-placed candidate. [26] This would create more meaningful variation in the degree of rejection while reducing uncertainty regarding representation. [11] The central empirical requirement would be constituency-level analysis of the correlation between NOTA

totals and either narrow winning margins or specific candidate categories. [18]

7.3 Enhancing Public Reporting of Constituency-Level NOTA and Winning-Margin Indicators: A option is more detailed public reporting on NOTA votes in conjunction with winning margins, second-place finishes, incumbency and inter-candidate competition at the constituency level. [15] This would enable analysts and voters to distinguish between constituencies in which NOTA votes are both numerous and electorally significant versus those where they represent a minor share of total votes. [30] It would also facilitate cross-election comparisons and identification of cases where NOTA votes either exceed or come close to the winning margin. [16] Improved reporting would enhance empirical analysis without modifying the basic voting rule. [17]

7.4 Incorporating NOTA Analysis into Candidate Selection and Electoral Accountability Research: A option is for researchers to examine NOTA in conjunction with broader sets of candidate selection criteria and accountability indicators. [39] Studies of Indian political recruitment suggest that institutional opportunities influence who eventually enters higher-level contention, while candidate characteristics and nomination procedures affect electoral performance. [40] NOTA votes should therefore be analysed with reference to criminal charges, experience, party-switching, campaign resources and incumbency, rather than being considered as a single proxy for general voter dissatisfaction. [42] This would reduce the danger of over-interpreting any particular NOTA result.

7.5 Targeted Statistical Monitoring of NOTA-Plurality Incidence in Specific Constituencies: A option is targeted statistical monitoring of the NOTA-plurality gap in specific constituencies where the margin between the NOTA vote and the winning candidate is narrow. [14] Plurality systems by definition produce discrete jumps in vote shares that determine electoral outcomes, so these would be the most revealing cases for examining the impact of NOTA on either relative candidate positioning or overall voter behaviour. [15] Monitoring could compare NOTA results with previous elections, candidate entry patterns, voter turnout, party-switching and the degree of multi-candidate competition. [18] Such analysis would help determine whether an incumbency advantage is present, absent or variable.

7.6 Periodic Independent Assessment of NOTA's Electoral and Policy Impacts: A option is for periodic independent assessment of NOTA's effects using electoral, behavioural and policy indicators rather than simply focusing on aggregate vote shares. [11] The literature demonstrates that NOTA can have differential effects on turnout, protest voting and candidate behaviour, while Indian elections also involve ideological, economic, gender and leadership dimensions. [12] Periodic assessment could therefore examine the impact of NOTA on voter participation, winning margins, candidate entry barriers, incumbency advantages, candidate quality and local

development outcomes. [36] This would allow continuous evolution of the NOTA framework in response to emerging evidence while retaining voter scope to express disapproval in a plurality system. [47]

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