



# A dynamic model of the invalid vote: How a changing candidate menu shapes null voting behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship attributes invalid voting to independent variables that are largely time invariant (e.g., levels of education, political institutions). Yet, rates of invalid voting vary widely across countries and over time. In this paper, I argue that dynamic features of political competition (e.g., the number of candidates competing) affect invalid voting in presidential elections in predictable ways. High levels of candidates should have a positive association with invalid voting, as voters frustrated by the status quo opt out of the process when political options are confusing or objectionable. Yet, positive *change* in the number of candidates ought to reduce null voting, as the entry of more candidates presents new options over which to cast valid ballots. I test these expectations, and find support for them, in multivariate analyses of aggregate electoral data from the Latin American region for 1982–2015.

## 1. Introduction

Around the world, individuals regularly absorb the time and travel costs associated with voting and then choose to spoil their ballots or leave them unmarked—that is, they cast “invalid” votes. Although these invalid ballots are tallied, final electoral results are usually determined using only *valid* ballots. High rates of “against all” voting signal citizen discontent and hold the potential to undermine electoral mandates, particularly in close elections.<sup>1</sup> Understanding what leads individuals to cast blank and spoiled ballots is an important step to clarifying support for policies, governments, and political systems. This topic is particularly relevant to parts of the world in which invalid votes frequently exceed the margin of victory in presidential contests.

To date, most models of invalid voting have focused on contextual factors that change slowly, if at all: political institutions and demographic features of populations (e.g., levels of education, ethnicity). While useful in understanding cross-national variation, such factors fail to illuminate the dynamics of cross-election changes in invalid voting levels. To address this short-coming, I introduce and test a model focused on shifting features of political competition. Features of political competition influence voting behavior around the world: Scholars have demonstrated that party fractionalization and the closeness of elections

affect voter turnout (see Jackman, 1987; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais, 2006); that polarization increases partisan affiliation and issue voting (Dalton, 2008, 2011); and that the tone of campaign ads and media coverage can be (de)mobilizing (Kahn and Kenney, 1999). Yet, existing studies of invalid voting have focused on mandatory vote laws, electoral disproportionality, district magnitude, bicameralism, and personalized voting systems in seeking to explain invalid vote rates.<sup>2</sup> These institutions shape the relative costs of (not) voting (e.g., mandatory vote laws make abstention costly), and may affect voters' perceptions of an election's stakes (Kouba and Lysek, 2016) or their feelings of efficacy (McAllister and Makkai, 1993; Power and Roberts, 1995; Power and Garand, 2007). However, the laws governing political institutions change rarely, while rates of invalid voting vary substantially across election type and over time. In contrast, features of political competition change across election cycles and thus provide important theoretical and empirical leverage for understanding why rates of invalid voting vary over time.

This paper advances the general argument that features of political competition affect the prevalence of blank and spoiled ballots by changing inclinations among the public to cast a protest vote.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I argue that change in the structure of political competition – represented by change in the number of candidates competing – affects voters'

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<sup>1</sup> While some invalid votes in Latin American democracies are cast by accident, recent studies show that most invalid voting in executive races is intentional and signifies protest of the specific choice set present at election time rather than democracy, itself (e.g., Cohen, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have used the number of parties as a proxy for the effect of electoral disproportionality (McAllister and Makkai, 1993, 25) and district magnitude (Power and Roberts, 1995; Power and Garand, 2007) on invalid voting. It is unclear that the number of candidates contesting an election is a good proxy for these political institutions in presidential elections, which are highly disproportional and have a district magnitude of one.

<sup>3</sup> This argument belongs in the family of arguments advanced by other scholars (e.g., Carlin et al., 2015) linking the structure of political competition to political participation.

perceptions that available choices represent their preferences. When the choice set expands to become more inclusive, invalid voting will decrease as citizens feel they have more and better options. When the choice set becomes limited, in contrast, individuals will tend to cast invalid votes with greater frequency as a means to protest these newly evident limitations. A key aspect of this argument is that the *level* of candidates competing is distinct – and has differentiable consequences – from *change* (expansion or contraction) in that level from one election to the next.

I test the resulting expectations using aggregate electoral data from presidential elections in 17 Latin American democracies, and first-past-the-post mayoral elections in Peru.<sup>4,5</sup> I focus on Latin America because invalid voting varies around a comparatively high mean in the region. The analyses demonstrate that, while the effective number of candidates competing in presidential contests has a positive association with invalid vote rates, positive *change* in the number of relevant candidates results in lower rates of invalid voting. In short, the evidence is consistent with the argument that voters view a broadening choice set as a

Rates of invalid voting in Latin America are among the highest in the world: since 1980, more than 5.5% of all ballots cast in presidential elections—and more than 8.5% of those cast in legislative contests—were left blank or spoiled across the region. These average figures conceal important national and cross time variation. Fig. 1 presents rates of invalid voting in presidential contests across Latin American countries from 1982 to 2015. Horizontal lines within each shaded box signify the median value of invalid voting for each country, and shaded boxes represent the 25th to 75th percentile of observations. Whiskers signify the upper and lower bounds of an approximately normal distribution of observed invalid vote rates within each country, and dots signify outlying observations. Rates of invalid voting vary substantially over time within some countries (in Brazil, for example, rates of invalid voting in presidential elections during this time period fluctuate from a low of 4.7 to a high of 19%)<sup>6</sup> and are much more tightly clustered in others (for example, invalid vote rates in Costa Rican presidential contests fluctuate between just 2 and 3% during this time period).

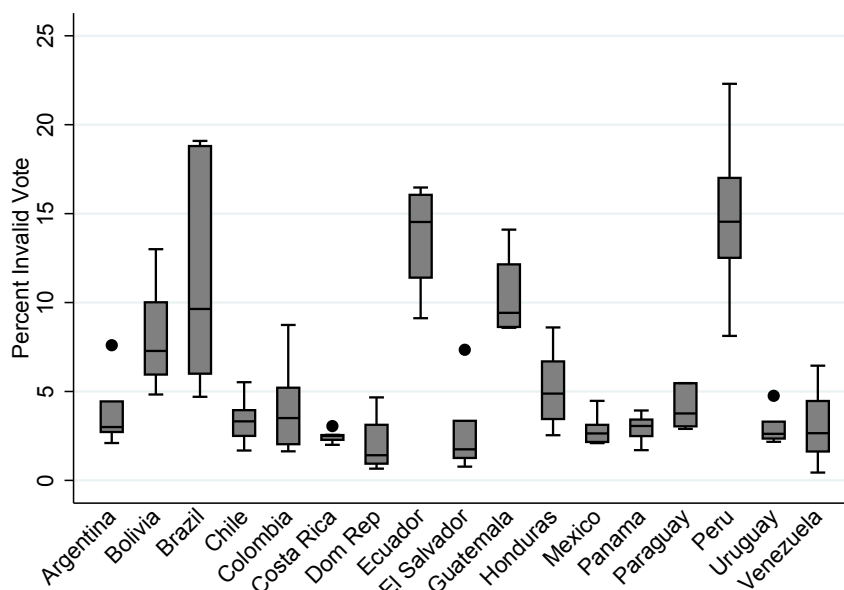


Fig. 1. Percent Invalid Votes in Latin American Presidential Elections, 1980–2015. Figure shows the distribution of invalid vote rates from first or single round elections.

positive change from the perspective of political representation. Holding the level of candidates constant, expansions of the menu of options draw citizens away from the choice to nullify their votes. As a whole, the theoretical perspective and statistical analyses advanced in this paper demonstrate the importance of incorporating dynamic features of political systems—that is, features that *change*—in order to better understand both invalid voting and voter behavior, generally.

## 2. The number of candidates and invalid voting

Across the world, voters regularly go to the polls and invalidate their votes by leaving their ballots blank, mismarking the ballot paper, or writing in the names of candidates who are not legally recognized.

<sup>4</sup> Because Nicaragua does not provide invalid vote totals for all the years studied, it was excluded from analysis.

<sup>5</sup> With few exceptions (see Carlin, 2006; Kouba and Lysek, 2016; Cohen, 2017), existing studies have focused their attention on explaining invalid voting in legislative contests. In doing so, scholars frequently aggregate data over wide subnational variation in key independent variables (e.g., district magnitude, the number of competitive candidates) and use national level averages. Latin American presidents are elected by a single, national district, making national-level analysis appropriate for these elections. By assessing the relationship between political factors and invalid voting in presidential races, this paper serves as a corrective to misattribution of these average values.

Because invalid ballots are usually tallied and then excluded from the final vote count,<sup>7</sup> scholars exclude invalid votes from statistical models of vote choice as a matter of course,<sup>8</sup> news media regularly exclude null votes from final tallies of election results, and political practitioners often treat the phenomenon as a residual behavior.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Electronic voting was gradually introduced in Brazil from 1996 to 2002, arguably eliminating ballot invalidation as the result of voter error. Indeed, rates of invalid voting in Brazil's presidential elections declined precipitously following the initial implementation of electronic voting, from 19% of all votes cast in 1998 to 6% of votes in 2002. However, there is still substantial variation in invalid voting under electronic voting: while only 4.7% of all ballots were invalidated in 2006, invalid votes more than doubled to 9.6% of all votes cast in the 2014 presidential election.

<sup>7</sup> In many Latin American countries, elections are automatically nullified if the proportion of invalid ballots crosses a certain threshold—usually an absolute or super-majority of all ballots cast. While national elections have been cancelled in this way (e.g., Colombia's 2014 elections for the Andean Parliament), such occurrences are rare.

<sup>8</sup> Examples abound, among them, two recent books on Latin American Politics (*The Latin American Voter* and *Latin American Elections*), which exclude invalid votes in their assessments of voter behavior.

<sup>9</sup> Statement based on personal interviews with sitting legislators, gubernatorial and mayoral candidates, and campaign officials in Peru conducted from 2013 to 14. With few exceptions (concentrated among niche party operatives), practitioners viewed invalid votes as a principally accidental behavior, and the voters who cast them as not worth the effort of mobilizing.

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