Vanguard of Discontent:

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ABSTRACT: Expressions of popular discontent are complex political phenomena: difficult to interpret and predict. Various forms of political dissenting unfold during the electoral process: abstention, election boycotting, and unconventional voting (e.g., blank voting, ballot spoiling, write-in and so on). This paper focuses on three of them: individual protest voting (a case of blank voting), the mobilized version of it (a case of null voting), and abstention. By comparing these forms of dissent, this paper demonstrates that the least studied of the three — blank voting — expresses the most conscious rejection of political candidates, parties, and/or electoral system. Moreover, and contrary to common wisdom, I show that blank voting is used by educated voters, who understand and leverage the symbolic political value of the ballot. The paper takes advantage of exogenous political and institutional variations in two cases: the Spanish national elections in the autonomous region of the Basque Country and the Italian municipal elections. It provides empirical evidence for the claim that this behavior is stimulated by disaffection toward electoral institutions or current politics, particularly in highly educated areas, where a larger pool of potentially politically sophisticated citizens live and vote. On the basis of these findings, I reconsider the role of protest voting as a more precise metric and predictor of popular discontent, as well as the potential advantages of its institutionalization on the ballot.

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“I didn’t think any of the candidates in my constituency were fit to enter the Parliament, so I clicked on NOTA [none of the above]”

**Indian voter, 2013 on The Times of India (2014).**

“The campaign of fear that has been conducted by both sides against the blank vote [...] To those who fear I say: there is nothing more fascist than voting out of fear. For this reason, I insist, I will vote blank”

**Mauricio Vargas on El Tiempo (Vargas, 2014)**

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1Translation by the author. Original quote: “La campaña del miedo ha sido dirigida por ambos bandos en contra del voto en blanco [...] A quienes tienen miedo les digo: no hay nada más fascista que votar por miedo. Por eso, insisto, votaré en blanco.”
1 Introduction

The first decades of the 2000s have been characterized by the expansion of mass political discontent. Large-scale demonstrations and riots have been shaking many democratic regimes, from the French banlieues’ riots to Occupy Wall Streets and the Spanish Indignados. Similarly, voting abstention is rampant across western societies, from the United States to Italy. Nonetheless, and despite the significant amount of scholarly work dedicated to both protest and abstention, social scientists have failed to systematically predict massive outbursts of political discontent. I claim that academics and practitioners have overlooked for too long a missing link in the chain of political protest: protest within the electoral process. Protest voting, in this paper, is the act of using the ballot in unconventional ways – ways for which ballots were not originally intended – to make a political statement.

Specifically, there exist a number of citizens who on election day walk all the way to the polling station and intentionally cast a protest vote, either by leaving the ballot completely blank (blank vote), or nullifying it on purpose (null vote). Who are these blank and null voters? How are they different from individual abstentionists or mobilized protesters?

In the vast literature on voting behavior, blank and null voting finds very little expla-
nation,\(^7\) while in the limited literature on the blank and null vote, no consensus has been reached regarding the determinants of this behavior. Several authors have attributed blank and null voting to unfortunate socioeconomic features leading to the incompetence of voters (Mott, 1926; McAllister and Makkai, 1993; Power and Roberts, 1995; Power and Garand, 2007), or a sense of social alienation (Stiefbold, 1965; Power and Roberts, 1995; Zulfikarpasic, 2001). Others (Zulfikarpasic, 2001; Herron and Sekhon, 2005; Power and Garand, 2007; Uggla, 2008) claim that this behavior is actually due to institutional and political factors and is a form of political protest.\(^8\) My paper supports this latter camp. However, my work goes one step further in the identification of the multifaceted nature of this vote. I demonstrate not only that blank and null voting is an intentional political action, but that the individual (non-mobilized) version of it is lead by sophisticated protesters. They send a political message that is more resolute and informed than that of abstentionists, who are often politically apathetic (Rosenthal and Sen, 1973), or organized protest voters, who are often ideologically driven and externally mobilized, just as any other form of political demonstrations (Aelst and Walgrave, 2001).

Nowadays, protest voting is a more widespread form of political protest than is commonly believed. It involves more people than street demonstrations in several Western democracies. The people who participated in the famous Spanish mass protest of the indignados in 2011, which brought hundreds of thousands of citizens to the street and gained significant media coverage, were fewer than those who, in the same year, cast a

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\(^7\)For a review of models of voting see Dhillon and Peralta (2002); Blais (2000). Examples of formal models considering the spoiled ballot are Myatt (2012) and Rosenthal and Sen (1973).

\(^8\)For an excellent overview of the approaches see Uggla (2008). For other literature referring to the blank and null voting and presenting the dual nature of this phenomenon as both incompetent and political protest, see Rosenthal and Sen (1973); Damore, Waters and Bowler (2012); Driscoll and Nelson (2014); Uggla (2008); Zulfikarpasic (2001). The work of Rosenthal and Sen (1973) deserves a separate note. It is the most successful application of spatial models on blank voting. They model voting behavior and account for blank voting as an important voting option, which is influenced by short-term factors. They show how a combination of alienation and heuristic models account for the variation in blank vote cast in the first and second ballot in French elections (1958-68).
blank and null vote, over 700,000.\footnote{This number includes a vote for the blank-null party, \textit{Escaños en blanco}, a party that aims to represent explicitly this form of protest, cast by 97,673 people (\textit{Ministerio del Interior España}, 2013), and the blank vote and null vote each cast by over 300,000 people. The estimated number of people who participated in the street protests of \textit{indignados} organized by 15-M movement in Madrid in 2011 is reported to be around 50,000 in various important cities of Spain like Madrid and Barcelona: \url{http://goo.gl/N3XFM}, or \url{http://goo.gl/NMk4Qc}.} Furthermore, in countries like Italy,\footnote{In Italy in 2013 parties with a share of the vote between 0 and 7\% - which corresponds to: plus or minus one standard deviation from the cross-national average - won a total of 83 seats only in the Lower House; blank and null voting of 3.59\% was larger than the vote share of 42 parties (\textit{Website of Italian Ministry of Interior}, 2013). It is instructive to compare the average blank and null vote rate since 2003 to the threshold of representation in the vast majority of Proportional or Mixed Member Proportional electoral systems, which range from 2 to 5\% (e.g., 2\% for the Knesset in Israel until 2015, and then it was increased to 3.25\%.} Chile,\footnote{For Chile I refer to the elections since 2014 when the compulsory status of voting was lifted.} and Colombia, blank voting often collects more votes than many minor or extreme parties, usually considered the recipients of protest votes (\textit{Uggla}, 2008).\footnote{I do not discuss the vote for small parties and candidates, which has often been classified as a vote of protest. It has been shown that this vote is actually often driven by the support for these parties’ political ideology. People choosing these parties actually share the platform of the parties (\textit{Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie}, 2000; \textit{Erlingsson and Persson}, 2011; \textit{Neocleous and Startin}, 2003).}

In this paper, I demonstrate that blank and null voting is an expression of higher political sophistication both in absolute terms, and relative to abstention and mobilized protest voters. I do so by focusing on individual\footnote{With “individual,” in this paper, I mean a vote that is not mobilized on large scale by existing organized groups or prompted by large-scale mobilization campaigns.} blank and null voting in recent elections in the north-western region of Spain, Basque Country, and Italy.

These cases have been selected because, first of all, they are both democracies with voluntary voting systems, which allows me to investigate this behavior in a context where the costs of abstaining are zero. Furthermore, these two countries are among the few non-compulsory democratic systems to record blank votes separately from null votes.\footnote{France just had its first European election in 2014 with this distinction.} Both blank and null voting can be forms of individual protest and both have been mobilized at times, from the Peronists’ blank vote in the 1950s to the Basques’ null ballots in 2004. However, when non-mobilized, the blank vote appears to be a cleaner message of protest than the null vote, which is sometimes due to voters’ involuntary mistakes.

Finally, the Basque country and Italy display unique variation along different dimensions of interest: institutional and political discontent, education, and protest mobilization. I leveraged these features empirically to obtain a proper causal identification and consis-
tent evidence of the sophisticated nature of individual blank voters.

However, the findings of this paper are generalizable to other western democracies with non-compulsory voting regulations. Individual blank or null voting is far from being simply a Southern European phenomenon and has become a more common political choice across several countries in the last 40 years. During this period its aggregate levels have been increasing significantly. In non-compulsory voting regimes, for instance, the phenomenon has more than doubled from the levels of the 1970s, from 1.26% to 3.4% (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2013), showing a much steeper increase than abstention,\(^\text{15}\) and a similar trend to that of citizens’ participation in lawful demonstrations (Aelst and Walgrave, 2001).\(^\text{16}\)

The findings of this paper about the sophisticated nature of the individual blank and null vote, combined with the realization of the increasing trends of the phenomenon within voluntary voting systems, have important theoretical and practical implications. First, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of voting. By showing that the act of leaving the ballot blank, which would be deemed irrational by many, is chosen by sophisticated citizens, I provide evidence for the expressive nature of voting. Indeed, if those better equipped to understand the limited impact of their single vote in any large election (Downs, 1957) are the same who are more likely to turn out and cast a blank vote, voting must be driven by more than simple instrumental goals.

Second, this line of work contributes to the debate over the importance of recording this form of protest and of possibly introducing an institutional “blank vote” on the ballot. Since the introduction in the 1970s of the “none-of-these-candidates” option on the ballot in Nevada, the United States has been witnessing an active discussion of the topic

\(^{15}\)The vote’s average calculated since 2003. This rising tendency is not the domain of only a few cases, but it is a shared pattern of the majority of the countries. Indeed, the median value of these same periods also shows a similar relationship: it has doubled from 9% (1970s) to 1.8% (after 2003) (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2013). Abstention has increased only 40% in the same period. The blank and null vote here is measured as “invalid vote” which is an aggregate of both blank and null. This measure contains a component that is not protest but simply mistakes of the voters.

\(^{16}\)This estimate is based on Aelst and Walgrave (2001) table 1 where the proportion of respondents who participated in lawful demonstrations across the time is reported for France, Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany, the UK, and the US.
(Damore, Waters and Bowler, 2012). Similar debates have taken place in India (Tembhekar, 2014) and Colombia (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2011), two countries that also have institutionalized this vote. Furthermore, France has recently decided to record the blank vote and to separate it from the null vote. By doing so, France aim to provide its voters with a clear channel of dissent (Licourt, 2014), as Italy and Spain already do. The final section of this paper delves into this debate. It introduces the different cases of blank vote institutionalization, presents the different existing justifications in favor of an official blank and null vote, and offers a further argument in terms of political responsiveness, derived directly from the findings of the paper.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Why Using the Ballot As a Tool of Protest?

The first and basic hypothesis presented in this paper is that blank and null voting is a form of political protest used by dissatisfied citizens. However, why would anyone decide to use the ballot to express discontent – a use of the ballot that would eliminate even a small chance of having an impact on the political outcome?

The reason I support in this paper is that for many voters the value of the vote goes far beyond the simple selection of candidates and is driven by more than just the interest in influencing the electoral outcome. It is a channel for political expression (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998), a source of political identity (Karst, 1985), and a tool of political protest. This approach to voting departs from the classical literature coming out of the seminal work of Downs (1957), in which voting has often been defined as an instrumental behavior based on a political cost-benefit calculation and on voters’ chances (perceived or real) of influencing the electoral outcome of the specific election (Dhillon and Peralta, 2002; Aldrich, 1993). In the last two decades, breaking with the rational choice tradition, several scholars have been reconsidering voting from different perspectives. Two important families of models are the “bounded rationality” (Bendor, 2010) models, which relaxes
the assumption about the information and cognitive skills of individuals, and the expressive behavior models (Schuessler, 2000; Wolfinger, 1980; Tyran, 2004), which shifts the focus from the outcome to the process of voting. According to this last approach voting is more about confirming one’s individual political identity (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998; Schuessler, 2000; Hillman, 2010). Voting is more like “cheering at a football match than it is like purchasing an asset portfolio.” (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998, p. 150). It would be about “being,” about identity, to the extent that it confirms one’s political belonging and ideas. A Democrat becomes a Democrat by voting for the Democratic Party and showing electoral support for it (Schuessler, 2000). In addition, political theorists like Judith Shklar have analyzed the symbolic value of the vote (Shklar, 1991) and its role for political identification and integration (Karst, 1989, 1985).

Alternative frameworks, instead, try to reconcile a more instrumental approach to voting with the possibility of protest voting. They claim that a vote can also be exploited by voters as “a signal of dissatisfaction with their most preferred party” (Kselman and Niou, 2011, p. 240). This type of vote would, hence, be used strategically to warn the favorite party (Kselman and Niou, 2011; Kang, 2004; Franklin, Niemi and Whitten, 1994). Although this approach is rarely used to this end, it can offer an explanation for blank and null voting. In Myatt (2012), for instance, blank and null voting embodies a communicative strategy enacted by the voter supporting one specific candidate, but wanting to signal some level of disappointment for specific policies by “avoiding a critically large winning margin; he wishes to prevent a landslide win” (Myatt, 2012, p. 2). Blank and null voting can both have a signal-jamming role, understood by the candidates running (Myatt, 2012), and be pivotal to the future behavior of voters and candidates (Castanheira, 2003; Piketty, 2000).

This last framework remains, however, less convincing than the expressive model presented above. The reason is that any approach that focuses on voters’ strategic attempts

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17 Even consumer behavior has been considered less and less as driven by a purely cost-benefit analysis of products. Since Levy (1959), also in the realm of marketing the role play by symbolism and status affirmation dominates any other.
to influence the outcome of an election faces similar challenges to the traditional instrumental interpretation of voting. Since the value of one single vote is minimal in large elections, it remains unclear what strategic signal individual voters can send by blank voting, or how they can realistically have a pivotal role in large constituencies.

2.2 What Kind of Political Discontent Provokes Protest Voting?

There are various types of political grievances that protest voting, through a blank or null vote, might represent. However, the most obvious and common sources of discontent are the political offering (i.e., parties and candidates running for office) and the institutional constrains (i.e., elections procedures and voting rules).

2.2.1 Rejection of the Political Offering

The first type of discontent, the popular perception of the low quality of the politicians and party system is the most significant cause of protest voting through a blank or null ballot and has had different origins in history, from large-scale parties’ mobilizations to voters’ uncoordinated individual choice. The majority of the mobilized versions of this protest fit in one of the following scenarios: the protest of an “illegal” party after having been outlawed, and the protest of legal opposition parties against a perceived democratic backslide of the government or fraudulent elections. Important examples of outlawed and illegal political movements that set in motions waves of blank or null voting can be found in Latin America and Southern Europe. Blank or null votes were used by the supporters of the guerrilla movement Sendero Luminoso in Peru (Palmer, 1986) in the 1980s. The “Shining Path,” a Marxist-leninist movement, created in the early 1960s by Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, was able to convince 56% of the voters in Ayacucho’s municipal elections to cast a blank or null vote in 1983 (Palmer, 1986). Another example, discussed at length in this paper, is that of the mobilized null votes chosen by the supporters of the

However, the most famous case of blank ballot surge among those lead by outlawed parties is found in Argentina, in the 1960s (*Canton and Jorrat, 1980; Peronists Win 'Landslide' With Blank Ballots*, 1959). In the election of 1957 for the Constitutional Convention, Perón, from his exile in Venezuela, asked his supporters to cast a blank ballot, which ended up being the first “party” in the race with 2,115,861 votes, with almost 10000 more votes than the first party (*UCRP*) (*Blank Ballots Top Argentine Party Votes*, 1957; *Snow*, 1963).

On the other hand, sometimes blank and null votes are mobilized by legal opposition parties, which aim to de-legitimize the ruling party (*Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009*) and possibly invalidate the election (*Patrawart, 2011*). A recent instance of this is represented by the case of Thailand in 2006. In the election for the Parliament, the main opposition parties called for a boycott of the elections, in response to widespread discontent with the single-party government controlled by a populist party – *Thai Rak Thai* – whose leader, owner of a telecommunications empire, had been accused of corruption. Thai electoral rules allow for the “no vote” option on the ballot. The large share of “no vote” (33%) together with the invalid vote (13%) made it impossible to fill all the seats and left 49 seats vacant (*Patrawart, 2011*). This fact, and evidences of electoral fraud by the TRT, eventually forced the Supreme Court to invalidate the elections (*Thai court rules election invalid*, 2006; *Patrawart, 2011*).

Another interesting case of opposition parties’ organizing of blank voting comes from Bolivia. In the 2011 first Bolivian election for four national courts (Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal, Supreme Court of Justice, Consejo de Magistratura and Agro-ambient Court), the opposition mobilized up to 60% of invalid votes (*Driscoll and Nelson, 2014*). This direct election of judges was part of a constitutional reform lead by the *Movimiento*
Al Socialismo (MAS) of Evo Morales (Driscoll and Nelson, 2014). The call for a null vote to protest against the MAS government, combined with the lack of electoral campaign, which was not allowed by law, produced a high level of blank and null voting (Elecciones judiciales en Bolivia: 60% de los votos son nulos o blancos, 2011).

While the mobilized demonstrations of dissent toward the political offering can be quite large in magnitude, they are usually quite infrequent. On the contrary, much more common is the individual choice of protest voting. This is represented by the vote of individuals who decide autonomously to reject all the political parties and candidates. They do so based on their own political motivations and not on behalf of existing political parties. This individual vote is not a sign of support or loyalty for any external political force but a direct rejection of the political options available.

Citizens’ movements have been created in several countries to lobby governments for the recognition of the blank vote as a valid electoral choice. These groups (e.g., the French Parti du Vote-Blanc or the British None-of-the-above) often run “awareness” campaigns to explain the meaning of this individual choice. For instance, a citizens’ movement called Movimiento Ciudadano por el voto blanco computable (Citizens movement for the computable blank vote) was created at the beginning of the 2000s in Spain. In their website, these activists claim that the movement targets those who “do not feel represented by any other political option.” Connected to this movement is Escaños en Blanco (blank ballot), a registered political party that aims to leave seats empty. These organizations cooperate with the goal of defending the right of those who want to cast a vote of protest; one that is actually counted as such. In 2011, this party in Cataluña obtained 1.47% of the votes (Resultados elecciones generales 2011, 2011). Similar parties currently exist also in France, United Kingdom, Colombia, Wales (UK), and Serbia (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, 2012).

In the mission statements of these blank voters’ movement from table 1 there are several references to the desire to participate in the democratic process, the sense of duty

http://www.votoenblancocomputable.org/
toward the society, and a vivid disappointment with the political offering. For examples the Colombian organization claims to represent“those who want democracy but has no one for whom to vote” (Voteenblanco, N.d.).

Figure 1: Blank vote movements’ mission statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME PARTY/MOV</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>MESSAGE/MISSION</th>
<th>WEBSITE/SOURCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Escaño Blanco (Blank Ballot)</td>
<td>SPAIN</td>
<td>“For whoever does not feel represented by any other political option” (Orig: “A quien no se siente representado por ninguna otra opción política.”)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.votoenblancocomputable.org/">http://www.votoenblancocomputable.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None-of-the-above</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>“Vote for a candidate you really want, or vote blank in protest. Both will help to revitalise UK politics”</td>
<td><a href="http://www.blankvote.org.uk/">http://www.blankvote.org.uk/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voto en Blanco (Blank Vote)</td>
<td>COLOMBIA</td>
<td>“[…] those who want democracy but has no one for whom to vote” (Orig: “[...] los que queremos la democracia, pero no tenemos por quien votar” )</td>
<td><a href="http://voteenblanco.org/">http://voteenblanco.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-Candidate-Deserve-My-Vote</td>
<td>WALES (UK)</td>
<td>“This party gives a voice to those who feel disillusioned or disenfranchised by the choice of political parties or their candidates.”</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nocandidate.org.uk/">http://www.nocandidate.org.uk/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti du Vote-Blanc (Party of Blank Vote)</td>
<td>FRANCE</td>
<td>“Blank vote identifies the will to participate to the democratic process but it marks a rejection of the proposed options.” (Orig: “Voter blanc indique une volonté de participer au débat démocratique mais marque un refus des choix proposés.)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.parti-du-vote-blanc.fr/">http://www.parti-du-vote-blanc.fr/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None-of-the-above (NOTA)</td>
<td>UNITED STATES</td>
<td>“All legitimate consent requires the ability to withhold consent; therefore, the legitimate consent of voters requires they be able to withhold their consent in an election to office.”</td>
<td><a href="http://nota.org/">http://nota.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti-nul (Null Party)</td>
<td>QUEBEC (CANADA)</td>
<td>“Why create Parti Nul? Because voters have no clear way to express, without a doubt, their dissatisfaction with regard to political parties, the electoral process, or political institutions in general. [...]”</td>
<td><a href="http://www.partinul.org/en/mission/">http://www.partinul.org/en/mission/</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2.2 Disapproval of the Electoral Constraints

The second type of discontent that protest voting might be channeling is the disaffection with the electoral institutions or voting regulations. This form of political disaffection is less obvious and self-evident and, hence, requires some more explanation. It has to do with the amount of flexibility and the expressive possibilities that voting rules allow
There are two main factors to consider in understanding the relationship between voting rules and popular discontent: the number of viable candidates that an electoral system tends to produce, and the type and number of preferences that the voters are allowed to allocate. For instance, a ballot in a Single Member District election (e.g., UK) will usually tend to produce a two-party system (Duverger, 1963), while a more proportional system increases the probability of having a higher number of parties on the ballot (Blais and Carty, 2006). This dimension of the electoral system, hence, shapes the number of parties and candidates among which the voter can choose (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Lijphart, 1990).

The second factor is the type of preferences voters can express, if any. The vote can be a one-shot approval of one of the candidates and a party at the same time, like in the United States. In other cases, it records a ranking of preferences, as in the Single-Transferable-Vote (STV), used for example in Malta, the Australian upper house, and Ireland. In the STV system, voters can declare a different level of approval for all (or some) of the candidates, which is then taken into consideration in the counting of the votes.

Other ballots permit voters to split the ticket and express separate preferences for candidates and parties (e.g., Italian local elections). This means that the voter can separately approve the individual candidate and the party platform, without being constrained in showing support for both. Similar is the case of many Mixed Member systems (e.g., Germany, Venezuela, and Italy pre 2005) where voters can express separate preferences for different parties or candidates in the same election (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001).

These features define how much and how complex of a political opinion a voter can really express, by building a “ceiling” for citizens’ expressiveness (Hirschman, 1982).

It is important to note that this paper does not discuss ballots’ “design” in terms of colors, order of the names or use of symbols, for a discussion of this see Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006).

For a discussion on the STV see for example: Farrell, Mackerras and McAllister (1996)

Often a part of the representatives are elected through a plurality system and the others through a proportional system.

A similar classification of the ballots structure is presented by Pereira and Andrade e Silva (2009). They create a “freedom of choice” index. Although their focus is more on the number of choices their index could be considered an operationalization of this idea of expressive range available to the voters. Instead, for a different way of classifying electoral systems based on the incentive to collect a personal vote they produce see Carey and Shugart (1995).
Decreases in terms of the expressiveness of the electoral systems will always be perceived by voters as a limitation of their political participation. More limiting systems cause greater political discontent and will witness a higher average rate of protest voting in the form of blank or null voting.

The fact that the ballot limits the participation potential of individuals is evident in moments of reform and introduction of new types of ballots. For example, in many European countries, the nineteenth century restriction of what was accepted as “valid” vote led to the disenfranchisement of many people who used the voting to convey their opinions and discontent. Ihl and Deloye (1991) studied the ballots from the 1881 legislative election in France when around 3% of the national vote was voided, some regions experiencing as much as 20% invalid votes. The authors found that many citizens had expressed strong discontent through the ballot.

Hence, the first two hypotheses tested in this paper are:

Hypothesis 1.a: In general, political discontent, either toward the political offering or the institutional constrains, will increase the use of the ballot to channel political protest.

Hypothesis 1.b: The specific discontent induced by more constraining electoral systems will witness, on average, more individual blank and null voting than more “expression promoting” electoral systems.

2.3 Who Uses the Electoral Channel to Express Political Discontent?

Who uses the electoral channel to express discontent? Voters who, in non-compulsory voting systems, individually choose to cast a blank or null ballot understand the voting process in its practical and symbolic aspects. They are politically sophisticated, and they posses the resources in terms of education and political knowledge to make such a choice on their own.

This description of voters hides a paradigm shift, from the classical Downsian ratio-
nal choice tradition (Downs, 1957) to expressive behavioral models (Wolfinger, 1980; Schuessler, 2000; Tyran, 2004). As explained eloquently by Schuessler (2000), it is in the relationship between education and voting behavior that the classical rational choice models, both decision-theory or game theoretical, fail. Voters are assumed to have a high enough level of awareness to be able to choose their preferred candidates based on candidates’ policy orientation. However, rationally they are expected neither to gather information (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Downs, 1957) nor to vote in large elections (Downs, 1957).

These predictions about the voting behavior of educated voters are inconsistent with what has been found empirically: educated voters vote also in large elections, and more so than uneducated people (Verba et al., 1993; Luskin, 1987).\textsuperscript{23} Higher education makes the political decisions of citizens more resolute (Matsusaka, 1995)\textsuperscript{24} and produces a sense of entitlement in expressing political opinion and voicing political needs (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Cohen, Vigoda and Samorly, 2001).\textsuperscript{25} In fact, educated citizens participate more in all forms of political activities (Hansen, Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1987; Wolfinger, 1980; Verba et al., 1993; Lassen, 2005), including political protest (Marsh and Kaase, 1979; Aelst and Walgrave, 2001).

I claim that it is despite their understanding of the limited impact of each single vote, and because of the expressive and symbolic value they assign to their own vote (Shklar, 1991), that sophisticated voters are more likely to vote in general. Only in extremely rare pivotal conditions, when their vote is likely to make a numerical difference, might they be driven by a precise cost-benefit calculation weighted by the chances of influencing the electoral outcome. In the other cases, precisely because of their high level of un-

\textsuperscript{23}For a meta-analysis of the correlates of voting at the individual levels across several empirical studies see Smets and Van Ham (2013).

\textsuperscript{24}Educated voters are also more predictable, and more extreme (Palfrey and Poole, 1987). Many reasons exist as to why some people might gather more information. First of all, high education level leads voters to gather information on various fields, including politics. A strong personal interest in politics, a strongly informed social network, a strong sense of civic duty (Feddersen and Sandroni, 2006), and a weak sense of partisanship (Larcinese, 2009) also lead to information gathering.

\textsuperscript{25}This is sometimes defined in the literature as “internal political efficacy” (Niemi, Craig and Mattei, 1991).
derstanding of the limited, marginal impact of one vote, better educated and politically sophisticated voters will be more prone to be expressive voters. As Judge Learned Hand declared, expressing a sentiment that is typical of sophisticated voters,

“OF COURSE [sic] I know how illusory would be the belief that my vote determined anything; but nevertheless when I go to the polls I have a satisfaction in the sense that we are all engaged in a common venture” (Quoted in Shklar (1991), p. 25)\(^{26}\)

Furthermore, and most importantly for this paper, given their symbolic and expressive use of the ballot, sophisticated voters will be more likely to implement unconventional voting behaviors like voting blank. The choice of expressing political disaffection with the party or electoral system through the ballot is then more intelligible. This is summarized in the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2.a**: In general, the political discontent expressed in the different use of *individual* blank or null votes will be a function of citizens’ political sophistication.

In the particular case of the discontent produced by electoral systems:

**Hypothesis 2.b**: The sensitivity of voters to electoral institutions, and to the different levels of expression allowed by the systems, will be a function of citizens’ political sophistication, and will be expressed in the form of different use of *individual* blank or null voting.

### 2.4 Blank and Null Voting Or Other Demonstrations of Dissent?

Are all forms of protest within the electoral context the same? Two ways of demonstrating political dissent are studied often in political science: abstention (Birch, 2010) and organized protest (Aelst and Walgrave, 2001). What I show in this paper is that neither

\(^{26}\)Quoted in (Shklar, 1991), but originally from Karst (1989).
of these forms are as much of a politically sophisticated choice as blank and null voting. In particular, in the case of organized protest, the ideal comparison, even more than street demonstrations, is organized protest that uses the ballot.

In contrast to others, blank and null voting remains a less commonly chosen form of protest. Using Tilly’s framework, it could be said that the idea of blank voting is not easily available in many countries’ political culture or “repertoire of contentions” (Tilly, 1978, 1986; Tarrow, 1993). The repertoire, according to Tilly (1978), is about what individuals know how to do in the moment in which they want to send a political message. It is also about the set of options that the society in which the individual lives considers valid and culturally appropriate styles of protest. Only rarely can blank and null voting be considered a mainstream form of demonstration of dissent.

As mentioned before, a few countries have experienced forms of large-scale, ideologically mobilized blank and null voting in their history. From these examples we can learn about the amount of efforts necessary to make the supporters aware of the protest tool chosen. For instance, the correspondence between Péron and John William Cooke, Péron’s representative in Argentina after the leader’s exile, reveals the complex campaign put in place to promote the use of the blank vote and the symbolism of this vote discussed at length within the party. Palabra Argentina,27 the most important newspaper of the Peronistas in the late 1950s (Pirro, 2014), was campaigning for the use of this vote; pamphlets were produced and sent from Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil; and clandestine publications were spreading the word in the entire country (Cooke and Duhalde, 2007).

As in the Argentinian case, mobilized blank and null voting is a function of the capacity of the organizer to mobilize its supporters by explaining to them the symbolic value and importance of that behavior. More than with other widely known forms of political protest, like street demonstrations or petitions, the success of the mobilized protest voting will depend on the level of control of the territory and ideological grip of the mobilizing force, on their capacity to activate ideological and partisan cues (Verba, Nie and Kim, 

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If not driven by ideological, well-organized mobilization, blank and null voting has to depend on individuals’ understanding of its political potential. For this reason, individual blank and null voting is a sophisticated political choice. These observations lead to two more hypotheses tested in this paper:

**Hypothesis 3.a:** The political discontent that is expressed in the different use of mobilized protest voting will be a function of citizens’ mobilization potential, i.e., their ideology and receptivity to mobilization messages.

**Hypothesis 3.b:** Mobilized protest vote will not be a function of political sophistication, but voters’ ideology and mobilizing forces’ communication capacities will guide the choice of this means of protest.

Finally, the comparison with abstention is even more striking. The literature has often shown that turnout is positively correlated with education (Lijphart, 1997; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, 1987) and that abstention is often due to apathy or long term socioeconomic trends (Rosenthal and Sen, 1973).

**Hypothesis 4:** Abstention is not driven by political sophistication, but by the lack thereof, and is not a strong expression of political discontent.

### 3 Case Selection and Data

#### 3.1 Case Selection

In this paper, I present two empirical cases: the national vote in the Basque Country, in Spain, and the local vote in Italian municipalities. Spain and Italy have been chosen because within the group of democratic countries with voluntary voting systems, they display some unique political and institutional variation that can be leveraged empirically to obtain a clean causal identification. First, they offer the opportunity to causally identify
the impact of different electoral institutions, political discontent, and mobilization. Italy has an electoral system for the selection of mayors that changes above a specific threshold of number of inhabitants, offering the opportunity to exploit a regression discontinuity design (Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini, 2013) to get to the causal impact of different systems on blank voting. Spain, and precisely the Basque Country, experienced a sudden mobilization of null voting in 2004 driven by a ban on the nationalistic party Batasuna. This proscription, as explained in detail later, can be seen as exogenous shock of discontent on the population, and caused a wave of mobilization in 2004.

Second, both contexts allow me to test the heterogeneous effect of the explanatory variables (institutional differences and mobilization) as a function of local variations in the presence of highly educated and political knowledgeable individuals.28

Moreover, they offer data at the smallest level of aggregation available above the individual level for electoral results and socioeconomic data: the municipal level.29 Finally, both Spain and Italy record the null separately from the blank vote. This allows an analysis of the blank vote, which is less problematic and contains only a minor component of measurement error, in the case of Italy, and a direct comparison of the blank versus the null vote in Spain, where the mobilization stimulated explicitly ballot spoiling. The “error” component that is present in the records of null voting, once I account for possible institutional and socioeconomic changes, can actually be disregarded as a classical measurement error. This type of measurement error leads to more imprecise estimates, with larger variance, when used as a dependent variable (Hausman, 2001) as in this paper.

28 For a similar approach see Duflo (2001).
29 Any use of aggregate data to test individual-level theories poses the challenge of ecological inference fallacy (King, 2013), the study of blank and null voting does not offer an easily available solution. The alternative approach, which I use in Chapter 3 of the manuscript, is the use of an individual-level survey. This is bound to suffer from a different issue: the bias in self-reporting voting behavior (Wolfinger, 1980; Sigelman, 1982; Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2001). I attempt to attenuate the ecological inference problem by using the smallest aggregation available: municipalities within countries (or regions) with the same political and institutional settings.
3.2 Data

For the Spanish case, I use the municipal election data from Ministerio del Interior España (2013), from 1989 to 2011 for 250 Basque municipalities. These are combined with demographic, educational, and socioeconomic data from the Instituto Vasco de Estadística (EUSTAT) (2013).

For the Italian case I used the replication data from Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013) that collects the Italian municipal elections from 1999 to 2010 for 7843 municipalities. I integrated this dataset with data from the archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Website of Italian Ministry of Interior, 2013, 2014). Finally, I combined the data with some socioeconomic and demographic data from the Italian Bureau of Statistics (2014) and the Ministry of Education, University and Research Statistical Bureau (Website of Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2014).

4 Mobilized Protest Voting, Individual Protest Voting, and Voting Abstention: the Case of the Basque Country

The first case, the analysis of the Lower House national elections in the Basque Country from 1996 to 2008, allows me to compare directly the trends and nature of individual blank voting – when individuals cast them because of their own initiative and without large-scale coordination – and mobilized protest voting – when citizens’ discontent is mobilized by a party.

30 For the analysis I used the first round electoral results.
4.1 Background: Origins of Mobilized and Endemic Political Discontent

In March 2003, one of the Basque nationalist parties, Herri Batasuna, was officially interdicted from participating in any election. Before its ban, Batasuna (or EH/HB) had quite a strong grip, especially on local elections: in the province of Guipúzcoa it reached the 26% of the votes on average, followed by Vizcaya with 17% and Álava with 11% (see figure 3, panel c).

The reason for the proscription was the recognition of Batasuna’s connection to the terrorist movement ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna).31 In the aftermath of 9/11, Spain increased its efforts to fight local terrorism, and in 2002 its Parliament passed a revision of the Law of Political Parties “prohibiting that a political party could, in a repetitive and serious way [...] support politically the violence and the activity of terrorist group.” (Jefatura del Estado, 2002, p. 23600).32 In August of the same year, Batasuna was suspended, and its official proscription arrived in March 2003 (Sawyer, 2002).

This ban caused great political discontent in the region. In response to it, Batasuna’s leader Arnaldo Otegi asked the supporters to invalidate/spoil the ballot (Gastaminza, 2004). The success of the call to protest was also reinforced by an Al-Qaeda terrorist attack in Madrid, which happened a few days before the election, and of which ETA was initially incorrectly accused.33

31 ETA started its more visible activity in the 1960s with a series of bombings against Franco’s regime and continued under democracy despite the level of autonomy conferred to the region within the Spanish state (Justice, 2005). Since 1959, its year of creation, ETA has been responsible for 836 deaths, 3391 terrorist attacks and an attempt on the life of the Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar in 1995 (Ayres, 2004; Sawyer, 2002). Herri Batasuna (HB) was created in 1978 as a coalition of various nationalistic parties, and as a political wing of ETA. In 1998, many members of the party were arrested and HB was substituted in the political arena by Euskal Herritarrok (EH). Finally, after 2001 EH’s electoral debacle, Batasuna emerged (Sawyer, 2002). Although members of Batasuna never disclosed a connection to ETA, they, at time, publicly supported violent actions conducted by the organization (Justice, 2005).

32 Original quote: “impidiendo que un partido político pueda, de forma reiterada y grave, [...] apoyar políticamente la violencia y las actividades de bandas terroristas,” translation by the author.

33 The mobilization happened within the electoral context of what could be classified as a rigid ballot with limited expressive range. Indeed, the Spanish electoral system for the lower house is a closed list proportional system (D’Hondt) with district magnitude (i.e., the number of seats assigned per district) varying from 1 to 35 and a legal threshold of 3% (Lago and Martínez, 2007). In this system voters can pick a list of candidates to vote for, but the position of the candidates on the list is fixed, and it is not possible for the...
The case of this proscription offers a good test of how the ballot gets mobilized as a tool of protest, and who responds to this call. Furthermore, it allows a comparison of the mobilized protest to a non-mobilized blank vote, which is responding to a more generalized discontent about the quality of Spanish politicians. Indeed, reasons for broader popular political discontent existed prior to (and regardless of) the ban on Batasuna. The 1980s and 1990s in Spain were characterized by wide-spread political corruption. Transparency International assigned a a score of 4.35 to Spain on a scale from 1 (for the highest corruption level perceived) to 10 (for the lowest corruption level) in the mid-1990s. The score of those years is much lower than the 7 points that characterized Spain in the 2000s (Transparency International, 2014). During the government of Felipe González,\textsuperscript{34} 1982-1996, numerous important political corruption scandals were revealed, such as the Filesa affair in 1993 (Pujas and Rhodes, 1999).

Evidence of the existence of this discontent are the large protests that erupted in 2011 and the subsequent foundation of anti-establishment, anti-corruption parties like Podemos and Ciudadanos.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, a movement that advocate the use of a blank vote in response to the political corruption, was created in 2004, Escaños en blanco (Blank Ballots). This a party aims to promote explicitly this form of protest as an individual choice of citizens. In 2004 and 2008, this party was not well-known, and the outreach of its awareness campaign was very limited. The party won less than 0.5\% of votes in the lower house elections.\textsuperscript{36}

\subsection*{4.2 Empirical Strategy for Spanish Case}

The section has two goals. The first is to show the impact of a sudden increase of discontent, and its mobilization, on the use of the null vote as a form of protest. I demonstrate how the variation in the use of this tool within municipalities is based on the ideological

\textsuperscript{34}Prime Minister from the Partido Socialista Obrero Español

\textsuperscript{35}For a description of Podemos see Tremlett (2015); for Ciudadanos see Kassam (March, 13th, 2015).

\textsuperscript{36}For more information about Escaños en Blanco see http://escanos.org/.
Figure 2: Distribution of blank and null vote in the Basque Country across time: panel a presents the level of null vote (as a proportion of the electorate in the Basque Country) while panel b is the blank vote. The period considered includes the elections for the Lower House from 1989 to 2011.

The grip of Batasuna and its mobilization potential. The second is to compare the interaction between discontent and education in the case of the mobilized form of protest, as well as of the individual version of it.

It is clear how the proscription of the Batasuna party, and the subsequent mobilization, produced a change in the voting behavior within the País Vasco. Figure 2 (panel a) introduces the striking difference in patterns of null voting when this form of unconventional voting was hijacked by Batasuna in 2004. The same increase is not observed in blank voting (panel b), which, instead, is quite consistent across those years. The magnitude of blank voting is larger, however, when looking only at the “non-mobilized” years (1996, 2000, 2008).

If the mobilization explained the peak of null voting in 2004, what accounts for the variation of null voting across municipalities? I test here which features of the municipalities made them more prone to respond to the mobilization. The key feature is obviously
the ideological support for the party and for the Basque nationalist cause. By using an approach similar to Duflo (2001), my identification strategy exploits both the time variation, before and after the 2004 mobilization, and the geographical variation in the nationalistic sentiment, representing the potential level of discontent, proxied by three variables: the proportion of literate Euskara (local language) speakers, the proportion of illiterate ones, and Batasuna’s share of the vote in the municipal election of 1999 (see figure 3).

As presented in figure 3, there is a significant variation in Euskara speakers between the three main provinces (Álava, Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa) of the Basque Country and within them, as well as of the vote for Batasuna in 1999. This variation can be leveraged as a measure of the intensity of the “treatment” (i.e., the mobilization) which equally impacted all the areas, but with different strengths depending on the potential discontent and potential reception-capacity of individuals.

In municipalities with a high proportion of Euskara literate voters there was a large peak in null voting in 2004. The gray lines and points (the “post-ban” points) in figure 4 panels a to c demonstrates that the phenomenon was a short term one and that in 2008 the null vote was already not displaying any correlation with potential nationalism. The leader of Batasuna himself admitted that the strategy of “illegal” voting had not been intended for a long time (Otegi admite que ‘el voto ilegal quizás llegó a su tope’ en las últimas elecciones [Otegi admits that the illegal vote maybe has hit the ceiling in the last elections], 2009). After the peak of the 2003/2004 elections the mobilized protest voters returned to either voting for various candidates supported by Batasuna at the time, or else they abstained. Furthermore, the comparison of these three panels also shows that all the chosen proxies of nationalism capture the variation in the heterogeneous effect of mobilization. However, the proportion of literate Euskara speakers (panel a) and the previous electoral support for Batasuna (panel c) display the strongest relationship. This is consistent with the idea that accessibility to the message of mobilization might play an

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37 In my analysis I focus only on this autonomous community. However, the “greater” Basque Country would also include the autonomous community of Navarre and a part of South-western France.

38 As explained in Duflo (2001), the combination of geographical and temporal variation can be assumed exogenous and the different impact of the treatment can be estimated.
Figure 3: **Distribution of the Euskara speakers (both literate and not) and Batasuna’s vote across Basque provinces:** these three figures display the distribution in each of the regions of the proportion of Euskara-literate and Euskara-illiterate across the time considered (1996-2008). The third panel c of this figure displays the share of votes received by *Euskal Herritarrok* (then *Batasuna*) in the local elections of 1999 across the three provinces of the Basque Country: Álava, Vizcaya, and Guipúzcoa.
Figure 4: **Pre- and post-ban use of blank and null vote in the Basque Country:** panel a presents the difference in the null vote before and after the ban on *Batasuna* as a function of the proportion of individuals who are literate in Euskara in each municipality. Panel b shows the same for illiterate Euskara speakers; panel c as a function of the vote for *Batasuna* in the municipal elections of 1999. Panel d, on the other hand, shows the different pattern of blank voting. The lines are drawn based on a non-parametric lowess smoothing. Source: Ministerio del Interior España (2013) and Instituto Vasco de Estadística (EUSTAT) (2013).
important role in the success of the mobilization itself. Finally, the blank vote (as shown in panel d) was above 1% of the voters across all proportion of Euskara speakers. This vote, not mobilized in the Basque nationalist protest, was most likely determined by the other source of political discontent, the endemic political corruption. Later, I test whether it was done by different types of dissatisfied voters from those who were mobilized in 2004.

To test more rigorously these non-parametric findings in the case of the lower house election within the Basque region I run linear models, with the rate of null voting and the rate of blank voting expressed as a proportion of eligible voters, as my dependent variables. Each specification includes the variable High Education defined as higher-than-secondary education, socioeconomic variables (i.e., total unemployment registered as proportion of population and gross added value of agricultural sector), and population size.

The potential nationalist support, as explained before, is represented by Euskara speakers, literate or illiterate. I assumed that these two groups, while equally likely to be sharing the same level of support for nationalism, might be differently receptive to a mobilization campaign. Illiterate individuals might lack the knowledge of the language, which could limit the access to some of the messages, but illiteracy might also be a proxy of less involvement and attention to the nationalistic cause.

I also control for some features of the election in the specific area, the number of parties that received at least one vote, and the level of competition calculated as the difference between the second party and the third party. In fact, in Spain, the PSOE (Socialist Party) and PP (Popular Party) are often the two main parties in the races. A large value of the “competition level” variable will indicate that those two parties dominate the scene, while a small one will indicate a multiparty environment in which smaller parties can also compete.

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39 This latter includes the vote for the “blank” party, Escaños en Blanco.
40 From the website: “degree Studies, Higher Engineering and similar, in addition to Holders of postgraduate qualifications, postgraduates, masters, doctorates and specialist qualifications” (Instituto Vasco de Estadística (EUSTAT), 2013).
In each specification I include the municipal-level fixed effects that control for all the time invariant characteristics of the municipalities, and the municipal specific time trends which account for potential problematic pre-trends in some municipalities. In other words, if a number of municipalities had already been observing increases in their levels of blank and null voting, this would be captured by these controls.

4.3 Spanish Case Results

4.3.1 Sudden Discontent, Mobilization, and Ideology

The results from the model and specification presented above confirmed that the ban on Batasuna and the mobilization that followed had a strong impact on null voting. The parametric analysis (reported in full in the appendix in table 4) confirmed that the interaction between mobilization and various proxies of nationalism is positive and significant, with the exception of the less “educated,” illiterate, Euskara speaker proxy, which does not reach statistical significance. Figure 5 summarized the key finding by plotting the coefficients on the two interactions terms from the model that includes all the controls, municipal dummies and individual time trends. These coefficients should be interpreted substantively as the expected change in null voting under mobilization in areas with difference of no literate Euskara speakers versus municipalities with all literate Euskara speakers. In other words, the areas with no Euskara speakers (the minimum is 0.01) and those with all Euskara speaker (actual maximum is 0.95) witness a difference of 23 percentage points. For the case of the illiterate Euskara speakers, this is a much less realistic scenario, since they represent a smaller proportion of the Basques in each municipality.

4.3.2 Education Role in Mobilized versus Individual Protest Voting

Once proven that the 2004 phenomenon was driven by the discontented nationalist Basques mobilized by Batasuna, I can now compare that special year with the ordinary (smaller) individual use of the blank vote in the other years, which experienced a less sudden type
Figure 5: **Coefficients from the interactions between mobilization and proxies of nationalism**: this reports the coefficients from the model that includes all the controls, municipal dummies and individual time trends. This coefficient corresponds to the extreme expected change in null voting if we were to compare municipalities with no Euskara speakers to municipalities with all Euskara speakers. This kind of change correspond roughly to the actual minimum (1%) and the maximum (95%) level in the actual distribution of Euskara **literate** speakers. The illiterate Euskara speakers, instead, are a much smaller proportion and also a much more noisy proxy.
of discontent and no mobilization.

I run simple cross-sectional versions of the model described above for four different years, three non-mobilized years (1996, 2000, 2008) and one with high mobilization (2004). In this analysis, I capture the change at the municipal levels of the most important determinants of the number of blank votes, null votes, and abstentions.

In the years that had no mobilization, education is the largest positive determinant of blank vote and null voting, although larger and statistically significant only for the former. In 2004, the relationship changes drastically, but only for the null vote, the vote chosen by Batasuna to symbolize the protest. The coefficient on high education in 2004 becomes highly negative and depicts a strong negative relationship between high education and protest voting.\footnote{This is also confirmed by running a triple interaction between Euskara speakers, education and mobilization (see appendix table 4).}

While the results are fully reported in the appendix in tables 5 and 6, figure 6 panel a summarizes visually the key findings. For each year, the panel displays the coefficients on high education in two models: one run on null votes (orange on the right) and the other on blank votes (red on the left). The bars represent the 90\% confidence intervals and help me show how the estimates of the coefficients in the case of blank voting are positive and significant, while in the case of the null voting they rarely reach statistical significance, except in 2004 when the coefficient is significant but switches sign.

Instead, the opposite relationship between high education and average abstention emerges. Unsurprisingly, abstention is constantly and systematically negatively correlated with education across all years considered.\footnote{The even more significant negative correlation in 2000 might be explained by the fact that in that election the list supported by Batasuna, EH, did not run and supported abstention (La abstención en Euskadi sigue igual que en 1996 en relación con la española [The abstention in Euskadi is the same as in 1996 relative to that of Spain], 2000).}
Figure 6: Coefficients on High Education from the four cross-sectional models: I show the different coefficients on the variable of high education proportions, across the years. The units of analysis are the 217 municipalities and the bars are the 90% confidence intervals. Source: Ministerio del Interior España (2013).
5 Political Sophistication, High Education, and Protest Voting: Italian Municipal Elections

The second case of the Italian municipal elections (from 1999 to 2010) allows to compare blank voting, null voting, and abstention across electoral systems with different expressive possibilities that should produce different levels of satisfaction among voters, as discussed in the theory section. Italy did not witness any strong mobilization of the blank or null vote in this period, so I can test the hypotheses regarding the heterogeneous use of individual protest voting as a function of the level of political education.

5.1 Background: Origins of Institutional Discontent

Mayors and the municipal councils in Italy are either elected through a plurality system (FPTP) in municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, or by a runoff system. The plurality system assigns victory to the mayoral candidate with the highest vote share. In the runoff system, on the other hand, if none of the candidates receive more than 50% of the votes in the first round, the two candidates with the highest shares run in a second round alone.

The ballot used for larger municipalities allows for more political expression in three ways. First, while the plurality system creates a bipartisan party system and forces voters into strategic voting (Duverger, 1963), a runoff system (or majority system) allows for a higher number of parties and a sincere vote in the first round. “Compared to plurality systems the majority rule is not so obviously biased against minor parties, thereby providing a wider variety of options to the voter” (Blais and Carty, 1990, p. 168). As shown empirically by Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013), specifically in the case of Italian municipal elections, the runoff system increases the number of candidates running by 29%.

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43The threshold is at 10,000 inhabitants in Sicily and 3000 in the autonomous province of Trento.
Furthermore, this system potentially (and often) has a second round of voting, allowing the voter to reconsider and evaluate the second round independently. In this way, the voters have often two moments of choice. Pereira and Andrade e Silva (2009), in creating their “freedom of choice” index for different electoral systems, assigned to the runoff system a score of 1.5 in the dimension they define as “number of choices.” On the other hand, they assigned only a score of 1 to the plurality systems, which is indeed a very expression-limiting electoral system that allows only for one-shot approval of one candidate and party.

Finally, within the municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants, voters are allowed to split the ticket between the candidate for the position of mayor and the list/party, while this kind of vote is not permitted on the ballot of the cities below the threshold.

This case provides the opportunity to directly compare two types of ballots that offer a substantially different range of expressive opportunities for the voters, and also to address the question of what geographical areas are more sensitive to these institutional differences. The hypothesis presented earlier, 2.a and 2.b, regarding the relationship between individual protest voting and electoral institutions would lead us to expect higher levels of individual protest voting (in the form of blank voting) in the electoral system with less flexibility and fewer expressive possibilities, which, in this case, would be the plurality system.

I start by gathering a few simple empirical observations, summarized graphically in figures 7 and 8. These figures introduce the relationship between electoral system, number of candidates, and protest vote. The first empirical fact is the existence of a negative correlation between the level of blank voting and the expressive possibilities and flexibility of the ballots. By plotting the mean of blank voting across time, in figure 7 panel a, I demonstrates that the municipal elections’ trends of blank voting across time are systematically higher in municipalities with plurality systems. Panel b, instead, shows the statistically noisy nature of the null vote that is partially composed of mistakes, more common in a
more complex ballot (i.e., runoff system).\textsuperscript{44}

Furthermore, a positive relationship between number of candidates (stimulated by more proportional systems like the runoff system) and blank voting is confirmed in figure 8. Here protest voting, both as null voting and blank voting, clearly peaks in the cases where only one candidate runs, which are not that rare in smaller municipalities. Blank votes, the cleaner measure of individual protest voting, monotonically decrease with the increase in number of candidates. On the other hand, the null votes appear sensitive only to the extreme cases of single candidate races.

![Blank and Null Vote Graphs](image)

**Figure 7:** Relationship across the time of different electoral institutions, blank and null vote: The two panels of this figure display the blank and null vote at the municipal level and show the differences between the municipalities with a runoff system and those with a plurality system.

5.2 Empirical Strategy for the Italian Case

To get to the underlying causal dynamics of the case, I use the same empirical strategy proposed by Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013) – a sharp regression discontinuity.

\textsuperscript{44}In the section for the Italian elections I use the blank votes only, since they seem to follow the same trends and are a cleaner measure. When including null votes in the analysis the results are consistent, but with a slightly larger SE, as expected when including a measure with errors.
Figure 8: **Relationship between the number of mayoral candidates and blank and null votes:** the figure displays the relationship between blank and null votes and the number of candidates for the mayoral races.

... design – and I identify the treatment effect of having a runoff system. Due to the fact that neither local governments nor voters can choose their electoral systems, it is possible to assume that in cities of 15,000 inhabitant and cities of 14,999 the electoral system implemented is basically randomly assigned.

While the ideal test would be run with cities right above and right below the threshold, the characteristics of my sample do not allow me to restrict the analysis to those. Instead, I test a bandwidth of 3,000 individuals above and below the threshold and I also apply other parametric approaches interacting the running variable with the treatment. I assume that the sample used is small enough to allow me to claim that the differences between the cities on either side of the discontinuity are minimal and that the “treatment” assignment – a two-round electoral system – is random. This design also allows me to assume that the likelihood of having a political scandal, a source of potential political discontent, is equal and larger than zero in both groups of cities above and below the threshold.\(^{45}\)

\(^{45}\)It is possible to use a “sharp” design, since around the 15,000 threshold the probability of having a runoff electoral system jumps from zero to one.

\(^{46}\)Once conditioning on the population size \(X_i\), the treatment \(T_i\) and the potential outcomes \((\text{Rubin, 2005})\), \(Y_i(0)\) and \(Y_i(1)\) are orthogonal, “unconfoundedness assumption” \((\text{Imbens and Lemieux, 2008})\).
By fitting a local linear regression without any other covariates, I estimate the local average treatment effect around the threshold, as:

\[ \alpha = E \left[ Y_i(1) - Y_i(0) \mid X_i = c \right] \]  \hspace{1cm} (1)

Where \( c \) is the cut-off at which the electoral system changes, 15,000 inhabitants, around which I check the assumption of continuity of the conditional distribution function of the covariate of interest (population). This appears smooth around the cut-off as shown in figure 12 in the appendix, meaning that there seems to be no sign of self-selection around the threshold.\(^{47}\)

I also test the relationship manually, by interacting the running variable (population) with the treatment variable (runoff electoral system) within a sample around the threshold, from 14,000 to 16,000 inhabitants, while controlling for two additional covariates: number-of-candidate fixed effects, year fixed effects, and Southern-region dummy (see appendix, table 7).

Finally, I verify whether or not there exists a heterogeneous impact based on the availability of “potential” protest voters: individuals who are highly educated and politically engaged. To capture the presence of these groups of voters I use the number of students enrolled in different types of majors who are resident in each province (109 provinces) in each year (12 years) and divide them by the number of individuals with an age between 18 and 27 who live in the same province at the same time. Hence, students will be counted in the province where they reside – often where they were born and still vote\(^{48}\) – not necessarily where the university they attend is located.

These measures of education intend to represent a proxy of the different types of individuals, as well as networks of families and peers, present in the different provinces.

\(^{47}\) The main assumptions are also confirmed by Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013) who use the same design to test different outcomes: number of candidates running and policy volatility.

\(^{48}\) Many students change only the domicilio when studying in a different city. This is different from an official change of residency. It is quite common for university students to continue voting in their city of origin.
To be conservative, the variables are operationalized as dichotomous variable (High Pol and High Edu) to identify areas where there is a relatively high proportion of students, i.e., higher than the third quantile of the distribution (0.287 for university students in general, 0.018 for political science students). In particular, areas with higher proportions of students in political science are expected to have higher levels of political education and engagement on average. I assume that the choice of this academic path will be influenced by, and will then influence, peers and families.

Figure 9 shows the proportions of students (political science in panel a and all majors in panel b) out of the number of individuals between 18-27 per province. The vertical white lines represent the thresholds chosen to identify a province as High Pol or High Edu. Some of the provinces with high proportions of political sciences students are areas with important universities with famous political science departments, like Bologna and Florence.

5.3 Italian Case Results

As reported in table 1, the regression discontinuity design shows how the more representative system (runoff electoral system), which constrains citizens’ voting preferences less (Duverger, 1963), decreases significantly the number of blank votes.49

While having an impact on blank voters across all municipalities, the difference in electoral systems seems to have a strong and significant effect only in those municipalities that are located in provinces with high densities of students enrolled in universities. This would be consistent with the idea that protest voting in the form of blank ballots is used more as a channel of expression where there is a larger pool of politically sensitive and well-informed citizens. In terms of population participating in this form of protest, in

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49This is the opposite of what previous literature has found in the case of Brazil, where Power and Roberts (1995) found that there are more invalid votes in open-list proportional representation, a system allowing for the expression of preferences for candidates, than in SMD (a plurality system). There are various reasons for the discrepancy in these findings. First of all, Brazil has a compulsory system, which creates different incentives and costs of abstaining and voting.
Figure 9: Proportion of students in political science and in all universities
provinces with high education rates the institutional difference account for an almost 1% increase, which corresponds to around 150 people in a small city of 15,000 inhabitants, but around 1,000 in a mid-size city of 100,000 people.

Interestingly, the null vote displays a non-statistically significant change under a runoff system. The positive direction of the effect could be due to the slightly higher chance of making mistakes in a runoff system offering more options in its first round.

Lastly, no change in turnout was witnessed in areas with mid or low education level. However, as expected by the literature (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais and Carty, 1990), there was a positive increase of around 3% in the less constraining systems in areas with larger proportions of university students.

The differences estimated in areas with a high proportion of educated voters are roughly similar for turnout and blank votes: a third of a standard deviation of the distribution in the case of the former, and a fifth in the latter. However, the effect on turnout disappears (-0.004)\(^{50}\) if I use the high proportion of political science students as a proxy, while the blank vote difference slightly increases to .0063 and remains highly significant (see figure 10, showing the same for manual regression discontinuity).

Furthermore, the change in turnout is not robust to the introduction, as a control, of the number of candidates. Indeed, as shown by Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013), the number of candidates is higher under runoff systems, and this variation seems to capture the entire effect of the electoral system. On the contrary, both the parametric and the non-parametric approaches demonstrate that the effect on blank voting is not due to the simple increase in candidates. The fact that the impact on blank voting survives, and actually increases to -0.007\(^{51}\) when accounting for the number of candidates, brings evidence to the idea that the other features of this specific electoral system, the possibility of splitting the ticket and the possibility of a second round of voting, also play a role in voters’ perceptions.

Figure 10 confirms these findings by displaying the drop in blank vote in the specifica-

\(^{50}\)With a p value of 0.77.
\(^{51}\)With p value of 0.01.
tions with linear, quadratic, and cubic functional forms at either side of the discontinuity. This was done by transforming the running variable so as to have zero as the threshold, and then interacting it with the dummy of the treatment. In this way, the coefficient on the lower term is interpreted as the jump of blank voting from a plurality to a runoff electoral system. Moreover, the last bar on the right in figure 10 shows the larger drop that the blank vote witnessed in the areas that have a high proportion of political science students.

Table 1 reports the results of a regression discontinuity designed done with a “triangular” kernel used in the local linear fitting. The estimates represent the change in voting behavior under the runoff system. The standard errors are clustered at the municipal level. The label “High edu” indicates that the estimation was run only on the subset of municipalities which are in areas with high proportions of university students, while “med-low edu” identifies that the estimation is based on the other municipalities.

Table 1: **Regression Discontinuity Results**

| Dependent variable   | Bandwidth | Observations | Estimate | Std. Error | Pr(>|z|) |
|----------------------|-----------|--------------|----------|------------|---------|
| Blank Vote (high edu)| 3000      | 141          | -0.006 * | 0.003      | 0.086   |
| Blank Vote (med-low edu)| 3000 | 524          | -0.001   | 0.001      | 0.359   |
| Turnout (high edu)   | 3000      | 157          | 0.029 *  | 0.015      | 0.060   |
| Turnout (med-low edu)| 3000      | 496          | -0.020   | 0.015      | 0.195   |
| Null Vote (high edu) | 3000      | 141          | 0.002    | 0.002      | 0.310   |
| Null Vote (med-low edu)| 3000 | 520          | 0.004    | 0.003      | 0.179   |
Figure 10: **Drop in blank vote in the manual regression discontinuity:** this figure reports the drop in blank vote in the different specifications with three different functional forms and, in the last bar to the right, within areas with high proportions of political science students only.
6 Conclusions

6.1 Results Summary

Here I summarize the results of the two cases (see also table 2). The Spanish case allowed me to compare the features of two different types of protest voting: a mobilized protest vote and an individually chosen protest vote. The data shows how individual protest voting, in the form of a blank vote, appears to be more prominent in areas where a larger proportion of highly educated individuals vote, while the opposite is true for mobilized null voting. Furthermore, abstention appears to be systematically negatively correlated with the proportion of highly educated individuals. This is consistent with the idea that the individual protest vote is a more sophisticated and educated expression of discontent than abstention and mobilized protest. These last two behaviors are often driven by apathy in the case of abstentionism, and by ideology or party loyalty in the case of mobilized protest.52

The case of Italy, instead, helped me further illustrate the relationship between electoral institutions and protest voting. Some electoral systems, like the runoff system, offer more opportunities for voters to express their political opinions and are more flexible in accommodating discontent. Others, for example, plurality systems, are more constraining. Those of the former type witness much less protest voting, in the form of blank votes, and more strikingly so in areas where there is a larger pool of potential politically sophisticated voters. These findings are summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Summarizing the Findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual blank vote is...</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Explanatory Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...politically sensitive to institutional changes and more so in high education areas</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Elect. institutions, polisci students and from all universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...more sophisticated/educated than mobilized protest voting and abstention</td>
<td>Basque Country</td>
<td>Nationalism, Euskara speakers and high education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

52 Driscoll and Nelson (2014) found the opposite relationship between blank vote, null vote, and education in their study of the case of Bolivia. My interpretation of the difference lies in the different institutional context (i.e., compulsory voting versus voluntary voting system) and on the different type of mobilization, which in the case of Bolivia actually did focus on blank vote.
6.2 Discussion: Institutionalization of The Blank Vote?

6.2.1 Institutionalized Blank Voter Around the World

An institutionalized “blank vote” option is available to voters in a number of countries. A civic movement brought the “none of these candidates” option officially on the Nevada’s ballot (USA) in the 1970s. In this state since 1975 the citizens have the possibility of choosing “None of these Candidates” for all the positions that are decided by a state-wide election. The option was brought to the ballot in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal to allow citizens to express their discontent. As Nate Silver said in a blog post: “In Nevada, No One Is Someone to Watch” (Silver, 2011). In 1976, this vote actually won the plurality of the Republican primary for a House seat; in 1996 it represented more than the difference between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, as it did in 1998 when in the Senate race the difference between Harry Reid and John Ensign was of about 395 votes while the “none” option received over 8000.

In 2012 the Republican party filed a lawsuit against the state of Nevada to eliminate the option on the ballot. The legal argument presented was that the voters of “NOTA” were disenfranchised since their vote could never win if it had won the plurality (Chereb, 2012; Mahtesian, 2012). The actual rational behind the lawsuit was the fear that “blank” votes would represent a loss for Mitt Romney who was the non-incumbent in that race.53

A much older and more common tradition of the US, which may as well be an alternative manifestation of blank and null vote in its protest nature, is the write-in procedure: the possibility of writing a name of a candidates who is not among those on the ballots. This option was the result of introduction of the Australian ballot system54 at the end of the 1800,55 which by construction, limited the possibility of choice to pre-selected candidates, already printed on the ballot. Hence, the need for the possibility of adding a name.

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53 The judge from the 9th district ruled the law unconstitutional, but the decision was then invalidated in the San Francisco Court of Appeal. The legal battle remains unfinished.
54 The Australian ballot is a secret ballot provided by the State, before its introduction, parties or other groups would deliver the ballots to the voters.
55 With Massachusetts being the first one in 1888.
to the list of candidates at the polling station arose (Ricciiani, 1993). Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia allow the use of “write-in” candidates; six only at general elections (e.g., Arkansas); four only in specific cases (e.g., Nebraska) and four completely prohibit (Ricciiani, 1993).^{56}

This type of vote has been used both to advance the actual candidacy of outsiders, with some successes (e.g., Lisa Murkowski in the 2010 senatorial elections) and as a form of protest (i.e., Donald Duck vote). A recent example of a provocative protest vote has been the campaign of the popular director Michael Moore who in the 2000 elections supported the candidacy (as a write-in) of a plant – a ficus for the Congressional race of New Jersey 11th district. The protest, according to the director, intended to challenge the lack of competition in many districts of the United States. In a television interview he declared:

“It’s amazing to see this kind of Ficus fever sweeping the nation, and I predict that this will help boost the turnout at the election in the fall, an election that otherwise was going to be attended by the smallest number of Americans ever in our history. So hopefully the plant will do some good in bringing some people out, who you know, unfortunately we don’t have “none of the above” on our ballots in this country, so the plant is a good way to vote “none of the above [...].” (Moore, 2000).

Another country where the blank vote option, in the form of “Against All,” had been used until recently is Russia. This vote had been in place since the 1991 with the official change of ballots from the Soviet ones. The option was eventually abolished in 2006. In its 15-year existence, “Against All” collected between 4.88 % in the second round of 1996 Presidential election, 4.7 % in the 2003 parliamentary election, and 3.45% in the presidential election of 2004 (Sakwa, 2008). While, initial rationale behind the introduction of the law was to avoid the dissent to be dispersed to minor parties (Sakwa, 2008), the United Russia (Putin’s ruling party) decided to eliminate as it started becoming more

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^{56}This states are Nevada, Oklahoma, Hawaii, and Rhode Island. In particular, Hawaii was at the center of a Supreme Court case, Burick v. Takushi, in 1992 from Ricciiani (1993).

44
popular (especially in the regional elections), despite the protests of the opposition parties’ leaders claiming that this was a further sign of democratic backslide of the country (Political Parties Criticize Elimination Of ‘Against All’ Ballot Option, 2006).

Ukraine, on the other hand, currently maintains the option of “against all” on its ballot, which collected 1.77% of the votes and impeded a larger party to enter the parliament (Santucci, 2013). Similarly, Bangladesh has introduce the “None of the Above” box in the 2008 election. It collected only a small percentage of votes (.55%) but according to some monitoring organizations, like the European Union, this option should be classified as:

“an additional mean of democratic control from voters’ perspective: those who decided to vote this way made a conscious choice not to abstain in order to express their opinion, and often had to queue for a couple of hours to do so - given that the turn-out reached 87,06% (the highest in the history of the country)” (Tannock, 2008, p. 7).

A similar step was proposed by the Supreme Court in Pakistan for 2013 elections but rejected by Election commission (Desk, 2013) and has been recently approved in India.

Since 1991, when Colombia decided to provide its citizens with the option of “voto en blanco” (blank vote) on the ballot (Shugart, 2010), the country has witnessed a few cases of surge of this vote. In 2010 the vote for the Andean parliament was almost invalidated by the 1,445,999 votes (the plurality) for the blank vote (Elecciones al Parlamento Andino tendrán que repetirse [Elections of the Andean Parliament will have to be repeated], 2010). In the same year, the vote in blank overcomes the 50% threshold in the Indigenous seat for the parliamentary elections (Votebien, 2010). Again, more recently, in the city of Bello (Antioquia), where the blank vote won the 2011 race for the mayor with 56.7% of the votes and it was propelled by political parties, Liberal Colombiano (Liberal Colombian) and the Green Party (El voto en blanco gana la Alcaldía de Bello, Antioquia [The blank vote wins the majoral race of Bello, Antioquia], 2011).

Among all the cases mentioned, only in Colombia does the victory of this vote have
actual consequences. If the blank vote wins the majority of the votes the election needs to be repeated, although only the first time. If the election has to be repeated, the candidates who were present in the invalidated election cannot participate anymore.\textsuperscript{57}

As the ex-president of the Constitutional Court in Colombia, Jaime Araújo, declared in an interview on \textit{Semana} (\textit{El voto en blanco es revolucionario [The blank vote is revolutionary]}, 2014):

“The blank vote is a peaceful revolution, a mechanism to channel much of the non-conformist behavior that exists in the country, and a way to renovate politics, Colombian society [...].”\textsuperscript{58}

In other countries blank voting is officially allowed, like in Sweden and Israel, where voters can pick a blank piece of paper to insert as a vote. In many countries, such as in Italy, Spain and France, it does not have an official space on the ballot, but a blank ballot is recorded separately from a null vote.

\subsection{6.2.2 The Normative Debate}

A famous Portuguese author, José Saramago, tells a story of a fictional election where the blank vote wins an overwhelming majority. He introduces the debate on the meaning of a blank vote very eloquently with this quote:

“[...]did you by any chance cast a blank vote [...] No, sir, I didn’t but if I had I would be as much within the law as if I had voted for one of the parties listed or made my vote void by drawing a caricature of the prime minister, casting a blank vote, mister questioner, is an unrestricted right” (Saramago, 2006, p. 42).

\textsuperscript{57}For details see the information provided by the government to the Colombian citizens here: http://goo.gl/cWUu23.

\textsuperscript{58}Original quote: “el voto en blanco es una revolución pacífica, un mecanismo para canalizar tanto inconformismo que hay en el país, y un medio para renovar la política, la sociedad colombiana [...].” translation by the author.
In reality, is blank voting an “unrestricted right”? With its findings, this paper intervenes directly in this heated discussion regarding the value of the blank vote and the introduction of an official “rejection” option on the ballot (i.e., “blank vote,” or “none-of-these-candidates”). The arguments in favor can be gathered in two main groups: intrinsic and instrumental justifications. My findings imply a new argument for the latter category.

To start, across different countries, many have interpreted the institutionalization of the blank vote as providing citizens with the opportunity to voice their dissent. Hence, they recognize in this vote a principle of freedom of expression that is intrinsically important for democracy. Along these lines is the ruling by the Colombian Constitutional Court in 2011, which declared the blank vote as:

“a political expression of dissent, abstention or nonconformity, with political effects [...] through which the protection of the freedom of the voter is promoted” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2011).

Similarly, California Proposition 23 declares that blank voting is a form of active dissent, as opposed to abstention, since “not voting does not get you heard, it just gets you labeled as apathetic” (Damore, Waters and Bowler, 2012, p. 896).

A different approach claims that the blank vote is equal to a vote for a candidate and increases the representativeness of the democratic system. This second argument is well represented in the decision of the Indian Supreme Court, which introduced the “none-of-the-above” vote in September 2013. The decision is based on the principle that democracy should allow for the option of rejecting all the candidates and that the right to “negatively” vote should be protected by secrecy as much as the “positive” vote, and that only the addition of the “NOTA” option on the ballot (or electronic voting screen) can ensure it (India Supreme Court, 2013).

On the other hand, there is an instrumental argument defended in the United States, Colombia, and India, is that the existence of an institutionalized blank vote would increase...
party accountability, forcing them to self-reform and improve transparency.

“It will have some effect on the political parties. If people prefer for [sic] NOTA over others, it will send a message to them that their choice of candidates is not right and we are unhappy,” said a political expert from an Indian Think Thank, Nikhil Dey, as reported in the Indian Newspaper, Times of India, (Sharma, 2013).

“Suppose that the candidates, to be elected, had to win an active majority or plurality, defeating also “none of the above”? I believe that political parties might be forced to reinvigorate their organization, to rebuild active ties to their constituent communities and to draw many of the politically alienated back into the political process” (Nagle, 1989).

In the United States there is an especially compelling case in favor of the use of the blank vote option in elections in which the competition between the two main parties is minimized:

“Giving voters NOTA as a democratic weapon to combat the growing anti-competitive arsenal of incumbents appeals to many on both the right and the left [...] NOTA would force incumbents in even the most gerrymandered districts to fear the wrath of voters” (None of the Above, 1990).

In this work, I provide a further possible instrumental justification for the institutionalization of the blank and null vote: a political responsiveness argument. I found that blank and null vote is a conscious message of discontent sent to the political system by knowledgeable voters, and that it is a symptom of the gap between citizens’ need for expression and the amount of expressiveness allowed on the ballot. Hence, neglecting it might prevent governments and parties from reaching a better understanding of the political condition and sentiments that animate their country. The existence of an option on the ballot could eliminate any ambiguity behind this message and make it even more explicit and easy-to-interpret.
Appendix 1: Summary statistics Basque Country Analysis

Table 3: Summary Statistics of the variables used in the models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>1st Qu.</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>3rd Qu.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>NA's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNV</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null vote</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank Vote</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstention</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euskara Lit Prop</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization*Euskara Lit Prop</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num Parties</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.97</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Level</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu Prop</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agr (GAV)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Prop</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>1,399</td>
<td>8,389</td>
<td>5,672</td>
<td>369,800</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Blank vote and Competitiveness

Figure 11: Competitiveness and blank and null voting: this figure displays the relationship between level of competitiveness in the mayoral race and blank and null voting. Competitiveness is defined as the margin of victory of the winner over the first loser.
Appendix 3: Robustness Check on Italian RDD Analysis.

Figure 12: Distribution of the population around the cut-off of 15,000, and zooming in on the entire distribution.
Appendix 4: Mobilization and Euskara Speakers

This figure shows the interaction between mobilization and Euskara speaker. The null vote appears to increase after the ban as a function of the potential support of the Basque nationalistic cause.

How do we know that the discontent was mobilized? To tackle this question, I check for the impact of the mobilization, interacted with potential discontented voters, on abstention, another possible form of dissenting. It can be noticed that in the case of abstention I do not observe any peak after the ban, but a decrease. The third column of table 4 shows clearly that abstention decreases after the ban as a function of the proportion of Euskara speakers. The finding of this unexpected trend in the case of abstention can be interpreted as evidence of a successful null vote mobilization. The discontent was fully channeled by the mobilization effort that might have stimulated also citizens who usually stay home and abstain from voting to, instead, go to the polls and cast a blank or null vote.

Column four contains the interaction of the mobilization with other variables of interest to confirm that the findings are robust to it. Other interactions with the agriculture GAV, unemployment and Euskara illiterate are significant, but only partially diminish the interaction of interest with the literate Euskara, suggesting that even accounting for other territorial features that might be correlated with the “Intensity” of the treatment, the variable Euskara maintains its role.
Table 4: **Ban, Null vote mobilization, and Euskara**: this table reports the results of three different model testing the impact of the ban of *Batasuna* and consequent mobilization on the blank and null vote as a function of the potential support for *Batasuna*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Null Vote</th>
<th>Blank Vote</th>
<th>Abs</th>
<th>Null Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization year</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>−0.003**</td>
<td>−0.097***</td>
<td>0.059***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Euskara prop</td>
<td>−0.044*</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.102***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illit Euskara prop</td>
<td>3.818**</td>
<td>−0.036</td>
<td>8.210***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.791)</td>
<td>(0.206)</td>
<td>(2.673)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote for <em>Batasuna</em> 1999</td>
<td>68.578</td>
<td></td>
<td>199.152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num Candidates</td>
<td>0.006***</td>
<td>0.0004***</td>
<td>−0.007***</td>
<td>0.005***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.0002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition level</td>
<td>0.091**</td>
<td>−0.018***</td>
<td>−0.389***</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Educ Prop</td>
<td>−0.155</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>1.306***</td>
<td>−0.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.208)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td>(0.311)</td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture Prop</td>
<td>−0.0001</td>
<td>0.0002***</td>
<td>−0.006***</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.0001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed prop</td>
<td>−0.258</td>
<td>−0.029</td>
<td>−3.903***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.263)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.392)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
<td>−0.00000**</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lit Euskara * Mobilization</strong></td>
<td>0.237***</td>
<td>−0.003</td>
<td>−0.077***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Illit Euskara * Mobilization</strong></td>
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<td>0.034</td>
<td>−0.258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.356)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.531)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Batasuna '99 * Mobilization</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.523***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu * Mobilization</td>
<td></td>
<td>−0.071</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.151)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu * Vote Batasuna '99</td>
<td></td>
<td>−0.629</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.155)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu * Vote B.'99 * Mobilization</td>
<td></td>
<td>−1.894**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.749)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Municipality individual trends | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Municipality dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 859 | 859 | 859 | 863 |

*Note:* 
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*
Appendix 5: Education and the Basks’ Voting Behavior.

Table 5: Abstention in the Basque Country 1996-2008: running the same model for four different years. 2004 is the year of the blank and null vote was mobilized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu prop</td>
<td>$-0.586^{**}$</td>
<td>$-1.820^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.899^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.902^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.203)</td>
<td>(0.233)</td>
<td>(0.139)</td>
<td>(0.158)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Euskara prop</td>
<td>0.069$^*$</td>
<td>0.357$^{***}$</td>
<td>0.292$^{***}$</td>
<td>0.439$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illit Euskara prop</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>0.725</td>
<td>0.478</td>
<td>0.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.424)</td>
<td>(0.649)</td>
<td>(0.536)</td>
<td>(0.686)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num Candidates</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>$-0.010^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.007^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.010^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Lev</td>
<td>$-0.00001$</td>
<td>$-0.00003^{**}$</td>
<td>$-0.00003$</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00001)</td>
<td>(0.00002)</td>
<td>(0.00002)</td>
<td>(0.00001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Prop</td>
<td>0.291</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td>1.894$^{***}$</td>
<td>2.635$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.386)</td>
<td>(0.812)</td>
<td>(0.662)</td>
<td>(0.648)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture prop</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>$-0.003^{***}$</td>
<td>$-0.001$</td>
<td>$-0.001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
<td>0.00001$^*$</td>
<td>0.00001</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.239$^{***}$</td>
<td>0.479$^{***}$</td>
<td>0.302$^{***}$</td>
<td>0.352$^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations: 186 213 215 216

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Table 6: **Blank and null vote in the Basque Country 1996-2008:** running the same model for four different years. 2004 is the year of the blank and null vote was mobilized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>Null Vote</th>
<th>Blank Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Educ</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num Candidates</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
<td>(0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Prop</td>
<td>−0.041</td>
<td>−0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Lev.</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture prop</td>
<td>−0.00000</td>
<td>0.00001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00005)</td>
<td>(0.00004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Euskara prop</td>
<td>−0.004</td>
<td>−0.010***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illit Euskara prop</td>
<td>−0.004</td>
<td>−0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>−0.00000</td>
<td>−0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.007***</td>
<td>0.011***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 7: Manually estimated RDD with subset between 14000 and 16000 inhabitants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dependent Variable: blank vote prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Run-off</td>
<td>$-0.003^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.003^{</strong></em>}$, $-0.004^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.001^{</strong></em>}$, $-0.004^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0002), (0.0003), (0.0004), (0.0001), (0.0002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>$0.00000^{<em><strong>}$, $0.00000$, $0.00001^{</strong></em>}$, $-0.00000^{<em>}$, $-0.00000^{</em>**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population$^2$</td>
<td>$-0.000$, $0.00000^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000), (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population$^3$</td>
<td>$0.000^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Pol</td>
<td>$0.007^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>$-0.003^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.003^{</strong></em>}$, $-0.003^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.003^{</strong></em>}$, $-0.004^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0001), (0.0001), (0.0001), (0.0001), (0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run-off $\times$ pop</td>
<td>$-0.00000$, $-0.00001^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.00000$, $-0.00000$, $0.00000^{</strong></em>}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000), (0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run-off $\times$ pop$^2$</td>
<td>$0.000^{<em><strong>}$, $-0.00000^{</strong></em>}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000), (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run-off $\times$ pop$^3$</td>
<td>$0.000^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run-off $\times$ High Pol</td>
<td>$-0.009^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population $\times$ High Pol</td>
<td>$0.00001^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run-off $\times$ pop $\times$ High Pol</td>
<td>$-0.00000$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Year dummies | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Num cand dummies | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Clustered SE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
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