ABSTRACT: Contrary to conventional wisdom, and to much of the rational choice literature of the Downsian tradition, this paper rejects the claim that invalid votes are irrational, or the incompetent actions of uneducated voters. Instead, it states that the blank and null vote (BNV) is primarily a form of political expression used by discontented, educated voters, leveraging the symbolic value of the ballot. Focusing on the purest version of this behavior—the individual and non-mobilized BNV—this paper takes advantage of exogenous political and institutional variations within the Spanish national elections and Italian municipal elections. It provides empirical evidence for the strong positive relationship between the BNV and political sophistication. Indeed, the BNV is shown to be the tool of the vanguard of discontented citizens, more politically sensitive and more likely to take place in highly educated municipalities than either of the widely-studied forms of dissenting: voting abstention and organized political protest. These findings lead to a reconsideration of the nature of voting as an expressive behavior, the role of the BNV as a more precise metric and predictor of popular discontent, and the potential advantages of its institutionalization on the ballot.
1 Introduction

“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 that voting out of fear. For this reason, I insist, I will vote blank”

Mauricio Vargas on El Tiempo (Vargas, 2014)

The first decades of the 2000s have been characterized by the expansion of mass political discontent. Large-scale protests and riots have been shaking many democratic regimes, from the French banlieues’ riots to Occupy Wall Streets and the Spanish Indignados, and voting abstention is rampant across western societies. Despite the significant amount of scholarly work dedicated to both of these well-known forms of dissenting, something is still missing, and social scientists have failed to systematically predict massive bursts 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.

There exist a number of citizens who on election day walk all the way to the polling station and intentionally cast a blank or null vote (BNV) by either leaving the ballot completely blank, nullifying it on purpose, or selecting the “blank vote” option. Who are these blank and null

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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.”

2For abstention see for example: Blais and Carty (1990); Aldrich (1993); Franklin (2004); Blais (2006); Geys (2006), for protest see for example: Porta and Reiter (1998); Aelst and Walgrave (2001); Norris, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2005)

3For reasons explaining this vacuum in the literature see Mott (1926); McAllister and Makkai (1993); Power and Garand (2007)

4For an existing example of the use of blank and null vote together, see Ugglal (2008). For examples of papers, instead, that distinguish null from blank see Driscoll and Nelson (2014). I also discuss briefly the empirical choice of using the two voters separately or together for the case of Italy and Spain.

5As explained later in the paper this option is officially available on the ballot in several political contexts: Ukraine, Thailand, United States (Nevada), India and Colombia. Other countries like Sweden allow the choice of a completely white paper to insert in the urn when voting.
voters? How are they different from individual abstentionists or mobilized protesters?

In the vast literature on voting behavior, BNV finds very little explanation, while in the limited literature on the blank and null vote, no consensus has been reached regarding the determinants of BNV. Several authors have attributed BNV 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. My paper brings evidence to this last camp. However, my work goes one step further in the identification of the multifaceted nature of this vote. I demonstrate not only that BNV is an intentional political action, but that the individual (non-mobilized) BNV voters are sophisticated protesters. They send a political message that is more resolute and informed than abstentionists, who are often politically apathetic (Rosenthal and Sen, 1973), and organized protesters, who are often ideologically driven and externally mobilized (Aelst and Walgrave, 2001).

Nowadays, BNV voting is a more widespread form of political protest than it is commonly believed to be. 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 BNV, over 700,000. Furthermore, in countries like

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6Note that a different phenomenon is instead the partial abstention. Authors like Ghirardato and Katz (2002) and Degan and Merlo (2011) explained the phenomenon of partial abstention, “as a result of differences in quality and quantity of information that the voters have about each election” (on the same ballot). Voters that go to the polls on a multiple-race election day would vote for the race they are informed about and leave blank the other. BNV voters are very different from partial abstentionists, with different motives and different incentives, as I will show in the next sections of this paper.

7For 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)

8For an excellent overview of the approaches see Uggla (2008). For other literature referring to the BNV see and presenting the dual nature of the BNV 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 BNV cast in the first and second ballot in French elections (1958-68).

9This number includes a vote for the blank-null party, Escaños en blanco, a party that aims to represent explicitly this form of protest, cast by 97,673 people (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 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: http://goo.gl/N3XFM, or http://goo.gl/NMk4Qc
Italy,\textsuperscript{10} Chile,\textsuperscript{11} and Colombia, BNV often collects more votes than many minor or extreme parties, usually considered the recipients of protest votes (Uggla, 2008).\textsuperscript{12}

In this paper, I show that BNV is an expression of higher political sophistication both in absolute terms, and relative to abstention and mobilized protest. I do so by zooming in on individual\textsuperscript{13} blank and null voting in recent elections in the north-western region of Spain, Basque Country, and Italy. These cases have been selected because, among democratic countries with voluntary voting systems, they display unique exogenous variation along three dimensions of interest, institutional rules, political discontent, and mobilization, which I leveraged empirically to obtain a proper causal identification. Nonetheless, the findings are generalizable to other western democracies with non-compulsory voting regulations. Individual BNV 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, especially in non-compulsory voting regimes. In these, the phenomenon has more than doubled from the levels of the 1970s, from 1.26\% to 3.4\% (IDEA.int, 2013), showing a much steeper increase than abstention,\textsuperscript{14} and a similar trend to that of citizens’ participation in lawful demonstrations (Aelst and Walgrave, 2001).\textsuperscript{15}

The findings of this paper about the sophisticated nature of the individual BNV vote, combined with the realization of the increasing trends of the phenomenon within voluntary voting systems, have important theoretical and practical implications. First of all, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of voting. By showing that the act of leaving the ballot blank, which would

\textsuperscript{10}In Italy in 2013 parties with a share of the vote between 0 and 7\% - which corresponds to: +/- one standard deviation from the cross-national average - won a total of 83 seats only in the Lower House; the BNV vote of 3.59\% was larger than the vote share of 42 parties (Website of Italian Ministry of Interior, 2013). It is instructive to compare the average BNV level 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\% (i.e. 2\% for the Knesset in Israel).

\textsuperscript{11}For Chile I refer to the elections since 2014 when the compulsory status of voting was lifted.

\textsuperscript{12}I do not discuss the vote for small parties and candidates that has often been classified as a vote of protest. It has been shown that this vote is actually often driven by the support in these parties’ political ideology. People choosing these parties actually share the platform of the parties (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2000; Erlingsson and Persson, 2011; Neocleous and Startin, 2003).

\textsuperscript{13}With “individual”, in this paper, I mean a vote that is not mobilized at large-scale by existing organized groups or prompted by large-scale mobilization campaigns.

\textsuperscript{14}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, also the median values of these same periods show a similar relationship: it has double from 3\% (1970s) to 1.8\% (after 2003) (IDEA.int, 2013). Abstention has increased only of 40\% in the same period. The invalid 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 simple mistakes of the voters. For a brief discussion of the empirical consequences of the measurement error in the BNV variable see the appendix.

\textsuperscript{15}This estimate is based on Aelst and Walgrave (2001) table 1 where the proportion of respondent that participated to lawful demonstration across the time is reported for France, Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany, the UK and the US.
be deemed as irrational by many, is chosen by sophisticated citizens, I provide evidence of 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 also those who turnout the most and use BNV at the highest rate, 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 on the topic (Damore, Waters and Bowler, 2012). Similar debates have happened in India (Tembhekar, 2014) and Colombia (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2011), which also have institutionalized this vote. Furthermore, other countries, like France, have recently decided to record the blank vote separately from the null to allow for a clear message of dissent (Licourt, 2014), as Italy and Spain already do. The final section of this paper delves into this debate, presenting the different existing justifications in favor of an official BNV and offering a further argument in terms of political responsiveness, derived directly from the findings of the paper.16

2 Theoretical Framework

The first and basic hypothesis presented in my paper is that BNV is a form of political protest used by dissatisfied citizens.

\textit{Hypothesis 0:} High discontent will produce on average more BNV.

However, this paper’s primary contribution is the idea that this protest, in non-compulsory voting systems, is very different from other form of dissenting, such as voting abstention and organized protest. Voters who individually choose to cast a BNV understand the voting process in its practical and symbolic aspects. They are politically sophisticated.

The concept of political sophistication has been often used in the political science literature to indicate “the quantity and organization of a person’s political cognitions” (Luskin, 1987, page 1). In this paper, I use a more precise and narrow conceptualization of political sophistication as “political knowledge that leads to the understanding of the voting process in its practical, and

\footnote{16For a larger discussion on this topic see Superti, Chiara “Vanguard of the Discontents.” PhD dissertation, Chapter 8.}
symbolic aspects.” I refer to individuals who have this knowledge as politically sophisticated or politically educated.

This definition is not only different from what is usually employed in the literature, but also requires a paradigm shift from the classical Downsian rational choice tradition (Downs, 1957) to expressive behavioral models (Schuessler, 2000). Well-educated voters are equipped to understand the limited marginal impact of each vote on the final outcome of large elections, as described by Downs (1957). Rationally, they should very rarely turn out to vote and, to begin with, they should have not have faced the costs of gathering information (Downs, 1957; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Instead, they often turn out to vote, more so than uneducated people (Verba et al., 1993; Luskin, 1987). 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 and also to use the ballot in unconventional manners. Only in extremely rare pivotal conditions, when and where 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 next section of this paper, I embark on the presentation of the three important underlying components of my claims. First, I describe what I mean by the expressive characterization of voting institutions and why more constraining systems witness more BNV. Then, I address the question of why politically educated voters would be more sensitive to this specific institutional feature than less educated citizens. Lastly, I complete the theoretical framework by presenting the reasons why educated voters would display higher propensity in choosing individual (non-mobilized) BNV as a form of protest. Moreover, I explain why other methods of dissenting, abstention and mobilized protest, display different origins.

In this section I also introduce the five hypotheses, besides hypothesis 0, that derive from the theoretical framework and will be tested empirically in the paper.

2.1 Engaging the Expressive Value of the Ballot

Different ballots allow the voters to express different ranges of political approval (i.e. different number of preferences or multiple votes). However, to fully understand the expressive value of the ballot, it is important to start by addressing how voting itself is to be interpreted as more
than a simple instrumental behavior. In my framework, the value of the vote goes far beyond the simple selection of candidates and it is driven by more than the interest in influencing the electoral outcome. It is a channel of political expression, a source of political identity, and a tool of political protest.

Since the seminal work of Downs (1957), 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) model, relaxing the assumption about the information and cognitive skills of individuals, and the expressive behavior model (Schuessler, 2000), shifting the focus from the outcome to the process of voting. According to this last approach voting would be 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, page 150). It would be about “being,” about identity, to the extent that it confirms your 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).

This paradigm shift toward a symbolic and expressive value of the vote reveals a practical contradiction of voting. Though it can be the locus chosen by many citizens to channel their political expression or protest, the vote is also created to contain it. As some interpret it, the voting process is useful tool to contain the political expression officially allowed to citizens. How

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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.

18 A different framework consider the vote can be used as a form of protest when “choosing a party other than one’s most-preferred to send that most preferred party a signal of dissatisfaction” (Kselman and Niou, 2011, page 400). This type of vote is used to warn the favorite party (Kselman and Niou, 2011; Kang, 2004; Franklin, Niemi and Whitten, 1994). Yet, only a very small part of this recent literature has recognized explicitly the BNV as a form of “tactical” voting. Among them stands the work of Myatt (2012) where the BNV embodies a communicative strategy done 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, page 2). The BNV can, hence, have a signal-jamming role understood by the candidates running (Myatt, 2012) or can be pivotal to future behaviors of voters or candidates (Castanheira, 2003; Piketty, 2000). This approach, however, is still problematic in the sense that the issue of the value of one single vote remain minimum in large elections.

19 For this discussion see the historical evidence reported by Hirschman (1982), page 112-120, about the introduction of the universal suffrage in France and England. In both occurrences, the vote was presented a way to channel the
much voters can express, how much they can “cheer”, support, or reject parties or candidates, is limited.\textsuperscript{20} The vote itself has been seen as “the safeguard against an excessively expressive citizenry” (Hirschman, 1982, page 106). It is often a simple one-shot approval for a candidate and its party and records neither different levels of support nor the variety of political opinions (Hirschman, 1982; Schaffer, 2008). As Hirschman (1982) wrote:

“Now the ‘one man one vote’ rule gives everyone minimum share in public decision-making, but it also sets something of a maximum or ceiling: for example, it does not permit the citizens to register the widely different intensities with which they hold their respective political convictions and opinions.” (page 104)

Yet not all ballots impose the same constraints. Unlike Hirschman, who discusses alternative means of political participation that compensate for this lack of expressive freedom, I focus on the different “ceilings,” expressive limitations, that various ballots and electoral systems impose. Voting systems can be classified then in terms of the amount of flexibility and expressive range that they permit.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, electoral reforms can be evaluated in terms of whether they expand or contract these expressive possibilities.\textsuperscript{22}

There are two main dimensions to consider: the number of candidates that an electoral system tends to produce, and the type and number of preferences that the voters are allowed to record. For instance, a ballot in a Single Member District election (i.e. 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, hence, shapes the number of parties and candidates among which the voter has to choose (Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Lijphart, 1990).

The second dimension 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 political turmoil into a moderate and limited form of political expression.

\textsuperscript{20}For the discussion on the “intensity” problem, a.k.a should an apathetic majority prevail on a passionate minority in democracy?, see Dahl (2013); Mueller, Tollison and Willett (1993); Kendall and Carey (1968). Instead for a discussion of plural votes based on education, see Mill and McCallum (1946)

\textsuperscript{21}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).

\textsuperscript{22} It is important to note that this paper does not discuss paper “design” in terms of colors, order of the names or use of symbols, for a discussion of this see: Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006)
for example in Malta, the Australian upper house, and Ireland. In the STV system, voters can declare the 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 (i.e. Italian local elections.) This means that the voter can express different approval for the individual candidate and for the party platform without being constrained in showing support for both. Similar is the case of many Mixed Member systems (i.e. Germany, Venezuela, and Italy pre-2005) where voters can express separate preference for different parties or candidates in the same election (Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001). Finally, some ballots include a “none of the above”, “against all”, “blank vote” option like in the case of Nevada (USA), India, Colombia, and Ukraine. This allows for the official expression of a strong rejection toward all candidates, which is recorded and reported as such.

These features define how much of a political opinion a voter can really expressed. They build the “ceiling” mentioned by Hirschman (1982). Differences in terms of expressiveness of the electoral systems will be perceived by some voters as a limitation especially in moments of strong political discontent. Within the same level of discontent, more limiting systems will witness a higher average rate of protest voting in the form of BNV. The first two hypotheses tested in this paper are:

*Hypothesis 1:* Keeping sources of discontent constant, the most constraining system will witness on average more individual BNV than expressive electoral systems.

### 2.2 Political Education and the Ballot

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. Their predictions about the voting behavior of educated voters are often inconsistent with what

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

24 Often a part of the representatives are elected through a plurality system and the other through a proportional system.
has found empirically: educated voters vote more, also in large elections.\textsuperscript{25} Higher education has been found to make the political decisions of citizens more resolute (Matsusaka, 1995)\textsuperscript{26} and also to produce a sense of entitlement towards expressing your own opinion and voicing your political needs (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Cohen, Vigoda and Samorly, 2001), sometimes defined in the literature as “internal political efficacy” (Niemi, Craig and Mattei, 1991). In fact, educated citizens participate more in all form 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).

The rational choice model, in many of its variations, cannot explain educated voter turnout. The expressive approach does a better job at this (Wolfinger, 1980; Schuessler, 2000; Tyran, 2004). To this framework, I add that better educated and politically sophisticated voters will be more prone to be expressive voters, precisely because of their high level of understanding of the limited marginal impact of one vote. As Judge Learned Hand declared, expressing a sentiment that is typical of sophisticated voters,

“OF COURSE 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), page 25)\textsuperscript{27}

Furthermore, given their symbolic and expressive used of the ballot, sophisticated voters will be more likely to react to differences in electoral systems that expand or contract the possible range of expression allowed on the ballot of the form described in the previous section. This is summarized in the following hypothesis:


\textit{Hypothesis 2:} Keeping sources of discontent constant, the sensitivity of voters to electoral institutions, expressed in the differential use of individual BNV, will be a function of citizens’ political sophistication.

\textsuperscript{25}For a meta-analysis of the correlated of voting at the individuals levels across several empirical studies see Smets and Van Ham (2013)
\textsuperscript{26}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 lead 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{27}Quoted in (Shklar, 1991), but originally from Karst (1989).
Similarly,

**Hypothesis 3:** Keeping the electoral system constant, political discontent, expressed in the differential use of individual BNV, will be a function of citizens’ political sophistication.

In addition to all of this, and most importantly for the context of protest voting, high education and political sophistication makes voting a symbolic venue (Shklar, 1991) of political expression, which makes the option of protesting through this symbolic channel conceivable and appealing. While a few countries have experienced various forms of ideologically mobilized BNV in the past (i.e. Argentina with Peronistas in the 1960s or Peru with Sendero Luminoso in the 1950s), in the majority of the political arenas citizens are not familiar with this type of behavior. This means that BNV is not easily available in many countries’ political culture or “repertoire of contentions” (Tilly, 1978, 1986; Tarrow, 1993).

Paraphrasing Tilly (1978), the repertoire 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 a valid and culturally appropriate forms of protest. Hence, when BNV is not part of this repertoire and is not driven by ideological mobilization, it relies on individuals’ understanding of its political potential. Instead, when non-individual it relies on the capacity of the organizer to mobilized its supporters through ideological and partisan cues (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978). The success of the latter then will depend on the level of control of the territory and ideological grip of the mobilizing forces, as other form of protest or voting. These observations lead to this hypothesis tested in this paper:

**Hypothesis 4:** Keeping the electoral system constant, political discontent, expressed in the differential use of mobilized BNV, will be a function of citizens’ ideology and not political sophistication.

Finally, regarding the comparison with abstentionists:

**Hypothesis 5:** Keeping the electoral system constant, political discontent, expressed in the differential use of abstention, will not be driven by political sophistication, but by the lack thereof.
3 Cases Selection and Data

3.1 Case Selection

In this paper, I am presenting two empirical cases: the national vote in the north-western region of Spain, Basque Country, 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 exogenous variation that can be leveraged empirically to obtain a clean causal identification. First of all, they offer the opportunity of causally identifying 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 BNV. Spain, and precisely the Basque Country region, experienced a sudden mobilization of BNV in 2004 driven by a ban on the nationalistic party Batasuna. This proscription, as explained in details later, can be seen as exogenous shock of discontent on the population, channeled by the leader of the party, mainly caused by the renewed attention to terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11.

Second, both contexts allow me to test the heterogenous effect of the impact of the explanatory variables (institutional differences and discontent) as a function of local variations in the presence of highly educated and political knowledgeable individuals (see (Duflo, 2001)).

Moreover, they allow for the smallest level of aggregation available for electoral results and socio-economic data above the individual level: the municipal level. Although any use of aggregate data to test individual level theories poses the challenge of ecological inference fallacy (King, 2013), the study of BNV does not offer an easily available solution. The alternative approach, an individual level survey, is bound to suffer from a different issue, self-reported bias of 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.

Finally, both Spain and Italy record the null separately from the blank vote. This allows, in the case of Italy, analysis of the blank vote, which is less problematic and contains only a minor component of measurement error. In Spain this was not possible because the mobilized vote was

\footnote{used by the author in Chapter 3 of the manuscript dedicated to BNV}
mainly expressed as a null vote. However, in this case, I am able to show a similar pattern of both and demonstrate how the null is simply a more noisy version of the blank vote. Moreover, the “error” component that is, indeed, present in the Spanish data, once possible momentary institutional changes and significant socio-economic variations are accounted for, can be actually 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 (see more in appendix).

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 socio-economic data from the Euskadi Statistical Bureau (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. 29 I integrated this dataset with the archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs data (Website of Italian Ministry of Interior, 2013, 2014). Finally, I combined the data with some socioeconomic and demographic data from Italian National Institute for Statistics (Italian Bureau of Statistics, 2014) and the Ministry of Education, University and Research Statistical Bureau (Website of Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2014). In particular, to get to a proxy of “potential” protest voters, I used the data on first year enrollment in university in 1998, at the beginning of the time series, for various type of majors (i.e. political science, other social sciences ect...) at the provincial level.

4 Mobilized BNV versus individual BNV

The first case, the analysis of the Lower House national elections in the Basque Country from 1996 to 2008, allows us to compare directly the trends and nature of BNV protest voting when individuals cast them because of their own choice, and when their discontent is channeled and mobilized.

29For the analysis I used the first round electoral results in the cases with a second round
The impact of the exogenous shock of discontent will be shown to be a function of the ideological

grip of the mobilizers in the different areas, while individual choice of using BNV is shown to be

a function of high education.

4.1 Origins of Discontent

In March 2003, one of the nationalist parties the Basque Country region in the North of Spain,

_Herri Batasuna_, was officially interdicted from participating to any election. Before its ban,

_Batasuna_ (or EH/HB) had a quite strong grip, especially on local elections: in the province of

_Guipúzcoa_ it reached the 26% of the votes on average, followed by Vizcaya with a 17% and Álava

with 11% (see figure 1, a).

The reasons for the proscription was the recognition of its connection to the terrorist move-

ment of ETA (_Euskadi Ta Askatasuna_). In the aftermath of 9/11, Spain increased its efforts to

fight local terrorism and its Parliament passed in 2002 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.” (translation by the author) (_Ley orgánica 6/2002, de

27 de junio, de Partidos Políticos_, 2002, page 23600) . 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 the ballot (_Gastaminza_, 2004). The success of the

call to protest was also reinforced by _Al-Qaeda_ terrorist attack in Madrid which happened a few

days before the election and of which ETA was initially incorrectly accused.

The mobilization happens 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

---

30 ETA started its more visible activity in the 1960s with a series of bombing against Franco’s regime and continue under democracy despite the level of autonomy conferred to the region within the Spanish state (_Justice_, 2005). Since 1959, year of creation, ETA has been responsible of 836 deaths, 3391 terrorist attacks and an attempt on the life of the Primer 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 electoral debacle of the party, _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).

31 Original quote: “impidiendo que un partido político pueda, de forma reiterada y grave, [...] apoyar políticamente la violencia y las actividades de bandas terroristas”
a closed list proportional system (D’Hondt) with district magnitude (number of seat assigned per
district) varying from 1 to 35 and a legal threshold of 3% (Lago and Martínez, 2007)^32. 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 voters to change the order in which the candidates get elected.

The case of this proscription offers a good test to show how a sudden increase of discontent
produced a peak of BNV. However, reasons for political discontent existed prior to the ban of
Batasuna. The 1980s and 1990s, in particular, were characterized by wide-spread political cor-
rup\tauion. 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 characterize Spain in the decade of the
2000s (Transparency International, 2014). During the government of Felipe Gonzáles,\^33 1982-
1996, numerous important political corruption scandals were revealed, such as the Filesa affair in
1993 (Pujas and Rhodes, 1999). No party or movement clearly promoted the use of a blank vote
in response to the political corruption until 2004 when Escaños en blanco (Blank Ballots), a party
that aims to represent explicitly this form of protest, was created. However, in 2004 and 2008, this
party was not well-known and its mobilization power was minimal (see figure 3).^34

4.2 Empirical Strategy for Spanish Case

The goal of this section is two-part. The first is to show the impact of a sudden increase of discon-
tent and the second is to compare the determinants of the organized form of BNV protest and of
the individual version of it. First of all, I show clearly how the proscription of the Batasuna party,
and the subsequent mobilization, produced a change in the voting behavior within the different
municipalities of the Pais Vasco based on their potential rate of support for nationalistic ideology.
By using an approach similar to Duflo (2001), my identification strategy exploits both the time
variation, before and after the 2003 ban, and the geographical variation in the nationalistic senti-
ment, representing the potential level of discontent, proxied by the proportion of literate Euskara
(local language) speakers.

As presented in figure 2 there is a significant variation of Euskara speakers, between the three

\[^32\text{This information refers to the 2004 elections}\]
\[^33\text{Prime Minister from the Partido Socialista Obrero Español}\]
\[^34\text{A more detailed description of this party and of many similar ones across the world can be found in Superti, Chiara.}\]
\[^{\text{“Vanguard of the Discontents.” PhD dissertation, Chapter 8}}\]

15
Figure 1: **Batasuna and Nationalism:** This figure displays the share of votes received by HB/EH/B in the local elections of 1999 across the 3 provinces.

Figure 2: **Euskara and Nationalism Distribution across Areas:** These two figures display the distribution in each of the region of the proportion of individuals that across the time period considered (1996-2008) were classified as Euskara speaker-literate and of those classified as Euskara speaker-illiterate.
main provinces (Álava, Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa) and within them. This variation can be leveraged as a measure of intensity of the treatment (ban) which impacted equally all the areas, but with different strengths depending on the potential discontent. As explained in Duflo (2001), the combination of the geographical variation and the temporal one can be assumed exogenous and the differential impact of the treatment can be estimated.

Figure 3 (a, b, and c) presents a peak of protest voting in the 2004 parliamentary election in three different ways: within the Basque Country, and within Spain (as a proportion of the electorate and as the number of people involved). Meanwhile, figure 4 demonstrates that the sudden increase of blank null voting, spurred by the proscription, is proportional to the support of Batasuna in the 1999 municipal elections. Indeed, in figure 4, I show the proportion of BNV used in the election of the Congreso (Lower House)\textsuperscript{35} as a function of the previous support for Batasuna. In municipalities with past high support for that party, after the ban in 2004, the BNV increased significantly (see red rounded dots). The gray line demonstrates that the phenomenon was a short term one and that the 2008 BNV votes were already not displaying any correlation with the support to Batasuna. The leader of Batasuna himself admitted that the strategy of “illegal” voting is not intended for a long time (Otegi admite que ‘el voto ilegal quizás llegó a su tope’ en las últimas elecciones, 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, I test the core claim of this paper: the differential origins of the BNV when individually chosen and when mobilized. To show this, I compare the relationship between high education and BNV across years of non-mobilization and years of mobilization.

4.2.1 Models and Variables

To test hypotheses 0, 3, and 4 in the case of the Lower House election within the Basque region, I run the following models, with the rate of blank and null vote, including the vote for the “blank”

\textsuperscript{35}The Spanish electoral system for the Lower House is a closed-list proportional system with district magnitudes are quite small.
Figure 3: **BNV in the Spain**: This figure presents the level of blank and null vote (as a proportion of the electorate in the Basque Country (a), in terms of number of people in the entire country (b), and as a proportion of the electorate in the entire country. The period considered includes the elections for the Lower House from 1989 to 2011.
Figure 4: **Pre and Post Ban:** This figure presents the difference in the BNV vote before and after the ban of the Batasuna party as the share of the votes for Batasuna were higher in the municipal elections of 1999. Both the BNV and the vote for EH are calculated as a proportion of the electorate, not of the votes cast. Source: *Ministerio del Interior España (2013)* and *EUSTAT (2013)*

and expressed as a proportion of eligible voters:

\[ y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Euskarait} + \beta_2 \text{HighEdu}_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + Z_{it}\delta + \epsilon_{it} \]

\[ y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Euskarait} + \beta_2 \text{HighEdu}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{Ban}_{it} \ast \text{Euskarait} + \beta_4 \text{Ban} \]

\[ + X_{it}\gamma + Z_{it}\delta + \alpha_i + \eta_t + \epsilon_{it} \]

\[ y_{it} = \beta_1 \text{Euskarait} + \beta_2 \text{HighEdu}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{Ban}_{it} \ast \text{Euskarait} + \beta_4 \text{Ban} \]

\[ + X_{it}\gamma + Z_{it}\delta + \alpha_i + \alpha_i \ast t_i + \epsilon_{it} \]

---

\(^{36}\) A citizens movement called “Movimiento Ciudadano por el vote blanco computable” (Citizens movement for the computable blank vote) was created at the beginning of the 2000s in Spain. On their website [http://www.votoenblancocomputable.org/](http://www.votoenblancocomputable.org/), activists claim that the movement targets those that “do not feel represented by any other political option”. Connected to this movement is “Escaños en Blanco”, a registered political party that aims to leave seats empty. Both organizations work in cooperation with the goal of defending the right of those that want to cast a vote of protest that is actually counted as such.
These specifications include the variable \( HighEdu_{it} \) defined as higher-than-secondary education. \( X_{it} \) is a matrix of socioeconomic variables, total unemployment registered as proportion of population and gross added value of agricultural section, and population size.

The potential nationalistic support, which corresponds to the potential discontent, represents the “intensity” of the treatment. It is identified as the literate Euskara speakers, \( Euskara \). Some specification will also include the illiterate Euskara speakers, but this variable shows little variation so is included only as a further robustness check. I also control for some features of the election in the specific area, the level of competition calculated as the difference between the second party and the third party, and the number of parties that received at least one vote.

Finally, \( Z_{it} \) gathers the covariates that characterized the elections. It includes the number of parties that in the specific municipalities received at least one vote and the level of competition, defined as the different vote share between the second party and the third. 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 also smaller parties can compete.

\( \alpha_i \) is the municipal level fixed effects that control for all the time invariants characteristics of the municipalities, while \( \eta_t \) accounts for common time trends that could explain the change. Finally, \( \alpha_i \ast t_i \) represents 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 BNV, this would be captured by these controls.

4.3 Spanish Case Results

4.3.1 Sudden Discontent, Mobilization and Ideology

In this section, I show that the ban of Batasuna had a strong impact on voting behaviors and that the mobilization of BNV was successful, more so in the areas where there are more Euskara speakers, representing potential discontented voters. Table 1, column (1) to (3), shows that the coefficients of the interaction terms are systematically positive and significant, ranging from 0.177 to 0.401, in all models. A difference in proportions of Euskara speakers of around 20% (one standard deviation)
lead to a 5-8% increase in protest voting.

Column (3) contains the interaction of the ban with other variables of interested to confirm that the finding is robust. 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 \textit{Euskara} maintains its role.

How do we know that the discontent was mobilized? To tackle this question, I check for the impact of the ban, 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 last column of table 1 shows clearly that abstention decreases after the ban as a function of the proportion of \textit{Euskara} speakers. The finding of this unexpected trend in the case of abstention can be interpreted as evidence of a successful BNV 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.

4.3.2 Education and individual Protest Voting

Once proven that the 2004 phenomenon was driven by the nationalistic discontented voters mobilized by \textit{Batasuna}, I can now compare that special year with the ordinary (smaller) individual use of BNV in the other years which experience a less sudden type of discontent, but no mobilization. Indeed, the 1980s and 1990s, in Spain, were characterized by widespread political corruption. During the government of Felipe Gonzales (\textit{Partido Socialista Obrero Español}) many scandals arose, such as the Filesa affair in 1993 (Pujas and Rhodes, 1999). For this reason, in particular for the elections of the 1996 and 2000, it is possible to claim that there was significant discontent toward the political system.

I run the simple cross-sectional model for four different years, three non-mobilized years (1996, 2000, 2008) and one with high mobilization (2004). I capture the change at the municipal levels of the most important determinants of amount of BNV. As shown in table 2, for the years that had no mobilization, education is the largest positive determinant of BNV, while in 2004, Euskara speaker proportion gains an important explanatory power and education becomes actually negative, as summarized graphically in figure 5. These results are robust to dropping the
Table 1: Ban and Euskara: This table reports the results of 3 different model testing the impact of the ban of Batasuna on the BNV vote as a function of the potential support for Batasuna.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>BNV/electorate</th>
<th>Abstention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1) (2) (3) (4)</td>
<td>(1) (2) (3) (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euskara lit prop * Ban</td>
<td><strong>0.401</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>0.177</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban</td>
<td>−0.025</td>
<td>−0.089***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euskara Lit Prop</td>
<td>−0.046</td>
<td>−0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numb Parties</td>
<td>−0.006***</td>
<td>0.007***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Level</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.051)</td>
<td>(0.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu Prop</td>
<td>−1.015***</td>
<td>−0.283**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.295)</td>
<td>(0.138)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agr (GAV)</td>
<td>−0.321*</td>
<td>−0.225***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.172)</td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed prop.</td>
<td>−3.204***</td>
<td>−0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.320)</td>
<td>(0.233)</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>Euskara Illit Prop</td>
<td>10.401***</td>
<td>(1.936)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Edu Lit Prop*Ban</td>
<td>−0.189</td>
<td>(0.201)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemproyed Prop. *Ban</td>
<td>−2.258***</td>
<td>(0.510)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euskara Illit. Prop*Ban</td>
<td>2.371***</td>
<td>(0.648)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agr (GAV)*Ban</td>
<td>0.694***</td>
<td>(0.155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>6.595</td>
<td>−0.094***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13.049)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality FE</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year FE</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality Time Trends</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>0.722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.298</td>
<td>0.618</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Table 2: **BNV 1996-2008**: Running the same model for 4 different years. 2004 is the year of the BNV mobilization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable:</th>
<th>BNV as prop of elect.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Edu Prop.</td>
<td>0.048** (0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num Parties</td>
<td>0.0001 (0.0004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Level</td>
<td>0.000 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Prop.</td>
<td>0.013 (0.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agr (GAV)</td>
<td>−0.0001 (0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Euskara Prop.</td>
<td>0.0002 (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>−0.000 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.012*** (0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Table 3: Abstention 1996-2008: Running the same model for 4 different years. 2004 is the year of the BNV mobilization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Edu Prop</td>
<td>−0.592***</td>
<td>−1.796***</td>
<td>−0.897***</td>
<td>−0.870***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.200)</td>
<td>(0.229)</td>
<td>(0.137)</td>
<td>(0.155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numb Parties</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>−0.011***</td>
<td>−0.008***</td>
<td>−0.011***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition Level</td>
<td>−0.000</td>
<td>−0.000**</td>
<td>−0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Prop.</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>0.657</td>
<td>1.831***</td>
<td>2.572***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.386)</td>
<td>(0.805)</td>
<td>(0.660)</td>
<td>(0.646)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agr. (GAV)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>−0.003***</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>−0.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit Euskara Prop.</td>
<td>0.068***</td>
<td>0.358***</td>
<td>0.298***</td>
<td>0.453***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000**</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.246***</td>
<td>0.511***</td>
<td>0.324***</td>
<td>0.373***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td>0.538</td>
<td>0.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>0.605</td>
<td>0.522</td>
<td>0.645</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Figure 5: **Coefficients on High Education**: I show the different coefficients across the years. The unit of analysis are the 217 municipalities. 90% confidence intervals. *Source: Ministerio del Interior España (2013).*

Furthermore, table 3 and figure 5 (b) validate the opposite relationship between high education and average abstention, which is constantly and systematically negative across all years.\(^{38}\)

## 5 Political Expressiveness: Runoff versus FPTP

The second case of the Italian municipal elections (from 1999 to 2010), allows the comparison of BNV use across electoral systems with different expressive possibilities. I test the hypotheses regarding the differential relationship of individual BNV and institutions depending on voters’ sophistication.

Mayors and the municipal council in Italy are either elected through a plurality system (FPTP), in municipalities with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants\(^{39}\), or by a runoff system. The plurality system

\(^{38}\)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 (*El Pais, 2000*).

\(^{39}\)The threshold is at 10,000 inhabitants in Sicily. For this analysis I simply excluded Sicily
assigns victory to the mayoral candidate with the highest vote share. In the runoff system, instead, 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 of all, while the plurality system tends to create a bipartisan party system and force the voters into strategic and insincere voting behavior (Duverger, 1963), a run-off 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, page 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%.

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.

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 vote is not permitted on the ballot of the cities below the threshold.

This case offers the opportunity to directly compared 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 (1 and 2) would expect higher levels of blank vote in the electoral system and ballot with less flexibility and fewer expressive possibilities, the plurality system. Furthermore, the use of this protest would be more likely in area with a large pool of potential blank voters, which are educated and politically engaged individuals. To capture the presence of this group of voters I use the rate of University enrollment in different types of majors at the beginning of the time series, 1998. This represents a proxy of the different types of individuals and networks of voters present in the provinces. These variables are operationalized into a dichotomous variable to identify areas where a relatively high number of students with a specific background vote. Areas with higher
numbers 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.

I start by gathering a few simple empirical observations, summarized graphically in figure 6 and 12. These introduce the relationship between electoral system, number of candidates, and protest vote. The first empirical fact is the existence of a negative correlation between level of blank vote and the expressive possibilities/flexibility of the ballots. By plotting the mean BNV across time, in figure 6 (a), I demonstrate that the municipal elections’ trends of blank voting across time are systematically higher in municipalities with plurality systems. Figure (b), instead, shows the statistically noisy nature of the null vote that is partially composed by mistakes, more common in a more complex ballot (i.e. run-off system). 40

Instead, the positive relationship between number of candidates (stimulated by more proportional systems like the run-off system) and BNV, also one of the explanations of the previous correlation, is confirmed in figure 7 (b). 41 Here protest voting clearly peaks in the cases where only one candidate runs, which are not that rare in smaller municipalities, and then monotonically decreases with the increase in number of candidates. Also in this case, the political sensitivity of the null vote appears attenuated. It does follow the same pattern in municipalities with only one candidate running, with a significantly higher level observed in those case, but then remains constant across different numbers of candidates.

Finally, regarding the relationship between “potential” protest voters and blank voting, it is interesting to notice in figure 8 that the positive relationship between number of protest voters and number of university students (at the provincial level) is the strongest when the students are from a department of political science (in red), and the least significant when they come from science and engineering departments.

40 In the section of the Italian elections I use the blank votes only since they seem to follow the same trends and is a cleaner measure. In the case of Spain this was not possible because many Batasuna supporters specifically nullified the ballot instead of leaving blank. When included the results are consistent but with slightly larger SE, as expected when including a measure with errors.

41 Yet, I will show later in the paper, that the number of candidates is not the only features that voters pay attention to in terms of expressiveness of the ballot/electoral system
Figure 6: **Institutions and BNV.** The two figures display the blank and null vote at the municipal level and show the difference between the municipalities with a runoff system and those with a plurality system.

Figure 7: **Candidates and BNV.** The figure displays the relationship between blank and null vote and the number of candidates for the mayoral races.
Figure 8: Department/Major of Freshmen and BNV (number). This graph demonstrates the different relationships between different numbers of freshmen from specific backgrounds enrolled in 1998 and the number of blank voters in the provinces of residence of the students.

5.1 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 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 4,000 individuals above and below the threshold, meaning that I assume that this difference is small enough to allow me to claim that the differences between the cities on either side 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.

Once conditioning on the population size \(X_i\), the treatment \(T_i\) and the potential outcomes

\[\text{PolSci, Law, Humanities, Other Social Sciences, Science-Engeneer-Math}\]

---

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

\[\text{A smaller bandwidth of 2,000 reported in the appendix. This is the smallest bandwidth that can be used given the lack of observations for population between closer thresholds.}\]
(Rubin, 2005), $Y_i(0)$ and $Y_i(1)$ are orthogonal, which is called “uncounfoundness assumption” (Imbens and Lemieux, 2008). 44

By fitting a local linear regression without any other covariates, I estimate the local average treatment effect around the threshold, as:

$$\alpha = E[Y_i(1) - Y_i(0)|X_i = c]$$

(2)

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 13, meaning that there seems to be no sign of self-selection around the threshold. 45

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. I created a variable called High Pol, which is equal to 1 if the province where the municipality is located has a proportion of political science major first-year students (in 1998) larger than 0.001% (the 3rd quantile of the distribution). Similarly, High Sc is equal to 1 for municipalities within provinces with proportion of natural sciences, engineering and math students larger than 0.0057. 46

5.2 Italian Case Results

As reported in table 4 47, 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, as shown in figure 9, figure 10, and in table 4. 48

44 “uncounfoundness assumption”, in an equation:

$$Y_i(0), Y_i(1) \perp T_i | X_i$$

45 The main assumptions are also confirmed by Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini (2013) who are using the same design testing different outcomes: number of candidates running and policy volatility.

46 The denominator of these proportions is the population resident in the province that had an election at the beginning of the time series from 1999-2001. This is obviously a smaller number than the total population of the province.

47 For the R package used see Dimmery (2013) and for graphical support Hlavac (2013)

48 This 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 PR, a system allowing for the expression of preferences for candidates, than in SMD (plurality system). There are various reasons for the discrepancy in these findings. First of all, Brazil has compulsory system and as presented in the complete theory of the author in Chapter 1 of the dissertation with the same title: “Vanguard of the Discontents”
While having an impact on blank voters across all municipalities, the difference in electoral systems seems to have a stronger effect in those municipalities that are located in provinces with high densities of students enrolled in Political Science departments. This is consistent with the idea that protest voting in the form of blank ballots is used more as a channel of expression by politically sensitive and informed citizens.

In terms of population participating in this form of protest, the changes in provinces with high number of political science students is 1% of the electorate 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. The last column of table 4 also shows how the same is not true for turnout.

The results are also robust to the addition of a control variable accounting for the number of candidates running, as shown in figure 11. This provides evidence that the mechanism through

Table 4: **RDD Results:** Table with the linear average treatment effect around the cut-off of 15,000. The placebo cut-off is of 14,000. Bandwidth is of 4000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV: Blank/elect</th>
<th>Blank/elect</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>High Pol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATE</td>
<td>-0.0039**</td>
<td>-0.0074*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0018)</td>
<td>(0.0035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obs</td>
<td>786</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Visualization of the Regression Discontinuity](image.png)

**Figure 9:** **Visualization of the Regression Discontinuity I.** On the x axis I plotted the population size with the 15,000 cut-off represented by the vertical red line. The y axis represents the amount of blank votes and turnout as a proportion of the electorate.
Figure 10: *Visualization of the Regression Discontinuity II*. On the x axis I plotted the population size with the 15,000 cut-off represented by the vertical red line. The y axis represents the blank votes as a proportion of the electorate in provinces with a high presence of political science major students in 1998 (*High pol*), and not (*No High Pol*)

which the decrease of protest voting as blank voting is happening is not only the increase in the number of available options. Indeed, the other features – the possibility of splitting the ticket and the possibility of a second round – must also be playing an important role.

### 6 Conclusions

#### 6.1 Results Summary

Here I summarize the results of the two cases (see also table 5). The Spanish case allowed to compare the features of BNV vote under successful mobilization, and as an individual choice. The data shows how individual BNV appears to be more prominent in areas where a larger proportion of highly educated individuals vote, while the opposite is true for mobilized BNV and abstention. 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 other two form of dissenting are often driven by apathy, in the case of abstentionism, and ideology, in the case of mobilized protest.
Figure 11: Visualization of the Regression Discontinuity III. On the x axis I plotted the population size with the 15,000 cut-off represented by the vertical red line. The y axis represents the blank votes as a proportion of the electorate. In this case I control for a factor representing the number of candidates: 1, 2, 3, 4, and larger than 4.

The case of Italy helped me illustrate further the relationship between electoral institutions and BNV voting. Some ballots offer more opportunities for voters to express their political opinions and are more flexible in accommodating discontent. Instead, more constraining systems, like plurality systems, witness more protest voting.

In addition, in the case of Italy as well, this vote appears to be driven by the presence of a larger number of “potential” BNV voters: educated and politically sophisticated voters. These are exemplified in this context by political science university students, which are not only potential BNV users, but also correlated to a more politicized environment and more politically educated networks of peers and families.

Table 5: Cases Summary. Case studies, claims, and variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual BNV IS...</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Explanatory Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...more politically sensitive than abstention</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Institutions and Political Science Enroll.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...more sophisticated than mobilized BNV and abs.</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Ban, Nationalistic Ideology, and High Edu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2 Discussion: Institutionalization of The Blank Vote?

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, page 42)

Is blank voting an “unrestricted right”? With its findings, this paper intervenes directly in the hotly debated 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”). This option already exists in some countries such as India, Ukraine, Thailand, and Colombia\(^49\), as well as in the state of Nevada (USA).\(^50\) The arguments in favor can be gathered in two main groups: intrinsic and instrumental justifications. My findings implies a further argument to the latter.

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) \(^51\)

\(^49\)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 that were present in the invalidated election cannot participate anymore. For details see the information provided by the government to the Colombian citizens here: http://goo.gl/cWUu23. In other countries blank voting is officially allowed, like in Sweden, 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 the null vote.

\(^50\)A larger discussion of the institutionalization of this vote see Chapter 8 of author’s dissertation “Vanguard of the Discontents”. The debate about the “right” to vote blank has been active in the United States since the introduction of this option on Nevada’s ballots as “none of these candidates”. This option has been available to Nevada’s voter for all state-wide elections since the 1970s. Other states in the US have been debating whether to reform the ballots or not (Damore, Waters and Bowler, 2012).

\(^51\)Translation by the author. From Sentence C-490 de 2011 of the Constitutional Court in reference to Law 1475 (Political Reform), see http://goo.gl/cWUu23
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” (from the California Secretary of State, 200, cited in Damore, Waters and Bowler (2012)).

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,\textsuperscript{52} 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 only the addition of the “NOTA” option on the ballot (or electronic voting screen) can ensure it (\textit{Writ petition (civil) NO. 161 of 2004}, 2013).

The main instrumental argument, instead, 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 \textit{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, \textit{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 US, there is an especially compelling case in favor of the use of the BNV 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.”(\textit{None of the Above}, 1990)

\textsuperscript{52}This sentence was in response to a petition from a civil rights group, \textit{Peoples Union for Civil Liberties}. 

35
In this work, I provide a further possible instrumental justification for the institutionalization of the BNV: a political responsiveness argument. I found that BNV 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 be preventing 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.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53}For a fully developed discussion of this topic see Chapter 8 of the author’s PhD dissertation “Vanguard of the Discontents.”
Appendix

Voluntary Protest with Error

Empirically, the voluntary blank null vote is tainted by mistakes done involuntarily by the voters. The “error” component that is, indeed, present in the data, once possible momentary institutional changes and significant socio-economic variations are accounted for, can be actually disregarded as a classical measurement error, which either leads to attenuation bias when BNV is used as regressor, or to more imprecise (larger variance) estimates when used as a dependent variable (Hausman, 2001).

When possible, it is good practice to focus on the blank component only which is cleaner metric. However, only rarely the distinction is available in the data and even when it is there are cases in which it is important to include the null vote (i.e. case of Spain). For an existing example of the use of this approach aggregating together null and blank you can see Uggla (2008).
Blank vote and Competitiveness

Figure 12: Competitiveness and BNV. This figure displays the relationship between level of competitiveness in the mayoral race and BNV. Competitiveness is defined as the margin of victory of the winner over the first loser.
Figure 13: Distribution of the population around the cut-off of 15,000, and zooming in on the entire distribution.

Table 6: Alternative Bandwidth for the RDD. RDD with a smaller bandwidth of 2,000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>High Pol</th>
<th>No High Pol</th>
<th>Placebo</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LATE</td>
<td>-0.0038</td>
<td>-0.0112*</td>
<td>-0.0023</td>
<td>-0.0029</td>
<td>-0.3312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>0.0026</td>
<td>0.0067</td>
<td>0.0029</td>
<td>0.0023</td>
<td>1.2213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obs</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary statistics Basque Country Analysis

Table 7: **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>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNV</td>
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<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>
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<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>167</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Control Variables</strong></td>
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<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>Ban*Euskara Lit Prop</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Num Parties</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>9.97</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>167</td>
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<td>Competition Level</td>
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<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
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<td>High Edu Prop</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>167</td>
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<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>
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<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>
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**URL:** [http://goo.gl/awq2ND](http://goo.gl/awq2ND)


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URL: [http://goo.gl/bfPwN9](http://goo.gl/bfPwN9)


