

# Protesting via the Null Ballot: An Assessment of the Decision to Cast an Invalid Vote in Latin America

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**Abstract** Rates of invalid voting in Latin America are among the highest in the world. Yet, scholars have not reached an agreement about whether these votes are driven by voter protest and, if so, what voters are protesting. Understanding whether these high invalid vote rates signify anti-democratic tendencies is particularly relevant given recent recessions in democratic quality across the region. This paper presents a theoretical framework and empirical tests using individual level data from 14 Latin American countries to show that invalid voting in presidential contests is used by individuals, particularly those high in knowledge, to protest poor government performance. However, invalid voting is *not*, on balance, an anti-system behavior. While political alienation differentially predicts invalid voting in countries with mandatory vote laws, the link between performance assessments and self-reported invalid voting is consistent across various contextual features that scholars link to invalid voting behavior.

**Keywords** Invalid voting · Null voting · Latin America · Political behavior · Protest vote

## Introduction

Around the world, individuals regularly bear many of the costs associated with voting—they register to vote, identify and travel to their assigned polling place, and wait in line—and then select to leave their ballots blank or mismark them. In Latin

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America, rates of invalid voting are notably high: the proportion of blank and spoiled ballots was larger than the winning candidate's margin of victory in 70%<sup>1</sup> of first or single round presidential elections in the region between 2000 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have reached inconsistent conclusions about whether invalid voting is mostly an expression of voter discontent, or whether the majority of blank and spoiled ballots are invalidated as the result of voter error. High rates of invalid voting may be cause for concern to the extent that invalid votes signify radical or anti-democratic tendencies among the voting public (see, for example, Power and Roberts 1995; Power and Garand 2007). Yet, recent scholarship suggests that at least one type of protest, street protest, is largely a “normalized,” pro-democratic behavior in Latin America that enables engaged citizens to air specific grievances rather than express revolutionary or otherwise anti-system tendencies (Dalton and van Sickle 2005; Moseley and Moreno 2010; Moseley 2015).<sup>3</sup> If intentional invalid voting mirrors other protest behaviors, individuals who cast blank or spoiled ballots may be using non-conventional behavior (purposely cancelling their ballots) as a means to protest conventional political problems. Two questions follow from this discussion: does invalid voting in Latin America reflect voter discontent, and if so, what are these voters protesting?

This paper answers these questions with a theoretical framework and empirical tests. First, I develop a theoretical framework that accommodates various potential attitudinal profiles of protest-motivated invalid voters. In creating this framework, I draw on previous studies of invalid voting as well as more general theories of contentious political action and voting behavior. Second, I test the framework's expectations using cross-national, individual-level survey data from 14 Latin American countries. Third, I assess the extent to which two contextual features that scholars have linked to various protest motivations—mandatory vote laws and multi-round elections—change individuals' motivations for casting invalid ballots. This study's contribution to scholarly understanding of invalid voting is twofold: first, by identifying and testing observable implications of various protest motivations, I provide a comprehensive test of the protest motivation for invalid voting. Second, as one of the first cross-national examinations of intentional invalid voting that uses data collected at the individual level to understand the attitudinal correlates of the phenomenon, this paper provides a decisive answer to the debate surrounding the individual causes of invalid voting.

I find that individuals who intentionally cast invalid ballots report greater dissatisfaction with government performance and express less interest in politics

<sup>1</sup> The proportion of invalid votes was larger than the margin of victory between first and second place candidates in 39 of 56 first or single round elections.

<sup>2</sup> Striking examples of high invalid vote rates exist at the national and supranational levels. For example, in the 2011 judicial elections in Bolivia, invalid ballots accounted for nearly 60% of all votes cast, and in Colombia's 2014 elections for the supranational Andean Parliament, 53% of votes were invalid, nullifying the entire electoral proceeding. See Driscoll and Nelson (2012, 2014) for in depth discussion of the 2011 Bolivian judicial elections.

<sup>3</sup> I define “anti-system” attitudes as an individual's expressed preference for a governing system other than the status quo (in Latin America, democracy). An “anti-system” behavior is one that seeks to enact this preference (e.g., by the overthrow of the status quo government). This term does not refer to low levels of legitimacy or “diffuse support” for the political system.

than other individuals. However, these intentional invalid voters do not, on average, express less support for democracy as an ideal, or for fundamental democratic institutions, than those who vote for legally recognized candidates or abstain. Further, with the exception of the alienation motivation and contrary to expectations drawn from existing scholarly perspectives, these findings about individuals' motivations for casting protest votes hold with striking regularity across institutional incentives including mandatory vote laws and the presence of second round elections. In sum, while intentional invalid voting in Latin America signals voter discontent with policy outputs and a rejection of sitting political actors, it does not, on average, represent a rejection of the democratic ideal.

## Motivations for Protest via the Invalid Vote

In any given election, two kinds of votes are cast: valid votes, which are included in the final vote count, and invalid votes, which are recorded but excluded from the final tally.<sup>4</sup> To cast invalid votes, citizens turn out the polls and leave the ballot blank, mark it incorrectly, or write in the name of an unauthorized candidate. Blank and spoiled ballots frequently outnumber votes cast for candidates from small or niche parties across election types in Latin America. Yet, scholars have reached few consistent conclusions about who casts blank or spoiled votes and why.

Some conventional and scholarly wisdom suggests that individuals who are illiterate, innumerate, or uninformed about politics invalidate their ballots accidentally, due to mechanical difficulties marking the ballot (Power and Garand 2007; Nicolau 2015).<sup>5</sup> To the extent that invalid votes are cast intentionally, scholars link the behavior to voter discontent. Yet, the strength of the evidence supporting the protest argument generally, and particular motivational arguments specifically, varies widely: while some find support for the protest argument (e.g., Zulfikarpasic 2001; Power and Garand 2007), others find no support at all (e.g., McAllister and Makkai 1993). There are several potential reasons for this variability. First, most studies of invalid voting focus on a single country or election;<sup>6</sup> however, the strength of protest motivations likely varies across countries and election years as the electoral context changes, which could account for different findings across case studies. Second, existing scholarship has relied almost exclusively on aggregate data to measure invalid voting and the motivation to protest.<sup>7</sup> Yet, invalid votes are cast

<sup>4</sup> In some cases (for example, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru) an election can be nullified and a new election called if invalid votes comprise a majority or super-majority of all ballots.

<sup>5</sup> It is also possible that validly cast ballots are manipulated by election officials during the vote tally as a means to change election outcomes. Indeed, there is a weak negative correlation between levels of election cleanliness as measured by the Varieties of Democracy Project and reported levels of invalid voting ( $\rho = -0.12$ ) for the elections studied here, which lends limited support to this argument. I do not explore this possibility in depth here.

<sup>6</sup> Three exceptions are Power and Garand (2007), Uggle (2008), and Kouba and Lysek (2016). These papers observe invalid voting in a cross-national, multi-election context but use aggregate electoral data to test their claims.

<sup>7</sup> Three exceptions are Stiefbold (1965), Carlin (2006), and Driscoll and Nelson (2014). These papers use individual level data, but are each limited to a single country case and election period.

by *individuals*, driven by individually held characteristics and attitudes. Reliance on aggregate data has left studies prone to the problem of ecological fallacy—missing individual-level relationships where they exist due to aggregation or incorrectly inferring that patterns at the aggregate level account for individual differences (see, e.g., Przeworski and Teune 1970; King et al. 1994)—and rendered scholars unable to separate intentionally cast invalid ballots from those cast by accident, complicating the task of testing hypotheses about voter discontent as a motivator of intentional ballot invalidation.<sup>8</sup> Third, lacking individual measures of various protest motivations, scholars have resorted to aggregate proxies that range from demographic features like gender and age (McAllister and Makkai 1993) to region-level features like levels of electoral manipulation or rates of violent or anti-system protest (Power and Garand 2007). As a result, most measures of protest motivations are not comparable across studies and, thus, it may not be surprising that scholars have reached different conclusions about whether and how discontent drives blank and spoiled voting.

Individual-level survey data from comparative survey projects sheds light on the intentionality of and motivations fueling invalid voting. Analysis of the region-wide, nationally representative AmericasBarometer<sup>9</sup> surveys indicates that a meaningful portion of invalid voting in Latin American presidential elections is intentional. Across waves of the AmericasBarometer study, respondents who reported turning out to vote in the most recent presidential election were asked for whom they had voted in the first round.<sup>10</sup> The question is open-ended, and individuals who spontaneously reported casting blank or spoiled ballots are coded in a separate response category. Figure 1 shows that rates of invalid voting reported by survey respondents in countries where a presidential election was held in the 12 months prior to survey fieldwork comport well with official figures: the average difference between official and reported invalid vote rates is 1.6%, although in several countries, this difference is smaller.<sup>11,12</sup> This constitutes strong evidence that a substantial portion of invalid votes in presidential elections is cast intentionally (see Online Appendix C for further details).

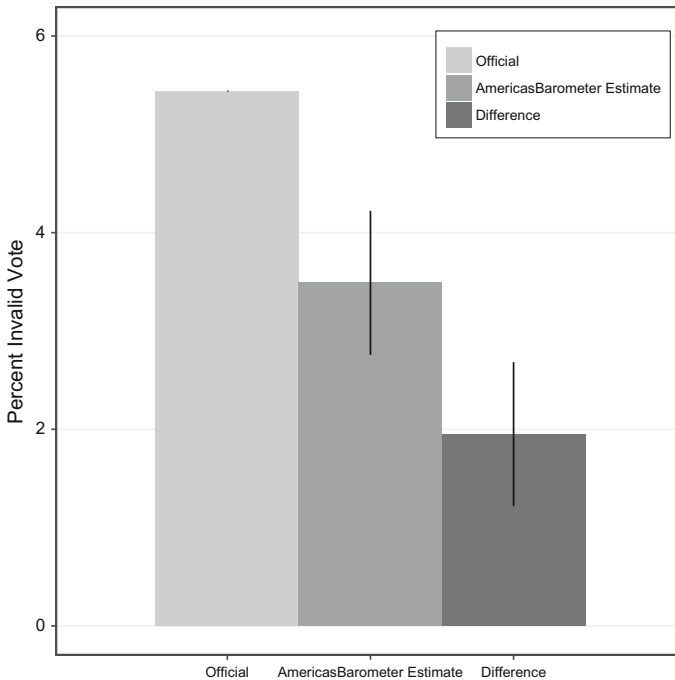
<sup>8</sup> Conversely, individual-level survey data *only* provide leverage over intentional invalid voting. Using public opinion data thus does not allow me to assess who accidentally casts invalid votes, or with what frequency.

<sup>9</sup> Source: The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), [www.LapopSurveys.org](http://www.LapopSurveys.org). Data and replication files for all analyses presented here are available at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/2ZEVWT>.

<sup>10</sup> Detailed information about all variables used in analyses is available in Table A in the Online Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> Reported invalid vote rates should not correspond perfectly to official reports, as surveys are prone to sampling and reporting error (for example, turnout is consistently over reported here) and some portion of invalid voting likely occurs by accident in all elections.

<sup>12</sup> The AmericasBarometer includes a second vote choice variable that asks respondents about their hypothetical behavior “if the election were held this week.” Responses to this vote choice item are inconsistent with invalid vote rates reported by national electoral commissions in all but two countries in the sample (see Online Appendix Table C2 for more details). Given this paper’s focus on understanding the attitudinal profile of those who intentionally invalidate ballots, rather than those who might be open to the behavior, I use the retrospective measure.



**Fig. 1** Official versus reported (on AmericasBarometer surveys) invalid vote rates in 14 Latin American countries. Confidence intervals were calculated in STATA 13 using survey weights to account for the complex sample design

There are at least three motivations that might drive individuals to cast invalid votes intentionally, as an expression of discontent. First, discontented voters might cast an invalid ballot as a means to reject the status quo political system—in the set of countries studied here, democracy. Such individuals may be opposed to democracy in the abstract or, like the street protestors described by the “grievance theory” of contentious political action, driven by specific grievances they link to the political system (Gurr 1970; Dalton and van Sickle 2005). This *Anti-System Motivation* is the foundation of proxies of the protest motivation used in existing studies of the phenomenon (e.g., rates of revolutionary violence, social marginalization). Indeed, Power and Garand (2007) argue that if anti-system protest is the main driver of invalid voting behavior, “invalid voting should logically be found alongside other manifestations of anti-system sentiment, e.g., revolutionary activity or political violence” (p. 434). Similarly, if invalid voting is a reflection of anti-system sentiment, individuals who intentionally invalidate their ballots should express distaste for the status quo political system. Anti-system voters may engage in violent anti-state action, or they may hold deep-seated distrust of democracy or its fundamental institutions (e.g., elections). Some individual-level analyses from single country cases have found that voters who are disillusioned with democratic politics in their country, perceiving that political institutions are inefficient and corrupt or the process is rigged, are more likely to cast invalid votes than others (Denemark and Bowler 2002, p. 61; Carlin 2006, p. 644).

A second reason that some individuals might cast invalid votes is to signal their discontent with specific policy outputs (*Policy Discontent Motivation*). Scholars of political behavior have long noted that voters from developed and developing nations, alike, tend to punish incumbents when they perceive that the economy is doing poorly, opting to “throw the bums out” with the expectation that the opposition will perform better once in office (see Anderson 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Murillo et al. 2010; Lewis-Beck and Ratto 2013). Similarly, some voters choose a candidate based on issue preferences, punishing the party in power for its performance in a particular policy area in the past election cycle (Ferejohn 1986). Evidence from Latin America suggests that voters have long memories, and use their votes to sanction current incumbents for recent negative outcomes as well as former incumbents who were responsible for negative economic outcomes in the past (Benton 2005). The same logic might apply to blank or spoiled votes: when a voter attributes responsibility for poor performance (economic or otherwise) to all viable candidate or party options, she might opt to sanction all responsible parties by invalidating her vote rather than choosing a culpable and therefore “bad” candidate (Tillman 2008).<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, individuals who perceive poor performance on relevant policy dimensions might cast invalid ballots as a blanket rejection of the options, without considering candidates’ legislative records with respect to those policies (Maggiotto and Piereson 1977; Rose and Mishler 1998).

Finally, intentional invalid voting might be driven by an *Alienation Motivation*, or a voter’s perception that political actors are not responsive to her preferences and demands (see Olsen 1968; Finifter 1970; Clarke and Acock 1989).<sup>14</sup> Individuals who feel alienated from politics might believe that their votes “do not matter” or “will not make a difference” either to the electoral outcome or in determining politicians’ actions. Such a voter might feel that none of the candidate options are good because political actors in general are unresponsive. Alternatively, an alienated voter might hold a candidate preference but believe that the likelihood of his preferred candidate winning is miniscule. Rather than cast a preference vote for a candidate who will not win or a strategic vote for the least-bad viable option, an alienated individual might withdraw from the decision-making process by casting an invalid ballot, accepting the majority’s decision as a *fait accompli* and opting not to voice her preference.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have posited the *Alienation Motivation* as a third

<sup>13</sup> Discontented individuals might also consider voting for outsider candidates. Why opt to nullify one’s ballot rather than select an outsider? Some voters may do so because they have observed poor performance by elected outsiders and therefore view these candidates with suspicion. It is also possible that outsider candidates tend to disproportionately promote illiberal policies. Given their relative support for democracy as a form of government (see below), invalid voters may prefer not to support candidates promoting anti-democratic policies (see also Footnote 20).

<sup>14</sup> I use the psychological conceptualization of alienation here, and follow extant scholarship by focusing on the “powerlessness in politics” dimension—or low external efficacy (Finifter 1970; Kabashima et al. 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Invalid voting driven by voter alienation might thus be more common when many candidates compete for the presidency. In additional analyses, I assessed the interactive effect between attitudinal variables and the effective number of candidates; I found no evidence of such a relationship. This could indicate no such relationship, or the non-finding may be due to limited variation in the number of competitive candidate options in this sample of country-years.

protest motivation in existing work (Stiefbold 1965; Power and Garand 2007); however, it has not been tested in a cross-national context, largely because no reliable aggregate level measure of voter alienation exists.

### Contextual Features and Protest Motivations for Casting Invalid Votes

In addition to the individual level features scholars have linked to invalid voting, some suggest that political context can shape voter attitudes in ways that might, in turn, affect the relative weight of particular motivations for casting invalid ballots. Scholars have argued that a wide range of second-level features could condition voters' motivations for invalidating ballots, from institutional features such as mandatory vote laws (Hirczy 1994) and the presence of second round elections (Kouba and Lysek 2016) to political factors including democratic quality (Power and Garand 2007), the winning candidate's margin of victory (Uggla 2008), the information environment (Driscoll and Nelson 2014), the effective number of candidates (McAllister and Makkai 1993; Kouba and Lysek 2016; Moral 2016), and the presence of an organized invalid vote movement (Cisneros 2013; Superti 2015). These studies show that contextual features affect aggregate levels of invalid voting, and scholars hint that they may influence voters' motivations for casting blank or spoiled ballots, as well. I turn to proposed links between two contextual features—mandatory vote laws and the presence of second round elections—and voters' motivations for intentionally casting invalid ballots in first round elections.<sup>16</sup>

Mandatory vote laws shape the relative costs of casting an invalid vote in ways that might make invalid voting motivated by discontent more likely. Because abstention is a high cost activity in countries where mandatory vote laws are enforced, discontented individuals who would prefer to abstain may find themselves obliged to go to the polls. Rather than comply fully with mandatory vote laws by selecting a candidate, such individuals may choose to register their discontent by casting invalid ballots, effectively abstaining while fulfilling the legal obligation to turn out (Hirczy 1994; Gray and Caul 2000; Zulfikarpasic 2001). Indeed, rates of invalid voting observed in countries with mandatory vote laws are often higher than those observed in countries where voting is voluntary. However, it is unclear whether mandatory vote laws alter the relative weight of discontent versus indifference as motivators for invalid voting.

If invalid voting serves as a means for those who would prefer to abstain to do so under mandatory vote laws (Gray and Caul 2000), invalid voting in countries with compulsory voting should be associated with attitudes that scholars have linked to abstention. Studies have consistently shown that those who abstain tend to be less engaged in politics: they express greater alienation from politics, or lower external efficacy (Karp and Banducci 2008; Herron and Sekhon 2005; but see Carreras and Castañeda-Angarita 2013), less interest in politics (Verba et al. 1995), and know fewer political facts than voters (Carreras and Castañeda-Angarita 2013). To the

<sup>16</sup> In additional analyses, I assessed whether the relationship between the effective number of candidates and Freedom House democracy scores affected the attitudes associated with invalid voting. I found no evidence that these features changed invalid voters' motivations.

extent that political disengagement predicts a preference for non-participation across political institutions, invalid voting in mandatory vote countries should be disproportionately associated with these “abstention-related” attitudes. What limited intentional invalid voting is observed in voluntary vote countries, on the other hand, should be associated with protest attitudes and higher political engagement compared to mandatory vote countries, as abstention in these cases is costless.<sup>17</sup>

Second, features of competition that affect voters’ perceptions of an election’s stakes, specifically the presence of runoff elections, may affect their propensity to cast invalid ballots as an expression of discontent with policy outputs in the first round. In many Latin American countries, the two presidential candidates who win the greatest vote share compete in a second-round election if neither reaches a particular vote threshold (in most cases an absolute majority, see Shugart and Carey 1992). In a country where second-round elections exist legally and occur frequently, casting an invalid vote to signal protest in the first round is an especially low cost behavior. While the likelihood that an individual’s vote will enable his least preferred candidate to win outright is always low, it is *even lower* in first round elections than in single or second round contests (Kouba and Lysek 2016). Because the risks associated with invalid voting are mitigated in first round elections when a second round is likely, voters seeking to express discontent through an invalid ballot should be more likely to do so in first round contests. When no second round election is held, on the other hand, casting a protest-motivated invalid vote carries greater perceived risk: in the extreme (though very unlikely) case, intentionally invalidating one’s ballot in a single round election could allow a voter’s least preferred candidate to win. Thus, the limited intentional invalid voting observed in single round contests—or in first round elections when a runoff election is unlikely—should be driven by considerations that outweigh candidate preference, in particular, the anti-system motivation.

### **(What) are Invalid Voters Protesting?**

To assess the extent to which intentional invalid voting is motivated by anti-democratic sentiment versus more programmatic concerns, I use individual-level survey data from LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer, collected from 14 countries across the Latin American region between 2008 and 2014. Using data from the AmericasBarometer to test expectations about elections has some limitations. As data collection is not timed to coincide with elections, some respondents are asked to recall their electoral behavior from years before the interview and may be more likely to misreport or incorrectly recall their vote choice. Furthermore, while demographic features such as income and education are relatively stable, attitudes towards political actors and government performance change more rapidly, making

<sup>17</sup> Abstention may not be truly costless in voluntary vote countries. Indeed, Zulfikarpasic (2001) indicates that rural French voters cast invalid ballots as a means of covert abstention, as a means to subvert social control.



the prediction of past actions with present attitudes problematic. To mitigate these concerns, I follow the example of Carlin and Love (2015) and use only those AmericasBarometer surveys for which data collection closely followed a national election. I set the cutoff point conservatively at 12 months; in most cases, the time lapse between the election and data collection is less than 6 months (See Online Appendix Table B1 for details).<sup>18</sup>

Invalid voting in presidential elections is a somewhat rare phenomenon: across all countries in the dataset, 3.3% of respondents (4.03% of self-identified voters) report casting an invalid vote in their country's most recent first round presidential election. The dependent variable used in the following analyses is a three-category nominal variable that distinguishes among abstainers, those who intentionally invalidate their votes, and those who cast a vote for a legally recognized candidate. I generated the dependent variable using two survey items tapping self-reported voter behavior. The first asks respondents whether they participated in the country's last presidential elections; self-reported abstainers form the first category in the dependent variable. The second item asks respondents for whom they voted in the first round of that presidential election. The second category of the dependent variable includes those who spontaneously responded that they cast blank or spoiled ballots, and is the base category in all analyses presented here.<sup>19</sup> The third category, valid vote, captures those who report voting for any legally recognized candidate or party option.<sup>20</sup>

I address the empirical expectations associated with each of the attitudinal explanations laid out in the previous section in turn.<sup>21</sup> First, if protest-motivated invalid voting is rooted in distaste for democracy as a form of government as suggested by the *Anti-System Motivation*, then low reported levels of support for democracy should predict protest voting. I include two independent variables that capture an individual's support for democratic politics: A Churchillian question of respondents' expressed *Support for Democracy* as the best political system in spite of its problems that ranges from 1 to 7, and an indicator variable measuring respondents' expressed *Preference for Democracy*, versus their willingness to sometimes favor non-democratic regimes.<sup>22</sup> These measures capture support for or

<sup>18</sup> Countries included in statistical analyses are: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

<sup>19</sup> Blank and spoiled votes are not distinguishable in the AmericasBarometer data prior to 2014. Some have suggested that blank votes are a clearer protest signal than spoiled ballots as the former is necessarily intentional, while the latter may be caused by voter error (Zulfikarpasic 2001; Uggle 2008; but see Driscoll and Nelson 2014). Abstention is consistently underreported.

<sup>20</sup> Following Uggle's (2008) insight that invalid voting is similar to voting for extra-parliamentary parties, I coded respondents who voted for a minor opposition candidate (received less than 5% of all votes) as a separate category in robustness checks. Respondents who voted for these candidates most closely resembled valid voters in their attitudes; however, they did report lower trust in elections and interest in politics than intentional invalid voters.

<sup>21</sup> Analyses presented in Online Appendix D link these political attitudes to voters' expressed motivations for casting blank or spoiled ballots.

<sup>22</sup> Although scholars have shown that support for democracy is over-reported in the aggregate when measured using these standard items, recent work affirms the utility of these items in individual-level analyses like those presented here (Kiewiet de Jonge 2016).

opposition to democracy as an *ideal*. However, it is possible that individuals who cast invalid votes do so to express discontent with specific democratic actors or institutions that they believe have abused citizens' trust, and not as a rejection of democracy's overarching principles (Carlin 2006).<sup>23</sup> If this is the case, then low trust of electorally relevant institutions should predict intentional invalid voting behavior; to test this possibility, I use a variable that captures *Trust in Elections* themselves and ranges from 1 to 7.

Second, the *Policy Discontent Motivation* posits that individuals' discontent with politicians' performance motivates them to cast invalid votes. If this is the case, invalid voting should be associated with poor assessments of government performance across salient policy areas. To tap this tendency, I use a seven-point additive index measure of perceived *Government Performance*. The measure is comprised of four questions that ask citizens to rate the government's performance fighting poverty, protecting democratic principles, combating corruption, and improving citizen safety.<sup>24,25</sup> A second observable implication of the *Policy Discontent Motivation* is that invalid voters will express disappointment with specific policy outputs, for example, poor economic performance. Although aggregate analyses have found little support for this argument (see Power and Garand 2007), it is certainly plausible that negative economic outcomes could generate discontent and motivate citizens to cast invalid votes. I test this argument using two indicator variables that measure respondents' perceptions that *Economic Performance* at the national and individual levels worsened in the past year.<sup>26</sup>

Third, the *Alienation Motivation* suggests that an individual's belief that she is unable to influence politics will be associated with intentional invalid voting. I measure alienation using a 7-point measure of external political efficacy. Because higher values of the *Alienation* variable indicate poorer perceptions of system responsiveness, the variable should be negatively associated with valid voting and abstention. Scholars have also found that alienated individuals tend to be less cognitively and behaviorally engaged in politics (Verba et al. 1995), so I include a measure of *Political Interest* as a second indicator of voter alienation, with the expectation that those who express less interest in politics will be more likely to report having cast invalid votes.

To provide the strictest test of self-reported interest in politics as a measure of alienation, I control for *Political Knowledge*, which scholars often link to feelings of efficacy and interest in politics (see, e.g., Craig et al. 1990), by creating an additive

<sup>23</sup> In robustness checks, I included measures of respondents' perceptions of and experiences with corruption as additional measure of the *Anti-System Motivation*, with the expectation that those who experienced or perceived more corruption (a direct consequence of low quality democratic governance) would be more likely to cast invalid votes. The corruption variables were insignificant in all model specifications. Because the corruption questions were not included in all countries and years, I do not show those results here.

<sup>24</sup> Confirmatory factor analysis supported the creation of the index: the lowest factor loading was 0.81 (eigenvalue = 2.73), and Cronbach's alpha is 0.90.

<sup>25</sup> Alternative model specifications show invalid voters also trust political parties significantly less than valid voters and abstainers—another implication of the policy discontent motivation.

<sup>26</sup> Personal and national economic perceptions are correlated ( $\rho = 0.44$ ). Results are robust to sequentially removing each measure.

index measure of responses to political information questions. The resulting index ranges from 0 to 1. I also assess whether invalid voting serves as a complementary behavior among politically mobilized and discontented individuals by including an indicator variable measuring self-reported *Protest Participation* in the 12 months prior to the survey.<sup>27</sup>

I control for demographic features (age, gender, years of education, wealth, and urban residence) that could be associated with invalid voting, although these results are not presented here to preserve space (see Online Appendix B for complete results). I include country fixed effects to account for systematic national-level variation and use the conservative multinomial probit estimation strategy. I also used STATA's "svy" prefix to account for the complex sample design.<sup>28</sup> Results are presented in Table 1. Higher values indicate more of all variables, e.g., higher *Performance* values indicate better perceptions of government performance. Those who report invalidating their ballots are the excluded category—all coefficients, then, should be interpreted as the values of abstainers or valid voters compared to those who report casting invalid votes.

I find little evidence in support of the *Anti-System Motivation*. In terms of the hypothesis' most direct observable implication, support for democracy does not distinguish abstainers or valid voters from those who cast invalid votes in any of the models presented here.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, an individual's expressed preference for democracy has no significant effect on invalid voting.<sup>30</sup> Invalid voters trust elections somewhat less than valid voters, although they are not distinguishable from abstainers. Because probit coefficients are not immediately interpretable, Fig. 2 displays the estimated change in the predicted probability of casting an invalid vote associated with a maximal change in each independent variable in the model. Overall, the *Anti-System Motivation* is associated with statistically insignificant and substantively small changes in the probability that an individual will report casting an invalid vote suggesting that, on average, this motivation is a weak predictor of invalid voting across the region.

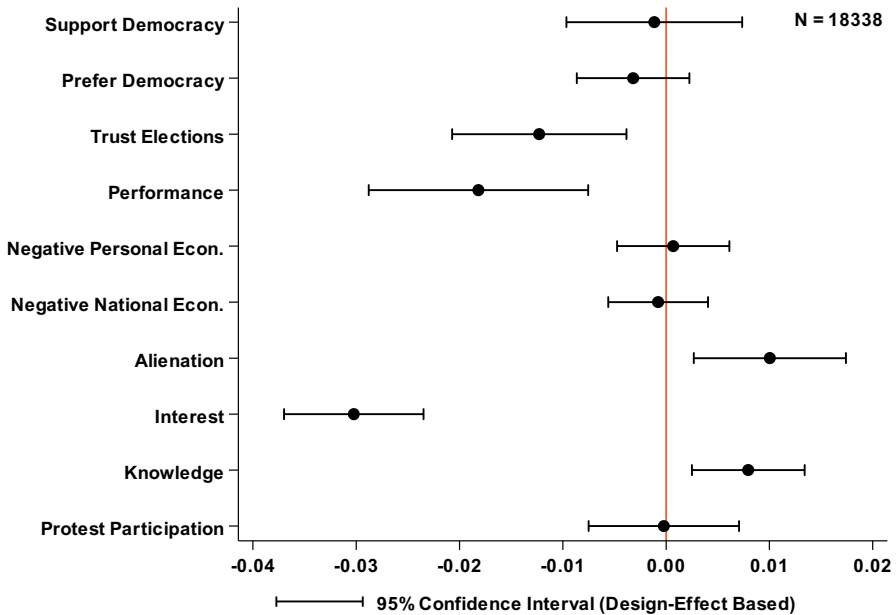
I find somewhat stronger support for the *Policy Discontent Motivation*. Government performance evaluations positively and significantly predict both abstention and valid voting. That is, those who cast invalid votes rate government performance more negatively than those who abstain and those who cast valid ballots. Substantively, the size of the effect for the performance measure is important: a maximal increase in assessments of government performance results in

<sup>27</sup> Because variables measuring recent protest participation were not included in the Guatemala 2008 study, that country is excluded from the analysis presented in Table 1.

<sup>28</sup> All statistical analyses were performed using STATA 13.

<sup>29</sup> When I estimate the model for individual countries in the sample, this pattern generally holds. Even in countries where democracy is sometimes considered "weak" or of "poor quality" (e.g., Guatemala, Ecuador, Venezuela), those who cast invalid votes are not distinguishable from others in terms of their support for democracy. In Honduras and Uruguay, those who cast invalid votes are less supportive of democracy than all others. In Bolivia and Panama, in contrast, invalid voting is associated with *greater* support for democracy than valid voting.

<sup>30</sup> *Support for Democracy and Preference for Democracy* are correlated at 0.20, and results are robust to sequentially removing each of the democracy variables.



**Fig. 2** Change in likelihood of casting a null vote: maximal increase. Maximal effects of independent variables on casting an invalid vote versus all other actions. Each independent variable was varied from its minimum to its maximum and other variables in the model held constant at their means

a 2.1 percentage point decrease (from 3.52 to 1.45) in the likelihood of casting an invalid vote. Sociotropic and egotropic economic evaluations, in contrast, have no statistical impact on invalid voting behavior, in line with existing scholarship. This suggests that, in contemporary Latin America, policy-motivated invalid voting is not driven, *on average*, by poor perceived economic outcomes, but rather by the perception that government performance has been poor across a range of policy areas.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, I find evidence in support of the *Alienation Motivation*. The *Alienation* variable is negatively signed (indicating that those who cast invalid votes are *more* alienated than abstainers and valid voters) and statistically significant. A maximal increase in alienation is associated with a one percentage point increase in the likelihood that an individual will cast an invalid ballot (from 1.72 to 2.85). Further, expressed *Interest* in politics differentiates those who cast invalid and valid votes: positive voters express greater interest in politics, on average, than those who report invalidating their ballots. The probability that an individual will report casting a blank or spoiled ballot decreases by more than three percentage points as interest increases (from 4.24 to 0.79).

<sup>31</sup> This non-finding is robust to sequentially removing each economic variable from the model. Again, the average tendency does not hold in all countries. In Uruguay, the perception that one's personal economic situation has declined was positively associated with abstention and valid voting, while in Ecuador, abstainers and valid voters viewed their personal economic situation as better, on average, than those who cast invalid votes.

**Table 1** Multinomial probit: protest motivations of invalid voting

	All countries	
	Abstain versus invalid	Valid vote versus invalid
<i>Anti-system motivation</i>		
Support democracy	−0.017 (0.020)	0.013 (0.020)
Prefer democracy	0.058 (0.078)	0.092 (0.071)
Trust elections	0.006 (0.020)	0.071** (0.018)
<i>Policy discontent motivation</i>		
Performance	0.053* (0.027)	0.091** (0.024)
Own econ worse	0.039 (0.082)	−0.040 (0.074)
Nat'l econ worse	−0.011 (0.073)	0.032 (0.069)
<i>Alienation motivation</i>		
Alienation	−0.054** (0.019)	−0.044* (0.018)
Political interest	0.069 (0.040)	0.376** (0.037)
<i>Control variables</i>		
Knowledge	−0.351** (0.081)	−0.163* (0.075)
Protest participation	−0.096 (0.112)	0.041 (0.105)
Constant	4.758** (0.339)	0.825* (0.305)
Observations	18,338	

Results of a multinomial probit analysis using survey weights. Additional socio-demographic control variables and country fixed effects included but not shown to conserve space. Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

The theoretically relevant control variables also yield interesting results. First, *Knowledge* is negatively and significantly associated with valid voting and abstention: a maximal increase in political knowledge is associated with a 0.88 percentage point increase in the likelihood of casting an invalid vote (from 1.91 to 2.79). This finding that intentional invalid voting is a relatively sophisticated form of protest is consistent with recent perspectives from the Mexican, Bolivian, and European contexts (Cisneros 2013; Driscoll and Nelson 2014; Moral 2016; Superti 2015). Participation in street protest, in contrast, is not significantly associated with invalid voting, suggesting that for this set of countries and years, invalid voting serves as a *replacement* for other non-conventional behaviors on average, not as a complement.

Measures of model fit suggest a relevant statistical impact of including protest variables in the null voting model.<sup>32</sup> And though the independent effect of any given variable on the probability that an individual will report casting an invalid vote is somewhat small, these effects are substantively meaningful given the low baseline

<sup>32</sup> I assessed model fit using Akaike's Inclusion Criterion (AIC), which penalizes models for the number of parameters estimated. A lower AIC suggests better model fit. The AIC for a baseline model including only demographic characteristics is 1.12, while the model incorporating these protest variables has a slightly lower AIC of 1.06.

expectations for invalid voting behavior—3.40% likelihood. It is also possible that one or more of the attitudes associated with protest-motivated invalid voting could occur simultaneously within a single individual. I estimated the probability that a hypothetical respondent would report casting an invalid vote if she held all of the statistically significant attitudes in the above model. When significant variables are varied from their minimum to their maximum and all other independent variables held constant at their means, the probability of reporting having cast an invalid vote increases from 0.26 to 8.7%—more than twice the baseline expectation. Accounting for various protest explanations of invalid voting behavior thus results in both important statistical and substantive effects.

## Political Context and Invalid Voting

To assess the extent to which mandatory vote laws and second round elections influence individuals' motivations for casting invalid ballots, I estimated a series of hierarchical logistic regression models in which I interacted measures of these contextual features with the theoretically relevant protest variables detailed above.<sup>33</sup> There are two dependent variables: the first compares abstainers and the second valid voters to invalid voters (the base category in these analyses, as above). I assessed the effects of the contextual variables sequentially rather than simultaneously due to the small number of country cases, and estimated separate models for each cross-level interaction using other independent variables as control variables (see Gelman and Hill 2006; see Online Appendix B for complete models). Each cell in Table 2 below thus denotes a separate model in which that cross-level interaction was the only one estimated.

To measure mandatory vote laws, I collapse Fornos et al.'s (2004) four-category classification of vote systems into two categories; countries where legal sanctions for abstention exist are coded as having *Mandatory Vote Laws*, regardless of levels of enforcement. I rely on information from Electoral Management Bodies to identify multi-round elections. Only those cases where a *Second Election Round* was held are coded as “1” in the resulting indicator variable.<sup>34</sup> Table 2 summarizes the results of the cross-level interaction variables estimated in these models. Each cell contains a + or –, indicating the direction of the estimated interaction. Statistically significant ( $p < .05$ )

<sup>33</sup> Protest participation is not theoretically linked to the motivations discussed above, so is not included here. When protest is included, none of the estimated cross-level interactions are statistically significant.

<sup>34</sup> This constitutes the strictest test of the second round “stakes” argument. In some countries where second round elections are legally possible, they were unlikely to occur in the years studied here given pre-election polls. The stakes argument requires that protesting voters estimate the likelihood that their vote will be decisive and the probability that the election will result in a second round; this variable reflects the latter half of that calculus.

**Table 2** Summary table, contextual effects on protest motivations for invalid voting

	Compulsory		Second Round	
	Abstain	Valid	Abstain	Valid
Context *Support Democracy	+	-	+	+
Context*Prefer Democracy	+	+	-	-
Context*Trust Elections	+	+	+	+
Context*Performance	+	+	-	-
Context*Own Econ Worse	-	-	+	+
Context*Nat'l Econ Worse	+	-	-	-
Context*Alienation	-	-	+	+
Context*Interest	+	+	-	+
Context*Knowledge	-	-	+	-
Observations	4,107	15,902	4,107	15,902
Number of Groups	14	14	14	14

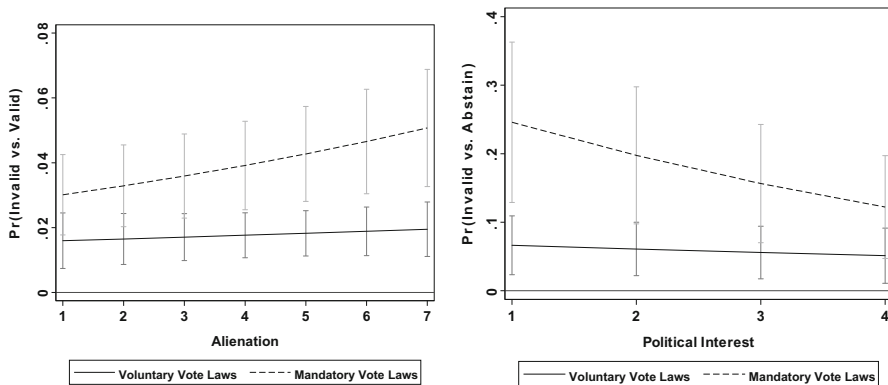
Table summarizes direction and significance of cross-level interaction terms for self-reported abstention/valid voting versus invalid voting. Shaded cells interactions that are significantly different across second level features for the observed values in the data set

cross-level interactions are denoted in bold type. A significant cross-level interaction term indicates that the estimated effect of a given individual-level factor varies significantly across observed values of the contextual variable. When cross-level interaction variables are not statistically significant, the estimated effect of the attitudinal variable does not differ significantly across observed values of a given contextual variable.<sup>35</sup>

With respect to the expectations outlined above, I find no evidence that mandatory vote laws affect the relevance of discontent with policy outputs or support for the political system as explanations of invalid voting behavior. The effects of variables linked with the anti-system motivation (*Support* and *Preference for Democracy*, *Trust in Elections*) and the policy discontent motivation (*Performance*, *Idiotropic* and *Sociotropic Economic Evaluations*), as well as political knowledge, do not change when the *Mandatory Vote Law* variable is included, and cross-level interaction terms between protest variables and compulsory vote laws do not reach statistical significance. That is, the significant effects of performance assessments and political knowledge on invalid voting do not vary significantly across mandatory versus voluntary vote laws, suggesting that these motivators of intentional invalid voting are not an artifact of the electoral regime.

I do find some evidence that invalid voting may serve as a replacement for abstention among alienated individuals in mandatory vote countries. Specifically, *Alienation* and political *Interest* are differentially associated with invalid voting

<sup>35</sup> Because the estimated statistical significance of interaction terms can be misleading (Kam and Franzese 2007), I plotted the effects of each cross-level interaction. Those plots were consistent with results shown here.



**Fig. 3** The effect of mandatory vote laws on the alienation motivation. Estimates for cross-level interactions with 95% confidence intervals. Each variable significantly distinguishes self-identified ballot invalidators from one other group of respondents—valid voters (alienation) or abstainers (interest)

under mandatory versus voluntary vote laws, although these variables do not consistently differentiate invalid voters from abstainers or positive voters. Figure 3 below plots the estimated effects of interest and alienation under mandatory versus voluntary vote systems. The most alienated individuals are about three percentage points more likely to invalidate their votes than to cast a valid ballot in mandatory vote countries versus voluntary vote countries (5.07 vs 1.95% likely). However, the relationship between alienation and abstention versus invalid voting does not vary significantly across contexts—regardless of mandatory vote laws, invalid voters are relatively *more* alienated than abstainers. At the same time, individuals who report the least interest in politics are substantially more likely to invalidate their ballots than to abstain (24.6 vs 6.6% likely) when voting is mandatory than when voting is voluntary. However, those who cast valid ballots are significantly more interested in politics on average than those who invalidate their votes in both mandatory and voluntary vote systems.

The effects of variables linked with the various protest motivations identified in this paper, as well as political knowledge, do not change in the presence of second round elections. Cross-level interaction terms between attitudinal variables and *Second Round Elections* do not reach statistical significance, suggesting that motivators of intentional invalid voting are not an artifact of run-off elections. Indeed, overall, the results from the multilevel models are most notable for the relative *lack* of significant cross-level results. As in the initial model, the average individual who intentionally invalidates her ballot tends to know more political facts and reports lower assessments of government performance. Invalid voters are not statistically differentiable from abstainers or other voters in terms of their support for democracy, regardless of mandatory vote laws or the presence of run-off elections.



## Conclusion

Scholars, political practitioners, journalists, and national electoral commissions often treat invalid ballots as “residual” votes, to be tallied and discarded rather than explained. This paper demonstrates that, at least in Latin America, this strategy is misguided: a meaningful subset of individuals cast blank and spoiled ballots intentionally, as an expression of their discontent with various facets of democratic politics and governance in their country. By using individual-level data, I confirm existing theoretical perspectives implicating discontent as a motivator of intentional invalid voting behavior. I also show that, in presidential elections across the region, a substantial portion of invalid voting is intentional.

Intentional invalid voting is particularly common among those who report that government performance is poor. Similarly, those who intentionally invalidate their ballots tend to be more knowledgeable about politics than other voters and abstainers: perceptions of poor performance could be based on an informed assessment of the political climate. The prevalence of these attitudes, particularly in conjunction with recessions in democratic quality across the region in recent years, could indicate a trend towards invalid voting as an expression of opposition to the democratic system more generally (see Freedom House 2015, Puddington 2012; Diamond 2015). I do not find evidence to support this conclusion: support for democracy as an ideal has little or no statistical impact on invalid voting behavior. While high or increasing rates of invalid votes might suggest lagging representation and the need for higher quality interaction between politicians and their constituents, a pervasive protest vote does not necessarily indicate trouble for democracy.

In fact, that citizens feel confident enough in the tools of democracy to use them to signal their discontent might suggest the relative *strength* of democratic processes in the region. Elsewhere, students of non-conventional politics have found that, in some Latin American countries, unconventional political behaviors like street protest have become “normalized”—rather than serving as an indication of anti-system values, protest behavior sometimes serves as one more tool in a citizen’s repertoire of participative political action (Dalton and van Sickle 2005; Norris et al. 2005; Moseley and Moreno 2010; Moseley 2015). This study suggests that invalid voting serves a similar function for a distinct group of citizens, constituting a protest behavior for those who generally favor democratic governance, but who are not especially likely to use other non-conventional actions.

These findings are consistent across two theoretically relevant political institutions. Scholars have shown that mandatory vote laws and second round election contests affect *levels* of invalid voting (McAllister and Makkai 1993; Power and Roberts 1995; Power and Garand 2007; Kouba and Lysek 2016) and have suggested that these institutions might also affect voters’ *motivations* for invalidating their ballots. I find that this is generally *not* the case: mandatory vote laws and second round elections do not change the associations between performance assessments, support for democracy, and intentional invalid voting in the set of countries and years studied here. However, I do find that alienation and disinterest

disproportionately fuel invalid voting in mandatory vote contexts, perhaps as individuals who would prefer to abstain are driven to participate to avoid punitive fines.

This paper thus contributes to scholarly understanding of the effectiveness of mandatory vote laws in promoting electoral participation. Some have argued that mandatory vote laws can increase voter engagement and participation (e.g., Lijphart 1997). Recent work finds that gaps in education, political knowledge, and interest among those who vote versus those who abstain are substantially smaller in countries with mandatory vote laws (Söderlund et al. 2011; Carlin and Love 2015; Singh 2015). This paper, in contrast, suggests that mandatory vote laws can change the political attitudes associated with voting for a candidate versus invalidating a vote or abstaining. While mandatory vote laws do encourage those who are less engaged in politics to turn out, many of these individuals then select to cast invalid votes. In effect, mandatory vote laws can make electoral participation more egalitarian, without making candidate *selection* more equitable.

This paper provides strong evidence to suggest that most invalid voting in Latin American presidential elections is intentional, and not merely an artifact of institutional incentives or voter incompetence. Rather, on average, invalid voting represents a rejection of policy outcomes or slates of candidates by citizens, often those highest in knowledge, who express disinterest or disgust with the political status quo—although not with democracy. Casting blank and spoiled ballots serves as an expressive means for citizens to respond to imperfections in the representative process. While high rates of invalid voting may indicate deeper problems with democratic representation if they endure over time, the results presented here suggest that protest via the invalid vote does not indicate declining support for democracy and its key institutions in Latin America.

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