Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Social Science Journal

Losing to nobody? Nevada's "none of these candidates" ballot reform

Adam R. Brown*

Department of Political Science, Brigham Young University, 745 SWKT, Provo, UT 84602, USA

A B S T R A C T

Since 1975, Nevada voters have had the option of voting for "none of these candidates" in all statewide elections—a reform that one-third of the American states have since considered copying. It remains unclear, however, what effects this reform has had. By testing several arguments made by proponents and opponents of this reform, I find, first, that voters who actually choose "none of these" are motivated by a mixture of ignorance and protest; second, that most voters who choose "none" would probably have left parts of their ballot blank in the absence of the "none" option; and third, that "none" does not drain votes from third-party candidates, as some have feared.

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In 1975, Nevada legislators amended their electoral code to provide voters with a new ballot option—the opportunity to vote for "none of these candidates" on election day in any statewide election. The bill's sponsors hoped that this new option would boost Nevada's lagging voter turnout rate by giving even disaffected voters a reason to show up—at the very least, they would be able to express their discontent.[1] Implicitly drawing on Hirschman's (1970) model of "exit, voice, and loyalty," Nevada's legislators seemed to think that fewer voters would "exit" if only they were given richer opportunities to "voice" their feelings.[2] They also expected that this reform would enhance incentives for reelection-minded politicians to perform well in office; not only would politicians need to win more votes than their opponents, but

they would desire to avoid an embarrassing loss to "none of these."[3]

In the decades since its introduction, the "none of these candidates" option (hereafter NOTC) has proven popular with voters. In statewide general elections held between 1998 and 2010, NOTC averaged 4.2% of the vote in non-judicial races and 19.9% in Nevada's non-partisan judicial contests. And in 12.5% of non-judicial races, the percentage of NOTC voters exceeded the winner's margin of victory; such was the case in Senator Harry Reid's narrow 1998 victory over then-representative John Ensign.[4] Moreover,

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[3] The *Las Vegas Sun* echoed these sentiments in an editorial supporting this bill: "Surely every office seeker and office holder would be firmly inclined to conduct himself properly, in office and off-duty, in such manner as to avoid a landslide of "none of these candidates" on Election Day" (March 12, 1975).

[4] Although some analysts expected a repeat of this phenomenon in 2010, Senator Harry Reid's 5.74% point margin over Sharron Angle easily exceeded the 2.25% of votes cast for NOTC. Note that Reid's 1998 victory over Ensign is the only case where it appears that NOTC may have changed the result of a non-judicial election. With a victory margin of only 0.09% and with 1.86% choosing NOTC, if all NOTC voters had chosen a major candidate and broken for Ensign by a margin of at least 4.8% then Ensign would have won. In every other non-judicial election where the margin

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* Tel.: +1 801 422 2182.
  E-mail address: brown@byu.edu

[1] See the March–April 1975 minutes of the Nevada Assembly Committee on Elections and Senate Committee on Government Affairs, pages 85–88, 887.

[2] In their wisdom, Nevada's legislators did not create a "none of these" option in legislative races, only in statewide races. Apparently they are more willing to embarrass statewide officers than themselves.

NOTC has never "won" a general election, although it has won the plurality vote in a handful of primaries. Of course, since NOTC is a non-binding ballot option, such circumstances do not mandate a new election.

Despite its popularity with voters, however, assessments of NOTC remain mixed. On the one hand, a small movement dedicates itself to spreading this curious institution to other states. Since 1991, advocates have formally introduced some form of NOTC legislation in sixteen states.[5] Where they have failed to persuade a state lawmaker to formally introduce NOTC legislation, activists have occasionally resorted to less traditional means of advocacy. In particular, David "none of the above" Gatchell has repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) run for high office in Tennessee with a promise to resign immediately after the election in order to force a new vote. Whatever their methods, proponents of the "none of these" option generally repeat the same basic claims made by Nevada's legislators thirty years ago—that NOTC would boost sagging turnout rates, provide richer opportunities for voters to express their views, enhance accountability, and so on. In 2007, sponsors of a bill in Florida further claimed that NOTC would reduce rolloff—the tendency of voters to skip obscure races when filling out their ballots—by giving would-be rolloff voters a better outlet for expression.[6]

At the same time, NOTC has its detractors. Soon after the bill took effect, Nevada Secretary of State Bill Swackhamer noted derisively that NOTC voting was most frequent in those races that featured the least publicity and advertising, such as judicial races: "This may very well have been a place where they voted for 'none of the above' because they did not know what was going on."[7] Of course, Swackhamer may have had ulterior reasons to dismiss NOTC's relevance; his own reelection race had attracted more NOTC votes than any other non-judicial race that year. Still, Swackhamer is not alone in his opposition to NOTC. A semi-official Nevada reference calls NOTC a "lesson in unintended consequences"; not only did NOTC fail to raise turnout levels, the reference claims, but it also drains votes from minor party candidates. For this latter reason Dan Becan, the late chair of Nevada's Libertarian Party, persistently opposed NOTC and advocated its repeal.[8] He almost got what he wanted. In 1987, Nevada's Assembly Elections Committee voted to eliminate the NOTC option—an effort that ultimately failed.[9]

Most of these arguments for and against NOTC have yet to be tested empirically. Although turnout, election administration, and ballot design have long occupied the attention of political scientists, Nevada's unique NOTC option has not—with only one exception. Shortly after NOTC took effect, Weinberg, Linderman, and Kawar (1982) showed that it did not produce the anticipated rise in turnout. Their conclusion contradicted optimistic evaluations by the bill's original sponsor, Assemblyman Don Mello, who claimed in 1978 that his reform had indeed succeeded in getting "frustrated" voters to come to the polls.[10] However, their brief analysis did not address the many other potential effects of this unusual ballot option. Additional analysis of Nevada's experiment is long overdue. Besides being of academic interest, a better understanding of NOTC should also interest legislators, election administrators, and activists concerned with improving their democratic processes.

The following three sections are organized around three general questions raised by NOTC. First, I examine the various motivations that might lead a voter to choose "none of these" on election day. Using general election data from 1998 through 2010, my analysis indicates that NOTC tends to draw votes in races that are either obscure or uncompetitive, suggesting that the most common motivations for NOTC voting are ignorance and protest. Second, I address the claim made by sponsors of Florida's unsuccessful NOTC legislation: that NOTC would reduce rolloff voting. As it turns out, there is a fair amount of truth to this claim. Third, I explore whether third-party candidates are correct to blame NOTC for their low levels of voter support. I find no evidence that third-party candidates receive fewer votes when "none of these candidates" receives more.

1. Who votes for nobody?

Voters who feel adequately represented by the existing field of candidates and parties may find it puzzling that anybody would bother turning out to vote if they planned to vote for "none of these candidates." In reporting on the 2006 elections, the Associated Press quoted one such voter, who "liked what [the] candidates had to say" and thinks that "makes strong showing none of the above' is kind of a waste."[11] Apparently, not all voters agree; that same year, one in four voters chose NOTC rather than support an uncontested judicial candidate. The same Associated Press article quoted two such voters who sought to justify their NOTC votes. The first lamented that he "did not want to vote for people [he] did not know" in obscure downballot races; the second explained his NOTC vote in uncontested races as a protest against candidates receiving a free ride into office.

These latter viewpoints suggest two basic reasons that a voter might support "none of these candidates": igno-

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was smaller than the NOTC vote, however, it is extremely unlikely that NOTC voters could have changed the result by choosing major candidates instead. The 2010 controller's race is a typical example. With a margin of 4.90% and with 5.10% choosing NOTC, the NOTC voters would have needed to break for the loser by a 96.1% margin to change the election result.

[5] This information is from "Voters for None of the Above" at http://www.nota.org/.

[6] "Bill would give Fla. voters 'no choice' on ballots," *Miami Herald*, Miami, FL, January 6, 2007.

[7] Quoted in "Candidate 'None' Didn't Do as Well in the General," *Reno Evening Gazette*, November 11, 1978.

[8] See "none of these candidates" in the *Online Nevada Encyclopedia* at http://www.onlinenevada.org/None_of_These_Candidates, as of July 13, 2009.

[9] For an example of the negative public response that led to the failure of this repeal effort, see "'None of Above' Option Needed" in the May 6,

1987, issue of *Nevada Appeal*.

[10] Mello's views are quoted in an Associated Press article, "Unique State Election Law is Debated," that ran in the *Nevada State Journal* on September 24, 1978.

[11] Brendan Riley, "Nevada's 'none of these candidates' makes strong showing." *Las Vegas Sun* (Associated Press), November 8, 2006.
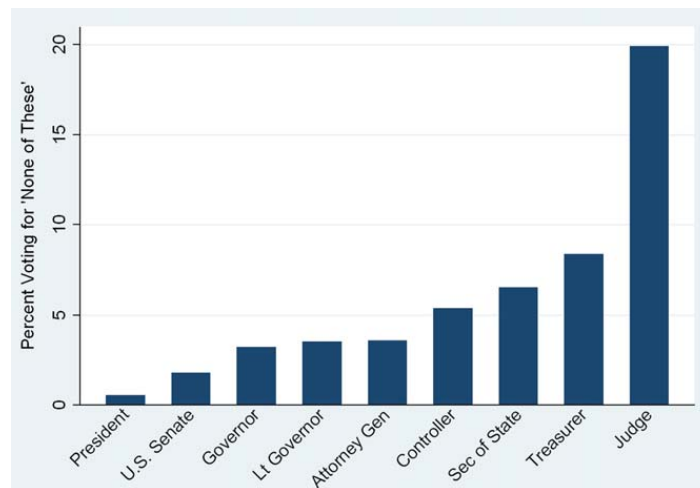
Fig. 1. Votes for NOTC by office, 1998–2010.

rance and protest (see also Weinberg et al., 1982). If voters choose NOTC merely because they do not know who the candidates are or what the job they are seeking entails, we can call that ignorance. Even the most informed voter may sometimes find herself in such a situation. Although the word "ignorance" reads somewhat harshly, the underlying problem—lack of information—may lead voters to choose NOTC. On the other hand, if voters choose NOTC to register their dissatisfaction with the array of choices available, we can call that protest. A voter might protest the low quality of the entire candidate field or the uncompetitiveness of a lopsided (or uncontested) race. Incidentally, protest and ignorance have also been cited as potential causes of rolloff—a point I return to in the next section.

These two possibilities, ignorance and protest, imply distinct observable outcomes. If ignorance motivates NOTC voting, then we should see NOTC voting rise in the least visible races. After all, campaigns for prominent offices are covered widely in the press, reducing voter information costs significantly (Popkin, 1993). Accordingly, fewer voters should vote for "none of these candidates" in presidential, gubernatorial, and senate races, since these races have the highest visibility; far more voters should choose NOTC in races for treasurer, controller, and judge, since these races have the lowest visibility. This pattern, if observed, would be consistent with Wattenberg et al.'s (2000) findings about rolloff: rolloff most often occurs when voters skip the ballot questions they know the least about. As applied to NOTC voting, this leads to a specific hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Ignorance). Because voters choose "none of these" when information costs are highest, NOTC voting should be highest in the least prominent races.

In contrast, protest voting would lead to an entirely different pattern. At the very least, protest voting would not necessarily lead to a rise in NOTC voting as voters move down the ballot. In fact, protest voters might even cast the most NOTC votes in the most visible races—after all, a voter cannot know whether to protest candidates whom she knows nothing about. However, the primary observable implication of protest voting has less to do with visibil-

ity than with competitiveness. If voters opt for "none of these" as a protest against the uncompetitiveness of the candidate field, then we would expect NOTC voting to be highest when only one major party fields a candidate, since voters from the other party would protest their lack of influence. We might also expect NOTC voting to rise in grossly lopsided races, since voters opposed to the heir apparent would have little faith that a vote for an opposing candidate would change the outcome. Both situations are related—both describe situations in which a voter's probability of influencing the outcome is far lower than usual. These two considerations lead to a two-part alternative hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (Protest). Because voters choose "none of these" when they are unhappy with the field of candidates available, NOTC voting should be highest if (a) only one major party nominates a candidate or (b) the winner is favored by a lopsided margin.

Fig. 1 displays average NOTC vote shares for elections held from 1998 to 2010, sorted in ascending order. Although this chart cannot differentiate fully between the two hypotheses given above, it does provide some preliminary evidence for Hypothesis 1: NOTC rates rise sharply as visibility declines. In presidential and senate elections, a negligible portion of voters chooses "none of these." In elections for judge, one in five voters chooses "none of these."

To estimate the relative importance of Hypotheses 1 and 2, Table 1 presents the results of two ordinary least squares regressions.[12] Model A includes all 51 statewide contests held in Nevada from 1998 through 2010. The dependent variable is the percentage of votes cast for NOTC. The first three rows list competitiveness variables relevant to Hypothesis 2; the next four rows contain office-specific variables relevant to Hypothesis 1. The results for these

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[12] Some types of elections are held more frequently than others, resulting in an oversample of judicial and (to a lesser extent) senate elections. To prevent these distinctive contests from biasing my results, I apply sampling weights based on the number of times each type of race was held.

Table 1
Percentage of votes for NOTC in Nevada, 1998–2008.

	Model A	Model B
Incumbent in race?	−0.39 (0.53)	−0.67 (0.53)
One major party candidate?	8.71** (2.34)	9.59** (2.42)
Winner's margin	0.011 (0.021)	0.042† (0.021)
Senate race	1.38** (0.35)	1.32** (0.48)
Gubernatorial race	2.52** (0.60)	2.14** (0.62)
Other statewide executive	4.02** (0.37)	3.66** (0.40)
Judicial race	14.90** (1.08)	
Constant	0.61* (0.25)	0.51† (0.30)
Observations	51	32
R-squared (adjusted)	0.93 (0.93)	0.89 (0.86)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Frequency weights applied.

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
† $p < 0.10$.

latter variables confirm the pattern seen in Fig. 1. After controlling for competitiveness, NOTC voting is least common in presidential elections (the baseline category); slightly higher in senate and gubernatorial elections (by 1.4–2.5 percentage points); higher still in other statewide executive elections (by 4.0 percentage points); and highest in statewide judicial elections (by 14.9 percentage points). This is clear evidence for Hypothesis 1. Many voters choose "none of these" simply because they do not know enough about the candidates or the office in question to make an informed choice.

At the same time, NOTC voting also rises in the least competitive races, as predicted by Hypothesis 2. In particular, NOTC voting jumps by 8.7 percentage points when only one of the two major parties nominates a candidate.[13] However, NOTC voting does not rise meaningfully when there is an incumbent in the race or when the winner's margin is large.[14] Still, the spike in NOTC voting in one-candidate races suggests that many voters choose NOTC to register their discontent with the choices available.[15]

Judicial elections provide 19 of the 51 observations (and 9 of the 11 one-candidate races) in Model A. To test whether these frequent but unique races skew the results, Model B replicates Model A with judicial races excluded. The basic results are unchanged. The most noteworthy difference in the two models is that the winner's margin appears somewhat more important in the reduced model, although the reduced model's extremely small sample size casts some doubt on this finding.

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[13] In Nevada's non-partisan judicial elections, this variable indicates that there was only one declared candidate on the ballot.

[14] The winner's margin remains insignificant even if it is specified quadratically or logarithmically. These findings are also robust to other controls, such as including year dummies.

[15] Protest can be a broader concept than the discussion to this point has implied. Due to data constraints, I have operationalized protest in terms of competitiveness. Observers of Nevada politics might dispute this operationalization by claiming that even in highly visible, highly competitive elections, large numbers of voters sometimes choose "none of these" to protest the slate of candidates on the ballot. Such may have been the case in 1998; Senator Harry Reid defeated then-Representative John Ensign by 401 votes, only to have his margin eclipsed by the 8113 votes for "none of these candidates." When expressed as a percentage, however, this episode is less anomalous than it sounds. Those 8113 NOTC ballots add up to only 1.86% of votes cast, a far less shocking figure—and one that does little to call this section's results into question.

It appears, then, that either ignorance or protest can motivate voters to choose "none of these candidates" on election day. NOTC voting rises sharply in uncontested elections and also in obscure races. Together, these protest and ignorance variables are powerful predictors of NOTC voting, explaining 93% of the variance.

2. Does NOTC reduce rolloff?

Political scientists have long known that many voters skip large portions of their ballots—something referred to as "rolloff" or "falloff" by political scientists and "undervoting" by election administrators. This phenomenon is puzzling; why would a voter go to the effort of registering to vote, driving to the polling place, waiting in line, and voting, only to skip some of the items on the ballot? In their efforts to resolve this puzzle, political scientists have generated a large and growing literature (Bullock & Dunn, 1996; Darcy & Schneider, 1989; Hall, 2007; Nichols & Strizek, 1995; Southwell, 2009; Streb, Brian, & LaFrance, 2009; Vanderleeuw & Utter, 1993; Wattenberg et al., 2000).

Rolloff has also attracted the attention of election administrators. In November 2006, for example, more than 18,000 voters in Florida's 13th Congressional district failed to mark a preference in the House election—an election that was decided by only 369 votes. After the election, advocates of the losing candidate contended that this unusually high rolloff rate might not have been intentional, but rather the result of confusing touch-screen voting technology. If that claim were true, then poor election administration might have decided the election outcome by preventing thousands of people from casting their intended vote. Unfortunately, Florida's election administrators had no way of knowing whether these undervotes were intentional or not. Hoping to prevent a repeat of this episode, a Florida state senator introduced NOTC legislation the following January. He believed that NOTC would greatly reduce intentional rolloff; if so, he reasoned, then future undervoting would be clear evidence of poor election administration.[16] Of course, this reasoning presupposes that rolloff voters would gladly vote for "none of these" if given the opportunity to do so rather than continuing to leave parts of their ballots blank—a testable hypothesis.

From the single previous study on Nevada's NOTC option, we know that this reform did not have the intended effect of boosting overall voter turnout (Weinberg et al., 1982). Yet even if NOTC did not increase the number of people who show up on election day, it may nonetheless have decreased rolloff. If so, NOTC would still have met the basic goal of its original sponsors—it would have provided the discontented with an opportunity to "voice" their concerns rather than "exit" the system by leaving parts of their ballots blank.

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[16] This summary is drawn from a handful of Florida news sources accessed through Lexis-Nexis: "'Older' precincts added to problem; Undervote larger in Congressional race" (*Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, January 2, 2007), "Bill would give Fla. voters 'no choice' on ballots" (*Miami Herald*, Miami, FL, January 6, 2007), "'None' should be an option for voters" (*Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, January 16, 2007), "'No choice?' Good choice" (*Palm Beach Post*, January 15, 2007).

A close, negative correlation between NOTC voting and rolloff certainly seems plausible. After all, many of the theories used to explain rolloff voting seem like they could easily apply to NOTC voting. In their efforts to explain rolloff, political scientists have identified confusing ballot design (Darcy & Schneider, 1989), voter fatigue (Bullock & Dunn, 1996; Southwell, 2009), ignorance of obscure candidates (Streb et al., 2009; Wattenberg et al., 2000), and uncompetitive races (Hall, 2007; Streb et al., 2009) as potential causes. Some of these theories have no clear application to NOTC voting. For example, if voters roll off because they do not understand the ballot or they have grown weary of filling it out, then it seems unlikely that these voters would have chosen NOTC if they had the choice. However, both potential causes of NOTC voting discussed in the previous section—ignorance and protest—also appear in the literature as explanations of rolloff. It seems plausible, then, that those who skip portions of their ballot due to ignorance or protest may well choose NOTC if given the chance, since it gives them a more direct way to express their discontent.

To isolate the potential effects of NOTC on rolloff voting, I compare electoral data from Nevada with comparable data from Nevada's five neighbors: Arizona, California, Idaho, Oregon, and Utah. Within each state, I look at all statewide general elections from 1998 to 2010. I omit offices that are not elected by at least two states, such as Insurance Commissioner (elected only in California) and Mine Inspector (elected only in Idaho). This design enables me to calculate a predictive model of aggregate rolloff rates using the ignorance and protest operationalizations developed above. If those who vote for "none of these" in Nevada would have rolled off if they were not given the NOTC option, then NOTC rates should have a negative one-to-one relationship with rolloff rates.

Table 2a summarizes the rolloff data for each of Nevada's five neighbors. Consistent with the ignorance hypothesis, rolloff in each state is highest in the least visible races. Table 2b juxtaposes Nevada's rolloff rates with the averages from Table 2a. For every office, Nevada has a lower rolloff rate than any of its neighbors. There are more than enough NOTC voters in Nevada to account for these differences (refer again to Fig. 1), providing some evidence that NOTC reduces rolloff in Nevada. We might conclude, then, that Florida's state senator was correct to expect that NOTC would reduce (but not eliminate) intentional rolloff.

Table 2a
Rolloff rates in neighboring states, 1998–2010.

	AZ (%)	CA (%)	ID (%)	OR (%)	UT (%)
President	1.4	1.4	2.4	1.5	1.7
Senate	4.2	3.9	5.5	3.4	2.5
Governor	1.7	2.7	1.5	2.6	2.4
Lt governor		4.8	3.3		
Attorney general	3.7	6.3	8.7	11.3	3.8
Secretary of state	4.9	6.3	9.1	6.1	
Treasurer	8.4	7.1	10.9	9.4	10.6
Controller		6.4	5.3		
Judge				40.5	

This conclusion requires some adjustment, however. The preceding paragraph implies that all NOTC voters are converted rolloff voters. But suppose we treat Nevada's NOTC voters as the equivalent of rolloff voters by adding Nevada's NOTC total into its rolloff total. As shown in Table 2b, we see that this "adjusted rolloff" rate is higher than the average rolloff rate in Nevada's neighboring states for most types of race. Moreover, for five of the offices (governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, treasurer, and controller), Nevada's "adjusted rolloff" is higher than any other single state's rolloff. It appears, then, that NOTC cuts both ways. Technically, it is true that Nevada has lower (unadjusted) rolloff rates for each office than any of its neighboring states, presumably as a result of the NOTC option; this finding is consistent with the Florida state senator's expectations. However, it is also true that a higher percentage of Nevada voters opt out of casting a "meaningful" vote—whether by rolling off or by voting for NOTC—than is observed in the neighboring states. If we place NOTC voters into the same normative category as rolloff voters, then we would conclude that NOTC actually increases voter abstention. Thus, implementing a "none of these" option may have the unintended effect of reducing the number of people who vote for an actual candidate.

Of course, the simple analysis in Table 2 cannot control for potential confounding factors. For a more nuanced look at these data, Table 3 contains the results of two regression models where the dependent variable is each race's rolloff percentage. These models use similar frequency weights as Table 1. They also include year and state dummies to control for any fixed effects. I omit judicial elections from the analysis, since competitive judicial elections occur regularly in only two of these states (Nevada and Oregon).

These regressions produce results consistent with the patterns observed in Table 2. Model A in Table 3 predicts

Table 2b
Rolloff rates in Nevada and its neighbors, 1998–2010.

	Neighboring state average (%)	NV (%)	Difference from average (%)	NV (adjusted) (%)	Difference from average (%)
President	1.7	0.6	−1.1	1.2	−0.5
Senate	3.9	1.3	−2.6	3.1	−0.8
Governor	2.2	1.2	−1.0	4.4	+2.2
Lt governor	4.0	2.3	−1.7	5.8	+1.8
Attorney general	6.7	3.2	−2.5	6.7	+0.0
Secretary of state	6.6	3.8	−2.8	10.0	+4.4
Treasurer	9.2	4.5	−4.7	12.3	+3.1
Controller	5.8	4.1	−1.7	9.3	+3.5
Judge	40.5	14.1	−26.4	31.2	−9.3

Table 3
Linear effect of NOTC on rolloff.

	Model A	Model B
NOTC %		−0.60** (0.08)
Incumbent in race?	−0.25 (0.26)	−0.29 (0.22)
One major party candidate	7.73** (1.61)	9.45** (0.98)
Winner's margin	0.046** (0.014)	0.042** (0.01)
CA	1.46** (0.29)	1.53** (0.29)
ID	0.27 (0.35)	0.22 (0.35)
NV	−1.45** (0.43)	1.06** (0.37)
OR	1.49** (0.35)	1.74** (0.36)
UT	−0.97† (0.51)	−0.53 (0.40)
Senate	1.82** (0.44)	1.62** (0.38)
Governor	1.56** (0.44)	1.44** (0.38)
Lt governor	3.39** (0.52)	3.27** (0.41)
Attorney general	4.54** (0.50)	4.39** (0.41)
Secretary of state	4.38** (0.51)	4.57** (0.43)
Treasurer	6.04** (0.53)	6.25** (0.45)
Controller	5.17** (0.54)	5.42** (0.49)
Constant	−0.80 (0.60)	−0.53 (0.53)
Observations	160	160
R-squared (adjusted)	0.88 (0.86)	0.92 (0.91)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Frequency weights applied. Year dummies not shown.

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
† $p < 0.10$.

rolloff rates without taking any account of Nevada's "none of these" option. Rolloff rises in obscure races, as has been reported elsewhere (Wattenberg et al., 2000). Relative to presidential races, rolloff rises somewhat in Senate and gubernatorial elections (by 1.6–1.8 percentage points), and it rises higher still in other statewide executive elections (by 3.4–6.0 percentage points). The Nevada dummy has the lowest coefficient of any of the state dummies, confirming the finding from Table 2 that Nevada has the lowest rolloff rates in the region—even when controlling for incumbency, margin of victory, one-party races, year, and type of office.

Unlike Model A, Model B adds the percent voting NOTC into the equation. This variable takes a value of zero for all races outside of Nevada. With this variable added to the model, the results change in ways that suggest that NOTC does indeed lower rolloff rates. For example, Model B shows that NOTC rates have a strong negative relationship with rolloff rates. When NOTC rates rise by one percentage point, rolloff rates fall by 0.60 percentage points. Apparently, then, roughly 60% of those who chose "none of these" in Nevada would have rolled off in the absence of the NOTC option. However, the estimated relationship between NOTC rates and rolloff is less than one-to-one, implying that not all of the NOTC voters were converted rolloff voters. That is, the remaining 40% of those who choose "none of these" in Nevada might have cast meaningful votes if not for the NOTC option.[17] This is consistent with my interpretation of Table 2; although most NOTC voters would have rolled off if they were not provided the "none of these" option, many would have chosen an actual candidate instead.

[17] When the twenty-nine judicial races are added to the model, the estimated effect of NOTC rates grows to −0.92, with a confidence interval that includes 1.0. In contrast to other races, then, it may be that NOTC voters in judicial races are almost exclusively converted rolloff voters.

These findings show that election administrators interested in reducing rolloff rates may find considerable success if they implement an NOTC option. But based on Nevada's experience, it appears that this reduction in rolloff would come at a cost: More people would choose not to vote for an actual candidate. This presents a normative concern that reformers should ponder carefully when considering NOTC.

3. Does NOTC hurt minor parties?

From a political scientist's perspective, it is puzzling that people would vote for minor party candidates; there are clear strategic incentives to support a candidate with a more realistic chance of winning (Cox, 1997). Among other explanations, researchers have explored the extent to which cynicism, distrust, and alienation—in short, protest—lead voters to support minor-party candidacies (Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005; Denemark & Bowler, 2002; Donovan, Bowler, & Tammy, 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Koch, 2003; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). But if protest can motivate voters to choose "none of these" when it is available, then minor party candidacies might be severely hurt by the NOTC option. As mentioned above, this very logic led Nevada's longtime Libertarian party chair to oppose NOTC. Likewise, when another small party's vote shares fell to the point that it would no longer appear on future ballots, the *Nevada State Journal*'s editorial writers pinned the blame, "at least in part," on NOTC.[18]

These complaints seem somewhat strange, given that minor parties in Nevada fare no worse than in neighboring states. Between 1998 and 2010, minor parties won an average of 5.3% of the vote in Nevada's non-judicial statewide elections, placing it in the middle of the pack when compared to its neighbors. From lowest to highest, minor parties in neighboring states attracted 2.2% of the vote in Idaho, 4.1% in Arizona, 4.2% in Utah, 5.7% in Oregon, and 7.0% in California during the same period. For a more nuanced test, Table 4 presents a model of minor party support specified similarly to Table 3. The dependent variable is the total percentage of the vote that went to minor party candidates in each race. I omit all non-partisan (i.e. judicial) races, as well as the handful of races in which there was no declared minor party candidate.

Model A in Table 4 returns unsurprising baseline results: When NOTC voting is not taken into account, minor-party voting shoots upward when only one of the two major parties nominates a candidate. It also rises in obscure races, where voters might feel they have less to lose by "wasting" their vote on a minor candidate. Model B replicates Model A, but with NOTC rates included. If NOTC were hurting minor parties, then we would expect this variable to have a strong negative effect on minor party vote shares. Instead, the NOTC variable has no effect whatsoever on any part of the model. Its estimated coefficient is statistically zero (and in the wrong direction), none of the other estimates changes meaningfully when NOTC rates are included, and the model's overall fit does not improve even slightly. These

[18] See the editorial "value of none" from November 15, 1978.

Table 4
Linear effect of NOTC on minor party voting.

	Model A	Model B
NOTC %		0.034 (0.15)
Incumbent in race?	−0.51 (0.38)	−0.51 (0.38)
One major party candidate	15.45** (1.57)	15.32** (1.93)
Winner's margin	0.025 (0.016)	0.025 (0.016)
CA	2.92** (0.58)	2.91** (0.59)
ID	−0.38 (0.72)	−0.39 (0.72)
NV	0.39 (0.50)	0.25 (0.79)
OR	1.54* (0.69)	1.52* (0.73)
UT	−0.049 (0.67)	−0.071 (0.69)
Senate	0.99 (0.76)	1.00 (0.76)
Governor	0.84 (0.78)	0.85 (0.78)
Lt governor	1.90* (0.83)	1.91* (0.83)
Attorney general	1.68* (0.81)	1.70* (0.80)
Secretary of state	2.31** (0.77)	2.29** (0.77)
Treasurer	1.88* (0.78)	1.87* (0.78)
Controller	2.58** (0.78)	2.57** (0.79)
Constant	1.81* (0.83)	1.81* (0.82)
Observations	138	138
R-squared (adjusted)	0.83 (0.80)	0.83 (0.80)

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Frequency weights applied. Year dummies not shown.

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
† $p < 0.10$.

results suggest that Nevada's "none of these" ballot option does nothing whatsoever to take support away from third-party candidates. Minor parties are chasing a red herring if they use any time or resources fighting the NOTC option.

4. Discussion

American federalism provides state governments the opportunity to experiment with new, untested reforms. At various times over the past thirty years, Nevada's "none of these candidates" ballot reform has inspired supporters in one-third of the American states to formally propose similar reforms in their state legislatures. These supporters concoct diverse arguments to support their proposals. One thing most have in common is a normative belief that NOTC will give voters a better chance to express their true views, but the debate over NOTC has also featured empirical claims about turnout, rolloff, and minor party voting. In this paper, I have tested a few of those empirical claims. As electoral reforms go, NOTC is a relatively benign one. True, it provides voters with a formal option to declare their ignorance of or distaste for the declared candidates. But for the most part, it merely absorbs votes from those who would otherwise roll off. NOTC does not harm minor parties at all.

Of course, all these findings could change if the reform were given more bite. In Nevada, "none of these" cannot "win" an election. Even if it did win the plurality, the candidate with the next-highest vote share would still be awarded the victory. If NOTC could "win" and force a new election with new candidates, it would almost certainly attract far more protest votes, and it could drain support from minor parties—who might even find it strategically

worthwhile to use NOTC in hopes of forcing the major parties to nominate candidates more to their liking. As currently designed, however, the political effects of Nevada's NOTC option have been minor.

When Nevada's legislators first passed this reform, the *Wall Street Journal* praised them in a December 22, 1975, editorial: "The Nevada law offers possibilities for a more accurate reading of how voters really feel. And assuming that politicians pay some heed to the results, it is hard to see how such knowledge could do any harm." The *Journal* was apparently correct—this reform had few empirical effects at all, good or bad. That being said, these minor empirical effects do not necessarily mean that NOTC has no value. Democratic procedures do not need to have obvious empirical effects to have worth. There is something to be said for an institution that gives voters the opportunity to register their protest explicitly rather than rolling off quietly. But as this question is normative, not empirical, I leave it for voters and legislators themselves to decide.

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