

Silence Over Protest: Unpacking Youth Apathy and the Untapped Power of NOTA in India

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Abstract: In Indian elections, the None of the Above (NOTA) option has sparked debate and discussions regarding its role in enhancing democracy. This study employs a quantitative research approach, using a survey-based methodology, to understand the reasons for young voters' reluctance to engage in elections and the underuse of the NOTA option. The survey findings reveal strong support for online and digital voting options, which could simplify the voting process and encourage more young people to cast ballots. Furthermore, youth voter apathy is greatly influenced by widespread distrust of political parties and the belief that voting does not produce meaningful results. To ensure greater electoral engagement in the world's largest democracy, the research seeks strategies to improve democratic procedures and increase youth voter turnout. India can set the stage for a more efficient, reliable, and participatory voting system that really involves all citizens by putting these thorough proposals into practice.

Keywords: Voter Apathy; Youth Voter Turnout; Electoral Reforms; Political Participation; Voter Trust; Digital Voting; Electoral Awareness; Voter Involvement; Electoral Participation.

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1. Introduction

India's young population plays a vital role in shaping governance and strengthening democracy. According to the Youth in India 2022 report by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India [15], nearly 40% of Indians are under 25, and around 65% are under 35. Their active participation in democracy, particularly voting, is essential to aligning policies with youth aspirations. To enhance democratic expression, India introduced the None of the Above (NOTA) option. However, despite its potential to drive reforms, NOTA remains underutilized, especially among voters aged 18-25. This group, despite holding significant political influence, has shown declining voter turnout. In the 2024 elections, only 38% of eligible first-time voters registered to vote. This gap between youth potential and participation raises concerns about disengagement and the underuse of NOTA. Addressing these challenges is crucial to strengthening democratic norms. By

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identifying the root causes of voter apathy, this study aims to contribute to discussions on political engagement and explore ways to create a more inclusive democracy [6].

1.1. Understanding NOTA

None of the Above (NOTA), an option available on ballots and Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), permits voters to reject all candidates running for election. This choice allows voters to voice their dissatisfaction while keeping their decision confidential, thereby strengthening their democratic rights [7].

1.2. Historical Background of NOTA: Initial Discussions and Legal Development

The idea of negative voting was first examined in the Law Commission's 170th Report in 1999, which also suggested a 50%+1 voting system. However, practical difficulties prevented the Law Commission of India from making any solid recommendations [13]. In 2004, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) submitted a petition to the Supreme Court, raising concerns about voter confidentiality under the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961. In September 2013, the Supreme Court instructed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to implement NOTA to protect voter privacy and democratic rights. The PUCL vs. Union of India case was pivotal in making NOTA mandatory, reinforcing the fundamental right of voters to express their discontent without fear of repercussions [2].

1.3. Initial Implementation of NOTA in Indian Elections

NOTA was first introduced during the 2013 Assembly Elections in Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Madhya Pradesh. It was subsequently applied in the 2014 General Elections, representing a major advancement in India's electoral reforms [12].

1.4. Impact of NOTA on Election Results

The Election Commission of India [7] has stated that NOTA votes are tallied but treated as 'invalid votes'. When NOTA garners the most votes in a constituency, the candidate with the next-highest number of votes is declared the winner [21]. The Supreme Court is currently examining petitions seeking to annul elections and hold new ones if NOTA receives a majority of votes. Certain states, such as Maharashtra, Haryana, and Puducherry, have labeled NOTA as a "Fictional Electoral Candidate," requiring new elections if NOTA achieves a majority [11].

1.5. Global Practices Similar to NOTA

European nations that permit comparable voting procedures include Finland, Spain, Sweden, France, Belgium, and Greece [10]. In the United States, some states allow write-in ballots as a means for voters to express dissatisfaction with candidates, despite the absence of an official "None of the Above" (NOTA) option [8]. Similarly, other countries have implemented NOTA-like solutions; for instance, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, and Ukraine offer similar mechanisms for voters to indicate their discontent with available choices [17].

2. NOTA in India: Empowering Voters or Electoral Ineffectiveness

In Indian elections, the None of the Above (NOTA) option has sparked debate about how it may strengthen democracy. By offering voters the option to reject any candidate, it increases democratic expression on the one hand [2]. Additionally, it encourages political parties to choose stronger candidates and forces them to be more accountable, which lessens complacency [12]. Additionally, a large percentage of NOTA votes may signal public discontent, helping policymakers gauge voters' mood [21]. Nevertheless, NOTA has its limitations. Since it does not affect election results, the candidate with the next-highest number of votes still wins, thereby limiting its electoral impact [7]. Some believe it can be exploited as a protest tool rather than a true rejection of candidates [11]. There are also concerns about caste biases, as significant NOTA votes in reserved constituencies might reflect deeper social divisions rather than political discontent [26]. Additionally, NOTA does not provide an alternative governance solution, rendering it largely symbolic rather than a mechanism for systemic change [22]. In conclusion, NOTA acts as a double-edged sword—while it offers a crucial voice to dissatisfied voters, its impact remains mostly symbolic unless further electoral reforms increase its significance.

2.1. Real Significance of NOTA in Indian Elections

The None of the Above (NOTA) option is a vital tool for Indian voters to express their disapproval of the candidates running for office. By providing a formal means to reject all candidates, NOTA compels political parties to improve their candidate

selection processes to ensure greater participation in future elections [3]. It also acts as a barometer of public discontent, highlighting the need for political reforms and better governance [20]. NOTA votes can affect the margin of victory by lowering the overall number of legitimate votes that political parties obtain, even though they have no direct effect on election outcomes. If NOTA had more electoral weight, election results might have been different, as evidenced by the fact that in several cases, the number of NOTA votes exceeded the margin of victory [21]. Discussions on whether NOTA votes ought to have greater weight in deciding this have stoked debate over election outcomes. There has been much discussion about NOTA's involvement in electoral reforms; some have called for re-elections or the nullification of the results if NOTA wins the most votes [2]. Some states, like Maharashtra, have even contemplated classifying NOTA as a "fictional electoral candidate," meaning that if it receives the most votes, new elections may be called [11]. Additionally, by providing a significant option for individuals who may otherwise choose not to vote because they are unhappy with the candidates, NOTA helps increase voter turnout [26]. NOTA promotes increased civic involvement and democratic responsibility by providing voters with a means to express their dissatisfaction without abstaining from voting [22].

2.2. Understanding Voter Apathy

Voter apathy refers to a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or motivation among eligible voters to participate in elections. This phenomenon can stem from various factors, including disillusionment with the political process, dissatisfaction with candidates or parties, or a belief that their vote will not make a difference [25]. As a result, voter turnout may decline, potentially impacting the overall democratic process [14].

2.3. Reasons for Voter Apathy

2.3.1. Lack of Interest and Disillusionment

A significant number of individuals, particularly those residing in cities, feel detached from the political system and doubt that their votes have a meaningful effect on governance [16]. Corruption and scandals breed distrust and lead to disengagement from the electoral process, further discouraging voter participation [4]. This feeling of helplessness often leads to voter apathy, especially among urban and middle-class voters.

2.3.2. Lack of Political Knowledge

The complexity of political issues, coupled with limited access to trustworthy information, leaves many voters feeling unprepared to make informed decisions [5]. The education system fails to adequately address governance and electoral processes, diminishing awareness among younger voters. Without sufficient political education, many people do not understand the importance of their vote, resulting in low voter turnout [9].

2.3.3. Urban Apathy

Cities often witness lower voter turnout due to a lack of interest and logistical issues, such as inaccuracies in voter lists and inconvenient polling locations [18]. Middle- and upper-middle-class individuals tend to vote less frequently compared to poorer communities, who often see voting as a way to achieve better governance. The fast-paced urban lifestyle and professional obligations also contribute to a lack of enthusiasm for voting in metropolitan areas [19].

2.4. Youth Disengagement

Young voters, especially first-time voters, face several obstacles, including logistical challenges such as voter ID requirements and insufficient political representation. Many young people feel that political parties do not address their issues, further detaching them from the electoral process [1]. Low enrollment among young voters affects overall turnout and weakens youth representation in governance.

2.5. Alienation from the Political System

Many voters perceive that the political system does not address their concerns, leading them to feel that participation is pointless. The lack of young leaders and diverse candidates further alienates parts of the population, reinforcing their belief that elections do not affect their lives. This disconnection leads to reduced voter turnout and ongoing disengagement from political activities [23].

2.6. Negative Media Influence

Sensationalized media coverage and misinformation foster political cynicism, discouraging participation [24]. Hate speech, excessive negative campaigning, and AI-driven misinformation make elections seem unappealing to many voters. When political discourse is dominated by negativity, voters may opt to disengage rather than participate in an environment they view as toxic.

2.7. Understanding the Low Usage of NOTA (None of the Above)

2.7.1. Reasons for Limited Use of NOTA

- **Lack of Awareness:** A significant number of voters are unaware of the NOTA option and what it entails. Without adequate education, they might not consider it a feasible choice during elections [2].
- **Perceived Ineffectiveness:** NOTA does not alter election results, as the candidate with the highest number of valid votes still prevails. This perceived lack of effectiveness deters voters from using it as a means of protest [12].
- **Social and Cultural Pressures:** Voters often experience pressure from family, caste, or religious groups to support a particular candidate. This societal influence makes it difficult for individuals to choose NOTA as an alternative [26].
- **Fear of Wasting Votes:** Some voters view selecting NOTA as equivalent to squandering their vote, since it does not lead to re-elections or political accountability [11].
- **Lack of Legal Consequences:** Currently, NOTA does not lead to re-elections, diminishing its impact as a protest vote. Without legal repercussions, its importance remains limited in electoral politics [21].

3. Problem Statement

Despite their significant influence on the country's political landscape, young Indians aged 18 to 25 are increasingly showing a lack of interest in voting, a trend that is becoming a major issue. This is evident from the low rates of voter registration and participation, indicating a disconnect from the electoral process. Furthermore, the NOTA (None of the Above) option, intended to give a voice to dissatisfied voters, is not being effectively utilized, thus failing to make a substantial democratic impact. This study examines the reasons behind young voters' reluctance to engage in elections and the underuse of the NOTA option. By examining these trends, the research seeks to identify ways to boost youth voter participation and enhance democratic practices, thereby ensuring greater electoral participation in the world's largest democracy.

3.1. Research Questions

- Why do Indian voters not use NOTA despite dissatisfaction with political candidates?
- What factors contribute to the low voter turnout among young people in India?

4. Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study employs a quantitative research approach, using a survey-based methodology, to understand the reasons for voter apathy and public opinion on NOTA. A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed via Google Forms, allowing for easy data collection and analysis.
- **Data Collection:** The survey was shared via online platforms to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended Likert-scale questions, ensuring both objective responses and the ability to measure participants' opinions. The survey also included demographic questions to examine trends across different population segments. There are also a few open-ended questions to understand people's perspectives on certain topics.
- **Sampling Method:** A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used because online respondents were readily accessible. The sample included individuals from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographical locations to ensure a broad perspective. The data for this study were collected via a Google Form survey, with responses from 75 students.
- **Data Analysis:** After collecting responses, the data was exported to Google Sheets or Excel for processing. Charts and graphs were generated to visualize key findings and to analyze trends.

5. Result

Voter Turnout:

- 64% of respondents have voted in an election, while 36% have not, indicating moderate youth voter participation.

Trust in Political Parties:

- A majority (46.7%) rated their trust in Indian political parties and leaders as 3 out of 5.
- 42.6% showed distrust (ratings of 1 or 2), while only 10.6% expressed strong trust (ratings of 4 or 5).

NOTA Awareness:

- 88% of respondents are aware of the NOTA option in Indian elections.
- 12% are unaware, indicating a need for greater voter education.

Usage of NOTA:

- Most respondents have never used NOTA.
- This suggests that, despite awareness, youth voters may not see NOTA as a viable protest mechanism.
- only 9.3% have used it.
- 32% indicated they might use it in the future, while 58.7% have never used it.

Legal Consequences for NOTA:

- 60% believe NOTA should lead to re-elections if it receives a majority of the vote.
- 28% are unsure.
- 12% think NOTA should remain symbolic.

Effectiveness of NOTA:

- 54.7% of respondents believe NOTA is an effective way to express dissatisfaction (40% agree, 14.7% strongly agree).
- 38.7% remain neutral, while 6.7% disagree.

Perceived Impact of NOTA on Political Change:

- 41.3% believe NOTA could lead to political change (36% agree, 5.3% strongly agree).
- However, 44% remained neutral, indicating skepticism.
- 14.7% disagreed with the notion that NOTA leads to change.

Influence of Social Media on Voting Behaviour:

- 62.7% said they follow political updates but do not always trust them.
- Online political discussions strongly influence 26.7%.
- 9.3% rely solely on personal judgment without social media influence.

This data illustrates an engaged yet uncertain youth electorate, one that is aware and expressive but still skeptical of political outcomes.

5.1. Interpretation of Results

5.1.1. Section 1 General Voting Behaviour

According to the survey, 36% of participants have not used their right to vote, while nearly two-thirds (64%) had taken part in an election. This suggests that young people participate in politics to a moderate degree (Figure 1).

1. Have you ever voted in an election?
75 responses

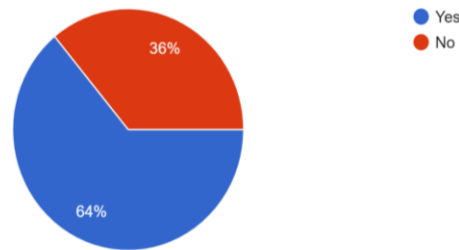


Figure 1: Voting experience

Nonetheless, the fact that more than one-third of eligible young people have never cast a ballot indicates a general lack of interest. This trend suggests that while awareness of elections is high, regular participation remains difficult, underscoring the need for greater civic engagement and easier access to polling places (Figure 2).

2. How often do you vote in elections?
75 responses

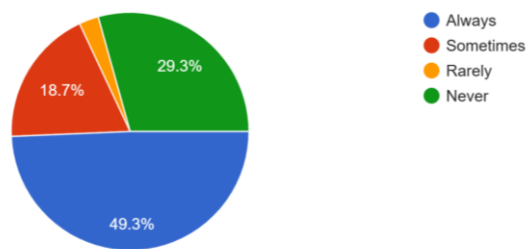


Figure 2: Frequency of voting

Respondents showed irregular patterns in how frequently they cast ballots; many said they cast ballots only in national elections and avoided local and state elections. Instead of chronic engagement, this irregularity emphasizes chosen participation. This discrepancy implies that young voters may underestimate the importance of regional administration even while they recognize the significance of big elections. The information emphasizes the crucial role of elections at all levels in democratic accountability. The perception that voting does not result in significant change was the most common excuse given by individuals who had not voted. Lack of voter registration, practical problems, and challenges getting to polling places were further obstacles. This result reflects both systemic and attitudinal issues: young people encounter structural barriers that deter their involvement in politics, while also feeling cut off from it. Therefore, it is crucial to address these obstacles through voter facilitation measures and civic trust-building activities (Figure 3).

3. If you have never voted, what are the main reasons?
75 responses

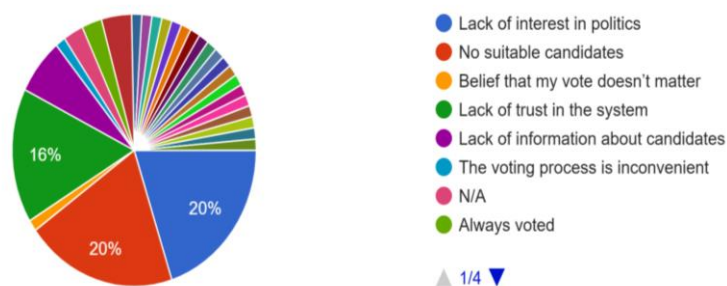


Figure 3: Reasons for not voting

5.1.1.1. Factors Encouraging Regular Voting

Respondents indicated that they would be more inclined to vote regularly if they were provided with better political awareness, easier registration processes, digital or online voting options, and visible political accountability. Incentives such as recognition or discounts were also seen as motivational tools. These preferences suggest that young voters prioritize convenience and tangible engagement, emphasizing the importance of combining awareness initiatives with institutional modernization.

5.1.2. Section 2 Political Trust and Representation

A large share of respondents expressed moderate to low trust in political leaders and parties, with 46.7% giving neutral scores and 42.6% expressing distrust. Only 10.6% demonstrated strong trust in current political actors (Figure 4).

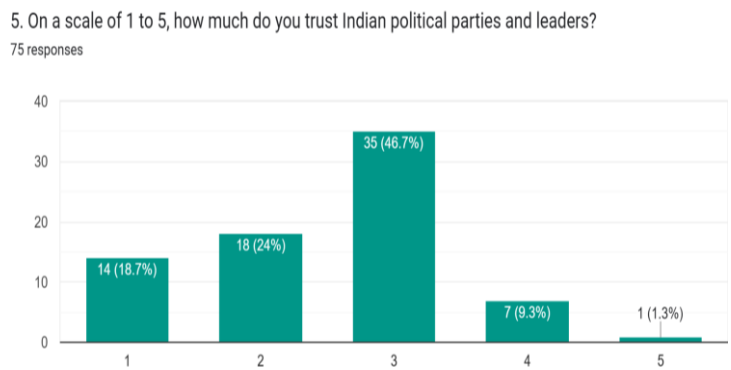


Figure 4: Trust in political parties and leaders section

This highlights a severe trust deficit, with young voters disillusioned by the conduct and credibility of political representatives. Such skepticism directly influences voter apathy, reinforcing the need for greater transparency, integrity, and responsiveness in party politics (Figure 5).

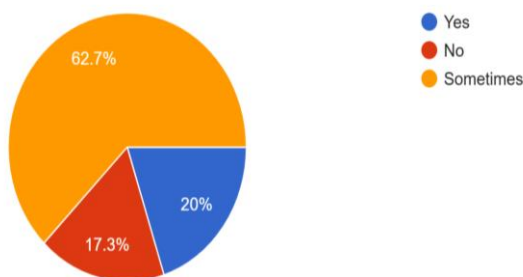
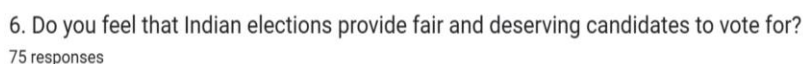


Figure 5: Perception of candidate quality

The vast majority of respondents expressed uncertainty or neutrality when asked whether elections produce candidates who are just and deserving. Few thought that credible candidates were constantly fielded in current elections. This opinion indicates that people who represent political institutions are also a source of discontent. Public trust in the electoral system may increase if the candidate selection process is strengthened and more nominations are made on merit.

The most frequently mentioned reasons for dissatisfaction with candidates were corruption, lack of integrity, nepotism, and poor representation of youth and women. This suggests that voters seek moral and generational reform in Indian politics. Their discontent appears rooted not only in policy failures but also in perceived ethical and representational gaps. Addressing these concerns requires political parties to adopt transparent, inclusive, and competency-based candidate selection systems (Figure 6).

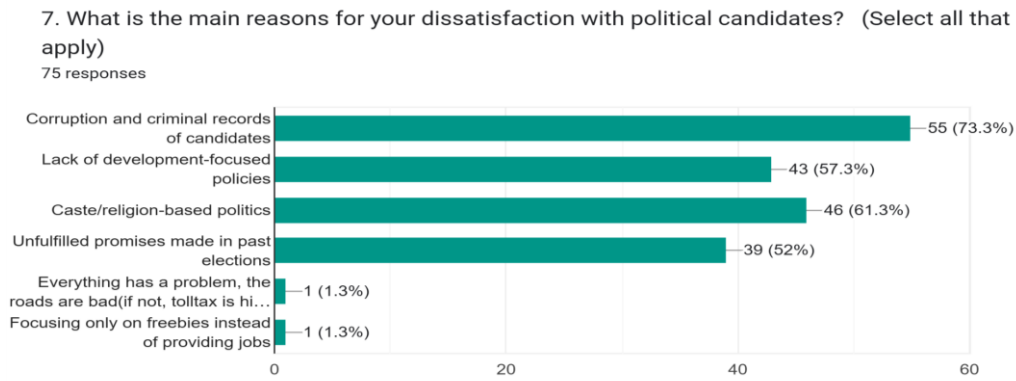


Figure 6: Causes of candidate dissatisfaction

5.1.3. Section 3 Awareness and Use of Nota

An overwhelming 88% of respondents were aware of the “None of the Above” (NOTA) option, while only 12% lacked awareness (Figure 7).

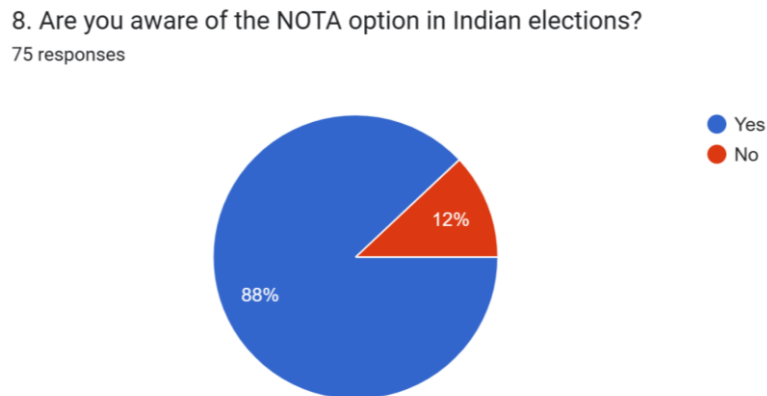


Figure 7: Awareness of NOTA

This indicates that awareness campaigns about NOTA have successfully penetrated the youth demographic. However, the data also hints that awareness alone does not translate into actual engagement—highlighting the gap between knowledge and practice in electoral participation (Figure 8).

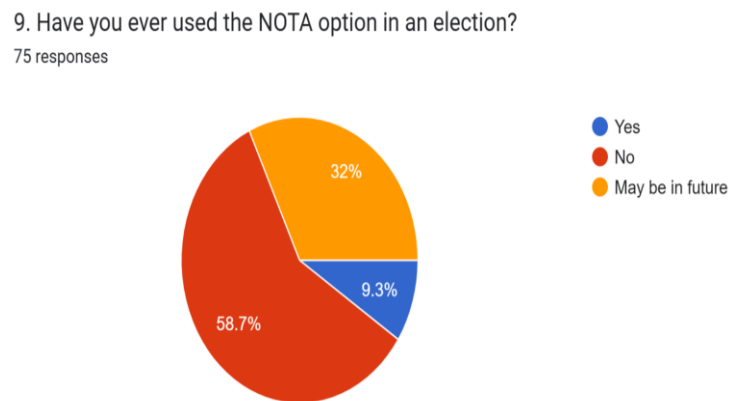


Figure 8: Usage of NOTA

Despite high awareness levels, actual NOTA use remains minimal. Only 9.3% of respondents reported having used NOTA, while 32% expressed willingness to use it in future elections, and 58.7% had never chosen it. This shows that while young voters recognize NOTA’s symbolic value, they perceive it as ineffective in bringing change. The results reveal a disjunction between political expression and perceived impact, underscoring the need for reforms that render NOTA consequential (Figure 9).

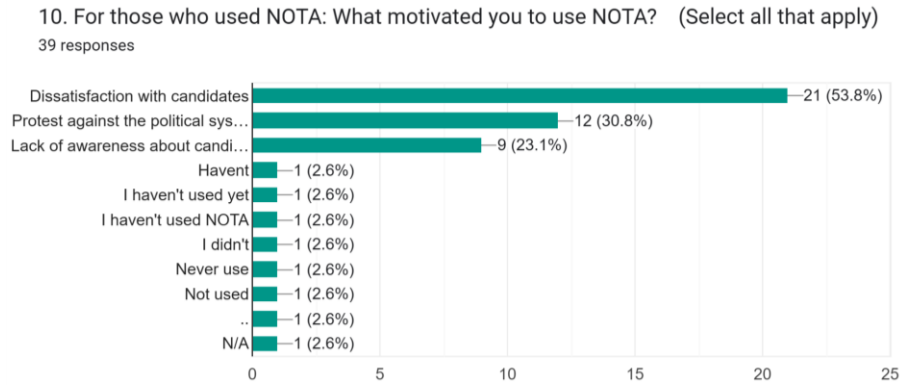


Figure 9: Motivations for using NOTA

Respondents who had used NOTA explained that their primary motivation was to reject corrupt or unqualified candidates while still exercising their democratic right to vote. For them, NOTA serves as a protest mechanism, allowing them to express disapproval without abstaining. This indicates that the NOTA option functions as a constructive channel for dissatisfaction rather than apathy, reinforcing its potential importance in measuring democratic discontent (Figure 10).

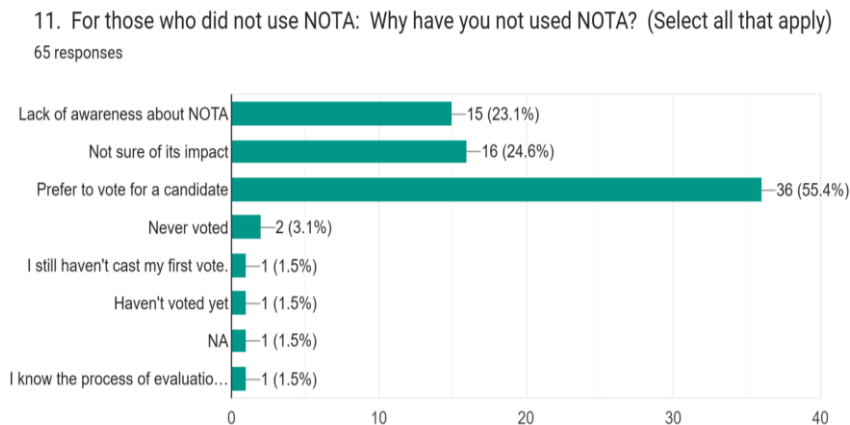


Figure 10: Reasons for not using NOTA

The belief that NOTA has no practical impact, societal pressure to support particular politicians, and the fear of wasting one's vote are among the primary reasons people did not use it. This demonstrates how the use of NOTA is discouraged by both systemic constraints and social conditioning. Therefore, giving NOTA results legal significance would encourage voters to utilize it more confidently as an instrument for accountability.

5.1.4. Section 4 Perceptions of Nota

54.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NOTA is a useful way to voice displeasure, compared to 38.7% who were neutral and 6.7% who disagreed (Figure 11).

12. Do you think NOTA is an effective way to express dissatisfaction with candidates?
75 responses

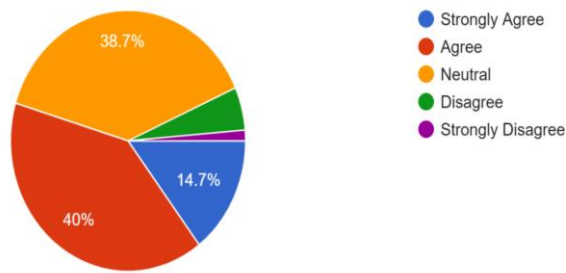


Figure 11: Perceived effectiveness of NOTA

This shows some hope for NOTA's goals, but it also shows persistent skepticism about its effectiveness. According to the research, NOTA has symbolic significance but not enough institutional recognition to have real political repercussions (Figure 12).

13. Do you believe NOTA can lead to positive changes in the political system?
75 responses

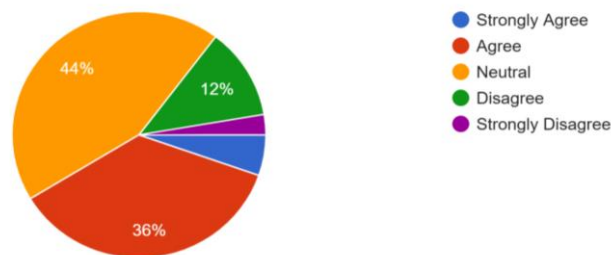


Figure 12: Can NOTA lead to political change?

41.3% of respondents believed that NOTA could encourage political change, compared to 44% who were neutral and 14.7% who disapproved. This ambivalence raises questions about whether symbolic protest can lead to reform. The results show cautious optimism: young voters respect NOTA's goals but question its capacity to change outcomes under current regulations. Nearly 60% of respondents supported re-elections if NOTA received the highest votes, while 28% were unsure and 12% opposed the idea. This reflects strong demand to strengthen electoral accountability mechanisms (Figure 13).

14. Do you think NOTA should have legal consequences, such as re-elections if it receives the majority vote?
75 responses

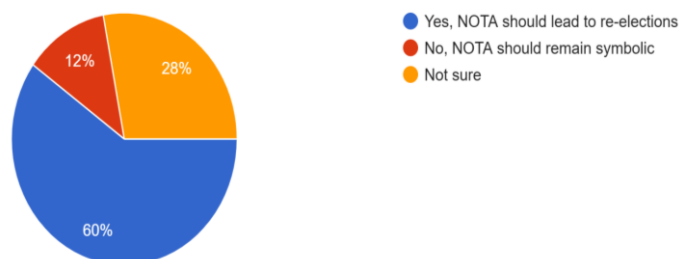


Figure 13: Should NOTA have legal consequences?

Respondents wish to see NOTA evolve from a symbolic gesture to a functional democratic instrument capable of influencing election results (Figure 14).

15. What changes would make NOTA a more powerful tool for democracy? (Select all that apply)
75 responses

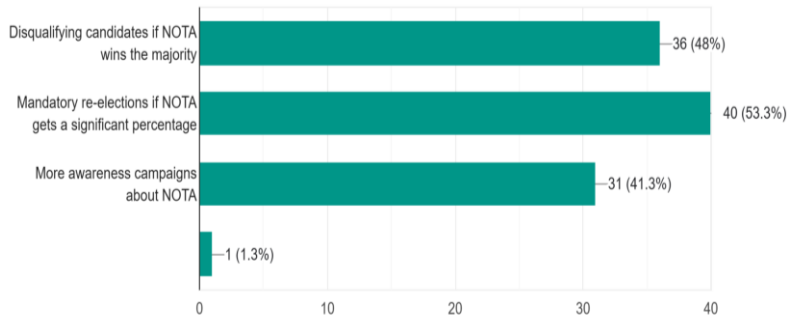


Figure 14: Preferred reforms to strengthen NOTA

When asked what changes would make NOTA more powerful, the majority recommended giving it legal implications, making its data publicly available, and linking it to candidate or party accountability. These responses indicate that voters desire transparency and reform driven by consequences. Institutionalizing the analysis of NOTA trends could make it a feedback tool for policymakers (Figure 15).

16. Do you think NOTA votes should be counted separately and analyzed in election reports?
75 responses

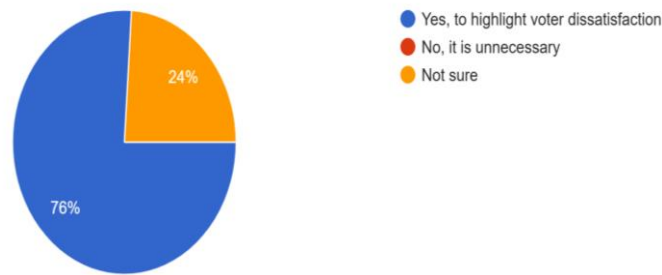


Figure 15: Should NOTA votes be officially analyzed?

Most respondents agreed that NOTA votes should be counted and analyzed separately in post-election reports. They believe such reporting would enhance transparency and serve as a barometer of public dissatisfaction. Including NOTA statistics in election reports would not only inform parties about voter sentiment but also legitimize public protest within democratic frameworks (Figure 16).

17. What prevents young voters (18-25) from voting? (Select all that apply)
75 responses

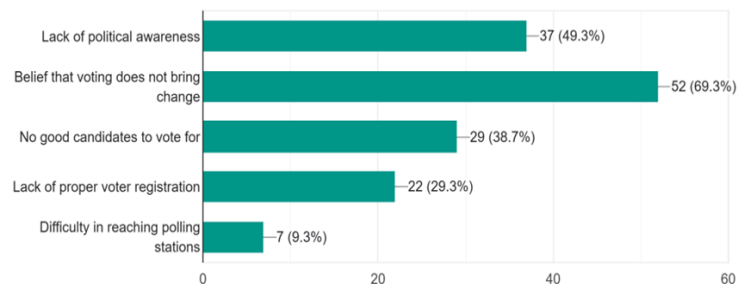


Figure 16: Reasons for youth voter apathy

When analyzing reasons for youth disengagement, the most frequent responses were the belief that voting does not create change, lack of political awareness, and the absence of credible candidates. Logistical issues like registration and polling

accessibility were mentioned but less frequently. The findings underscore that apathy is rooted more in perception and disillusionment than procedural difficulties, highlighting the importance of rebuilding political trust (Figure 17).

18. Would you be more likely to vote if the process was digital or more accessible?
75 responses

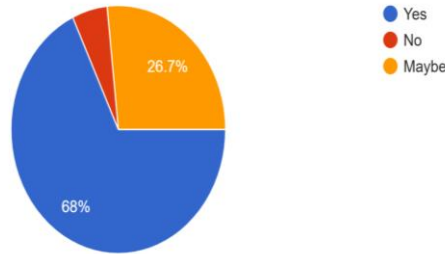


Figure 17: Digital voting preferences

A vast majority stated they would be more likely to vote if digital or online voting options were available. Respondents view technological integration as a way to simplify participation and overcome logistical barriers. This demonstrates a clear appetite for modernizing electoral infrastructure, particularly among digitally literate youth (Figure 18).

19. What should be done to encourage youth participation in elections? (Select up to 2 options)
75 responses

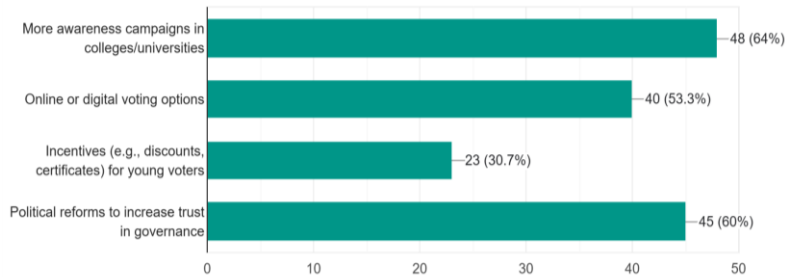


Figure 18: Measures to increase youth participation

The most common suggestions included offering incentives to young voters, expanding campus awareness programs, introducing online voting options, and reforming political structures to increase trust. These responses suggest that youth engagement strategies should blend motivation (through incentives) with empowerment (through education and digital access).

5.1.5. Section 6 Social Media and Influence on Voting

About 27% of respondents acknowledged being heavily affected, and over 62% of respondents stated they follow political debates online but do not always believe them (Figure 19).

20. How much do social media and news influence your voting decision?
75 responses

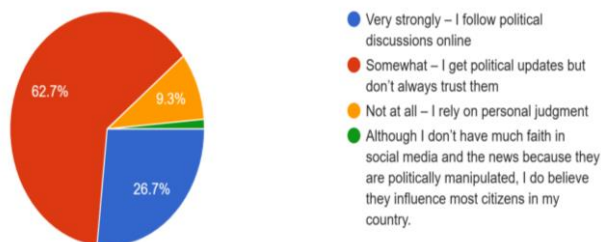


Figure 19: Influence of social media on voting

This demonstrates the dual function of social media: it mobilizes and informs, but it also fosters distrust because of false information. Its effects could be mitigated by supporting fact-checking initiatives and verified political information (Figure 20).

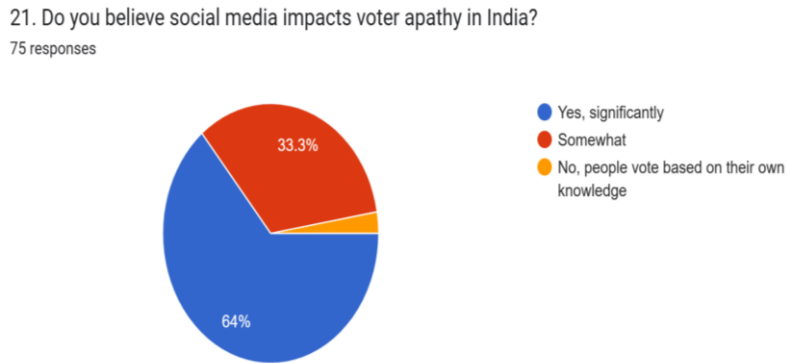


Figure 20: Social media and voter apathy

A majority agreed that negative media coverage and misinformation increase political cynicism, discouraging participation. The constant exposure to divisive and sensational content appears to intensify disillusionment. This indicates a need for responsible media discourse and digital literacy programs that encourage critical engagement instead of withdrawal.

5.1.6. Section 7 Reforms and Future Perspectives

Respondents strongly emphasized the need for electoral reforms that enhance transparency and accountability. A significant majority (74.7%) advocated for more transparent candidate selection processes, reflecting a growing demand for merit-based political nominations over nepotism and favoritism. Additionally, 64% supported stricter laws against electoral fraud, underscoring public concern about corruption and election malpractice (Figure 21).

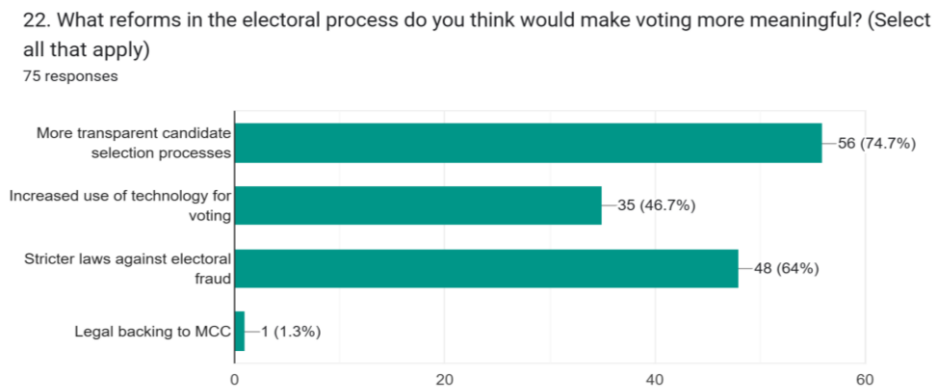


Figure 21: Reforms

Nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) endorsed greater use of technology in voting, signaling openness to modernization and digital solutions to improve efficiency and trust. Only a small fraction (1.3%) called for legal backing to the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), suggesting that while ethical enforcement is valued, it is seen as secondary to structural reforms. These responses collectively indicate that young voters are seeking a more transparent, technology-driven, and rule-bound electoral system to restore faith in India’s democracy.

5.1.6.1. Impact of Voter Education Programs on Participation

Most respondents agreed that voter education programs can significantly boost electoral participation, especially among youth and first-time voters. They emphasized that political awareness and civic literacy are crucial for informed decision-making and long-term engagement. A smaller group, however, felt that education alone cannot solve deeper issues such as distrust in governance or a lack of credible candidates. Overall, the responses suggest that comprehensive and youth-focused voter education initiatives are widely seen as an effective means to combat voter apathy and encourage democratic participation (Figure 22).

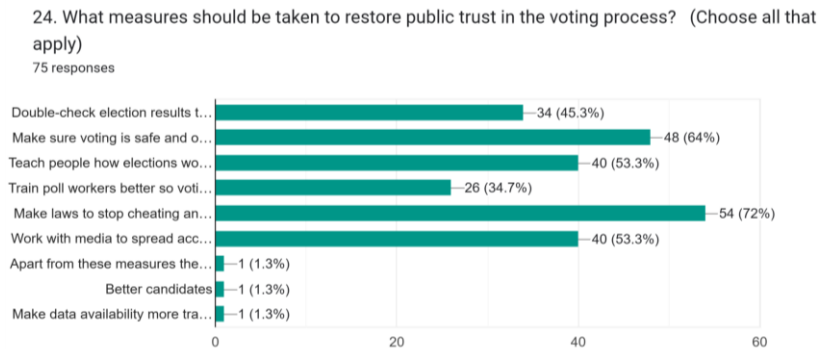


Figure 22: Measures to restore trust in elections

Respondents emphasized the importance of verifying election results, ensuring voting security, increasing transparency through public observation, and educating citizens about the voting process. These findings point to a collective demand for openness and reliability in electoral practices. Building transparent and participatory mechanisms is thus essential for restoring faith in India’s democratic system.

6. Key Findings

The survey findings provide a deeper understanding of how young voters in India think about elections, the NOTA (None of the Above) option, and their overall trust in the political system. The responses reveal both awareness and disillusionment, showing that while young citizens understand their democratic rights, many still feel disconnected from the political process.

6.1. Voter Participation and Engagement

Approximately two-thirds (64%) of those surveyed reported voting in an election, while 36% had not. This demonstrates that even if a large portion of youth engage in the democratic process, a sizable portion still do not. Voting feels like “a routine task with no real change,” according to many respondents, who express a sense of helplessness and indifference. This result is consistent with a previous study by Verba et al. [28], which indicates that people are less inclined to vote when they think their vote has little impact. This disappointment is not the result of ignorance, but rather of frustration—the conviction that the system does not take common people seriously.

6.2. Trust in Political Parties and Leadership

Trust in political parties appears to be weak among young voters. Nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) gave a neutral score, while around 42.6% expressed distrust, and only a small fraction (10.6%) said they strongly trust political leaders. Survey comments showed that many young people view politicians as disconnected from citizens, saying things like “leaders only show up during elections” or “no one represents the youth.” Such attitudes echo Dalton [4] argument that when citizens lose faith in institutions, democracy itself is weakened. The results clearly show that political distrust is a major driver of voter apathy in India.

6.3. Awareness and Use of NOTA

Awareness about the NOTA option is very high—88% of respondents knew about it. However, very few (only 9.3%) have ever used it. Despite being aware, most young voters do not consider NOTA a practical tool for expressing dissatisfaction. Many respondents said it feels “symbolic” and “ineffective,” since it does not lead to re-elections or real accountability. This aligns with Singh [2] and Singh [23], who also noted that NOTA currently serves more as a moral expression than as a force for change. Interestingly, about one-third (32%) of respondents said they *might* use NOTA in the future—indicating that young people are open to it if it had greater legal power or consequences.

6.4. Legal Consequences and Effectiveness of NOTA

A majority of respondents (60%) believed that if NOTA receives the most votes in a constituency, new elections should be held. This shows a strong demand for legal reform that makes NOTA meaningful. Another 28% were unsure, and 12% felt NOTA should stay symbolic. While 54.7% agreed that NOTA is a useful way to express dissatisfaction, a large number (38.7%) remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about whether it truly makes a difference. This “neutral middle” represents those who

want change but are skeptical about whether the system will respond. As Gaikwad [12] noted, NOTA, in its current form, serves more as a statement of conscience than as a real tool for reform.

6.5. Perceived Impact of NOTA on Political Change

41.3% of respondents agreed that NOTA could bring about political change, 44% were neutral, and 14.7% disapproved. This divide demonstrates that, whereas some young people see its promise, others are skeptical of its real impact. NOTA encourages political parties to submit better candidates, according to respondents who supported it. However, some believed that NOTA votes are counted and ignored. This conflicting view demonstrates NOTA's dual character: it allows voters to express their displeasure but lacks the power to effect change. According to Norris [17], this is a "symbolic protest" in which individuals voice their dissatisfaction without anticipating concrete outcomes.

6.6. Influence of Social Media on Voting Behavior

Social media greatly influences young people's political opinions. While 26.7% of respondents indicated they are heavily influenced by political debates on social media, over 62.7% of respondents said they follow political updates online but do not always trust what they read. The answers highlight a paradox: while digital platforms provide access to knowledge, they also propagate bias, hostility, and false information. Online debates, according to some respondents, are "toxic" or "more emotional than factual." This supports the idea put forth by Tewksbury and Rittenberg [27] that social media can simultaneously raise awareness and cynicism. The results imply that although social media links young people to politics, it does not always foster genuine understanding or trust.

6.7. Core Causes of Youth Voter Apathy

From the open-ended responses, five major reasons for low voter participation among youth emerged:

- **Disillusionment with Outcomes:** Many feel that their vote does not bring real change.
- **Lack of Credible Candidates:** Corruption and political dynasties turn voters away.
- **Limited Civic Education:** Schools rarely emphasize voting rights and responsibilities.
- **Practical Barriers:** Voter ID problems, registration delays, and polling inaccessibility.
- **Social Influence:** Many follow family or community voting patterns rather than their own personal choice.

These explanations demonstrate that youth apathy is more about alienation than laziness. According to Gangte and Touthang [29], young voters are alienated rather than ignorant. Politics is important to them, but they believe the system doesn't give a damn.

6.8. Synthesizing the Findings

Putting all the data together, one clear pattern emerges: India's youth are aware but unconvinced. They understand how democracy works but are skeptical about whether it works for them. They know about NOTA but see it as powerless. They engage with politics online but question what's real. This "informed detachment" defines the modern youth voter. Awareness on its own is insufficient for democracy to flourish; it needs to be supported by accountability, trust, and true representation. The study's conclusions demonstrate that both structural and emotional change will be necessary to reintegrate young people into the political process.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a central paradox in contemporary Indian democracy: young voters are politically informed but emotionally detached. Despite greater literacy, digital access, and political awareness, many individuals aged 18–25 remain distant from formal political participation. Their disengagement stems less from ignorance and more from frustration, a belief that their participation rarely produces meaningful change. This trust deficit toward political institutions reflects Dalton [4] observation that weakening confidence in governance erodes democratic legitimacy. The data suggest that young citizens, while knowledgeable about politics, view it as unresponsive and transactional. Several respondents described voting as "a cycle of promises and disappointments," revealing a deep-seated disillusionment with the political system's ability to deliver accountability. The limited use of the None of the Above (NOTA) option further underscores this disconnection. While 88% of respondents were aware of NOTA, only a small fraction had ever used it, a pattern consistent with Singh [2] and Singh [23], who noted that NOTA's symbolic status undermines its reform potential. Many participants emphasized that unless NOTA has legal weight, such as prompting re-elections or compelling better candidate selection, it remains a gesture without consequence. The fact that 60% support making NOTA binding indicates a clear public desire for greater accountability and electoral fairness.

Social media emerged as another complex influence in shaping youth political engagement. On one hand, it provides unprecedented access to information and fosters open debate. On the other hand, it amplifies polarization and misinformation, contributing to confusion and distrust. This dual effect echoes the findings of Tewksbury and Rittenberg [27], who found that online media can both engage and alienate users. Several respondents admitted that while they rely on social media for political updates, they often question its credibility, emphasizing the need for media literacy initiatives that help young voters critically assess online content. Collectively, these findings capture what Verba et al. [28] termed ‘informed apathy’, citizens who understand political processes but feel powerless to influence them. This condition is not a sign of apathy in the conventional sense but of alienation, a psychological distance created by distrust and inefficacy. In this survey, youth appear informed, connected, and opinionated, yet reluctant to vote because they perceive politics as inaccessible and unresponsive to their aspirations. For policymakers, the implications are clear: awareness alone does not guarantee participation. To bridge the gap between knowledge and engagement, democratic institutions must work to restore credibility through transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness. Respondents expressed strong support for electoral reforms such as:

- Making NOTA binding, allowing for re-elections when it receives the highest votes.
- Introducing structured voter education and civic literacy programs in schools and universities.
- Ensuring political parties uphold higher standards of accountability and candidate integrity.

Addressing these concerns requires moving beyond symbolic reforms toward structural change. If trust is rebuilt and institutions become more transparent, ‘informed apathy’ can evolve into active citizenship, a shift essential for the vitality of Indian democracy. Failure to act, however, risks deepening disillusionment and disengagement, threatening the participatory foundations of democratic legitimacy.

8. Conclusion

The findings underscore an urgent need to enhance political engagement and awareness among young voters. While the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option allows individuals to express their dissatisfaction with candidates, many respondents question its real impact on driving change. A pervasive lack of trust in political parties, coupled with the belief that voting does not lead to meaningful outcomes, significantly contributes to youth voter apathy. To foster greater participation in elections, it is essential to address these concerns head-on. This study reveals that while NOTA is recognized as a voting option, its effectiveness in instigating electoral change remains limited, primarily because it lacks legal consequences. Nevertheless, the high number of NOTA votes reflects a growing public discontent and serves as an important indicator for policymakers. By taking these insights into account, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and responsive political environment that resonates with young voters.

8.1. Recommendations

8.1.1. Legislative Reforms

To foster greater political accountability and fairness in elections, researchers need to introduce important legislative changes. For instance, if the “None of the Above” (NOTA) option receives the highest number of votes in a constituency, it should trigger re-elections. This would ensure that voter dissatisfaction is taken seriously. Additionally, researchers must implement stricter laws against electoral fraud, supported by robust enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). These reforms would promote transparency in political processes and deter practices that undermine our democracy.

8.1.2. Enhancing Voter Awareness

A nationwide campaign to educate citizens about their voting rights and responsibilities is crucial. By integrating electoral literacy into school and college curricula, researchers can cultivate a well-informed electorate from an early age. Higher educational institutions should take the lead in voter awareness initiatives, especially targeting first-time voters who may feel uncertain about the process. Moreover, strengthening media engagement to share accurate electoral information will help combat misinformation and build voter confidence.

8.1.3. Boosting Youth Electoral Participation

To tackle voter apathy among young people, researchers need to adopt targeted engagement strategies. The survey findings reveal strong support for online and digital voting options, which could simplify the voting process and encourage more young people to participate. Offering incentives, such as tax benefits or discounts, could also motivate young voters to participate in elections. Furthermore, political parties should strive to increase youth representation in leadership roles, ensuring that governance truly reflects the concerns and aspirations of younger generations.

8.1.4. Electoral Transparency and Trust Restoration

Restoring public confidence in elections hinges on increasing transparency throughout the electoral process. Implementing independent auditing mechanisms to verify election results is essential. Additionally, public observation measures—such as monitored ballot drop boxes and live-streamed vote counting—can help reinforce voter trust. Creating safe, accessible, and fraud-free voting environments is vital to encouraging higher participation and alleviating skepticism about electoral integrity.

8.1.5. Improving Electoral Infrastructure

Researchers can significantly enhance accessibility by simplifying the voter registration process and expanding digital voting facilities, particularly for urban populations and first-time voters. Establishing more accessible polling stations and providing online voter registration services will streamline participation for everyone. Prioritizing investments in technology-driven electoral reforms will modernize our voting procedures while ensuring security and fairness. By implementing these comprehensive recommendations—legislative reforms, voter education initiatives, youth engagement strategies, transparency measures, and infrastructure improvements—India can pave the way for a more participatory, trustworthy, and efficient electoral system that truly engages all citizens.

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