

India polls: Choosing none of the above

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For the first time, voters can exercise the "None of the above" option after an order from the Supreme Court [Reuters]

In less than a week's time, Indians will head to polling stations to choose their next government.

A staggering 814 million people are eligible to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections to be held in nine phases from April 7 to May 12.

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And for the first time, voters can exercise the "None of the above" (NOTA) option after an order from the Supreme Court.

The country's top court in a landmark judgement on September 27, 2009, ruled that right to register a "none of the above" vote in elections should apply, noting that it would increase participation.

Voting in the world's biggest democracy is done through Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) that will now have the NOTA option, a sign of the quality of candidates, with a large number of them tainted by corruption and court cases.

The newly formed anti-corruption party, Aam Aadmi Party (Common man party), which won a surprise election in Delhi last year, has brought the issue of corruption and political-criminal nexus in the public domain.

Will NOTA empower the voter. Will it bring about a change?

Al Jazeera asks prospective voters about their opinion on the new option, which gives them the liberty to choose none.

Ashwati CK, 23, Student, Kerala



[Al Jazeera]

India has adopted first-past-the post electoral system, in which the candidate securing highest number of votes polled wins. In this scenario, introduction of "none of the above" button in Electronic Voting Machines are hardly going to make any difference.

It can be viewed as a power provided to the voters to reject all candidates in case they find them as not eligible to be their representatives. Need of the hour is to devise mechanisms to contain the rampant criminalisation of politics and prohibiting malpractices during elections.

Naveen Bhartiya, 30, IT Professional, Bihar



[Al Jazeera]

NOTA is a welcome step towards strengthening the democratic selection process of candidates, but it is a toothless tiger in its current form. We can say through NOTA that all of the above candidates are not good, but NOTA does not empower the people to force political class to change the candidates. In my view, political parties should be forced to change a candidate if certain percentage of voters opt for NOTA.

People can also show their dissent towards political class and system by using the NOTA option. Voters in conflict areas such as North Eastern regions, Maoist dominated areas and Indian-administered Kashmir can use NOTA to highlight their plights and miseries. Democracy has to move ahead with Right to Reject, Right to Recall. The NOTA option is a beginning.

Naresh Rai, 32, Social Activist, Rajasthan



[Al Jazeera]

NOTA will help in increasing the voter turnout and hence make elections a more participatory exercise. While this will not make a difference to the electoral outcome as such, I do hope that in the future, Election Commission will implement the next logical step i.e. if the NOTA option is the choice of the majority of the voters in a particular constituency, then re-election should be held, with the condition that none of the candidates from the previous round can become candidates in the next round. This will prove effective and will force the political parties to introspect and put up good candidates in the electoral fray.

Dhanachandra Singh, 29, PhD scholar, Manipur



[Al Jazeera]

The introduction of the NOTA button in the Electronic Voting Machines is a good step in election processing in India. With this, we can definitely hope for a change in the mindset of candidates. This button will help people in expressing their opinion to all candidates. I definitely feel that the NOTA button will definitely bring changes in the upcoming elections.

Sourabh Ganpatye, 33, Media Professional, Mumbai



[Al Jazeera]

In the recent assembly elections, less than four percent voters used this (NOTA) option. It specifies the failure of this option. Moreover, in the upcoming general elections, voters have many choices in terms of caste, class, age and party of choice. So, there is no room for argument about candidates.

Dr Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan, 37, Professor, Bangalore



[Al Jazeera]

Electoral process is an instrument of representative democracy. It is the process in which people vote to choose a leader. The NOTA option, in its present form, clearly does not contribute towards this. While recommending the NOTA, the Honorable Supreme Court had identified three possible advantages - empowerment of voter (because of the additional choice), increase of voter turnout, and incentive for political parties to project clean candidates. But the simple provision of the NOTA option is unlikely to achieve any of these goals. NOTA votes, though counted for the sake of records, are considered 'invalid'.

Hence, it is unlikely that a significant number of voters will opt for NOTA and it will remain a futile statistical exercise.

India needs substantial, not symbolic, politico-electoral reforms, such as the Proportional Representation System of Election, which would indeed achieve what the apex court has so optimistically hoped to achieve through NOTA.

Geetika Mehta, 27, Animator, Delhi



[Al Jazeera]

Indian voters are dissatisfied with the candidates contesting elections, and NOTA give voters the option to not vote for any candidate listed on the ballot if they find all of them unsuitable.

If a large number of people in a given constituency vote for "None of the Above" then it would send a clear message to all the political parties that they have chosen a wrong candidate. India has a multi-party system, but there is one thing which is common in all parties is the increasing criminalisation and corruption. All political parties would make sure that people with criminal records should not contest elections.

Kamlesh Kumar, 29, Advocate, Delhi



[Al Jazeera]

I believe that (NOTA) is the first small step towards election reforms in India, however, this has not been very popular until yet. This is very incomplete in its present form, as it has not been popularised very well by the election commission. I have seen many advertisements by the Chief Election Officer of Delhi which asked people to vote, but I haven't come across any advertisement about the NOTA option.

I would better vote for the best available contestant rather than choosing NOTA. But definitely, there is a need for an option like NOTA which would at least instill a fear, if not enthusiasm, in the winners to work continuously or otherwise being chucked out altogether.

