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Introduction

None of the Above

The first round of the 2021 Ecuadorian presidential election was decided by an extremely narrow margin. Yaku Pérez of the indigenous Pachakutik Movement was nudged out of contention in the April runoff, winning only 32,115 fewer votes (0.35% of all votes cast) than eventual winner Guillermo Lasso.

After this close loss, Pérez demanded a recount of the votes from three provinces, claiming that fraud had altered the final outcome. Following several false starts and a cross-country protest march by Pérez's supporters, Ecuador's Supreme Electoral Tribunal declared that Lasso, not Pérez, would advance to the runoff.[1] After this determination, Pérez announced that he would not vote for either second-round candidate. Instead, he told his voters that he would spoil his runoff ballot, choosing "the third way" over the available options. Pérez was not alone. The Pachakutik Movement, as well as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, the country's largest pan-indigenous organization, called on their supporters to spoil their ballots to express disappointment that the runoff candidates did not represent their preferences (La República 2021).

On the day of the runoff, images of spoiled ballots circulated on social media. "[The candidates] aren't worth shit" (*valen verga*) read one such ballot (Belchi 2021). "They won't be able to rob this vote," read another, referencing Pérez's claims of election fraud (Pérez 2021). Pérez himself was photographed on Election Day casting a ballot with the words, "Yaku

president, resistance" (EuropaPress 2021). Nearly two million Ecuadorians cast spoiled ballots like these. Invalid votes accounted for 17.9% of all ballots cast in the runoff, a more than 5 percentage-point increase from the first round (12.7%) and nearly three times higher than the rate in the presidential runoff in 2017 (7.0%).

Political scientists tend to think that voters participate in elections to support their preferred party or to punish poorly performing incumbents. Yet, each year, millions of voters turn out and then choose not to select a candidate in executive elections around the world. Existing theories of voter behavior fail to explain why voters would go to the effort to turn out but then opt not to select a candidate, like so many did in Ecuador's 2021 presidential runoff. This book addresses this gap by answering two central questions. First, why do voters bear the costs of voting and then decide not to choose a candidate, but to cast "invalid" (blank or spoiled) votes? And, second, how do campaigns promoting the blank and spoiled vote influence this decision?

To explain the emergence and success of invalid vote campaigns, I first present a framework for understanding spoiled ballots in presidential elections as a tool that disgruntled, habitual voters use to express their discontent with the candidates on offer. Following from this understanding of invalid vote behavior when it is *not* mobilized, I derive expectations about voter behavior when it *is* mobilized. I argue that invalid vote campaigns should respond to the quality of democracy, emerging more often and garnering more electoral success when democratic backsliding has occurred and where none of the options have strong democratic credentials. Participation in campaigns promoting the invalid vote, then, is a tool of last resort for committed democrats who want to voice their concerns about weakness in *elections* while also expressing a preference for high-quality *democracy*.

I assess these arguments using data from executive elections in Latin America. Because rates of invalid voting in Latin America are the highest in the world (IDEA 2022), and campaigns promoting the spoiled vote have emerged across the region since initial democratic transitions in the twentieth century, this is the ideal region to develop and test general arguments about the nature of invalid vote campaigns.

In the twenty-first century, democratically elected illiberal political leaders from the left and right have used ostensibly legal means to undermine democracy, weakening checks from other branches of government, proscribing opposition parties, and silencing dissent (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Schedler 2002). Given this global democratic reces-

sion (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), understanding how and under what circumstances citizens use different tools to respond to declining democratic quality is a pressing question. Recent scholarship shows that Latin Americans, increasingly disaffected by the disconnect between politicians' promises and policy outcomes, engage in a range of behaviors to voice their discontent and improve governance. Citizens have taken to the streets to voice their discontent with politics (Boulding 2014; Moseley 2018), elected populists and antiestablishment candidates (Carreras 2012; Weyland 2020), supported impeachments to remove low-quality incumbents (Pérez Liñán 2007), and advocated for constitutional reform (Corrales 2018) in attempting to improve their democracies. Yet, democratic quality often *declines* in the aftermath of such society-wide protests. I show that invalid voting follows a distinct dynamic. As with other forms of protest, invalid voting is more common when democracy is in decline. Strategic political elites and civil society actors are more likely to attempt to mobilize the invalid vote during such moments, seeking either personal political gain or to effect political change. However, the aftermath of invalid vote campaigns is rarely one of democratic decline. If anything, invalid vote campaigns may *improve* the quality of democracy in the short term.

Outlining the Phenomenon: What Are Invalid Votes?

What is an invalid vote, and why do citizens cast them? Invalid ballots are those that have been destroyed or marked in such a way that election officials are unable to identify the voter's candidate preference. There are two types of invalid votes: ballots that are left unmarked (called "blank" or "empty" ballots), and those that are mismarked (called "null" or "spoiled" votes).

In fair democratic elections, voters receive unmarked ballots from election officials when they enter the voting booth. If a voter decides not to mark that ballot for a given contest, then her ballot is counted as blank for that race. Most countries report the portion of blank ballots separately from null or spoiled votes.[2]

Null or spoiled ballots vary much more widely, as do the laws identifying them. In some countries, like Australia, ballots are marked as spoiled only if markings on the ballot prevent election officials from identifying the voter's intent or identify the voter (Australian Electoral Commission 2019). In other countries, like Peru, any unsanctioned mark on a ballot paper is grounds to invalidate that vote, regardless of the clarity of a voter's

intent (RPP Noticias 2021).[3] There are thus many ways to spoil a ballot, ranging from the relatively straightforward (e.g., an affirmative selection of all options) to the creative (e.g., peppering the ballot with commentary, as above). Most electoral commissions report a single "null vote" total that includes all mismarked ballots.

Voters can leave their ballots empty or mark them incorrectly by accident. Especially in contexts where citizens have relatively low levels of education, correctly casting a ballot may represent a cognitive or mechanical challenge for many voters (McAllister and Makkai 1993; Power and Garand 2007). Complex electoral rules and an overabundance of candidates are also associated with higher rates of invalid votes, which scholars attribute to confusion or error (Cunow et al. 2021; Lysek et al. 2020; Mott 1926).[4] And while colorful ballots that include party symbols and candidate images have been introduced to facilitate voting for illiterate or innumerate populations, these complex ballots may cause higher rates of unintentional vote spoiling than simpler technologies (Reynolds and Streenbergen 2006; Pachón et al. 2017; Pierzgalski et al. 2019).[5]

Executive elections, and presidential elections in particular, should be the least prone to such voter error. Structurally, presidential elections are simple: voters do not have to consider party lists or district magnitude, nor are they required to rank their options. A voter casts a single preference vote for an individual candidate. Depending on local rules, if a candidate wins a plurality or an absolute or qualified majority, she wins the election.[6] In many Latin American democracies, if a candidate fails to meet a minimum vote threshold (often an absolute majority of valid votes), the top-two vote getters advance to a runoff. Again, voters cast a preference vote for a single option, and the candidate with the most votes wins the election.

At the same time, information about presidential candidates is widely available. Unlike lower-level contests that may include dozens of candidates with relatively obscure profiles, presidential elections are discussed regularly in national media. Even voters who are uninterested in politics are likely to be incidentally exposed to information about the candidates through soft news or social media (e.g., Baum and Jamison 2006; Feezell 2018). And, as partisan contests, presidential elections provide voters with readily accessible heuristics that can further simplify voters' decisions (e.g., Mondak 1993; Sniderman et al. 1993). In other words, not only is the mechanical task of selecting a candidate at its simplest in presidential races, so too is the cognitive task. As a result, intentional ballot invalidation should be at its highest in presidential elections.

What Invalid Votes Are Not

In this book, I treat invalid voting in presidential elections as an intentional, politically motivated behavior. Doing so runs counter to several common scholarly perceptions of invalid voting, in particular that spoiled ballots are primarily driven by voter error, that blank votes are the equivalent of abstention under mandatory voting, and that invalidating the ballot is interchangeable with other protest tools used by disgruntled citizens, such as street demonstration and voting for antiestablishment candidates. In what follows, I present evidence in support of this understanding of the invalid vote.

A first common conception of invalid ballots is that they are predominantly cast by accident. If invalid voting in presidential elections were driven primarily by error, invalid vote rates should decline as Latin American democracies age. This is because, as citizens gain experience with voting, they should be less likely to commit errors. However, official electoral data, presented in figure 1.1, show remarkable *stability* in invalid vote rates since the democratic transitions of the 1970s and 1980s. Hollow circles denote invalid vote rates in first-round presidential elections, and closed gray circles indicate invalid vote rates in runoff elections. The black line represents the estimated year-over-year trend in first-round invalid voting, and the gray line is the equivalent trend, calculated for runoff elections.

While invalid vote rates vary widely in presidential elections, the figure reveals little in the way of cross-time trends. Average invalid vote rates in first-round presidential elections remained effectively flat over this period, accounting for 5.9% of the total vote, on average. In runoff elections, blank and spoiled votes represent 6.6% of the total vote on average during this period.[7]

A close reading of news sources from the region provides additional evidence that most invalid votes in presidential elections are cast in protest, rather than by accident. To make this assessment, I analyzed the content of 1,995 news stories collected from national and international news sources covering 18 Latin American democracies and including the terms "blank" or "spoiled" vote in reference to a presidential election.[8] I read each story and used an inductive coding scheme to describe the coverage.

A plurality (about 49%) of news stories provide exclusively factual information about invalid votes, for example by reporting official election returns. About 19% of news stories describe the invalid vote in terms of parties' or voters' strategic considerations. For example, one story from Chile in January 2000 describes those who cast invalid ballots as an impor-
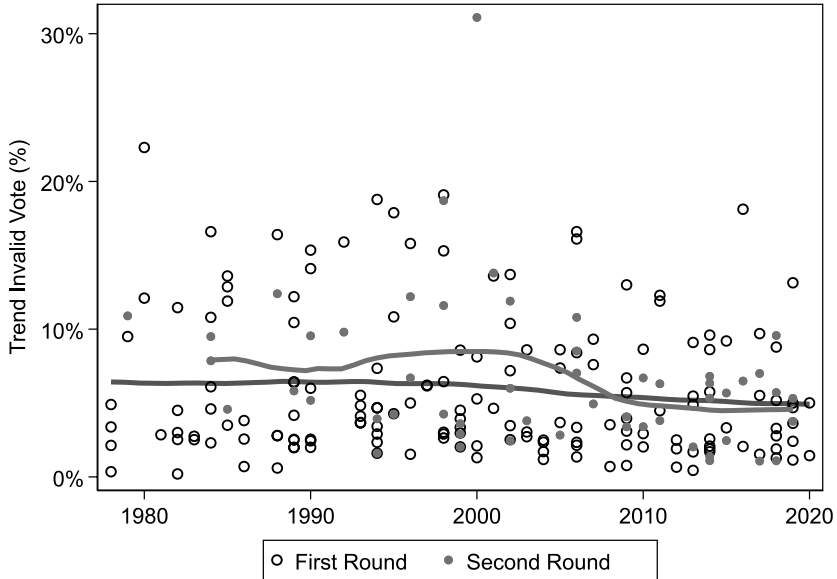
Figure 1.1. Invalid Voting over Time, across Election Rounds, Latin America (1978–2020)
Source: Original data collection, electoral management bodies.

tant electoral bloc: "The campaign teams for both candidates began [the day after the first-round election] to make organizational and communications adjustments to break the 'virtual tie' that swept the polls, but above all to design a strategy that enables them to capture those sneaky [*esquivos*] voters who preferred to vote blank, null, or simply abstained from voting" (Pérez 2000). This kind of coverage implies that individuals who invalidate their votes are members of a "swing" constituency that is both *able* to cast valid ballots and can be won over with the right messaging.[9]

The next most common category of news coverage describes invalid vote campaigns. About 15% of news stories mention efforts to mobilize voters to leave their ballots blank or spoil them—an intentional, protest-motivated form of invalid voting. A smaller portion of news stories ascribes specific protest intentions to invalid votes. Most notably, about 12% of stories attribute invalid voting to anticandidate sentiment, while 9% of stories attribute blank and spoiled voting to the unrepresentative nature of the candidates or parties competing in the election. More infrequently, those who invalidate their votes are called irresponsible (4% of stories), urged not to cast blank or spoiled votes (4%), or exhorted that this behavior ben-

efits the leading candidate (3%). Of all news coverage, only a small fraction (3%) attributes invalid votes to voter error.

Finally, survey data also affirms that many voters invalidate their presidential ballots intentionally. Many international survey projects exclude the invalid vote as a response option to vote questions, reflecting the belief that this behavior is primarily accidental and making it impossible to conduct cross-regional analysis of survey data. However, the AmericasBarometer project includes this response option in its retrospective vote choice question across countries. For 21 country-years between 2008 and 2019 where an election occurred during the 12 months prior to an AmericasBarometer survey data collection, I compared reported rates of invalid voting in the survey data to official electoral returns from national electoral management bodies.[10] In most countries, rates of invalid voting reported using the retrospective measure are quite close to official results. In 33% of cases, the survey estimate is not statistically distinguishable from reported vote totals using a standard 95% confidence interval. But even where the survey estimate differs significantly from official reports, these differences are relatively small: the median value is an underestimate of 1.7 percentage points.[11] This suggests that a substantial portion of individuals who invalidate their ballots are aware of having done so. In short, electoral data, news reports, and survey data show that invalid voting in presidential elections is *not* primarily driven by voter error.

A second common view of the invalid vote is that it serves as a functional equivalent of abstention, especially in countries where voting is mandatory. Because abstention is costly where mandatory vote laws are enforced, apathetic or disengaged citizens who would prefer to abstain are obliged to turn out. One notion that follows is that such individuals will not care to gather information about the candidates, and they may cast invalid votes as a way to abstain from decision-making while fulfilling the legal obligation to participate (Gray and Caul 2000; Hirczy 1994; Hooghe et al. 2011; Singh 2019; Zulfikarpasic 2001). The implication is that, in mandatory vote countries, rates of invalid voting will be higher and individuals who spoil their votes will be disengaged, expressing low knowledge of and interest in politics (Hill and Rutledge-Prior 2016). In voluntary vote countries, according to this view, intentional invalid voting should occur less often, and these votes should not be attributable to low political engagement (because less engaged individuals are free to abstain).

Certainly, rates of invalid voting are higher in countries where turnout is mandated and that mandate is enforced: in the elections examined here, average first-round invalid vote rates in mandatory vote countries were

twice as high as where voting is voluntary (8.2% versus 4.1%). However, as chapter 2 details, analysis of focus group and survey data provides little evidence that invalidating the vote in mandatory vote countries disproportionately reflects voter apathy, compared to voluntary vote countries. In other words, while *some* invalid voting in presidential elections is a replacement behavior for abstention, *much* invalid voting in these elections is not.

A third common perception is that invalidating the ballot is simply one more tool in protestors' toolkits in a region that is highly engaged in contentious politics. However, data from the cross-national AmericasBarometer survey project shows that citizens who invalidate their ballots differ in key ways from those who participate in street protest or vote for antiestablishment candidates. To examine similarities and differences across these groups, I analyzed data from 23 nationally representative surveys that were conducted within a year of a presidential election. Only 2% of respondents who reported either casting an invalid vote or participating in a street protest in the past year had engaged in both behaviors. This is suggestive evidence that those who intentionally spoil their votes are different people from those who take to the streets in Latin American democracies. Alternatively, invalidating the ballot could serve as a *replacement* for other protest behaviors (Desai and Lee 2021). If this were the case, then individuals who intentionally invalidate their ballots should have similar demographic and attitudinal profiles to those who vote for antiestablishment candidates or participate in street protests. I do not find support for this expectation. Results presented in the appendix (table A1.2) show that, compared to both outsider voters and street protestors, those who cast invalid ballots express lower presidential approval, less interest in politics, and are substantially less likely to belong to a political party. In short, although invalid vote rates are higher where other forms of protest occur (e.g., Power and Garand 2007), those who spoil their ballots in presidential elections represent a distinct group of citizens from those who vote for protest candidates, or those who participate in street protests. Indeed, chapter 2 shows that those who cast invalid votes closely resemble other habitual voters, but that they are particularly disgruntled with respect to low-quality candidates and persistent, poor performance.

Theoretical and Empirical Questions about Invalid Vote Campaigns

This discussion defining invalid votes and delineating patterns in who casts blank and spoiled ballots in executive elections raises theoretical and

empirical questions. Below, I detail these questions and outline this book's answers to them.

Theoretical Questions

Canonical understandings of turnout treat voting as a costly action: it implies nontrivial time, information, and travel costs while providing voters with few benefits (e.g., Downs 1957). From this perspective, it is puzzling that an individual would bear the costs of voting and then opt not to select a candidate. A first theoretical puzzle, then, is why voters bear the costs of turning out and then choose not to vote for any of the available candidates.

I answer this question by examining the psychology of individuals who spoil their ballots. I build on scholarship that argues that voting can be very *low cost* for habitual voters (Aldrich 1993), that turning out carries important psychological benefits for habitual voters (Blais 2000), and that abstention implies psychological and social costs for such individuals (Aytaç and Stokes 2019; Blais and Achen 2019). For those who habitually participate in politics but are unhappy with the specific candidates and policies on offer, invalidating the ballot can serve as a means to express distaste for the options while demonstrating buy-in to democracy and avoiding costly abstention by participating in elections.

A second theoretical puzzle relates to the emergence of campaigns promoting the blank and spoiled vote. To annul an election result, invalid ballots must commonly constitute an absolute majority or supermajority of the total vote—a threshold higher than that reached by the vast majority of successful political candidates. Chapter 4 shows that invalid vote campaigns are unpopular with the public, making the task of mobilizing voters to engage in this costly political action even more difficult. Further, organizing a political campaign promoting the spoiled vote is costly. Campaigners must not only mobilize voters, which implies both time costs (e.g., time spent on organization and outreach) and financial costs (e.g., for campaign advertising), but must also convince those voters to bear the costs of participating *without reaping the rewards of potentially voting for a winning candidate*. Given these costs, and the very low likelihood of achieving their ultimate goals, we might expect campaigns promoting the invalid vote to emerge very rarely. Yet chapter 3 shows that invalid vote campaigns have occurred in more than one-quarter of post-transition presidential elections in Latin America, and are in fact increasing over time. What accounts for the frequent emergence of invalid vote campaigns?

To answer this question, I turn to features of the political context that are likely to affect voters' decisions. The global context of democratic recession should affect committed democrats' calculations over invalidating the ballot. Democracy has been "the only game in town" (Schmitter and Karl 1991) in most Latin American countries since regime transitions in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, in recent years, incumbent leaders across Latin America have taken steps to undermine democratic quality, eliminating presidential term limits (e.g., in Bolivia), weakening checks from other branches of government (e.g., in Guatemala, El Salvador), undermining press freedom (e.g., in Mexico), and proscribing legitimate opposition party candidates (e.g., in Nicaragua). As politicians degrade the quality of democracy, voters who are strongly committed to the political system should respond. If a single undemocratic candidate is on the ballot and elections are likely to be conducted fairly, committed democrats may choose to vote for a candidate whose policies they otherwise would not support rather than invalidate their vote in protest. This is because spoiling the ballot when an illiberal candidate is viable increases the likelihood that this unacceptable candidate will win. In these circumstances, campaigns promoting the invalid vote should also be uncommon, as it will be harder to mobilize voters who view invalidating the ballot as irresponsible given the political alternatives.

However, some forms of democratic backsliding diminish the quality of elections themselves. If an incumbent's actions undermine elections to the extent that voters no longer believe they will be conducted fairly, democracy's supporters should be increasingly willing to rally against the available options.[12] This is because backsliding affects the likelihood that an invalid vote will alter the final election outcome. When elections are relatively fair, there is a chance—even if it is minimal—that an illiberal candidate will lose. However, when backsliding undermines electoral fairness, voters may come to believe that the probability of casting a decisive vote is, in fact, zero. In these circumstances, voting for an opposition candidate can serve to legitimate unfair elections. Invalidating the ballot, in contrast, carries the benefit of explicitly signaling protest. Campaigns promoting the invalid vote should thus be more appealing to committed democrats when incumbents undermine the quality of elections. In short, if backsliding has undermined the fairness of elections, pro-democracy voters should be more amenable to appeals promoting the invalid vote, making these campaigns more likely both to emerge and to succeed.

This theoretical perspective suggests that invalid voting behavior, mobilized and not, responds to democratic quality. Abrupt changes in

invalid voting behavior—both sudden increases and declines—can thus be interpreted as a leading indicator of declining democratic health from a citizen perspective. And declining democratic quality in Latin America in recent years is, in turn, a likely contributor to the increasing emergence of invalid vote campaigns over time.

Empirical Questions

This book also provides substantial evidence addressing—and often contradicting—common empirical claims about invalid votes. Scholars have focused relatively little attention on blank and spoiled ballots and the individuals who cast them, frequently viewing these votes as electorally unimportant. Campaigns mobilizing invalid ballots have received even less attention, likely due to perceptions that they occur infrequently and have little effect on election outcomes (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2018; Kouba and Lysek 2016). I show that this scholarly consensus is incorrect. Invalid ballots are regularly electorally important in Latin American presidential elections. In fact, campaigns promoting the invalid vote occurred in 26% of post-transition presidential elections (chapter 3), and half of these campaigns were followed by an increase in the invalid vote (chapter 5).

Invalid ballots are usually tallied and then removed from final vote calculations; they therefore have no direct, observable effect on electoral outcomes.[13] However, invalid ballots do *indirectly* affect election results. For example, because they are removed from the electoral tally, high rates of invalid voting shrink the universe of votes from which outcomes are decided, effectively decreasing the number of votes a candidate must earn in order to win office (the "threshold for inclusion"). At the same time, the invalid vote often represents an important proportion of the total vote. In 27% of first- or single-round Latin American presidential elections from 1980 to 2020, the invalid vote rate was larger than the vote margin separating the top two vote-getters. And the invalid vote surpassed the margin of victory in 37% of runoff elections during this period. All told, in more than three of every 10 presidential elections in the post-transition period, altering the behavior of those who cast invalid ballots could have changed the final election result. Individuals who cast blank and spoiled votes can thus represent an important swing constituency for strategic politicians. While capturing the votes of those who are inclined to invalidate their ballots may not guarantee victory, it can, and some politicians are aware of this possibility.

Further, invalid votes *can* have a direct effect on election outcomes. In

several Latin American countries, elections are automatically nullified if a certain proportion (usually a majority or supermajority) of ballots are invalidated. While no national election has been cancelled through this mechanism as of this writing, subnational and supranational contests have been (e.g., Palacio Vélez 2018)—and, as chapter 3 details, campaigns that mobilize voters to spoil their ballots are increasingly common. In short, not only do invalid votes indirectly shape election outcomes, they increasingly have the potential to have a large, direct effect on election outcomes.

Invalid vote campaigns can also shape other features of elections. First, and most obviously, these campaigns may affect blank and spoiled vote rates when they occur, altering election results as outlined above. Additionally, invalid vote campaigns may shape the *electorate*. Invalid vote campaigns have the potential to mobilize formerly disenchanted citizens to engage unconventionally in electoral politics. Once citizens turn out to vote, scholars find that they are significantly more likely to continue to do so in future elections (e.g., Coppock and Green 2015). A voter who turns out to spoil her ballot as part of an invalid vote campaign may thus become newly motivated to engage in politics in the future. Invalid vote campaigns could therefore have the downstream effect of increasing turnout among formerly demobilized groups. At the same time, invalid vote campaigns can make blank and spoiled ballots a salient tool of protest for disgruntled voters in *future* elections. By linking the invalid vote to protest, invalid vote campaigns can lead to the diffusion of this tactic and increase its use in future elections (Superti 2020). Invalid vote campaigns thus have the potential to shape the ways that voters interact with politics and understand their options when entering the voting booth.

Finally, invalid vote campaigns may have downstream consequences for *democracy*. If elites interpret invalid vote campaigns as a signal of dissatisfaction with declining democratic performance, then the quality of democracy should improve following invalid vote campaigns. This is because election-oriented politicians should seek to win back the support of invalid voters, and pro-democracy politicians should gain an electoral advantage. However, if elites interpret invalid voting as a signal of low public buy-in to democracy, then incumbents should increasingly engage in democratic backsliding in the wake of invalid vote campaigns. Elites' perceptions of voters' beliefs should also affect their future campaign strategies. For example, if elites believe that a preponderance of spoiled votes signals lagging faith in democracy, antiestablishment candidates should be more likely to compete, and should have greater electoral success, in the wake of invalid vote campaigns.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 details the book's central argument. Using data from original focus groups and cross-national surveys, and drawing on theories of voter behavior from American and comparative politics, I argue that, when unmobilized, invalid voting should be a tool used most often by habitual voters who are unhappy with the candidate options. For these individuals, turning out to vote is a very low-cost activity they engage in regularly; invalidating the ballot therefore implies no additional time or information costs but provides a modest expressive benefit compared to voting for a "least-bad" candidate option. I then build on this argument to derive expectations over public responses to invalid vote campaigns. I argue that invalid vote campaigns serve as a heuristic that can increase the potential benefit of a blank or spoiled vote by assigning it a specific protest meaning while also decreasing information costs for unengaged citizens. In the wake of democratic backsliding, committed democrats may become less likely to cast invalid ballots, as doing so under such circumstances may enable a voter's least-preferred, illiberal candidate to enter office. However, when backsliding undermines electoral integrity, committed democrats should become more persuadable, as spoiling the ballot becomes a tool of last resort to signal concerns about the quality of democracy.

Having detailed theoretical expectations over how citizens will engage with invalid vote campaigns, chapter 3 presents descriptive information about these campaigns. I analyze a novel dataset of invalid vote campaigns, which I created using local news sources, to show that these campaigns have emerged more frequently over time, and that they regularly cite a range of grievances including corruption among the candidates, unrepresentative candidate options, low candidate quality, and flawed elections. I then use data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project to assess whether these contextual factors are associated with invalid vote campaign emergence. I find that campaigns are more likely to occur when incumbents intimidate opposition parties.

How do voters view invalid vote campaigns, and does their support for these efforts shift based on features of the campaign? Chapter 4 answers these questions drawing primarily on survey experimental data from Peru, a country with a long history of invalid vote campaigns that often experiences high rates of blank and spoiled voting. A substantial plurality of Peruvians expresses strong disapproval of invalid vote campaigns in general. However, when campaigns protest an egregious grievance (e.g., political corruption or likely electoral fraud), approval increases significantly. Con-

sistent with expectations that invalid vote campaigns will attract commit-
ted democrats in the wake of backsliding, these gains in approval are most
marked among respondents who express higher support for democracy.
I then turn to campaign leadership. I find that Peruvians express lower
approval of invalid vote campaigns that are led by politicians versus citi-
zen groups; however, a campaign's stated preference for democracy has no
effect on campaign approval. These results are conditioned by citizens'
prior feelings toward political parties and democracy. In particular, respon-
dents who distrust political parties express significantly lower approval of
campaigns led by parties compared to campaigns led by citizen groups.
And respondents who express low support for democracy express signifi-
cantly higher approval of antidemocracy invalid vote campaigns compared
to pro-democracy efforts.

Having shown that citizen approval of invalid vote campaigns shifts
based on campaign leadership and grievances, chapters 5 and 6 ask whether
these individual-level findings predict aggregate election outcomes. Chap-
ter 5 examines the extent to which campaign leadership and grievances, as
well as other features of the political environment, explain the success or
failure of invalid vote campaigns in a broader set of subnational and national
invalid vote campaigns. I examine subnational data from null vote cam-
paigns in Peruvian gubernatorial elections from 2010 to 2018 and in Latin
American presidential elections from 1980 to 2020. Consistent with exper-
imental results presented in chapter 4, I find that invalid vote campaigns
organized around egregious grievances succeed more often. In particular,
campaigns citing corruption and credible claims of election fraud succeed
at higher-than-average rates. The chapter closes by turning to questions of
causality. Does the emergence of invalid vote campaigns affect voters' will-
ingness to spoil their ballots, or do these campaigns instead emerge where
the public is already poised to nullify their votes? The evidence points to
the latter scenario. Invalid vote campaigns do not appear to create inter-
est in casting blank and spoiled votes; rather, campaigns are more likely
to emerge and gain strength where the public has demonstrated that it is
already inclined to cast protest votes.

Chapter 6 examines the mechanisms through which invalid vote cam-
paigns succeed or fail by presenting four comparative case studies of
invalid vote campaigns in gubernatorial elections in the Peruvian depart-
ments of Áncash and Arequipa. Both departments experienced invalid vote
campaigns in 2014 and 2018; only the 2014 campaign in Áncash failed to
increase the prevalence of spoiled ballots. By comparing departments to
one another at two points in time, and to themselves across time, I am

able to control for specific departmental features to examine the ways that campaigns succeed or fail. I draw on news reports, public opinion data, and personal interviews with campaigners, journalists, and political informants in both regions to trace the paths these campaigns followed to success or failure. The case studies reveal three likely mechanisms for campaign failure. First, citizens may view elites promoting the invalid vote as self-serving, or as sore losers, and politicians' actions can exacerbate this perception. Second, citizens may not receive information about invalid vote campaigns when campaigns exclusively use traditional media outlets to publicize their message. Third, when a null vote campaign's grievances apply asymmetrically to the candidates, voters may overlook these grievances and choose to vote for the "least-bad" option.

Are null vote campaigns bad for democracy, on average? More broadly, what are the downstream effects of invalid vote campaigns on democratic politics and political engagement in the societies where they occur? Chapter 7 answers these questions with V-Dem data, official candidate biographies, and electoral data. I find that across a range of measures, democratic quality is stable or *improves* after invalid vote campaigns occur. That is, invalid vote campaigns not only do not precipitate short-term declines in democratic quality, but may buoy democracies at risk of backsliding. In the aftermath of invalid vote campaigns, antiestablishment candidates win a larger share of the vote, although this tendency appears to result from underlying protest tendencies in the population rather than from invalid vote campaigns. Finally, turning to patterns of participation, the results are clear: turnout does not change following invalid vote campaigns, but voters cast blank and spoiled ballots at substantially higher rates in presidential and gubernatorial elections. Invalid vote campaigns thus appear to shape public understanding of invalid ballots as a salient and viable option through which to express discontent.

The book concludes by considering remaining questions about the downstream consequences of invalid vote campaigns for the individuals who participate in them and the societies where they occur.