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Encouraging voter participation in the electoral process

Purpose:

This briefing provides information about the reasons some people don't participate in the electoral process, and the work the Electoral Commission is doing to encourage participation.

Minister	Action Sought	Minister's Deadline
Hon Kris Faafoi, Minister of Justice	Note the contents of this briefing. Note that the Electoral Commission intends to publish a copy of this briefing on its website.	When convenient

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)

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Purpose

1. This briefing provides information about the reasons some people don't participate in the electoral process, and the work the Electoral Commission is doing to encourage participation.

Background

2. At its meeting with you in January 2021 the Electoral Commission's Board offered to provide you with a briefing on how the Commission is addressing barriers for youth, Māori, Pasifika and disengaged communities in the electoral process.
3. The Commission wants to ensure that New Zealand has a healthy democracy by encouraging high levels of participation. To support this objective, the Commission regularly undertakes research to understand voter behaviour and demographics, and monitor trends. The insights we get from this work are particularly important given that the population of New Zealand is becoming more diverse in terms of culture, language, education and socio-economic status. We also see varying levels of understanding, engagement and experience of the electoral process among different voter and non-voter groups.
4. This briefing summarises the key findings from our research and outlines the key strategies used to promote participation, which centre around ensuring people:
 - have a good understanding of the electoral process
 - feel motivated to participate
 - find it simple and straightforward to take part in electoral events.

Some demographic groups are less likely to enrol and vote

5. Overall New Zealand has a high rate of enrolment, and over the past three elections, turnout of enrolled voters increased from 77.9 percent in 2014 to 82.2 percent in 2020.
6. However, there continue to be groups who are less likely to enrol and vote, including Māori, Pasifika, new New Zealanders and young people (18 to 24-year-olds). As a result, the Commission has focused on lifting voter participation in these groups. They are less likely to vote due to their lower levels of engagement and/or lower understanding of the electoral process.

Turnouts of these groups have improved in recent elections

7. Table 1 shows that turnout in the Māori electorates (voters on the Māori roll) increased from 65.1 percent in 2014 to 69.1 percent in 2020. Turnout rates for Māori on both the Māori and general rolls is higher and increased from 67.6 percent in 2014 to 72.9 percent in 2020.
8. Table 1 also shows that turnout of younger voters has improved significantly. The turnout of enrolled 18 to 24-year-olds increased from 62.7 percent in 2014 to 78.0 percent in 2020.

Table 1. Māori and youth turnout at the 2014 and 2020 General Elections

Turnout as a percentage of those enrolled	2014 General Election (%)	2020 General Election (%)
Māori on Māori roll	65.1	69.1
Māori on Māori and General rolls	67.6	72.9
18-24 year olds	62.7	78.0
Overall turnout	77.9	82.2

9. We are unable to provide a breakdown of enrolment or turnout rates for Pasifika or new New Zealanders as the Commission does not collect ethnicity data. Self-reported enrolment rates for these groups in our 2020 post-election voter and non-voter survey have improved since the last election. 88 percent of Pasifika and 92 percent of Asian respondents said they were enrolled compared with 77 percent and 91 percent respectively in 2017. Despite the high enrolment rates, electorates where we know these populations are higher have significantly lower turnout including Botany, Māngere, Manurewa, Panmure-Ōtāhuhu and Takanini.

The main reasons for not voting in 2020 were personal barriers

10. In our most recent survey of voters and non-voters, the biggest reason for not voting in 2020 was due to **personal barriers** such as:
- personal commitments (11 percent)
 - work commitments (5 percent)
 - religious reasons not to vote (8 percent)
 - health reasons (5 percent).
11. Zero percent stated disability as a personal barrier, as in 2017. These personal barrier reasons were 28 percent of all the 'main' reasons for not voting and 35 percent of the total reasons for not voting. The latter is significantly higher than in 2017 (20 percent).
12. More detailed analysis of personal barriers in 2020 shows that:
- Those of Māori ethnicity were more likely to say they had work commitments (13 percent versus 3 percent for non-Māori ethnicity)
 - Those aged 50+ were more likely to say they had religious reasons for not voting (18 percent versus 6 percent aged 18-49 years)
 - Those aged 30-49 years were more likely to say that they had health reasons for not voting (7 percent versus 0 percent for other age groups)
 - Those of Asian ethnicity were more likely to say they had personal commitments (22 percent versus 9 percent for non-Asian ethnicity).
13. The second main category of reasons for not voting was **not knowing who to vote for** at 22 percent of all main reasons given, which is consistent with 2017 (18 percent). This was a function of not knowing who to vote for (17 percent),

not being able to work out who to vote for (5 percent), and not knowing the candidates (1 percent).

14. **Voting process** barriers accounted for 7 percent of main reasons for not voting. This is consistent with the 2017 result. This result was driven by people not being enrolled (4 percent) – which was down from 7 percent in 2017.
15. The amount of stated **practical access barriers** to not voting was low (2 percent in 2020) and decreased compared to 2017 (7 percent).
16. There were also many non-voters who gave other reasons for not voting (see Appendix 1). Of these, most comments were related to non-voters feeling the election result was foregone or inevitable so their vote wouldn't make a difference.

We use a segmentation approach to understand voters and non-voters

17. For the 2020 electoral cycle we also used a segmentation approach to better understand voter engagement. Through this research we identified eight distinct segments based on types and levels of engagement with the electoral process. Four of the segments relate to voters and four relate to non-voters (see Appendix 2). The largest voter segment is called 'responsive' and the largest non-voter segment is called 'apathetic'.
18. We have been able to characterise each engagement segment in terms of demographics. For example, the 'apathetic' segment is more likely to be younger, renting, single, female, living in Auckland, Māori or Asian. Our research has also identified the media and communications preferences of each segment.

We build understanding and motivation through information and education campaigns and community engagement

19. A key approach we have taken to drive engagement and participation in the electoral process is through the public information and education campaigns that we run during an electoral event.
20. The development of our campaign for the 2020 General Election was informed by the voter segmentation approach referred to above. This enabled us to tailor information for different audiences. In particular, we sought to address lower levels of understanding and motivation to take part.
21. For the 2020 General Election the campaign had three objectives:
 - To raise awareness about taking part in the general election and referendums.
 - To provide all New Zealanders with simple, accurate and engaging information to enable them to enrol and vote in ways which will appeal to a range of audiences.
 - To inspire and motivate communities with lower participation rates to enrol and vote by reducing the perceived effort of participation while increasing its perceived rewards.

22. To support and enhance the targeted public information and education campaigns in elections we also run an ongoing programme of community engagement to engage with specific groups under-represented in electoral participation. It focuses on geographical areas/communities of those identified that are the hardest to engage in the electoral process.
23. The community engagement programme has three broad objectives:
- Build enduring partnerships with stakeholders who can promote the value of participating in New Zealand's electoral processes and who can influence their communities to participate.
 - Provide targeted information which will educate and inform communities about New Zealand's system of democracy, how to participate and the value of participating.
 - Recruit and build a Commission-wide workforce with the capacity to develop and implement targeted participation programmes for hard to engage voters.
24. The 2020 General Election posed unique challenges for the community engagement programme. This required a switch in focus to predominantly digital engagement, supported by 'off-line' approaches where appropriate. The programme had three phases:
- Connecting with communities
 - Encouraging, inspiring and motivating electors to enrol or update their details.
 - Sharing key recruitment and referendum messages.
 - Supporting our communities so people would:
 - know what to expect at the voting place
 - know what to do if they couldn't go to a voting place, for example for health or mobility reasons
 - know where they could vote.
 - Enrolling and voting
 - Providing enrolment expertise in voting places.

We aim to make it simple and easy for voters to participate

25. In recent election cycles the Commission has aimed to make enrolment and voting as easy as possible by reducing voting process and practical access barriers. A range of tactics have been used such as the introduction of the EasyVote card, a digital enrolment option, making voting places more accessible, and the introduction of a Voter Assistant role in voting places. All these tactics help to reduce barriers and pain points in the voting process.
26. More could be done in future, for example to improve the voting experience for Māori and people with disabilities. However, as process improvements can involve significant cost to roll them out nationwide the Commission does need to

carefully consider their affordability, practicability, and relative cost-effectiveness.

Next steps

27. While the results of our work in the 2020 General Election to reach those less likely to enrol and vote is pleasing, there is still more that could be done to maintain and improve participation rates.
28. Gaining traction with non-voters is a long-term goal and requires an ongoing effort between elections. Between now and the next election, we will continue to engage with a range of groups to build understanding and participation through on the ground activity, education programmes and advertising campaigns that resonate with these audiences.
29. A key strategic priority for the Commission is to strengthen relationships with the people and groups who support us to deliver elections and build understanding of the electoral system. This work includes ensuring we have the cultural capacity to increase and deepen our partnership with Māori. We will be consulting groups representing disabled people as we work to update our disability strategy to make enrolling and voting more accessible. We have memorandums of understanding with groups that have trusted voices in the Pasifika community including Pasifika Futures, and in the migrant and refugee community, including English Language Partners New Zealand. These agreements help us in our efforts to provide information and support to enrol and vote to all communities, and to increase participation.
30. The Commission will also, as part of its work on the design of the next election and the preparation of a funding bid for Budget 2022, look at what might be needed to maintain or improve participation and what investment will be required.

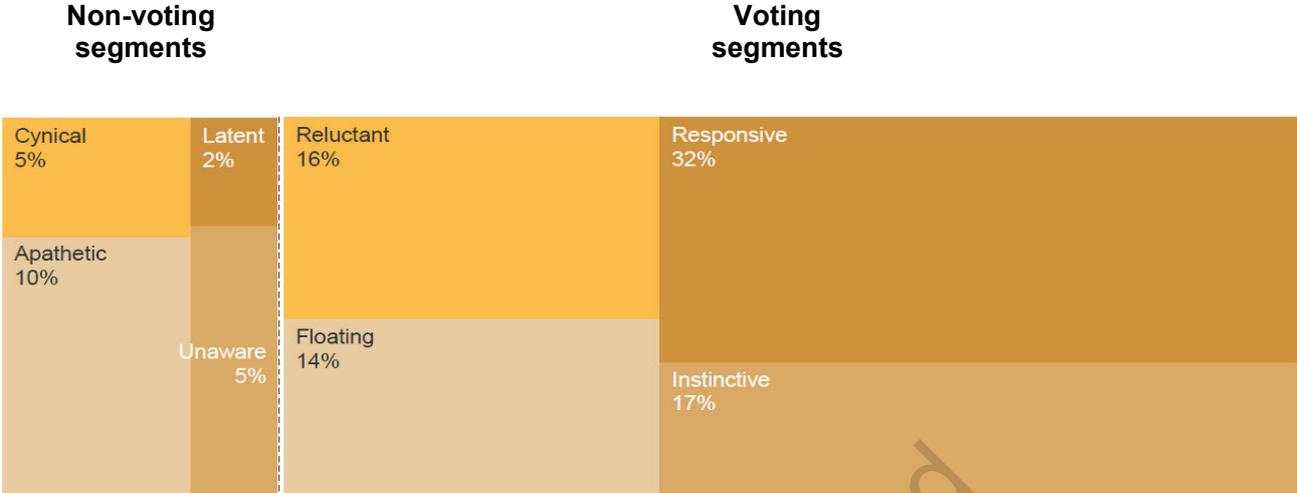
Appendix 1: Main reason and total reasons for not voting in the 2017 and 2020 General Elections*

	Main reason		Total reasons	
	2017	2020	2017	2020
Didn't know who to vote for	18%	22%	20%	25%
Didn't know who to vote for	-	17%	-	20%
Couldn't work out who to vote for	17%↑	5%↓	17%↑	6%↓
Didn't know the candidates	1%	0%	1%	0%
Voting process	9%	7%	9%	13%
Wasn't enrolled	7%	4%	7%	5%
Didn't know where to vote	0%	2%	1%	3%
Didn't get to the voting place on time	4%	1%	4%	4%
Didn't know how to vote	2%	0%	2%	0%
Didn't know when to vote	0%	0%	0%	0%
Couldn't work out how to vote in the referendums	-	0%	-	1%
Personal barrier	19%	28%	20%↓	35%↑
Had personal commitments	7%	11%	9%	16%
Religious reasons not to vote	11%	8%	12%	9%
Had work commitments	7%	5%	7%	7%
Health reasons	1%	3%	2%	5%
Disability	0%	0%	0%	0%
Practical access barrier	7%↑	2%↓	9%↑	2%↓
Voting place too far away/ no transport	1%	0%	1%	1%
Away from home but still in New Zealand	1%	1%	1%	1%
Religious day (i.e., Sabbath, Holy Day)	0%	1%	0%	1%
Overseas at the time	5%↑	0%↓	7%↑	0%↓
Other	22%	25%	37%	34%
Don't believe in voting / couldn't be bothered	11%	11%	14%	13%
I forgot	3%	4%	3%	5%
Covid-19	-	0%	-	1%
Wasn't aware of election	-	0%	-	0%
Bad weather on voting day	-	0%	-	0%
No particular reason	1%	2%	1%	2%
Not sure	5%↑	0%↓	6%	8%
<i>n</i> =	165	162	165	162

* Main reason is single response; total reasons include main plus any other reason(s) given for not voting

Source: Kantar. Report into 2020 General Election, Report for the Electoral Commission, December 2020

Appendix 2: Relative size of the eight engagement segments



Source: Kantar. Understanding engagement segments, Report for the Electoral Commission, February 2020

Proactively Released