

Voting and Non-Voting in Christchurch City

Territorial local Authority
and District Health Board Elections
October 2001



ENTERPRISES

PO Box 504, Rangiora 8254. N.Z.

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An analysis of a survey on voter attitudes conducted immediately following the City Council and District Health Board elections, October 2001

1. As a consequence of concern at a potentially lower turnout in the 2001 Christchurch City Council and District Health Board elections, the Council's senior administrative staff decided to conduct a survey of electors in an attempt to ascertain what, if any, reasons lay behind the possible lower turnout. The survey was carried out in the week following the date that the poll closed (13 October).

2. The Sample

2.1 The raw sample of 801 persons was overweighed in favour of females who comprised 60.8 per cent. After a weighted total was calculated females comprised 52.4 percent of respondents. The initial discrepancy may have been caused by the time of day that potential respondents were contacted. The margin of error for the full sample is ± 3.46 per cent.

2.2 The weighted sample of respondents who indicated that they had voted in the election was 60.4 per cent. This response rate is 12.1 per cent higher than the overall turnout percentage. The discrepancy may reflect the fact that a number of those who did not vote refused to participate in the survey, thus inflating the 'Yes' responses.

2.3 96.2 per cent of respondents said that they were aware that an election had just been held. Of those who were unaware, 76.7 per cent were aged between 18 and 24 and 63.3 per cent were males.

3. Analysis of Survey Results

3.1 Table 1 reports the difference in turnout between male and female respondents. It shows that a slighter lower proportion of males than females voted although the difference lies well within the margin of error.

Table 1: Voter Turnout by Gender (weighted sample)

	Turnout	Voted	DNV
Male	47.6	44.6	50.8
Female	52.4	55.4	49.2
<i>N</i> =	771	466	305

- 3.2 Table 2 sets out voter turnout by age. The significant point to note is that people under the age of 35 were nearly three times less likely to vote than those between 45 and 54, and 16 times less likely to vote than people over the age of 65.

Table 2: Voter Turnout by Age (weighted sample)

	% of sample	Voted	DNV
18-24	16.5	6.4	25.6
25-34	20.8	13.7	32.1
35-44	19.0	18.2	22.3
45-54	15.4	18.9	11.5
55-64	10.5	14.6	4.9
65+	17.7	27.9	3.6
<i>N =</i>	<i>771</i>	<i>466</i>	<i>305</i>

- 3.3 Table 3 sets out voter turnout by the length of time they have been living in Christchurch. Overwhelmingly, those who responded have lived in the city for more than 10 years, and this group was much more likely to exercise their vote. Those who have lived in the city for less than 10 years were much less likely to cast their vote – nearly 2:1 against in the case of those who have lived in the city for between 3 and 10 years, and nearly 2.5:1 against in the case of those who have been in the city for less than three years.

Table 3: Voter Turnout by Time in Christchurch (weighted sample)

	% of sample	Voted	DNV
Less than 3 years	7.9	4.7	11.1
3 – 10 years	16.4	12.0	22.6
10 years +	75.8	83.3	65.9
<i>N =</i>	<i>771</i>	<i>466</i>	<i>305</i>

3.4 Electors who Voted

- 3.4.1 The margin of error for the weighted sub-sample of those who voted is ± 4.53 per cent.
- 3.4.2 Table 4 summarizes the main reasons respondents gave for exercising their vote. (*Individual responses were classified into broad groups by the interviewing company, and have subsequently been further grouped into what may be termed the ‘large ideas’ that came through.*) From this table it is clear that, overwhelmingly, the act of voting is seen as a duty, right, or responsibility, or that some individuals vote because of ‘habit.’ Nearly 6 in 10 voters fell into this category. Of the other broad groupings the next most important was electors’ perceptions of candidates. Policy orientation as a motivation for voting was a minor factor in persuading people to vote in these elections.

Table 4: Reasons given by Respondents for Voting

	All reasons	Main reason
Habit, Duty, Right	58.7	58.7
Candidate orientation	18.9	21.3
Policy orientation	7.1	8.0
Miscellaneous	15.3	12.0
	<i>N</i> =	466

- 3.4.3 Table 5 analyses the main for voting by gender and age. Females appear to see ‘duty’, ‘right’, and ‘responsibility’ as motivation more so than males; conversely, males see ‘policy orientation’ as being more important. When age is examined it is clear that the youngest group of voters (18-24 year olds) do not have the same emotional attachment to voting as their elders. The sharp increase by voters in the other age groupings (except 35-44) reflects their greater perception of responsibilities they have acquired, as they have grown older. This is quite predictable. Perceptions of candidates also becomes more important as voters grow older. It is also noteworthy that the youngest age group show a much greater range of ‘miscellaneous reasons for deciding how and/or why they will vote. Again, this is understandable because they have not had the same range of political experiences at local authority level as their elders.

Table 5: Main Reason given by Respondents for Voting, by Gender and Age

	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Habit, Duty, Right	53.6	62.8	58.1	62.5	44.8	61.6	63.2	61.8
Candidate orientation	21.3	21.7	19.4	15.6	25.9	25.6	17.6	18.3
Policy orientation	10.6	5.8	0.0	4.7	11.8	5.8	10.3	9.2
Miscellaneous	14.5	9.7	22.6	17.2	17.6	7.0	8.8	10.8
<i>N</i> =	207	258	31	64	85	86	68	131

3.5 Non-Voters

- 3.5.1 The margin of error for the weighted sub-sample of those who did not vote is ± 5.61 per cent.
- 3.5.2 Table 6 summarizes the main reasons respondents gave for not voting vote. *(Here again individual responses have been grouped according to the ‘large ideas’ that came through.)* This table makes it clear that a lack of interest in or commitment to the elections (and perhaps, also, the electoral process) was the principal reason why this group of electors did not vote. More than 4 in 10 fell into this category. The second-most important reason given was that respondents had too little or, alternatively, too much information on which to base their voting decision. Those citing a lack of information as their main reason almost certainly fall into the ‘lack of interest’ category. Others felt overwhelmed by the number of candidates standing (almost certainly a factor with the District Health Board election, which possibly flowed over into the city council elections). Another, smaller group indicated that they ‘didn’t know’ or ‘didn’t know enough about’ the candidates offering. Yet others commented that the candidate profile booklet did not really assist.

Table 6: Reasons given by Respondents who Did Not Vote

	<u>All reasons</u>	<u>Main reason</u>
Lack of interest	43.8	44.3
Information (too much or lacking)	28.9	26.1
Candidate(s)	11.1	9.4
Miscellaneous	16.2	20.2
<i>N</i> =	425	307

3.5.3 Table 7 sets out the reasons for non-voting by gender. Lack of interest amongst males was slightly higher than for females; information overload or lack of information was of greater concern to females; while males were more likely to be put off by the candidates offering.

Table 7: Reasons given by Respondents who Did Not Vote by Gender

	<u>All reasons</u>		<u>Main reason</u>	
	<u>M</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>F</u>
Lack of interest	44.0	43.4	46.1	43.3
Information (too much or lacking)	26.3	31.5	24.0	27.3
Candidate(s)	13.4	8.7	11.0	7.3
Miscellaneous	16.3	16.4	18.8	22.0
<i>N</i> =	209	219	154	150

3.5.4 Table 8a shows that respondents who have lived in the city for less than three years (ie. moved to Christchurch from elsewhere since the 1998 election) gave a 'lack of information' as a reason for not voting. Conversely, the most prevalent reason given by those who have lived in the city for more than 3 years was their perception (generally dislike, but also lack of knowledge) of candidates. These data were replicated when the main reason for not voting was given (Table 8b).

Table 8a: Reasons given by Respondents who Did Not Vote by Length of Time in City (all reasons)

	<u>Lack of interest</u>	<u>Lacked information</u>	<u>Candidate(s)</u>	<u>Miscellaneous</u>
Less than 3 years	6.8	40.9	36.4	15.9
Between 3 & 10 years	6.6	31.9	46.2	15.4
More than 10 years	12.8	26.2	44.8	16.2
	<i>N</i> =			425

Table 8b: Reasons given by Respondents who Did Not Vote by Length of Time in City (main reason)

	<u>Lack of interest</u>	<u>Lacked information</u>	<u>Candidate(s)</u>	<u>Miscellaneous</u>
Less than 3 years	9.1	39.4	30.3	21.2
Between 3 & 10 years	8.6	28.6	47.1	15.7
More than 10 years	9.5	22.5	47.0	21.0
	<i>N</i> =			307

3.5.5 16.4 per cent of those who did not vote stated that they had not received the voting papers in the mail. Although this figure might appear to be rather high, it must be remembered that there is a high level of population mobility within the city, par-

ticularly in those areas where rented accommodation is significant. The data indicate that over three-quarters (78.3 per cent) of respondents claiming not to have received voting papers were under 35 years of age and 73.9 per cent had been living in the city for less than 10 years. This is consistent with research that shows that younger and more mobile people have a lesser interest in politics. 18.2 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 24, and 12.0 per cent of respondents aged between 25 and 34, had lived in the city for less than three years.

4. Concluding Observations

- 4.1 The data collected paints a picture that is largely what one would expect:
- the most dedicated voters were those in the older age groups;
 - younger voters were generally less motivated to vote;
 - more women than men appear to have exercised their right to vote;
 - ‘habit’, and a sense of responsibility were the dominant factors in persuading people to cast their votes;
 - Perceptions of candidates and policies being promoted lagged far behind ‘habit’ and a sense of responsibility in encouraging people to cast their votes;
 - it appears as though a number of voters were either ‘put off’ by the plethora of candidates, the amount (or lack) of information about them and their policies, and the fact that they ‘didn’t know’ their candidates (despite the candidate profiles circulated with the voting papers at this election), or they were insufficiently motivated (‘could not be bothered’) to take time to find out about the candidates, parties and policies.
- 4.2 Attached for your information is a graph showing the percentage of electors casting votes in each Christchurch City Council election since 1974. It shows varying but generally declining turnouts over this 27-year period. The 1974 election was the first city council election in modern times to be contested in Wards. This undoubtedly encouraged a higher turnout because voters were not faced with voting for a large number of ‘at large’ candidates. (There were, of course, other factors, notably the contest between the late Neville Pickering and Hamish [later Sir Hamish] Hay.). Thereafter turnout declined steadily until the introduction of postal voting in 1986. The 1989 election, the first to be held within the new, enlarged city boundaries, and in an untested political environment, witnessed a further increase in turnout. Throughout the 1990s turnout declined slightly until 1998 when there was an ‘open’ contest for the mayoralty. Overall, however, turnout has declined steadily since the high point of 1974. It would appear that where there is an element of ‘novelty’ (such as the introduction of postal voting in 1986, or the restructured city in 1989), or where there is an ‘open’ election (such as occurred in 1989 and 1998) voter interest is raised.
- 4.3 Further research into turnout at local authority level is indicated and warranted. I would recommend that this be conducted under the auspices of the Local Government Association or the Society of Local Government Managers, and that it examines the phenomenon longitudinally, to ascertain whether the issues raised in this report are unique to Christchurch or are part of a wider picture.

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 22 November 2001